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James Bury

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The God of All Comfort in Paul's Thought

by James Bury

Rabbi Alexandri said: "If an ordinary person makes use of broken vessels, it is a disgrace for him, but the vessels used by the Holy One, blessed be He, are precisely broken ones." (Leviticus Rabbah 7.2)¹

The words of this third century rabbi could summarize Paul's view of divine comfort. Paul believed that God restores vessels from their broken pieces. However, brokenness and restoration are not simply two themes which exist side by side. The connection is stronger than that. For at the very juncture of shattering and renewal Paul discovered the "God of all Comfort." This understanding of God came through Paul's own experiences, but it did not originate there. Paul learned about God's comfort in Scripture long before it was confirmed in his own life. As Rabbi Alexandri realized, God had shown his interest in broken vessels throughout the history of Israel.

The Background of Paul's Thought

Paul's terms for "comfort" (*parakaleo* and *paraklasis*) are seldom used in the sense of "console"

James Bury recently taught New Testament at Pepperdine University and has served as an instructor at Preston Road Center for Christian Education.

in Greek literature outside of the Bible, and they are certainly not used with reference to divine consolation. In fact, Greco-Roman religions had no parallel to his belief in a God who comforts the suffering.² But this does not mean that Paul's perspective on God is "something completely new."³ Paul makes a fresh contribution with his claim that God's comfort is most decisively known through Christ, but his general understanding was not unique. Well before Paul, Judaism had come to describe the salvation of the coming Messiah as "the consolation of Israel" (cf. Luke 2:25).⁴ This also reminds us that for Paul comfort is not reduced to emotional or psychological relief. It is God's intervention on behalf of his people to bring "salvation" (2 Cor. 1:6) or "life" (1 Thess. 3:7, 8).⁵

It is not hard to find the biblical foundations for Paul's understanding. From the Exodus through the Exile, God shows not only a desire to comfort his people but the ability to do so. Again and again the Psalms praise God for his comfort: "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (34:18).⁶ Perhaps even more influential on Paul was the theme of divine comfort in Isaiah 40-66. The prophet knew God would comfort Israel "as a mother comforts her child" (66:13) and looked for the fulfillment of that comfort in God's anointed Servant (61:2).⁷ Such ideas were relevant to Paul because he shared Israel's hope in God's deliverance and testified to its realization in his proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah. Thus it is more than a verbal

parallel when Paul echoes the Psalms and the Prophets in speaking of “the God of endurance and comfort” (Rom. 15:5) or “the God who comforts the lowly” (2 Cor. 7:6); Paul’s very concept of God has been shaped by these writings. Perhaps the best known example of this influence is in the opening prayer of his second letter to Corinth: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercy and the God of all comfort” (1:3). Because of the focus on comfort in this passage,⁸ it deserves a closer examination as we try to understand what the “God of all comfort” means to Paul.

2 Cor. 1:3-11: “The God of All Comfort”

Paul’s emphasis on God’s comfort in 2 Corinthians 1:3-11 is part of his attempt to clarify the nature of—even legitimacy of—his apostleship. This concern dominates not only the letter opening, but appears throughout the letter, especially in chapters 10-13. Our focus is on the content of the ideas expressed here, rather than their function within the rhetorical situation of the letter, but we need to keep the present context and Paul’s larger agenda in mind.⁹ For what we have here is not an abstract discussion of the phenomenon of suffering, but Paul’s attempt to interpret suffering within a Christian framework.

This paragraph can be divided into two parts: the blessing (vv. 3-7) and the body opening (vv. 8-11). The blessing reveals at least three fundamental convictions about divine comfort. First, Paul emphasizes God’s role as comforter. In traditional Jewish terms he praises God as “father of mercies” and “the God of all comfort” (v. 3). Paul elaborates on this role by saying that God comforts in “any and all troubles” (see v. 4, NIV). Secondly, Paul claims that God not only comforts the apostles, he comforts through them. When he says that their own comfort is in order to comfort the Corinthians (v. 4), it is clear that the apostles play an essential role. It is just as clear that the apostles are not the source but are agents of comfort (v. 4b, 5b). The construction in v. 5 (“just as . . . thus . . .”) would lead us to expect a parallelism such as “just as the sufferings of Christ overflow for us, thus the comfort of Christ overflows for us” (or perhaps for “you”; cf. 2 Cor. 4:12, 15). But the somewhat awkward chiasmus used here highlights the role of the apostles: “just as the sufferings of Christ overflow for us, thus through Christ *our comfort overflows*.” Paul makes his point even more emphatic when he twice says that whatever the apostles experience, distress or comfort, “it is for your comfort” (v. 6). The third point for us to note about divine comfort is that the Corinthians share in

