

The Kindness of God in the Face of Death—Blog

“He is like one who has set sail upon a stormy and tempestuous sea, and before he has been carried out into the deeps, gets in safely to the secure haven”

In March, 1541, Claude Ferey died to the plague. Claude was a French refugee, professor in the city of Strasburg, and tutor to the sons of M. de Rich-she-bou Richebourg. He was also friend to one of the most esteemed theologians of the day whose name was John. John had trusted Claude and held him in high regard in ministry. As we will come to see, theirs was a brotherhood in the Lord reminiscent of that of Paul and Timothy. Like so many in that day, however, Claude was taken away suddenly by plague. At the beginning of March, John had left him in charge of writing letters, and by the end of the month he had died.¹

Claude was not the only one to die that month. Three days after his death, Richebourg's son Louis also died to the plague. John's house was turned into a state of “sad desolation.”² For John did not know for several days if Louis' brother Charles, or his own brother, or his own wife were safe from the plague.³ Only after receiving news of their safety could he recover enough to do anything but grieve in crippling anxiety.

Yet, out of his own grief, his heart ached for those grieving. “To the bitterness of grief, therefore, there was added a very anxious concern for those who survived.”⁴ John, in the face of such a sudden and saddening death, took up his pen and wrote to the bereaved father. He did not hide his own grief for the death of Claude or for Louis, whom John also loved. He did not doubt that Richebourg and his other son Charles were both “steeped in sorrow and soaked in tears.”⁵ John did not reprimand this. He called it a “most reasonable sadness,” a “human” reality, as welling up from “the love of a father.” He only urged him not to “give way to senseless wailing,”⁶ and that only for Richebourg's sake and the sake of his family.

In the darkness of that night of death, John lit his lamp. To the grieved he took the comfort which he had been comforted with. In his affliction, he comforted the afflicted. He wrote of the “never-failing source of consolation.”⁷ Like a blazing fire in a winter's night, so John saw the unfailing goodness of God the Father against the coldness of death. He urged Richebourg not to “vex and annoy ourselves” with questions like “Why is it not otherwise with us?” which only dispirits us more. Instead, he wrote of God's unquenchable goodness that not even death could put out:

It is God, therefore, who has sought back from you your son, whom He had committed to you to be educated, on the condition, that he might always be His own. And, therefore, He took him away, because it was both of advantage to him to leave this world, and by this bereavement to humble you, or to make, trial of your patience. If you do not understand the advantage of this, without delay, first of all, setting aside every other object of consideration, ask of God that He may show you.⁸

John did not elevate Louis to angelic status. He did not cover over Louis' life with glossy polish as though Louis had not needed the Savior. Rather, he pointed to the work of God in the young man's life. That after producing the fruit of the Spirit here on earth, as a member of the body of Christ, "he was taken from us and transplanted."⁹ That both Claude and Louis "had both so lived and so died, that" he could not "doubt but they are now with the Lord; let us, therefore, press forward toward this goal which they have reached."¹⁰ For in the Christian life, it is not the sinners' efforts, but God's complete mercy in Christ that will get His own safely home.

To the father who had seemingly lost his child in the flower of his age, John wrote that Louis "is like one who has set sail upon a stormy and tempestuous sea, and before he has been carried out into the deeps, gets in safely to the secure haven."¹¹ God had not been rash or forced into this situation. For, John assured him, God "foresees, decrees, and executes nothing but what is just and upright in itself, but also nothing but what is good and wholesome for us."¹²

However brief, therefore, either in your opinion or in mine, the life of your son may have been, it ought to satisfy us that he has finished the course which the Lord had marked out for him. Moreover, we may not reckon him to have perished in the flower of his age, who had grown ripe in the sight of the Lord.¹³

Richebourg did not lose his son, then. Rather, as John wrote, "There can be no doubt but that Christ will bind together both them and us in the same inseparable society, in that incomparable participation of His own glory."¹⁴

This is the Christian hope of all those who call upon Christ as a perfect Savior. In the face of death, grief, pain and loss, believers have full assurance of the goodness of God to His children in His Son. In our grief and comfort, we can comfort those grieving, as John Calvin did in this letter. In this way, we too can live in the reality of 2 Corinthians 1:3-7:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

All references are from *John Calvin. Selected Works of John Calvin, Volume 4, Letters Part 1.* AGES Software.

1 - 225.

2 - 232.

3, 5-14 - 240-246

4 - 232.