

# BUT IT'S NOT FAIR

## Annie Nardone on Lessons from Boethius

What happens when human suffering suddenly enters into a life that was endowed with renown, wealth, and political office — everything that is assumed to lead to a successful and happy life? Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (c. 480-c.524/6) not only wrote *The Consolation of Philosophy* but also placed himself in the text as the person who struggles with the problem of evil. He brings in a cast of characters who share hard truths about the human condition, creating a conversation and resolution for narrator and reader alike. Should we risk trying to answer emotional questions about suffering with more emotion, or should we approach the question of suffering with logic like Boethius did in *Consolation*? Using reason in rhetorical dialogue with Boethius, Lady Philosophy explains human assumptions of suffering applicable to present-day theological challenges.

Society in the twenty-first century is ill-prepared to face suffering. Lives are managed and scheduled, and unless issues are on the news, we are largely removed from deeply disturbing stories. When challenges strike — a lost job, unexpected death, debt — people will look at God and demand answers. The world cries out to know: *what good is God if He allows all of this evil? If He was a loving God, He would protect us and prevent evil.* People feel singled out, but suffering is not unusual. Misery and sorrow aren't unique to the modern day. The challenge

lies in discovering a well-reasoned Christian response to them.

For *Consolation*, Boethius writes while under house arrest. He's been convicted and condemned to death on false charges of treason and sacrilege. All of the markers of a successful life have been taken away from him. He was exiled away from his home, family, and his ministerial status in the government of King Theodoric. If there was ever a man who was entitled to lament over a cruel twist in life, it was him. But interestingly, he isn't mourning his impending death. Rather, he would welcome it, but, "Alas, Death turns deaf ears to my sad cries."<sup>1</sup> Like Boethius in his miserable state, other people have found themselves in the pit of despondency, believing that the only way out is to die. From the first chapter, Boethius takes hold of human nature's timeless contention with tragedy; although he enjoyed a successful life, he suffered too, not unlike every generation after him. But it is our response to challenges that marks wisdom. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned like Boethius under false charges, teaches that we should enter into that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients. "We do not complain of what God does not give us; we rather thank God for what He does give us daily."<sup>2</sup>

Boethius is trapped in his emotional response to his misfortune. His Muses of Poetry attend him, "furnishing words to articulate my grief," but this does nothing to

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<sup>1</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. P. G. Walsh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.1.15.

<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 28.

alleviate it.<sup>3</sup> He feels that the Muses console him in his “sad, old age” as much as they brought him joy in his youth.<sup>4</sup> Now they only serve to inspire him to further angst. Wallowing in self-pity is the worst mindset to live in because there is no solution. He must find a way to climb out of the pit and move on with reason rather than relying on emotion for answers. C.S. Lewis writes that, “Reason is our starting point. There can be no question either of attacking or defending it. If by treating it as a mere phenomenon you put yourself outside it, there is then no way, except by begging the question, of getting inside again.”<sup>5</sup>

Enter Lady Philosophy, whose rhetorical approach will be the ladder out of his irrational and emotional pit. Until her intervention, Boethius relied on his feelings to explain his sudden turn of bad fortune instead of looking at his life with sound reason. When Philosophy sees him, he is a shadow of his former self. He has lost his curiosity and let his wisdom fade. She remembers that “his custom was to scrutinize Dame Nature’s hidden scheme.”<sup>6</sup> He views his difficult circumstances as an end, but Philosophy has just begun her work to restore his hope and happiness. She acknowledges that he is in the middle of a dark time after losing all of his worldly importance, “‘However,’ she added, ‘this is no time for complaints, but for healing.’”<sup>7</sup> Stopping the downward spiral of

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<sup>3</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 1.1.7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.1.8.

<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 33.

