

A Reformation Martyr Comforts His Wife

By W.L. Bredenhof

Some time ago, *Time* magazine featured a cover story entitled, “Does God Want You to Be Rich?” In this story, the authors describe how people like Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer are pushing a new gospel. They teach that the good news is that Jesus Christ came to make us wealthy, healthy, and materially blessed. Their books are very popular in broader Christian circles and sometimes they’re even found in our homes. They’re popular, but they’re dead wrong. The gospel is not in wealth, health and prosperity. In Acts 14:22, Paul and Barnabas encouraged the believers at Lystra, Iconium and Antioch by telling them, “*We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.*” They had learned this from the Lord Jesus himself when he told them that anyone who follows him must take up the cross.

These Biblical truths were recovered by the Reformation. On October 31, we remember that in 1517, Martin Luther pinned his 95 theses to the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany. Two years later, in 1519, Luther travelled to the birthplace of our Heidelberg Catechism. At Heidelberg, Luther and one of his colleagues, Leonard Beier, defended another set of theses. With the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther laid out the difference between a theology of glory and a theology of the cross. The Roman Catholic Church taught a theology of glory. Through good works and a little help, man could climb his way up to God and receive God’s blessing. The Bible, on the other hand, teaches a theology of the cross. Through grace, God comes down to man in Jesus Christ crucified. The wisdom of God is in the cross and in suffering, not in glory on this earth.

Today, we need to recover a sense of this theology of the cross. We live in a comfortable world. We don’t suffer in any meaningful way. The temptation is great to turn to a theology of glory like that preached by Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer. The way to resist this temptation is to turn again to what we confess from the Scriptures. We need especially to turn to the Belgic Confession. The Belgic Confession is entirely unique – it is the only Reformation confession written by a martyr. As you read through the Confession, you know that it comes from a world where believers were regularly dying for their faith. This is our confession and because we confess a Catholic church, one that stretches not only through the world, but also through the ages, we are brought into fellowship with the suffering body of Christ then and now. To help us in developing that sense, let me share a letter written many years ago. It was written by the author of our Belgic Confession, Guido de Brès. It was written in April, 1567. He was in prison and he knew that he was going to die for what he had confessed.

Letter of Comfort from Guido de Brès to His Wife

The grace and mercy of our good God and heavenly Father, and the love of His Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, be with you, my dearly beloved.

Catherine Ramon, my dear and beloved wife and sister in our Lord Jesus Christ: your anguish and sadness disturbs somewhat my joy and the happiness of my heart, so I am

writing this for the consolation of both of us, and especially for your consolation, since you have always loved me with an ardent affection, and because it pleases the Lord to separate us from each other. I feel your sorrow over this separation more keenly than mine. I pray you not to be troubled too much over this, for fear of offending God. You knew when you married me that you were taking a mortal husband, who was uncertain of life, and yet it has pleased God to permit us to live together for seven years, giving us five children. If the Lord had wished us to live together longer, he would have provided the way. But it did not please him to do this and may his will be done.

Now remember that I did not fall into the hands of my enemies by mere chance, but through the providence of my God who controls and governs all things, the least as well as the greatest. This is shown by the words of Christ, "Be not afraid. Your very hairs are numbered. Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And not one of them shall fall to the ground without the will of your Father. Then fear nothing. You are more excellent than many sparrows." These words of divine wisdom say that God knows the number of my hairs. How then can harm come to me without the command and providence of God? It could not happen, unless one should say that God is no longer God. This is why the Prophet says that there is no affliction in the city that the Lord has not willed.

Many saintly persons who were before us consoled themselves in their afflictions and tribulations with this doctrine. Joseph, having been sold by his brothers and taken into Egypt, says, "You did a wicked deed, but God has turned it to your good. God sent me into Egypt before you for your profit." (Genesis 50). David also experienced this when Shimei cursed him. So too in the case of Job and many others.

And that is why the Evangelists write so carefully of the sufferings and of the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, adding, "And this was done that that which was written of Him might be accomplished." The same should be said of all the members of Christ.

It is very true that human reason rebels against this doctrine and resists it as much as possible and I have very strongly experienced this myself. When I was arrested, I would say to myself, "So many of us should not have traveled together. We were betrayed by this one or that one. We ought not to have been arrested." With such thoughts I became overwhelmed, until my spirits were raised by meditation on the providence of God. Then my heart began to feel a great repose. I began then to say, "My God, you have caused me to be born in the time you have ordained. During all the time of my life you have kept me and preserved me from great dangers and you have delivered me from them all – and if at present my hour has come in which I will pass from this life to you, may your will be done. I cannot escape from your hands. And if I could, I would not, since it is happiness for me to conform to your will." These thoughts made my heart cheerful again.

And I pray you, my dear and faithful companion, to join me in thanking God for what he has done. For he does nothing that is not just and very equitable, and you should believe that it is for my good and for my peace. You have seen and felt my labours, cross, persecutions, and afflictions which I have endured, and have even had a part in them when you accompanied me in my travels during the time of my exile. Now my God has

extended his hand to receive me into his blessed kingdom. I shall see it before you and when it shall please the Lord, you will follow me. This separation is not for all time. The Lord will receive you also to join us together again in our head, Jesus Christ.

