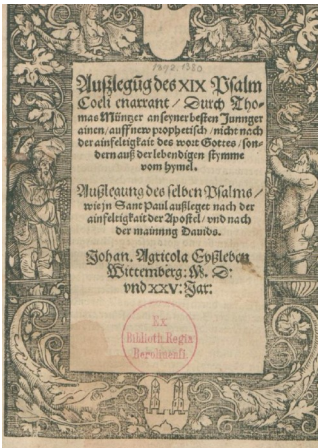


Letter written to Christoph Meinhard,¹

Allstedt, 30 May 1524

This is one of several letters written by Müntzer to the Eisleben iron-master, Christoph Meinhard (he was also probably a cousin of Johann Zeiss of Allstedt). Meinhard had been in contact with Müntzer since the autumn of 1523, and was clearly interested in several aspects of Müntzer's doctrines. Here, Müntzer provides him with a short overview of the necessity of spiritual suffering and despair before attaining true faith. He contrasts this with the kind of faith promoted by the Lutherans.



To his dear Christoph Meinhard, from Thomas Müntzer.²

May the spirit of wisdom and an understanding of the knowledge of God be with you, my dear brother.

I detect in your letter a very keen desire for the truth, for you show great persistence in asking after the right path. This is easiest to explain by a description of the true fear of God, contained in the 18th Psalm: “The heavens declare” etc.³

Here you are told by the holy spirit that your eyes must first be opened by suffering the work of God, as God's law explains. You must always place one word beside another, and consider them with your heart, since the sun goes up from its true starting-point only after the long night, Psalm 129. Those who have not suffered the long night will not come to the knowledge of God, for the night unto the night reveals knowledge, and only after it will the true word emerge into the light of day, John 8 and 10. They must truly be heavenly men who seek the glory of God to the detriment of their own name. They must use every moment to mortify the flesh, and in particular our name must stink terribly to the godless, for only someone who has been tested can preach God's name; if the listener has previously heard Christ preaching in his heart, in

¹ The original letter is lost, but Johann Agricola published it in his very hostile edition *Auslegung des 19. Psalms*, printed in Wittenberg, May 1525. It discusses Psalm 19, although the text refers to ‘Psalm 18’: Müntzer's numbering of the Psalms follows the Vulgate version of the Bible; others, and always in modern times, are more used to the Hebrew-Masoretic numbering, in which, from Psalm 9 and 10 onwards, the numeration is one different – hence Müntzer's ‘Psalm 18’ is our ‘Psalm 19’. All Müntzer's references to Psalms within this letter should therefore be increased by one...

² The greeting is written in Latin, the remainder of the letter in German.

³ In the original text, the numbering of Psalms follows the Vulgate version of the Bible; in modern times, we are more used to the Hebrew-Masoretic numbering version. As a general rule, from Psalm 9 and 10 onwards, the numeration is one different: where Müntzer cites Psalm 18, for example, we should consult Psalm 19; where he cites 129, we should check 130; and so on. Müntzer's original numbering has been retained in this translation.

the spirit of the fear of God, then the true preacher can provide testimony enough. The work of the hands of God must cause the first astonishment in the soul, otherwise all preaching and writing is a waste of time. Whoever is constantly exercised in such things can then pass judgement on anything without punishment. The renowned teaching of such people must resound throughout the whole world, without prohibition by the godless, so that they, with all their power and might, shrink back in terror before he who will teach them through a new Jehu, 2 Kings 9. God is a friendly bridegroom to his beloved. First of all he lets her serve as the most abject handmaiden, so that he may test her. Then he casts his eye upon things that are lowly and turns away from the lofty, Psalm 112, 1 Samuel 2, Deuteronomy 32. It seems as if the godless should hold power eternally; but then the bridegroom comes out of the bedchamber, a mighty man who has drunk deeply, who has slept through all the preparations of his servants, Psalm 72. Oh, then must we make our prayer: I think the time has come, arise, why are you asleep? For just as the Lord slept in the little boat, when it seemed that the storm-wind raised by the raging insolence of the godless was going to plunge the boat to the bottom; so the bridegroom rises and comes out of his bedchamber, when the voice of its true owner is heard within the soul, John 3. Afterwards, all the elect rejoice with Jesus, saying with Luke 12: "I must be anointed with another baptism than with the baptism of John, and I will be sorely straitened until that is accomplished." This agrees with the words of this psalm: he exulted like a strong man. He was as splendid as a giant striding along the road.

When a person becomes aware of his beginning in the stormy sea of his agitation, when he is right in the middle of his unsteadiness, then he must behave like a fish which has dived down into the murky depths from the clear waters above: it turns back again, swims, climbs up through the water until it has reached its first beginning again. The elect may not stray too far from God, or he will send out his fire, Luke 12, from which no one can conceal themselves and which will burn in their heart, their conscience. However greatly the elect may sin, yet the fire of their conscience will drive them to feelings of horror and disgust at their sinning. If they deliberately nurture this sadness and horror, then they can no longer sin. That is what I call 'patience', something that the lusting swine mock through their snouts. They curse the Old Testament, use Paul endlessly to dispute good works, completely denigrate the law, and yet, even if they were to burst, they have nothing in common with Paul.

The law of God is quite clear, it opens wide the eyes of the elect, and makes the godless utterly blind, it is a perfect teaching which illuminates the spirit of the true fear of God, something that happens when a person risks their neck for the truth, as Christ said, Luke 12. Paul commanded such works by the law. In short, they too are necessary, however much the godless may oppose them with idle sophistry and a false Paul. They cite the fact that Paul never once dreamed. To the devil with such preachers! Paul spoke about those dissolute wretches when the godless were trying to seduce the elect. Along come our shameless Bacchanals⁴ and claim that they have hit upon the answer when they refer to the fourth chapter of Romans, that part about Abraham receiving God's grace without having to pay any price; but they do not take into account the 15th chapter of Genesis, nor the 31st Psalm "Blessed are those"; those were also cited by Paul in that very same chapter to show that God drives people, by many stabs of conscience, to comprehend the grace which already resides in their heart.

Just as Paul stresses faith without any reliance on works, so do I stress the need to suffer the work of God. Isaiah 5, John 6. I agree with Paul and not with our scholars, who steal little bits from him now here, now there, like the beasts of the belly, Philippians 3: the damned do not suffer the working of God. They falsify Christ as the fulfiller of the law, so that, by pointing at his suffering on the cross, they do not themselves have to suffer the working of God. That is why this same lazy, worm-eaten theology of these old fantasists can readily be compared to the drunkard who has tumbled into the thorn-bush.

The righteousness of God must strangle our lack of belief for as long as it takes us to realise that all lust is sin and that we have become obdurate in order to protect our lusting. So a person must apply themselves to come to an understanding of these secret lusts, which are extremely insidious. If the person has no terror of this, then these lusts will dominate them, drive them, will do enough to bring them beyond advice or assistance. Paul stated this quite unequivocally in 2 Timothy 3, where he said: men will become debauched, lovers of pleasures, and will say that they cannot endure or understand the work of God, that they will deny the study and consideration of the law, by which the work of God can be recognised.

So there you have a short interpretation of the 18th Psalm. Make a duplicate or fair copy of it, and send it to me.

Dated in the year 1524, the Monday after the first Sunday of Trinity.

⁴ i.e. Bletherers, or high-living priests

(Translated by Andy Drummond, March 2016)

Original German text available at pages 240-252 of:
Thomas Müntzer: Briefwechsel, edited by S. Bräuer and M. Kobuch, Leipzig 2010