it precisely the way Paul does—through suffering, and in fact through the very same suffering (v. 6). By this he does not mean the Corinthians face similar circumstances. Nothing in either letter to Corinth indicates that. Rather, they also participate in the sufferings which Paul identifies as the suffering of Christ.¹⁰

With these ideas set before the readers in a general way, Paul starts to deal with the issues facing him in Corinth (8-11). As he begins the body of the letter, Paul does not avoid the problem posed by a suffering apostle. Instead he previews what he will later say (e.g., 12:9f.; 13:3f.) by suggesting that it is not in spite of, but through his suffering that Paul is qualified for his task.¹¹ Whatever the desperate situation in Asia, it had the effect of a death sentence (v. 9). Paul admittedly saw the situation as hopeless; he was once again a broken vessel. Yet this reminded him to trust in the God who *raises* the dead (present tense, 9b). God’s deliverance in times past and present is the basis for the hope of deliverance still to come (v.10). This is however, provided that the Corinthians remain partners with the apostles through prayers on their behalf (v. 11). By asking for their prayers at the opening rather than the close of the letter, Paul underscores the significance of the Corinthian’s solidarity with him in suffering and

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comfort. Of course if they did as Paul asked, it would also undermine the efforts of those who said such suffering disqualified him as an apostle.¹²

If it is clear why Paul wanted to convince the Corinthians of his views on divine comfort, it is not so clear what they actually mean or how they might work out in the lives of his readers. To put the issues more sharply, just what does it mean to say God comforts the suffering? How is this comfort mediated through the apostles? And why is the suffering

and comfort of believers identified with the suffering and comfort of Christ? The answers to these questions are not spelled out in 2 Corinthians 1:3-11, although they do become clearer as we read the rest of the letter. If we also draw on related themes from his other letters we may begin to grasp the convictions Paul expresses here: in the midst of suffering, comfort comes from God, through the apostles, with Christ.

The Significance of Christ for Paul's View of Divine Comfort

We can already see that Paul's thought goes beyond what he reads in Scripture when he identifies Israel's "Father of mercies" as the "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 1:3). Only from Christ does Paul learn the full meaning of divine comfort. This does not mean that he draws on the teachings of Jesus about God's help for the hurting (cf. Matt. 5:4). Perhaps it was because these ideas had already been conveyed by Scripture, perhaps because Paul is not so interested in what Jesus said as what Jesus showed. For rather than citing Jesus' teachings *about* God, Paul considers Jesus' treatment *by* God as the primary witness to divine comfort.

Even with the debate about what was at the center of Paul's theology, there should be no doubt about the central topic of his preaching. Whether we look to Paul's own summary statements (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2; 15:1-4) or to Luke's accounts (e.g., Acts 13:26-39; 17:16-31; 26:22, 23) it is evident that the main topic of Paul's preaching was the death and resurrection of Christ. Throughout Paul's letters we can find a variety of interpretations and applications of that event. Whether the problem is anxiety over the dead (1 Thess. 4:13-18) or arrogance among the living (Phil. 2:1-11) Paul finds the solution in the message of the cross. It is also this message which explains Paul's convictions about God's comfort.

