

The God of All Comfort, the Comforter, and Peter's Restoration

Ministry · October 4, 2020

Psalm 94 — In the Multitude of My Anxious Thoughts

Psalm 94:18–19: when I said, my foot slippeth, thy lovingkindness, O Jehovah, held me up. In the multitude of my anxious thoughts within me, thy comforts have delighted my soul. David had anxious thoughts — a man who faced a lion and a bear, who killed Goliath, who was hunted by Saul. Bravery does not mean the absence of anxious thoughts; it means acting rightly in spite of them. And David's comfort was not his support network but the comforts of God. Earlier in the same book: thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. The instruments the shepherd uses to direct and correct the sheep are his comfort — not what the world would recognise as comfort at all.

This points to something important about the character of true comfort. When we have anxious thoughts, the instinct is to reach for what feels comforting: the sympathy of friends and family, the reassurance of people who love us and tell us it will work out. Those things are not wrong in their place. But they are not the comfort of God, and they cannot do what the comfort of God does. They address the feeling; God's comfort addresses the cause and transforms the person.

2 Corinthians 1 — The Father of Compassions and God of All Encouragement

Second Corinthians 1:3–4 describes God as the Father of compassions and God of all encouragement — not of some encouragement, not of religious encouragement with some supplementation from other sources, but of all

encouragement. All true comfort and encouragement flows from Him. What He uses to bring that comfort is also instructive: Hebrews 12 shows a loving father whose hand of chastening is one of the forms of his encouragement. The father who corrects his child when the child has gone astray is not being punitive — he is directing the child back into the right path, which is an act of love and encouragement toward something better.

When the Lord brings difficult circumstances into a believer's life, one of two things is likely to be true: either He is chastening to correct and restore, or He is pruning to produce more fruit. In either case the God of all encouragement is at work. And the conscience usually knows which it is — there are moments when something has gone wrong and the first thought is, yes, I know why that happened. That is the Father's chastening. The right response is not to reach for the world's comfort, which knows nothing of God's ways, but to come before the Father who is chastening because He loves.

The Comforter — Not for Circumstances but for Christ

John 14, 15, and 16 give four descriptions of the Holy Spirit as the comforter. The Lord calls Him another comforter — He Himself was the comforter to His disciples while He was with them; now the Father would send another in His name. This comforter would be in us and with us, teaching us all things, bringing to our remembrance what the Lord had said, bearing witness concerning the Lord, convicting the world of sin and righteousness and judgment.

The characteristic work of the comforter is to point to the Lord and to His word. It does not address circumstances. And this is a crucial point. When a believer has anxious thoughts, the mind is fixed on the circumstances: something needs to be fixed, something went wrong, an injustice has been done, things are not as they should be. The comforter does not reach in and settle those circumstances. He points to the Lord. He opens the Scriptures. He brings to mind what the Lord

has said. This is why the word of God needs to be hidden in the heart — if it is not there, the Spirit has nothing to point us to when He would comfort us.

The world cannot receive this comforter. It does not see Him and does not know Him. And the Lord's departure from this world — His ascension — was itself a condemnation of the world. The world rejected the righteous one and demanded His crucifixion. His leaving condemned it. To go to that condemned world for comfort is to go to the wrong place entirely. The world's encouragement is for the flesh — it makes the flesh feel better, which is all the world knows how to do. But the God of all encouragement works through the comforter, who points to the Lord.

The Father of compassions and God of all encouragement, who encourages us in all our tribulations. — 2 Corinthians 1:3–4

Peter's Restoration — Boring In to the Bottom

John 21 shows what the comforter's work looks like in practice. Peter had denied the Lord three times. After the resurrection, he said: I go to fish — and the others followed him. The Lord came, and three times asked Simon Peter: lovest thou me? Three times, corresponding to the three denials. And the Lord called him Simon — not Peter, the name the Lord had given him. That was the state he was in. His conscience had brought him back to his old name.

The third time the Lord asked, Peter was grieved. And his answer is notable: Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I am attached to thee. Peter's testimony was so poor that he could only say, You are the sovereign God who sees my heart, and You know that there is love for You in there, even though nothing in my outward life has shown it. That is not a comfortable confession. It is the bottom.

Only then did the Lord give him the three-fold commission: feed my lambs, shepherd my sheep, feed my sheep. And immediately after, the word about his

death: when thou art old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou dost not desire. Peter had boasted that he would die for the Lord. The Lord told him he would — but by the power of the Holy Spirit, and for the Lord's glory, not by Peter's natural boasting. There would have been no glory for the Lord in that boast. But dying for the Lord after being brought to the bottom and fully restored — that would glorify God.

The Lord bores in with His question until He gets to the bottom of things. Our minds rationalise and minimise; the Lord wants to get to the real place. When we are willing to let Him do that work — to search us as David prayed, to find if there be any hidden sin — then the comforter who is already in us can do His work. The comfort of God flows when there is no distance between the soul and the Lord. It is not that we need to get off the path to know the comfort of God restored; but when we have got off the path, the way back is the way of complete honesty before the Lord who sees our hearts.