



THE SAFETY OF THE VIRTUOUS

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Philip Melanchthon (Schwarzerd) was born at Bretten, in Baden, in 1497. His name is noteworthy as first a fellow laborer and eventually a controversial antagonist of Luther. At the Diet of Augsburg, in 1530, he was the leading representative of the Reformation. He formulated the twenty-eight articles of the evangelical faith known as the "Augsburg Confession." The Lutherans of extreme Calvinistic views were alienated by Melanchthon's subsequent modifications of this confession, and by his treatises in ethics. He and his followers were bitterly assailed, but his irenic spirit did not forsake him. He was a true child of the Renaissance, and is styled by some writers "the founder of general learning throughout Europe." While he was never called or ordained to the ministry of the Church, he was in the habit of addressing the local religious assemblies or collegia from time to time, and, being a man of profound piety, his sympathetic and natural style of delivery made him an impressive speaker. He died in 1560, and his body was laid beside that of Martin Luther.

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Neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.—John x, 28.

To Thee, almighty and true God, eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, maker of heaven and earth, and of all creatures, together with Thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost—to Thee, the wise, good, true, righteous, compassionate, pure, gracious God, we render thanks that Thou hast hitherto upheld the Church in these lands, and graciously afforded it protection and care, and we earnestly beseech Thee evermore to gather among us an inheritance for Thy Son, which may praise Thee to all eternity.

I have in these, our assemblies, often uttered partly admonitions and partly reproofs, which I hope the most of you will bear in mind. But since I must presume that now the hearts of all are wrung with a new grief and a new pang by reason of the war in our neighborhood, this season seems to call for a word of consolation. And, as we commonly say, "Where the pain is there one claps his hand," I could not, in this so great affliction, make up my mind to turn my discourse upon any other subject. I do not, indeed, doubt that you yourselves seek comfort in the divine declarations, yet will I also bring before you some things collected therefrom, because always that on which we had ourselves thought becomes more precious to us when we hear that it proves itself salutary also to others. And because long discourses are burdensome in time of sorrow and mourning, I will, without delay, bring forward that comfort which is the most effectual.

Our pains are best assuaged when something good and beneficial, especially some help toward a happy issue, presents itself. All other topics of consolation, such as men borrow from the unavoidable nature of suffering, and the examples of others, bring us no great alleviation. But the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who was crucified for us and raised again, and now sits at the right hand of the Father, offers us help and deliverance, and

has manifested this disposition in many declarations. I will now speak of the words: "No man shall pluck my sheep out of my hand." This expression has often raised me up out of the deepest sorrow, and drawn me, as it were, out of hell.

The wisest men in all times have bewailed the great amount of human misery which we see with our eyes before we pass into eternity—diseases, death, want, our own errors, by which we bring harm and punishment on ourselves, hostile men, unfaithfulness on the part of those with whom we are closely connected, banishment, abuse, desertion, miserable children, public and domestic strife, wars, murder, and devastation. And since such things appear to befall good and bad without distinction, many wise men have inquired whether there were any Providence, or whether accident brings everything to pass independent of a divine purpose? But we in the Church know that the first and principal cause of human woe is this, that on account of sin man is made subject to death and other calamity, which is so much more vehement in the Church, because the devil, from the hatred toward God, makes fearful assaults on the Church and strives to destroy it utterly.

Therefore it is written: "I will put enmity between the serpent and the seed of the woman." And Peter says: "Your adversary, the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about and seeketh whom he may devour."

Not in vain, however, has God made known to us the causes of our misery. We should not only consider the greatness of our necessity, but also discern the causes of it, and recognize His righteous anger against sin, to the end that we may, on the other hand, perceive the Redeemer and the greatness of His compassion; and as witnesses to these, His declarations, He adds the raising of dead men to life, and other miracles.

Let us banish from our hearts, therefore, the unbelieving opinions which imagine that evils befall us by mere chance, or from physical causes.

But when thou considerest the wounds in thy own circle of relations, or dost cast a glance at the public disorders in the State, which again afflict the individual also (as Solon says: "The general corruption penetrates even to thy quiet habitation"), then think, first, of thy own and others' sins, and of the righteous wrath of God; and, secondly, weigh the rage of the devil, who lets loose his hate chiefly in the Church.

In all men, even the better class, great darkness reigns. We see not how great an evil sin is, and regard not ourselves as so shamefully defiled. We flatter ourselves, in particular, because we profess a better doctrine concerning God. Nevertheless, we resign ourselves to a careless slumber, or pamper each one his own desires; our impurity, the disorders of the Church, the necessity of brethren, fills us not with pain; devotion is without fire and fervor; zeal for doctrine and discipline languishes, and not a few are my sins, and thine, and those of many others, by reason of which such punishments are heaped upon us.

Let us, therefore, apply our hearts to repentance, and direct our eyes to the Son of God, in respect to whom we have the assurance that, after the

wonderful counsel of God, He is placed over the family of man, to be the protector and preserver of his Church.

We perceive not fully either of our wretchedness or our dangers, or the fury of enemies, until after events of extraordinary sorrowfulness. Still we ought to reflect thus: there must exist great need and a fearful might and rage of enemies, since so powerful a protector has been given to us, even God's Son. When He says: "No man shall pluck my sheep out of my hand," He indicates that He is no idle spectator of woe, but that mighty and incessant strife is going on. The devil incites his tools to disturb the Church or the political commonwealth, that boundless confusion may enter, followed by heathenish desolation. But the Son of God, who holds in His hands, as it were, the congregation of those who call upon His name, hurls back the devils by His infinite power, conquers and chases them thence, and will one day shut them up in the prison of hell, and punish them to all eternity with fearful pains. This comfort we must hold fast in regard to the entire Church, as well as each in regard to himself.

