

# On Constancy Book I

## Chapter I: An Introduction and a Complaint about the Troubles in the Low Countries

A few years ago, while traveling to Vienna, I felt guided by Providence to take a small detour to the town of Liege. It wasn't far off my path, and I had friends there whom I felt I should visit, both out of habit and genuine affection. Among them was Charles Langius, who—if I may say so without exaggeration—was the most virtuous and learned man in all of Flanders.

He welcomed me into his home, and his hospitality was more than just polite and kind; it included conversations that were so valuable to me that they will benefit me for the rest of my life. He was the one who opened my eyes, clearing away the fog of common, mistaken beliefs. He showed me the direct path to what the poet Lucretius calls:

*The high temples of the wise, Reached by the clear light of learning.*

We were walking on his porch one hot afternoon in late June when he kindly asked me about my journey and the reasons for it. I told him a great deal about the troubles in the Low Countries—the arrogance of those in power and the brutality of the soldiers. I admitted that while I had given other excuses for my travels, this was the real reason I was leaving.

“For who,” I asked, “has a heart of stone that can endure these evils any longer? For years now, we have been tossed on the storm of civil wars, battered by the winds of chaos and rebellion. If I seek quiet and rest, I am interrupted by the sound of trumpets and the clash of armor. If I try to find peace in my country gardens and farms, the soldiers and marauders force me back into the town.

“And so, Langius,” I declared, “I am resolved to leave this unfortunate country, Flanders—forgive me, my dear homeland—and exchange this land for another. I will flee to some other part of the world where I no longer have to hear about the name or the deeds of this cursed generation.” (*The "Pelops brood" is a reference to a family from Greek mythology known for its horrific acts of murder, incest, and betrayal.*)

Langius was surprised and concerned by this. “My friend Lipsius,” he said, “will you really leave us like this?”

“Yes,” I replied. “I will either leave this country, or I will leave this life. How can I escape these evils except by fleeing? I cannot bear to see and suffer these things day after day, Langius. My heart is not made of steel.”

Langius sighed. “Oh, you foolish young man,” he said. “What a childish idea! Do you really think you can find safety by running away? I admit this country is grievously tormented, but what part of Europe is free from trouble these days? It seems the old saying of Aristophanes is proving true:

*Thundering Jupiter will turn all things upside down.*

“Therefore, Lipsius, you must not abandon your country, but rather your passions.” (By *'passions,'* he means the destructive emotions that disturb our peace of mind, like fear, anger, and grief.) “We must strengthen and shape our minds so that we can find rest in the midst of turmoil and peace in the heart of war.”

I replied, perhaps too rashly, “No, I *will* abandon my country. It is less painful to hear reports of evil than to witness it firsthand. Besides, by leaving, we remove ourselves from the field of danger. Do you not remember Homer’s wise warning? *'Stay out of the weapon's reach, lest someone add another wound to the one you already have.'*”

## **Chapter II: Why Traveling Abroad Cannot Heal Inner Troubles**

Langius shook his head gently. “I hear you, Lipsius,” he said, “but I wish you would listen to wisdom and reason instead. The fog clouding your judgment rises from the smoke of your own flawed opinions. As the philosopher Diogenes said, *'You have more need of reason than of a rope.'* I am offering you the light of reason to clear the darkness from your mind.

“You are leaving your country,” he continued. “But tell me, can you also leave *yourself* behind? Be careful you don’t do the opposite—and carry the source of your grief with you, right in your own heart, wherever you go.

“A person with a fever tosses and turns, changing beds in the useless hope of finding relief. We do the same when our minds are sick: we wander from one country to another, but it does no good. The journey only puts our suffering on display; it does not cure it. It reveals the fire burning inside us but does nothing to extinguish it. The wise Roman philosopher Seneca put it perfectly:

*‘It is the mark of a sick person that they cannot endure anything for long and treat change as if it were medicine. This leads to aimless wandering from shore to shore. Our restlessness, always hating the present, drives us one moment to the sea and the next to wish we were back on land.’*

“So you are always running from your troubles, but you never escape them. You are like the wounded deer in Virgil’s poem:

*A hunter, chasing it through the woods, shoots an arrow from afar, Striking the deer by chance and leaving the shaft in its side. She flees deeper into the wilderness, crying out in pain, But it is all for nothing, because, as the poet adds: ‘The deadly arrow remains stuck beneath her ribs.’*

“You have been struck by the arrow of your own passions, but instead of removing it, you carry it with you to a new place. A man with a broken arm does not get on a horse to fix it; he goes to a surgeon. So why this madness of thinking you can heal an inner wound by just changing your location?

“It is your mind that is wounded. All this weakness, despair, and weariness comes from a single source: your mind has collapsed. The rational, ruling part of you has dropped its scepter and has been so debased that it now serves what should be its servants—your emotions.

“Tell me, what good can any place or any journey do for a problem like that? Is there some land on earth that can temper our fears, restrain our desires, and cleanse us of the faults we have carried since childhood? No such place exists, not even in the mythical Fortunate Islands. If there were such a place, we would all flock there together.

“But perhaps you believe that the novelty of travel itself has a healing power, that seeing new places, people, and customs can refresh a troubled mind. No, Lipsius, you are mistaken. To be clear, I am not saying travel has no effect at all. It can certainly help with minor feelings of boredom or fatigue. But it is useless against deep-seated afflictions that external remedies cannot reach. Music, wine, or sleep might extinguish the first sparks of anger, sorrow, or love, but they

can never uproot a settled and profound grief. In the same way, travel might heal a surface scratch, but never a deep wound.

“These fleeting feelings arise from the body and linger only on the surface of the mind. It is no surprise they can be washed away. But it is a very different matter with long-festering passions that have seized the very throne in the fortress of your mind. You can never drown them in the sea or bury them in the earth, no matter how far you travel. They will follow you every step of the way. As the poet Horace said, *‘Dark anxiety sits right behind the horseman.’*

“When someone asked Socrates why his travels had not improved him, he replied, *‘Because you never left yourself behind.’* And I say the same to you. Wherever you go, you take your corrupted mind with you, and that is a terrible traveling companion. In fact, I fear it is more than a companion; it is your master. You are not leading your emotions; they are leading you.”

### **Chapter III: Why Deep-Seated Troubles of the Mind are Not Cured, or Even Eased, by Travel, but are Often Made Worse**

So, you might ask, does travel do nothing to relieve these great troubles? Doesn't the sight of beautiful fields, rivers, and mountains take a man's mind off his suffering?

Perhaps they distract us from our pains, but only for a short time and with no lasting benefit. Just as an exquisite painting delights the eye for a moment, the novelty of new people and places pleases us, but only for a little while. This is a temporary diversion from our troubles, not an escape from them. Travel may loosen the bonds of sorrow, but it does not break them. What good is it to see the sun for a moment, only to be thrown back into a dark prison cell immediately after? In the same way, these external pleasures deceive the mind. Under the pretense of helping, they actually do great harm.

Just as a weak medicine doesn't purge sickness but only stirs it up, these empty diversions only kindle and inflame the passions within us. The mind cannot wander from itself for long. Sooner or later, willingly or not, it is driven back to its old harbor of suffering. The very towns and hills you see for comfort will only remind you of your own country. Even in the midst of joy, you will see or hear something that reopens the old wounds of your grief. And if you do find some temporary ease, it will be as brief as a nap. When you wake, the fever of your mind will be just

as it was, or perhaps even worse. For we know that some desires only grow stronger when they are temporarily suppressed; they use the delay to take deeper root.

Therefore, Lipsius, reject these useless—no, harmful—poisons that you mistake for remedies. Instead, you must be willing to endure the true, corrective medicine, even if it is harsh. You want to change your country? Instead, change your mind, which has been wrongly enslaved by your passions and has rebelled against the authority of its rightful sovereign: Reason. It is the corruption of your mind that causes this despair and weakness. You must change your mind, not your location.

You have a strong desire to see the fertile lands of Austria, the great city of Vienna, and the mighty Danube river—sights that would impress anyone. But how much better would it be to apply that same passion to seeking wisdom? To discovering the true source of all human turmoil? To building mental fortresses that can withstand the furious assaults of your passions? These are the true remedies for your sickness. All the rest only feed and foster the disease. Your wandering to other countries will do you no good at all.

*To pass through all the towns of Greece, Or flee through enemy lines to find your peace— It is all for nothing. For you will always find the enemy within you, right here in your own heart.”*

With that, he gently tapped me on the chest.

“What good will a peaceful place do you? You carry war within you. How can a quiet home help? Trouble is always with you—in fact, it *is* you. Your distracted mind is at war with itself, torn between desire and aversion, hope and despair. Those who turn their backs to the enemy in fear are in the greatest danger, for their faces are turned from the threat and their backs are unprotected. The same is true for those who have never resisted their passions but have simply fled from them.

But you, young man, if you take my advice, will stand your ground and plant your feet firmly against your adversary, which is sorrow. Above all, you must be constant. For many have found victory by fighting, but no one has ever found it by fleeing.”

## Chapter IV: The Definitions of Constancy, Patience, Right Reason, and Opinion

Encouraged by Langius's words, I said to him, "Your advice is truly remarkable and valuable, and I am beginning to feel a little stronger—though it feels as fleeting as waking from a dream. To be honest, Langius, my thoughts keep returning to my country, and my worries about it, both personal and public, are deeply fixed in my mind. If you can, please drive away these evil birds that are devouring me, and release me from the chains of care that bind me to this rock of suffering." (*This is an allusion to the myth of Prometheus, who was chained to the Caucasus mountains where an eagle ate his liver every day.*)

Langius smiled. "I will drive them away," he replied. "Like a new Hercules, I will set this chained Prometheus free. Just listen carefully to what I am about to say. I have urged you to embrace constancy, for in it lies all hope for your well-being. So first, we must understand what it is.

**Constancy** is a correct and unshakable strength of the mind, which is not thrown off balance by external events or chance occurrences—neither puffed up by them nor cast down.

By 'strength,' I mean a firmness that comes not from mere opinion, but from judgment and sound reason. I want to be very clear that this is not the same as **obstinacy**, or what you might call stubbornness. Obstinacy is a rigidity of a stubborn mind that comes from pride or vanity. The stubborn man is hard in only one direction: he is difficult to push down, but all too easy to lift up, much like an inflated bladder, which you can barely force underwater, yet it leaps to the surface on its own. This brittle hardness comes from pride and an overinflated sense of self-worth—in other words, from opinion.

The true source of constancy is **patience**, which is born of humility. Patience is the willing and uncomplaining acceptance of whatever may happen to a person. When this patience is guided by right reason, it becomes the very root that supports the tall, mighty oak of constancy.

But be careful here not to let opinion trick you into accepting a cheap imitation of patience: a weak-willed submissiveness that comes from a cowardly mind. This is a terrible vice that stems from a person's low sense of self-worth.

True virtue, however, always seeks the middle path, avoiding extremes in its actions. It does this by weighing everything in the scales of Reason, using it as the ultimate standard for all judgments.

Therefore, we define **Right Reason** as the true understanding and judgment of all things, both human and divine, as they relate to us.

And we define its opposite, **Opinion**, as a false and superficial guess about these same things.”

## Chapter V: The Origins of Reason and Opinion: One Leads to Constancy, the Other to Instability

Since all strength and weakness of mind—and indeed, everything in life that deserves either praise or blame—flows from the twin sources of Reason and Opinion, it seems worthwhile to discuss their origins and nature in more detail. Before I can dye your mind with the deep, permanent purple of constancy, Lipsius, I must first prepare it, just as wool is treated with other liquids before it can take a perfect color.

First, you know that a person is made of two parts: soul and body. The soul, the nobler part, is like a spirit or a fire. The body, the baser part, is like the earth. These two are joined together, but in a conflicting harmony, and they rarely agree, especially when a conflict arises over which one should rule. Each wants to be in charge, particularly the part that shouldn't be. The earthly part tries to dominate the spiritual, and our mortal nature tries to rule our divine one. This is the source of the conflict, turmoil, and constant war within us.

The captains in this war are Reason and Opinion. Reason fights for the soul, from within the soul. Opinion fights for the body, from within the body.

Reason's origin is divine; it comes from God. The philosopher Seneca praised it highly, saying that a part of the divine spirit is hidden within every person. Reason is the supreme power of understanding and judgment. It is the perfection of the soul, just as the soul is the perfection of a human being. The Greeks called it *Nous*, and the Romans called it *Mens*. You could say it is the very mind *of* the soul.

But do not be mistaken: the entire soul is not Right Reason. Only the part that is pure, simple, unmixed, and free from all corruption is. In short, it is the part of the soul that remains purely divine. For even though the soul is tainted by its connection to the body and the influence of the senses, it still retains some remnants of its divine origin. There remain within it clear sparks of the pure, fiery nature from which it came.

This is why wicked men feel the pangs of conscience, those inward gnawings and scourgings. It is why, even against their will, they recognize and admire virtuous living. This good part in a person may be suppressed, but it can never be completely defeated. These fiery sparks may be covered, but they can never be fully extinguished. These embers always glow, illuminating our darkness, cleansing our impurities, and guiding our doubts. Ultimately, they lead us to constancy and virtue.

Just as the marigold and other flowers naturally turn toward the sun, so does Reason naturally turn toward God, the source from which it springs. Reason is resolute and immovable in a good purpose. It does not waver in its judgment, and it consistently seeks the good and shuns the bad. It is the fountainhead of wholesome counsel and sound judgment.

To obey Reason is to rule, and to be subject to it is to have sovereignty over all human affairs. Whoever obeys Reason is the master of all desires and rebellious passions. Whoever holds this "thread of Theseus" can navigate all the labyrinths of life without getting lost. Through this divine image, God enters us—or rather, *comes to* us. And whoever first said it was right: *There is no good mind without God.*

But the other part, Opinion, is born from the body—that is, from the earth—and therefore it is concerned only with earthly things. For although the body is senseless on its own, it receives life and movement from the soul. In turn, it presents the shapes and forms of the world to the soul through the windows of the senses. This creates a partnership between the soul and body, but one that is ultimately not good for the soul. Little by little, the soul is stripped of its dignity, becoming addicted to the senses. From this impure mixture, Opinion is born in us.

Opinion is nothing but a vain image and shadow of Reason. Its seat is in the senses, and its origin is the earth. Being base and low, it is always directed downward and has no concern for high or heavenly matters. It is empty, uncertain, and deceitful, giving bad counsel and making poor judgments. It robs the mind of constancy and truth. One day it desires something; the next

day it despises it. It praises one thing and condemns another. It has no regard for sound judgment, only for pleasing the body and satisfying the senses.

Just as the eye is deceived when it looks at something through water or mist, so too is the mind deceived when it perceives the world through the clouds of Opinion. Opinion is the mother of all mischief, the author of a confused and troubled life. Through it, we are burdened with cares, distracted by turmoil, and ruled by vices.

Therefore, just as those who wish to banish tyranny from a city must first tear down its fortresses, if we truly desire to have a good and stable mind, we must demolish this fortress of Opinion from its very foundations. Otherwise, it will keep us forever floating on the waves of doubt, without any firm resolution—making us complaining, troubled, and offensive to both God and man.

An empty ship without ballast is tossed and tumbled on the sea by the slightest gust of wind. So it is with a light and wandering mind that is not steadied by the ballast of Reason.

## **Chapter VI: In Praise of Constancy, and a Call to Embrace It**

So you see, Lipsius, that inconstancy is the companion of mere opinion. Its defining trait is to change its mind constantly, wishing to undo what it just did a moment before. But constancy is always paired with reason. This is the virtue I urge you to embrace.

Why do you flee to these empty, external things? Constancy is the beautiful Helen who will offer you a healing cup—an antidote that will banish the memory of all your cares and sorrows. Once you have tasted it, you will be firmly grounded against all of life's chances, standing upright in the face of any disaster. Neither inflated by good fortune nor crushed by bad, you can claim for yourself that great title—the closest a human can come to being like God: to be immovable.

Have you not seen that noble motto on the coats of arms of some men in our time? "*Neither by hope, nor by fear.*"

This motto will be fitting for you. You will be a king—truly free, subject only to God, and liberated from the slavery of fortune and your own passions. Just as some rivers are said to flow through the sea while keeping their water fresh, you too will pass through the chaos of this world without being tainted by the salty bitterness of its sea of sorrows.

Are you about to be cast down? Constancy will lift you up. Are you wavering in doubt? She will hold you steady. Are you in danger from fire or water? She will comfort you and pull you back from the edge of the abyss. You only need to take courage and steer your ship into this port—a harbor of security and peace, a refuge and sanctuary from all turmoil and trouble.

Once you have moored your ship there, you will remain unmoved, even if your country is not just troubled but shaken to its very foundations. Let storms, thunder, and lightning rage around you, and you will be able to cry out with a bold voice, *“I lie at rest in the midst of the waves.”*

## Chapter VII: The Things That Disturb Constancy

Langius spoke with more seriousness in his voice and expression than usual, and his words ignited a spark of inspiration in me.

“My Father,” I said—and I called him that sincerely—“lead me and teach me as you see fit. Guide me and correct me. I am your patient, ready to accept any cure, whether it means cutting with a razor or cauterizing with fire.”

Langius replied, “I will need to use both. Sometimes, the dry stubble of your false opinions must be burned away. At other times, the new shoots of your passions must be cut off at the root. But tell me, would you rather walk or sit?”

“I would prefer to sit,” I said, “for I am getting warm.”

So Langius ordered stools to be brought to the porch. As I sat beside him, he turned to me and began to speak.

“Until now, Lipsius, I have only been laying the foundation for our discussion. Now, if you are ready, I will get to the heart of the matter and examine the causes of your sorrow. For I must touch the wound directly.

“Two things assault the fortress of constancy within us: **false goods** and **false evils**. I define both as things that are external to us, not part of our inner selves. In themselves, they do not truly help or harm the inner person—that is, the mind. Therefore, I cannot call these things inherently good or evil by their very nature. I admit, however, that they are considered so by popular opinion.

“In the first category, false goods, I include wealth, honor, power, health, and a long life. In the second, false evils, I include poverty, disgrace, lack of advancement, sickness, and death. In short, this includes anything that is external to us and happens by chance.

“From these two roots spring the four main passions that disturb a person’s life: desire and joy, fear and sorrow. The first two—desire and joy—relate to what we perceive as good, while the latter two—fear and sorrow—relate to what we perceive as evil.

“All of these passions can harm and unbalance the mind, and if not checked in time, they will throw it into chaos. Yet, they do not all work in the same way. The peace and constancy of the mind depend on maintaining an even balance. These passions disrupt that balance—some by puffing the mind up with excitement, others by weighing it down with despair.

“For now, I will not discuss the false goods that inflate the mind, because your suffering comes from another source. I will focus instead on the false evils, which can be divided into two types: public and private.

“**Public evils** are those that affect many people at the same time, such as war, plague, famine, tyranny, and massacres. **Private evils** are those that affect individuals, such as personal grief, poverty, disgrace, or death—and anything else of that nature that can happen to a single person.”

I believe I have good reason to make this distinction, because we grieve differently for the misery of our country—the exile and destruction of a multitude—than we do for a single person. Furthermore, the grief that comes from public disasters is different from that caused by private ones. Public evils are heavier and take deeper root in us. We are all vulnerable to these common calamities, either because they come all at once, overwhelming anyone who resists, or because they deceive us. We often do not even realize how sick our minds have become from dwelling on them.

Consider this: if a man is overcome by a private grief, he must admit his own weakness, especially if he makes no effort to regain his composure. He has no excuse. But when it comes to being distressed by public calamities, we are so far from admitting any fault that some people actually boast about it and consider it a sign of virtue. They call it “piety” or “compassion.” This common affliction has now been listed among the virtues and is practically worshipped as a god.

Poets and orators praise intense patriotism, and I do not condemn it. But I insist that it must be tempered with moderation. Otherwise, it becomes a vice—a sign of a lack of self-control, a dethroning of the mind from its rightful place. I admit that grief for one's country is a severe affliction and has a powerful effect on a person, because the sorrow it causes is complex, involving both yourself and others.

To make this clear with an example, look at how your own country, Flanders, is tormented by countless disasters and scorched by the flames of civil war. The fields are laid waste, towns are overthrown and burned, men are captured and murdered, women are violated, and virgins are defiled, along with all the other miseries that follow war.

Are you not grieved by this? Yes, I am sure you are, and in many different ways: for yourself, for your countrymen, and for your country. Your own losses trouble you. The suffering and slaughter of your neighbors trouble you. The ruin and overthrow of your country trouble you. At one moment you might cry out with the poet, *“Oh, what an unhappy wretch I am!”* and at another, *“Oh, my father! Oh, my country!”*

Anyone who is not moved by such events, who is not weighed down by so many and such varied miseries, must either be a very wise and steadfast person, or else very hard-hearted.

