

# The Comforting Rod

by Thomas Watson

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*The sermon emphasizes that God's rod, whether it be His destroying rod, pastoral rod, or disciplining rod, brings comfort to the people of God through various means.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 23:4, Psalm 119:50, Isaiah 61:3, Hosea 14:8, 2 Corinthians 4:17, 2 Corinthians 7:2, Hebrews 12:8, Revelation 3:19

**Topics:** "Divine Discipline", "Spiritual Comfort"

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## Description

Thomas Watson preaches on the comforting aspects of God's rod and staff as highlighted in Psalms 23:4. He explains that God's rod can be seen as a destroying rod upon His enemies, a pastoral rod guiding His sheep, and a disciplining rod for His children. Watson emphasizes that God's rod, even in affliction, provides comfort through instruction, a token of God's love, a means to bring us to glory, and as a way to make us better. He challenges the congregation to not be dejected in affliction but to seek comfort and growth in God's discipline.

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## Transcript

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"Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." Psalm 23:4

Bernard calls this Psalm, a noble and illustrious Psalm. The Jews used to repeat this Psalm when they sat down to eat. In it, David sets forth two things--his experience and his confidence. His confidence, in the first and last verses. In the first verse, "The Lord is my Shepherd; (therefore) I shall not lack." In the last verse, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." Here is David's confidence. His faith was risen up into a great degree of confidence. But that which I shall speak to, is David's experience in the words I have read, "Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."

What is meant here by staff? A staff is for support, whether it is the staff one walks with to support the body, or whether it is the staff of bread that supports the life of man. Staff is for support, and so it is used here in the text, "Your staff comforts me." By staff is meant, metaphorically, the staff of God's support, "Your staff comforts me." God's providence is a wing to cover the saints. It is a breast to feed them, and a staff to uphold them. In the most calamitous times, the Church of God has the staff of God's support, and

this is the reason that the Church is preserved in spite of all malice and opposition. This bush burns--yet it is not consumed. Though the lion roars--yet the lambs of Christ's fold are in safety. Though the rulers take counsel against the saints of the Most High--yet they are kept alive.

Here is the reason Your staff comforts me. The saints always have the staff of divine protection. God secretly preserves them and sets an invisible guard about them. We see the staff that smites the godly--but we do not see the staff that upholds them. We see their danger--but do not see their defense. God is their staff of support. God's continual care of His Church is as a wall of brass against which the gates of hell shall never prevail. The Church of God has God for her Guardian. "The enemies must first overcome God--before they can overcome His Church," said Luther.

For the use of this briefly: This is no small comfort to God's Church. She has a staff of support. God is her protection. The saints of God have malignant enemies to conflict with. The powers of the earth are against the godly. We read that the beast in Revelation had on his head seven horns and ten crowns, Revelation 13:1, "And it was given him to make war with the saints." You see, the people of God were then in a bad case. They had the horns and the crowns against them. But the saints have the Lion of the tribe of Judah on their side. And Christ has a staff to protect them and teeth to devour all His enemies.

So much briefly for that expression, for I have only glanced at it. "Your staff comforts me." Your staff of support and glorious providence is always with me. It comforts me.

But that which I shall chiefly speak to, is the first of these in the text, "Your ROD comforts me."

QUESTION. What is meant by rod?

ANSWER. This word rod, when it is ascribed to God, is taken three ways in Scripture.

First, for God's destroying rod.

Second, for God's pastoral rod, as that of a shepherd.

Third, for His disciplining rod, or rod of affliction.

1. God's DESTROYING rod. The rod, when it is ascribed unto God, which He uses towards His enemies. Psalm 12:9, "You shall break them with a rod of iron." This rod of God upon His enemies, comforts the godly, Psalm 58:10. The righteous shall rejoice when they see the vengeance. God's destroying rod upon sinners is a matter of rejoicing and comfort unto the godly. We read of Deborah's triumphant song and the Jew's festival after the destruction of Haman, Esther 9:22. The rod of God upon the wicked, comforts the godly.

QUESTION. But some may say, "How far may the godly be comforted in the destruction of wicked men? How far may they rejoice?"

ANSWER.

First, The godly may be comforted in the destruction of wicked men, so far as now there is a stop put to their sins, and they cannot live any longer to dishonor God.

Second, God's destroying rod upon the wicked is a matter of comfort to the godly, as hereby God's justice is declared to all the world. Why did God smite Pharaoh? For his pride and tyranny. The saints rejoice and

triumph to see God's justice executed upon His enemies, Exodus 15:1. They are comforted to see God's justice in punishing the wicked of the world.