<sup>6</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 1.2.30.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.2.36.

despondency and turning to recovery is valuable for someone who has lost hope. First, we must rid their minds of melancholy so that they can see clearly. In a poetic passage, Lady Philosophy advises,

He who keeps composure in a life well-ordered,

Who thrusts underfoot fate's arrogant incursions,

Confronts with integrity both good and evil fortune,

Succeeds in maintaining an undefeated outlook.<sup>8</sup>

Deep despair can block the light of reason and is “a greater sin than any of the sins which provoke it.”<sup>9</sup> Boethius’s next difficulty lies with “the manifold deceits of that monstrous lady, Fortune.”<sup>10</sup> Philosophy correctly identifies Boethius’s cause of his mental sickness as “yearning and pining for your earlier fortune.”<sup>11</sup> When we have achieved greatness or riches, we are shocked to find that it all might disappear in a day when Fortune sweeps it away. All of our anchors of comfort are gone, so we pine away for “the good, old days” when life was sweet. But was it truly sweet, or are we fondly reminiscing and romanticizing the past? What we

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<sup>8</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 1.4.1-5.

<sup>9</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943), 149.

<sup>10</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 2.1.3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.1.2.

thought was ours, especially in the material sense, never was. Fortune merely chose to bless us for a time. Philosophy understands that a reversal of Fortune can cause almost anyone to lose their peace, but after acknowledging Boethius's bitterness toward Fortune, she brings his focus back to "sweet-sounding rhetoric."<sup>12</sup> Philosophy reminds him that the only thing certain about Fortune is her uncertainty. Fortune didn't change her attitude toward him because she didn't have any loyal disposition to begin with. Lady Philosophy bears no allegiance to any man — step back and take the bad fortune with the good. Enjoy Fortune when she treats us well with worldly happiness; also know that will almost certainly change. Nobody is exempt. "Having entrusted yourself to Fortune's dominion, you must conform to your mistress's ways."<sup>13</sup>

Fortune teaches that the things of this world are never really ours. Fortune wishes to know why Boethius is so upset when she takes his wealth, prestige, and office. "When nature brought you forth from your mother's womb, I adopted you; you were naked then, and bereft of everything. I nurtured you with my resources. . . . It now suits me to withdraw my gifts."<sup>14</sup> We come into the world with nothing, and that is how we leave it. Fortune never guarantees that we will keep the gifts that she's bestowed on us. Neither does the world guarantee it. No matter how well we behave or how high our virtue, Fortune can reverse, and we will start over from nothing again.

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<sup>12</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 2.1.8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.1.18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.2.4.

Boethius acknowledges that the logic Philosophy used regarding Fortune sounds reasonable but also understands that emotion can cloud clear and rational thought. He continues the debate by stating, “But when people are unhappy, awareness of their misery runs deeper, so once these words cease to echo in our ears, the grief implanted in our hearts outweighs them.”<sup>15</sup> His sadness has blocked his vision again, so Lady Philosophy continues with the next logical step: she reviews his blessings. Boethius’s life was full of favor up to the point of his imprisonment. He was adopted as an orphan by a wealthy family and married a wonderful woman who was an ideal among wives. He had sons who became successful in their chosen stations as consuls. Now he is an exile from his former life. At this point in time, Boethius experiences his first real crisis. He had known success up to that point, and he should be grateful for those years of ease.

It’s not a popular idea in the current day, but in Boethius’s lifetime, people recognized that there were difficult stages in life as well as blessed stages. Ecclesiastes and Job are Old Testament testimonies to difficulty. Philosophy says, “What you now think of as harrowing days are likewise passing away. It is not as if you are a stranger to the stages of life.”<sup>16</sup> She reminds him that he is not exempt from the march of time.

