

1-1-1992

Before I found the Page

Elmer Prout

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Prout, Elmer (1992) "Before I found the Page," *Leaven*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol2/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

Before I Found The Page

By

Elmer Prout

The following article is different in that the author follows a kind of mental odyssey of reflections, recollections, and narration with a compelling personal ending. Led by the questions, "How do I begin? Where will my ideas take me? How do I give form to my notions?" Elmer Prout leads the reader through the difficulty of expressing clearly the meaning of consolation in personal terms. Is this not a difficulty many of us experience?
The Editor

I found the words quickly enough. Two-thirds of the way through the C's in my office directory: page 284, column two, twenty-six lines from the bottom of the page.

Consolation *N.* 1. a. The act of an instance of consoling. b. The state of being consoled. 2. Someone or something that consoles; a comfort.

Elmer Prout, former missionary to Japan, is presently minister of the Church of Christ in Shafter, CA.

Console *tr. v.* To cheer in time of grief, defeat, or trouble; to comfort; to solace. (see *sel-²* in appendix).¹

Since I certainly did not want to overlook any shade of meaning, I turned to the appendix.

sel-² Of good mood; to favor. 1. Germanic lengthened from *sel-* in Old English . . . happy . . . 2. Suffixed lengthened O-grade form *sol-a-* in Latin *solari*, to comfort, console: SOLACE, CONSOLE

The definition was clear. In the light of scholarly opinion and modern usage, perhaps now I should have been ready to write about consolation.

But a vague dissatisfaction blocked each attempted beginning. Something seemed to be missing. Was my office dictionary incomplete, unreliable, or out of date? I turned to Webster: nothing different there. The *Oxford English Dictionary* was next. Perhaps this respected work

would supply the information to fill the void. But the *OED* offered no corrective. In fact, it confirmed the other sources and left me as far from getting started as I had been before.

Would a theological word book do the trick? I took a volume from the shelf. The comments on “philosophical consolation” looked promising.

In popular as in philosophical consolation the exhortation to stop crying and lamenting is the final word of wisdom. This is common comfort . . . Even the other platitudes: ‘Lamenting is useless, ‘one must set an example to others’ . . . ‘think of your distinguished position’ . . . always have as their conclusion: ‘Therefore stop lamenting.’ This will not, of course, surprise those who recognize that the comfort of antiquity, unlike that of primitive Christianity . . . is often designed simply to silence weeping, so that the heart is as little consoled as it was before.²

These were interesting words. At least they warned against a direction I did not want to take. But the unformed question persisted. I was still uneasy about where to begin. I turned then to a favorite author, Paul Scherer. Surely his insight into Job’s search for consolation would remove my hesitation and release a flow of ideas. I began with what Scherer had written about Job’s three friends and their attempts to console their suffering friend.

It is a mistake to deal harshly with these men. They have become a proverb; but not all

proverbs are fair . . . They had been grieved to hear of his calamities, they had fixed their rendezvous and come to be with him, and they meant him the best they knew . . . The only thing that can be said of them justly is that they were poorly equipped for their ministry of consolation. They were “too white”; and “the flower of life is red.” They lacked most where the need was greatest. The world perishes not of dark but of cold. The soul in its deep distress seeks not light but warmth, not counsel but understanding. If they had ever suffered any themselves, it might have been different. As it was, they came with a theory to meet a person, were of one mind and one will; but the heart is the place of meeting . . . Less and less did they concern themselves with the sufferer; more and more it was ‘the principle of the thing’ that mattered . . . [this attitude] distorted everything they said. It made abysmal folly of their wisdom . . . Analysis, warning, the promise of a happy issue one of these days — none of it was consolation . . . When God consoles he enters into a man’s solitude as a companion and bearer of burden. (Gal. 6:2).³

It sounded true, with every word on target. I found Scherer’s message echoed by numerous other authors. On the negative side I read:

Others the Syren Sisters

*warble round,
And empty heads con-
sole with empty sound.⁴*

On the positive side it went like this:

*I was injured
But now
Your kindness enters the
wound
And touches my heart.⁵*

And yet, impressive as it all was, the words left my disease unresolved. My head agreed with all I had read. The logic was clear. Intellectually, I nodded assent. Even my heart was moved. But still the flow of thought lay stagnant.

