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The Comforter Has Come

Consolation in Luke/Acts

by John O. York

Theory and practice rarely seem so far removed from each other as when we find ourselves trying to help others deal with grief or crisis -- either physical or spiritual -- in life. No matter how many books one reads on pastoral care, it is still different actually being at the bedside of the person who is sick or dying, or looking into the face of those grieving the death of a loved one. The theoretical gets lost in the reality of people's pain as one seeks to offer help and hope in difficult circumstances. What do you say to a family whose son or brother is dying with AIDS, and they are terrorized by what may happen if "the church" finds out? What do you say to the person sitting in sullen silence in your office when she finally blurts out, "Does God *really* forgive? Does the church really forgive?" From where will the words of consolation come for the young couple whose six week old daughter has just died? You know that all of these people have spent their lives in a church setting, but that fact seems hollow in the midst of their respective crises. It is good I suppose, that physical presence alone speaks louder than

words at times. But there is always the felt need to bring words of consolation that communicate the love and compassion and comfort of God to suffering people.

The search for passages of hope and/or words of comfort from scripture rarely takes one to Luke-Acts. We are more inclined to examine Paul and John and the Psalms when searching for a divine word of comfort, and for good reason: Paul's letters speak often of the consolation and hope that come to the sufferer through the grace of God and the promised resurrection. The same could be said of Psalms and of John, both in the Gospel and in Revelation.

But while the precise words of consolation/comfort may not appear in Luke's writings, the true content of Christian consolation is carried in the narrative of this theological history. As one begins to read Luke's story, it is the narrative as a whole, not just individual words or scenes that bring a message of consolation. Through the birth narrative, the ministry of Jesus, the passion narrative, and the ongoing work of the resurrected Lord through the church by the Holy Spirit in Acts, Luke offers his readers consolation and hope. Those in need of comfort receive it through the coming of Messiah; conversely, those who are self-assured and self-satisfied experience desolation and emptiness.

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Advent as Consolation/Redemption

On the surface, the first two chapters of Luke recount the parallel birth stories of John and Jesus. As the story is told, John is great but Jesus is greater. John's mother is old and barren; Jesus'

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mother is a young virgin. John is full of the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb, but Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit. John is the prophet of the most high who will go before the Lord to prepare his ways (1:76); Jesus is the child born in the city of David—a savior, Christ the Lord (2:12). Although Jesus is not revealed as “the consolation of Israel” until his presentation in the Temple (2:25ff.), the experience of consolation comes to both Elizabeth and Mary in their pregnancies. Elizabeth, having endured the female shame of barrenness all of her married life, understands that the Lord “looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people” (1:25). Mary sings of the way in which God has “looked with favor on the lowliness of his slave-girl. All generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty one has done great things for me, and holy is his name” (1:48-49). The core of Mary's Song then describes in an anticipatory vision the salvation (consolation) coming to some and the destruction coming to others through the birth of this child: “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (1:51-53). Salvation/consolation comes to those who previously were “have-nots” in the world; conversely, the proud, powerful, and rich experience the opposite downfall and destruction (this message is reiterated in the beatitudes and woes in 6:20-26).

When the child Jesus is brought to the temple to be dedicated as a first-born son to the Lord, the old

man Simeon and the old woman Anna give voice to what is implicit to this point in the story, namely the savior/redeemer (1:68; 2:11) of Israel is also the consolation of Israel. Simeon has been waiting for the “consolation (*paraklesin*)¹ of Israel” (2:25) and is ready to die after he has seen the child. Anna praises God and speaks about the child to “all who are looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38). Simeon also reveals that the salvation brought through the child reaches beyond those of Israel to include all peoples (“a light for revelation to the Gentiles”). At the same time, Simeon reminds the child's parents that “this child is set for the rising and falling of many in Israel.” Not all will find redemption and consolation through his presence.

