

A photograph of a field at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. In the foreground, a single stalk of grain, possibly wheat or barley, is in sharp focus, with its seed heads clearly visible. The background shows a dark, silhouetted landscape under the bright sky.

***ANICIUS MANLIUS
SEVERINUS
BOETHIUS***

***THE CONSOLATION
OF PHILOSOPHY
(SEDFIELD
TRANSLATION)***

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius

The Consolation of Philosophy (Sedgefield translation)

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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In the days when the Goths out of the land of Scythia has raised way against the Roman empire and under the kinds Rædgod and Alaric had stormed Rome, and won all the realm of Italy from the mountains even to the island of Sicily, then, after those kings, did Theodoric hold the same empire in sway. Theodoric was an Arruling and a Christian, though he held fast to the Arian heresy. To the Romans he promised his friendship, and that they should keep their old rights; but he kept that promise very basely, and his end was grievous and full of sin, in that his countless crimes were increased by the murder of Pope John. At that time there lived a consul, a chief we should now call him, whose name was Boethius, a man of book-learning and in worldly life most truly wise. He, perceiving the manifold wrongs wrought by Theodoric upon the Christian faith and upon the chief man of the Romans, began to recall the glad times and immemorial rights they had once enjoyed under the Caesars, their ancient lords. And so meditating, he began to muse and cast about within himself how he might wrest the sovereignty from the unrighteous king and restore it to them of the true faith and of righteous life. Wherefore, sending word privily to the Caesar at Constantinople, the chief city of the Greeks and the seat of their kings, because this Caesar was of the kin of the ancient lords of the Romans, he prayed him to help them back to their Christian faith and their old laws. But cruel king Theodoric heard of these designs, and straightway commanded that Boethius be thrust into a dungeon and kept fast therein. How when this good man fell into so great straits he waxed sore of mind, by so much the more that he had once known happier days. In the prison he

could find no comfort; falling down, grovelling on his face he
by sorrowing on the floor, in deep despair, and began to
weep over himself, and to sing, and this was his song:



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The songs that I, poor exile, once sang so merrily I must now croon sadly sighing, and make of unmeet words. I who of old did oft so deftly weave them, now ever the fitting words I fit awry, weeping aye and sobbing. 'Tis faithless prosperity hath dimmed my sight, blinding me and forsaking me in this sunless cell, and that to which I ever trusted most hath robbed me of all my joy. It hath turned its back upon me and utterly fled from me. Why, oh why, did my friends tell me I was a happy man? How can he be happy that cannot abide in happiness?



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When I had sung thus plaintively, saith Boethius, there entered unto me divine Philosophy, who, addressing words of greeting to my mournful friend, said, 'Art thou not the man that was once nourished and taught in my school? Then how comes it that thou art thus grievously oppressed with these worldly sorrows? Unless, methinks, thou hast too soon forgotten the weapons that once I gave thee.' Then, lifting up her voice, she cried, 'Depart from the mind of my servant, ye worldly cares accursed, for ye are the worst of foes, and suffer him to return again to my teachings.' And she drew nearer unto my grieving intelligence, saith Boethius, and raised it up somewhat from its prostrate state; then, drying its eyes, she asked it cheerily whether it knew again its foster-mother. With that the Mind turned towards her and forthwith clearly recognized his own mother, that same Philosophy that long before had trained and taught him. And perceiving that the mantle of her doctrine was much rent and torn by the hands of foolish men, he asked her how this came about. And Philosophy made answer and said that her disciples had torn her thus, being minded to possess her altogether. But of a truth they will gather much folly by their presumption and vainglory unless every one of them shall turn again to her healing care.

Here Philosophy began to take pity on the Mind's feebleness, and fell to singing, and these were her words: 'Ah, how deep the pit in which the mind labours when it is assailed by the hardships of this life! If it forget its own light (that is, joy eternal), and press on to unfamiliar darkness

(that is, the cares of this world), as this Mind now doth, naught else shall it know but sorrow.'

