

The Comforter

The inspired Wise Preacher speaks of the vanity of life without the Hope that Yahweh provides:

“So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but *they had no comforter*” (Eccl. 4:1)

Having no hope, there is no comfort to those who travail in iniquity. Describing Israel whose sins had separated between them and their God, we read: “she hath *none to comfort her*,” and again in the same chapter, “she hath no comforter” and yet again: “for these things I weep: mine eye, mine eye runneth down with water, *because the comforter* that should relieve my soul *is far from me ...*” (Lam. 1:2, 9,16-17). Ultimately, Yahweh is the great comforter – and so alienation from Him is by definition, alienation from the source of comfort granted to those who trust in His promises.

The Prophet Isaiah describes those who are alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and therefore also from the Kingdom to Come:

“... the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. *There is no peace*, saith my God, to the wicked” (Isa. 57:20-21).

What a desolate situation this is! No “peace”, no “comforter”, and “troubled” like the raging waves of the sea, casting up filthiness and defilement! But even in the most desperate of situations, there is hope for those who would turn to take hold of it. As the disciples of Christ experienced, Messiah is able to calm the troubled sea with but a word. In him, we have great comfort and hope, as we look to the times of the restitution of all things. Whatever might befall us on our journey, we have an exceedingly great weight of glory awaiting us: if we but hold fast to the things of the Spirit. Christ was thus a great comforter to his disciples in the days of his mortality, and prior to his departure he promised to send “another Comforter” in the form of the Holy Spirit bestowed upon the faithful, a token of the reality of the Gospel message that they were preaching.

Ecclesiastes continues:

“Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit” (Eccl. 44)

In this context of men being jealous of another man’s works, we might think of Joseph and his brothers. Certain revelations were given to him, which he relayed to his family. They, however, refused to accept them, and three times in one chapter we are told that they “hated” him (Gen. 37:4,5,8). Verse 11 states that his brethren “envied him” and it was out of their hatred and envy that they delivered him into the hand of the Midianites as a slave, who in turn sold him into Egypt, to Potiphar, who was an officer of Pharaoh’s and captain of the guard” (Gen. 37:36).

We know the account well (if not, read Genesis 39), how through the collected force of various circumstances, Joseph ended up in the prison, for a crime that he did not commit. In Joseph, again we have a desolate experience relayed to us. Taken away from his family, sold as a slave, and then banished to the darkness of the Egyptian prison, his circumstances were dire. The Psalm comments on him:

“whose feet they hurt with fetters: he was laid in iron: until the time that his word came: the Word of Yahweh tried him” (Psa. 105:19)

The Word preached was the very cause for such a treatment of Joseph, but in addition, it “tried” him. In such a position as he, there was no human comforter. All that he had was the comfort of the Word

– the revelations that were given to him: and that “tried” him, as his patience and trust in Yahweh were tested. If we ever think that we are spiritually alone, just think back to Joseph, down in the Egyptian dungeon. Yet in this terrible circumstance, the Scriptures say twice that “Yahweh was with Joseph” and not only was he saved from death in prison, his latter end was that he would be raised to an exalted position: second only to Pharaoh.

There are a number of passages which are particularly relevant here, firstly Ecclesiastes 4 (again):

“better is a poor and wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished. ***For out of prison he cometh to reign ...***” (Eccl. 4:13-14).

Joseph was a wise, yet poor child cast into the prison: but by the grace of Yahweh, he came out to reign over Egypt.

Again, Psalm 142:7 reads:

“bring my soul ***out of prison***, that I may praise thy name ...”

This latter reference is of particular interest in the context of Joseph, for the preceding verses describe how he was humanly alone, with no comforter:

“I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me: no man cared for my soul” (Psa. 142:4).

Humanly alone, Joseph trusted that what Yahweh had promised he would perform, and it is in that Word alone that he had a source of comfort.

Another example that comes to mind is that of Cain and Abel. Abel brought an offering in harmony with the revealed necessity for sacrifice, whereas Cain sought to approach the Deity by a different means, the fruit of the ground. It would seem that Cain knew what was required of him, and brought something different, as it is written: “his own works were ***evil***”. It wasn’t simply a misunderstanding which needed to be corrected: it was “evil” which implies an evil intent. The character of the man is further demonstrated in how that out of envy he slew his brother Abel. Abel’s name means “vanity” and such was his life in human terms. Yet according to Messiah, he was also a prophet (Luke 11:51), which implies there was a message which he was speaking. If this is so, this would provoke further animosity with his carnally minded brother. We do not know what his message was, but there has always been enmity between the carnally minded and the spiritually minded, and this could only further the tension between the two brothers.

TWO ARE BETTER THAN ONE

Returning to Ecclesiastes chapter 4, (ironically in the light of the above), we read that:

“two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour” (Eccl. 4:9).

