

2 Corinthians 1:3 (Russell Elliott) 138216

The God Of All Comfort, God of All Comfort, The

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“As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you” (Isa. 66:13).

“Blessed be God ... the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort” (2 Cor. 1:3).

In the above quotations from the Old and New Testaments, we have God presented to us in the same character, namely, as a Comforter. In the one case, it is as a mother; in the other, as a father. “As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you.” “Blessed be God ... the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort.”

Our very first view of God is in the character of a mother. In that sublime opening to the Bible in which the earth is seen without form and darkness upon the face of the deep, the Spirit of God is described as moving — brooding like a mother bird — upon the face of the waters. So God still broods over many a wrecked and darkened life. “As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you.”

A mother! Does not all that is tenderest and best gather around that name? Do you not see the gentle form bending over the child, the young man, or the grown-up daughter when pain, grief or disappointment has come? What concern, what sympathy, what love blend in the voice, in every movement, in every touch! And God says, “As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you.” He who made the mother — He who gave the pity and solicitude of a mother’s heart — He from whom came all that was ever found in the loveliest, tenderest, holiest mother that ever lived — He says that the comfort He will give is “as one whom his mother comforteth.” Oh! what a God! Someone has said that the heart of God is the mother of all mothers.

The words of our text are found in the prophecy of Isaiah, and they come at the very close of that wonderful evangel. What a close! God bending over the bowed form of repentant Israel — Israel His son, His firstborn. In the opening chapter, the awful sin of Israel is depicted in the most glaring colors, and no words were too strong in which to paint it, but in the end, after all the sin and the folly and the needed discipline, God has His wayward child, as it were, in His arms, and He comforts. The opening of chapter 40 begins thus: “Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” And in the same chapter we learn who this God is that comforts and feeds His flock like a shepherd and gathers the lambs with His arm. “Have ye not known? have ye not heard? hath it not been told you from the beginning? have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is He that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in ... To whom then will ye liken Me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number: He calleth them all by names by the greatness of His might, for that He is strong in power; not one faileth.” It is this One, and no one less, who comforts as a mother.

And how does a mother comfort? In three different ways at least. Her child has been disappointed, or injured, or some treasure has been lost or broken, and the mother takes the child in her arms and presses it to her heart. It may be no word is spoken. The sorrow is too deep for words, and words too poor, at present, to soothe. And so the only thing is to draw the child as close to her as she can and make it feel that the grief is understood and shared, and that while something the child had set its heart upon has been taken away, a mother’s love remains, which is better than all. And so with God. “As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you.” He overshadows us with His presence; He makes us lean upon His arm; He allows us to find a place upon His bosom; He hides us near His heart. Here, again, no word is spoken either by Him or us. He only makes us conscious that He is near: We are in His presence, until we realize that He covers us “with His feathers, and under His wings” we can trust, and that we lodge “under the shadow of the Almighty.” When the Father ran and fell on the prodigal’s neck and kissed him (Luke 15), no word is recorded as having been spoken by him while in that attitude. It was an action which no words could enforce. It was the silence of love (see Zephaniah 3:17, margin). In the silent presence of God the heart often finds its first and deepest comfort, until at last we can exclaim, “Thou art my hiding place, Thou shalt preserve me from trouble, Thou shalt compass me about with songs of deliverance.”

A Christian lady not long ago dreamed a dream which was not a dream, but a fact. She saw herself as surrounded with God — encircled above, beneath and all around, as with a blaze of light. Brilliance inconceivable made a pavilion for her, and while she stood in the midst of the glory, she saw all her cares and her troubles and her temptations and her sins wandering about outside the wall of light, unable to reach her. Unless that light itself should open and make a way for them, she was serenely secure, although she could see the perils which else would destroy her. Is not the Lord a wall of fire round about us, and the glory in the midst? Is it not written, “He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty”? Evil shall not come near to him who is near to God.

Can we not say, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me”?

When the child is in a measure pacified and ready to listen, the mother has a second method of comfort. She talks to it or sings it some lullaby. Perhaps the child falls, at length, into a calm sleep and wakes up forgetting all its sorrow. This is how God comforts. Are there any more comforting words than those in the Bible? This feature, alone, gives it a superiority over every other book that was ever written. Think of David’s psalms. Think of certain passages in Paul’s epistles. Study the closing chapters of Isaiah. Have not myriads been comforted by

such utterances as these? And why? Because, although they came through men, they are not of men. They are of God. Often some text of Scripture has illuminated the darkness that has shrouded the soul. Only God could speak such words. They can calm the most troubled heart, give relief to the most perplexed mind, can rouse the drooping spirit, and rally us again to the conflict with evil and adversity. To one, as he faced one of the blackest days man can know, there came, as distinctly as any human voice could have uttered them, these words: Who "turneth the shadow of death into the morning." "Into the morning"! The beginning of a new day and of new things; the shadow of death gone with the night: a morning without clouds. Who has not had such experience? There is not a sinner under the sun that is beyond the comfort of God's Word!