“Is there a poet? Someone who can sing more of this matter? Set it to music, play on the cords of the heart as well as walk the paths of the mind? What might Studdert-Kennedy have to say about the source and ministry of consolation?”

Thinking that this was the solution, I picked up his collected poems. The book opened to the title “The Suffering God.” I was invited to consider the price God had paid and continues to pay for His divine ministry of consolation. The poem was an invitation to journey in deep waters.

*If He could speak, the victim torn
and bleeding,
Caught in His pain and nailed upon
the Cross,
Has He to give the comfort souls are
needing?
Could He destroy the bitterness of
loss?⁶*

“Comfort” and “consolation” — related words, intertwined history. I sought to evade the unrelenting question: “Has He to give the comfort souls are needing?” He does! But at what price to the

divine Self? Studdert-Kennedy would not permit me to dodge the issue.

*Once and for all men say He came
and bore it,
Once and for all set up His throne
on high,
Conquered the world and set His
standard o’er it,
Dying that once, that men might
never die.*

Can consolation find its footing there? Could my writing begin at that point? No! It is too soon, too simple. Consolation must be rooted in stark reality. Those who would console must read on.

*Yet men are dying, dying soul and
body,
Cursing the God who gave to them
their birth,
Sick of the world with all its sham
and shoddy,
Sick of the lies that darken all the
earth.*

.....

*Are there no tears in the heart of the
Eternal?
Is there no pain to pierce the soul of
God?*

.....

*Father, if He, the Christ, were Thy
Revealer,
Truly the First Begotten of the Lord,
Then must Thou be a Sufferer and a
Healer,
Pierced to the heart by the sorrow of
the sword.
Then it must mean, not only that
Thy sorrow
Smote Thee that once upon the*

*lonely tree,
But that to-day, to-night, and on the
morrow,
Still it will come, O Gallant God, to
Thee.*

.....

*Peace does not mean the end of all
our striving,
Joy does not mean the drying of our
tears;
Peace is the power that comes to
souls arriving
Up to the light where God Himself
appears.*

*Joy is the wine that God is ever
pouring
Into the hearts of those who strive
with Him,
Light'ning their eyes to vision and
adoring,
Strength'ning their arms to warfare
glad and grim.*

.....

*Give me, for light, the sunshine of
Thy sorrow,
Give me, for shelter, shadow of Thy
Cross;
Give me to share the glory of Thy
morrow,
Gone from my heart the bitterness of
Loss.*

I read and remembered that after He declared himself "the Resurrection and the Life" Jesus still wept with Martha and Mary at the tomb of their brother, Lazarus. The Lord offers no discounted consolation.

The comfort of Jesus is the deed which He alone can per-

form and which alone comforts; for all comfort which leaves the power of death unbroken is incomplete and unsatisfying. Hence true comfort can be given only by Him who is Himself the resurrection and the life.⁷

Other words from Paul Scherer underlined the point.

It is compassion that life needs, not censure. And compassion that costs, and thinks nothing of the scars. Not sentiment. No distant amity. A passion that trudges its way that can be done to it. What is there in that for us? Is there anything at all in anything else?⁸

The poetry and the preaching pulled me back to the Apostle's grateful affirmation in II Corinthians 1:3, 4 (NRSV).

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.

Somewhere during my search and repeated false starts, the dissatisfaction found a voice. "Dictionaries are dependable. Word books are helpful. Definitions are absolutely essential. Theologians are worthy of attention. Poets do lead a fine chorus. The Apostle speaks inspired words. But what about me? What has been my per-

sonal experience with this concept which I am trying to express? How does what I have read and sung and felt from the minds of others fit into my own life? Have I, Elmer Prout, ever been consoled? Have I personally tasted consolation? Has the consolation which came into my life been waiting to be acknowledged and expressed while I have been running after outside sources?"