After that Philosophy, that is to say, the Spirit of Reason, had sung this song, she began again to speak, and she said to the Mind, 'I see thou hast need of comfort rather than of woeful words. Wherefore, if only thou wilt show shame for thine error, I will soon begin to raise thee up and carry thee with me to heaven.'

'What,' answered the sorrow-stricken Mind, 'and is this the boon and the reward thou didst always promise them that would obey thee? Is this wise Plato's saw thou toldst me of long ago, that without righteousness no power was rightful? Dost thou mark how the righteous are hated and oppressed because they are resolved to do thy will, and how the unrighteous are exalted by reason of their misdeeds and their self-esteem? Even that they may do their wicked will the sooner, they are furthered with gifts and possessions. Therefore I will now call earnestly upon God.'

Then he began to sing, and these were the words of his song:

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‘O Thou Creator of heaven and earth, that rulest on the eternal throne, Thou that makest the heavens to turn in swift course, and the stars to obey Thee, and the sun with his shining beams to quench the darkness of black night, (so too the moon with her pale beam maketh the stars to grow dim in the heaven, and at times robbeth the sun of his light, coming between him and us men; and that bright star too that we call the morning star, and which by its other name we call the evening star), Thou that givest short hours to the days of winter, and longer ones to those of summer, Thou that in autumn with the strong north-east wind spoilest the trees of their leaves, and again in spring givest them fresh ones with the soft south-west winds, lo! all creatures do Thy will, and keep the ordinances of Thy commandments, save man only; he setteth Thee at naught.

‘O Almighty Creator and Ruler of all things, help now Thy poor people! Wherefore, O Lord, hast Thou ever suffered that Fate should change as she doth, for she oppresseth the innocent and harmeth not the guilty at all? The wicked sit on thrones, and trample the saints under their feet; bright virtues abide in hiding, and the unrighteous mock the righteous. False swearing bringeth no harm to man, nor false guile that is cloaked with deceits. Wherefore well-nigh all men shall turn to doubt, if Fate shall change according to the will of wicked men, and Thou wilt not check her.

‘O my Lord, Thou that beholdest all that Thou hast made, look now in Thy loving kindness upon this miserable earth, and also upon all mankind, for that at this present it is all struggling with the waves of this world.’

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While the Mind was thus uttering his plaint and singing this song, Philosophy (that is to say, Reason) watching him with a cheerful eye, in no wise cast down for his melancholy, and she said unto him, 'No sooner did I see thee lamenting thus and sorrowing than I perceived that thou hadst departed from thy native home—that is to say, from my teachings. Thou didst depart from it when thou didst forsake thy firm belief, and bethink thee that Fate ruled this world at her own pleasure, disrespectful of God's will or leave, or of the deeds of man. I knew that thou hadst departed therefrom, but how far I knew not, until thou thyself didst make all clear to me in thy song of sorrow. But though thou hast indeed wandered farther than ever, yet art thou not utterly banished from thine home, though far astray. No one else hath led thee into error; 'twas thyself alone, by thine own heedlessness; nor would any man be led to expect this of thee if thou wouldst but remember thy birth and citizenship as the world goes, or again, according to the spirit, of what fellowship thou wast in mind and understanding; for thou art one of the righteous and upright in purpose, that are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. From hence, that is, from his righteous purpose, no man is ever banished save he himself so chooseth. Wheresoever he be, he hath that ever with him, and having it he is with his own kin and his own fellow-citizens in his own hand, being in the company of the righteous. Whosoever then is worthy to be in their service hath perfect freedom.

'Nor do I shun this lowly and this foul dwelling, if only I find thee wise, nor do I care for walls wrought of gold, as I care for a righteous will in thee. What I seek here is not

books, but that which understands books, to wit, thy mind. Very rightly didst thou lament the injustice of Fate, both in the exalted power of the unrighteous and in mine own dishonour and neglect, and in the licence of the wicked as regards the prosperity of this world. But as both thine indignation and thy grief have made thee so desponding, I may not answer thee till the time be come. For whatsoever man shall begin untimely hath no perfect ending.

