

Pierre Viret’s Consolation for the Persecuted Huguenots

REBEKAH A. SHEATS

Abstract

This article examines the consolation that the Swiss Reformer Pierre Viret offered to the persecuted Huguenots from 1530 to the 1550s. During these years, Viret, living primarily in Lausanne and Geneva, closely followed the persecution of the Protestants in neighboring France, and offered counsel and comfort to the troubled Huguenots. The consolation he offered these suffering believers is examined and summarized through the Reformer’s letters and writings.

I. *Placards, Jean Morin, and the Shoemaker’s Son*

On the morning of October 18, 1534, the inhabitants of a predominantly Roman Catholic Paris exited their houses to find placards nailed to their walls and to posts on their street corners. These placards, affixed by unknown hands, denounced “the horrible, great, and unbearable abuses of the popish mass.” Violently deprecating the idolatry of the mass, the placards called for all true Christians to abandon the superstition of the Catholic priests and monks (who were declared to be “presumptuous enemies of the Word of God”) and begin celebrating the Lord’s Supper with its original meaning and simplicity.¹

¹ Jean Henri Merle D’Aubigné, *History of the Reformation in the Time of Calvin* (Harrisonburg, VA.: Sprinkle Publications, 2000), 3:98–103.

The Affair of the Placards, as it came to be called, terrified and infuriated the Roman Catholic populace of France. Many of the Protestants themselves disapproved of the inflammatory nature of the act, and feared the strife it would engender. In city after city across the realm, the placards were discovered. Indeed, so bold were the conspirators that a copy of the articles was even affixed to the door of the royal bedchamber. King Francis I, appalled and enraged at the dishonor and affront he deemed had been shown his person, immediately ordered a search to be made for the instigators of such a vile, seditious act.

The hunt for the treasonous conspirators began in Paris. The officer entrusted with the task of searching out the accursed “Lutherans” was a man by the name of Jean Morin, the *lieutenant-criminel* (public prosecutor), who was as well known for his cruelty as he was for his dissolute life. Knowing Morin to be perfectly suitable for the task, the king added an increase in pay as a further incentive to inspire Morin to bend all his efforts toward the discovery of the heretics. Henry Baird notes, “The judicious addition of six hundred *livres parisis* [francs minted at Paris] to his salary afforded him a fresh stimulus and prevented his zeal from flagging.”² With such motivation, Morin was certain of discovering the perpetrators of the dastardly placard affair. Bartholomew Milon, son of a Paris shoemaker, was one of the first who fell prey to the zeal of the *lieutenant-criminel*.

As a young man, Bartholomew had led a profligate life, despising God and living only to satisfy his lusts and sensual pleasures. One day, while engaging in one of his dissolute frolics, Bartholomew broke several of his ribs. The ribs never properly healed, and the young man soon could no longer walk upright. With the passage of time his legs grew weaker, and at last he found himself paralyzed from the waist down.

Embittered by his ruined life and his broken, pain-racked body, Bartholomew sat all day upon his bed within his father’s shop, mocking those who passed by the shop’s window. His jeering one day caught the attention of a man (whose name has been forgotten to history) who paused to address the young cripple.

“Poor man,” the stranger replied to Milon’s mockery, “why do you mock at the passersby? Do you not see that God has broken your body to heal your soul?” The man then drew forth a French New Testament and handed it to Bartholomew. “Read it,” he said—and read it Bartholomew did.

With the Scriptures in hand, Bartholomew drank deeply of the words of

² Henry M. Baird, *History of the Rise of the Huguenots* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1880), 1:171.

life, and was changed forever. Day and night he studied the Word, reveling in the truth contained therein, and day by day he spoke of Christ, not only to his own family, but to any who would listen.

The astonishing change that marked the life of the paralyzed shoemaker's son arrested the attention of many who daily passed the little shop in Paris, and many were the souls that first heard the gracious words of the gospel from the lips of this young man.

When the placards appeared in Paris and Jean Morin began his hunt for heretics, the *lieutenant-criminel* quickly found his way to the shoemaker's door. It mattered not that Bartholomew's broken frame clearly proclaimed him innocent of having played any part in affixing the noxious placards to the city's walls; he was suspected of heresy, and that was sufficient to condemn him.

It is recorded that Morin, upon entering the shoemaker's shop, turned furiously to where Bartholomew lay. "You," he cried, pointing at the man, "get up!" Despite the deadly peril of his situation, Bartholomew could not restrain a smile at the inquisitor's imperious command, and simply replied, "Sir, it would take a greater lord than you to make me rise up and walk."³

Unable to raise himself from his bed, the shoemaker's son was carried to prison by Morin's soldiers. Bartholomew's crippled condition did not exempt him from the customary harsh treatment received from Morin's hands, but the man bore his handling patiently and with astonishing fortitude. Remaining peacefully steadfast through all, he spent his final days encouraging his fellow-prisoners.

