

Now From the Altar of My Heart

John Mason (1646–1694)

Now from the altar of my heart
Let incense flames arise;
Assist me, Lord, to offer up
Mine evening sacrifice.

This day God was my Sun and Shield,
My Keeper and my Guide;
His care was on my frailty shown,
His mercies multiplied.

Minutes and mercies multiplied
Have made up all this day:
Minutes came quick, but mercies were
More fleet and free than they.

Lord of my time, whose hand hath set
New time upon my score,
Then shall I praise for all my time,
When time shall be no more.

February 7, 2020

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Tried With Fire: On the Shelf

Kevin T. Bauder

Gabe was an old man. He had spent years on a mission field where his ministry had produced marked results. Now retired, his will to serve was strong, but his body was feeble. He deeply wanted to do something for God, but it seemed as if he could no longer do anything useful.

Joe was a young man who loved God, but who landed in prison on a trumped-up assault charge. To all indications his testimony was ruined. It seemed as if every opportunity to serve God would be denied to him.

Ben was suffering the first stages of Alzheimer's. He knew that his mind was going, and he dreaded what this meant for the future. He could see no way that he would ever again be useful to God.

John still had one of the brightest minds of his civilization, and he was known for his skills as a translator and author. John, however, was going blind. Pondering his loss, he wondered aloud why God would remove the one real talent that he had to offer.

Some of the names have been changed, but none of these situations is fictional. In fact, they are common. Many believers face a future that looks like one of these situations.

Most react almost instinctively with dread. No one looks forward to body and mind decaying. Nobody wishes for a falsely-ruined reputation. No believer wants to be useless to God. Some have even preferred to take their own lives rather than to submit to what they viewed as a futile existence.

All of which raises an important question: is it even possible for a believer to become involuntarily useless to God? Can circumstances or even slander hurt us so badly that God can do nothing further with us? The question here is not whether believers' sins can damage their usefulness to God. That question is worth discussing, but here the question is about circumstances that affect Christians through no fault of their own.

To answer this question in the affirmative, it would be necessary to affirm one of two propositions. First, some circumstances that believers face are truly outside of God's control and can damage their usefulness to Him



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

Permission is granted to duplicate for personal and church use.

www.centalseminary.edu | info@centalseminary.edu
900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

without His permission. Second, even though God has control of all circumstances, He genuinely wishes to reduce some of His children to uselessness.

The first proposition is manifestly false. The uniform message of Scripture is that God exercises meticulous, Providential control over every circumstance. When Joseph spoke of his brothers' past sins against him, he told them, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen 50:20). Joseph used the same verb in both halves of the verse. He was saying that his calamities had resulted from a double intention: his brothers' and his God's. In the long run, God's intention overcame the brothers' evil plan. No circumstance ever occurs in any believer's life without God's permission and oversight.

So might God sometimes wish to reduce some of His children to uselessness? The only acceptable reply is that God is perfectly capable of using us even when we do not perceive our own usefulness. Indeed, God may be using us greatly in exactly those moments when we feel that our existence is most futile.

Years ago I was in a doctoral course when the professor began to unburden himself about his father's situation. His father had been a widely-known exegete and theologian, master of many languages, and author of many publications. We all knew his name and had read his books. But now, in his old age, the father's mind had deteriorated to the point that he was barely aware of his surroundings. My professor and his brother had been tasked with the old man's care. They hated to place him in an institution, but they felt themselves incapable of providing the kind of round-the-clock care that he would require in their homes. My professor was perplexed, and he was actually looking to his students for prayer and counsel.

As we prayed and talked through the situation, it occurred to me that my professor (himself a brilliant academic) was being stretched and deepened spiritually by this situation. God was using his father's senility to accomplish profound spiritual results in his life. In fact, no one else could have been used in quite the same way. Yet the father had little or no awareness of his usefulness to God in this situation.

Our perception of our usefulness does not reflect our true usefulness to God. Instead, God delights to use us when we are weakest—that is to say, when we are most useless in ourselves. After all, it is not as if God needs us. He uses us for our benefit, not His. He is pleased to allow us to be His instruments.

When God wanted to use Joseph (the Joe above), He prepared him by allowing a woman's false accusation to put him in prison. When God wanted to use John Milton (the John above), He took away his eyesight. The Milton who wrote *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes* was a blind man. In the meanwhile, Milton also authored a sonnet in which he wrestled

with the question of his usefulness to God. This poem has ministered to thousands of God's people, and its conclusion ought to be engraved on every Christian heart.

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide;
"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
I fondly ask. But Patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies: "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait."



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of 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.