1. God comforts the suffering Paul's reflection on the cross had impact on every area of his thought. It forced him to redefine his former notions of wisdom and power (1 Cor 1:18-25); it led him to reject prior categories of achievement and aspiration

(Phil. 3:4-11); it assured him of God's power over the powers of the world (Col 2: 15) and even over the power of death itself (1 Cor. 15:54-57). His existence was so altered by the meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ that he claimed, "I no longer live; Christ lives within me" (Gal. 2:20; cf. Rom. 6:1-11). Paul's reflection on the cross also provided him with a new basis for believing that God comforts the suffering. All of God's acts of deliverance in the past are overshadowed by what God has done in Christ. Now Paul is certain that nothing can hinder God's deliverance of the believer (Rom. 8:31-39). Paul's confidence that God will continue to rescue him grows out of his knowledge that his is the God "who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9, 10).

But the cross not only proclaims *that* God gives comfort, it tells *where* divine comfort can be found. God acts precisely in what would otherwise be hopeless situations. This is why Paul boasts in his weaknesses; they are a showcase for God's power.¹³ In the same way, suffering highlights God's comfort. As

God's power is best seen when no other power is present (2 Cor 12:9, 10), so God's comfort is best recognized when no other comfort is in sight. This is the point of 2 Corinthians 1:8. When Paul was "utterly, unbearably crushed" he saw no options and had no prospects. Yet such suffering "forced him to give up any pretense of being sufficient to overcome it, and led him to rely solely on God."¹⁴ As Paul looks at his own ministry, he sees the most impressive display of God's comfort for the suffering not in the power to avoid; but in the power to endure (2 Cor. 4:7-11).¹⁵ This is why Paul emphasizes his hardships in 2 Corinthians. If the readers missed the significance of Paul's claim that God's comfort "produces endurance" in their own suffering (1:6, NIV), surely they would see it in the description of his ministry. In the extreme hardships he faced (see 11:23-33), Paul was sufficient only because God was present. And that presence was never so visible as it was in the divine comfort of the suffering.

We might, however, put the connection between suffering and comfort more radically than this. For Paul, suffering is not simply the location for recognizing divine comfort; it is the condition for

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receiving it. The wording of 2 Corinthians 1:7 is not explicit, but it suggests that *because* the Corinthians have suffered Paul knows they will be comforted.¹⁶ Note the connection between the apostles' experiences of what are referred to as "death" and "life" in 2 Cor. 4:10, 11: they face death "so that" life may come (NIV). This same connection exists in Romans 8:17 where Paul says, "we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (NIV). There could be no participation in Christ's resurrection apart from first joining in his sufferings. So the cross teaches Paul that comfort does not merely come to the suffering—comfort comes through suffering.¹⁷ To state Paul's thought in this way is to risk possible misunderstanding. Paul does not mean suffering procures comfort. He does find that suffering leads to the place where comfort can be found, the place of absolute dependence on God (2 Cor. 1:9). In other words, comfort comes through suffering only because comfort comes through faith in God.

The word of the cross says that suffering is not a meaningless experience to be despised; it is not a mark of God's rejection or failure. God's handiwork is seen in broken vessels. Because in suffering we recognize our dependence on God, in suffering God reveals his power and glory.¹⁸ In suffering there is a continuing reliance on God for the life that only God can give and a constant reminder that whatever life we possess on our own is not the real thing.¹⁹

2. God Comforts through the Apostles.

A frequent answer to the question of how God comforts through the apostles stresses their ability to empathize with those who suffer. For example, one commentator compares Paul to the philosophers Seneca and Epictetus who taught "sufferers can aid those in like circumstances."²⁰ Empathy with the suffering is certainly important (cf. 1 Cor 12:26); there is some consolation in knowing that others have been through similar pain. But this doesn't explain the distinctive role of the apostles or give adequate attention to suffering in Paul's theology: God uses broken vessels, and Paul is one.