## **Chapter VIII: A Defense Against Public Evils, and a Warning Against Fake Grief**

“So, Lipsius, do you think I have surrendered the cause of constancy by entertaining your sorrow? Not at all. I have acted like a good general, drawing all your arguments—your ‘troops’—out onto the battlefield so that I can confront them head-on.

But first, I will engage in some light skirmishes before we meet in open battle. In these skirmishes, I will attack, one by one, three passions that are the sworn enemies of constancy: Deception, misguided Piety, and Pity. I will begin with the first.

You say you cannot bear to see these public miseries—that it grieves you, that it’s like death to you. Are you speaking from the heart, or are you just saying the words?”

At this, I grew a little angry and asked if he was mocking me.

“No,” Langius replied. “I am perfectly serious. Many people like you deceive their own doctors, making them believe they are sick with grief over public evils when, in reality, their own private losses are the true cause.

So I ask you again: is the anxiety boiling in your heart for your country’s sake, or for your own?”

“What?” I said. “How can you even ask? Of course, Langius, it is for my country’s sake alone that I am so distressed.”

“Be sure of that,” he said, “because I would be surprised to find in you such a pure and sincere patriotism, which so few people truly possess. I don’t deny that most people complain about public disasters; it is the most common kind of sorrow you hear people talk about. But if you look closely, you will often find a great gap between what people say and what they feel. The words, *‘My country’s suffering grieves me,’* often contain more vanity than truth.

History tells us of a famous actor named Polus. When he had to portray great sorrow on stage, he secretly brought with him the ashes of his dead son. The memory of his loss made him shed real tears, filling the theater with genuine grief. I believe most of you are doing the same thing. You are performing in a play. You pretend to be grieving for your country, but you are really weeping for your own private misfortunes.

It has been said that ‘all the world’s a stage,’ and in this case, it is certainly true. People cry out, ‘These civil wars are a torment! The blood of innocents is spilled! We have lost our laws and our liberty!’ But is that the real reason for their tears? I see their sorrow, but I must investigate the cause more closely. Is it really for the public good? Oh, actor, take off your mask! Your own self-interest is the real source of your grief.

We often see farmers trembling and praying together when a sudden disaster or rebellion threatens them. But once the danger has passed, you will find that each one was really only afraid for his own fields and his own crops. If a fire broke out in this city, there would be a great public outcry. The lame and even the blind would rush to help put it out. Why? For the good of the city? Ask them, and you will see it was because the loss—or at least the fear of it—would have affected everyone personally.

And so it is in this matter. Public evils trouble many people not because the harm affects the community, but because they themselves are part of that community and stand to lose something.”

## **Chapter IX: Unmasking Our True Motives and Our True Country**

So, you shall be the judge in this matter, but only if you remove the veil from your eyes and look honestly. You fear the war. I know. Why? Because war brings destruction. To whom? To others, for now, but you fear it could soon come to you. *There it is*—that is the true source of your grief.

Just as a lightning strike that hits one person makes everyone nearby tremble, so it is with these public disasters: the actual loss touches only a few, but the fear spreads to everyone. If you could remove that fear for yourself, your sorrow would vanish. Think about it: when there is a war in Ethiopia or India, it doesn’t affect you, because you are out of danger. But when the war is here in Flanders, you weep, you cry out, and you wring your hands in despair. But if you were truly grieving for the tragedy of war itself, as a public evil, then you would feel no differently about a war there than you do about a war here.

You will say, “But that is not my country.” Oh, you fool. Are those people not also human, descended from the same origin as you? Do they not live under the same sky and on the same earth? Do you truly believe that your country is just this small patch of land, marked out by a few mountains and a river? You are mistaken.

Our true country is the entire world—wherever the human race, descended from a divine origin, resides. When Socrates was asked what country he was from, he answered, “The world.” For a noble and expansive mind will not allow itself to be penned in by such narrow ideas. It understands that the entire world is its home.

We laugh at fools who let their masters tie them to a post with a piece of straw, yet stand there as if they were bound by iron chains. Our own foolishness is no different when we allow the weak thread of opinion to chain us to one small corner of the world.

But let’s put aside these deeper arguments for now. I ask you: if God guaranteed that in the midst of all this chaos, your fields would be safe, your house and property secure, and you yourself could watch from a high mountain, out of all danger—would you still grieve?

I am reluctant to say this about you, but I am certain that many people would actually be glad. They would greedily feast their eyes on the spectacle of such slaughter. Why do you turn away? Why are you surprised by this? Such is the natural corruption of humanity that, as the poet says, we rejoice in the misfortunes of others. Just as some apples taste sweet but are bitter to the stomach, so are the miseries of others when we ourselves are safe.

Imagine a man standing safely on the shore watching a shipwreck. He will be moved, of course, but—in truth—he will also feel a secret sense of satisfaction, because he is witnessing another's danger while he himself is secure. But if he were on that ship himself, he would feel a very different kind of grief.

And that is exactly how it is in this case, no matter what we might say or pretend. The truth is, we mourn our own misfortunes earnestly and from the heart, but we mourn public calamities with words only, for the sake of appearances. Therefore, Lipsius, pull away these stage-hangings. Draw back the curtain that stands before you and, without any pretense or deception, tell me the true cause of your sorrow.

## **Chapter X: A Complaint About Harsh Criticism, and the Philosopher's Duty to Speak Truth**

That first exchange felt very sharp, so I interrupted him. “What gives you the right to speak so freely?” I asked. “This is nothing but bitter mockery. Is this how you help me, by prodding at my wounds? I should answer you with the words of Euripides:

*Do not add more grief to my heavy burden; God knows, I already suffer more than I can bear.*

Langius smiled. “I see,” he said. “You were expecting gentle comforts from me, like sweet wine and cakes. But just a moment ago, you were asking for a cure, even a painful one like a razor or a hot iron—and you were right to do so. For I am a philosopher, Lipsius, not an entertainer. My purpose is to teach you, not to charm you; to help you, not to please you. I aim to make you blush with self-awareness, not smile in comfort; to make you repentant, not defiant. A philosopher’s school is like a doctor’s office: you go there for health, not for pleasure. A true doctor doesn't waste time or flatter his patient. He cuts, he prods, he scrapes—and with the sharp salt of truthful words, he draws out the foul infection from the mind. So do not expect roses,

soothing oils, or spices from me. Expect thorns, surgical knives, bitter herbs, and sharp vinegar—”

I cut him off. “Frankly, Langius, if I may be so bold,” I said, “you are not treating me fairly or kindly. You are not defeating me in an honest debate, like a true champion, but undermining me with clever tricks and subtleties. You claim that I only pretend to grieve for my country’s suffering and that my concern is not genuine. In that, you do me a great injustice.

“Let me confess that I do have *some* regard for my own safety, but that is not the whole story. I am grieving primarily for my country’s sake, even if the danger she faces does not touch me personally. And I have good reason to feel this way. She is the one who first brought me into this world and then nourished and raised me. By the common consent of all nations, one’s native land is our oldest and most sacred mother.

“You tell me the whole world is my country. Who would deny that? But you cannot deny that, in addition to that vast and universal country, there is another, more intimate one that is nearer and dearer to me. I am tied to it by a secret bond of nature. Or do you believe there is no persuasive, attractive power in the native soil we first touched with our bodies and walked upon with our feet? The place where we took our first breath, cried as infants, played as children, and grew into adults? The place where the sky, the rivers, and the fields are familiar to our eyes? Where our relatives, friends, and companions have lived for generations? Where so many sources of joy exist, which I could never hope to find anywhere else in the world?

“This is not, as you claim, the flimsy thread of opinion. These are the strong chains of nature herself. Look at all other living creatures. Wild beasts know and love their dens; birds love their nests. Even fish in the vast, endless ocean prefer a certain part of it. And what need I say of humans? Whether civilized or savage, they are so devoted to their native land that any true man would willingly die for it.

“Therefore, Langius, this new and strange philosophy of yours—I do not yet understand its depths, and I have no intention of adopting it. I would rather listen to the true words of Euripides:

*Necessity compels every person To love his country with all his might.”*

You will say that great and learned scholars have spoken of it in those terms. They have indeed, but only by following popular opinion, not because they themselves were truly convinced of it. But if you wish to follow the truth, you will reserve that sacred and noble title for God, and perhaps also for your parents. As for this affection for one's country, once it has been reined in and moderated, let it be content, in God's name, with the title of Love or Charity.

Yet this is just an argument over a name. Let us get to the heart of the matter. I am not trying to eliminate this feeling entirely, but to temper it—to lance it with the sharp scalpel of right reason. For just as a vine grows wild if it is not pruned, so do our passions run rampant when they are inflated by the favorable winds of popular opinion.

...But let me confess here—for I am still a man and a citizen—that every one of us does feel an inclination and goodwill toward our particular country. However, I can see that you do not understand the true cause of this feeling. You believe it comes from nature, but the truth is that it arises from custom and from social contracts.

When humanity left its wild and savage state and began to build houses, wall in towns, and form societies for mutual defense, a certain sense of community naturally developed. They divided the land among themselves with clear boundaries. They shared common temples, marketplaces, treasuries, and courts of law. Most importantly, they shared ceremonies, traditions, and laws.

In time, our human tendency toward possession led us to value these common things as if they were our own private property—and in a way, they were, since every citizen had a stake in them. They differed from private possessions only in that no single person owned them entirely.

This association and fellowship gave shape to a newly formed state, which we now call a commonwealth, or our country. And when people realized that the safety of each individual depended on the safety of the whole, laws were created for its protection. At the very least, customs were passed down from generation to generation that became as powerful as laws.

This is why we rejoice in our country's good fortune and grieve at its misfortunes—because our own private well-being is secured by its safety and lost in its ruin. This is the true source of our goodwill and love for it. And for the sake of the common good (guided by the secret providence of God), our ancestors did everything they could to strengthen this affection, establishing and maintaining the majesty of their country.

In my judgment, therefore, it is clear that this affection originates from custom, not from nature, as you claim. Otherwise, why wouldn't everyone feel it to the same degree? Why do the nobility and the rich care more for their country than the poor, who are typically concerned only with their private matters and not at all with public affairs? This is not the case with feelings that are truly governed by natural instinct.

Finally, how can you explain why such a trivial reason can often weaken, or even completely extinguish, this love for one's country? Look at how every day people abandon their country—some out of anger, some for love, some for ambition. And think of the multitudes who are drawn away by the pursuit of profit. How many Italians, purely for the sake of greed, have abandoned Italy—the queen of all countries—to move to France, Germany, or even as far as Sarmatia? How many thousands of Spaniards does ambition draw to the other side of the world every day? These examples prove conclusively that the bond tying us to our country is merely external and accidental, since it can be so easily broken by a single, powerful desire.

Furthermore, Lipsius, you are deeply mistaken in how you define our country. You tie it too narrowly to the specific soil where we were born and raised, and other such trivial things, from which you try in vain to find natural causes for our affection. If our country is truly just the soil where we were born, then Brussels alone would be my country, and Iscanum yours. For someone else, it would be a humble cottage, and for many others, not even a cottage, but a forest or an open field.

What then? Should my goodwill and affection be confined within those narrow walls? Should I focus my devotion on a single town or house as my country? What foolishness that would be! By your definition, the happiest people would be those born in the woods and open fields, since those places are always flourishing and are rarely, if ever, subject to destruction.

No, no, our country is not what you think it is. It is a single state—like one common ship—governed by one ruler or one body of law. I agree that we ought to love it, defend it, and even die for it. But that love must not drive us to lament, wail, and despair. As the poet rightly said:

*It is a noble and worthy cause To give one's life for one's country.*

He said we should *die* for our country, not that we should weep and lament for it. We must be good citizens, but not at the expense of being good and virtuous human beings—which we cease to be when we give ourselves over to childish and unmanly lamentations.

Finally, Lipsius, I want you to learn this one hidden and profound truth: if we consider the complete nature of a human being, all these earthly countries are empty and falsely named. They are our country only with respect to the body, not the mind or soul. The soul, having descended from its high celestial home, sees this entire earth as a jail or a prison. Heaven is our true and rightful country. Let us lift all our thoughts there, so that we can say with confidence, as the philosopher Anaxagoras did when someone foolishly asked if he had no regard for his country, “Yes, I do—for *that* is my country,” pointing his finger and his mind toward heaven.

## **Chapter XII: The Problem with Pity, which is a Vice, Not a Virtue**

Langius’s words had cleared some of the fog from my mind. I said to him, “My mentor, your warnings and instructions have helped me greatly. I believe I can now control my attachment to my native land, but I cannot control my feelings for my fellow citizens. How can I not be pained and tormented by the disasters afflicting my countrymen, who are tossed on this sea of troubles and are perishing in so many ways?”

Langius replied immediately, “What you are describing is not sorrow, but pity. And this is a feeling that a wise and constant person must reject. The most important quality for such a person is a steady and unshakable mind, which is impossible to maintain if you are brought down not only by your own misfortunes, but by the misfortunes of others as well.”

“What kind of cold, Stoic argument is this?” I asked. “Are you telling me not to feel pity for another person’s suffering? Surely pity is a virtue among good and religious people!”

“I deny it,” Langius said, “and I trust no good person will be offended if I try to cleanse the mind of this sickness. For pity is a dangerous disease. In fact, I believe that the person who is quick to pity others is in a pitiful state himself. Just as it is a sign of unhealthy eyes if they tear up at the sight of another’s inflamed eyes, it is a sign of an unhealthy mind if it grieves at the sight of another’s grief.

“Pity is defined as a weakness of an abject and small mind, one that collapses at the sight of someone else’s misfortune.

“So what does this mean? That we should be so unkind and inhuman as to feel nothing at another's misery? No. I believe we should be moved to *help* them, but not to weep and wail *with* them. I approve of mercy, but not of pity. I define mercy as the inclination of the mind to relieve another person's suffering or need.

“This, Lipsius, is the virtue you are trying to see, but your vision is clouded. And in its place, pity has taken root in your mind.”

But you will say, “It is human nature to be moved by pity.” Perhaps, but that does not make it right or virtuous. Do you think virtue consists in weakness and mental collapse? In sorrowing, sighing, and sobbing along with those who weep? Of course not.

I can show you greedy misers from whom you could sooner squeeze a thousand tears than a single penny from their purse. A truly merciful person, however, does not simply weep for the distressed; he does more to help them than the one who only pities them.

He will look upon human misery with an eye of compassion, but one that is guided by reason. He will speak to those who suffer with a serious expression, but not one of mourning or despair. He will offer sincere comfort and generous aid. He will accomplish more with his actions than with his words, extending his hand to the poor and needy, rather than just his tongue.

He will do all this with care, so that he does not become infected by another's suffering. As fencers say, he does not take another's blows upon his own ribs.

Is there anything inhuman or cruel in this? At first glance, this philosophy may seem harsh. But if you look closer, you will find it is gentle, and even more lovely than Venus herself.

Let this be enough on the subject of these three passions. If I have managed to expel them from you, even in part, it will give me a great advantage in the battle to come.

### **Chapter XIII: The Four Arguments for Enduring Public Evils, Beginning with Divine Providence**

I am moving now from minor skirmishes to the decisive battle, from light preliminary arguments to the heart of the matter. I will now deploy my main arguments, organized into four points, or “troops.”

First, I will prove that these public evils are sent to us by God himself. Second, that they are necessary and destined to happen. Third, that they are actually beneficial for us. And finally, that they are neither as terrible nor as unusual as they seem.

If each of these arguments does its part, can the army of your sorrow possibly stand against them? Can it even speak a word in its own defense? No. Victory will be mine. So let the trumpets sound and the drums beat to signal the charge.

Lipsius, while all the passions that disturb a person's life come from a mind that is unbalanced and lacks reason, in my opinion, none is more irrational than the sorrow you feel for your country. Other passions, at least, have a purpose: the lover wants to be with his beloved, the angry man seeks revenge, the greedy person wants to acquire wealth, and so on. But this grief for your country has no goal at all.

To be specific, you are mourning the decline of your country. Tell me, what do you hope to accomplish by this? Do you think your tears will fix what is broken? Preserve what is about to be destroyed? Or wash away the plague and punishment hanging over your country? None of these things. The only result is that you can say, like everyone else, “I am sorry.” In every other way, your mourning is completely useless. For not even God himself can change what has already happened.

Not only is your weeping useless, it is also wicked and ungodly, if you think about it properly. For you know there is an eternal spirit, whom we call God, who rules, guides, and governs the turning spheres of heaven, the complex courses of the stars, the constant changing of the elements—in short, everything in heaven and on earth.

Do you really believe that mere chance or fortune holds any power in this magnificent design? Or that human affairs are driven by random accidents? I know you do not think so, nor does any person with a shred of wisdom. It is a truth spoken by nature itself. Whichever way we turn our eyes or our minds, all things—mortal and immortal, heavenly and earthly, living and nonliving—cry out and affirm that there is something far greater than us that created these countless wonders, and that continually governs and preserves them.

This is God. And nothing is more essential to his perfect nature than that he is both willing and able to care for his own creation. Why would he not be willing, since he is supremely good? Why would he not be able to, since he is all-powerful? There is no force greater than his; indeed, all force comes from him. Nor is he overwhelmed by the sheer scale or complexity of it all. For this eternal light shines its beams everywhere, instantly piercing the depths of the heavens, the earth, and the sea. He is not just a ruler over all things, but is present *within* them.

And why should this be surprising? Think of how much of the world the sun can illuminate at once. Think of how many different things our own minds can comprehend at once. You fools! Can he who made the sun and the mind not perceive and understand far more than they can? A man with little knowledge of theology once spoke truly and divinely:

*As the pilot is to his ship, the driver to his wagon, the cantor to his choir, the law to a city, and the general to his army, so is God to the world.*

The only difference is that their work is burdensome, difficult, and painful. But God rules without any effort, labor, or struggle.

Therefore, Lipsius, there exists in God a watchful and constant care—yet without any anxiety—through which he observes, examines, and knows all things. And knowing them, he arranges and directs them according to an unchangeable plan that is beyond our understanding. This is what I call Providence. A person may, in their weakness, grumble or complain about it, but no one can truly doubt it, unless their senses are numb and their mind is set against nature itself.

## **Chapter XIV: Nothing Happens Except by Providence, So We Should Obey God and Not Mourn**

If you truly understand and believe that this divine governing power permeates everything—that, as the poet says, it “passes through every path of sea and shore”—then I see no room left for your grief and complaint.

For the very same foreseeing intelligence that turns the heavens, that causes the sun to rise and set, that brings forth the fruits of the earth and closes them up again—that same power produces all the calamities and changes that you marvel and mutter at. Do you think God gives us only

what is pleasing and profitable? No, he also sends what is harmful and hurtful. Except for sin, nothing in this vast theater of the world is planned, tossed about, or changed that does not originate from that first Cause of all causes. As the poet Pindar rightly says, “The dispensers and doers of all things are in heaven.” And, as Homer poetically described, a golden chain is let down from heaven, to which all things on earth are bound.

When the earth has opened up and swallowed cities, that came from God’s providence. When the plague has consumed thousands of people elsewhere, that came from the same cause. When slaughter, war, and tyranny rage in the Low Countries, that too comes from the same source. From heaven, Lipsius—from heaven all these miseries are sent. Therefore, Euripides spoke well and wisely when he said that all calamities come from God.

The ebb and flow of all human affairs depend upon that divine moon. The rise and fall of kingdoms come from that divine sun. So, when you give free rein to your sorrow and complain that your country is being turned upside down, you fail to consider who you are and against whom you are complaining.

What are you? A man, a shadow, mere dust. And against whom are you raging? I fear to say it: you are raging against God himself.

The ancients told fables of giants who rose up against God to pull him from his throne. Let us set aside those fables. In truth, you who complain and murmur—you are those giants. For if it is true that God not only allows but actively sends all these things, then when you strive and struggle against them, what are you doing but trying to seize the scepter of government from his hands?

Oh, blind mortality! The sun, the moon, the stars, the elements, and all other creatures in the world willingly obey that supreme law. Only man, the most excellent of God's creations, lifts his heel and kicks against his maker.

If you raise your sails to the wind, you must follow where the wind forces you, not where your own will desires to go. And in this great ocean of life, will you refuse to follow the divine spirit that governs the entire world? It is a useless struggle. For if you do not follow willingly, you will be dragged along by force.

We would laugh at a man who, having tied his boat to a rock, pulls on the rope as if the rock should come to him, when in fact he is only pulling himself closer to it. But our foolishness is far

greater. We are bound fast to the rock of God's eternal providence, yet by our struggling and pulling, we expect it to obey us, rather than the other way around.

