

The Duteous Day Now Closeth

Paul Gerhardt (1607–1676); tr. Robert Bridges (1844–1930)

The duteous day now closeth,
each flow'r and tree reposeeth,
shade creeps o'er wild and wood;
let us, as night is falling,
on God our Maker calling,
give thanks to Him, the Giver good.

Now all the heav'nly splendor
breaks forth in starlight tender
from myriad worlds unknown;
and man, the marvel seeing,
forgets his selfish being,
for joy of beauty not his own.

His care he drowneth yonder,
lost in th'abyss of wonder;
to heav'n his soul doth steal;
this life he disesteemeth,
the day it is that dreameth,
that doth from truth his vision seal.

Awhile his mortal blindness
may miss God's loving-kindness
and grope in faithless strife;
but when life's day is over
shall death's fair night discover
the fields of everlasting life.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Tried with Fire: A City That Hath Foundations

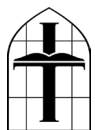
Kevin T. Bauder

Abraham entered the Promised Land as a foreigner. Although he spent virtually the rest of his life in the land, he never lost his status as an alien. Rather than ceding rights to the surrounding kings, settling down, and establishing a home, Abraham continued to live as a nomad (Heb 11:8-9). He had been promised this land as an inheritance from God. He anticipated a “city that hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb 11:10). He would accept nothing less.

Abraham's attitude is built into the life of faith. To live by faith is to confess that one is a foreigner and an exile on earth. It is to yearn for a better homeland—a heavenly one. God delights in people who display this attitude, and He has prepared a city for them (Heb 11:16). Clearly Christians ought to be such people.

The problem is that all our lives we have the opportunity to return to our old homeland (Heb 11:15). We know that we are destined for the heavenly city, New Jerusalem (Rev 21-22). Yet that city seems more distant and less real—less like home—to us than, say, Minneapolis or Dallas. For now, it is invisible and intangible, but the necessities of mortal life are present to us. At meal time our bellies want substantial (and preferably tasty) food; we cannot eat the marriage supper of the Lamb. When we stub our toe in the dark our first thought is not for the light of the eternal city, but to reach for a light switch. Of course, the pleasures of sin may seem very pleasant indeed, even if we know that we enjoy them only for a season. Even apart from sin, however, the innocent delights of this world may occupy our attention by virtue of their very immediacy.

We face something of a paradox. On the one hand, we dare not deny the goodness of God's creation (including the goodness of our own bodies), and we ought not to question that He has made certain good things in the present world to delight us. Who would want to live in a world without sunsets and autumn leaves? On the other hand, we are destined for a new creation that culminates in a New Jerusalem on a new earth, and the life of faith consists in prioritizing the new creation above the old.



In the Nick of Time is published by Central Baptist Theological Seminary.

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This paradox forces upon us two temptations. The first is that we may seek to value the new creation by neglecting or even despising the good things that God has placed in the old. In the face of this temptation we need to recall that not everything that is immanent is evil; in some sense we are to use this present world without abusing it (1 Cor 7:31). Christianity has no place for an utterly world-denying asceticism.

Yet we face a second temptation as well. We may become so preoccupied with immanent things—even good things—that we fail to stretch our anticipation forward toward our eternal home. When this happens we run the risk of becoming grubby, earthbound creatures who delight only in what can be seen and touched. When we lose our expectation of the New Jerusalem, we lose hope, for in the Bible hope is expectation. Furthermore, when we lose hope we also lose faith, for faith is the substance of things hoped for.

What we need is a way to make earthly things seem as ephemeral as they actually are while at the same time making the heavenly city to seem as substantial as it really is. God in His goodness has provided such a way. It takes the form of suffering.

Suffering teaches us by practice that even the good things of this world are very transient. Loving relationships lead to bereavements and betrayals. Good health gives way to illness and age. Money brings cares and often loss. Life itself is a vapor. Each good thing that we own comes to own a part of us, for with possession comes the stewardship of maintenance and right use. Hence the maxim, *bon pa dire*—good don't last. The better we learn this lesson, the greater will be our legitimate detachment from earthly things.

On the other hand, suffering also tends to draw our attention to our eternal home and to make that home seem sweeter. Every loss quickens our eagerness for that which cannot be lost. Every hurt stirs up hope for a city where there are no tears and where pain has ceased to exist. What once seemed shadowy and ephemeral begins to take on solid form—the substance of things hoped for.

The first Christian martyr was Stephen the deacon. As the gnashing mob rushed upon him, God granted Stephen an unusual blessing. The heavens were opened before his sight. He saw God's glory, with Jesus standing at God's right hand (Acts 7:54-55). In that moment, what must have seemed most real to him?

We do not have to wonder about the answer to this question. Stephen cried out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" The term for *receive* (the Greek verb *dechomai*) carries the idea of showing approval by welcoming a gift that is willingly offered. In other words, as the mob was murdering Stephen, he wasn't begging for help. He was expressing readiness and even eagerness to go home, to step into the glory of God and presence of Jesus upon whom

he was gazing. For Stephen, Christ was real and the glory of God was real—more substantial than the attackers who were about to martyr him.

We do not expect God to give us a similar glimpse into glory. Nevertheless, God teaches us to yearn for home like Stephen did. We usually take longer to learn the lesson, but God's methods are suited to individual situations. Each affliction instructs us that this world is not our home. Every trial directs our attention away from the home we have left (but that still beckons to us), and toward the home to which we are going. We are citizens of another city, and when we live now as citizens of that city, God will not be ashamed to be called our God.



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.
