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Misery Loves Company

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God's comfort is creative—
not palliative.

ONE of the great fellowship songs of the church is the song "Blest Be the Tie That Binds." In the third stanza of this old, old song are these familiar words:

"We share our mutual woes,
Our mutual burdens bear,
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear."

When we join hands and hearts to sing these words we are telling one another that there are a few things, at least, we have discovered about life. We say that we are sharing in the hurt and heartache of a world that seems to show no favor to either pagan or Christian. We hope we are saying something about the capacity of the human heart to feel its way into another human heart when it is hurt. We say that when we are hurt, and our heart aches, we need one another.

We are saying *misery loves company!*

The song ends, and we go our separate ways, glad for the words and for what they can mean. Then the day comes when the words challenge us in live experience. A letter comes in the morning mail from one whose friendship we deeply cherish. Incredibly we read within the lines and between the lines: "I have had a recurrence of cancer. . . . I feel that I am walking swiftly into the valley of the shadow. . . . Life is slipping away from me."

Blest be the tie that binds!

Misery loves company!

What can we say, what can we do or be, to comfort this one whose illness is not our illness, whose inward fears are not our inward fears, whose impending future, so far as we know, is not ours.

Or even if we have been, or are, in a similar state, what can we say more than "I know just how you feel"? And what is accomplished by our saying this more than to affirm that "misery loves company"?

How very much we feel, and want to feel and give, but in our feeling and giving we wonder if we really comfort or only confuse.

The questions raised here are, What is the nature and extent of human comfort? and How can we be of more comfort? When we bring these questions to the Scriptures we find that Paul through the Spirit has anticipated us with His beatitude in 2 Corinthians 1:3-5:

"Misery Loves

By Wilbur Alexander
Professor of Theology, Andrews University

Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and 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. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ.

Acquainted as we are with affliction and misery, either by personal experience or by observing the tormented, crushed lives of others, we could quickly compile a catalog of those outward and inward miseries that plague us: loss of property, starving hunger, poverty, pain, insecurity, feelings of worthlessness, despondency, misunderstanding, ridicule, persecution, meaninglessness, boredom, loneliness, sense of guilt, alienation, estrangement.

Sin the Source of Misery

Is it not true, however, that all of this long catalog, all of our miseries without exception, whether from within or without, have their origin in the sin problem of the world? That is to say, that were it not for sin there would be no miseries.

It would seem that Paul deliberately chooses the word "all" and sets it before the words "tribulation" and "comfort," to help us understand that only God can do, and has done, something about the sin problem, and is therefore the only one who can bring comfort to a person who is in misery.

This interpretation would seem to relieve us of our comforting responsibilities, except that Paul says further, "who comforteth us in all our tribulation, so that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God" (verse 4).

In what sense is Paul using the word "comfort" here?

It seems clear that God's comfort does not always necessarily mean the removal of our miseries. Nor does His comfort come as a tranquilizer to dull our awareness or a pain killer to release us from feeling our hurts and heartaches.

God's comfort is creative.

Under the Holy Spirit's influence and power—for He is the Comforter

—God's creative love is brought in touch with the deepest hurt.

We are helped by the Spirit through the Word of God to understand that something has been done, something is being done about the sin problem out of which our own particular problem has arisen.

We are helped to look at our misery in perspective, not only at the crushing moment but in terms of the final end. We live in our misery between the Lord's ascension and His advent, and misery is to be viewed in both directions. There was One who gathered the hurt of the world into His heart and walked with it up the hill. He was carried with it into the tomb. He rose with it, and though a conqueror and healer of it, He can still feel our infirmities. Misery loves company? Here is quality company, made ours in the Spirit. And this same Jesus will come again to put a final end to misery. *He is in control.*

We cannot explain the problem of evil, but we can know comfort when the whole hurt life is opened to God. As we do this there comes new insight into God's sustaining, comforting love. New conviction, new faith. That in suffering which could well paralyze us, is harmonized and built into an ongoing experience in communion, through the Spirit, with God.

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us (Rom. 5:3-5, R.S.V.).

How are we to pass along such an experience of comfort so that though we recognize that all comfort is of God, yet this comfort is passed in some degree through human lips and lives? For pass it on we must!