Let us abandon this foolishness. If we are wise, we will follow the power that draws us from above, and we will accept that what pleases God ought to please us as well.

In a military camp, when the signal is given to march, the soldier packs up his gear. But when he hears the call to battle, he lays it all down, preparing himself with heart, eyes, and ears to do whatever is commanded. In the same way, in this warfare of our lives, let us follow cheerfully and courageously wherever our general calls us.

As Seneca said, we have sworn an oath to endure our mortality and not to be troubled by those things we cannot avoid. We are born into a kingdom, and true freedom is to obey God.

## **Chapter XV: The Second Argument for Constancy: Necessity**

This next argument is a sturdy bronze shield against all external misfortunes. It is the golden armor that Plato urges us to wear in our fight against chance and fortune—to submit to God and, in all events, to fix our thoughts upon that great universal mind, which is Providence.

Now that I have laid out the sacred and blessed forces of Providence, I will bring forth another army under the banner of Necessity. This is a force that is valiant, strong, and hard as iron—one I could rightly call the "Thundering Legion." Its power is grim and invincible; it tames and conquers all things. Therefore, Lipsius, I will be amazed if you can stand against it.

When the philosopher Thales was asked what is strongest, he answered, "Necessity, because it conquers all things." There is even an old saying—perhaps a reckless one—that not even the gods can command Necessity. I place Necessity right next to Providence because it is closely related to it—or rather, born from it. For Necessity springs from God and His decrees. As a Greek philosopher defined it, Necessity is nothing less than a firm command and the unchangeable power of Providence.

I will prove that Necessity plays a part in all public disasters in two ways: first, by looking at the nature of things themselves, and second, by considering destiny.

First, let's consider the nature of things. It is a natural property of everything created to be subject to change and decay. Just as rust naturally clings to and consumes iron, and a worm gnaws at wood, causing it to rot and waste away, so too do living creatures, cities, and kingdoms all contain the internal causes of their own decay.

Consider all things, high and low, great and small—whether made by hand or conceived by the mind. They have always decayed, and they always will. And just as rivers flow in a constant, swift course to the sea, all human creations slide through the channel of decay and disaster toward their final destination: destruction. This destination is death and ruin, and the paths that lead there are plague, war, and slaughter.

Therefore, if destruction is necessary, then the means to that destruction are also necessary. To help you understand this better through examples, I will now take you on a journey, in our minds, through the great university of the world.

## **Chapter XVI: Examples of Inevitable Change and Death Throughout the World**

An eternal decree was pronounced upon the world and everything in it from the very beginning: all things must be born and die, begin and end. The supreme Ruler of all things willed that nothing should be permanent and stable except Himself. As the tragic poet Sophocles wrote:

*From age and death God only stands free, But all things else by time consumed be.*

Everything you see and admire will either perish in its own time or, at the very least, be altered and changed. Look at the sun—it weakens. The moon—it struggles and fades. The stars—they dim and fall. And no matter how human ingenuity tries to explain these things away, things happen in the heavens that confound both the theories and the minds of astronomers.

I will not even dwell on comets—so strange in their shape, position, and movement—which no university could ever persuade me are mere atmospheric phenomena. But consider how our astronomers have recently been troubled by strange movements and new stars. Just this year, a new star appeared whose brightening and fading were clearly observed. And so we witnessed—a thing almost impossible to believe—something in the heavens itself that had a beginning and an

end. The ancient writer Varro declared that the evening star, Venus, had changed its color, size, appearance, and path.

After the heavens, look at the air. It is constantly changing into wind, clouds, and rain.

Now consider the waters. The rivers and springs we think of as permanent sometimes dry up completely, or at other times change their course. The vast ocean, that great and mysterious part of nature, is constantly churned by storms. And even when there are no storms, it has its tides, its constant flowing and ebbing. This daily swelling and receding shows us that even the ocean is subject to decay.

Now, look at the earth itself, which we believe to be immovable and solid. It too grows weak. It is shaken by a secret, inner force that makes it tremble. In some places it is eroded by water, in others, consumed by fire. These elements are at war with each other, so do not be surprised to see war among men.

Think of the great lands that have been laid waste, or even completely swallowed up, by sudden floods and violent seas. In ancient times, the sea submerged the great island of Atlantis (and I do not believe this story is a myth), and after that, the mighty cities of Helice and Bura. And to leave ancient examples behind, right here in Flanders, two islands, along with their towns and people, were lost to the sea. Even today, the sea god Neptune opens up new breaches, daily washing away the weak dikes of Friesland and other coastal lands. Yet the earth does not sit idle like a lazy housewife; sometimes she takes her revenge and raises up new islands in the middle of the sea, much to Neptune's surprise.

And if these great bodies, which seem eternal to us, are subject to change, then why not also towns, commonwealths, and kingdoms? They are made of mortals, so they too must be mortal. Just as every individual person has a youth, a prime, an old age, and a death, so it is with these larger bodies. They begin, they grow, they flourish—and all of it leads to their eventual decay.

One earthquake during the reign of the emperor Tiberius overthrew twelve famous cities in Asia. In Constantine's time, just as many were destroyed in Campania. A single war led by Attila, the Scythian king, destroyed a hundred cities. The ancient Egyptian city of Thebes is now barely a memory. The hundred towns of Crete are so completely gone that people doubt they ever existed. To speak more certainly, our ancestors saw the ruins of Carthage, Numantia, and

Corinth, and marveled at them. And in our own time, we have seen the sad remains of Athens, Sparta, and many other renowned cities.

And what of that queen of all cities and countries, falsely called the “Eternal City”? Where is Rome now? Overwhelmed, torn down, burned, and flooded. She has perished by more than one kind of destruction. Today, people search for her original foundations, but they cannot be found.

Do you see the noble city of Byzantium, proud of being the seat of two empires? Or Venice, which has stood for a thousand years? Their day, too, will come. And you also, my dear Antwerp, the most beautiful of cities—in time you too shall become nothing. For the great Master Builder of the universe tears down and builds up, and—if I may say so—makes a sport of human affairs. Like a potter, he shapes and reshapes all things from his clay.

I have spoken of towns and cities. Countries and kingdoms run the very same course. Once, the East flourished. Assyria, Egypt, and Judea excelled in both war and peace. That glory then moved to Europe, which now seems to me like a sick body, trembling on the verge of its own collapse.

And what is even more astonishing is that this world, after 5,500 years, has finally reached its old age. And now, as if to prove the ancient fables of Anaxarchus true, a new world with new peoples is rising elsewhere.

Oh, the law of necessity—it is wonderful and incomprehensible! All things are swept into this fatal whirlpool of ebbing and flowing. Some things in this world may last for a long time, but nothing lasts forever.

Lift up your eyes and look around with me. See the constant changes in all human affairs, how they swell and recede like the tides of the sea. *You, rise up; you, fall down. You, rule; you, obey. You, hide your head in shame; you, lift yours in pride.* Let this wheel of change keep turning, for as long as this round world remains.

You Germans, were you once fierce? Now you are among the gentlest people in Europe. You Britons, were you once uncivilized? Now you surpass the ancient Egyptians and Sybarites in luxury and wealth. Did Greece once flourish? Now let her be afflicted. Did Italy once hold the scepter? Now let her be ruled by others.

You Goths, you Vandals, you vilest of barbarians—come out of your hiding places and take your turn ruling the nations. And you, rude Scythians, draw near and with a mighty hand take the reins of Asia and Europe for a time. But soon after, you too must give way and hand the scepter to another nation from across the ocean.

Am I deceived? Or do I see the sun of a new empire rising in the West?

## **Chapter XVII: The Necessity of Destiny and the Ancient Belief in It**

Langius spoke with such clarity about the vanity of human affairs that tears streamed down my cheeks.

Raising my voice, I cried, “Alas, what are we, and what are all these things for which we struggle so hard? What does it even mean to be somebody? As the poet says, man is just a shadow and a dream.”

Then Langius replied, “But you, young man, must not only contemplate these things; you must hold them in contempt. Imprint constancy on your mind amidst the random and ever-changing nature of all things. I call it ‘random’ only from the perspective of our limited understanding, for if you look to God and His providence, you will see that all things unfold according to a steady and unchangeable order.

“Now, I will set aside my sword and bring out my siege engines. I will no longer attack your sorrow with small arms, but with heavy artillery. I will come against it with a battering ram so strong and terrible that no human power can resist it and no strategy can avoid it. This is slippery ground, but I will proceed—cautiously, slowly, and, as the Greeks say, with a soft step.”

“First of all,” he continued, “that there is a kind of destiny in the world, I do not think that you, Lipsius, or any people in any age has ever truly doubted.”

Here I interrupted him. “Forgive me for stopping you,” I said. “Are you really bringing up *destiny*? That is a weak argument, pushed by the feeble Stoics. I’ll tell you plainly: I don’t give a damn about destiny or the so-called Fates who control it. I agree with the soldier in Plautus: *I will scatter this troop of old wives with a single breath, like the wind scatters leaves.*”

Langius looked at me sternly. “Will you so rashly and thoughtlessly mock and deny destiny?” he asked. “You cannot, unless you are prepared to deny God and His power at the same time. For if there is a God, there must be providence. If there is providence, there must be a pre-ordained order of things. And from that order follows the unshakeable necessity of all events. How do you evade that logic? With what axe will you cut that chain?”

“For we can only conceive of God, that eternal spirit, as a being with eternal knowledge and foresight. We must acknowledge that He is constant, resolute, and unchanging—always the same, never wavering from what He has once willed and foreseen. As Homer says, ‘*The eternal God never changes his mind.*’ And if you admit this is true—which you must, if you have any reason or sense in you—then you must also accept that all of God’s decrees are firm and immovable, from eternity to eternity. From this arises necessity, and the very destiny that you mock.

“The truth of this is so clear and widely accepted that it has been a common belief among all nations. Whoever had any understanding of God and His providence also had an understanding of destiny. Believe me, the most ancient and wisest poet, Homer, guided his divine muse along no other path than this one. And the other poets who followed him did not stray from his footsteps—look at Euripides, Sophocles, Pindar, and, among the Romans, Virgil.

“Shall I speak of the historians? They all say the same: this or that happened by destiny; by destiny kingdoms rise and fall. Do you want to hear from the philosophers, whose chief concern was to discover and defend the truth against common opinion? Although they disagreed on many things, out of an ambitious desire to argue, it is remarkable how they all agreed on the basic path that leads to destiny.

“I say they agreed on the *path* to it, because I do not deny that they took different detours along the way. These different views can be reduced to four kinds of destiny: Mathematical, Natural, Violent, and True. I will explain them all briefly, just touching on each one, because this is where confusion and error usually arise.”

## **Chapter XVIII: The First Kinds of Destiny Explained**

I call **Mathematical Destiny** the belief that all actions and events are firmly bound to the power and positions of the planets and stars. The Chaldeans and astrologers were the first to propose

this idea. Among philosophers, its chief proponent is the great Hermes Trismegistus, who made a subtle and wise distinction between Providence, Necessity, and Destiny.

He said that Providence is the complete and perfect wisdom of the celestial God. Closely connected to it are two other forces: Necessity and Destiny. Destiny serves both Providence and Necessity, and the stars, in turn, are the instruments of Destiny. According to this view, no one can escape the force of fate or the influence of the stars, for the stars are the weapons of Destiny, through which it carries out its will for nature and for humanity.

This foolish opinion is held not only by the common crowd of astrologers but also, I am ashamed to say, by some theologians.

I call **Natural Destiny** the order of natural causes, which, when left uninterrupted, produce a specific and predictable effect according to their nature. According to his interpreter, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Aristotle belongs to this school of thought. So does Theophrastus, who wrote plainly that “destiny is the nature of each thing.”

In their view, it is destiny that a man begets a man. It is also destiny that he dies of natural causes from within, and not by violence. In contrast, it would be *against* destiny for a man to father a serpent or a monster, or to be killed by a sword or by fire. This opinion is not very offensive, because it doesn't reach as high as the true force of fate. (Just as a man who never climbs high will never fall.) Aristotle writes this way almost everywhere he discusses celestial matters, except in his book *On the World*, which is a golden treatise that breathes a more divine air. I have also read in a Greek writer that Aristotle believed fate was not a cause at all, but that chance was merely a variation on the causes of things otherwise governed by necessity. What a strange philosophy, to count fortune and chance as causes, but not destiny!

But let him be. I now come to my friends, the Stoics, a school of philosophy that I hold in high esteem. They were the authors of what I call **Violent Destiny** (or irresistible fate), which Seneca defined as “*a necessity of all things and actions, which no force can withstand or break.*” Chrysippus called it “*a spiritual power, orderly governing the whole world.*”

These definitions are not far from the truth, if they are interpreted soundly and with moderation. In fact, their entire philosophy on the matter might have been acceptable if the common people had not already condemned it with prejudiced minds. The Stoics are charged with two impieties: first, that they make God subject to the wheel of destiny, and second, that they do the same to the

actions of our will. I cannot entirely acquit them of these faults. Some of their surviving writings seem to support these ideas, while others offer more wholesome and reasonable views.

Seneca, a leading figure of the Stoic school, seems to stumble right at the beginning of his book *On Providence*. He writes: “*The very same necessity binds God. An irrevocable course carries away both human and divine things. The maker and ruler of all things decreed the fates, but now he follows them. He commanded once, but he obeys forever.*” This idea of an unbreakable chain of causes seems to imply that everything is subject to constraint.

But the true Stoics never taught such doctrines. If a similar idea appears in their writings, it was likely said in the heat of argument and was more a matter of words than of substance. Chrysippus, who first complicated the noble Stoic philosophy with thorny and subtle questions, still took care to clear it of the charge that it denied human freedom. And Seneca, who was wiser than that, did not truly make God subject to fate; rather, he was describing God's relationship to His own divine nature.

The Stoics who came closest to the truth sometimes used the words “destiny,” “providence,” and “God” interchangeably. For example, after Zeno defined destiny as “*a power that moves through matter in a consistent and unchanging way,*” he added, “*it makes no difference whether you call it providence or nature.*” Likewise, Chrysippus elsewhere called destiny “*the eternal decree of providence.*” The Stoic Panaetius said that God himself *is* fate.

Seneca agreed, writing, “*You may call the author of all nature by whatever name you wish. You may rightly call him Jupiter, the best and greatest, the Thunderer, or ‘Stator’—not because he once stopped the Roman army from fleeing, as the historians say, but because all things stand firm by his grace, and so he is the great establisher. If you also call him Fate or Destiny, you will not be wrong. For since destiny is nothing but an unfolding series of causes, He is the first and principal cause upon which all others depend.*” These last words are so divinely spoken that even slander itself cannot find fault with them.

That great writer Boethius, addressing a great king, shared a similar view with the Stoics: “*I think that Necessity should be called nothing other than God, as a steadfast and stable nature. And Destiny is that which connects all things and runs its course freely, without impediment.*”

Even if these sayings seem bold, they are not impious. When interpreted correctly, they do not differ much from the true understanding of fate and destiny. I sincerely commend the Stoics for

this: no other school of philosophy upheld the majesty and providence of God more, nor did any other draw people closer to heaven and eternal things. And if they strayed a bit while exploring the path of destiny, it was out of a noble desire to rescue humanity from the blind goddess, Fortune—whose very name, let alone her nature, they forcefully banished from their philosophy.

## Chapter XIX: The True Nature of Destiny Explained

So much for the opinions and disagreements of the ancients. Why should I dig into the secrets of hell, as the proverb says? I have enough to do to explain true destiny, which I will now set forth.

I call true destiny **an eternal decree of God's providence, which can no more be taken away than providence itself**. And let no one argue with me about the name. There is no other proper Latin word for this concept than *fatum* (fate). So what if the old writers misused it? Let us reclaim it. By freeing this word from the prison of Stoic philosophy, we can bring it into a better light. The word *fatum* comes from the Latin verb *fari*, meaning “to speak.” It is, properly, nothing other than the word and command of God.

This is the concept I am exploring. I define it either with the famous philosopher Pico della Mirandola as “*a series and order of causes depending on God’s counsel,*” or, in my own more subtle words, as “*an immovable decree of providence, inherent in movable things, which firmly brings about everything in its proper order, place, and time.*”

I call it a “decree of providence” because I do not entirely agree with the theologians of our day (may they permit me this freedom in the pursuit of truth) who confuse it in both name and nature with providence itself. I know it is a difficult and bold task to try to capture in words that supernatural and celestial essence—God—or anything that belongs to Him. Yet, as far as human understanding allows, I maintain that providence is one thing, and destiny is another.

I understand **providence** to be the power and faculty in God of seeing, knowing, and governing all things. It is a power that is universal, undivided, and unified. But **destiny** seems to descend into things themselves and can be seen in the particular details of the world. It is, as it were, the distribution and application of that universal providence to specific things.

Therefore, providence is *in* God and is an attribute of Him alone. Destiny is *in* things and is ascribed to them. You may think I am splitting hairs, but no, Lipsius, I take this distinction from

the common way people speak. Nothing is more usual than for someone to say, “This was my good or evil destiny,” or “This was the fatal decree for that kingdom or that town.”

But no one speaks that way of providence. No one applies it to things themselves without sounding impious or ridiculous. Therefore, I was right to say that one is *in* God, while the other is *from* God and is perceived in things themselves.

Furthermore, although providence is not truly separate from destiny, it is more excellent and more ancient. It is like the distinction we learn from the wise, who teach us that the sun is greater than its light, eternity is greater than time, and understanding is greater than the reasoning used to reach it.

To summarize these complex matters, you can see that I have good reason both to make this distinction and to retain the name of destiny, even against the new school of theologians. The ancient and celebrated Church Fathers do not forbid me from using the word “destiny” in its proper and true sense.

Now, to return to my definition, I said it was an “*inherent decree*” to show that destiny is observed *in* the things it affects, not where it comes from. I added “*in movable things*” to signify that although destiny itself is immovable, it does not take away the natural motion or faculty of things. It works gently and without force, according to the nature God has imprinted on each thing. In necessary causes (by which I mean secondary causes), it works necessarily. In natural causes, it works naturally. In voluntary causes, it works voluntarily. In contingent causes, it works contingently.

Therefore, from the perspective of the things themselves, destiny does not force or constrain them. It simply directs and guides everything according to its created nature. But if you trace it back to its ultimate source—God and His providence—then I state boldly that all things that happen by destiny, happen necessarily.

Finally, I included the words “*in its proper order, place, and time*” to establish what I said before: providence deals with things universally, while destiny deals with them individually.

By “**order**,” I mean the chain of causes that destiny sets in motion. By “**place and time**,” I mean that wonderful and incomprehensible power by which all events and actions are tied to a specific location and moment.

It was destiny that Tarquin would be banished from his kingdom. So be it. But first, the adultery had to be committed. You see the *order* of the causes.

It was destiny that Caesar would be killed. So be it. But it had to happen in the Senate, by the statue of Pompey. You see the *place*.

It was destiny that Domitian would be murdered by his own people. So be it. But it had to happen at the very hour he had long feared—the fifth hour—which he tried in vain to avoid. You see the *time*.

## **Chapter XX: The Difference Between Divine Providence and Stoic Fate**

“Well, young man, do you understand?” Langius asked. “Or do I need to shine a brighter light on this for you?”

I struck my head in frustration. “Yes, Langius, I need more light, or I will never escape this darkness. These distinctions seem so thin—like clever word traps. Frankly, I feel like you're leading me into a trap, and I distrust your mysterious and confusing words as if they were my enemies.”

Langius laughed a little. “Take courage,” he said. “There is no Hannibal here. You have come to a safe fortress, not fallen into an ambush. I will give you all the light you need. Tell me, what specific point still confuses you?”

“It’s the part about force and necessity, Langius. I truly cannot see how the destiny you describe is any different from the Fate of the Stoics. It seems to me that while you throw Stoic Fate out the front door with your words, you sneak it right back in through a side door.”

“No, Lipsius, God forbid. I would never dream of proposing such a Stoic destiny, and I have no desire to revive those old fables, which are long dead and buried. I am offering you a doctrine that is consistent with piety and reason, and it differs from the Stoics' harsh concept of Fate in four key ways.

First, the Stoics make God himself subject to Fate. In Homer’s story, for example, even Jupiter, though he desperately wanted to, could not free his son Sarpedon from his fated death. But in our

view, destiny is subject *to* God. He is the completely free author and director of all things, able at His will to override and break the supposed chains of destiny.

Second, they believe in an eternal, unbroken chain of natural causes. But we do not believe the causes are always natural—for God often performs wonders and miracles that are outside of or contrary to nature—nor do we believe that this chain of causes is eternal.

Third, the Stoics remove all possibility of chance or contingency from the world. We, however, allow for it, affirming that whenever secondary causes permit, chance can play a role in outcomes and events.

