'Fight or Flight' is a dilemma all creatures share. For us humans, however, the anguish from advance notice of danger heightens the difficulty. People have always feared pestilence, yet today our fears are exacerbated by rapid communication; they are complicated by expectations that the government ‘do something.’ Recent fears are of communicable disease throughout the world—particularly, the H5N1 ‘bird-flu virus,’ which has been compared to the influenza epidemic of 1918—and terrorism using biological agents. Previous generations, however, faced pandemics much more frequent and probably as virulent—at least as deadly, when factoring in the state of medical knowledge.
In the late summer of 1527 plague struck northern Germany, arriving in Wittenberg around the end of July. The situation so concerned Elector John of Saxony that on 10 August he ordered Luther and his family to leave the city, for he had arranged to move the university from Wittenberg to Jena; it would remain housed there until the following April. Luther, however, refused to leave! He and Johannes Bugenhagen (1484–1558), pastor of the city church (and Luther’s longtime confessor), and chaplains Georg Rörer and Johannes Mantel stayed to minister to the sick and dying. Luther continued to lecture—on 1 John and then Titus—to a small group of students who also did not leave. Among Luther’s acquaintances, the plague claimed its first victims within days after its arrival. On 19 August he wrote to Spalatin that the wife of Bürgermeister Tilo Dene had that very day died virtually in his arms.

Fear of plague began to spread in the city. By mid-September, additional deaths to plague began to take their toll on the populace. In response to reports that drunken gravediggers had been rude to grieving family members, Luther spoke out in the pulpit, admonishing listeners to show love for their neighbors. He also rebuked those who left their wives because of the plague. In early November things got worse for the tightly-knit circle of Wittenberg reformers: on 2 November the Luthers were shaken by the deaths of their good friend Georg Rörer’s wife and her newborn child. Bugenhagen and his family—in whose home the Rörer deaths had occurred—moved in with the Luthers, providing companionship as well as preserving resources and confining

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3 *WABr* 4:227.14f. (Nr. 1126), Luther to Melanchthon (2 August 1527): “Pestem hic esse persuasi sumus.” By 15 August Melanchthon reported to Joachim Camerarius (1500–1574) in Jena that Wittenberg was definitely infested (“Urbs Witteberga infesta est pestilite”); cf. *WABr* 4:227, note 9.

4 *WABr* 4:227f. (Nr. 1127), Elector Johann to Luther (10 August 1527).

5 Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 2:207.

6 *WABr* 4:232.16f. (Nr. 1130); Luther to Spalatin (19 August 1527): “Hodie Tilonis Deni vxorem sepeliumus, que fere inter brachia mea expiruit heri, atque hoc primum funus in media vrbe.”