Bartholomew was condemned to be burned over a slow fire, a sentence that was carried out on the 13th of November, 1534.⁴ Carried past his father's workshop on the way to his execution, his courage never faltered. As Jean Crespin noted, "The very enemies of the Truth were astonished at the steadfastness displayed by this admirable servant and witness of the Son of God—both in his life and in his death."⁵

The story of Bartholomew the shoemaker's son was only one of many. Jean Morin's zeal knew no bounds, and hundreds in Paris lived in terror for their lives. Any suspicion was sufficient to convict a man. Indeed, in those days anyone who "didn't bow the knee when the bells of the *Ave Maria* were heard, forgot to hail the statues of the saints, ate meat on a fast day, or

³ Jean Crespin, *Histoire des martyres* (Toulouse: Société des Livres Religieux, 1885–1889), 1:303. This and all following translations of French texts are my own.

⁴ Émile G. Léonard, *Histoire Générale du Protestantisme*, vol. 1, *La Réformation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961), 208; ET, *A History of Protestantism*, vol. 1, *The Reformation*, ed. H. H. Rowley, trans. Joyce M. H. Reid (London: Nelson, 1966), 234.

⁵ Crespin, *Histoire des martyres*, 1:303.

learned Greek and Hebrew,”⁶ was beyond doubt a heretic, and for many long months the fires of martyrdom lit the streets and countryside of France.

II. *Pierre Viret's Reaction*

News of this new wave of persecution sweeping over France was received with horror and dismay by the believers in neighboring Switzerland. Pierre Viret (1511–1571), a native pastor of the Pays de Vaud (a Canton of French Switzerland) and friend and associate of John Calvin, felt deeply the bloody trials and unspeakable affliction being endured by the Huguenots, his fellow-believers across the border. As a young man, Viret had left his native home in the Pays de Vaud and journeyed to Paris to study for the priesthood. While there he had been converted to the Protestant faith, and was forced to flee the city to save his life. Returning to his hometown of Orbe, at twenty-one years of age Viret was pressed into the ministry by William Farel, the man who would later call Calvin to the same task. In 1534 he journeyed to Geneva to assist Farel in bringing the Reformation to that city. Now, in the midst of his work at Geneva, Viret heard that persecutions had broken out afresh across the border in France, and listened with tears to the deplorable tales of refugees fleeing their native land in an attempt to save their lives from the cruel persecution and death awaiting them.

Deeply moved by the harrowing news of ever-increasing martyrdoms of men, women, and children, Viret bent all his energies to seek a means of relieving the suffering of his persecuted brethren. On August 4, 1535, he and his co-laborer Farel wrote to the churches of Germany and German Switzerland, requesting their aid both by prayer and advice for the believers in France, particularly the Vaudois or Waldensians of Provence. “The cause of the Vaudois is the cause of us all,” they declared, begging the assistance of their German brothers in behalf of the persecuted Huguenots.⁷ Appeals were also made to the Protestant lords of Bern, who remonstrated with Francis I on the cruel measures being employed against the Huguenots.

In God’s providence, the intercession of Viret and his fellow-ministers obtained its desired effects. Francis I, pressured by the Protestant magistrates of both Germany and Switzerland, published two edicts that moderated the Roman Catholic persecution of French Protestants.⁸

With the dawning of 1539, however, persecutions broke out anew in

⁶ Alexandre Crottet, *Petite Chronique Protestante de France* (Paris: A. Cherbuliez, 1846), 83.

⁷ A. L. Herminjard, *Correspondance des Réformateurs dans les Pays de Langue Française* (Geneva: H. Georg, 1866–1897), 3:327.

⁸ Jean Barnaud, *Pierre Viret, sa vie et son oeuvre* (Saint-Amans: G. Carayol, 1911), 186.