Finally, they seemed to impose a violent force upon our free will. This is far from our view. We accept both destiny and, at the same time, the freedom of the will. We avoid the treacherous winds of random fortune, but we do not crash our ship upon the rocks of absolute necessity.

Is there such a thing as destiny? Yes. But it is the first and primary cause, and far from eliminating the secondary causes, it usually works *through* them. Your will is one of those secondary causes. Do not think that God forces it or takes it away. This is where all the error and ignorance on this subject lies: no one understands that you ought to will what destiny wills—and I say you ought to will it *freely*.

For God, who created all things, also makes use of them without corrupting their nature. Just as the outermost sphere of the heavens turns and carries the inner spheres along with it, yet does not prevent or disrupt their own proper motions, so God, by the power of destiny, guides all things but does not take away the unique power or motion of anything. He willed that trees and crops should grow, and so they do, according to their own nature, without force. He willed that humans should use deliberation and choice, and so they do, freely and without force.

And yet, whatever they were going to choose, God foresaw from all eternity. He foresaw it, I say, but He did not *force* it. He knew it, but He did not *compel* it. He foretold it, but He did not *prescribe* it.

Why do these endlessly curious minds stumble over this? Oh, you simple creatures! I see nothing clearer than this—unless some restless, argumentative mind simply wants to stir up trouble, infected with an insatiable itch for debate.”

“But how can this be?” they ask. “If God foresaw that I would sin, and His foresight cannot be mistaken, doesn't that mean I must sin *necessarily*?”

You fool! Who denies it? You sin necessarily, and yet you do so of your own free will. For God foresaw that you would sin in the exact way that you do—and He foresaw that you would sin *freely*. Therefore, you sin both freely and necessarily. Is that clear enough?

They press further: “Is not God in us the author of every motion?”

He is the general author of motion, I confess, but He is the favorer of good only. Are you inclined toward virtue? He knows it and helps you. Are you inclined toward vice? He knows that also, and He permits it. But the fault is not in Him.

If I ride a lame horse, the act of riding comes from me, but the lameness comes from the horse itself. If I play upon a poorly tuned harp, the bad sound is the fault of the instrument, not of me. The earth nourishes all plants with the same universal moisture, yet some grow to be wholesome and others poisonous. Should we blame the earth for this, or rather the nature of the plants that convert good nourishment into poison?

So it is in this case. The fact that you are moved comes from God. But the fact that you are moved toward evil comes from within yourself.

To conclude on the matter of freedom: destiny is like the leader of a great dance in this world. But we dance our parts too, by willing or not willing. Our freedom, however, extends no further than that. We have the free will to struggle against God, but not the power to overcome His will. I am free to walk around on a ship, to run back and forth on its deck, but my movements cannot stop the ship from sailing on its course. In the same way, in this fated vessel in which we all sail, our wills may struggle and resist all they like, but they cannot turn the ship from its course or hinder its journey in any way. That highest will of all must hold the reins and, with the turn of a hand, direct this chariot wherever it pleases.

## **Chapter XXI: Concluding the Discussion of Destiny, with a Warning Against Prying too Deeply**

“But why am I sailing so long in these waters?” Langius said. “I will turn the ship now and avoid this Charybdis—this whirlpool that has swallowed the minds of so many. I see here how Cicero was shipwrecked; he chose to deny providence rather than give up one ounce of human freedom. And so, as one bishop cleverly put it, in making men free, he made them sacrilegious. The theologian John of Damascus also sailed into this gulf, extending providence to all other things but excluding it from the things within our power.

“Warned by their mistakes, Lipsius, I will stay close to the shore and not venture too far into this deep sea. When the philosopher Euclides was asked many questions about God, he gave a fitting reply: ‘I do not know about other things, but I am certain of this: he hates those who pry too much.’ I think the same is true of destiny. It is something to be acknowledged, not dissected; to be believed in, not perfectly understood. I believe the saying of Bias, ‘Concerning God, believe that He exists,’ applies even better to destiny. It is enough to know that it exists. If you are ignorant of the details, it is no sin.

“This much is sufficient for our purpose,” he said, returning from his digression. “You must believe that necessity is inseparable from public disasters, and from that belief, you must seek comfort for your sorrow. What business is it of yours to investigate the freedom or bondage of the will? Whether it is forced or persuaded? You poor soul! Your town is being sacked by the enemy, and you are sitting here drawing circles in the dust. War, tyranny, slaughter, and death hang over your head—these are things truly sent from above, and they have nothing to do with your will or pleasure. You may fear them, but you cannot prevent them. You may try to flee, but you cannot escape them.

“Arm yourself against them. Take up this fated weapon—the acceptance of necessity. It will not just prick your sorrows, but dissolve them entirely. It will not merely lighten your burden, but remove it completely. Just as a nettle stings if you touch it lightly but loses its power if you grasp it firmly, so this grief grows worse when treated with gentle salves but is quickly cured by harsh medicines.

“And there is nothing more powerful than necessity. It can overthrow all these weak feelings in a single assault. What are you doing, Sorrow? What is the use of you when something must

happen by necessity or ought to happen by reason? What will your whining complaint accomplish? You may shake this celestial yoke, but you can never shake it off.

*Cease to believe God's fated decree Can be changed by your misery.*

“There is no escape from necessity except to want what it wants. A wise man said it well: ‘You are sure to be the victor if you only enter into conflicts that are in your power to win.’ The battle against necessity is not such a conflict. Whoever fights it will be overcome. In fact—and this is even more remarkable—he is already defeated before he even enters the fight.”

## **Chapter XXII: On Not Using Destiny as an Excuse for Laziness**

Langius paused, which gave me an opportunity to speak. “If the wind keeps blowing in this direction,” I said, “I think I will reach the harbor soon. I now feel a firm resolve to follow God and obey necessity. I believe I can now say with Euripides, *‘I would rather offer sacrifice to God than kick against the goads in anger; or, being a mortal man, contend with the immortal God.’*”

“Yet there is one last stormy wave of doubt that troubles my mind. Please, Langius, calm it if you can. If all these public disasters are caused by a destiny that cannot be resisted or changed, then why should we take any care for our country? Why not leave everything to that unmastered Lord and simply sit still with our hands in our laps? After all, you said that all our efforts and advice are useless if destiny is against them.”

Langius replied, “Alas, young man, you stray from the truth out of stubbornness. Is that what it means to obey destiny? Or is it not, rather, to resist and despise it? You say you will sit still with your hands in your lap. I wish your tongue had been tied just now. Who told you that destiny works alone, without the help of secondary causes and means?

“It may be your destiny to have children, but first you must plant the seed in your wife’s garden. It may be your destiny to be cured of a disease, but only if you use a doctor and proper nourishment. In the same way, if it is the destiny of this storm-tossed ship of your country to be saved, it is also its destiny that it be helped and defended. If you want to reach the harbor, you must row the oars and hoist the sails, not just sit idly by, waiting for a favorable wind from heaven.

“On the other hand, if it is your country’s destiny to be destroyed, then destiny will bring about the very human actions that lead to its ruin. The rulers and the people will be divided among themselves. No one will be willing to obey; no one will be able to command. Everyone will speak proudly but act cowardly. Finally, the leaders themselves will lack both wisdom and loyalty. As the historian Velleius truly said:

*The power of the fates is inescapable. When they decide to ruin a man’s fortune, they first corrupt his judgment.*

And again:

*When God wishes to change a man’s good fortune, he takes away his understanding. And, what is most wretched of all, he makes it so the man’s downfall appears to be deserved.”*

“Still, you must not fall into despair at the first sign of trouble, as if your country were on the verge of total destruction. How do you know that? How can you tell whether this is just a passing fever or a fatal disease? Therefore, you must lend your helping hand and, as the proverb says, *‘Hope, as long as the sick man is still breathing.’*

“But if you see by certain and undeniable signs that the fatal moment of the state’s collapse has arrived, then I would follow the saying:

*Do not fight against God.*

“In such a case, I would follow the example of Solon. When Pisistratus seized control of Athens, Solon, seeing that all his efforts to defend their liberty were in vain, came and laid down his sword and shield before the Senate doors, crying out, ‘O my country, I have defended you in word and deed for as long as I could.’ Then he went home and lived in peace. You should do the same. Yield to God and give way to the times. And if you are a good citizen, preserve yourself for a better and happier future. The liberty that is lost now may one day be recovered, and your ruined country may flourish again in another age. Why do you lose all courage and fall into despair?

“Of the two consuls at the battle of Cannae, I consider Varro, who escaped, a better citizen than Paulus, who was slain. And the Senate and people of Rome agreed, publicly thanking him because he had not lost all hope for the commonwealth.

“However, whether your country is shaken or falls, whether it is weakened or utterly destroyed, do not be afflicted. Take on the noble courage of Crator, who, when Alexander the Great asked if he wanted his country restored to liberty, replied, ‘Why should I? Another Alexander might just come and oppress it again.’ This is the attitude of wise and valiant men, as Achilles advised in Homer:

*Though our grief is great, let us keep it to ourselves; It does no good to weep.*

“Otherwise, you will be like Creon in the myth, who embraced his burning daughter. He did not save her; he only destroyed himself. In the same way, Lipsius, you are more likely to quench the light of your own life with your tears than you are to extinguish this great fire consuming your country.”

As Langius was speaking, the doors creaked loudly, and a boy sent from the worthy gentleman Torrentius came toward us to remind us that it was time for supper. Langius, as if waking from a deep sleep, said, “Oh, how this conversation has deceived me! The day has completely slipped away.”

He rose, took me by the hand, and said, “Come, Lipsius, let us go to our long-awaited supper.”

“No,” I said, “let us sit a while longer. This conversation is the best supper of all—what the Greeks would call ‘the food of the gods.’ At this banquet, I am always hungry and never full.”

But Langius pulled me along, saying, “Let us keep our promise for now. We can finish our discussion on constancy tomorrow, if you like.”

*End of the First Book*

## On Constancy Book II

### Chapter I: A Pleasant Garden Renews the Conversation

The next day, Langius decided to show me his gardens. He had two of them, which he maintained with great care: one on the hill across from his house, and another farther away, in a valley by the Meuse river.

*The river flows gently Past a most pleasantly situated town.*

He came to my room rather early. “Well, Lipsius,” he said, “shall we go for a walk, or would you rather stay here and rest?”

“I would much rather walk with you, Langius,” I replied. “But where shall we go?”

“If you like,” he said, “we can go to my garden by the river. It is not far. You will get some exercise and see the town. Besides, the air there is fresh and pleasant in this hot weather.”

“That sounds wonderful,” I said. “No journey will seem long to me if you are leading the way, even if it were to the farthest Indies.”

So we called for our cloaks and set out for the garden. As soon as we entered, I looked around with a wandering curiosity, marveling at the elegance and beauty of the place.

“My friend,” I said, “what a delightful and magnificent place this is! You have heaven here, Langius, not a garden. The stars in a clear night sky do not shine more brightly than these fine flowers, glistening in all their varied colors. The poets write about the gardens of Adonis and Alcinous, but those are trifles. Compared to this, they are no better than paintings of flies.”

As I drew nearer and brought some of the flowers to my nose, I exclaimed, “What should I wish for first? To have the hundred eyes of Argus, or the keen nose of Catullus? This delight tickles and feeds both my senses at once. Away with all the perfumes of Arabia! They are repulsive to me compared to this pure and heavenly air.”

Langius gently squeezed my hand and said with a laugh, “You praise it well, Lipsius, but truly, neither I nor my country muse, Flora, deserve such lofty and kind words.”

“But you do deserve them, Langius! Do you think I am flattering you? I am speaking in earnest, from the heart. The Elysian Fields themselves are nothing compared to this garden of yours. Just look at the exquisite neatness everywhere! The order! How perfectly everything is arranged in its beds and plots, more intricate than a checkerboard. And what an abundance of flowers and herbs! What rarity and novelty! It seems as if Nature has gathered into this one small plot every precious thing from both the Old and the New World.”

## Chapter II: In Praise of Gardens

“Indeed, Langius,” I continued, “your diligent care for these gardens is a fitting and praiseworthy pursuit. It is a labor, if I am not mistaken, that every good man is drawn to by his very nature. And the proof of this is that you cannot name any other kind of delight that the greatest men of all ages have loved more.

“Look into the Holy Scriptures, and you will see that gardens began with the world itself, when God placed the first man in one as the setting for a blessed and happy life. In secular writings, the gardens of Adonis, Alcinous, Tantalus, and the Hesperides have become legendary. And in well-respected histories, you will find that King Cyrus planted orchards with his own hands, that Queen Semiramis had wondrous hanging gardens, and that King Masinissa of Numidia had such strange and famous gardens that all of Africa marveled at them.

“Among the ancient Greeks and Romans, how many great men could I name who cast aside all other cares to devote themselves to gardening? And they were, in a word, all philosophers and wise men, who avoided the cities and the troublesome crowds to remain within the peaceful bounds of their gardens. I can picture King Tarquin in ancient Rome, walking happily in his garden, trimming the tops of his poppies. I remember Cato the Censor, who took pleasure in gardens and wrote seriously on the subject. I think of Lucullus, who, after his victories in Asia, retired to his gardens for recreation. And Sulla, who gave up his dictatorship to spend his old age joyfully among his plants. Finally, I must not forget the Emperor Diocletian, who preferred his vegetables and lettuce from a small farm in Salona to the imperial scepter and purple robes.

“And it is not just the great and powerful who feel this way. I know that all honest people, free from ambition, have always delighted in this pastime. There is a secret and natural force within us—the cause of which I cannot fully explain—that draws not only those who are naturally inclined to it, but also even the most stern and serious people who might otherwise seem to despise such a simple pleasure.”

Just as no one can gaze upon the heavens and the immortal spirits without awe, no one can behold the earth and its sacred treasures, or the excellent beauty of this world below, without an inner thrill and delight of the senses. Ask your own mind, and it will confess that it is captivated and nourished by such a sight. Ask your senses of sight and smell, and they will tell you they take no greater pleasure in anything than in the well-tended beds of a garden.

Pause for a moment, I beg you, and look at the multitude of flowers in their daily growth—one just a stalk, one a bud, another in full bloom. See how one fades while another springs forth. And in a single

type of flower, observe the countless variations in beauty, form, and shape. What mind is so stern that it would not be softened and filled with gentle thoughts in the midst of all this?

Now, you curious eye, come closer and fix your gaze upon these vibrant colors. Look at this natural purple, that blood-red, this ivory, that snow-white, this fiery orange, that golden yellow—and so many other shades that the best painter might envy but could never imitate with his brush. And what a sweet scent there is! What a piercing aroma! It is as if a portion of the heavenly air itself has been infused into them from above. It is no wonder the poets imagined that flowers first sprang from the blood and essence of the gods.

Oh, true fountain of joy and sweet delight! Oh, home of Venus and the Graces! I wish I could rest here and spend my whole life in your bowers. God grant me leave—far from the chaos of the towns—to walk with a joyful and wandering eye among these herbs and flowers from both the known and the unknown world. May I reach out my hands, first to this full-blown flower, then to that newly opened bud, so that my mind, lost in a kind of blissful reverie, might forget all my cares and troubles.

### **Chapter III: On the True and Proper Use of Gardens**

As I finished speaking, my voice and expression full of excitement, Langius spoke to me softly. “I see you love this flourishing, purple-robed nymph, Lipsius,” he said, “but I fear you are infatuated with her. You praise gardens, but you seem to admire only their superficial and external qualities, while ignoring their true and proper delights. You are captivated by the colors and the arrangements, and you crave strange flowers brought from every corner of the world.

“And what is the point of all this? It makes me think you belong to that new school of thought that has sprung up in our time—a group of meticulous yet idle men who have turned a good and harmless thing into a tool for two terrible vices: vanity and sloth.

“This is the only reason they keep their gardens. They boastfully hunt for exotic herbs and flowers, and once they get them, they guard and cherish them more carefully than a mother does her child. These are the men whose letters fly to Thrace, Greece, and India, all for a single root or seed. They would be more grieved by the loss of a newly discovered flower than by the death of an old friend. Wouldn’t you laugh at the Roman, Hortensius, who mourned in black for a dead fish? That is how these men act over a plant.

“And if one of these men you see visiting my garden happens to acquire a new or rare flower, how he boasts of it! His companions are filled with envy. Some of them go home more heartbroken than Sulla

or Marcellus were when they lost their elections for high office. What can I call this but a kind of cheerful madness, like children fighting over their dolls?

“And think of the ‘great effort’ they put into these gardens. They sit, they walk the paths, they stretch like lazy sluggards, and they sleep. They make the garden not just a nursery for idleness, but a tomb for their own sloth. A profane generation! I would gladly banish them from the sacred community of true gardeners. For I know that gardens were created for modest recreation, not for vanity; for solace, not for sloth.

“What? Should I be so shallow as to have my spirits lifted or crushed by getting or losing some rare herb? No. I value things for what they are worth. Setting aside the allure of rarity and novelty, I know that they are just herbs and flowers—that is, fleeting things of little real consequence. As the poet rightly says, *‘The wind brings some to life and withers others.’*

“Therefore, I do not despise their beauty and elegance (as you can see here with your own eyes). But I disagree with these great garden-masters in this: I acquire them without great effort, I keep them without anxiety, and I lose them without grief.”

“And I am not so foolish or shallow as to chain myself to the shady corners of my garden. Even in the midst of my leisure, I find work to do. Here, my mind is occupied without drudgery and exercised without pain. As Scipio said, *‘I am never less alone than when I am alone; and never less idle than when I am at leisure.’* That is a noble saying, and I would swear it was first conceived in a garden just like this.

“For gardens were created not for the body, but for the mind—to refresh it, not to dull it with idleness. They are a wholesome retreat from the cares and troubles of the world. Are you weary of crowds? Here you can be alone. Have the affairs of the world exhausted you? Here you can be restored, as the nourishment of quiet and the gentle breeze of pure air breathe new life into you.

“Think of the wise men of ancient times. They made their homes in gardens. Think of the learned minds of our own age. They delight in gardens, and it is in them that most of their divine writings are composed—works that we marvel at and that no passage of time will ever erase. So many sharp and subtle arguments in natural philosophy have come from these green bowers. So many precepts of morality from these shady Academies. Yes, from the walking paths of gardens spring the sweet, flowing rivers that have watered the entire world with their wisdom.

“And why is this? Because the mind is lifted up to these high thoughts when it is free to behold its true home—the heavens—rather than when it is confined within the prisons of houses or towns. Here, you

learned poets can compose verses worthy of immortality. Here, let all scholars meditate and write. Here, let philosophers debate contentment, constancy, life, and death.

“Behold, Lipsius, this is the true purpose of a garden: quiet, retreat from the world, meditation, reading, and writing—all done as a form of recreation. Just as painters, whose eyes have grown tired from staring intently at their work, refresh them by looking at green things, so here we can refresh our weary and wandering minds.

“Why should I hide my purpose from you? Do you see that arbor over there, intricately shaped with figures cut from the green boughs? That is the home of my Muses, my nursery and school of wisdom. There, I either apply myself to diligent reading or sow the seeds of good thoughts in my heart. In doing so, I store up wholesome lessons in my mind, like weapons in an armory, always ready to be used against the assaults and changes of fortune. As soon as I set foot in that place, I command all vulgar and servile cares to leave me. Lifting my head high, I scorn the delights of the common crowd and the great vanity of human affairs.

“In fact, I feel as if I shake off everything merely human in me and am carried up high on the fiery chariot of wisdom. Do you think, when I am there, that I care what the French or the Spanish are plotting, or who holds power in Flanders and who has been deposed? Do you think I worry whether the Ottoman Sultan threatens us by sea or by land? Or what the king of some cold northern country is scheming? No, none of these things trouble me. I am guarded and fortified against all external things and am settled within myself, concerned with only one care: to bring my broken and troubled mind under the command of right reason and God, and to subdue all human and earthly things to my mind.

“So that whenever my final day comes, I will be ready to welcome it with courage and joy, and to depart this life not as if I were being thrown out of a window, but as if I were being let out through the door. This, Lipsius, is my recreation in my gardens. These are the fruits I gather, and as long as I am in my right mind, I would not trade them for all the treasures of Persia and India.”

## **Chapter IV: A Call to Wisdom as the Path to Constancy**

When Langius finished speaking, I admit I was stunned by his profound and steady words. After gathering myself, I said, “Oh, you happy man, both in peace and in trouble! Your courage is more than human! I only wish I could imitate it in some small measure and follow in your footsteps, even if I fall far behind.”