Consolation in the Ministry of Jesus

Only Luke uses Jesus' return to Nazareth as the inaugural sermon for his earthly ministry. The entire scene is a prophetic forecast of the rest of Jesus' life on earth. The initial acceptance, followed by angered rejection and even an attempt to kill Jesus, foreshadows the ultimate outcome of his earthly mission. The reading Jesus selects from Isaiah 61 is programmatic for his teaching and healing ministry.² The rest of the story in Luke fleshes out the self-understanding that Jesus is the anointed of God, sent to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. All of those mentioned—the poor, captives, blind, oppressed—are the misfits and outcasts of society. In a social setting in which the values of honor and shame were critical for personal identity and place in society and community,³ Jesus came to restore honor and identity. To those in greatest need, he offered deliverance.

The rest of Luke's story presents Jesus being constantly involved in bringing honor or salvation (a word often used in the context of physical healing as well as spiritual healing in Luke)⁴ to those disenfranchised from social or religious community. Repeatedly Jesus is embroiled in controversy with the religious leaders because he eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners (5:27ff.; 15:2; 19:7). Jesus understands that he is a physician to the sick, not the healthy; his ministry is not a call to the righteous but to sinners. In chapter six, the poor are declared blessed recipients of the Kingdom, while woe is pronounced upon the rich who already have their consolation (6:20, 24). Likewise, those who mourn, the hungry, and the despised are blessed; woe is pronounced upon the laughing, the full, and those well spoken of in the community.

In chapter seven, Jesus heals the servant of

a Gentile centurion, and then raises to life the dead son of a widow. The former sign affirms acceptance for a faithful Gentile; the latter restores an otherwise societal outcast widow to community by restoring her family. Jesus then confirms to John's disciples that he is "the one who is to come" by reciting a list of wonders he performed: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them" (7:22). The final episode of chapter seven encapsulates the two reactions to Jesus (i.e., the outcast versus the self-righteous insider [7:36-50]). The host of the dinner, a Pharisee, is contrasted with the prostitute—a woman of the city. The story ends with the outcast woman being commended for her activity as a true hostess to Jesus, and her receiving forgiveness and salvation (vv. 48, 50). Simon the Pharisee, on the other hand, is publicly disgraced and proven faithless.

The contrast between the shamed of society and the self-assured, self-righteous of society is repeated several times in the travel narrative of Luke (9:51-19:27). In each case, the former group is given honor and identity by Jesus; the latter group is shamed and either rejects or is rejected by Jesus. The neighborliness of the outcast Samaritan is contrasted with the unconcern of the lawyer and with the priest and Levite who pass by (10:25-32). In chapter fourteen, those seeking the "first seats" at dinner are told to choose the last seats because "everyone who humbles himself will be exalted; everyone who exalts himself will be humbled" (14:1-11). More importantly, Jesus tells the hosts (14:12-14) to stop inviting the honorable of society—friends, brothers, kinsmen, rich neighbors—and instead invite the outcasts who cannot reciprocate—the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind (those Jesus came to minister to, 4:16ff., 7:22f.). The parable of the banquet then reiterates the consolation of those who enter into the banquet versus the shame of those who refused the invitation (14:15-24). In chapter fifteen, the contrast between "lost" and "found" (both words are used eight times in the chapter) culminates with the prodigal son dining at the banquet while the elder brother refuses the invitation to enter in. The son who wanted to be a slave enjoys sonship; the son who retained his birthright acts like a slave. In chapter sixteen, the earthly status of the beggar Lazarus is first contrasted with that of the rich man, then completely reversed in the afterlife. In chapter eighteen, the tax collector who prays for mercy goes home justified; the self-righteous Pharisee's prayer apparently is not heard.

In the midst of these stories, there are nu-

merous instances of Jesus' healing those with various physical maladies, ranging from demon possession to leprosy, hemorrhages, and blindness.⁵ While the word "consolation" is never used, Jesus' mission clearly is to bring salvation in all its forms—spiritual, social, physical—to those in need of a savior. In Luke's presentation of the gospel story, one cannot separate social and physical circumstances from spiritual need and understanding. Just as surely as Jesus can declare "the kingdom is in your midst" (17:21), so can "the consolation of Israel" be given concreteness in the lives of those who accept Jesus and his message.