Third, it is comfort to the people of God, to see a wicked man destroyed. God's ruining of sinners is a warning to others to make them fear sin. This is clear from Deuteronomy 17:12-13. The man who sins presumptuously shall die, and all the people shall hear and fear and shall no more sin presumptuously. God's judgments upon wicked persecutors may make others afraid and tremble to go on in their sin. Thus far God's destroying rod is a comfort to the godly. They rejoice to think that this may be a warning to sinners, and may be a means to reclaim many from their impieties.

Fourth, and last, God's destroying rod upon the wicked is a comfort to the godly upon this account--as peace and deliverance arises to the Church of God. When Pharaoh was destroyed, Israel had a writ of ease now granted them. Nay, further, the destruction of the wicked, such as are desperate sinners, not only causes liberty to arise in the Church of God--but it causes the growth of religion. A clear instance: Herod being eaten up with worms, the text says immediately that "the Word of God grew and multiplied," Acts 12:23. Thus far God's destroying rod upon the wicked, flagitious sinners is a comfort to the godly. "Your rod comforts me." Your rod of iron which breaks the profane sinners of the world, comforts me.

2. As there is God's destroying rod which comforts the godly, so there is God's PASTORAL rod which He uses towards His sheep, conducting them to green pastures and still waters. There is God's shepherding rod, by which He leads His elect sheep to the green pastures and still waters. These green pastures and still waters may be meant of the ordinances and that sweet comfort the people of God find in the use of them. Why, this rod of God, this shepherd's rod, this pastoral rod, comforts the godly.

3. Third, and last, there is God's DISCIPLINING rod, or His rod of affliction. This also is a comfort to the people of God. 2 Samuel 7:14, "I will chasten him with a rod of Mine." And in Micah 6:9, "Hear the rod, and He who has appointed it." And in this sense I understand this text of Scripture, "Your rod comforts me." So, then, the observation is this:

DOCTRINE: God's rod, His afflicting rod upon His people, yields matter of comfort to us.

"Your rod comforts me." This, I confess, seems strange to flesh and blood; it is a paradox. What, that the rod of correction should give comfort! If David had said, "Your promises, Lord, they comfort me," it would have been no wonder. But that he should say, "Your rod comforts me," how can this be? Is it usual for a person to call pain, comfort? How, then, does David say, "Your rod comforts me"? Who can of such thistles, gather figs? Or of such thorns, gather grapes? How can there be comfort, from the rod?

I shall show you that there is much consolation gathered out of correction. "Your rod comforts me." The rod of God is not like Moses' rod when turned into a serpent--but it is like Jonathan's rod, which had honey at the end of it. The rod of God is like Aaron's rod which brought forth buds, blossoms, and almonds, Numbers 17:8.

Then the question is this: How does this afflicting rod give comfort? In six particulars.

1. God's afflicting rod comforts us--as it gives us instruction. Where it teaches, it comforts. Micah 7:14, "Teach Your people with Your rod." How does the rod teach? Why, it teaches with instruction, so it teaches with comfort. Luther said there were many Psalms in the Bible he never rightly understood until he was in affliction. The rod teaches to know God aright--and is that not matter of comfort? In 2 Chronicles

33:11, when Manasseh was afflicted--then he knew the Lord was God. And the rod teaches a man to know himself. He sees that corruption working in his heart that he could never discern before. The eyes which sin shuts--affliction opens. The rod gives wisdom; it is a teaching rod, and thus God comforts. What if it makes us weaker--so long as it makes us wiser?

2. God's afflicting rod has comfort in it--as it is a token of special favor He bears towards us. "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten." Revelation 3:19. We think God cannot favor us unless He has us in His lap. Yet He loves and favors us--when He gives us the bitter drink of affliction. God's rod and God's love both stand together. Thus the rod comforts; it brings us a token of God's love. It is no love in God, to let men go on in sin and never smite; this is not love. Is it any love to your child to let him run into the water and drown? To be without the rod of God's discipline, is a sign of a bastard child, a mark of reprobation, "But if you are without chastisement, then you are bastards, and not sons." Hebrews 12:8. If God will let any fall upon the rock of ruin, then He will allow them to go on in sin and not correct them. Hosea 4:14, "I will not punish your daughters when they commit whoredom." Take notice, God spares the rod--in anger! God's hand is heaviest--when it is lightest. God punishes most--when He does not punish!

But God smites His people--that He may save them, and is that not love? And the love of God allays and takes off the smarting power of the rod and gives the soul comfort. Let me feel God's smiting hand--so that I may have His loving heart.