Langius gently corrected me. “Why do you talk of imitating me? You can easily surpass me. You can not only follow me but go far beyond. For I myself, Lipsius, have only taken a few steps on this path of

constancy and virtue. I cannot yet be compared to the truly valiant and good, though perhaps I am a little better than the most cowardly and wicked.

“But you, whose spirit is lively and quick, should press forward. Under my guidance, enter this main road that leads directly to stability and constancy. The road I speak of is Wisdom. I urge you not to stray from its straight and easy path.

“Have you taken delight in learning and the company of the nine Muses?” (*The Muses, goddesses of the arts and sciences.*) “I approve of that. I know that this lighter and more pleasant kind of learning prepares the mind, which is otherwise unfit ‘to receive the sacred seed.’ (*A quote from St. Augustine.*) However, I do not want you to stop there, as if that were the beginning and end of all your studies. These studies should be the foundation, not the building itself; the path to the goal, not the goal itself.

“If you were invited to a banquet, I trust you would not just taste the sweets and desserts, but would first fill your stomach with heartier food. Why should we not do the same in this great feast of learning? Why not pair the firm nourishment of philosophy with the sweet delicacies of the orators and poets? Do not misunderstand me. I am not condemning poetry and rhetoric; I commend them in their proper place. But I believe those wandering nymphs should be reined in, so to speak, by a stern Bacchus. (*Here, Bacchus represents the serious discipline of philosophy.*)

“Homer rightly mocks the suitors who, failing to win Penelope, turned their attention to her handmaidens. Be careful you do not do the same, forsaking the queen of all disciplines, Wisdom, to fall in love with her servants. It is pleasant to be called a learned man, but it is better to be called a wise man, and best of all to be called a good man. Let us pursue this. Let our great efforts not be just to know, but to be wise and to act accordingly.

*What good is all our learning, If wisdom is not there?*

...So says the old verse, and truly. How many of those who follow the Muses today disgrace both themselves and the name of learning? Some are filled with vice and wickedness. Many others are vain, fickle, and concerned only with abstract knowledge, dedicating themselves to no useful or profitable study.

So what if they can understand the Greek and Latin authors? That is all they do—understand them. The philosopher Anacharsis once joked that the Athenians use money only for counting. In the same way, these scholars have knowledge for no other purpose than to know. They care so little about how they live their lives that it is no wonder learning has a bad reputation among the common people, as if it were a teacher of wickedness.

But when good literature is used correctly, it is a guide to virtue. We must pair it with wisdom. Learning should prepare our minds for wisdom, not claim them for itself. Just as some trees will not bear fruit unless they grow near a male tree of the same kind, these tender virgins—I mean, the liberal arts—will not be fruitful unless they are joined with the masculine strength of wisdom.

Why do you edit the writings of Tacitus if your own life is uncorrected? Why do you illuminate the works of Suetonius while you yourself are in a dark fog of error? Why are you so meticulous about cleansing Plautus of his faults when your own mind is full of filth?

Turn yourself, at last, to better studies. Acquire a learning that is not for empty show but for good use and purpose. Apply yourself to wisdom, which can correct your bad habits and bring peace and beauty to your disordered and unclean mind. Only wisdom can instill virtue in you, stamp upon you the mark of constancy, and open for you the temple of a good mind.”

## **Chapter IV: A Call to Wisdom and Constancy**

Langius finished speaking, and I confess that his profound and steady words left me amazed. After collecting myself, I said, “Oh, you are a happy man, both in peace and in turmoil! What more-than-human courage you possess! I wish to God that I could imitate it in some small measure and follow in your footsteps, even if from a great distance.”

Langius corrected me. “Why do you speak of imitating me? You can easily surpass me, not just follow. To be honest, Lipsius, I myself have only taken a few steps on this path of constancy and virtue. I am not yet to be compared with the truly valiant and good, though perhaps I am a little better than the most weak and cowardly.

“But you, whose spirit is eager and bright, must push forward. Under my guidance, enter this highway that leads directly to stability and constancy. The path I speak of is Wisdom. I urge and advise you not to stop treading its smooth and even track.

“Have you taken delight in literature and the company of the nine Muses? I approve of that. I know that this lighter and more pleasant kind of learning prepares the mind, making it ready to receive the sacred seed of wisdom when it otherwise might not have been fit.

“However, I do not want you to stop there, as if that were the beginning and end of all your studies. These subjects must be the foundation, not the building itself. They are the path to the goal, but not the goal itself. If you were invited to a banquet, you would not just taste the desserts, but would first fill

your stomach with heartier food. Why should we not do the same in this great feast of learning? Why not pair the sweet delicacies of the orators and poets with the solid nourishment of philosophy?

“Do not misunderstand me. I am not condemning literature; I commend it in its proper place. But I believe these wandering nymphs should be guided, so to speak, by a sterner Bacchus.

“Homer rightly mocks the suitors who, failing to win Penelope, turned their attention to her maids. Beware that you do not do the same, forsaking the mistress of all knowledge for her servants. It is a pleasant praise to be called a learned man, but it is better to be called a wise man, and best of all to be called a good man. Let us pursue this. Let us labor not just to know, but to be wise and to act accordingly.

*What good is learning's skill, Where wisdom is not present still?*

## **Chapter V: Wisdom is Gained Through Action, Not Wishing**

This advice stirred in me a deep desire that I could not hide. “My father,” I said, “I follow you in my heart and mind. When will I be able to follow you in my deeds? When will the day come that I am free from all these troubles and can walk the path to true wisdom and constancy?”

Langius cut me short. “What? Are you resorting to wishing instead of doing? That is a foolish way to speak, like the common folk. You cannot, as the fables say of Caenus, be transformed from a woman into a man with a wish. Nor can you become wise and constant overnight by simply wishing for it. You must work for it and, as the saying goes, join your hands to your heart. Seek, read, learn.”

“I know I must, Langius,” I said, “but I ask for your helping hand. Please continue your discussion from yesterday, which was interrupted by supper. Let us return to the topic of constancy. We have already begun to honor her, and it would be sacrilege to stop now.”

Langius shook his head slightly. “No, Lipsius,” he said, “I will not do it, lest I lock myself up in this schoolhouse again. This garden is not the right place for such a serious discussion. You know I made it for my relaxation, not for my work. We will take up that argument another time.”

“No, let's do it now!” I insisted. “What place could be more fitting for such a wise conversation than this, your school of wisdom? I mean your beautiful summer house. To me, it is like a temple, and the table inside is an altar where we can properly pay homage to wisdom. And I have a good feeling about it.”

“What is that?” Langius asked.

“Just as those who sit in an apothecary’s shop carry the scent with them when they leave, I have good hope that some of the fragrance of wisdom will stick to my mind by spending time in its sanctuary.”

Langius laughed. “I fear that feeling of yours is so light it will weigh nothing at all. But let us go there, Lipsius. In all honesty, your earnest desire moves and encourages me. Just as those who search for springs of water, seeing steam rise from the earth in the morning, guess that water lies beneath, so too do I have great hope for the fruitful streams of virtue when I see such a desire for learning in a young man.”

With those words, he led me to his summer house. He sat down at the table, and I turned to the servants who were there. “You there,” I said, “stand watch. First, lock the door. And listen to me: if you let anyone in here, you will answer for it. I want no man, dog, or woman to enter—not even Good Fortune herself, if she should come.”

Langius laughed out loud. “Have you been a viceroy at some point? Your commands are so majestic and severe.”

“Indeed,” I replied. “I learned my lesson from last night’s interruption. Now, in God’s name, continue your talk.”

## Chapter VI: The Third Argument for Constancy: The Benefit of Calamities

Langius did not pause for long before he began. “I will hold firm to the topic of constancy we discussed yesterday,” he said, “following the same plan and keeping to the points I laid out before. You remember I had four arguments, or ‘troops,’ to defend constancy against your sorrow and despair. I have already sent the first two into the field: Providence and Necessity. I proved that public calamities are sent by God alone, and that they are unavoidable.

“Now I bring forward my third troop, led by the idea of **Benefit**. I might call this the legion of self-interest, and it is a powerful and clever force if you observe it closely. It has a way of creeping into the minds of men, overcoming them with a kind of gentle persuasion. It does not attack us, but entices us; it does not force us, but leads us. We are as easily guided by what is good for us as we are compelled by necessity. This argument of benefit, Lipsius, is what I now set against you and your weak defenses.

“I say that these public calamities we suffer are *profitable* to us; they come with an inner fruit and advantage. Do we call them evils? On the contrary, they are good, if only we pull aside the veil of our opinions and look at their beginning and their end. For they begin with God, and they end in goodness.

“As I proved yesterday, the origin of these miseries is God—that is, not just the highest good, but the author, source, and fountain of all goodness. It is as impossible for evil to come from Him as it is for Him to be evil Himself. The divine power is generous and healing, incapable of either doing or receiving harm. Its greatest virtue is to do good. This is why the ancients, even without a true knowledge of God, had some inkling of this and called their chief god *Jupiter*, from the Latin word *iuvare*, meaning ‘to help.’

“Do you imagine that God is angry or vengeful, and that He hurls these harmful darts at humanity? You are mistaken. Anger, wrath, and revenge are human passions. They arise from natural weakness and are found only in weak beings. But the divine spirit is eternally good. Those bitter pills He gives us are medicines; though they taste sharp, their effect is wholesome. The prince of philosophers, Plato, was right when he said, ‘*God does no evil, nor is He the cause of any.*’ And our own master, Seneca, spoke even more eloquently:

*‘What is the cause of God’s goodness? His own nature. Anyone who thinks God can or will do harm is deceived. He can neither suffer wrong nor inflict it. The first step in worshiping God is to believe in Him, and then to acknowledge His majesty—to know that He is the governor of the world, that He rules all things as His own, and that He watches over all humankind, and even more carefully, over every single person. He neither does evil to others, nor has any evil in Himself.’”*

## **Chapter VII: How Calamities Lead to a Good End, Even When Caused by Wicked People**

Therefore, these calamities are good in their origin, and they are also good in their final outcome, because they are always directed toward a good and beneficial purpose (at least for good people).

You will object, “How can this be? Is it not obvious that these wars and massacres are committed with the intent to do harm?” That is true, from a human perspective, but not from God’s. To help you understand this more clearly, I must make a distinction.

There are two kinds of calamities sent by God: simple and mixed. Simple calamities are those that come directly from God, without any human involvement. Mixed calamities are also from God, but they are carried out through the actions of men. (*Later philosophers would call these “natural evils” and “moral evils,” respectively.*)

Examples of simple calamities are famine, earthquakes, floods, sickness, and death. Examples of mixed calamities are tyranny, war, oppression, and slaughter.

In the simple calamities, everything is pure and untainted, as it flows from a perfectly pure source. In the mixed ones, I do not deny that there is filth and impurity, because they are channeled through the foul conduits of human passions. (*It is a classic Stoic idea that passions are evil because they are contrary to reason.*) When a human being is the instrument of a calamity, is it any surprise that a fault is committed in the process?

What should surprise you more is the provident goodness of God, who turns that very fault to our benefit and that offense to our good. Do you see a tyrant spewing threats and murder, whose only delight is in doing harm? Who would be willing to destroy himself just to persecute others? Leave him be; he is out of his right mind. And God, with an invisible string, is leading him toward His own ends. These wicked people are like an arrow that flies to its target without any awareness on the part of the one who shot it.

For the supreme power of God restrains and controls all human power, and it directs their wandering course toward a beneficial outcome. In an army, the soldiers have different motives: one fights for plunder, another for glory, another out of hatred. Yet they are all fighting for their prince and for victory. In the same way, the wills of all people, good or bad, serve under God. And though they pursue many different ends, they all ultimately arrive at the one final end that God intends.

But you might ask, why does God use wicked people as His instruments? Why doesn't He inflict these punishments Himself, or through the hands of good people?

Oh, man, you ask too much. And I do not know if it is within my power to reveal these secrets to you. This much I know: God always has a reason for what He does, even when we cannot see it. And yet, is this really so strange? A governor orders a criminal to be punished according to the law, but the one who carries out the punishment is a jailer or an executioner. A father sometimes corrects his son himself, and at other times he asks a servant or a tutor to do it. Why should we not grant God the same authority? Why should He not, when it pleases Him, punish us with His own hand, and at other times, through the hands of others?

There is no injustice in this. Is the servant who punishes you angry with you? Does he intend to harm you? It doesn't matter. You should focus on the intention of the one who gave the order. For your Father, who commanded it, is standing by, and He will not allow you to receive a single strike more than He has appointed.

“But why,” you ask, “is sin mixed in with this? Why is the poison of human passion attached to these divine arrows?” Now you are pushing me up a steep mountain, but I will try to climb it.

God, in order to display His wisdom and great power, “thought it better to bring good out of evil, than to permit no evil at all.” (Those are the words of Augustine.) For what is wiser or greater than a being who can draw good from evil, and turn things that were intended for destruction into sources of health and safety? We praise a physician who mixes the venom of a viper into a medicine to create a healing remedy. Why, then, would you criticize God if He adds the faults of men to the healthful medicine of calamity, without any real harm to you? For with the secret, purifying fire of His providence, He boils away and consumes that added poison.

Finally, it contributes to the advancement of His power and glory, to which all things are ultimately directed. For what could better express His mighty power than the fact that He not only defeats His enemies but so overrules them that He makes them fight on His side? That they take up arms for His victory? This happens every day, when God’s will is accomplished *by* the wicked, but not *of* the wicked. That is, when He turns the things that ungodly men do against His will, so that they end up accomplishing His will.

And what greater miracle could there be, “than that wicked men should make good men out of those who were evil before?” (*This is a quote from Boethius's The Consolation of Philosophy.*)

Consider the example of Gaius Julius Caesar. Go on, Caesar, and trample underfoot two things that should be sacred to you: your country and your son-in-law. Your ambition, without you even realizing it, will serve God and the very country you seek to conquer, for it will ultimately restore and preserve the Roman state.

And you, Attila the Hun, thirsty for blood and plunder, hurry here from the farthest corners of the earth. Seize, slay, burn, and destroy. Your cruelty will be fighting for God, and it will do nothing more than awaken the Christians who were drowning in pointless pleasures and delights.

And what about you, the two Vespasians (Vespasian and his son Titus)? Destroy the land of Judea and its people. Capture and sack the holy city. Why? You do it for your own glory and to expand your empire. But you are mistaken. You are merely the enforcers of God’s severe punishment upon that ungodly nation. Perhaps, at the very same time you are putting Christians to death in Rome, you are also avenging the death of Christ in Judea.

And now, you who are our ruler, whether you come from the West or the East, what do you intend with this war and these bloody weapons? You aim to strengthen your kingdom’s authority and the power of your nation. But you are nothing more than a whip to scourge the decadent and undisciplined Flemish people. We seem unable to handle our great prosperity without being plunged into these harsh, Neronian trials.

Examples like these can be found in every age, where we see God using the wicked desires of some to accomplish His own good will, and using the injustice of others to carry out His just judgments. Therefore, Lipsius, let us admire the hidden power of His wisdom and not presume to fully understand it. Let us be assured that all these great afflictions serve a good and final purpose, even if our blind minds cannot perceive it or are slow to grasp it. For the true purpose of our suffering is often hidden from us. But it will run its course, even if we do not see it, just like certain rivers that flow underground, hidden from our sight, but are still carried onward to their proper sea.

## Chapter VIII: The Three Purposes of Suffering

But if I may be permitted to set sail and venture deeper into this sea of divine matters, perhaps I can speak more plainly and profoundly about the purposes of suffering—if, as Homer says, it is in my power to do so, or if the subject itself allows it. For some of these purposes I seem to understand well enough to explain to others, while some I perceive only dimly, as if through a fog.

Of those purposes that are certain, there are three: **Exercising**, **Chastising**, and **Punishing**.

If you look closely, you will find that the grievous afflictions sent by God are intended to do one of these three things, all for our own good: to *exercise* the virtuous, to *chastise* those who have strayed, or to *punish* the wicked.

Let's focus for a moment on the first one: **Exercising**. We see every day that the best people are subjected to calamities, either in their private lives or alongside the wicked in public disasters. We see this and we marvel at it, because we do not understand the cause or consider the outcome. The cause is God's love for us, not his hatred. The outcome is not our harm, but our benefit.

For this *exercising* helps us in more ways than one: it strengthens us, it tests us, and it makes us an example of patience for others.

**First, it strengthens us.** Adversity is a kind of school where God trains His servants in constancy and virtue. We see wrestlers and fighters endure many hard trials so that they can achieve mastery. We should think of ourselves in the same way in this battle against adversity. For our trainer and master is one who demands patience and effort, not just until we sweat, but until we bleed. Do you think He will handle His students gently? That He will pamper them with delights on His knee? No, He will not. Mothers often spoil their children and make them weak with their tender care, but fathers hold them to a higher standard with greater severity. God is our Father, and so He loves us truly, but with that same severity.

If you want to be a sailor, you must learn in a storm. If you want to be a soldier, you must learn in danger. If you want to be a true man, why do you shrink from affliction? There is no other path to constancy. Think of those soft and lazy bodies that are rarely touched by the sun, the wind, or any sharp air. The minds of those who have known nothing but happiness are just like that. The slightest breeze of misfortune blows them down and turns them to nothing.

Therefore, adversity confirms and strengthens us. Just as trees that are beaten by the wind grow deeper roots, so are good men held more firmly within the bounds of virtue when they are assaulted by the storms of adversity.

**Second, adversity tests us.** How else could anyone be certain of their progress and steadfastness in virtue? If the wind is always at his back, a sailor has no chance to test his skill. If everything in a man's life goes well, there is no opportunity to prove his virtue. The only true measure of a man is affliction. Demetrius rightly said, "I consider no man more unfortunate than one who has never experienced adversity." And it is true. For our great General does not spare such soldiers; He mistrusts them. He does not love them; He despises them. He casts them out of his ranks as worthless cowards.

**Third, adversity makes us an example for others.** The constancy and patience of good people in times of misery are like a bright light in this dark world. By their example, they inspire others to virtue and blaze a trail for them to follow.

The philosopher Bias lost his possessions and his country, but his words echo in our ears to this day: that he carried all his true possessions with him. The Roman general Regulus was unjustly tortured to death, but his noble example of keeping his promise lives on. The jurist Papinian was murdered by a tyrant, but the very axe that cut off his head emboldens us to suffer death for the sake of justice.

In short, we have seen so many notable citizens violently and unjustly banished or murdered. But from the rivers of their blood, we drink, as it were, virtue and constancy every day. All these examples of courage would lie hidden in the dark corners of oblivion if it were not for the bright torch of these public afflictions and calamities. For just as costly spices release their sweet fragrance only when they are crushed, so the fame of virtue spreads farthest when it is pressed by adversity.

## **Chapter IX: Affliction as a Form of Divine Correction**

Another reason God sends afflictions is to correct us, and I believe it is the best and gentlest way to bring about our improvement. Affliction helps and heals us in two ways: it acts as a whip when we have done wrong, or as a bridle to hold us back from doing wrong.

It is a whip because it is our Father's hand that often scourges us when we go astray. In contrast, a butcher's fist strikes rarely, but when it does, it settles the score all at once. Just as fire and water are used to cleanse filth, the purgatory of suffering cleanses us of our sins. And this whip, Lipsius, is something we have deserved. We Flemings have fallen from grace. Corrupted by luxury and excessive wealth, we have long wandered down the slippery paths of vice.

But the great God is now calling us back. He gently corrects us with a few lashes, so that, being warned, we may return to our true selves—or rather, to Him. He has taken away the wealth that we so recklessly abused. And with this gentle correction of calamity, He is purging and washing away our wickedness.

And it is a truly gentle correction. For what a light punishment this is! It is said that when the ancient Persians wanted to punish a nobleman, they would take his robes and headdress, hang them up, and whip them instead of the man. Our heavenly Father does the same. In all His corrections, He does not touch our true selves, but only our bodies, our fields, our wealth, and all other external things.

Affliction also serves as a bridle, which God uses skillfully when He sees us running toward wickedness. Just as a good doctor will sometimes draw blood not because the patient is sick, but to prevent sickness, so God takes things away from us through affliction to remove what would otherwise feed and nourish our vices. For He who created all men knows their nature. He does not judge our sickness by our pulse or the color of our skin, but by looking directly into our hearts.

Does He see that the Tuscans are sharp-witted and prone to strife? He keeps them in check with a prince. Does He see that the Swiss are peaceful and quiet by nature? He grants them liberty. Does He see that the Venetians are somewhere in between? He allows them a mixed form of government. And He may change all of this in time, if those people change their dispositions.

Yet we still murmur, saying, “Why have we been afflicted with war longer than others?” or “Why are we held in such cruel bondage?” Oh, you fool, sick to the very heart! Are you wiser than God? Tell me, why does a doctor give one patient more bitter medicine than another? Because the disease or the patient's constitution requires it. Think of yourself in the same way. God sees that this nation, for example, is stubborn and must be kept in line with correction, while another, gentler nation can be brought to obedience with a mere shake of the rod.

