

What Not to Say to Those Who are Suffering

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6 14

“It could be worse. Imagine if you broke *both* legs.”

We have some odd ways of cheering each other up.

Most of our bone-headed comments to suffering people are offered with passable intentions, and most of those comments are judged by their recipients as misguided rather than malicious, but it sure would be nice to improve our record of encouragement in the midst of pain.

We could all generate a Top Ten List of words we spoke or received that make us shudder when we think about them. Here is one that, I suspect, makes a lot of lists.

“What is God teaching you through this?”

Hmmm. This is orthodox. God does teach us in our suffering, and he is working all things together for good. We agree with C.S.Lewis when he writes that pain is God’s megaphone to arouse a deaf world. But the story of Jezebel and her entrails being food for the dogs is orthodox too. We are after orthodoxy that is relevant, pastoral and edifying.

Consider a few of the possible problems with this question.

1. It tends to be condescending. If you heard this question from someone, you probably didn’t hear compassion.
2. It suggests that suffering is a solvable riddle. God has something specific in mind and we have to guess what it is. Welcome to a cosmic game of Twenty-Questions, and we better get the right answer soon; otherwise, the suffering will continue.
3. It suggests that we have done something that has unleashed the suffering.
4. It undercuts God’s call to all suffering people, “Trust me.”

To briefly respond to these four problems,

1. *Suffering compels us to modesty.* Scripture gives us a number of insights into human suffering, but no insight is exhaustive. The mystery in suffering reminds us that we are still like children who don’t understand how good parents can impose difficulties in our lives. In light of the mystery, humility is natural and necessary. For those who speak to suffering people, humility before the Lord is expressed in humility before the suffering person.
2. *We over-interpret suffering.* I am speaking with a person now who has gone through horrible suffering in her life, and “What is God trying to tell you?” has been the question everyone asks. She has wondered for years why she doesn’t have an answer yet. All she can figure is that she is too sinful to get it or God is not giving out the answer key – so she is alternately guilty and frustrated. Job in the Old Testament and the man born blind in the New Testament (John 9) should keep us from endless speculation about God’s precise intent. Neither one was supposed to get what God was teaching them.
3. *Focus on a sin-suffering nexus to your peril.* Granted, the question might not assume that the suffering person is in sin. The question might have been intended more positively, as in “How are you learning about the Lord in this?” But unless there is an absolutely clear connection between a person’s sin and suffering, and it is obvious to every believer on the planet, then we

shouldn't make the connection and do everything we can to keep the suffering person from making the connection. Most of us see more of our sin during our suffering – I know I do – but that doesn't mean our sin was the cause of the suffering.

4. *Insight can work against faith.* By that I don't mean that we should be mindless stoics in our suffering. But when our primary goal is to discover a personal message about a specific deficiency in our lives, then we are resting in our human understanding rather than the plainly revealed character of God. Faith is our calling in suffering – faith in Jesus Christ. This is not a mindless leap into the unknown. It is a turn of heart, away from us and to Jesus. In our suffering we want to remember that God is, indeed, good and compassionate. Jesus' incarnation and his voluntary suffering culminating with the cross are the undeniable evidence. Then we trust him.

Some have heard the question, "What is God teaching you?" and, though not especially edifying, the question wasn't discouraging. If so, expect that this question was not the first one asked, and it was asked in the context of a secure relationship.

When in doubt, skip the question all together.

Replace it with something like this.

"How can I pray for you?"

Here is a hard working question. With it we are coming beside those who suffer, we are reminding them that God hears, we are asking them to consider the promises of God to them, and we are saying that they are going to be on our heart. If we get an answer such as "pray that God would leave me alone" or a roll of the eyes – something that suggests either anger or spiritual indifference – then we can propose something that is a promise of God, such as comfort or the knowledge of God's love and presence.

Even better than "How can I pray for you?" we could pray for the person on the spot. "How could I pray for you now?" And after that comes the most important part – we follow up. When we pray for someone we keep praying and we pray until we have witnessed God on the move.

And I didn't personally say the one about the legs. I am guilty for many other unedifying comments, but I didn't say the one about the legs. A "friend" said it. Really.