A SAMPLE CHAPTER

Asleep

A Lutheran Word at the Graveside

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CHAPTER ONE

Fallen Asleep

The Bible did not invent the habit of calling death sleep. People in every age have reached for the comparison, because a dead body looks so much like a sleeping one. The eyes are closed. The face is still. Funeral directors work hard to make it look that way on purpose. Pagan poets used the image too, and when they did, they usually meant something bleak: a sleep with no morning, a night that never ends.

Scripture takes the same image and fills it with something the poets never had. In the Bible, sleep is not a polite word for the end. It is a promise about what comes after.

SLEPT WITH HIS FATHERS

The language runs deep into the Old Testament. When the great kings of Israel and Judah died, the historians wrote that they "rested with their fathers" or "slept with their fathers." David, Solomon, Hezekiah, Josiah: one after another they lie down with the generations before them. At first glance it is simply a way of saying they died and were buried in the family tomb. But it carries a quiet confidence that the dead are gathered, not scattered, and that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is still their God.

By the time of Daniel, the image has turned unmistakably toward waking. At the end of his visions, Daniel is told:

> And many who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, but others to shame and everlasting contempt. (Daniel 12:2)

There it is in a single sentence. The dead sleep in the dust. The dead will awake. The sleeping is real, and so is the waking. It is also sobering: not everyone wakes to joy. The word "sleep" is not a guarantee of comfort for every person who dies. It is a statement about the body and the Last Day, and what a person wakes to depends on the One he wakes to meet. We will come back to that hard edge in Part Three. For now, simply notice that the Old Testament already speaks of death as a sleep with a morning on the other side of it.

THE GIRL WHO WAS NOT DEAD

When Jesus begins His ministry, He picks up the word and uses it in the most shocking way possible.

A synagogue leader named Jairus falls at His feet because his twelve-year-old daughter is dying. On the way to the house, word comes that it is too late. The girl is dead. Jesus keeps walking. When He arrives, the professional mourners are already at work, wailing and weeping the way mourners did in that culture. Jesus says to them:

> "Why all this commotion and weeping? The child is not dead, but asleep." And they laughed at Him. (Mark 5:39–40)

They laughed because they knew death when they saw it. They were not wrong about the girl's condition. She had stopped breathing, and they had seen enough dead children to know. What they were wrong about was Jesus. They did not know that the one who had just entered the house could speak to the dead the way a parent speaks to a sleeping child.

He sends them out. He takes the girl by the hand and says, in the Aramaic Mark preserves for us, *Talitha koum!* "Little girl, I say to you, get up!" And she gets up and walks around, and Jesus tells her stunned parents to give her something to eat.

That is the pattern. Jesus calls death sleep, the world laughs, and Jesus wakes the sleeper. At Jairus's house, then at Bethany with Lazarus, He gave small previews of what He will one day do for every one of His people. Each of those He raised died again later. Lazarus has been in his grave for nearly two thousand years. But the previews tell us what kind of Lord we are dealing with. To Him, our death is no more permanent than a nap.

HE FELL ASLEEP

After the resurrection and ascension, the apostles do something remarkable with the word. They take it up at some of the most important moments in their proclamation, not to deny death, but to speak of Christian death in the light of Christ's resurrection.

The first Christian martyr is Stephen. He preaches Christ to the council, they drag him out of the city, and they stone him while a young man named Saul holds their coats. Luke tells it this way:

> Falling on his knees, he cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:60)

It is one of the most violent deaths in the New Testament, and Luke describes the end of it as falling asleep. Not because stoning is gentle. It is not. But because of what Stephen had just seen: the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. A man who dies looking at Jesus does not die the way the world dies.

Paul uses the same word again and again. When he lists the witnesses of the risen Christ, he mentions more than five hundred brothers who saw Jesus at one time, "most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:6). When he argues that Christ really rose, he says that if He did not, then "those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished" (15:18). And then he announces the good news: "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (15:20). To the grieving Thessalonians he writes about "those who sleep in death" (1 Thessalonians 4:13), and the Greek behind that phrase is simply the word for sleeping.

The Greek verb is *koimaomai*, "to fall asleep," the same root as *koimētērion*, the sleeping place. It is ordinary vocabulary. It is the word you would use for a child dozing off after supper. The apostles use this ordinary sleep vocabulary when speaking of dead believers, especially where they look toward the resurrection of the body.

THE ONE WHO DIED

There is one striking exception in the way the apostles use the word, and it may be the most important thing in this chapter.

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:14 slowly. Paul says that we believe that Jesus *died* and rose again, and that God will bring with Him those who have *fallen asleep* in Him. He does not say that Jesus fell asleep. He uses the hard word for Jesus and the soft word for us.

The contrast is striking, and it agrees with the whole New Testament proclamation. Jesus did not fall asleep on the cross. He died. He tasted death in all its bitterness: the wages of sin, the curse of the law, the God-forsakenness of the cross, the full weight of the world's guilt. He went into death not as a sleeper but as a substitute, and He took the sting out of it by taking the sting into Himself.

Because He died, His people sleep. The real death, the death that is God's judgment on sin, has already been died for you. What remains for the baptized believer is the body lying down to rest until the Lord who conquered death calls it back.