3. God's rod comforts--as it makes way for comfort. Medicine, though bitter--yet has comfort in it--as it makes way for health. The rod is to make way for comfort. The rod of God is to beat out the dust and make us purer. The launderer dips his cloth in water--to whiten the cloth. The water of afflictions is to make God's people white. Daniel 12:10, "Many shall be tried--and made white."

Nay, farther, God's rod upon His children not only makes way for comfort but, what is more, this rod distills comfort into the soul. Even as the fire causes sweet water to drop from the still--so out of affliction, God distills the sweet water of consolation. A clear instance is in 2 Corinthians 1:4, "Who comforts us in all our tribulations." Here is the rod of God comforting. When the saints' trials have been sharpest, their comforts have been sweetest. Behold here honey at the end of the rod. John 16:22, "Your sorrows shall be turned into joy." Here is the saints' water--turned into wine. That holy martyr who was in prison dates his letter thus, "From the pleasant garden of prison." God candies His wormwood with sugar. The saints never tasted so much of God's compassion, as in their deepest affliction. And in this sense David might truly say, "Your rod comforts me." So said the Apostle, "God comforts us in all our tribulations."

4. God's afflicting rod has comfort in it--as it brings the good news to the soul that this is the worst which shall ever befall him. The Lord comes down with a murdering axe to hew down wicked men--but He has only a rattling rod for His children. This is all the hell they ever shall feel. Is this not comfort? 1 Corinthians 11:32, "We are judged and disciplined by the Lord--that we should not be condemned with this world." Is this not comfort to know, that this is the worst we shall have? God lays upon us a light affliction--and saves us from wrath to come! Here is the rod full of comfort. What the drop of sorrow which the godly taste--compared to the bottomless sea of wrath, which the damned endure forever?

5. Yet farther, the rod is full of comfort--as it makes us happy. And for this consult Job 5:17, "Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty."

Some place their happiness in riches, some in wisdom, some in pleasure and the like--but who ever placed happiness in affliction?

The worldlings cry, "If this is happiness, Lord, deliver me from it!" But Job said, "Happy is that man whom God corrects." How is he happy? He is happy--who is made better by affliction. Though the affliction makes the outward condition worse--yet it makes the heart better.

Again, he is happy--who has God to visit him. Don't we account him a happy person--who has a king to visit him? How much more to have a God to visit him? Persecution is a rod, yes--but for all that it is a blessed rod, it is a healing rod. Though the rod smarts--yet it saves the soul. Well, then, may a Christian say, "Lord, Your rod comforts me. This makes me happy." Happy is that man whom God corrects.

6. Last, God's rod has comfort in it--as a means to bring us to glory. God's rod whips us to heaven! 2 Corinthians 4:17, "These light afflictions, which are but for a moment, work for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." Affliction is like throwing a bag of money at another person; it may bruise him--but it enriches him. So affliction may bruise us but it enriches us, and this works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

In short, the black rod prepares for the white rod. O Christian! You who are now humbled by some sharp affliction--shall shortly wear a garland made of the flowers of paradise. You shall have your soul set thicker with the jewels of heaven--than the sky is with the stars.

Thus you see this truth is verified, "Your rod comforts me."

Use 1. INFERENCE. I will name but four:

1. See then from hence, the difference between the wicked and the godly. God makes the worst things tend to the consolation of the godly--and the best things tend to the condemnation of the wicked. Let the people of God meet with affliction--it is for the better. God's rod comforts. "Your rod and your staff, they comfort me." Let the wicked have prosperity, it is for the worse. Cordials kill them. To the godly--evil things have good in them. To the wicked--good things have hurt in them. This is clear Scripture, "Their table is a snare." I say, the wicked man's table is a snare, Psalm 69:22. Wicked men have mercy out of God's hand as Israel had quails. They were sauced with the wrath of God. Ecclesiastes 5:13 is a clear Scripture, "I have seen an evil under the sun, riches kept for owners to their hurt." Riches are like Haman's banquet--which was a prologue to his execution. To wicked men, even spiritual mercies are turned into judgments. The Word preached is a savor of death to the wicked, 2 Corinthians 2:16. Nay, farther, Jesus Christ Himself is a rock of offense to the wicked, 1 Peter 2:7. Christ is equally for the falling--as the rising of many, Luke 2:34. In short, sinners stumble at a Savior and pluck death from the tree of life. As for the godly--God's rod comforts them. As for the wicked--God's mercy ruins them.

2. See then from hence, that true religion is not to be looked on as a melancholy thing. Some people discourage religion and draw it with a sour countenance, and in a frightful dress. But we see the worst of religion, has much comfort in it. The very rod of God comforts the godly. See the Scripture in James 1:2, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds." Take the part of religion that is sourest to the soul, repentance; and that which is sour to the body, affliction--and there is comfort in both.