It may seem otherwise to you, but what does that matter? Parents will not let their child play with a knife, even if he cries for it, because they foresee the danger. Why should God give us our way when it leads to our own destruction? For we are truly like infants, who do not know what is good for us or what is harmful.

So, if you must, weep all you want. But you will still drink the cup of affliction that your heavenly Physician offers you, filled to the brim, and prescribed with perfect judgment.

## **Chapter X: Why Punishment Itself is Good—for God, for Humanity, and Even for the Punished**

I admit that punishment is inflicted upon wicked people, yet that does not make punishment itself wicked.

First, it is good from God's perspective, because His eternal and unbreakable law of justice demands that human faults be either corrected or eliminated. Correction reforms those who can be saved, while punishment removes those who are beyond saving.

Second, it is good for society, because no community can survive if wicked people are allowed to do whatever they please without consequence. Just as it is necessary for the safety of every individual to punish a thief or a murderer, it is also necessary for the public good to administer justice to notorious criminals who harm everyone. Punishments must sometimes be inflicted upon tyrants and those who wreak havoc on the world, so they can serve as a warning to the rest of us:

*Learn justice from this, and despise God no more.*

Third, punishment is good even for those who are punished. It is not vengeance or revenge. The gentle nature of God does not, as a certain poet wrongly claimed, "punish with furious rage." Instead, punishment is simply a way to prohibit and restrain wickedness. As the Greeks so aptly put it, it is *correction*, not *retribution*.

Just as God sometimes takes good people from this life before they can fall into grievous sin, He does the same for the hopelessly wicked, who are so in love with their ungodliness that they can only be stopped by being removed entirely. In this way, God halts our destructive path, gently removing those who have gone astray and are rushing deeper into sin.

In conclusion, all punishment is good from the standpoint of justice, while allowing wickedness to go unpunished is evil. Impunity allows people to become more and more wicked, which is to say, more and more miserable. Boethius wisely said, "The wicked who endure punishment are actually happier than if the rod of justice never corrected them." And he gives this reason: because something good—namely, their correction—is added to their lives, a good that was absent when they were only accumulating faults.

## Chapter XI: The Fourth Purpose of Evil, Concerning the Preservation and Beauty of the World

The three purposes I just described, Lipsius, are certain and clear, and I have explained them with confidence. But the fourth purpose is one where I am less certain. It is more mysterious and far beyond the grasp of human reason. I can only see it dimly, as if through a cloud. I can guess at it, but I cannot truly know it. I can wander in its direction, but never fully arrive.

This purpose I speak of is a general one, concerning either the preservation of the world or its beauty.

Regarding preservation, my guess is this: the great God who wisely created and ordered all things has arranged them according to measure, number, and weight. Nothing is allowed to exceed its proper limit, for that would lead to the ruin of the entire system. The great bodies of the heavens, the sea, and the earth all have their boundaries. Every era has its allotted number of living creatures. The same is true for humanity, for our cities, and for our nations. If any of these were to exceed their bounds, then a whirlwind of misfortune must necessarily consume them. Otherwise, they would damage and disfigure the beautiful structure of the world.

It is obvious that things often strive to exceed their limits, especially creatures that naturally reproduce and increase. Consider humanity. Who can deny that, by nature, far more of us are born than die? In just a few years, two people can be the ancestors of a hundred, of whom perhaps only ten or twenty might die. Herds of cattle would increase without number if butchers did not select some for slaughter each year. Likewise, birds and fish would soon overwhelm the air and the waters if it were not for the conflict among themselves and the traps set for them by men. In every age, cities and towns are built. If fires and other disasters did not happen, this world, and perhaps not even another, could contain them all. You can apply this same logic to all of nature.

Is it any wonder, then, if the great Father of this family sometimes takes his sickle to this overgrown field and cuts down the excess thousands with plague or war? If He did not, what country could contain us? What land could provide us with food? Therefore, in God's name, let some parts perish so that the perfection of the whole may endure forever. For just as the safety of the people is the highest law for a ruler, so is the preservation of the world for God.

As for the beauty and adornment of the world, my guess is twofold. First, I cannot imagine any elegance in this vast creation without constant change and variety. I know the sun is beautiful, yet the dewy night and the dark cloak of evening make its return all the more glorious. Summer is most pleasant, yet winter, with its icy marble and white snow, makes us love summer all the more. If you were to take away these contrasts, you would rob us of the deep delight we feel from both the sun and the summer. On this earth, a uniform landscape does not please me. Instead, I take pleasure in seeing plains and

mountains, valleys and rocks, tilled fields and sandy shores, meadows and forests. Boredom and disgust are the constant companions of uniformity.

And so, on this stage of life, why should a single, unchanging scene satisfy me? It should not. In my view, let there be times of great peace, which contain their own small imperfections, only to be swept away by the chaos of war and the rage of tyrants. Who would wish this world to be a dead sea, without wind or waves?

But I see another kind of beauty, one of greater value and deeper benefit. History teaches me that all things become better and more settled after the storms of adversity have passed. Does war trouble a nation? It also sharpens it, often bringing in new arts and other skills that enrich the mind. The ancient Romans placed a heavy yoke on the neck of the world, but it was a yoke that ultimately proved beneficial, for it drove barbarism from our minds just as the sun drives darkness from our eyes. What would the French, the Germans, and we ourselves be today if the light of that mighty empire had not shone upon us? We would be fierce and uncivilized, delighting in slaughter, and showing contempt for both God and man.

I believe the same will happen in the New World, which the Spaniards have laid waste with a profitable, though severe, hand. Soon they will repopulate and inhabit it themselves. Just as a gardener tending a large nursery of plants will transplant some, cultivate others, and prune yet others—all with skill, for their own good and benefit—so does God in this vast field of the world. He is the most skillful of all husbandmen. At one time, He breaks off the unproductive branches of entire families; at another, He trims a few leaves of individuals. This helps the main trunk of the tree, even though the branches perish and the leaves are blown away by the wind.

He sees one nation is barren of virtue, so He casts it out. He finds another rough and unfruitful, so He removes it. Some He even mixes together, grafting one onto another. You Italians, growing weak and effeminate in the decline of your empire, why do you hold on to the best country in the world? Make way! Let the stern and sturdy Lombards cultivate this soil with greater success. You wicked and decadent Greeks, perish utterly, and let the cruel Scythians settle in your land and become civilized. And through a mixing of nations, you French now possess Gaul, you Saxons Britannia, and you Normans the Low Countries and their neighboring lands. All of these things, Lipsius, and many more, are clear to any diligent reader of history.

Therefore, let us raise our sights. Whatever loss we may suffer as individuals, let us understand that it benefits the world as a whole in some way. The uprooting of one nation is the foundation of another. The decay of one tower is the building of another. Nothing truly dies or perishes here; it only changes form. Are we Flemings the only people God values? Are we to be the only ones who are forever happy and favored by Fortune? Oh, what fools we are! That great mother, Fortune, has many other children,

and we must be content to let her cherish and cradle each of them in her lap, one after another, since she cannot or will not dote on them all at once. The sun has shone its bright beams upon us for a long time. Now, let it be night for us for a while, and let that glittering light illuminate the Spaniards and the farthest corners of the west. Seneca, in his profound way, speaks perfectly to this point:

*A wise man should not be troubled by whatever happens to him. Let him understand that the very things which seem to harm him are part of the preservation of the universe and contribute to the grand order and purpose of the whole.*

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*[Translator's Note: In the following chapter, Langius essentially accuses Lipsius of arrogance for continuing to question the problem of evil, a reaction that seems more characteristic of medieval theologians concerned with heresy than of classical Stoic philosophers.]*

## **Chapter XII: The Impious Folly of Questioning God's Justice**

As Langius paused, I spoke up. “Your words,” I said, “are like a cool spring to a traveler in the summer. They soothe and refresh me, and they ease the fever in my mind. But they only ease it; they do not extinguish it. A thorn remains stuck in my mind—a question that troubled the ancients as well—concerning the fairness of punishments.

“For what kind of balanced justice is it, Langius, if the sword of suffering:

*Often lets the wicked go free, And strikes down the good and harmless?*

“Why,” I asked, “are innocent people destroyed, and why do children and future generations suffer for the sins of their ancestors? This is a thick fog before my eyes. If you can, please scatter it with the bright light of your reason.”

Langius’s brow furrowed. “Young man,” he said sternly, “have you gone astray again so quickly? I will have none of this. A skilled hunter does not allow his hound to wander off the trail; he keeps it focused on a single deer. In the same way, I want you to stay on the path I have marked out for you. I have been trying to impress upon you the *purposes* of suffering, so that if you are good, you will see it as a test; if you have fallen, you will see it as a chance to be lifted up; and if you are wicked, you will see it as a punishment. And now you demand to know the *causes*? What a wandering mind you have!

“What do you mean by this prying curiosity? Do you want to touch the fires of heaven? They will melt you like wax. Do you intend to climb the tower of Providence? You will only fall headlong from it. Just as a moth flutters around a candle at night until it is burned, so the human mind plays with this secret flame of divine knowledge.

“‘Show me the reasons,’ you say, ‘why God’s judgment skips over some and punishes others?’ You seek reasons? I can tell you plainly: I do not know them. I have never been a member of the heavenly court, nor have I understood its decrees.

“Of this alone I am certain: God’s will is the cause that is above all other causes. Anyone who seeks a reason beyond it is ignorant of the power and nature of God. A cause must always precede and be greater than its effect. But since nothing precedes or is greater than God and His will, His will has no cause. God has forgiven; God has punished. What more do you need to know? As the writer Salvianus said, ‘The will of God *is* the highest form of justice.’

“And yet you demand a reason for this inequality. From whom? From God? For Him, whatever He pleases is lawful, and He pleases nothing that is not lawful. If a servant demands an accounting from his master, or a subject from his king, it would be seen as contempt or even treason. Are you bolder with God? Shame on such perverse curiosity! There is a saying about absolute power: ‘The only way for such authority to stand is if it is not required to give an account to anyone.’

“And even after all your efforts, you will never escape the fog of ignorance or be party to God’s mysterious counsels. As Sophocles so excellently wrote:

*You will never attain the knowledge of heavenly things if God conceals them, no matter how hard you strive.”*

## **Chapter XIII: Answering Objections to God's Justice**

“This plain and direct path, Lipsius, is the only safe one. All others are deceptive and slippery. In divine matters, the sharpest vision is to see nothing, and the only true knowledge is to know nothing.

“Yet, because this cloud of doubt has long troubled the minds of men, I will try to lead you out of it. I will wash away what clings to you with the water of this very river before us.”

He then looked up to the sky and said, “O celestial and eternal Spirit, pardon and forgive me if, in speaking of these profound mysteries, I say anything impure or ungodly, though my intent is pious.

“First, I can defend God’s justice with a single, decisive argument. If God observes the affairs of men, then He cares for them. If He cares for them, He governs them. If He governs them, He does so with judgment. And if He governs with judgment, how can He do so without justice? Without justice, there is no government, only disorder, confusion, and chaos. What can you say against this? What shield can you raise? The truth is, your only defense is human ignorance.

“‘I do not understand,’ you say, ‘why some are punished and others are not.’ Very well. But will you now add arrogance to your ignorance? Just because you cannot comprehend the divine law, will you find fault with it? What a foolish argument against justice! If a foreigner came to your country and presumed to judge your laws and customs, you would tell him to hold his tongue, because he has no knowledge of them. And yet you, an inhabitant of this earth, rashly condemn the unknown laws of heaven? You, a creature, condemn your Creator?

“But fine, have it your way. I will meet you on your own terms and try to dispel the thick fog of your objections with the clear light of reason, as you requested. You object to three things: that God lets offenders escape, that He punishes the innocent, and that He transfers punishments from one person to another. I will begin with the first.

“You claim that God’s vengeance is wrong to let the wicked go unpunished. But does it truly let them go? No, I believe it only defers their punishment. If I am owed great debts and I choose to demand payment from one debtor immediately while giving another more time, who can blame me? It is my decision to make. So it is with God. All wicked men have earned punishment. He exacts it from some now and allows others to pay later, with interest. Where is the injustice in that, unless you are worried on God’s behalf, fearing that He will suffer a loss from His generous forbearance? But you foolish man, you are more afraid than you need to be. No one will ever deceive this great Creditor.”

Wherever we flee, we are always in His sight—in fact, we are bound to Him in chains.

“But,” you say, “I want that tyrant punished *now*, so that his death can bring justice to the many people he has oppressed. That would make God’s justice more obvious to us.”

No, that only reveals your own foolishness. Who are you to tell God not only *how* to punish, but *when*? Do you think He is your judge, or merely your servant? “*Go, lead him away, whip him, cover his face, and hang him on a cursed tree, for that is what seems right to me.*” Shame on such arrogance!

God sees things differently, and you must understand that He sees this situation far more clearly than you do. His purpose in punishing is not the same as yours. You are driven by anger and a desire for revenge. He, being far from both, is concerned with the example it sets and the correction of others. He

also knows best who will benefit from it, and when. Timing is often critical. The most effective medicine can become deadly if it is not administered at the right moment.

God cut down Caligula in the prime of his tyranny. He allowed Nero to continue much longer, and Tiberius longest of all. And you should not doubt that this was for the good of the very people who complained about it at the time. Our corrupt and disordered behavior requires a constant scourge, but we want it taken away and thrown into the fire at the first sign of pain. This is one reason for God's forbearance, and it concerns us.

Another reason concerns God Himself. It seems to be part of His nature to be slow to avenge Himself, and to compensate for that slowness with the severity of the final punishment. Synesius put it well: "The divine nature proceeds slowly and methodically." The ancient sages were not far from the truth when they imagined God as having feet of wool. So even if you are a hasty and vengeful person, you should not be troubled by this delay, for it is a delay that only increases the punishment to come.

Tell me, when you watch a tragedy, does it bother you to see Atreus or Thyestes strutting in majesty on the stage in the first or second act? To see them reign, threaten, and command? I think not, because you know their prosperity will be short-lived, and you expect to see them brought to a shameful end in the final act.

So why, in this great tragedy of the world, can you not grant God the same artistic license you grant a mere poet? "This wicked man prospers. That tyrant lives." Just wait. Remember, it is only the first act. Keep in mind that their joy will soon be followed by sobs and sorrow. This scene will soon be swimming in blood, and their purple and golden robes will be rolled in it. For our divine Poet is a master of His art, and He will not violate the rules of His tragedy. In music, do we not accept occasional dissonant notes, knowing they will ultimately resolve into harmony?

"But the victims do not always live to see the punishment." What is so surprising about that? The tragedy is often long, and they cannot remain in the theater until the end. But others see it, and they are rightly struck with fear when they realize that, before this stern throne of justice, some may be given a temporary reprieve, but none are truly pardoned. The day of execution is only postponed, not canceled.

Therefore, Lipsius, hold this for certain: the wicked are tolerated for a while, but they are never forgiven. No man carries a sin in his heart without also carrying Nemesis on his back. For that Fury is always following them and, as Euripides said, *"Moving silently and with a soft foot, she will, in due time, violently pluck the wicked from the earth."*

#### \*\*Chapter XIV: The Different Kinds of Punishment, and How the Most Severe are the Inner Torments that the Wicked Can Never Escape\*\*

To help you understand this better, and to bring you to the central fortress of this argument, you must know that there are three different kinds of God's punishments: internal, those after this life, and external.

The first are those that torment the mind or soul while it is still in the body: sorrow, regret, fear, and the endless gnawing of conscience.

The second are those that affect the soul after it has been freed from the body—these are the punishments that many ancient pagan writers rightly guessed were waiting for the wicked after death.

The third are those that affect the body or our physical circumstances, such as poverty, exile, pain, sickness, and death.

It often happens that, by God's just judgment, the wicked suffer all three. But the first two kinds are certain to follow them. And speaking of internal punishments, has there ever been a man so devoted to wickedness that he did not feel sharp lashes and heavy blows in his own mind, either while committing his evil deeds or afterward? For Plato truly said that punishment is the companion of injustice. Or as Hesiod put it more forcefully, it is born at the same moment as the sin itself. The punishment for a wicked deed is related to it—in fact, it is born from within it. The only thing in this life that is free from care is innocence.

Just as criminals in ancient Rome who were condemned to crucifixion had to carry the very cross that would soon carry them, so God has laid the cross of conscience upon all wicked men. In this way, they suffer their punishment even before their final judgment.

Do you think the only punishments are the ones we can see with our eyes, or the ones inflicted on the body? That is far from the truth. Those punishments are external and affect us only lightly and for a short time. But the internal ones are a true torment. We consider someone who is slowly wasting away from consumption to be sicker than someone with a fever, even though the fever seems more dramatic. In the same way, the wicked who are led to their eternal death at a slow, lingering pace are in the worst condition of all.

The tyrannical emperor Caligula would suddenly be struck with such terror that he felt he was about to die. This is what happens to the wicked when that butcher—their own conscience—continuously prods and strikes them with subtle but relentless blows.

Do not be fooled by their splendid appearance, their powerful entourage, or their vast wealth. They are no happier or better off for it, any more than a sick man is cured of his fever or gout just because he is lying on a magnificent feather bed.

When you see a poor beggar on a stage playing the part of a king, dressed in golden robes, you do not envy him, because you know that beneath that gorgeous costume are sores, filth, and squalor. You should have the same opinion of all these great and powerful tyrants. “If their minds could be opened,” says the historian Tacitus, “we would see them ripped and wounded—for just as the body is scarred by whips, so is the mind torn apart by cruelty, lust, and evil thoughts.”

I know they sometimes laugh, but it is a hollow laugh that never reaches their eyes. They may seem to rejoice, but there is no true joy in it. They are no different from a prisoner in a dungeon, condemned to die, who tries to distract himself by playing dice, but cannot. The deep-seated terror of his coming punishment never leaves him, and the grim image of death is always before his eyes.

I urge you to pull back the curtain of these external appearances and look at the Sicilian tyrant Dionysius:

*Over whose wicked head a naked sword Always hangs.*

Listen to the Roman emperor Tiberius crying out in his misery, “May all the gods and goddesses send me a worse destruction than the daily death I feel within me.” Hear another emperor sighing from the depths of his soul, “What? Am I the only man who has neither friend nor foe?”

These, Lipsius, are the true torments of the mind. These are the truly agonizing griefs: to be constantly tormented, sorrowful, and terrified. Do not ever dare to compare any physical torture, rack, or iron instrument to these.

## **Chapter XV: How the Wicked are Punished After This Life, and Usually in This One as Well**

Furthermore, add to this the eternal punishments after death. I will only mention these, as they are a matter of theology that I won't explore further here. Then, consider external punishments. Even if these seem to be absent, the internal ones never are, so who can rightly accuse God of injustice? But I say that external punishments are *not* absent. It is a rare thing indeed for notoriously evil people and oppressors not to suffer public and visible punishments. Some suffer sooner, some later. Some suffer in their own person, others through their descendants.

You observe and grumble that the Sicilian tyrant Dionysius commits adultery, theft, and murder for many years without consequences. Have patience for a little while. You will soon see him disgraced, banished, and penniless—dethroned and reduced to wielding a schoolmaster's rod. The same king who ruled a great island will end his days teaching in a school in Corinth, a mockery of fortune.

On the other hand, does it grieve you that Pompey was defeated in the battle of Pharsalia, his army composed almost entirely of senators? Does it pain you that the tyrant Caesar rejoiced and reveled in the blood of his fellow citizens? I do not blame you much, for even the great Cato lost his sense of judgment in this matter and cried out from his heart, “The ways of the gods are shrouded in darkness.”

Nevertheless, you Lipsius, and you Cato, look just a little further, and you will see something that will restore your faith in God’s justice. Behold that same Caesar—stately, victorious, and in his own eyes and the eyes of others, a god—slaughtered in the Senate. And not with a single stroke, but with twenty-three separate stab wounds, rolling in his own blood like a beast. And (what more could you wish for?) this was done in the court of Pompey, at the foot of Pompey’s statue, as if offering a great sacrifice to the ghost of Pompey the Great.

In the same way, I feel compassion for Brutus, who lost his life fighting for his country at the battle of Philippi. But I am comforted when I see the victorious armies soon turning on each other. I see Mark Antony, one of the commanders who defeated Brutus, himself defeated on both land and sea, dying an undignified death by his own womanish hand, surrounded by women. Where are you now, you who were once the lord of the East, the leader of Roman armies, the persecutor of Pompey and the Republic? Behold, you hang by your own bloody hand! You creep into your grave half-dead! And even in death, you cannot be separated from the woman who was your ruin! Do you see now that Brutus did not speak in vain when he uttered his last words, “O Jupiter, do not let the author of this evil escape you”? He did not escape.