Think of some of the passages in Isaiah from chapter 40 (to which we have already referred and which opens with, "Comfort ye, comfort ye My people") and onward.

Here is one: "Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of My righteousness" (Isa. 41:10).

Here is another: "I, even I, am He that comforteth you: who art thou, that thou shouldest be afraid of a man that shall die, and of the son of man which shall be made as grass" (Isa. 51:12).

Again: "O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colors, and lay thy foundations with sapphires" (Isa. 54:11). "No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper." "The Lord shall guide thee continually."

One part of the mission of Christ is described in Isaiah 61:2-3: "To comfort all that mourn; to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."

Once more: "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee" (Isa. 43:2).

Yes, of Him who "tellethe the number of the stars" it is said, "He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds." And His method of doing it is by His Word. Is it any wonder the Apostle Paul writes, "That we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope"? or that the Holy Spirit Himself should be called the Comforter?

To how many of the tried children of God have such passages as we have quoted come with peculiar sweetness and power in seasons of distress? How many could testify to the uplifting power of some text in moments of peril or in some sorrow! Yes, God comforts by His Word. Here is one instance from the personal experience of the late C. H. Spurgeon. We will give it in his own words: "Many years ago, when this great congregation first met in the Surrey Music Hall and the terrible accident occurred (through a false alarm of fire), when many persons were either killed or wounded in the panic, I did my best to hold the people together till I heard that some were dead, and then I broke down like a man stunned, and for a fortnight or so I had little reason left. I felt so broken in heart that I thought I should never be able to face a congregation again, and I went down to a friend's house a few miles away, to be very quiet and still. I was walking around his garden, and I well remember the spot, and even the time, when this passage came to me: 'Him hath God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour,' and this thought came into my mind at once: 'You are only a soldier in the great King's army, and you may die in a ditch, but it does not matter what becomes of you as long as your King is exalted.' He — He is glorious. God hath highly exalted Him! And so I just thought, 'He is exalted; what matters it about me?' and in a moment my reason was perfectly restored. I was as clear as possible. I went into the house, had family prayer, and came back to preach to my congregation ... restored only by having looked to Jesus and having seen that He was glorious."

A mother has a third method of comfort: She comforts by presenting some fresh object to the child: some new toy to replace the broken one, or a promise of some special treat. Does not God comfort in a similar way? "As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you." God comforts often by outward things, by bringing us into new circumstances, by granting us some peculiar mercy, by some special providential dealings.

We have already quoted some words of the Apostle Paul from 2 Corinthians 1, showing that he knew what it meant to be comforted of God. In 2 Corinthians 7:5-6 he makes a further statement to this effect: "When we were come into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears. Nevertheless God, that comforteth those that are cast down, comforted us by the coming of Titus." Here was a providential dealing on God's part: a circumstance by which God comforted His tried and harassed servant. From an earlier statement we learn that the Apostle had gone to Troas to meet with Titus and had not seen him. "I had no rest in my spirit," he says, "because I found not Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went from thence into Macedonia." And there, as we have seen, his flesh had no rest; "without were fightings, within were fears." So anxious was he about the Corinthians, his spiritual children — so eager for Titus to come and bring some news as to the effect of his letter upon them — that, to use his own words, he was "troubled on every side." But God knew all that His child was passing through, and He also knew all about His other children at Corinth, and He knew where Titus was, and the whole time, unknown to His faithful servant, He was working in such a way as to bring the fullest comfort and joy to the heart of the one so sorely cast down.

"And though His comfort stay, His help be slowly wrought, As though He turned away, As though He loved thee not;

And though thou sink awhile In darkness and in pain, As though He would not smile Or show thee light again:

He will not always chide, But when the hope seems least, If still thy faith abide, Then shalt thou be released;

And when thy trust is proved, The grief that harmed thee not Shall wholly be removed, Thy full deliverance wrought."