We are our most vulnerable when we forget who we are and that we are truly made for a purpose. Boethius is still struggling through his emotional fog, and it prevents him from seeing his situation with a clear and

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<sup>15</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 2.3.2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.3.12.

rational mind. Philosophy likens his current emotional state as defective “like a gap in a fortified rampart, through which the disease of emotional disturbance has permeated into your mind.”<sup>17</sup> She asks him if he remembers “the final purpose of the world, the goal to which the whole order of nature proceeds?”<sup>18</sup> He doesn’t. When we can’t see our way out of a seemingly hopeless situation, we lose our value. The world doesn’t make sense.

Philosophy asks who is the source of everything, and he replies, “God is the source.”<sup>19</sup> With her gentle words, Philosophy then guides Boethius to the foundation that her argument is built upon, that “You have forgotten your own identity. So I have now fully elicited the cause of your illness, and the means of recovering your health.”<sup>20</sup> There is a plan, and the world is not full of random occurrences where “wicked and unprincipled individuals are powerful and blessed.”<sup>21</sup> Philosophy only needs to remind him that he believed “that the universe is guided by divine reason and is not subject to random chance.”<sup>22</sup> Boethius requires reasoned thought to clear the dark despair in order to bring back the light of truth.

After all of Philosophy’s counsel, Boethius continues to pity himself by dwelling on the life he had. His hope is gone, but “Hope...means...a continual looking forward

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<sup>17</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 1.6.9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.6.10.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.6.11.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.6.17.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.6.19.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.6.20.

to the eternal world.”<sup>23</sup> After all, he had risen quickly to the top in the Roman Empire and had everything that demonstrated success. Rather than being thankful that he had known many blessings, he complains, “This is precisely what roasts me more fiercely as I contemplate it, for of all Fortune’s blows, the unhappiest aspect of misfortune is to have known happiness.”<sup>24</sup> Does he really mean that? Philosophy reminds him of all that he still has, mainly a devoted family. Fortune has not altered his household, and for that, he should consider himself blessed and fortunate. Philosophy confronts him by asking if any of us are truly happy. She asks, “Does any individual enjoy such total blessedness that he does not find fault in some respect with the nature of his condition?”<sup>25</sup> There always seems to be something to be unhappy about. Not only that, but every person suffers setbacks. We can choose to feel sorry for ourselves or be grateful.

When we rest our happiness in worldly pleasure like wealth and status, we will never be truly content because, without a doubt, those things can vanish. When we envy other people, what we see may be an illusion. “So what is crystal clear,” Philosophy tells Boethius, “is how wretched is the happiness which mortal possessions bring, for those content with life do not possess it for ever, and it does not satisfy in its entirety those who live in distress.”<sup>26</sup> She gives him examples: a rich man

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<sup>23</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2000), 134.

<sup>24</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 2.4.2.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.4.12.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.4.21.



embarrassed by his poor childhood, a man of high office and celebrity has a miserable home life, the rich, single, lonely politician, and the married man who cannot have children. Why do we try to find happiness outside of ourselves? We will suffer when we look to other people, material things, and status to give us importance and joy. Things are not what they seem, so don't envy what is not known as truth.

We must ask ourselves what truly makes us happy. The beauty of gems or a pastoral setting? "But do any of these things belong to you?" Philosophy asks. "Fortune will never award you what the world of nature has set apart from you."<sup>27</sup> We acquire things, thinking they will bring us happiness. But the more we own, the more we have to manage. Humans have reason, above all other living creatures. Reason and rationality, the ability to use logic and rhetoric, sets us apart from any other creature. This is where true joy can be found. Philosophy wonders, "Has the world become so topsy-turvy that a living creature, whom the gift of reason makes divine, believes that his glory lies solely in possession of lifeless goods?"<sup>28</sup> Wealth and position in Boethius's life had become his happiness. This worldly pleasure isn't really his. Fortune has blessed him with it, but she has also snatched it away. She had made no guarantees, and the pleasures were not Boethius's to begin with. Part of our true happiness should include our rational mind and self-knowledge, not outer appearances.