France. Viret, writing from Lausanne and neighboring Geneva (where he was temporarily stationed after Calvin's expulsion from that city), wrote his fellow-Reformer in Strasbourg of the disturbing news the Huguenot refugees brought of the present state of France. Calvin replied to one of Viret's letters on the 19th of May, 1540:

Your letter was a very sad one to me, and all the more so because I can well imagine that cruel butchery to boil over without measure, as always happens whenever it has once burst forth, and there is no way of putting a stop to it. ... Wherefore, unless the Lord open up some new outlet, there is no other way of helping our unhappy brethren than by our prayers and exhortations.⁹

Writing Calvin again in February of 1541, Viret informed his brother of yet more heart-breaking tales brought to him by the Huguenot refugees:

Geneva, February 6, 1541

We have just had the unexpected arrival of Saunier's father-in-law (with his other son-in-law, who is also a refugee). They recounted to us how the Lord delivered them, as well as what terrors are still shaking the brethren. No respite has been given the captives; many have been tortured or put to death; those who are still alive live in greatest fear for their lives. You have heard, I think, of the Vaudois minister who, taken by his enemies, denounced a thousand four hundred families, who have all been delivered up to the slaughter.¹⁰

As the persecutions escalated in France, Viret offered assistance to the numerous refugees seeking asylum in Geneva and the surrounding towns. In July Viret and his associate André Zebédée journeyed to Bern to seek further aid for the suffering Huguenots. Appearing before the lords on the 17th of that month, Viret presented his petition, asking the Bernese lords to again request of Francis I an abatement of the present persecution. The records of the Council of Bern note:

Regarding the request made by Pierre Viret and Zebédée in the name of the other [ministers] their brothers regarding the persecution of the Protestants in France, my lords are of the opinion that, for the moment, it is not expedient to importune the King, seeing that he has written to my lords requesting them to leave him in peace.¹¹

Finding further petitions to the magistrates unavailing, Viret returned home with a heavy heart. Burning with a desire to aid his afflicted, suffering brethren, he was troubled at finding his endeavors to assist them apparently

⁹ Jules Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858), 1:187.

¹⁰ Pierre Viret to John Calvin, February 6, 1541, quoted in Charles Schnetzler et al., eds., *Pierre Viret d'après lui-même* (Lausanne: Georges Bridel, 1911), 47.

¹¹ Quoted in Herminjard, *Correspondance*, 5:371.

fruitless. But, as he later wrote, “[God] has not particularly declared that he will aid us by this or that means, or by this or that person. . . . He holds these matters in his secret counsel.”¹² He therefore did not despair at the refusal of the civil magistrates.

III. *Letters of Comfort*

Knowing that God employs whatever means please him, Viret turned to yet another method of providing assistance and comfort to the persecuted Huguenots: the use of his pen. During the difficult days of 1541, he published his *Epistre Consolatoire envoyée aux fideles qui souffrent persecution pour le Nom de Jesus et Verité evangelique* (A letter of consolation to the French Protestants suffering persecution for the name of Christ). Within this work, Viret’s pastoral heart is clearly seen in his ardent desire to comfort and console the Huguenot believers.

Beginning his letter with a reminder to the persecuted believers that they were united to Christ and thus of one body with him, Viret called to mind Peter’s advice: “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you” (1 Pet 4:12 KJV).

My dear brethren, seeing that we are members of Jesus, we must not be surprised or astonished if we are partakers of His cross and suffering. For if we desire to reign with Him we must likewise suffer with Him (2 Tim 2:12). Seeing that He is our Head and we His members, the Head cannot travel by one road and the members by another, but the entire body and all its members must follow the head which guides and governs it.

If then our Head was crowned with thorns, we cannot be a member of His body if we do not feel their pricks and if their pain does not pierce our heart. If our King and sovereign Master was naked and bloodied, covered with reproaches, disgrace, and blasphemies, and nailed to and hanged upon the cross, we must not expect to slumber ever at our ease in this world.¹³

Recognizing that the path of persecution is a way of thorns, Viret reminded his readers that this painful path is also a training ground that will yield much fruit. Though trials and suffering appear grievous and horror-filled for the moment, they are indeed a blessing in disguise, he declared, for they draw the believer to a greater understanding of Christ:

¹² Pierre Viret, *Epistres aus fideles, pour les instruire et les admonester et exhorter touchant leur office, et pour les consoler en leurs tribulations* (Geneva: Jean Rivery, 1559), 164.

¹³ Pierre Viret, *Epistre Consolatoire envoyée aux fideles qui souffrent persecution pour le Nom de Jesus et Verité evangelique* (Geneva, 1541), 3–4.

In reading the Scriptures we learn the theoretical, but we are never good theologians until we practice our theology in divine letters, and never shall we comprehend it well without being exercised in it by various trials, by which we come to the true understanding and knowledge of the matters we read of, and taste the goodness and assistance, help, and favor of God. By this we see how blessed they are who trust in Him who shall never forsake them. For apart from this we speak only of the Holy Scriptures as armchair generals, and as those who discuss the war or other matters after only hearing of it, with no understanding or experience of it whatever.

