

"You Don't Have to Say Something Biblical Right Away," and Other Better Ways to Encourage Newly Suffering Believers

By Steve Burchett



Believers suffer for the benefit of other suffering believers.

Paul told the Corinthians that the affliction he and his team experienced in Asia was so difficult that “we despaired of life itself. Indeed we felt that we had received the sentence of death” (2 Cor 1:8b-9a). God had a purpose, though: “But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.”

Suffering brings us to the end of self-reliance and instead to dependence on God. It also puts us in a place to experience God’s help and strength as he “comforts us in all our affliction” (v. 4). Because of our union with Jesus (v. 5), God is always for us and so has perfect designs in our trials.

But God’s purposes in suffering don’t end there. Paul writes that God “comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (v. 4). John Trapp, a Bible commentator in the 1600s, illustrates Paul’s teaching with this story from the life of the famous Scottish preacher John Knox:

Mr. Knox, a little before his death, rose out of his bed; and being asked wherefore, being so sick, he would offer to rise? He answered that he had sweet meditations of the resurrection of Jesus Christ that night, and now he would go into the pulpit and impart to others the comforts that he felt in his soul.

If you are going to bring comfort to suffering believers, it is critical that you not grow bitter and cold in your trials and pain but tender and warm as you receive God’s care. Yet you must not remain in a state of weakness and need. I’ve known some believers who appear to be perpetual sufferers — always receiving, rarely giving. No, God’s design is for you to be strengthened and then help others.

Once you are ready to extend that comfort to other suffering believers, it will be helpful to have considered some better approaches to accomplishing this. Let’s think just about the early days of suffering. Here are four better ways to encourage newly suffering believers.

First, *you don’t have to say something biblical right away*. I read that one pastor’s immediate words to a mother who just lost her sick baby were, “Praise the Lord!” The mother didn’t quite understand, so the pastor elaborated, “Praise the Lord, she’s not in pain anymore!” (Dave Furman, “10 Ways Not to Help a Hurting Friend,” crossway.org). Of course, this is true, but blurting out even the truth in the initial stages of grief is cold and inconsiderate. Just a brief greeting, a warm hug, and your quiet presence are what are most encouraging at first. Sit, listen, observe, tear up, listen some more. When you do speak, you will have not only built up a measure of credibility, but you will be even more aware of what would be most helpful to say.

Second, *beware of using overly theological statements to the neglect of heartfelt, kind words*. Yes, people need the truth, but rarely does heavy doctrine or philosophical eloquence bring comfort initially. Instead, speak kindly from the heart. “How forcible are right words, especially when uttered more from the bowels than the brain” (John Trapp, online commentary on 2 Corinthians). This does not mean, “Don’t text the Bible verse you thought would be comforting.” By all means, send it! Telling somebody who is hurting, “I was reading my Bible this morning, and I thought this verse might be an encouragement to you,” is neither overly theological nor trite.

Third, *don’t be surprised if a believer initially responds poorly to suffering*. Think about your life: when things get difficult at work, in a relationship, or in the family. You don’t always immediately respond with patience and love and dignity, right? It should not shock us, especially when the suffering is severe, when a believer doesn’t instantly say with Job, “Blessed be the name of the Lord.” This is not to downplay sin, but often in these early stages of suffering, our love can overlook their sin. God knows that person better than we do. In fact, this may be the very thing God is doing to purify his child (1 Peter 1:6).

Fourth, *it’s better to be too concerned than not concerned enough*. If you find yourself asking, “Should I [*insert loving action*] for [*insert suffering person*]?” the answer is almost always “Yes!” Christ’s will is always more love. When I have asked that question and not followed through, I almost always regret it.

In your suffering, draw close to the Lord. Receive his loving care. And then rise and be on the lookout for fellow sufferers. They are out there, and they are hurting. Some, like Paul, are despairing of life itself. They need God’s comfort, so they need you to come and minister to them gently, thoughtfully, patiently, eagerly, and tenderly.

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