



Comfort for Women Who Have Had a Miscarriage

Translated by James Raun

Introduction

As preacher in the town church of Wittenberg, professor at the university, and an active church administrator, John Bugenhagen was a close associate of Luther in the Reformation. He served on the committee for Luther's Bible translation, officiated at Luther's wedding, and preached the sermon at Luther's funeral.

In 1541 Bugenhagen had written an interpretation of Psalm 29 and dedicated it to King Christian III of Denmark, where he had introduced the Reformation in 1537. Before sending the manuscript to the printer, Bugenhagen showed it to Luther. Luther's eye caught a reference to "little children" in the text, whereupon he suggested that Bugenhagen ought to add a word of comfort for women whose children had died at birth or had been born dead and could not be baptized. Bugenhagen, however, was not disposed to add such an appendix, though he did not disagree with Luther in principle. He had written what he felt God gave him to say and did not think it proper to go into this subject himself. However, he said he was willing to add any statement Luther might care to make on the subject. Luther agreed to prepare such a statement. Thus this brief but significant piece is an appendix that has outlived the book to which it had originally been attached.

This short item is a significant statement by Luther regarding the fate of children who die before they can be baptized—a borderline theological question of considerable anguish to grieving mothers. It is just such a person that Luther has in mind, not the sophomoric, speculative thinker.

Writing with pastoral concern, Luther points out that the miscarriage (where it is not due to deliberate carelessness) is not a sign of God's anger. God's judgment is and must remain hidden from us. Luther sees the basis for Christian consolation in the unspoken prayers of the mother in which the Spirit is at work and which sanctify the child, and in the prayers of the Christian congregation.

This item appeared in three editions of Bugenhagen's exposition of Psalm 29, published in 1542, in five subsequent editions, and in a Latin edition. It was then incorporated in the various editions of Luther's collected works. This translation is based on the German text, *Ein Trost den Weibern, welchen es ungerade gegangen ist mit Kindergebären*, in WA 53, (202) 205–208.

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A final word¹—it often happens that devout parents, particularly the wives, have sought consolation from us because they have suffered such agony and heartbreak in child-bearing when, despite their best intentions and against their will, there was a premature birth or miscarriage and their child died at birth or was born dead.

One ought not to frighten or sadden such mothers by harsh words because it was not due to their carelessness or neglect that the birth of the child went off badly. One must make a distinction between them and those females who resent being pregnant, deliberately neglect their child, or go so far as to strangle or destroy it. This is how one ought to comfort them.

First, inasmuch as one cannot and ought not know the hidden judgment of God in such a case—why, after every possible care had been taken, God did not allow the child to be born alive and be baptized—these mothers should calm themselves and have faith that God’s will is always better than ours, though it may seem otherwise to us from our human point of view. They should be confident that God is not angry with them or with others who are involved. Rather is this a test to develop patience. We well know that these cases have never been rare since the beginning and that Scripture also cites them as examples, as in Psalm 58 [8], and St. Paul calls himself an *abortivum*, a misbirth or one untimely born.²

Second, because the mother is a believing Christian it is to be hoped that her heartfelt cry and deep longing to bring her child to be baptized will be accepted by God as an effective prayer. It is true that a Christian in deepest despair does not dare to name, wish, or hope for the help (as it seems to him) which he would wholeheartedly and gladly purchase with his own life were that possible, and in doing so thus find comfort. However, the words of Paul, Romans 8 [26–27], properly apply here: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought (that is, as was said above, we dare not express our wishes), rather the Spirit himself intercedes for us mightily with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the heart knows what is the mind of the Spirit,” etc. Also Ephesians 3 [20], “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.”

One should not despise a Christian person as if he were a Turk, a pagan, or a godless person. He is precious in God’s sight and his prayer is powerful and great, for he has been sanctified by Christ’s blood and anointed with the Spirit of God. Whatever he sincerely prays for, especially in the unexpressed yearning of his heart, becomes a great, unbearable cry in God’s ears, God must listen, as he did to Moses, Exodus 14 [15], “Why do you cry to me?” even though Moses couldn’t whisper, so great was his anxiety and trembling in the terrible troubles that beset him. His sighs and the deep cry of his heart divided the Red Sea and dried it up, led the children of Israel across, and drowned Pharaoh with all his army,³ etc. This and even more can be accomplished by a true, spiritual longing. Even Moses did not know how or for what he should pray—not knowing how the deliverance would be accomplished—but his cry came from his heart.

Isaiah did the same against King Sennacherib⁴ and so did many other kings and prophets who accomplished inconceivable and impossible things by prayer, to their astonishment afterward. But before that they would not have dared to expect or wish so much of God. This means to receive things far higher and greater than we can understand or pray for, as St. Paul says, Ephesians 3 [20], etc. Again, St. Augustine declared that his mother was praying, sighing, and weeping for him, but did not desire anything more than

that he might be converted from the errors of the Manicheans⁵ and become a Christian.⁶ Thereupon God gave her not only what she desired but, as St. Augustine puts it, her “chiefest desire” (*cardinem desiderii eius*) that is, what she longed for with unutterable sighs—that Augustine become not only a Christian but also a teacher above all others in Christendom.⁷ Next to the apostles Christendom has none that is his equal.

Who can doubt that those Israelite children who died before they could be circumcised on the eighth day were yet saved by the prayers of their parents in view of the promise that God willed to be their God. God (they say) has not limited his power to the sacraments, but has made a covenant with us through his word.⁸ Therefore we ought to speak differently and in a more consoling way with Christians than with pagans or wicked people (the two are the same), even in such cases where we do not know God’s hidden judgment. For he says and is not lying, “All things are possible to him who believes” [Mark 9:23], even though they have not prayed, or expected, or hoped for what they would have wanted to see happen. ☞

Endnotes

1. Luther wrote this item to be appended to Bugenhagen’s exposition of Psalm 29.
2. Cf. I Cor. 15:8.
3. Exod. 14:26–28.
4. Cf. Isa. 37:4.
5. As a young man Augustine (354–430) adhered to the philosophy of the Persian teacher Manes (ca. 215–275), which was based on a dualism of light and darkness.
6. *Confessions*, 5, 8; cf. F. J. Sheed (trans.), *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1943), p. 931.
7. Augustine subsequently became bishop of Hippo. His thinking has played a significant role in Christian theology and had considerable influence upon Luther, who frequently quoted from his writings.
8. At this point the edition of Luther’s works by Enders (vol. XV, pp. 55–56) includes some addition material as cited in *WA* 53, 207, n. 1: “that he could without them [and sacrament and in ways unknown to us save the unbaptized infants as he did for many in the time of the law of Moses (even kings) apart from the law, such as, Job, Naaman, the king of Nineveh, Babylon, Egypt, etc. However, he did not want the law to be openly despised, but upheld under threat of the punishment of an eternal curse.
“So I consider and hope that the good and merciful God is well-intentioned toward these infants who do not receive baptism through no fault of their own or in disregard of his manifest command of baptism.
“Yet [I consider] that he does not and did not wish this to be publicly preached or believed because of the iniquity of the world, so that what he had ordained and commanded would not be despised. For we see that he has commanded much because of the iniquity of the world, but does not constrain the godly in the same way.
“In summary, the Spirit turns everything for those who fear him to the best, but to the obstinate he is obstinate” [Ps. 18:27].