

13.19

Romans 6:23—The Despair of *Doctor Faustus*

The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus, commonly referred to simply as *Doctor Faustus*, is an Elizabethan tragedy by Christopher Marlowe. It premiered sometime between 1588 and 1593 and has met with tremendous popular and critical acclaim ever since. The play recounts the story of a doctor who sells his soul to the devil in order to achieve power on earth. Dr. Faustus is given ample opportunities to repent and even to renounce the bargain that guarantees his perdition but he refuses, convinced that this is the fate allotted to him. Thus Doctor Faustus adheres to a rather absolutist version of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. Critics continue to debate whether Marlowe intended the play to be an endorsement or critique (mockery) of that doctrine.

In one pivotal scene, Faustus makes his case for why repentance is impossible: he draws on Scripture, reading aloud from Romans 6:23 and 1 John 1:18, the combination of which prove (to him) that there is no hope:

“The reward of sin is death.” That’s hard.

“If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and there’s no truth in us.” Why then, belike we must sin and so consequently die.

Ay, we must die an everlasting death.

What doctrine call you this? *Che sera, sera,*

“What will be, shall be”? Divinity, adieu!

Act 1, Scene 1, lines 41–47

Of course, any number of theologians (including Calvinists) have wanted to point out Faust’s exegetical errors. For one thing, he quotes only portions of his Bible verses. The fuller readings would be

The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 6:23)

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8–9)