And again:

“if two lie together then they have heat; but how can one be warm alone?” (Eccl. 4:11).

This idea of two being better than one extends right back to Genesis, where we read of the words of Yahweh: “it is not good that the man should be alone: I will make him a help meet for him” (Gen. 2:18). Accordingly, Eve was formed out of Adam’s side: a wife to complement her husband. We think of this in the context of comfort: a believing husband and wife are “heirs together of the Grace of Life” (1 Peter 3:7), and as such are in a position to comfort one another in the day of affliction (see Eccl. 4:10). In Scripture, the importance of families is paramount: it is directly through the

propagation of the human race through families, in the union between man and his wife, that the purpose of God can be accomplished. The earth truly shall be filled with an innumerable multitude – but each individual member came from their mother’s womb in the first instance: the natural first and then the spiritual.

Our Master, Jesus the Christ sent his disciples in pairs of two:

“He called unto him the twelve, and began to send them forth by two and two; and gave them power over unclean spirits” (Mark 6:7).

This is a good model for us to follow: when going out preaching, if possible go in two’s – for both practical and spiritual reasons.

It is interesting to note how Ecclesiastes 4 is quoted by the Apostle in a similar context as this:

“Two are better than one; because they have a *good reward for their labour*” (Eccl. 4:9).

“now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his *own reward according to his own labour*” (1 Cor. 3:8).

Notice this: in both cases two are mentioned, and in both cases, a reward for labour is mentioned: we can see the parallelism quite plainly, which reinforces the point we are making.

DAVID AND JONATHAN

The writer to the Hebrews give the instruction to: “exhort one another daily” (Heb. 3:13). Here, the Greek word rendered “exhort” is translated “comfort” 23 times in Scripture. This verse emphasises the importance of encouraging, and comforting each other as we endure the trials that come upon us daily. We have an example of this in David and Jonathan. Jonathan recognised that David, not he, would be king over Israel. In recognising and embracing the promises made, when David needed exhortation, the method by which Jonathan gave comfort was with reference to those things:

“Jonathan Saul’s son arose, and went to David in the wood, and *strengthened his hand in God*. And he said unto him: “Fear not: for the hand of Saul my father shall not find thee; and *thou shalt be king over Israel*, and I shall be next unto thee; and that also Saul my father knoweth” (1 Sam. 23:16-17).

Although, as things worked out, Jonathan was not to reign with David, the point here is that Jonathan encouraged David with reference to the promise of coming glory – which David and Jonathan will experience when the ancient Davidic seat of power shall once more be established in the earth, and Messiah shall reign over all 12 tribes. The example of David and Jonathan appears to be alluded to in Romans 12:

“be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; not slothful in business; fervent in spirit, serving the Lord, rejoicing in hope ...” (Rom. 12:10-11)

Like David and Jonathan, we are to be kindly affectioned towards each other. Like Jonathan submitting himself to David, we must “in honour prefer” one another. Like both David and Jonathan, we must be “fervent in spirit, serving the Lord,” and like them, we must rejoice in the hope we share, which greatly surpasses any of the troubles that might come upon us.

THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

We come now to consider the example of the Son of God himself. Just like Joseph of old, we are told that: "... the chief priests had delivered him *for envy*" (Mark. 15:10). Again, like Joseph, at the time of his greatest trial, he had no human comforter. So it is written in the Psalms:

"reproach hath broken my heart; and I am full of heaviness: and I looked for some to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none" (Psa. 69:20).

The literal outworking of this is seen at Gethsemane. There, he asked his disciples:

"My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me" (Mat. 26:38).

However, rather than watching with the Master, they all fell asleep:

"he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour?" (Mat. 26:40).

This was the time of Messiah's greatest trial: his wrestle between the flesh and the spirit, yet not even his disciples could stay awake to be a comfort to him. Jesus knew that this would happen, for he had earlier said:

"Behold, the hour cometh yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, *and shall leave me alone*: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me" (Jno. 16:32).

Left alone, by men but not by his Father Who was with him until the last. Again, if we ever feel alone in our struggle against the flesh, let us consider Messiah, whose friends and disciples couldn't watch with him for one hour. His trust, like Joseph's was in the Eternal God, and the promises He made. Truly it was "for the joy that was set before him [that he] endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb. 12:2). And it is to that same vision of joy that we look, that we also may endure the trials of mortal weakness.

We have before us the faith and examples of many worthies of old. Each experienced both joy and travail in the course of their lives – under Divine regulation. A vision of joy is set before each one of us. We look towards the coming of Messiah to the earth once more, when "the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall be ever be with the Lord. *Wherefore comfort one another with these words*" (1 Thes. 4:16-18)

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