My brethren, let us thus regard the afflictions and persecutions that we endure in this valley of misery, for they are great blessings of God to instruct us how to mortify our flesh, to crucify and put off the old man in order that the new might be endued with greater vigor, and to humble our sensual and carnal flesh—so prideful and rebellious against the will of God—that we might be made obedient and subject to the Spirit (2 Cor 5:1–5, 14–15).¹⁴

Persecutions are one of God's special blessings, according to Viret, who assured the troubled Huguenots that all they were experiencing was for their good. For, as he noted, if afflictions were not for the good of the saints, God could not be a good God:

Indeed, if persecution were not a singular blessing of God, we would be constrained to look upon God our Father as bitter, harsh, and severe toward His children because He allowed His servants the prophets, apostles, and martyrs—indeed, even His own Son Jesus Christ the King and Ruler of all—to be thus treated by wicked and unbelieving men.¹⁵

To the contrary, God's goodness and mercy are openly displayed in the persecutions he brings upon his children, by which he seals them as his own:

The sorrow of the children of God is always turned into a joy and jubilation which shall have no end. They shall laugh when the wicked weep and gnash their teeth (John 16:20–22). It is fitting that each of us drink a part of the cup which the Lord drank, each one his portion. But the wicked and reprobate drink down and swallow the dregs, which shall be terrifyingly bitter. Let us rejoice in our tribulations, and sing praises to the Lord with the disciples of Jesus Christ (Acts 5:41), being assured that the Lord shall never forsake us, but to the contrary, just as He delivered Noah with his ark from the depths and torrents of the flood and delivered the children of Israel from the hard bondage of Egypt, spoiling the wicked persecutors who afflicted His people, so also He shall now be merciful to His Church (Gen 7:1, 17–23; Exod 14:30).¹⁶

As persecutions increased, Viret knew that the temptation to abandon Christ (or at least to conceal one's adherence to him) would become strong. He knew also that many of those who had openly professed Christ in times of safety would now return to the apostate church and denounce those who suffered for the sake of the gospel. Writing to the Huguenots on a later

¹⁴ Viret, *Epistre Consolatoire*, 7–8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13–14.

occasion, Viret warned them of the dangers of following those who sought to worship God without taking up their cross to follow him:

Let us not be like those who said to Jesus Christ, “If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross,” and then we shall believe in Thee. And, “He saved others; let him save himself” (Matt 27:40; Mark 15:29–30; Luke 23:35). There are today many who say the same, and who are quite ready to believe in Jesus Christ as long as they need not be crucified, and as long as they never see the cross and are never betrayed by their enemies as thieves and murderers. All those who desire the Gospel without the cross, without tribulations and persecutions, are Christians such as these. ...

Therefore beware of ever following the advice and counsel of such persons. But follow God—and Him alone. Follow him who said, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world” (Gal 6:14). And also, “For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” This is “unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks [or the wise of this world] foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 2:2; 1:23–24). And therefore this same apostle says in another place, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Rom 1:16). So also you have no cause for shame.¹⁷

Throughout the decades of the sixteenth century, persecutions in France continued. In August of 1553, Viret wrote Rudolph Gwalther, a pastor of Zurich, “In France the enemies of Christ ruthlessly hold sway with their accustomed ferocity, ... Our times are most certainly evil indeed, and I know of no comfort remaining but prayer.”¹⁸

Though much concern, compassion, and pity for the physical suffering and torments of the Huguenots filled Viret’s heart, he was nevertheless more concerned with the state of their soul than their physical wellbeing. In the midst of persecution, he explained that it was not enough to merely suffer patiently; an inward examination must also be made. Writing to the persecuted Frenchmen, Viret begged them to examine themselves by the light of the Word of God to ensure that they were standing in his path and walking according to his commands. As Viret so aptly noted, true comfort requires a right view of God. Apart from this, all suffering will inevitably lead to deception or despair.¹⁹

Recognizing that lying spirits and wily seducers always prey upon the afflicted church, Viret called the troubled Huguenots to guard themselves against any who sought to draw them from the path of righteousness (and persecution) to walk in an easier, safer way:

¹⁷ Viret, *Epistres aus fideles*, 117–18.

¹⁸ Schnetzler et al., *Pierre Viret*, 116.

¹⁹ Viret, *Epistres aus fideles*, 11–16.

