

Luther's Advice to Christians who live under a Tyrannical Government.

In the following letter addressed to some Christians at Miltenberg, whose pastor had been run out, and whose prominent fellow Christians had been arrested and executed, Luther points out that they are to look for heavenly comfort and not for worldly comfort; for the first only will be effective, while the second one will not. Moreover, physical revenge would not succeed, only godly patience and resignation to God's plan will.

"It would be a worldly comfort, which could be of no benefit whatever, but altogether injurious to your souls and to the cause, if you and I should seek comfort in avenging ourselves upon the blasphemers by scolding and mourning over their impiety and wickedness. And though we should even slay them all with our hands, or banish them, or had the pleasure and delight of seeing them punished by some one else on account of the suffering inflicted upon us, there would yet be nothing thereby accomplished. For this is worldly revenge and comfort, and does not befit us; but it is befitting to our enemies, as you now see that they, having cooled their malice upon you and avenged themselves, are merry over it, and are wonderfully comforted. But what sort of comfort is that? Have they any hope? Have they any patience? Have they any Scripture? Verily, instead of God, they have used their fists; instead of patience, they have shown revenge; instead of hope, they have given vent to their malice openly and have already received all the good things that they will ever have. Whence comes then such comfort? It does not come from God, and must therefore certainly come from the devil. And so it does. But what will be the end of the comfort that comes from the devil? Paul says (Phil. iii.19): 'Their boasting shall come to a shameful end'.

"See now what a rich, proud comfort arises out of this for you! In the first place, you are certain that it is for the sake of God's Word that you endure their insolence and abuse. What matters it that they call it heresy? You are sure that it is God's Word; they cannot therefore be sure that it is heresy. They will not hear nor receive it; they cannot therefore prove it to be heresy. Yet they go on slandering and persecuting, upon such uncertain ground, as St. Peter says (2 Pet. ii. 12), 'What they do not understand'! Hence they cannot have a good conscience in the matter; but you have a secure, certain conviction that you are suffering for God's sake. Now who can ever fully describe what a blessed, proud comfort it is, to be certain that one is suffering for God's sake? For who suffers? Whom does it concern? Who will avenge it, if we suffer for God's sake? Well does St. Peter say (I Pet. iii. 14): 'Blessed are ye, if ye suffer for righteousness' sake'. If one were the emperor of the whole world, he should not only be willing cheerfully to surrender his throne to secure such sufferings, but should even count it as dung, compared with such comforting treasure.

"You have really, therefore, dear Friends, no occasion to desire revenge, nor to wish evil to your enemies, but much rather to regard them with heartfelt compassion. For you have in fact been already too highly avenged, to say nothing of that which yet awaits them at the end. They have already suffered altogether too much. To you they have done only a kindness, that you should be led by their raging to the comfort of God; to themselves they have done an injury, from which they can scarcely, and some of them never, recover.

"For what does it matter, that they have tormented you for a little while in your body and your earthly possessions? That will soon be over. And what does it matter, that they for a little while rejoice in their wantonness? It cannot last long. Consider, in the meantime, your happiness and their misery. You have a good, secure conscience and a just cause; they have an evil, uncertain conscience and a blind cause, of which they do not even yet know how unjust it is. You have therefore the comfort of God with patience out of the Scriptures in hope; they have therefore the comfort of the devil through revenge in visible wantonness.

"If now the privilege were given you to choose between their portion and your own, would you not run and flee from their side, as from the devil, even though it were a very heaven, and hasten to your portion, even though it were a very hell? For heaven could not be joyous, if the devil reigned there, and hell could not be gloomy, if God reigned there.

"Therefore, dear Friends, would you avenge and comfort yourselves right well and proudly, not only upon your visible, bodily persecutors, but upon the devil, who rides them, then treat him thus: Be right joyful, and thank God that you have been made worthy to hear and understand his Word, and to suffer for it, and be content to know certainly that your cause is God's Word and your comfort from God. Pity your enemies, who have no good conscience in their cause, but only the miserable, gloomy comfort of the devil through their insolence, impatience, revenge and earthly malice. Believe assuredly that you will by such a joyful spirit, praise and thanksgiving, grieve their god, the devil, more than if you were to slay a thousand of your enemies. For it is not his aim to comfort them and give you bodily pain, but he wants to make you sad and melancholy, so that you may be of no service to God. Keep on, therefore, all the more, and mock him, that his scheme may fail and be given up in disgust" (August Nebe, *Luther as Spiritual Adviser*, translators Charles A. Hay and Charles E. Hay [Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1894], pages 79-83).

In a different letter addressed to some other Christians who were enduring "ridicule and reproach," Luther reminds them that it is God's will that if we would enjoy the high privilege of ruling with him for eternity in heaven, we first will have to suffer in this world. The two cannot be separated.

"I could not and ought not to neglect to exhort you and to comfort you with the comfort wherewith we are comforted of God through his holy Word, in order that you may not only bear the present trial with patience, but also become vigorous and strong to await and to overcome yet greater things, although I do not imagine that you stand in need of my poor epistle.

"In the first place, Paul says (Rom. viii. 17; 2 Tim. ii. 12): 'If we would reign with him, we must also suffer with him'. For, if we take pleasure in the Gospel and desire to become partakers of his unspeakable riches and his eternal treasure, we must also take into account his cross, and the tribulation that comes with it, considering that his riches and treasure are eternal and his tribulation temporal, yea, but momentary. He has himself declared (Jn. xvi. 33): 'In the world ye shall have tribulation, but in me ye shall have peace'. If we would have peace in him, then we must have tribulation from the world. The words of Christ can have no other meaning. Remember my word, says he, which I have spoken to you: 'The servant is not better than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you also'. A slothful and unprofitable servant indeed would he be, who should wish to sit upon a silk cushion and live-in luxury, while his master was without, hungering and toiling and contending against his enemies. That would be a foolish merchant indeed, who should throw away his gold and silver and have nothing to do with it, because it was tied up, not in silk and satin, but in rough, dirty bags and sacks; or who should become disgusted with his treasure because it was heavy, and not as light as a feather. It is the very nature of treasures to be heavy and to increase in weight according to their value; and it is not customary to carry gold and silver in beautiful bags and sacks, but in black, rough, dirty cloth, which no one would otherwise like to have about his body....

"Therefore be of good cheer, my dear Masters and Brethren; it is well with you, and better times will come. Only fall not away, out of the hand of God, who has now laid hold of you to make good, honest Christians out of you, that you may not in word alone, as I, alas! and others in your circumstances, but in deed and in truth, live according to the Gospel.

"It is written (Isa. lxiv. 8): 'We are his clay; he is our potter'. The clay must not control the art and the hand of the potter, but must let itself be controlled and shaped. Therefore the Gospel applies its square, which St. Paul has given it: the word of the cross (I Cor. i. 8). He who will not have the cross, must do without the word....

"You yourselves know very well, Beloved, that the Word of God is everywhere in the Scriptures represented as bringing with it in this world tribulation, shame and all manner of trials, but as setting forth at the same time also, for admonition and comfort, how very precious this treasure of our faith is, and how greatly its value is increased by such trials" (August Nebe, *Luther as Spiritual Adviser*, translators Charles A. Hay and Charles E. Hay [Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1894], pages 71-76.