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Behind a Frowning Providence — The Christian’s Confidence in the Face of Sorrow

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William Cowper [1731-1800] was among the greatest of English poets and hymn writers. With John Newton, he produced the famed hymnal, *Olney Hymns*, in 1779. Cowper wrote “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” in 1774. The phrase quickly entered popular parlance, but Cowper’s reverent and thoughtful understanding was quickly lost. When he described God’s ways as mysterious, Cowper was not shrugging his shoulders in resignation, but expressing a Christian confidence.

Cowper’s words should encourage believers troubled by the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, or by any great distress. “Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,” Cowper instructs, “but trust Him for His grace.” Our confidence: “Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.”

Those words define Christian truth and Gospel courage in the face of what truly appears as a “frowning providence.” Cowper did not deny the reality of evil and suffering, but he did deny the victory of evil and suffering. We dare not doubt God’s smiling face.

*God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform; He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.
Deep in unfathomable mines of never-failing skill, He treasures up His bright designs, and works His sovereign will.
Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take, the clouds ye so much dread, are big with mercy, and shall break In blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace; Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face.
His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour; The bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.
Blind unbelief is sure to err; and scan his work in vain; God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain.*

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