And above all things beware lest you fall prey to seducers and false prophets, who alter the path and turn you from the right way. Take heed that they do not hinder your course, and that by this means they be the cause of you losing your prize and crown of glory which is prepared by the just Judge for all who can say in truth with the holy apostle: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim 4:7). For not all those who run and fight shall receive the prize, but only those who run and fight as it has been commanded them (1 Cor 9:24–27; 2 Tim 2:4–5).²⁰

To merely run the race is not sufficient. In his letters, Viret warned that a man's patient endurance under trials would avail him nothing if he were not running the race as God had prescribed for him.

But how was a believer to know that he was walking in the course which God had laid? Viret's answer was simple: there is only one way available by which to know God rightly:

The way we are to inquire at the mouth of the Lord and request counsel of Him to be informed of His will and to have a conscience well assured, is by His Word, by which alone He reveals Himself and communicates Himself to us. Therefore we cannot have a true understanding of His will, nor do anything which might be pleasing and acceptable to Him and which would not be a sin worthy of death and damnation, except as much as we follow the rule He has given us in His Word. For this is the light, the torch, and the guide which directs our steps, which is more necessary to us than the sun is to the world (Pss 17:4–5; 119:105).

For without it, what path would we take? What could we do except stray from the path of life into the path which leads to the depths of hell? Therefore take most careful heed that you never abandon this Guide. For as soon as you turn from it, you shall be lost. You will walk in the night and be enveloped in darkness. ... Take firm hold upon this divine Word. Keep it as your shield, your staff, sword, armor, and weapons (Prov 30:5; Eph 6:13–17). For while you are thus accoutered, you shall be invincible. You shall vanquish and overcome all.²¹

The Word of God is full of promises of comfort for the afflicted Christian, but Viret warned the persecuted believers that these marvelous promises were available only to those who walked according to its rule. As he strove to console the troubled and suffering Huguenots, Viret was poignantly aware of the danger of false assurance, and therefore in his letters called the believers time and again to examine themselves to be certain that they were in the faith. "If you are well established in true doctrine," he wrote, "persevere in the good until the end, for salvation is only promised to those who persevere, and to no others."²²

Therefore,

²⁰ Pierre Viret, *Letters of Comfort to the Persecuted Church*, trans. Rebekah A. Sheats (Monticello, FL: Psalm 78 Ministries, 2015), 39–40.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 41–42.

²² Viret, *Epistres aus fideles*, 12.

It is necessary first of all that you pay diligent heed to what teaching you follow, and why, and in whose name you receive it, in order that before all things you might lay a sure foundation, and that your beginning might be in the name of God and by His Spirit, as I am assured that it is. For if your foundation is in Jesus Christ and in His Word, and your commencement is in God, you are assured that He who began His work in you shall complete it until the day of the Lord.

And if it please God that you suffer for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, you have this comfort at least (which is indeed not small), that you are assured in your heart that you suffer neither for heresy nor false doctrine, nor as an evildoer, but for a good cause—for the Truth, and for righteousness and the glory of God (1 Pet 4:14–16). Therefore you are certain that you shall be partakers of the blessing and bliss promised by Jesus Christ to those who suffer for His name, and that your sorrow shall be turned to joy, and your temporal afflictions shall be exchanged for eternal and everlasting comfort and joy (Matt 5:10; Luke 6:20–23; John 16:20–22).

But if we are not well assured of the doctrine we follow, and are not well-founded in the certainty of the Word of God, we are deprived of this great comfort and of all consolation. Therefore this is the first and chief matter to which you must take heed and examine yourselves, that you beware of believing every spirit, but test them to see if they are of God, in order that it might not happen to you as it has to many poor people who have fallen into the hands of various dangerous spirits by which they were greatly led astray (1 John 4:1).²³

After dealing with the necessity of examining one's state before God by the light of the Word, Viret comforted his readers with the blessed assurance enjoyed by true believers:

Let us not fear that [Christ] will fail to give a good account of us to the Father. For He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep (John 10:11). Let us only take care that we are sheep, and then we can enjoy full assurance against the rage of the wolves, seeing that we have as our Shepherd the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29; Rev 5:6).²⁴

Indeed, suffering is a grace and an honor that God bestows upon his children:

I can say little to you beyond what Paul wrote, that is, that God has given you the grace “not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake” (Phil 1:29).

This holy apostle here touches upon a point which is truly worth noting. For he instructs us in a knowledge and a secret which is unknown to the world, and is neither known nor understood by any but the sons of God. For the sons of this world who are Christians only in name and appearance experience nothing but great horror when they suffer, and above all when they suffer for Jesus Christ. Yet they meanwhile appear to bear a great affection for the cross of Jesus Christ which is quite marvelous. In witness to this they adorn themselves with crosses, and honor and reverence them as if they had Jesus Christ within their arms. And yet there is nothing in the world for which they have a greater hatred or abhorrence than the cross of Jesus Christ. For if they must suffer the

²³ Ibid., 22–23.