Paul's faith that God comforts the suffering was based on the message of the cross. And this message, with its claim that divine strength is perfected in human weakness, was the basis on which others could share that faith and know God's comfort. Therefore, the apostles mediate divine comfort when they proclaim the salvation of the cross. They bring God's comfort with their testimony to God's past act of deliverance and their assurance concerning his promises for the future. This is why Paul also finds the Scriptures as a source of comfort and endurance (Rom. 15:4; cf. Ps. 119:49-52, 76f.). They bear witness to the certainty of divine comfort. In

this way, the role of the apostles is parallel to that of the prophets. The proclamation of divine comfort is the means of providing the comfort. And the fact that Israel's promised comfort (cf. Isa. 61:2) has come, only heightens the significance of the apostles' role.²¹

Of course it is not merely by the preaching that this good news is proclaimed. We see in the lives of the apostles an "enactment of the kerygma."²² Paul's own sufferings were part of his apostolic testimony to God's salvation. His sufferings were, therefore, not a source of discouragement but rejoicing (cf. Col. 1:24; Eph 3:7, 14). It should go without saying that it was not a narcissistic or even a masochistic streak which led Paul to glory in his suffering. It was the evangelistic drive in Paul that led him to find in his own experience of suffering, the proclamation of God's promised deliverance. The failure of the Corinthians to hear the gospel in Paul's suffering was at the heart of their problem with him. They found it hard to accept that suffering apostles are witnesses to the comforting God. Perhaps they had forgotten that God uses broken vessels. This is why Paul tries to help them see the suffering of believers as suffering with Christ.

3. Suffering is with Christ. At times Paul speaks of suffering on behalf of Christ (Phil. 1:29; cf. Acts 9:16), and at times he calls suffering an imitation of Christ (1 Thess. 1:6; cf. 2:14ff.). But suffering takes on a new significance when it is seen as a participation in the suffering of Christ (2 Cor. 1:5, 7; Rom. 8:17). For Paul this is a corollary to his conviction that believers are united with Christ in his death. There can be no rising with Christ apart

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from dying with him; there is no sharing in his power without sharing in his suffering (Phil. 3:10f.; cf. 2 Tim 2:11f.).²³ The pattern of the cross declares that crucifixion precedes resurrection. Paul needed the Corinthians to realize this so they would not misin-

terpret his suffering, and more importantly so they would not misinterpret their own. To view suffering in terms of Christ's death on the cross is to see suffering as the place where God rescues from death into life. Seen in this way suffering brings us to the very place of God's deliverance and creates the only conditions which allow it—when we are helpless to deliver ourselves. By leading the Corinthians to see their suffering as a participation in Christ's suffering, Paul not only helps them affirm the foundation and orientation of their life in Christ, he also keeps them directed toward the hope of their future glorification with Christ (2 Cor 4:16-18; see also Rom. 8:14-17).

If we think of suffering as solidarity with Christ we begin to realize how God can achieve his purposes in spite of suffering—or better, especially in suffering. Suffering helps the life of the believer “take on a structure corresponding to the founding events of the new dominion.”²⁴ Their lives are brought into line with Christ's experience on the cross. Or to use Leonard Allen's phrase, to become a “cruciform church” in suffering is to develop a cruciform dependence on God and a cruciform confidence in his promised comfort.²⁵

Conclusion

Paul's understanding of the God of comfort had important implications for his message in Corinth and for his ministry with the church there. If we share his convictions there are important implica-

tions for us as well. For one thing, to believe that God comforts in suffering means we can face suffering as an instrument of God's grace. Suffering in itself is certainly not a positive experience. We dread it for its existential as well as its physical pain. Suffering forces us to admit we are vulnerable; it forces us to concede that our life is unpredictable; and suffering proves that we are incapable of handling everything that comes our way. If all this were not enough, suffering can convince us that we are completely alone: cut off from others and abandoned by God. But Paul's convictions offer us a new vision of suffering which releases us from the fear and dread it creates. He says nothing to diminish the fact of suffering, but he does give us a new way to understand its meaning.²⁶ Even while suffering is at work impressing upon us the limits of our humanity, God is at work “commandeering it for his own purposes.”²⁷ God uses suffering to bring us to divine strength and sufficiency and salvation. And we are not left to bear our suffering alone. The God of comfort is there, as he was at the cross, using the shame of crucifixion to demonstrate the glory of resurrection.

Paul knew more about the God of comfort than many of us because the God he read about in Scripture and the God he met at the cross was the God he relied on in life. He knew God as comforter because he knew God in suffering. Paul knew what it meant to be a broken vessel, a vessel used by God.