‘When the sun’s beams shine hottest in the month of August he is foolish that would commit any seed to the dry furrows; so too is he that would look for flowers during the storms of winter. Nor canst thou press wine in midwinter, though thou wouldst fain drink of the warm must.’

Then Philosophy cried aloud and said, ‘May I then put thy fixed belief to the proof, that I may thereby get to know by what means and in what manner I am to cure thee?’

‘Prove me as thou wilt,’ answered the Mind.

Then said Philosophy, ‘Dost thou believe that Fate rules this world, or that aught of good may happen without a Cause?’

‘I do not believe,’ replied the Mind, ‘that in that case anything could happen in such an orderly fashion; nay, of a truth I know that God is the controller of His own work, and from that true faith I have never swerved.’

Then again Philosophy answered and said, ‘It was about time same thing thou wast singing but a little while ago, that each creature knew from God its due season, and fulfilled its due course, save only man. Wherefore I marvel beyond measure what ails thee, and why thou complainest, holding this faith. But let us consider the matter yet more deeply. I do not fully know which of thy doubts remain; but thou sayest thou hast no doubt that God guideth this world; tell me then, how would He like it to be?’

M. I can hardly understand thy question, yet thou sayest I am to answer thee.

P. Dost think I know not the danger of that confusion in which thou art wrapt around? Come, tell me what is the end that every beginning is minded to have?

M. I knew it once, but this sorrow of mine has reft me of the memory of it.

P. Knowest thou whence everything comes?

M. I know that everything comes from God.

P. How can it be that, knowing the beginning, thou knowest not the end also? Confusions may distract the mind, but cannot rob it of its understanding. And I would have thee tell me whether thou knowest what thou art thyself?

M. I know that I belong to living man, intelligent, yet doomed to die.

P. Dost thou know aught else concerning thyself, besides this thou hast said?

M. Naught else do I know.

P. Now I understand thy melancholy, seeing that thou thyself knowest not thy nature is; and I know how to cure thee. Thou hast said that thou wast an outcast and bereft of all good, in that thou knewest not what thou wast, and thereby thou didst make known thine ignorance of the end that every beginning has in view, when thou didst think that unguided and reckless men were the happy ones and the rulers of this world. Furthermore, thou didst make known that thou knewest not with what guidance God ruleth this world, or how He would like it to be ordered, saying that thy belief was that harsh Fate governs the world apart from the design of God. Indeed, there was great risk that thou shouldst think so, for not only wast thou in boundless misfortune, but thou hadst even well-nigh perished withal. Thank God therefore that He hath succoured thee, and that I have not utterly forsaken thine understanding. Now that thou believest that, apart from God's design, Fate cannot by herself guide the world, we have fuel for thy salvation. Thou needest fear naught now, for from the little spark which

thou settest to the under the light of life has shone upon thee. But it is not yet the time for me to hearten thee yet farther, for it is the habit of every mind to follow falsehood when once it hath forsaken the dictates of truth. From this have begun to gather the mists that perplex the understanding and utterly confound the true sight, even such mists as are now over thy mind. But first I must dissipate them, that afterwards I may the more easily be able to bring the true light unto thee.

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‘Behold the sun and the other heavenly bodies; when black clouds come before them, they can no longer give out their light. So too at times the south wind in fierce storms stirreth up the sea that before was in calm weather as clear as glass to look upon; but as soon as it is troubled by the surging waves it very quickly groweth gloomy, that was but now so smiling to behold. Lo, the brook also swerveth from its right course, when a great rock rolling from the high mountain falleth into it, parting its waters, and damming up its proper course. Even so the gloom of thy troubled mind withstandeth the light of my teaching. But, if thou art desirous in good faith to know the true light, put away from thee evil joys and unprofitable, and also useless miseries and the evil dread of this world. That is to say, exalt not thyself beyond measure in thine health and happiness, nor do thou again despair of all good in any adversity, for the mind is ever bound about with confusion in which either of these two ills holdeth sway.’