

Give to the Winds Thy Fears

Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676); tr. John Wesley (1703–1791)

Give to the winds thy fears,
hope and be undismayed;
God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears;
God shall lift up thy head.

Through waves and clouds and storms,
He gently clears the way;
wait thou His time, so shall this night
soon end in joyous day.

What though thou rules not,
yet heav'n, and earth, and hell
proclaim, God sitteth on the throne,
and ruleth all things well.

Leave to His sov'reign sway
to choose and to command.
so shalt thou wond'ring own His way,
how wise, how strong His hand!

Far, far above thy thought
His counsel shall appear,
when fully He the work hath wrought,
that caused thy needless fear.

Thou seest our weakness, Lord,
our hearts are known to Thee;
O lift Thou up the sinking heart,
confirm the feeble knee.

Let us in life, in death,
Thy steadfast truth declare,
and publish with our latest breath
Thy love and guardian care.



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In the Nick of Time

Tried with Fire: The God of All Comfort

Kevin T. Bauder

To all appearances the apostle Paul was less than average. He was probably so short that he couldn't see over the heads of a crowd. He was no golden-tongued orator—in fact, his preaching was known to put people to sleep. Many believe that he had an ocular disease that forced him to keep wiping the pus from his eyes while he was speaking. In an age when physical appearance was thought to mirror greatness of soul, he was squat and ugly.

Paul also had a questionable reputation. He was thought to be argumentative in writing but pusillanimous in person. He had been in trouble with the law on multiple occasions. He could produce no letters of recommendation from the people who really mattered. He changed cities so often that he looked like somebody on the run. He kept poking his nose into places it was not welcome. Some people even questioned his sanity.

Furthermore, he seemed to be the unluckiest man alive. He kept getting beaten, stoned, and whipped. He was once left for dead. He had been shipwrecked repeatedly, and on one occasion had spent three days drifting at sea. He often went without food and drink. Sometimes he did not have adequate clothing. He would work late into the night, sometimes skipping sleep entirely. He seemed to face a myriad of dangers, sometimes from robbers, sometimes from Gentiles who thought he had turned the world upside down, sometimes from Jews who thought he had betrayed their religion, sometimes in crowded cities, sometimes in empty wastes, sometimes on the high seas, and sometimes from people who pretended to be his friends but then betrayed him.

Paul suffered much and some people held it against him. For example, the church at Corinth had been swept off its feet by avowedly Christian leaders who called themselves “Super Apostles.” These leaders were tall, handsome, learned, eloquent, accomplished, and well connected—just ask them! They were also religious hucksters, and they understood that they had to discredit Paul if they were going to capture the church. The easiest way to gain control was to point out Paul's deficiencies, his ostensibly bad reputation, and his constant troubles. Surely (they reasoned) God would not permit one of His *genuine* apostles to live such a life.

People bought it. Even though the church in Corinth owed its origin (humanly) to Paul, its members began to despise him and even to mock him. In comparison to the Super Apostles he was seen as a lightweight. His ponderous words could be safely ignored in view of his contemptible person. The thing that made it all so believable was Paul's suffering.

This pathetic situation directly precipitated the letter that we now call 2 Corinthians. Paul wrote this epistle specifically to address the problem of rejected leadership—his leadership. It is the most personal of Paul's missives. His heart is laid bare on every page.

Interestingly, Paul did not begin the letter by drawing attention to himself or even to the Super Apostles, but to God. Even more interestingly, he did not point to God as transcendent, powerful, sovereign, or glorious. Instead, he drew attention to God as the God of all comfort.

God *is* the God of all comfort. This truth implies that He is on the side of His afflicted children. Sufferings are not a sign of His displeasure, but of His tenderness and compassion. For Paul, God being the God of all comfort was more than simply a paragraph in his theological catalog. It was a truth that mattered in life, for two reasons.

First, since God is a God of comfort, He comforts His children in all their afflictions. He is filled with mercy and compassion, and He is available to His children when they are hurting. He enfolds His own just as a nursing mother soothes her child. He knows how weak and frail His people are, and He shows them the kind of compassion that a father shows to his little children. From His own heart He lends them peace in their distress, joy in their sorrow, and consolation in their anguish. God ministers comfort because His nature is to comfort. This is who He is.

Of course, we can know cognitively that God is the God of all comfort without really understanding what that means. As long as God's comfort remains an abstraction, our theology will show a deficit. The only way to balance the books and to grasp the meaning of God as the God of all comfort is actually to experience His comfort. For that to happen, however, we must first need to be comforted.

Consequently, God permits at least some pain in our lives specifically so that He can comfort us. He longs for us to know Him as He is, and that includes knowing Him as the God of all comfort. The only way we can know Him as the God of comfort is to meet Him in the midst of suffering. In other words, suffering is a way of growing in our experiential knowledge of God. Paul can rightly exclaim, "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation" (2 Cor 1:3-4).

The fact that God is the God of all comfort also matters for a second reason. God wishes to administer His comfort not only to us but also through us. He wants us to become conduits through which His comfort reaches others who are torn. By ourselves, however, we tend to be self-centered and callous. We are insensitive to the sufferings of others, blind to their misery and deaf to their groans. God needs to show us how to be people of comfort, channels of His own comfort. He does that by permitting pain in our lives, allowing us to be hurt, and then showing us how comfort feels and why it matters. He works this way so "that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God" (2 Cor 1:4).

For these reasons, Paul told the Corinthians that his affliction (which they held against him) was for their good. They saw him afflicted and comforted. They saw him comforting others who were afflicted. They learned that when he suffered, they suffered with him. They also discovered that when he was comforted, his comfort became theirs (2 Cor 1:5-7). The bonds of Christian sympathy are forged in the bonfires of shared affliction and tempered in cooling showers of shared comfort.

Suffering is never meaningless for those who fear God. Our Father is working in and through all of our pain. In our tribulations He accomplishes many purposes. One of those purposes is to comfort us so that we can comfort others, until we find our place in the vibrating web of shared affliction and consolation.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