Who would have thought that a man of such intellectual powers and iron purpose as the Apostle of the Gentiles needed comfort? Ah, even he could be cast down. Therefore do not be surprised if you are the same. Remember that the God of all comfort "comforteth those that are cast

down.” A well-known professor once said, not long before he died, to one of his dearest friends, “What people need most is comfort.” Yes, if we could look into people’s hearts and get beneath the external indifference they often assume, that is what we should find. All their intellectual greatness and culture, all their wealth and influence, all their philosophy and activity are not enough, and the reason is that most people have feelings, and this world is a very trying world on that account. There are a few people who seem to have no feelings, and they neither want comfort nor can they give it, but most of us have feelings, and there is much that happens in this rough-and-tumble world to lacerate them. Is not God, then, the very One we need — the “God of all comfort”?

Someone who knew God in this character and what it was to trust Him once said, “During the last two years, though I have said little about them, I have had many a crevice open up before me. The ice has seemed to split asunder, and I have looked down into the blue depths....It is a glorious thing to have a big trouble, a great Atlantic billow, that takes you off your feet and sweeps you right out to sea and lets you sink down into the depths, into old ocean’s lowest caverns, till you get to the foundation of the mountains and there see God, and then come up again to tell what a great God He is and how graciously He delivers His people.”

Let us then carry all our cares to Him and bring away the comfort. Is there a tired, harassed, disappointed soul reading these lines? Turn to the God of all comfort. Just let Him do His blessed work. Just let the sense of His presence steal into your soul — a calm, still, mellowed light of unutterable peace. Listen for His voice: He can breathe words of comfort such as no mother ever spoke. Be on the lookout for some unexpected mercy. The God who gave Christ for your sins, who allowed His own and only Son to suffer in your stead, is He who can give you all the comfort you need just at this present moment. Bring every cause of discomfort and trial to Him.

“The little sharp vexations,And the briars that catch and fret,Why not take them to the HelperWho never failed us yet?

“Tell Him about the heartache,And tell Him the longing, too;Tell Him the baffled purpose,When we scarce know what to do;

“Then, leaving all our weakness,With the One divinely strong,Forget that we bore the burden,And carry away the song.”

Yes, God knows all our trials: and more, He knows just how they affect us. He knows our feelings. He who guides the eagle in its flight and makes a way for the lightning — He also marks the sparrow’s fall and numbers the hairs of our heads and knows everything we feel and how we feel it and is able to comfort us. He knows likewise how to correct our feelings, for we often feel wrongly about things, and He uses all for our discipline and highest good. Often we have to challenge ourselves as to this — to ask ourselves, Am I feeling rightly about all this that has been allowed to happen? Do my feelings arise simply from pride or mortification, because my will has been crossed or my hopes disappointed? As someone has finely said, “What disturbs us in this world is not trouble, but our opposition to trouble. The true source of all that frets and irritates and wears away our lives is not in the external things but in the resistance of our wills to the will of God expressed by external things.” Oh that we could be more like the one of whom it was said, “He sold a bit of tea and staggered along the road on the hot June days afflicted with a serious malady, and he prayed as if he had a fortune of £10,000 a year and were the best-off man in the world.”

Just as there are three kinds of comfort, so there are three special sorts of trial. (1) There is that which is known only to yourself and to God. (2) There is the trial you are able to tell to others. (3) There is the kind which everybody can see.

We find all three mentioned in Exodus 3:7-8, where God refers to the sufferings of His people in the land of Egypt. “I have surely seen the affliction of My people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them.”

1. Which particular form of trial is yours at the present moment? Is it one which everybody can see? Is it some serious illness? Has death come to your household, and are the blinds drawn? Or is it some commercial disaster? Well, remember this: God sees it. “He that formed the eye, shall He not see?” “I have surely seen the affliction of My people.” And is He not the same as ever? Will He not do for you what He did for His people long ago? “I am come down to deliver them.” As surely as Christ of old touched the hand of Peter’s wife’s mother and the fever left her, as certainly as He brought comfort to the bereaved home at Bethany, as effectually as He fed the hungry multitude by multiplying the loaves and fishes, so surely can He comfort you, and, if deliverance is necessary, in due time deliver you, if you trust Him.

2. There are trials which are not so obvious to everybody, but we can speak of them, at all events to a select few, if to no more. What a comfort to be able to speak to God — to think He will listen and be the most attentive and sympathetic listener of all. We can surely do that which the children of Israel did in Egypt. “They cried, and their cry came up unto God.” And in due time we hear God saying to Moses, “I have heard their cry.” God was planning their deliverance long before they knew it. If they had only known what God was saying to Moses, would they not have been comforted? But we do know. Shall we not say to ourselves, then, “God has already given attention to my cry; some word of command has already gone forth for my deliverance; some special mercy will be vouchsafed, or some word is to be spoken which will tune my heart to sing His praise”?