Giving Comfort to Others

In theory we can see something of what is involved in God's comfort. In experience we have known something of comfort. And yet in the giving of comfort when others need it and reach out for it, we seem to feel so helpless. Our words seem to be so ineffective, so formalized when we say: "God is near." "God will comfort."

Company"



J. BYRON LOGAN

"Hold fast." "Keep up your courage." "My heart goes out to you." Limited as we feel we are, what will give such quality to what we say or do that God can, in fact, make it a meaningful channel for His comfort?

Paul shows the way in verse 5 of 2 Corinthians 1: "For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too" (R.S.V.).

In the context of the Corinthian letter, "abounding in, sharing in Christ's suffering" has meaning in terms of the misery that comes from ridicule, criticism, or persecution—if it is received in the name of Christ. One can feel the torment, the misery, in Paul's mind over the sins of the Corinthian saints. His heart is broken over their crude response to his former letter. This, plus the abuses he suffered in Asia—hinted at in Acts—gives us some idea of what Paul calls sharing in Christ's suffering. But there is more to sharing in Christ's suffering which Paul also knew, and which became part of the dynamic force of his receiving and being a channel of God's comfort.

By constant reflective thought and experience Paul shared in the realities and results of Christ's suffering.

As we read his letters they reflect the truth that in study and prayer Paul lived with the Scriptures and the accounts of the life and the passion of our Lord. Intensely and always reverently, he asked the questions: "Why did Jesus come to earth?" "Why did He patiently endure such humiliation and abuse?" "Why did He go to the cross?" "What is the meaning of man's rebellion?" "What is the nature of sin, which brings God into such unthinkable, unreasonable, irrational affliction?" "Why was Jesus despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief?"

Continually Paul allowed the Spirit to make fresh the scenes of Gethsemane and Calvary. And each time he looked he saw something in more depth and with more meaning.

Because he lived in the shadow of the cross, thus deeply sharing in Christ's sufferings, the apostle Paul seemed in greater degree to under-

stand, to appreciate, to sense the meaning of comfort. Therefore he could be used effectively by God in comforting others. He had been concerned with sin and guilt and atonement and could therefore share intelligently, feelingly, the comfort of reconciliation, and the incomparable comforting experience of forgiveness.

Paul knew he was of value in the heart of God. He knew he belonged. He knew he was never alone. He knew that even in death he would not be overwhelmed. Paul lived and moved and had his being in the gospel. He abounded in the sufferings, and he abounded in the comfort, of his Lord and Saviour.

In Gethsemane

That the Lord Jesus wants us to come into, and share, His suffering in order to share more meaningfully in His comfort is clearly illustrated in the Gethsemane experience of Christ. The disciples were involved in mutual jealousy that last night when they gathered for the paschal meal. Occupied as they were with jealousy and maneuvering for first place, they could not help sensing all through supper, and during the farewell words, something of the heaviness of the Master's heart.

When they reached the garden, Jesus motioned to the three who seemingly had been able to make the greatest response in their relation to Him, to come and be with Him in the desperate hours that lay ahead. He brought them as near as was humanly possible to His suffering. He wanted them there. All that was human in Him reached out to all that was human in them. His misery wanted their company.

As He went on alone into the shadows He drew them up to the very

edge of the great darkness, and bade them watch and pray. He called them to feel with Him, as far as they were able, the hurt of the world. To feel with Him the meaning of sin in the human experience. To feel something of the cost of redemption. He did not ask them to understand everything, for they could not, but they could reach out with all they had.

But there in the darkness they went to sleep. A few minutes later they scattered down into the valley and up into Jerusalem, in fear and despair. It was only when they came to their senses and were strengthened by the resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that they began to share meaningfully in His suffering and comfort. Only then could Christ use them to bring gospel comfort to the world.

Every day of our lives we are confronted in one way or another with the misery of the world, if not in our own lives, most certainly in many lives all about us. Misery loves company. Some people are able, by temperament and emotional make-up, to get near to other persons more effectively than others, but in the end only God can comfort. He chooses in part to channel His comfort through Christian hearts.

If we interpret Paul's words aright we are being challenged to an increasing sensitiveness to suffering. We are being challenged to enter deeper into the garden, to move nearer to the cross, to probe more deeply into the sin problem, which even now brings our Lord indescribable anguish of heart, and having done this, deliberately to open our own comforted hearts, to share with others the comfort wherewith we have been comforted.

Misery loves company!