The Consolation and Comfort of the Cross

From a Pauline perspective, the cross event—Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection—is of primary importance in humanity's receiving the grace of God

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and ultimate consolation/salvation. Commentators on Luke-Acts have noted, however, that Luke gives little attention to the suffering servant, dying Messiah motif and is more interested in the resurrected Lord—a "theology of glory." While Luke's theology clearly is more interested in the exalted Lord than in the suffering Messiah, the sacrificial nature of the cross event is still pivotal to understanding how Jesus is ultimately the consolation of Israel. Like his counterparts Matthew and Mark, Luke presents three passion predictions by Jesus, all parallel to those found in Matthew and Mark (9:18-22; 9:43b-45; 18:31-34). The second of these predictions is shortened simply to "the Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men." But Luke then includes a fourth reference when talking about the day of the Son of man (17:22-37) which states, "But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation."

The suffering of Christ and the sacrificial nature of the cross is evident as well in the Last Supper scene. Contemporary churches often avoid the public reading of this event from Luke because of the anomaly of the extra cup and the sequence of drinking, eating, and drinking (22:17-20). To read the passage with understanding would require some explanation of the passover meal. But that is precisely what Luke wants his readers to do—reflect on the passover meal and contrast it with the new passover meal. Literarily, the scene is not *drink, eat, drink*, but *eat and drink, eat and drink*. First, Luke states that Jesus earnestly desired to eat the passover meal before he “suffered” (*pathein*—the aorist infinitive form of *pascho*, from which we derive the “passion” of Jesus). Jesus will not eat again until all is fulfilled in the kingdom of God (22:16). Then comes the cup, and he declares, in parallel form, that he will not *drink* again until the kingdom of God comes (22:18). Both eating and drinking of the passover look forward to the kingdom of God. Then he institutes the new meal, *eating and drinking* of the bread and cup—his body given for them and the new covenant in his blood. What is important for Luke is that Jesus presents himself as the new passover lamb who indeed will bring redemption to Israel.

The Emmaeus Road incident clarifies this point (24:13-35). Jesus walks along unrecognized by two men who tell him all about the man, Jesus, whom they thought was the prophet sent to redeem Israel (24:21; cf. Simeon and Anna, 2:25, 38). Instead the Jewish leaders had condemned him to death and crucified him. Even amidst reports by some that on this third day since his death he was raised to life again and after Jesus himself testified to his own identity from the scriptures, these men do not recognize Jesus. Only after he sits at table and takes bread and blesses it and breaks it and gives it to them (the same sequence and wording used in 22:19) do they recognize him for who he is. They then go to Jerusalem to tell others how “he was made known to them in the breaking of bread” (24:35).

“Thus it is written,” the resurrected Jesus says to his disciples, “that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (24:46-47). The suffering Messiah is now the resurrected Lord, and he goes on to recite the mission of his followers. It is a continuation of his own mission, not to “call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” Repentance and forgiveness of sins are to be preached to all nations. Simeon knew that when he had seen the consolation of Israel, he also had seen the salvation God had “prepared in the presence of all peoples, a

light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel” (2:30-32). When these men had received power from on high (24:49), their mission would begin.

The Church as Bearer of Consolation

It is clear from the opening words of Acts that not only is this a continuation of the first volume, it is the continuing story of the ministry of Jesus (1:1-3). The on-going work of Jesus is to be carried forth by the Holy Spirit-empowered followers of Jesus. Their mission is set forth by the resurrected Jesus in 1:8: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” Much has been written about this verse as an outline of the missionary activity recorded in Acts. Perhaps more should be said about their empowerment and ministry as witnesses. The acts of the Apostles are the acts of the Holy Spirit, not just in the lives of the twelve but in the life of the community. Proclamation almost always follows a reference to being filled with the Holy Spirit. With the exception of obvious aberrant behavior (Ananias and Sapphira, Simon the sorcerer), the life of the community of believers is a communal existence in which there is no more talk about rich and poor, societal outcasts, sinners and (self) righteous (cf. the summaries in 2:42-47; 4:32-37). As the narrative unfolds, hearing progresses from the Jews to the Samaritans and then to the Gentiles, with a concurrent rejection taking place among the Jews. The volume, therefore, ends with the outcast Gentiles being the new primary recipients of the message and with Isaiah’s prophetic vision of those “not seeing or hearing” being announced against the unbelieving Jews.