This is why the word is not sentimental. A sentimental word would make death sound nicer than it is. The apostles knew exactly how terrible death is. They had watched their Lord die it. They call your death sleep because His death was not.

WHAT THE WORD MEANS

If Scripture calls the death of believers sleep, what exactly is it telling us? At least four things.

First, the word is about the body. It is the body that lies down, the body that looks asleep, the body that goes into the sleeping place. The person you loved is not unconscious somewhere, waiting in the dark. Jesus told the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Paul said he would rather depart and be with Christ, "which is far better" (Philippians 1:23), and that to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). The soul of the believer who dies goes to be with Christ at once. Some Christians have taught that the whole person sleeps unaware until the Last Day, and a few careless sentences in Luther have been pressed into service for that idea. But the plain words of Jesus and Paul will not allow it, and Chapter 3 will take up the question in full. For now, hold onto this: when the Bible says *asleep*, it is speaking of the body in the grave, not of a soul in a fog.

Second, the word means rest. Sleep is what you do when the day's work is done. John heard a voice from heaven say, "Blessed are the dead—those who die in the Lord from this moment on," and the Spirit answered that they will rest from their labors (Revelation 14:13). For the believer, the hard part is over. The fight with sin, the long illness, the years of pain, the slow failing of the mind, the battle that some of our loved ones fought every single morning: all of it is finished. The body that carried those burdens is laid down, and it is not carrying them anymore.

Third, the word means waking. Nobody goes to sleep intending to stay there. Sleep is, by definition, temporary. Paul puts it this way:

> Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. (1 Corinthians 15:51–52)

The Last Day is morning. The trumpet is the alarm clock that every grave in the world will hear. The One who said *Talitha koum* to a dead girl will say your name, and you will get up.

Fourth, the word means the body matters. You do not throw away a sleeping person. You tuck them in. You lower your voice. You treat the body gently because the person is coming back to it. That is why Christians have characteristically handled their dead with such care: washing them, dressing them, carrying them, laying them down. It is not superstition. It is a confession that this body, created by God, redeemed by Christ, washed in Baptism, and fed with His body and blood, belongs to Him and will be raised. Chapter 5 will have much more to say about this. But it starts here, with the word.

WHAT THE WORD DOES NOT MEAN

The sleep language can be misused, so it is worth saying plainly what it does not mean.

It does not mean death is small. Calling death sleep is not a way of shrugging it off. Death is still the last enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26), and the next chapter will insist on that. The word *asleep* does not make death nice. It makes death defeated. Those are very different things. An enemy that has been defeated can still wound you on its way out the door.

It does not mean you should not grieve. Jesus called Lazarus asleep, and then stood at his tomb and wept (John 11:35). He knew perfectly well He was about to raise him, and He wept anyway. If the Lord of life could weep at a grave He was about to empty, you are allowed to weep at one you cannot. Paul does not tell the Thessalonians not to grieve. He tells them not to grieve "like the rest, who are without hope." Grief with hope is still grief. Chapter 7 is devoted to it.

It does not mean every death is a peaceful sleep for every person. Daniel already told us that some wake to everlasting life and others to everlasting contempt. The New Testament reserves the language of falling asleep almost entirely for those who die in Christ. The sleep is sweet because of the One you fall asleep in. That is a sobering word for the living, and a reason to cling to Christ while it is still today. It is also not a word that gives us license to declare anyone's eternal destiny from the outside, and Chapter 8 will deal with that carefully.

GOODNIGHT

There is an old Christian habit of saying "goodnight" at a deathbed instead of "goodbye." It can sound like a pious trick, a way of not facing facts. It is not. It is simply believing the word Jesus chose.

You say goodbye to someone you do not expect to see again. You say goodnight to someone you will see in the morning. If the one you love fell asleep in Jesus, the morning is coming. The Lord who went to Bethany to wake His friend has promised to come for His people, and He has never yet failed to keep His word.

So grieve. Weep if you need to weep. Sit by the grave and miss them with everything in you. But when you walk away from the sleeping place, you do not have to say goodbye.

You can say goodnight.

AT THE GRAVESIDE

Jesus called it sleep, and then He went and woke His friend. The one you love is asleep in Him, and He is coming in the morning.

FROM THE CONFESSIONS

In the Apostles' Creed the church confesses "the resurrection of the body." Luther's explanation of the Third Article in the Small Catechism ends with the promise that on the Last Day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ (SC II.6). Notice the order: *me and all the dead*. The resurrection is not a general idea. It has your name on it.

A HYMN STANZA

Jesus lives! The victory's won!
Death no longer can appall me;
Jesus lives! Death's reign is done!
From the grave will Christ recall me.
Brighter scenes will then commence;
This shall be my confidence.

Christian F. Gellert, 1757; tr. Frances E. Cox, 1841

FOR REFLECTION

1. Before reading this chapter, what did you picture when you heard that a Christian had "fallen asleep"? Did the phrase comfort you, or did it sound like a way of avoiding the word *death*?
2. Why do you think the apostles use the hard word *died* for Jesus and the soft word *fallen asleep* for believers? What does that tell you about what He did for you?
3. Jesus wept at the tomb of a friend He was about to raise. What does that give you permission to do with your own grief?

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This is where the sample ends. The rest of Asleep is the invitation it opens onto.

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