Boethius still lacks perspective. He thinks that he is virtuous and claims that "ambition for material things

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<sup>27</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 2.5.14.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.5.25.

had little or no influence with me: rather, I sought the opportunity for public service so that virtue would not languish in silence.”<sup>29</sup> Perhaps that is his view, but Philosophy knows his mind better than he does. He claims virtue, but he is driven by “precisely the desire for glory and the reputation for outstanding achievements in the service of the state.”<sup>30</sup> Boethius is motivated by glory, not by selfless virtue. We may feel mighty, but we need to remember that we are “a mere pinprick when measured against the dimension of the heavens.”<sup>31</sup>

To truly understand what he sees as his own dire situation, he needs to appreciate how insignificant his problems are in the grand scope of time and space. Philosophy tells him that we are no bigger than a speck of dust, so his reputation and name really mean nothing. Boethius is sitting in a room under house arrest. His reputation and political office carry no importance. She asks, “How many men, highly famed in their own day, have been expunged from our memory because of the poverty of written records has brought oblivion?”<sup>32</sup> Fame is fleeting, but a mind that is self-aware is above earthly status and burdens. And ultimately, we all meet the same end. “Death lumps together lowly and high-born as one; She ranks the highest with the base.”<sup>33</sup>

Boethius is nearing the end of the rhetorical discussion, but he still has a “deep-seated sense of

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<sup>29</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 2.7.1.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.7.2.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.7.3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.7.13.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.7.13-14.

grief.”<sup>34</sup> He states, “The consuming cause of my depression is this, that in spite of the existence of a good ruler over the world, it is at all possible for evils to exist, or to go unpunished . . . since wickedness rules and flourishes, virtue not only goes unrewarded, but is also subservient, trodden underfoot by the feet of criminals, and pays the penalty which crimes should pay.”<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, the question that has forever plagued man is this. If there is a good God, why does evil continue unpunished and virtue goes unrewarded? This is a bigger issue than much of the former dialogue about suffering. Why are there despots ruling countries who starve and torture their citizens? Wars and corruption advance. Evil continues unchecked, or so it seems. What do we say to a hurting world that demands answers? Philosophy gently corrects. She tells him that all is not what it seems, and he should remember what they had just discussed. “Powerful men are in fact always the good, while wicked are always the abject and the weak; that vices never go unpunished, nor virtues unrewarded; that the good always achieve success, and the wicked suffer misfortune.”<sup>36</sup> Man must step back and look at the bigger picture. Asking the question, “Why?” is fine, but be prepared to not only use reason to work toward resolution but also know that an answer may not be found. Job was reminded of that when God asked, “Where

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<sup>34</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 4.1.1.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.3.4.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.1.7.

were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding.”<sup>37</sup>

We must remember that this earth is a speck in space and time. The author of Ecclesiastes shares, “I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.”<sup>38</sup> Even so, as a reminder of the eternal, Philosophy recites a long and comforting poem to Boethius. In it, she promises when he arrives in his native land, he will look back to earth with loathing. Someday, he will see that his sorrows on earth were insignificant in the expanse of eternity. Then he will say, “My origin. Here shall I stay.”<sup>39</sup> She reminds him that in his sorrow, he’s forgotten his true land. It may appear that evil men rule on earth, but they are imprisoned there with no beauty, no rest, never knowing true happiness. It appears that the wicked are in power, but Philosophy knows better. “Reflect too on the crippling paralysis which grips the wicked. . . . They fail in their quest for the supreme crown of reality, for the wretched creatures do not succeed in attaining that outcome for which alone they struggle day and night, whereas the power of good men is conspicuous in this respect.”<sup>40</sup> Why, Boethius, would you want to stay there? Christians can see a parallel to a dark and sinful world that is temporary. Like Boethius, we will leave this dark,

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<sup>37</sup> Job 38:4, ESV.

<sup>38</sup> Ecclesiastes 2:11, ESV.

<sup>39</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 4.1.25.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.2.27-28.

momentary world behind and know a brighter eternity with a purely good, unchangeable King.