Nor did that other commander, Augustus, who suffered punishment for the misdeeds of his youth, though less obviously in himself than in his own family. Let him be the mighty and fortunate Caesar Augustus. But let him also have a scandalous daughter, Julia, and an equally scandalous niece. Let him lose some of his nephews to false accusations and banish others. Let him become so disgusted with his life that he tries to starve himself to death for four days, but cannot. Let him live with his wife Livia, a marriage begun and maintained in dishonor. And the very woman he doted on became the cause of his shameful death. Finally, as the writer Pliny says, “After being made a god and ascending to heaven (though whether he deserved it, I do not know), let him die, and let the son of his enemy be his heir.”

These are the kinds of things, Lipsius, that we must remember whenever we are tempted to complain about God's injustice. We must always consider two things: that punishment can be slow, and that it

comes in many different forms. Is a certain wicked man not punished? Be patient. He will feel it soon enough. If not in his body, then certainly in his mind. If not in this life, then without a doubt in the next.

*Though vengeance may limp, with a foot that is sore, She will overtake the sinner who runs on before.*

For that heavenly eye is always watching. And when you think it is sleeping, it is only blinking. Therefore, make sure you conduct yourself rightly before Him, and do not foolishly accuse the very Judge by whom you yourself will soon be judged.

## **Chapter XVI: Why No One is Truly Innocent, and Why Only God Can Judge Sin**

“But,” you say, “innocent and guiltless people are punished.” This is your second complaint—or rather, I should call it a slanderous accusation.

You reckless young man! How can you say such a thing? In what country could we find people who are without fault? It would be audacious, even rash, to claim that about a single person. And yet you have no problem absolving entire nations of sin? That is utterly foolish. The truth is, we have all sinned and continue to sin every day. We are born into corruption, and we live in it.

*[Translator’s Note: Here, Lipsius seamlessly substitutes the Christian doctrine of original sin for the similar Stoic view that all people, except for the nearly unattainable ideal of the wise sage, are morally flawed.]*

Indeed, as the satirist said, heaven’s armory would soon be empty of thunderbolts if one were thrown for every sin. For though fish are born and raised in the salt sea without tasting of salt themselves, we cannot imagine the same is true for us. We are born into the contagion of this world, and we cannot escape its corruption. Therefore, if everyone is a sinner, where are these innocent people you speak of? Punishment is always the just companion of sin.

“But,” you will say, “I object to the inequality of it all. Some who have sinned only a little are punished harshly, while others who are notoriously wicked are allowed to flourish and rule.”

I see what this is about. It seems you want to take the scales of justice out of God’s hands and balance them according to your own whims and desires. To what other end do you presume to measure sins as greater or lesser in God’s eyes?

But here, Lipsius, I want you to consider two things. First, humans cannot and should not take it upon themselves to judge the faults of others. For how can you, a mere man, judge sins fairly when you cannot even see them completely? How can you pass a just sentence on something you cannot possibly examine?

You would agree that it is the mind, or the soul, that sins, using the body and its senses as its instruments. But the entire weight and burden of the sin rests on the soul. This is so true that if a person commits an act against their will, we say they have not truly sinned. If that is the case, how can you possibly see the sin, when you cannot even see its origin and dwelling place? The truth is, you are so far from seeing into another man's mind that you cannot even perceive your own.

Therefore, it is the greatest folly and arrogance to claim for yourself the right to judge something that cannot be seen, known, or comprehended by any human mind.

Second, even if there is such inequality as you describe, no injustice is done. There is no injustice because it is for the good of those who are punished immediately, even for their smallest faults. In this, God shows His love for us. We should be most suspicious of long periods of tolerance, for they often lead to far more severe punishments later on. And again, no wrong is done because, as I have said, we have all deserved punishment. Even in the best of us, there is no purity so complete that it is not stained by some faults, which must be washed away by the salty water of adversity.

Therefore, young man, abandon this overly complicated debate about judging sins and offenses. You are an earthly and simple judge. Refer this matter to God, who discerns all things rightly and soundly from His high throne of justice. He alone is the one who judges faults impartially. He is the one who, without any deceit or pretense, sees virtue and vice in their true colors.

Who can deceive Him who searches all things, both outward and inward? Who sees the body and the mind, the tongue and the very depths of the heart? Who sees all things, whether they are open or hidden? He sees not only the deeds themselves, but also their causes and motivations, as clearly as if they were in the bright light of noon. When the philosopher Thales was asked if a wicked person could deceive God, he answered, "No, not even if he only thinks of it." And he was right.

But it is different for us, who live here in darkness. We not only fail to see secret sins, but we also miss those that are committed right under our noses. We barely even recognize those sins that are done openly in the light of day. For we do not see the sin itself, in its entirety, but only some outward sign of it, long after it has been committed and is already in the past. We often think the best of men are those whom God knows to be the worst, and we reject those whom He has chosen.

Therefore, if you are wise, you will shut your eyes and close your mouth when it comes to judging the worthiness of others. The hidden causes of their actions are almost impossible for us to know for certain.

## **Chapter XVII: Why Punishments are Justly Passed from One Generation to Another**

Now we must dispel the third cloud that has been cast over God's justice. Some say it is unfair for God to transfer punishments from one person to another, and that it is wrong for children to suffer for the sins of their ancestors.

But is this really so strange? I am surprised that anyone would marvel at this, since we do the very same thing here on earth. Tell me, do not the rewards that princes give to men for their virtues also benefit their descendants? Of course they do. And I believe the same is true for punishments.

In cases of treason against a ruler or the state, a few people are guilty of the crime, but many others share in the punishment. Human law is so severe in this matter that it decrees that the innocent children of traitors should be condemned to perpetual poverty, "so that death might seem a comfort to them, and life a torment."

Your minds are truly perverse. You allow a king or some petty ruler to do what you will not allow God to do—even though, if you think about it, God has far greater reason for such severity. For every one of us has transgressed and rebelled against this mighty King. And that original stain has been passed down through many generations to their unfortunate children. Before God, there is a continuous chain of sin. It was not my father or yours who first began to sin, but the father of all humanity. Is it any wonder, then, that He punishes in the descendants those faults which are not truly separate, but are joined together and passed down through the generations without a break?

But let us set aside those deep mysteries and use a more familiar line of reasoning. Understand this: God sees as a single whole those things that we, in our weakness and ignorance, break apart. He views families, towns, and kingdoms not as a collection of separate individuals, but as one continuous body, a single entity.

To Him, the family of the Scipios or the Caesars is a single entity. The city of Rome or Athens is one city throughout its entire history. And this makes perfect sense. These great bodies are held together by a common bond of laws and a shared community, which means that rewards and punishments are rightly shared among their members, even across different generations.

Therefore, were the Scipios good men in the past? Their descendants will benefit for it before the heavenly judge. Were they evil? Then let their descendants suffer the consequences. Have we Flemings, in recent years, been decadent, greedy, and godless? Then let us suffer for it now.

This is because, in all *external* punishments, God considers not only the present but also the past. By weighing both, He keeps the scales of His justice perfectly balanced. I stress the words '*external punishments*,' and I want you to mark them well. The sins of one person are not blamed on another; there is no confusion of guilt. (God forbid!) Rather, these are punishments that happen *to* us, not *within* us. They concern the body or our possessions, but not our inner soul.

And what injustice is there in that? We are happy to inherit the rewards and comforts our ancestors earned. Why should we refuse to inherit their punishments and pains? The Roman poet said, "O Romans, you will suffer for the sins of your ancestors, unworthily." He spoke the truth, except when he added the word "unworthily." For it is most deservedly, because their forefathers deserved it. The poet saw only the effect, without raising his thoughts to the cause.

Just as a man can be justly punished in his old age for a crime he committed in his youth, so too can God punish old sins in empires and kingdoms. In terms of their external community and society, they are one and the same thing in His eyes. The passage of time does not separate us in the sight of Him who holds all of eternity in His infinite mind.

Did those "Wolves of Mars"—the Romans—overthrow so many cities and shatter so many kingdoms in ancient times and get away with it? Did they spill so much blood in slaughter, yet never shed their own? If so, then I would have to confess that God is not a God of justice, who "both hears and sees all that we do." But that is not the case. The truth is that they must, eventually, receive their punishment through their descendants—a punishment that may be slow, but is never too late.

Furthermore, God sees not only a unity of time but also a unity of parts. This is what I mean: just as in a human body, when the hands, the private parts, or the belly transgress—through theft, lechery, or gluttony—the whole body pays the price, so too in a community, the sin of a few is often required of all. This is especially true if the offenders are the most important members of that community, such as kings, princes, and magistrates. The poet Hesiod wisely said:

*For one man's fault, the whole city suffers, When he commits sacrilege or wrong. From heaven, God sends down storms of rain, Or plague, or famine upon them all.*

Thus, the entire Greek fleet was destroyed because of the sin of one man: the furious outrage of Ajax. Likewise, in ancient Israel, seventy thousand men were justly killed by a plague because of the king's unlawful pride when he numbered the people.

Sometimes the opposite happens: when everyone has sinned, God chooses one or a few to be, as it were, a sacrifice for the common crime. And while this may seem to deviate from a strict standard of equality, a new kind of justice arises from this inequality. For what appears to be harshness toward a few is actually a merciful justice toward the many. Does not a schoolmaster punish one student to correct a classroom full of lazy scholars? Does not a general punish a mutinous army by executing every tenth man? Both do so with good reason, because a punishment inflicted on a few can terrify and reform all the rest. I have often seen physicians open a vein in the foot or the arm when the entire body is sick. Who is to say it is not the same in this case?

For these matters are mysteries, Lipsius. They are very deep mysteries. If we are wise, we will not get too close to this sacred fire. We may see its sparks and flickers, but we cannot see the fire itself. Just as those who stare too long at the sun lose their sight, so we extinguish the light of our own minds when we gaze too intently upon this divine light.

Therefore, my opinion is that we should stay away from this dangerous and prying question. Let us be content with this: mortal men cannot and should not attempt to judge the sins of others. God has a different set of scales and a different seat of judgment. And however His secret judgments are carried out, we must not accuse Him, but endure and revere them.

I want you to be thoroughly persuaded of this one sentence, with which I will conclude this matter and silence all curious busybodies: *Most of God's judgments are secret, but none of them are unjust.*

## **Chapter XVIII: Turning to Examples, and the Benefit of Mixing Sweetness with Bitter Medicine**

“This is what I have to say in defense of God’s justice against its unjust accusers,” Langius concluded. “I admit it was not entirely central to my main argument, yet it was not far from it either. For we will surely bear these great public miseries more willingly and with greater acceptance once we are fully convinced that they are justly inflicted upon us.”

*[Translator’s Note: Or, one might cease to personify the order of the universe—an option Lipsius does not seem to consider.]*

We fell silent for a moment, and then Langius suddenly spoke again. “Good,” he said. “I have caught my breath. Now that we have sailed past the dangerous rocks of these difficult questions, I believe I can enter the harbor with full sails. I see my fourth and final argument right before me, which I will gladly bring into the field.

“Just as sailors in a storm take great hope and comfort when they see the twin stars, Castor and Pollux, I feel the same now that this double legion of arguments has appeared after so many tempests. I call it a ‘double legion’ in the ancient style, because it has two parts. With it, I will prove two things: that the evils we are now suffering are neither as severe as we think, nor are they new or unusual. I ask you, Lipsius, to be attentive and receptive to these last few points.”

“Never have I been more willing, Langius,” I replied. “I am very pleased that we are past the most difficult part, and after these sharp and bitter pills of philosophy, I am eager for some more pleasant and familiar medicine. From the sound of it, that is what this next discussion will be.”

“You are right,” said Langius. “Just as a surgeon, after cutting and cauterizing a wound, does not simply dismiss the patient but applies gentle medicines and soothing salves to ease the pain, so it is with me. Having sufficiently seared and purged you with the razors and fire of wisdom, I will now comfort you with some sweeter conversation and touch you with a gentler hand, as the saying goes.

“I will descend from the rugged mountain of philosophy and lead you for a while into the pleasant fields of literature and history. And I do this not just for your entertainment, but for your health. There is a story about a physician named Demochares who had a noblewoman named Considia as his patient. She refused all bitter medicines, so he gave her the milk of goats that he had fed exclusively on sweet herbs. In the same way, I will now offer you some enjoyable stories from history, but seasoned with the secret flavor of wisdom. For what does it matter how we cure a sick body, as long as we restore it to perfect health?”

## **Chapter XIX: Why Public Evils Are Not as Grievous as They Seem**

Now, let my own good legion of arguments march forward. First, the vanguard, whose task is to prove that these public evils are not truly grievous. I will demonstrate this with a two-part argument.

First, let us use reason. If you look at them properly, all the things that happen to us and hang over our heads are neither grievous nor great. They only *seem* to be so. It is our own Opinion that magnifies them, placing them on a stage, as it were, to make them appear larger than they are. But if you are wise, you will scatter that thick fog of opinion and look at things in the clear light of truth.

For example, in these times of public disaster, you fear poverty, banishment, and death. If you look at these things with impartial and clear eyes, you will see what trifles they are. If you weigh them for what they truly are, how light they will seem.

You fear that this war, or the tyranny of your rulers, will impoverish you with excessive taxes. What of it? You will be a poor man. Did not nature bring you into this world with nothing, and will she not take you from it in the same state?

But if the hateful name of *poverty* offends you, then simply change your perspective, and you will free yourself. Fortune, if you look closely, has actually helped you by providing you with a more secure position. No one can rob or exploit you anymore. The very thing you thought was a disaster has become your remedy.

“But I will be a banished man,” you say. No, you will simply be a traveler, if you so choose. If you change your attitude, you change your country. A wise man is a pilgrim wherever he goes. A fool is an exile everywhere.

“But,” you will say, “death is always hanging over me because of this tyrant.” As if it weren't hanging over you every day by nature.

“Yes, but it is a shameful thing to be executed or strangled.” Oh, you fool. No kind of death is shameful, unless your life has been shameful. Think of the best and most worthy people who have ever lived; most of them died a violent death.

This is the kind of examination, Lipsius, of which I am only giving you a taste, that you must apply to all things that seem terrible. You must look at them stripped bare, without the clothing or mask of your opinions. But we miserable creatures focus on these empty, external details. We do not fear the things themselves, but the circumstances surrounding them.

Look, if you are sailing on the sea and a storm begins to rage, your courage fails and you tremble with fear. You imagine that if the ship sinks, you will have to swallow the entire ocean, when in reality, a quart or two is enough to drown you. If an earthquake strikes, what crying and shaking there is! You imagine the whole town, or at least a whole house, will fall on you, when a single falling stone is enough to kill you.

It is the same with these great public disasters. It is the noise and the empty image of things that terrifies us. “Look at that troop of soldiers! Look at those shining swords!” Why? What can those soldiers and those swords do?

“They will kill me.”

What is killing? It is nothing but death. And so that the word itself does not frighten you, it is simply the departure of the soul from the body. All those soldiers, all those threatening swords, will do nothing more than what a single fever, a single grape seed, or a single tiny worm can do.

“But a violent death is more painful.” No, it is far easier. An illness, which you seem to prefer, can keep a man in agony for a whole year. But here, the matter is finished in an instant, with a single blow.

Socrates was right to call all these things nothing more than goblins or painted masks. If you wear one, children will run from you in fear. But as soon as you take it off and show your own face, they will gather around and embrace you. It is the same with these things that seem so terrible. If you look at them without their veil or mask, you will admit that all your fear was childish. Just as hailstones beat against a roof with a great noise but then bounce off and melt away, so these disasters, if they strike a constant and settled mind, will not crush it. Instead, they will vanish and come to nothing.

## **Chapter XX: Comparing Our Miseries to Those of the Past**

Langius’s serious and philosophical lecture was not at all what I had hoped for. I interrupted him. “Where are you going with this?” I asked. “Is this what you promised me? I was expecting the sweet wine and honeycombs of history, but instead you serve me the sourest sauce in all of philosophy. What, do you think you are talking to some wise sage like Thales? No, you are talking to Lipsius, an ordinary man who needs remedies with a little more humanity in them than this.”

Langius replied with a mild voice and a gentle expression, “I admit, I am to blame. In following the bright light of reason, I see I have strayed from the main road and wandered back onto the path of pure philosophy. But I will correct my course and return to a more familiar and accessible route. Does the sharpness of the wine I have served you displease you? I will sweeten it with the honey of examples.

“Now,” he continued, “I will make some comparisons. I will prove to you that none of the evils we see all around us today are so terrible or great if we compare them to the evils of the past. For in ancient times, they were far more horrific and lamentable than they are now.”

At this, I replied even more eagerly than before, “What? Do you really mean that? Do you think you can make me believe such a thing? No, Langius, not as long as I have any sense left in my head. For what past age, if you look at it honestly, has ever been as miserable as our own? What country has suffered such unspeakable and unbearable things as we Flemings are suffering today?

“We are torn apart not just by foreign wars, but by civil wars. And not just civil wars, but conflicts that rage within our very own factions. There are not only parties among us, but parties within those same

parties. Alas, my dear country, what can possibly save you? Add to this plague and famine, crushing taxes, robbery, and slaughter—and the worst kind of tyranny, which oppresses not only our bodies, but our minds.

“And what is happening in the rest of Europe? War, or the fear of war. And if there is any peace, it is a shameful servitude under petty tyrants, which is no better than war itself. Wherever we look, everything is uncertain and suspicious. It is as if we are living in a crumbling old house that shows every sign of collapse. In short, Langius, just as all rivers flow into the sea, it seems that all the misfortunes of history have converged upon our present age. And I am only speaking of the evils that are happening right now. What need is there to mention the ones that are hanging over our heads? I can truly apply the words of Euripides to our situation:

*I see so great a sea of evils at hand, That it seems a difficult matter to swim safely to land.”*

Langius turned to me with an angry look, as if to rebuke me. *[Translator's Note: This flash of anger seems uncharacteristic for a Stoic sage.]*

“What?” he said. “Are you still throwing yourself down with these whining complaints? I thought you were finally standing firm like a man, but I see you are falling again. I thought your wounds were closed, but I see you are tearing them open. You must learn to be content if you ever want to be truly well.

“You say this age is the unhappiest that has ever been. This is an old song, sung for a very long time. I am sure your grandfather said the same thing, as did your father. And I know your children and your children’s children will sing the very same tune. It is human nature to stare intently at everything that is painful, while closing our eyes to everything that is pleasant.

“Just as flies and other pests do not rest on smooth, polished surfaces, but cling to rough and filthy corners, so a complaining mind quickly passes over all good fortune but never forgets the bad. It dwells on adversity, examining it from every angle, and often, with great imagination, makes it even worse than it is. Just as a lover always sees something in his beloved that makes her seem superior to all others, so do grieving men see something unique in their own miseries.

“Even worse, we imagine things that are not true. We grieve not only for our present troubles, but for those that have not yet come. And what do we gain from this clever foresight of ours? Nothing, except to be like soldiers who, seeing a cloud of dust raised by a distant army, abandon their posts in fear. In the same way, the mere shadow of a future danger throws us into the pit of despair.”

## Chapter XXI: A Comparison with the Evils of the Past, Beginning with the Wars and Destruction of the Jews

But Lipsius, let us leave these common arguments and turn to the comparison you so desire. It will become clear to you that the terrible destructions of the past were not only equal to those of our own time but far surpassed them. We who live today have more reason to rejoice than to complain.

You say we are tormented by wars. So what? Were the ancients not tormented by them as well? Yes, Lipsius, wars began with the world, and they will not end until the world does. But perhaps their wars were not as great or as terrible as ours. On the contrary, all our wars are mere jokes and child's play—I say this in all seriousness—when compared to those of ancient times.

I will hardly know where to begin or end if I dive into this vast sea of examples. Nevertheless, shall we wander a little through all parts of the world? Let us go.

We will begin with Judea, with the holy nation of the Jews. I will skip over what they suffered in Egypt and after their exodus, as those events are well-documented in Holy Scripture. I will go straight to the end, to the events surrounding their final destruction, which I will lay out for you like a ledger.