There is comfort in that which is sour to the soul--repentance. For whom is the oil of joy prepared but for God's mourners? Isaiah 61:3. A gracious soul is never more enlarged and comforted, than when he can melt kindly for sin. Christ Jesus made the best wine from water. The best wine of joy is made of the water of true repentance. The Hebrew word for repentance signifies to take comfort. None have such ground of comfort as a true penitent. When God makes him weep for sin--he goes away weeping for joy! Thus you

see, that the sourest part of religion has comfort in it.

Take that which is sour to the body--affliction, and it has comfort in it. A parallel Scripture for this is worth observing. 2 Corinthians 6:20, "As sorrowful--yet always rejoicing." There is comfort in the rod. A Christian is like a bird that can sing in the winter season. He can pick comfort out of the rod and, with Samson, fetch honey out of the lion. 1 Thessalonians 1:6, "Having received the Word with much affliction, with joy." Here is God's rod comforting that Christian, who knows affliction tends to better him--making his grace purer and his crown brighter! He can rejoice in affliction and say as David, "O Lord, Your rod comforts me." Thus, you see, true religion is no uncheerful thing.

3. If God's rod comforts, then it shows us what good reason we have to choose affliction rather than sin. There is something in affliction to comfort us--but there is nothing in sin to comfort us. Sin is evil--and nothing but evil. It defiles the mind and disturbs the peace. It puts a worm into conscience, a sting into death, and a fire into hell. This is, in Scripture, called "the abominable thing," Jeremiah 44:4, "Do not do this abominable thing which I hate." Sin binds the soul over unto God's wrath forever. Oh, then, what wisdom is it to choose affliction rather than sin! A Christian can say, "There is comfort in the rod," but he cannot say, "There is comfort in sin." Sin puts the soul into an agony and makes it the very suburb of hell. Moses chose affliction rather than sin for a season, Hebrews 11:25.

4. Last, if God's rod comforts--then what does God's love do? If there is any comfort, as you have heard, while God is afflicting us--what comfort is there while He is embracing us! If there is any comfort in the valley of tears--what is there then in paradise! There is the bed of spices and the river of pleasures. If God can make a prison sweet--what then is heaven! If afflicting mercy is so great--what is crowning mercy! If God made one of the martyr's flames a bed of roses, why then, how sweet is it to lie in Christ's bosom, the bed of perfume!

#### Use 2. EXHORTATION.

If God's rod has so much comfort in it to the godly, then be not too much dejected and cast down in affliction. If you meet with losses, if you meet with pirates at sea and hornets on land--you see God can turn all these to good. "Your rod comforts me." Therefore, be not too much cast down. Though we are not to pray for affliction, for it is in itself penal, neither must we despond under affliction.

"Oh," said one, "if God loved me, He would not have dealt this severely with me. He has bereaved me of such and such a dear comfort, which is like plucking a limb from the body."

But Christian, consider that which you call a dear comfort, which God has taken away. Perhaps it was an idol! It may be, you loved it more than you loved God; and if you had not lost this comfort, you might have lost your soul and heaven too! Why then--has God done you any wrong in taking away this comfort? There is mercy in all this! You have much cause to say at last, "Your rod comforts me."

#### Use 3. TRIAL.

Let us examine whether we have had any honey out of the lion, any comfort out of affliction. Has the rod of God upon us blossomed and brought forth almonds? It's certain we have met with affliction in one kind or another--but what benefit have we got by affliction? What advantage for our souls? Can we say indeed as David, "Lord, Your rod comforts me"? Can we say that we have met with such and such a sore trial, and it has brought us nearer to God and weaned us from the world? that it has conquered our pride and tamed

our covetousness? When God's rod upon us fetches water of tears and makes us weep bitterly for our sin, then it is a good rod.

In short, if God's rod has made us better, it has made us reform and break off iniquity. This is when we can say with Ephraim, Hosea 14:8, "What have I to do with idols?"

To conclude all, let it be our daily prayer to God that we may find some comfort in affliction, some honey mingled with our gall. David speaks of comfort in affliction, Psalm 119:50, "This is my comfort in affliction." Affliction is not joyous but grievous. Oh--but when the Lord blesses and sanctifies it to us, then it brings comfort with it.

Let us pray that we may hear the voice of the rod and kiss the rod and bless the hand that holds it. Let us pray unto God that we may see His hand in every affliction and wherefore God contends with us that we may turn to him who smites and say, as David does here in the text, "Oh, Lord, Your rod and Your staff--they comfort me!"

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