Finally, it's important to note the good that suffering offers us. In *The Discarded Image*, C.S. Lewis tells us, "We say that the wicked flourish and the innocent suffer. But we do not know who are the wicked and who are the innocent; still less what either need. All luck, seen from the centre, is good and medicinal. The sort we call 'bad' exercises good men and curbs bad ones — if they will take it so."<sup>41</sup> Are challenges something to be desired? Philosophy states, "My opinion in fact is that adverse Fortune benefits people more than good, for whereas when good Fortune seems to fawn on us, she invariably deceives us with the appearance of happiness. Adverse Fortune is always truthful."<sup>42</sup> Good Fortune can lull us into complacency and false security with the deception that it will last. We lose our insight and are distracted by ease. Adverse Fortune clarifies our thinking to look for truth. And when trouble strikes, we realize the frailty of happiness. One of the best methods for discovering who our real friends really are is to suffer misfortune. Philosophy inquires, "You must surely believe that we are to regard it as no trivial blessing that this harsh and repulsive Fortune has laid bare the attitudes of friends loyal to you?"<sup>43</sup> The character of true companions will shine in the darkness of ill Fortune. Wealth and fame may vanish, but deeply loyal friends are more precious to us than any worldly wealth.

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<sup>41</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 87.

<sup>42</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 2.8.3.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.8.6.

Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* still influences minds through the centuries and continues to be read by scholar and common man alike. He discovers treasure in his search for answers to the eternal question "why do bad things happen?" through writing *Consolation*. "God's gaze anticipates everything that is to happen, and draws it back and recalls it to his own knowing in the present."<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, we can't know the mind of God. But we can look at the circumstances at the end of Boethius's life and note that if he hadn't been arrested, he would not have been able to write *Consolation* or had as deep of an understanding for the desperate times in the lives of other people.

His dialogue with Lady Philosophy has given Christians an example to follow in apologetics work. *The Consolation of Philosophy* was written from a philosophical, rather than a strictly theological, vantage point. But as Lewis notes, "He [Boethius] congratulates himself on having reached conclusions acceptable to Christianity from purely philosophical premises—as the rules of art demanded."<sup>45</sup>

As we read *The Consolation of Philosophy*, we learn that fame is fleeting and riches can disappear, and Boethius's work serves as an anchor of reason. Perhaps the people who were devoted to his book saw their own minds reflected in Boethius's questions. Did they think, "What are we pursuing?" If it's fame, wealth, or high political office, we are misguided. These markers of success are fleeting and only offer temporary happiness.

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<sup>44</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.6.40.

<sup>45</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 78.

Truest happiness and the deepest good are found in the intangible things in life.

Boethius's struggle and discovery help the modern apologist to explain Fortune and the problem of human suffering. Ultimately, our own human understanding is too limited. We have reason, but we only see part of the picture. "Understanding belongs solely to the divine."<sup>46</sup> But if we could comprehend the past, present, and future like God, we wouldn't need Him. God would be nothing more than a reasoned being. Our rational mind looks at Boethius's situation, imprisoned and waiting to be executed, and agrees with Boethius's opinion that he has been dealt a bitter hand. It makes no sense. But we are looking at one moment in time. Boethius writes *The Consolation of Philosophy* in the midst of his confusion, explaining his argument and eventual consolation and conclusion. Philosophy tells him that God sees all things in his eternal present, seeing the span of eternity and how things work together.<sup>47</sup> We cannot. As we read through *Consolation*, Boethius comes to see that we can't control suffering or eliminate it; therefore, we must rise above the immediate problem we cannot understand and remember to value what cannot be taken from us. Lady Philosophy, through the author Boethius, leaves us with this advice. "So avoid vices, cultivate the virtues, raise your minds to righteous hopes, pour out your humble prayers to heaven."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.5.4.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.6.20.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.6.47.

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