3. But there is the third trial — that which no one sees, no one knows, and you cannot talk about, or if to some extent it can be seen and known, no one can know all that you feel about it. Is there anything to meet this? The dull aching pain at the heart, the sorrow that has gone right down deep into the very soul with a weight like lead, which nobody seems able to touch, is there any alleviation for this? Yes. There is balm in Gilead. There is a physician there. The God of all comfort says, “I know their sorrows.” He not only sees, He not only hears, He knows. How often you have sighed, when no one was near, with a sigh too deep for words. God heard; God knew even what you yourself could not express. “The children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage.” And what was the divine answer? “I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them.” “As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you.”

Thus we see there is not a single trial or sorrow or discouragement which does not come within the scope of God’s comfort. It is remarkable how many shades of meaning this word “comfort” contains within itself. The Hebrew and Greek words, with their roots, involve the ideas of sympathy, strengthening, refreshment, to encourage or make bold, to be near, to solace, to put in good spirits, to stand by your side and speak to you. When God is declared to be the God of all comfort, think how much it means. He enters into all your feelings, for He sighs with you; when prostrate with grief, He strengthens you; if weary with constant anxiety, He refreshes you; if you are timid, He makes you bold; if friends forsake, He Himself comes near to you; if depressed and downcast, He can solace you in your dreariness and put you in good spirits;

above all, if enemies multiply, He will stand by your side and speak to you. The word "comfort" includes all this. There was one, a man of like passions with ourselves, who passed through every phase of anxiety and trial, and he never found this comfort fail him. He never found himself in a situation or in an extremity where this comfort could not reach him. Hear what he says: "The God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God." And having known what it was to be comforted of God, he is able to say, "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed."

Some words just quoted indicate another aspect of the subject of the utmost importance. "That we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble." Let us never forget it: God comforts us that we may comfort others. The comfort of God reaches us oftentimes through human channels. The whole comfort of the Bible reaches us, in one sense, by that means. And those inspired penmen, such as David and Isaiah and Paul, had to pass through the greatest stress and privation in order that God's comfort might flow through them to others. Job, in his distress, found little solace from his three friends, and he at last exclaimed, "Miserable comforters are ye all." It was because they had never passed "through the mill" themselves that they knew not how to comfort. If we know, let us not hold it back. Very often we should find our own sorrows grow less if we sought to pour the wine of consolation into the troubled heart of another.

It was the blind and brokenhearted George Matheson who wrote that hymn, "O Love that wilt not let me go." In early manhood, when full of promise, God took away his sight, and at the same time he lost an earthly love, which perhaps affected him still more. And so he wrote, "O Love that wilt not let me go." That hymn has comforted thousands. We mention one remarkable incident in connection with it, and then close. It happened at an English service on the continent where people had met from all quarters, either on holidays or for other reasons. We give the account in almost the identical words of an eyewitness. After speaking of the uneventful character of the first part of the service, the narrator thus proceeds: "While the minister was reading the first verse (of the above hymn — a gentleman in the audience had specially asked for it), I noticed a man of perhaps fifty change seats with the organist.

"We stood and sang:

"O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be!"

"Was the change in me or in my environment? I cannot tell. The lost chord seemed to have been found....The organist seemed in the third heaven. He sang and played and carried us on irresistibly....We reached the second verse:

"O Light that followedst all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to Thee;
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
That in Thy sunshine's blaze its
day
May brighter, fairer be!"

"I could not fail to notice the deep emotion of a lady close by, for she stood in the next pew in front. She had ceased to sing; her trembling was manifest. The music was like the sound of many waters. The third verse was reached:

"O Joy that seekest me through pain,

I cannot close my heart to Thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be."

"With a strange suddenness the lady in front fell on her knees ... and the husband bowed in prayer at his wife's side. The sight was beautiful and there were many wet eyes near where I stood. But what of the organist? Down his furrowed face tears made their way. Bending over the keys, he poured out his very soul. Of time and space he seemed ignorant.

"When we reached the last verse, I, for one, wished blind Matheson had provided us with more. And yet we might not have been able to bear it.

"O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from Thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be."

"When the congregation rose to disperse, several went forward to thank the organist. In the group were several Americans, and one said to him, his face still bathed in tear marks, 'We knew your wife.' The answer was a quiet smile, followed by a quick retirement Two years before, his wife lay dying....She had asked him to sing to her, as she entered the valley of the shadow of death, 'O Love that wilt not let me go.' He did so, but he had not ventured to sing it again until that memorable morning. Ah, that was a sufficient explanation; sorrow had wrought the power."

Yes, we can only comfort others with the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.

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