²⁴ Viret, *Letters of Comfort*, 71.

least thing of the world for it, they think themselves lost. They despair. They are prepared to renounce Jesus Christ a thousand times rather than lose even one of their fingernails for Him, or bear His cross even a short distance. Thus God has not given them the grace to suffer for Him. For this is a great honor that He bestows upon us, to make us companions of Jesus Christ His Son, and causes us to suffer with Him, that we might also reign with Him (Rom 8:18; 1 Pet 3:13–17; Acts 5:41).²⁵

With true assurance of being a child of God, no persecution is to be feared. As Viret wrote in August of 1553, no matter how violent or ruthless the enemies of Christ may be, “that which ever prevails over the fury of the tyrants is the steadfastness and courage of the martyrs of Christ.”²⁶ This steadfastness and courage is found in the understanding that every believer is held and upheld by God himself.

To illustrate this point, Viret reminded the Huguenots that God, like a father, holds each of his children within his arms. From such a position of security, what harm could ever befall them? If a man is truly in Christ, he need fear his enemies no more than the imaginary monsters a child fears in his closet:

Satan, as a magician, seduces and deceives us by his delusions, and it appears to us that he has monsters and horrible and terrifying giants where there is truly nothing but straw and stubble, which the fire of God’s wrath and indignation shall devour in a moment. Let us not fear and let us not be troubled, seeing that we have a Lord, a Captain, and a Father who knows, sees, and understands all the schemes, counsels, and machinations of our enemies, without whose permission they cannot even move or breathe.

They must first receive His permission before they can work any evil against His servants, even as Satan their ruler and lord, who did not dare lay a hand upon Job before asking permission (Job 1:8–12). Indeed, so limited is his power that he did not even possess the boldness to enter a herd of swine without first asking Jesus Christ’s permission (Matt 8:30–31). Now consider that if the prince of this world, the king of the sons of perdition and of all the wicked and reprobate, does not even possess power and dominion over a single hog, how can his vassals, pages, valets, and courtiers possess any greater power?²⁷

So powerful is God’s protection of believers and so great are the chains he places upon his enemies that Satan himself cannot stir without first asking permission. The Christian’s adversary has already been defeated, and must not be feared. Viret wrote:

We know that we are fighting against enemies who are already beaten and defeated—though they still put up a little fight—who are unable to harm us in any way that we ought to fear. It is the same with them as it is with a snake whose head is crushed, who can no

²⁵ Viret, *Epistres aus fideles*, 130–31.

²⁶ Schnetzler et al., *Pierre Viret*, 116.

²⁷ Viret, *Letters of Comfort*, 26.

longer strike, but still twitches in death. Therefore Paul spoke with assurance: “The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly” (Rom 16:20). And John said, “young men ... ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one” (1 John 2:14).

Although those to whom John wrote were still in battle, he nevertheless wrote as if they had already attained the victory, because they were fully assured of obtaining it. And he at the same time declared to them where their power proceeded from, by which they were assured of gaining the victory. For if the Word of God is in them, they do not fight without God, whose word it is, and without faith in Him, which is our victory which overcomes the world, as this same apostle testifies (1 John 5:4). Therefore rest assured in these promises, knowing that the Lord who gave them is faithful.²⁸

Though the rage and power of their enemies might appear invincible, Viret assured the Huguenots that Christ’s power had not waned. Despite all appearances, the Lord still held sway over the Catholic hosts. As in the Garden of Gethsemane, he ruled all according to his good pleasure, no matter how dark the hour appeared:

You can know by this that the Lord holds the bridle of this great murderer and this red dragon, and that He has bound the hands of all your adversaries, just as He bound His enemies in the garden in which He was taken. For though He allowed Himself to be taken by them, nevertheless He so terrified them by His word alone, and so removed from them all power of harm as much as it pleased Him, that not only did He make every one of them fall flat on their faces, but He also bound their hands so tightly that all of them together had not the power to touch a single hair of the head of any of His disciples. For as He said to them, “I am he [whom you seek]: if therefore ye seek me, let these go their way” (John 18:8). This word held the same power as an express command, which all His enemies were constrained to obey whether they liked it or not.

