

The Head That Once Was Crowned With Thorns

Thomas Kelly (1769–1855)

The head that once was crowned with thorns
is crowned with glory now;
a royal diadem adorns
the mighty Victor's brow.

The highest place that heav'n affords
is his, is his by right,
the King of kings and Lord of lords,
and heav'n's eternal Light:

The joy of all who dwell above,
the joy of all below,
to whom he manifests his love,
and grants his name to know.

To them the cross, with all its shame,
with all its grace, is giv'n;
their name an everlasting name,
their joy the joy of heav'n.

They suffer with the Lord below,
they reign with him above;
their profit and their joy to know
the myst'ry of his love.

The cross he bore is life and health,
though shame and death to him;
his people's hope, his people's wealth,
their everlasting theme.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Tried with Fire: That Ye Faint Not

Kevin T. Bauder

The apostle Paul knew how to write with exceptional clarity. Sometimes, however, he chose to express himself in ambiguous ways. A clear example of Pauline obscurity can be found in Ephesians 3:13. Paul writes, "Wherefore I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory" (KJV). In this verse Paul is making a request (*I desire* means *I ask*), but he does not specify whether he is making this request to his readers or to God. The request itself is literally *not to be discouraged*, but Paul does not elucidate whether he or his readers are the ones who might grow discouraged. He talks about the purpose of his afflictions, which are "for your glory," but he does not clarify whether this glory is a matter of their present boasting or of their future glorification before God.

Paul wrote Ephesians from prison. If he intended to address his request to God, he probably would have said so. Furthermore, he was personally in little danger of losing heart, as his attitude in Philippians (written at about the same time) shows. So Paul is likely recognizing that his readers might be embarrassed and discouraged in the face of his imprisonment. He asks them to buck up, reminding them that they can actually glory in his present sufferings.

Why would a Christian glory in tribulation, particularly someone else's tribulation? The first word of the verse (*wherefore*) indicates that the previous discussion contains the reason. The immediately preceding verse (Eph 3:12) says that believers have boldness and confident access through the "faith of Christ." This boldness and access are "in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph 3:11) in whom God carried out His eternal purpose. According to this purpose, God made known His multi-faceted wisdom to heavenly rulers and authorities (Eph 3:10), a reference to invisible superhuman intelligences. In other words, even though these powerful spirit beings are surrounded by God's splendor, they are learning something more about the intricacies of His wisdom—and they are learning it by observing His dealings with and through the Church. The Church itself was a secret, hidden by God since creation. God has now brought this secret to light (Eph 3:9). He chose to reveal it through the ministry of Paul, who was given the astounding privilege of preaching Christ's incomprehensible wealth to the Gentiles (Eph 3:8).



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Paul is saying that heavenly beings already knew about certain aspects of God's plan. We can speculate about how much they knew. They probably knew about God's plan for Israel. They probably knew about His plan for the nations. These matters were revealed in the Old Testament. With the beginning of the Church, however, God began to do something that was not included in these previous plans. He was now incorporating both Jews and Gentiles into a new humanity (Eph 2:11-22). This enterprise was so grand and unexpected that it provided a staggering new revelation of God's wisdom. Mighty spirits in heaven were learning about God from the Church, and Paul's preaching was right at the center of this unfolding revelation. At the time Paul was writing these words, he was in prison for his preaching—but so what? Even his imprisonment was part of a grand object lesson that God was using to instruct princes and rulers in heaven. Why should Paul's readers be ashamed of such an imprisonment? Instead they should glory in it, just as he did.

No sensible person would choose the circumstances in which Paul found himself. He was in jail, awaiting trial. Potentially he could be executed. For the duration he had no liberty, no privacy, no ability to pursue his own agenda. Yet he was able to look beyond his circumstances and to glimpse a larger picture in which his afflictions played a part. In this larger scheme, his sufferings were not really about him. Instead, they were an aspect of a magnificent seminar that God was conducting in His cosmic classroom. Because Paul's suffering had a role in God's great work, he could embrace it and even glory in it—and he expected others to glory in his behalf.

Paul's teaching implies another application for his readers, whether past or present. As long as the Church is on earth, God is continuing to reveal His wisdom to principalities and powers in heavenly places. All those who are in the Church (i.e., all those who are united to Christ's body) have a role in that revelation, just as Paul did. We do not bring the mystery to light as Paul did, but we do play a part in its ongoing development and exposition. Our faithfulness matters, just as Paul's did. Furthermore, just as Paul's faithfulness was tested through suffering, so ours will be also.

Not all trials come from persecution, but every single affliction is an opportunity to exhibit our trust in God. When we respond to suffering in godly ways, we are acting out a part of the object lesson that the Greatest Instructor is setting before the heavenly powers. When God permits pain in our lives, Cherubs and Seraphs have the opportunity to observe how He accomplishes His manifold goals. Partly, God's purpose is His glory, but partly it is also our good. God never acts contrary to our ultimate welfare when He puts Himself on display, because part of what He displays is His goodness.

When we suffer, we need to remember who we are. We are part of a now-open secret, the Church. God is using the Church, including us, to reveal His manifold wisdom to the aristocracy of heaven. One way in which He

does that is by permitting affliction, tribulation, and suffering in our lives. Whenever we and our loved ones encounter such things, we need to remember that the trial is not necessarily about us, but about a greater good that God is accomplishing. Let us ask ourselves (as Paul asked his readers) not to be discouraged, for in this picture even our suffering is our glory.



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.