The most notable early disciple mentioned who was not one of the twelve is a man named Joseph. His name is changed to Barnabas, a name that we are told means “son of encouragement” (*parakleseos*—cf. Luke 2:25) or “son of consolation.” Barnabas, of course, appears at crucial junctures in the story. When no one else will accept the converted Saul in Jerusalem, Barnabas becomes his advocate before the apostles (9:26ff.). When Gentiles are converted in Antioch, the Jerusalem church sends Barnabas, who, when he “saw the grace of God, he was glad; and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose; for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (11:23-24). Barnabas then goes on to retrieve Saul from Tarsus, and the two of them become emissaries for the Antioch church and then missionaries to the Gentile world. It is this “son of consolation” who soon

takes a back-seat to Saul/Paul in their travels. It is Barnabas who believes in his nephew enough to want to take him on a missionary trip a second time when Paul refuses (15:36-41).

As the individual embodiment of consolation in Acts, Barnabas does not bring simply words of hope and comfort to a funeral or a hospital. He is "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith," who brings to the church and to the world the witness of Messiah, the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins which—just as Jesus did in his ministry—brings honor and identity and spiritual blessing to those lives he touches. The reference to his being "full of the Holy Spirit" is a reminder that in the life of the church, the Holy Spirit is the ultimate source of comfort. The concluding summary in chapter nine states, "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the *comfort* (*parakleseis*) of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied" (v. 31).

Conclusion

Luke's audience in the latter part of the first century probably would not have considered the message of Luke and Acts as an overt word of comfort and consolation any more than we do today. Yet, the message certainly would have been a powerful witness to their identity as people called to faith in the crucified and resurrected Lord. The challenge of the Gospel and Acts was for the audience to be among those capable of hearing and receiving the salvation/consolation offered by Jesus and to manifest abundantly that consolation to one another by the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. This faith was not just another religion, but a complete identity, and the people most in danger of missing salvation were always those whose source of identity or comfort and consolation came through self-generated means (e.g. wealth, institutional religion, self-righteousness, political position).

The message for today is no different. Certainly, our substitute sources for identity and comfort/consolation may seem to us more enticing but only because they are part of our culture and time period. We tend to have very compartmentalized views of our own reality. Church is often viewed as

a part of the balanced life, something that must *fit in* alongside work and family and recreation, rather than a communal center for learning about who we are as God's people. Thus, spiritual consolation and comfort have their appropriate moments—the funeral or the hospital. Yet, it is in the discomfort of the funeral home or the hospital room that we find a clue to the poverty or richness of our understanding of consolation as Jesus understood and manifested it.

In the narrative of Luke-Acts, consolation is an underlying assumption of Christian existence. Consolation is not a word to be studied. Rather, it is a fundamental reality related to all aspects of the Christian life, a community life that cannot be separated from family life or business life. The source of all consolation is God whose decisive act of consolation was the manifestation of his presence on earth in Jesus. Jesus' birth announced the salvation/consolation of all peoples; his ministry brought salvation/consolation to individual lives, not just with a promise about other-worldly existence, but with substantive changes of identity and circumstance in the present; his death was sacrificial, bringing about the redemption of all who believe in him. The church, as the ongoing presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit, is presented as the community that sustains those who believe and bears witness to the resurrected Lord in the world around her. Consolation is rooted in the cross event but is given form and substance by the presence of the Holy Spirit in believing individuals like Barnabas who offer acceptance and forgiveness as Jesus did. Jesus is the "consolation of Israel." We, as Christ's Holy Spirit-empowered body, are to be and bring that consolation to one another and to the world.

There is, indeed, tremendous importance in simple being at the side of that young couple mourning the loss of their daughter. For the families and individuals dealing with AIDS, today's version of leprosy, we as the body of Christ must give the compassionate touch and assurance that they are loved. As the forgiven church, we must be a people and a place where the hurting person can find healing, and forgiveness rather than guilt and condemnation. *The Comforter Has Come*, and he announces his presence today through us!