Now, if Jesus Christ had such power against His enemies—indeed, in the very hour when He gave Himself up to die by their hands—we can easily judge whether He possesses any power now (while He is reigning at the right hand of God His Father) to hold in check the rage of His present enemies, and to guard His disciples in the midst of them, while such is His pleasure.²⁹

With the power of Christ holding sway over his enemies, Viret assured the Huguenots that Christ’s church shall never perish. No matter how many martyrs meet their end at the hands of the apostate church and the haters of God, the believer can rest in the assurance that God remains the same, and his promises will not fail. Evil may momentarily appear to triumph over the truth, but this is no cause for fear. Calling to mind examples of God’s dealings with man throughout history, Viret assured the afflicted believers that God will triumph in the end:

²⁸ Ibid., 97–98.

²⁹ Viret, *Epistres aus fideles*, 173.

Though Herod killed the children, he did not kill Jesus whom he sought. Though Herod killed James, Peter still escaped until his hour was come, and the cruel tyrant finished his days miserably among worms, lice, and vermin which ate away his flesh, soul, and conscience before he was even laid in the grave (Acts 12:23). Though Jesus was crucified and buried, He did not remain in the place of the dead, nor could Truth remain entombed. Though King Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem after having laid waste the land of Judah, yet he never entered within the city's gates, but was miserably defeated at what he thought to be his greatest hour (2 Kgs 19:35–37). Pharaoh afflicted Israel in Egypt, but he could not hold them forever, and when he chased after them to bring them back, he and his army were drowned in the sea, which opened itself before the children of God.

Let us then be as Moses, placing our trust in the Lord—not fearing the Egyptians at all—and the Lord shall fight for us, and we shall see the wonders of God. And, though we may suffer for a time, in His time the Lord will raise us up and shall not allow His people to wholly perish.³⁰

With the assurance of being called of God to the suffering prepared for them, and of being protected and preserved by God in the midst of such persecutions, how then are believers to respond to such persecution and suffering? Viret's answer again is simple: rest in God. Call to mind his past goodness and mercies, and rehearse his faithfulness of old:

Recall to mind the victories He has already fought for you and the battles He has won up till now. Consider David's example: David, coming to fight that great giant Goliath, recalled to mind the victory God had already given him over the lion and the bear he killed when he was a shepherd. And from this he drew great hope that God, who gave him the strength to overcome these savage beasts, would not forsake him in the present battle He called David to fight.³¹

These mighty battles of the past and great Ebenezers of history remind the believer that God has not changed, and that he shall always triumph over his enemies, for it is he himself who fights for his people:

This war being waged in God's name is different from those waged humanly. In wars which are humanly waged, there can be no shout of triumph before the victory is won, for the outcome of such wars is doubtful and uncertain. But it is not so here. We are assured of the victory from the moment our Captain sends us into the battle. For He does not place us there to leave us alone, but He is ever with us, and it is He who fights for us. This is well displayed in Stephen, when the heavens were opened before him and Christ was seen at the right hand of the power of God (Acts 7:55–56). And, though we do not see as Stephen saw, it is no less true because of this, seeing that we defend the same cause. This is why Christ willed to appear to this holy martyr, who was the first after the ascension of Jesus Christ to taste death for the testimony of the Gospel. The Lord Jesus did this to testify that thus He is also toward all others who are called into the same combat.

³⁰ Viret, *Letters of Comfort*, 25.

³¹ Viret, *Epistres aus fideles*, 166–67.

Seeing that it is so, we are thus assured that He will not lose the battle. For He it is who said, “Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).³²

Possessing such assurance of victory, the soul needs not fear any danger, Viret exclaimed. No torment need concern the believer, for all proceeds directly from the merciful, powerful, and victorious hand of a loving Father:

But He also later said, “the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matt 10:30). “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father” (Matt 10:29). Seeing then that this is the Lord who sends us, who holds us in His keeping, and who cares for us—even to the very hairs of our head—let us deliver ourselves wholly into His hands, commending ourselves to Him. And then let us await what it pleases Him to send us. For we are quite assured that if we trust in Him, He will send us nothing except what will be to our profit, and nothing shall ever come upon us except such as shall serve to His glory and our good.

For if He cares for the little sparrows and other brute beasts (no matter how little they may be esteemed of men), how much more will He care for His own children, redeemed with the precious blood of His own Son? Did He not say by His prophet that He would give His angels charge over us, to keep us from all harm, and that they would encamp around His own as an army to guard us? (Pss 91:11; 34:7). Therefore you can rest assured in the statement of Paul—that is, that God, who is faithful and true, shall keep all men, particularly those who believe (1 Cor 10:13).