Within the space of seven years, during their civil and foreign wars, they suffered the following losses:

First, in various uprisings and conflicts:

- At Jerusalem, by order of Florus: **630**
- At Caesarea, massacred by the inhabitants out of hatred for their nation and religion: **20,000**
- At Scythopolis, a town in Syria: **13,000**
- At Ascalon in Palestine, by the inhabitants: **2,500**
- At Ptolemais: **2,000**
- At Alexandria in Egypt, under the governor Tiberius Alexander: **50,000**
- At Damascus: **10,000**

Later, in open war with the Romans:

- At the capture of Joppa by Cestius Gallus: **8,400**
- On Mount Asamon: **2,000**
- In a battle at Ascalon: **10,000**
- Again, by deception: **8,000**
- At the capture of Aphaca: **15,000**
- On Mount Gerizim: **11,600**

- At Jotapata, where the historian Josephus was present: about **30,000**
- At the second capture of Joppa, drowned: **4,200**
- At Tarichaeae: **6,500**
- At Gamala, killed or threw themselves from cliffs: **9,000** (Only two women, who were sisters, survived.)
- At the fall of Gischala, killed in the fight: **2,000** (with **3,000** women and children taken captive)
- Of the Gadarenes, put to the sword: **13,000** (with **2,200** taken captive, and an infinite number who leaped into the river)
- In the streets of Idumaea: **10,000**
- At Gerasa: **1,000**
- At Machaerus: **1,700**
- In the forest of Jarden: **3,000**
- At the fortress of Masada, who killed themselves: **960**
- In Cyrene, killed by the governor Catullus: **3,000**
- In the city of Jerusalem, during the siege, died of starvation or were killed: **1,100,000**
- Taken captive from Jerusalem: **97,000**

The total number of those killed or captured, not counting the countless others who perished from famine, exile, and other misfortunes, comes to **1,337,490**.

What do you say to that, Lipsius? Are you casting your eyes down in horror? No, lift them up. And tell me if you still dare to compare all the wars that have ravaged Christendom for so many years with the miserable destruction of this single Jewish nation.

## **Chapter XXII: The Destruction Wrought by War in Greece, Rome, and the New World**

I will not stop here, but continue on to Greece. It would be tedious and pointless to list, one by one, all the wars the Greeks fought, both among themselves and with foreign powers. I will say only this: the region was so continually devastated by the sword of calamity that, as the historian Plutarch records (a fact I can never read without anger and astonishment), the entire nation in his time could not muster even three thousand soldiers. And yet, he notes, in the days of the Persian War, the single small town of Megara, near Athens, could raise that number on its own.

Alas, how you have fallen, O garden of the earth, the glory and beauty of nations! Today, there is hardly a town of any note in this troubled land of Flanders that could not match that number of fighting men.

Now, shall we turn our attention to the Romans and to Italy? The writers Augustine and Orosius have already done most of the work for me. Read their histories, and you will find vast seas of suffering. The Second Punic War alone—fought in Italy, Spain, and Sicily over the course of just seventeen years—consumed more than 1,400,000 men. (I have researched this number very carefully.) The civil war between Caesar and Pompey cost 300,000 lives. And the wars involving Brutus, Cassius, and Sextus Pompeius claimed even more than that.

And why do I speak of wars fought by different commanders? Look at what one man, Gaius Caesar, accomplished. (Oh, what a plague and pestilence he was to mankind!) He boasted of having slain 1,192,000 men in battle. And this number does not even include the slaughter of his civil wars. These were foreigners, killed in the few years he governed Spain and France.

And yet, in this regard, he was surpassed by the man called “the Great”—Pompey Magnus. Pompey had it inscribed in the temple of Minerva that he had “conquered, put to flight, slain, or received the surrender of 2,184,000 men.” And to continue this grim accounting, you can add Quintus Fabius, who slew 110,000 Gauls, and Gaius Marius, who killed 200,000 Cimbri. And in a later age, there was Aetius, who killed 162,000 Huns in a single famous battle.

And do not imagine that only men were destroyed in these great wars; magnificent cities were also ruined. Cato the Censor boasted that he had taken more towns in Spain—four hundred of them, according to Plutarch and Appian—than he had spent days in that country. Sempronius Gracchus, if we believe Polybius, utterly destroyed thirty cities in the same region.

I believe no age in history can match these horrors, except our own—and in another part of the world. Within the last eighty years, a few Spaniards sailed to that vast and marvelous New World. O good God, what immense slaughters have they committed? What astonishing desolations? I am not speaking of the reasons or the justice of the war, but only of its results. I see that enormous land—a place that would be a great achievement just to have seen, let alone to have conquered—and how it was overrun by just a handful of soldiers. And I see those herds of naked people cut down by them like corn with a scythe.

Where are you now, you once-mighty island of Cuba? You, Haiti? You, islands of the Lucayas? In the past, you were filled with five or six hundred thousand people. Now, in some of you, barely fifteen are left alive to carry on your lineage. Come forward for a moment, you Peru and Mexico. Oh, what a marvelous and miserable spectacle! That vast country, truly another world, now lies desolate and wasted, as if it had been consumed by fire from heaven. My mind and my tongue both fail me, Lipsius, as I recount these things. I see now that all our own troubles, in comparison, are nothing but, as the comic poet said, “tiny mites and fragments of straw.”

And I have not yet even spoken of the fate of captives, which was the most miserable aspect of ancient wars. Free men, nobles, children, women—the conqueror carried them all away. And who knew if they were being led into perpetual slavery? It was such a wretched kind of slavery that I am glad that nothing even resembling it has existed for a long time in the Christian world. The Turks, indeed, still practice it, and there is nothing that makes their rule more hateful and terrifying to us.

## **Chapter XXIII: Comparing Our Troubles to the Plagues, Famines, and Tributes of the Past**

And still you continue your whining complaint, adding plague, famine, taxes, and looting to your list of woes. Let us compare each of these, but briefly.

Tell me, how many thousands have died of the plague in all the Low Countries in the last five or six years? Fifty thousand, I think, or at most a hundred thousand. But a single plague in Judea during the time of King David killed seventy thousand people in less than a day. Under the emperors Gallus and Volusianus, a plague that began in Ethiopia spread through all the Roman provinces and raged for fifteen years. I have never read of a greater plague, either in its duration or its geographical scope.

However, for sheer ferocity, the plague that struck Byzantium and the surrounding regions under the Emperor Justinian was even more notorious. It was so extreme that it caused five thousand deaths a day, and on some days, ten thousand. I would be afraid to write this, for fear of being accused of lying, if I did not have credible witnesses who lived at that time.

No less horrifying was the plague in Africa that began around the time of the destruction of Carthage. In the region of Numidia alone (now called Barbary), it killed eight hundred thousand people. Along the African coast, it killed two hundred thousand. And in the city of Utica, it killed thirty thousand soldiers who were stationed there to defend the coast. Again, in Greece, under the reign of Michael Ducas, the plague was so severe that, in the words of the historian Zonara, “the living were not enough to bury the dead.” Finally, in the time of the poet Petrarch, around the year 1359, the plague grew so fierce in Italy that, as he records, barely ten people out of every thousand survived.

And as for famine, our age has seen nothing that can compare to the famines of the past. Under the Emperor Honorius, there was such a scarcity of food in Rome that people resorted to cannibalism. Instead of the usual cheers at the public games, a voice was heard crying out, “Set a price on human flesh!” Again, throughout all of Italy, during the time of the Gothic invasions under Justinian, the famine was so severe that fifty thousand people died of hunger in the region of Picenum alone. Not only human flesh, but even human excrement was commonly used for food. Two women—I tremble to say it—killed seventeen men by treachery and ate them, before they themselves were killed by the

eighteenth, who discovered their crime. And I am not even speaking of the famous famine in Jerusalem, or other well-known examples.

And now, regarding taxes. It cannot be denied that the tributes we currently endure are very heavy, if we consider them on their own. But they are nothing compared to those of the past. Nearly every province under the Roman Empire paid one-fifth of the yield from their pasture lands and one-tenth from their farmlands every year. And Mark Antony and Caesar did not hesitate to demand nine or ten years' worth of tribute all at once. After the assassination of Julius Caesar, when the Republic took up arms in defense of liberty, every citizen was commanded to pay one twenty-fifth of all his goods. And on top of that, every senator had to pay six *asses* for every roof tile on his house—a sum so immense that to us it seems neither believable nor payable.

But Octavianus Caesar, perhaps in keeping with his grand title, exacted and received one-eighth of all the goods of his freedmen. I will not mention the practices of the triumvirs and other tyrants, for fear that in describing them I might give ideas to the rulers of our own time.

Let one example of this kind of extortion serve for all the rest: the practice of establishing colonies. While this was a very effective way to strengthen the empire, nothing could have been more crushing for the conquered subjects. Whole legions of veteran soldiers were sent out to settle in foreign lands and towns. In a short time, the poor local inhabitants were stripped of all their goods and property, not because they had committed any crime, but simply because they were wealthy and their fields were fertile. This one form of plunder contained within it an abyss of all other calamities.

Is it a miserable thing to be robbed of our money? What is it, then, to be deprived of our fields and houses? If it is grievous to be thrown out of our homes, what is it to be banished from our country? To be cast out from our temples and altars? For behold, thousands of people were uprooted—children from their parents, masters from their households, wives from their husbands—and scattered to distant lands, wherever their lot fell. Some were sent to, as the poet said, “the thirsty lands of Africa,” others “to Scythia, or among the Britons at the farthest ends of the world.” Octavianus Caesar alone established eighteen such colonies in Italy, and as many as he pleased in the provinces of the empire. And I know of nothing that was more ruinous to the French, the Spaniards, and to us.

## **Chapter XXIV: Examples of Ancient Cruelty That Surpass Even the Massacres of Our Time**

But you also claim that the cruelties and butcheries of our age are unlike anything ever heard of before. I know what you are referring to (*the translator notes this is likely the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Paris*). Yet tell me honestly, Lipsius, have such things not happened in ancient times? If you do not

know this, then you are ignorant; if you pretend not to, you are dishonest. The examples are so numerous that my only difficulty is in choosing among them.

Have you heard of the man named Sulla, who called himself “the Fortunate”? Then you must also know of his infamous and tyrannical proscription, by which he murdered 4,700 citizens in a single city. And lest you think they were all commoners, know that 140 of them were senators. This is to say nothing of the countless other murders committed by his order or with his permission. It was not without reason that Quintus Catulus cried out, “Who will be left for us to live with, if we kill armed men in war and unarmed men in peace?”

Not long after, I read that three of Sulla’s followers, the triumvirs, imitated their master and banished 300 senators and more than 2,000 Roman gentlemen. Oh, what monstrous wickedness! The sun has never seen its like, nor ever will. If you wish, read the historian Appian, and there you will witness the grotesque spectacle: some hiding in corners, some fleeing, some being dragged away, while their wives and children weep around them. I would wish myself dead if any man would not agree that humanity itself was utterly extinguished in that bloody and brutish age. And these things were done to senators and the noblest of gentlemen—that is to say, to men who were practically kings and princes.

But perhaps the common people did not suffer the same fate? On the contrary. Mark how that same Sulla, after four legions of the opposing army had surrendered to him, trusting in his promise of safety, had every single one of them put to the sword in a village. Their cries for mercy at his treacherous hands were in vain. When the pitiful groans of the dying men reached the Senate, and the senators turned around in alarm, Sulla said calmly, “Pay it no mind, reverend fathers. It is only a few seditious men being punished by my order.” I truly do not know which is more astonishing: that a man could commit such an act, or that he could utter such words.

Do you want more examples of cruelty? Then listen to this. Servius Galba gathered the people of three towns in Spain, pretending he wanted to discuss their welfare. Then he suddenly had 7,000 of them murdered, among whom were the finest of their youth. In that same country, the consul Lucius Licinius Lucullus, after promising safety to the people of Cauca if they surrendered, broke his word, sent his soldiers into their city, and slaughtered 20,000 of them.

When Octavianus Augustus captured the city of Perusia, he selected 300 of the surrendered men, both nobles and commoners, and had them killed as sacrifices before a newly built altar dedicated to the Divine Julius Caesar.

The emperor Caracalla, offended by some jokes made by the people of Alexandria, entered their city peacefully, summoned all their young men to a large field, surrounded them with his soldiers, and, at a

signal, had every one of them killed. He then unleashed the same cruelty on the rest of the city's inhabitants, leaving that once-populous city almost entirely empty.

King Mithridates, with a single letter, ordered the murder of 80,000 Roman citizens who were living throughout Asia for trade and other business.

Volesus Messala, the proconsul of Asia, had 300 men beheaded in a single day. Then, walking proudly among the corpses with his arms outstretched, as if he had accomplished some great feat, he cried out in Greek, "Oh, what a kingly deed!"

I have spoken only of profane and wicked pagans. But consider also those who, in name at least, were consecrated to the true God. The emperor Theodosius, in a most wicked and deceitful act, gathered 7,000 innocent people in Thessalonica, pretending it was for a public spectacle, then sent in his soldiers and had them all slaughtered. There is no act among all the impieties of the ancient tyrants more vile than this.

Go now to my countrymen in Flanders, and complain about the tyranny and treachery of the rulers of *this* age.

## **Chapter XXV: On Tyranny, Then and Now**

Finally, you complain about the tyranny of our times and the oppression of body and mind. It is not my goal to praise this age of ours, nor to condemn it. What good would that do? I will only speak of what is relevant to my comparison.

When were such evils not widespread? And where were they not found? Name any age or any country that was free from notable tyranny. If you can do so, I will gladly admit that we are the most wretched of all people.

Why are you silent? I see that the old cynical saying is true: "All the good princes who ever lived could be listed on the inside of a ring." It is in the very nature of men to use power arrogantly. They cannot easily practice moderation in something that is, by its very nature, immoderate. Even we who complain so loudly about tyranny carry the seeds of it in our own hearts. Many of us lack only the power to be tyrants ourselves, not the will. A snake, numbed by the cold, still has its venom; it just cannot strike. So it is with us. Only weakness and a lack of opportunity keep us from doing harm. Give us strength, the right moment, or the means, and I fear that those who now complain so bitterly about the powerful would become the most unruly of all.

We see examples of this in everyday life. See how one father tyrannizes his children, a master his servants, a schoolmaster his students. Each of them is a tyrant in his own small way. They stir up storms in their own little ponds just as kings do in the great seas.

Nor are other living creatures free from this natural disposition. Many of them exercise cruelty upon their own kind, in the air, on the earth, and in the water. As the writer Varro said:

*The little fish are prey for the great, And the greedy hawk slays the helpless bird.*

But you reply that these are only oppressions of the body. “What is truly unbearable now,” you say, “is that we also suffer the oppression of our minds.”

Is that really so? Oppression of our minds? Be careful that this is not a claim born more of envy than of truth. Anyone who thinks the mind can be oppressed or forced does not understand himself or the divine nature of the mind. For no external force can ever make you want what you do not want, or believe what you do not believe.

Power can be exerted over the body—this chain or fetter of the mind—but not over the mind itself. A tyrant has the power to free the mind from the body, but he cannot change its nature. That which is pure, eternal, and of a divine, fiery essence is completely unaffected by all external violence.

“But,” you say, “I am not allowed to express my mind freely.” So be it. In that case, only your tongue is restrained, not your mind. Your judgment is not controlled, only your actions.

“But this is a strange and unheard-of oppression!” Alas, my friend, how mistaken you are. How many people could I name who, under past tyrants, suffered punishments for their reckless words? How many tyrants have tried to force and control men’s very judgments—yes, their judgments, I say, even in matters of religion?

The kings of Persia and the East regularly demanded to be worshipped as gods. We know that Alexander the Great, despite the disapproval of his own countrymen, claimed divine honors for himself. Among the Romans, even the good and moderate Emperor Augustus had priests appointed to him in every province, and even in private homes, as if he were a god. Caligula had the heads cut off the statues of the gods and replaced them with his own likeness. With a ridiculous impiety, he built a temple and appointed priests to offer exquisite sacrifices in honor of his own majesty. Nero insisted on being recognized as the god Apollo, and he executed prominent citizens on the pretext that they had never sacrificed to his “heavenly voice.” As for Domitian, he was commonly called “our god” and “our lord.”

What foolishness or impiety would it be, Lipsius, to speak out against any king? I have no intention of sailing any closer to that dangerous gulf, into which no storm of ambition will ever draw me. For, as they say, “the reward for silence is safety.”

I will offer just one testimony concerning the servitude of ancient times, from a writer you know well, and I want you to pay close attention. Tacitus, writing about the reign of Domitian, said this:

We read that it was a capital crime when Arulenus Rusticus praised the memory of Paetus Thrasea, or when Herennius Senecio praised Priscus Helvidius. And this cruelty was not directed only at the authors, but at their books as well. A special commission was appointed to burn the works of these excellent minds in the public marketplace, in full view of the people. They foolishly believed that with that fire, they could silence the voice of the Roman people, abolish the liberty of the Senate, and erase the conscience of all mankind.

Furthermore, they expelled all teachers of philosophy and banished every noble art, so that nothing of virtue would remain in use. Surely, we have given a remarkable demonstration of our patience. For just as past ages saw the highest degree of liberty, so have we experienced the lowest extremity of servitude. Through constant spying, the very freedom to speak and to listen has been taken from us. And we would have lost our memory along with our voice, if it were as easy to forget as it is to remain silent.

## **Chapter XXVI: How Our Troubles are Neither New Nor Unique, and the Comfort Found in That Knowledge**

I will not say any more about comparing times. I come now to the final part of my argument, which will attack the idea that our troubles are something new. This will be a brief and dismissive assault, more like gathering the spoils from a defeated enemy than engaging in a fierce battle. For in truth, what is there in our suffering that could be considered new to anyone, unless you yourself are a newborn, a novice in the affairs of humanity?

The philosopher Crantor spoke wisely when he often repeated this line: “Alas, alas, why do I suffer? I have only suffered what is common to all mankind.” For these miseries are constantly turning on the wheel of time, running in a continuous circle around the world. Why do you sigh at these heavy misfortunes? Why are you surprised by them?

*O Agamemnon, son of Atreus, You were not born for joy alone. As you have had mirth, so you will have sorrow; You are mortal, and this is your fate. Even if you struggle and stubbornly refuse, If God has willed it, you have no choice.*

What would truly be astonishing is if any person were exempt from this universal law and did not have to carry their share of the burden that everyone else bears.

Once, in Athens, Solon saw a friend of his grieving deeply. He took him to the top of a high tower and, pointing to all the houses in the great city below, said to him, “Think of how many different sorrows have been in all these houses in times past, how many are in them at this very moment, and how many there will be in the times to come. And then, stop grieving for the miseries of mortals as if they were yours alone.”

I wish you could do the same, Lipsius, for the entire world. But since you cannot do it in reality, let us do it for a moment in our imagination. Imagine, if you will, that you are with me on the peak of Mount Olympus. Look down from there on all the towns, provinces, and kingdoms of the world, and see them as enclosures filled with human calamities. They are nothing but stages, prepared for the purpose of Fortune’s bloody tragedies.

And you do not need to look far. Do you see Italy? Not even thirty years have passed since it was at peace from cruel and bitter wars on all sides. Do you see the vast country of Germany? Recently, the sparks of civil war were burning there, and now they begin to smolder again. Unless I am mistaken, they will soon burst into a consuming flame. Britain? It has seen continual wars and slaughters. The fact that it is at peace now is due to the rule of a peaceable queen (*a reference to Queen Elizabeth I*). And what of France? Look and pity her. At this very moment, the festering gangrene of a bloody war is creeping through her every joint. And so it is in the rest of the world.

Think on these things, Lipsius, and by recognizing this shared experience of misery, lighten your own burden. Just as the Roman generals, riding in their triumphal parades, had a servant behind them who would whisper in their ear, “Remember, you are only a man,” so you should have a prompter at your side, constantly reminding you, “These things are human; they are the common lot of mankind.” For just as labor, when shared among many, becomes easy, so does sorrow.

## **Chapter XXVII: The Conclusion of the Conference**

I have brought forth all my forces, Lipsius, and all my arguments. You have heard everything I thought necessary to say in defense of constancy against sorrow. I pray to God that these words prove not just pleasing, but truly helpful to you; that they do not merely delight you, but genuinely benefit you.

And they will, if they sink not just into your ears but into your very mind. They will, if you do not allow them to lie forgotten and wither away, like seed scattered on the ground. And finally, they will, if you review these ideas often and consider them carefully. For just as a fire is not struck from a flint with a

single blow, so the languishing sparks of virtue in our frozen hearts are not kindled by a single word of advice.

And so that these sparks may finally ignite within you—not just in words or appearance, but in true action—I humbly pray to that eternal and celestial Fire. (*That is, God, who is a fiery spirit.*)

When he had said this, he rose quickly. “I am going, Lipsius,” he said, “for the midday sun tells me it is time for dinner. Follow me.”

“Yes,” I replied, “gladly and with all my heart.”

And now I could truly respond to him, as in the antiphony of a sacred ceremony:

*I have escaped the evil, and found the good.*

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**THE END**

*Praise, Honor, and Glory to God, the Three in One.*

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