If, in these distracted and warring times, we see States blaze up and fall to ruin, then look away to the Son of God, who stands in the secret counsel of the Godhead and guards His little flock and carries the weak lambs, as it were, in His own hands. Be persuaded that by Him thou also shalt be protected and upheld.

Here some, not rightly instructed, will exclaim: "Truly I could wish to commend myself to such a keeper, but only His sheep does He preserve. Whether I also am counted in that flock, I know not." Against this doubt we must most strenuously contend, for the Lord Himself assures us in this very passage, that all who "hear and with faith receive the voice of the gospel are His sheep"; and He says expressly: "If a man love me, he will keep my words, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him." These promises of the Son of God, which can not be shaken, we must confidently appropriate to ourselves. Nor shouldst thou, by thy doubts, exclude thyself from this blest flock, which originates in the righteousness of the gospel. They do not rightly distinguish between the law and the gospel, who, because they are unworthy, reckon not themselves among the sheep. Rather is this consolation afforded us, that we are accepted "for the Son of God's sake," truly, without merit, not on account of our own righteousness, but through faith, because we are unworthy, and impure, and far from having fulfilled the law of God. That is, moreover, a universal promise, in which the Son of God saith: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

The eternal Father earnestly commands that we should hear the Son, and it is the greatest of all transgressions if we despise Him and do not approve His voice. This is what every one should often and diligently consider, and in this disposition of the Father, revealed through the Son, find grace.

Altho, amid so great disturbances, many a sorrowful spectacle meets thine eye, and the Church is rent by discord and hate, and manifold and domestic public necessity is added thereto, still let not despair overcome thee, but know thou that thou hast the Son of God for a keeper and protector,

who will not suffer either the Church, or thee, or thy family, to be plucked out of His hand by the fury of the devil.

With all my heart, therefore, do I supplicate the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who, having been crucified for us, and raised again, sits at the right hand of the Father, to bless men with His gifts, and to Him I pray that He would protect and govern this little church and me therein. Other sure trust, in this great flame when the whole world is on fire, I discern nowhere. Each one has his separate hopes, and each one with his understanding seeks to repose in something else; but however good that may all be, it is still a far better, and unquestionably a more effectual, consolation to flee to the Son of God and expect help and deliverances from Him.

Such wishes will not be in vain. For to this end are we laden with such a crowd of dangers, that in events and occurrences which to human prudence are an inexplicable enigma, we may recognize the infinite goodness and presentness of God, in that He, for His Son's sake, and through His Son, affords us aid. God will be owned in such deliverance just as in the deliverance of your first parents, who, after the fall, when they were forsaken by all the creatures, were upheld by the help of God alone. So was the family of Noah in the flood, so were the Israelites preserved when in the Red Sea they stood between the towering walls of waters. These glorious examples are held up before us, that we might know, in like manner, the Church, without the help of any created beings, is often preserved. Many in all times have experienced such divine deliverance and support in their personal dangers, as David saith: "My father and my mother have forsaken me, but the Lord taketh me up"; and in another place David saith: "He hath delivered the wretched, who hath no helper." But in order that we may become partakers of these so great blessings, faith and devotion must be kindled within us, as it stands written, "Verily, I say unto you!" So likewise must our faith be exercised, that before deliverance we should pray for help and wait for it, resting in God with a certain cheerfulness of soul; and that we should not cherish continual doubt and melancholy murmuring in our hearts, but constantly set before our eyes the admonition of God: "The peace of God which passeth all understanding keep your heart and mind"; which is to say, be so comforted in God, in time of danger, that your hearts, having been strengthened by confidence in the pity and presentness of God, may patiently wait for help and deliverance, and quietly maintain that peaceful serenity which is the beginning of eternal life, and without which there can be no true devotion.

For distrust and doubt produce a gloomy and terrible hate toward God, and that is the beginning of the eternal torments, and a rage like that of the devil.

Now you must guard against these billows in the soul, and these stormy agitations, and, by meditation on the precious promises of God, keep and establish your hearts.

Truly these times allow not the wonted security and the wonted intoxication of the world, but they demand that with honest groans we should cry for help, as the Lord saith, "Watch and pray that ye fall not

into temptation," that ye may not, being overcome by despair, plunge into everlasting destruction. There is need of wisdom to discern the dangers of the soul, as well as the safeguard against them. Souls go to ruin as well when, in epicurean security, they make light of the wrath of God as when they are overcome by doubt and cast down by anxious sorrow, and these transgressions aggravate the punishment. The godly, on the other hand, who by faith and devotion keep their hearts erect and near to God, enjoy the beginning of eternal life and obtain mitigation of the general distress.

We, therefore, implore Thee, Son of God, Lord Jesus Christ, who, having been crucified and raised for us, standest in the secret counsel of the Godhead, and makest intercession for us, and hast said: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." I call upon Thee, and with my whole heart beseech Thee, according to Thine infinite compassion, forgive us our sins. Thou knowest that in our great weakness we are not able to bear the burden of our woe. Do Thou, therefore, afford us aid in our private and public necessities; be Thou our shelter and protector, uphold the churches in these lands, and all which serves for their defense and safeguard.

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