Trust then in these holy promises, pursuing the calling in which the Lord has called you, and fearing more to offend Him than anything else in the world (1 Tim 2:2–3). It must suffice us to be always in the hand of our Father, in whom we can never perish, and that He gave His own Son as our Shepherd, to whom I pray that He shall increase your faith and all His other gifts and graces ever more and more, that you might persevere in His calling unto the end.³³

Thus, though torments and sufferings afflict the soul, Viret assured the Huguenots that as believers they could meet these trials with joy and peace, knowing that all was for their eternal good and the glorification of God’s name. And, though a believer might never fully understand the purpose of his individual trials, Viret called each believer to remember the instruction Christ gave to Peter:

Jesus Christ said to Peter, “When thou wast young, thou girdedst thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry *thee* whither thou wouldest not” (John 21:18). John explains that Jesus Christ said this to signify by what death Peter would glorify God. Peter, having heard this statement from the mouth of his Master, had the boldness to ask Jesus Christ what would become of John his companion who was then present. At this Jesus Christ responded, “If I will that he tarry till I come, what is *that* to thee? follow thou me” (John 21:22). By these words our Lord Jesus supplies us with much sound doctrine:

³² Viret, *Letters of Comfort*, 96–97.

³³ Viret, *Epistres aus fideles*, 150–51.

First, God is glorified in our death and in all that we suffer for His name.

Second, our good Father spares us when it pleases Him.

Third, it has already been ordained what we will suffer, and what death we will die to glorify Him.

Fourth, we must be prepared and fully willing to suffer when it pleases Him.

Fifth, we must not be envious of others if He spares them while we suffer. For our sole concern must be to obey God in all things that it pleases Him to bring upon us, and leave all others in His hands. For He knows well what He wills to do.³⁴

“Leave all in his hands,” Viret counseled. Despite all appearances to the contrary, the Christian life is truly a life of utmost simplicity: fear God, honor him, and rest in his promises. This is the essence of true consolation.

Writing to a young man who was soon to suffer martyrdom for his testimony to Christ, Viret concluded his counsel and comfort by rehearsing the true biblical simplicity of resting and trusting in a wise and righteous God:

The Lord does what He wills with you, and what pleases Him. If He desires to be glorified in your life, He is quite powerful enough to preserve it despite all your enemies. If He desires to be glorified by your death, your death shall not be death, but true life. And the Lord whom you serve shall give you the power, strength, and consolation required for such a combat and battle. For you have the promise of Him who never disappoints the hope of those who wait upon Him. Therefore you need never doubt that He shall perfect the work which He has begun in you.

You must then be prepared, as true and valiant soldiers who go to war to maintain the cause of their ruler and fight valiantly for him, be it by life or by death. But you have an assurance and a consolation more than these; for whether you live or die, you live and die to God, and are assured of the victory if you persevere in this confidence and hope you have in Him, as I trust He shall give you the grace. If it please Him that you die, your death shall be a testimony to the Church of God of the steadfastness and victory of your faith and heart, which can never be vanquished. Though the body may be forced by the violence of your adversaries, they have no power over your heart, your faith, or your hope.³⁵

Whether a believer was facing the loss of goods, reputation, or even his very life, Viret's advice remained the same: “Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee” (Ps 55:22 KJV). With a right knowledge and understanding of God and a true trust in his lovingkindness and wisdom, every affliction is a blessing, and can be received as one, to the glory of God.

IV. Conclusion

Thus by word, prayer, and pen Viret offered consolation, instruction, and encouragement to the faithful Huguenots suffering persecution for the

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 183–84.

³⁵ Jean Crespin, *Des cinq escoliers sortis de Lausanne, bruslez à Lyon* (Geneva: Jules-Guillaume Fick, 1878), 147–48.

sake of their Lord. Writing to those whom he had never met, and whose very names were often unknown to him, Viret's letters express the heart of a true pastor who calls sheep to look to the true and trustworthy Shepherd of their souls.

In concluding his letter to the young Frenchman about to suffer martyrdom for his adherence to Christ, the words of Viret—words that ring true throughout every age of history—capture the heart of genuine Christian love, as well as the comfort and consolation reserved for the believer who knows that persecution is only one more way by which God is perfecting his work:

I have [written you] in order to show that I have not forgotten you, and that I wish to spare nothing for you, whatever other affairs I may have; for nothing is so urgent that I cannot easily lay it aside for you and your companions, considering the combat in which you are engaged, by which the Lord desires to strengthen you by His grace. To Him I commend you. ... [Know that] God shall assist, confirm, and preserve you by His grace, and that He shall perfect the work which He has begun in you until the day of our Lord Jesus, to whom alone be honor and glory forever. Amen.³⁶

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.