I had not known dissatisfaction to ask such questions before. But as I listened, awareness dawned. A memory began to take shape. Awareness and memory brought the certainty that long before I found page 284 in my office dictionary, or nodded my head at Paul Scherer's insights, or thrilled to the lyrics of Studdert-Kennedy, or recognized the inspiration of the Apostle that I had indeed experienced consolation.

But, to my dismay, I found my memory focused on a consolation experienced in my early school days. Writer's block loomed again. How could I dare set my childish memories beside the wisdom and style of Scherer, Studdert-Kennedy, and the inspired Apostle?

But then it came clear. There is no comparison, no competition in the consolation which God gives to his children. Old or young, sophisticated or simple, all receive from the "God of all consolation" his gift according to our individual needs. As he has promised, "with consolation I will lead them" (Jeremiah 31:9 *RSV*), so God consoles each of his children. It is to that divine gift of consolation that I write my testimony of thanksgiving.

It was time for the outing at the end of the school year. I was a kindergartner tagging along after the "big kids." As fleet as deer, they ran beside the creek toward the spot where the picnic meal was to be eaten. No one waited for me. All I could do was listen forlornly to the distant shouts as the other students raced farther through the trees.

Sadness engulfed me. Loneliness chilled my heart. Eyes downcast, tears brimming, I shuffled hopelessly along. Not a friend in the world . . .

Something on the ground caught my eye. A small fish which had been hooked and then carelessly discarded lay dead in the sand.

What a flood of self-pity poured over me. I felt just like the fish. Forgotten. Alone. No one cared—all the bitter thoughts of a five-year-old who was too slow to keep up on the picnic trail.

I knelt beside the lifeless form. After brushing the flies away, I promised a proper burial. A funeral, even for a fish, suited my mood perfectly.

As I scooped out the sandy grave, I became aware of the sound of footsteps. I was afraid to look up. I was sure that one of the "big kids" had returned to tease me. I knew how they would jeer if they saw the dead fish. They would hoot unmercifully if they discovered my plans for the burial. Why could they not have stayed away for another five minutes? My mind was in a turmoil. My heart contracted in fear.

I waited for the dreaded words. But there was no sound, no laughter. No hint of mockery. No jeering. What was going on? Who was there? The silence filled the air. My discomfort grew with each second. Why could they not go away and leave me and my dead fish alone?

Finally I dared to look up — right into the eyes of the oldest girl in our school. I waited for her scorn and a scolding for falling so far behind the others. I was sure she would be angry to be away from the fun at the picnic ground. I hung my head, but no harsh words came. I looked more closely at her face. To my delighted surprise, her eyes mirrored understanding and acceptance.

"May I help you?" she asked.

I said "Yes!!" in every way my five-year-old mind could think of. She knelt

beside me and joined in the digging — no condescension, only comradeship. She even found a piece of paper and wrapped the fish in it.

“Must have proper grave clothes,” she whispered in a conspiratory tone.

When the service was over, we sat together for a while in the summer sand. The shouts and laughter of the other students rang through the trees. But it was no longer painful to hear those sounds. They did not emphasize the loneliness, because it was a new day. The blue of the sky was brighter and the air was fresher, and the birds’ songs were sweeter than they had ever been before. A five-year-old heart was lighter than air. Everything around blended into a song of happiness. Consolation . . .

So goes a memory, a reverie of one moment of consolation. It is not intended to replace careful word studies. It does not encourage a by-pass of theological thought. It is no substitute for carefully honed phrases of a master preacher or poet. It stands aside for the authoritative words of the Apostle.

And yet I offer no apology. None is needed because we can still hear Jesus saying “become like a little child to see and to enter the kingdom.” Because that is true, we adults can gladly anticipate those moments when, in the midst of our “grown-up grief,” we are gifted once again by the consolations reserved for those little children who come in expectant trust to the “all-merciful Father, the God whose consolation never fails us!” (II Corinthians 1:3 *REB*).