This is not the place of our habitation – that is in heaven. This is only the place of our journey. That is why we long for our true country, which is heaven. We desire to be received in the home of our Heavenly Father, to see our Brother, Head, and Saviour Jesus Christ, to see the noble company of the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and many thousands of martyrs, into whose company I hope to be received when I have finished the course of my work which I received from my Lord Jesus Christ.

I pray you, my dearly beloved, to console yourself with meditation on these things. Consider the honour that God has done you, in giving you a husband who was not only a minister of the Son of God, but so esteemed of God that he allowed him to have the crown of martyrs. It is an honour the like of which God has never even given to the angels.

I am happy; my heart is light and it lacks nothing in my afflictions. I am so filled with the abundance of the richness of my God that I have enough for me and all those to whom I can speak. So I pray my God that he will continue his kindness to me, his prisoner. The One in whom I have trusted will do it, for I have found by experience that he will never leave those who have trusted in him. I would never have thought that God would have been so kind to such a poor creature as I. I feel the faithfulness of my Lord Jesus Christ.

I am practicing now what I have preached to others. And I must confess that when I preached I would speak about the things I am actually experiencing as a blind man speaks of colour. Since I was taken prisoner I have profited more and learned more than during all the rest of my life. I am in a very good school: the Holy Spirit inspires me continually and teaches me how to use the weapons in this combat. On the other side is Satan, the adversary of all children of God. He is like a boisterous, roaring lion. He constantly surrounds me and seeks to wound me. But he who has said, “Fear not, for I have overcome the world,” makes me victorious. And already I see that the Lord puts Satan under my feet and I feel the power of God perfected in my weakness.

Our Lord permits me on the one hand to feel my weakness and my smallness, that I am but a small vessel on the earth, very fragile, to the end that he would humble me, so that all the glory of the victory may be given to him. On the other hand, he fortifies me and consoles me in an unbelievable way. I have more comfort than the enemies of the gospel. I eat, drink and rest better than they do. I am held in a very strong prison, very bleak, obscure and dark. The prison is known by the obscure name “Brunain.” The air is poor and it stinks. On my feet and hands I have irons, big and heavy. They are a continual hell, hollowing my limbs up to my poor bones. The chief constable comes to look at my irons two or three times a day, fearing that I will escape. There are three guards of forty men before the door of the prison.

I have also the visits of Monsieur de Hamaide. He comes to see me, to console me, and to exhort me to patience, as he says. However, he comes after dinner, after he has wine in the head and a full stomach. You can imagine what these consolations are. He threatens me and says to me that if I would show any intention of escaping he would have me chained by the neck, the body and legs, so that I could not move a finger; and he says many other things in this order. But for all that, my God does not take away his promises, consoling my heart, giving me very much contentment.

Since such things have happened, my dear sister and faithful wife, I implore you to find comfort from the Lord in your afflictions and to place your troubles with him. He is the husband of believing widows and the father of poor orphans. He will never leave you – of that I can assure you. Conduct yourself as a Christian woman, faithful in the fear of God, as you always have been, honouring by your good life and conversation the doctrine of the Son of God, which your husband has preached.

As you have always loved me with great affection, I pray that you will continue this love toward our little children, instructing them in the knowledge of the true God and of his Son Jesus Christ. Be their father and their mother, and take care that they use honestly the little that God has given you. If God does you the favour to permit you to live in widowhood with our children after my death, that will be well. If you cannot, and the means are lacking, then go to some good man, faithful and fearing God. And when I can, I shall write to our friends to watch over you. I think that they will not let you want for anything. Take up your regular routine after the Lord has taken me. You have our daughter Sarah who will soon be grown. She will be your companion and help you in your troubles. She will console you in your tribulations and the Lord will always be with you. Greet our good friends in my name, and let them pray to God for me, that he may give me strength, speech, and the wisdom and ability to uphold the truth of the Son of God to the end and to the last breath of my life.

Farewell, Catherine, my dearly beloved. I pray my God that he will comfort you and give you contentment in his good will. I hope that God has given me the grace to write for your benefit, in such a way that you may be consoled in this poor world. Keep my letter for a remembrance of me. It is badly written, but it is what I am able to do, and not what I wish to do. Commend me to my good mother. I hope to write some consolation to her, if it pleases God. Greet also my good sister. May she take her affliction to God. Grace be with you.

At the prison, April 12, 1567.

Your faithful husband, Guy de Brès, minister of the Word of God at Valenciennes, and presently prisoner for the Son of God at the aforesaid place.

He was hung on May 31, 1567.

Closing Reflection

Reflecting on that letter, consider how your brother, Guido de Brès, was sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Through many tribulations, he was entering the kingdom of God. He left a Confession for us, a faithful summary of what Scripture teaches. Would you die for that Confession? Would you suffer for it? Would you give up family and friends for the doctrine of the Old and New Testament summarized in that Confession? Let me leave you with the words of our Lord Jesus in Matthew 10:37-39, "*He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.*"

This letter is found translated in *Procedures Held With Regard to Those of the Religion of the Netherlands* (no publication information). I compared and corrected the translation in some places with reference to the French original found in *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica*, Volume 8, pp.624-628..