



DISCOVERY SERIES

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# When You Don't Know What To Say

Comforting Someone Who Is Suffering

# WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY

## CONTENTS

Awkward Moments . . . .	2
Father Of The Year . . . .	3
Satan's Accusations . . . .	4
Job's Faith Tested. . . . .	6
Comforting Someone Who Is Suffering . . . . .	14
What Do We Say? . . . .	19
Facing The Mystery Of Suffering. . . . .	30
Reaching Out . . . . .	31

An ancient proverb says, “Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; when he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive” (Prov. 17:28). A modern version of that thought says, “Better to keep your mouth closed and be thought a fool than to open it and remove all doubt.”

But what about those times in life when it's not about us? What about those awful moments when our friends are hurting, and everything in us wants to offer words of comfort and encouragement?

It's for those times that author Roy Clark draws on a lifetime of experience and pastoral counsel to help us in those moments when we don't know what to say.

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## AWKWARD MOMENTS

**M**y father loved desserts. One of his favorite stopping places in the 1940s was Freddy's Donuts. I was with him on a particular day when, after picking out a dozen donuts, he got in the car and told me that we had to make another stop on the way home. A fellow employee at the bank had passed away and we would be visiting the family at the funeral home.

When we pulled into the parking lot, Dad turned off the motor and just sat for what seemed like an eternity, though it was probably only 3 or 4 minutes. Finally, I asked Dad if he was going into the funeral home. Sobbing, he put his head on the steering wheel and said, "I don't know what to say."

Funeral homes were such a struggle for Dad. Because his mother had died when he was very young, perhaps death was a painful reminder of his loss of a mother's love. He eventually went in, but after he came back to the car he was quiet all the way home.

Like that situation with my father, there are many awkward and sometimes painful moments in life when we just don't know what to say. For example:

- A friend receives the news that her cancer is terminal. We know we should go to the hospital to see her, but we don't know what to say.
- A family in our church is enduring the agony of their son's suicide. Although they have returned to church, we avoid them because we are unsure how to approach them.
- A man's divorce is now

final and this is his first Sunday back at church. He stands in the corner of the foyer wondering if anyone will greet him. Dozens of people scurry past him without speaking because they don't know what to say. These cases remind me of Job's three friends who heard about his suffering and came to mourn with him and comfort him. They were quiet for 7 days, but when their silence was finally broken it became obvious that they simply didn't know what to say.

If you want to be a comforter who helps instead of hurts and engages instead of ignores, you should consider the first six chapters of Job's story. There we learn what to say—and what not to say—in those moments when an encouraging word is so desperately needed.

## FATHER OF THE YEAR

If there was an award in the ancient land of Uz for “Outstanding Father Of The East,” Job would have won the prize hands-down. His story opens with superlatives, painting a portrait of a man with a character of integrity who was living an ideal life. Financially, he was very wealthy. Spiritually, he walked with God and prayed regularly for his 10 children.

There would have been no need for comfort from his friends if that had been the whole picture. But there's always “the rest of the story.” The writer of the epic story of Job lifts the curtain on a conversation that took place in heaven between God and Satan. And after that dialogue, Job's life would never be the same.

## SATAN'S ACCUSATIONS

When we read the first chapter of Job, we are listening in on a conversation that took place in heaven thousands of years ago between God and Satan. In this supernatural dialogue, we learn much about the devil. In Revelation 12:10, Satan is called the “accuser of our brethren”—and that’s exactly what he was doing in Job 1. He had been wandering the earth observing the failures of a fallen human race.

God’s response? He invited His adversary to scrutinize Job’s life and to pay special attention to his character:

*Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who*

*fears God and shuns evil? (1:8).*

Backed into a corner, Satan fought back by charging God with playing favorites. He said that Job’s loyalty was not genuine but the result of God building a protective hedge of blessing around him and his family. Job had a great family, large flocks, and plenty of money. Who wouldn’t worship a God who gave him all he could ever dream of?

Satan’s challenge to God?

*Stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face! (1:11).*

Thousands of years later, we read the story without the necessary awe. We may have heard Job’s story so many times that our ears are numb to the shocking nature of God’s response. God allowed Satan to attack Job’s well-being. To be sure, He drew a boundary by prohibiting

the enemy from taking Job's life. But Satan was allowed enormous latitude.

As we read about Satan unleashing a storm of adversity into the life of Job, it's helpful to remember that we know something that Job did not. He didn't know anything about the heavenly conversation that occurred in Job 1. He was experiencing the collapse of a hedge of blessing because of a challenge between God and Satan. Philip Yancey portrays this in his book *Disappointment With God*:

It helps to think of the Book of Job as a mystery play, a "whodunit" detective story. Before the play itself begins, we in the audience get a sneak preview, as if we have showed up early for a press conference in which the director explains his work (chapters 1-2). He

relates the plot and describes the main characters, then tells us in advance who did what in the play, and why. In fact, he solves every mystery in the play except one: How will the main character respond? Will Job trust God or deny Him?

Later, when the curtain rises, we see only the actors on stage. Confined within the play, they have no knowledge of what the director has told us in the sneak preview. We know the answer to the "whodunit" questions, but the star detective, Job, does not. He spends all his time on stage trying to discover what we already know. . . .

What did Job do wrong? Nothing. He represents the very best of the species. Didn't God Himself call Job

“blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil”? Why, then, is Job suffering? Not for punishment. Far from it—he has been selected as the principal player in a great contest of the heavens (Zondervan, 1992, pp.163-64).

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*We often turn to the book of Job to try to find definitive answers to the issue of human suffering, but we won't find those answers there.*

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We often turn to the book of Job to try to find definitive answers to the issue of human suffering, but we won't find those answers there. Instead,

we discover a story about relentless faith in God in the midst of a Katrina-like hurricane of trouble.

## **JOB'S FAITH TESTED**

The phone rang about 10:00 one morning. Jim, our eldest son, was calling from Indiana. His voice quivered with emotion as he described how our youngest son, Dave, had walked into a store while a robbery was in progress. The details came out, between Jim's sobs, that Dave had been shot twice—once in each arm. He was in the hospital.

We drove to Indiana in record time. When we arrived at the hospital, we found Dave's room guarded by a policeman. Once we were allowed to enter the room, Dave shared his story. Sensing his

anxiety, we read Psalm 91 together for comfort and encouragement. Verses 10-11, however, gave us pause:

*No evil shall befall you, nor shall any plague come near your dwelling; for He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways.*

Dave pointed to his wounds and said, “What about these?” Our faith in a watchful God was being tested.

Job’s faith was likewise tested as an incredible series of losses came in rapid-fire succession and his world came crashing down on him.

So, what did he lose?

## **HIS POSSESSIONS**

Job was referred to as “the greatest of all the people of the East” (1:3), and the writer of Job tells us why he was worthy of that title. In the ancient world, a person’s

wealth was determined by the size of his flocks and herds. And nobody had more than this man—7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 1,000 oxen, and 500 donkeys. Job must have had enormous pastureland to care for these 11,500 animals. But the story indicates that it was all wiped out in just one day. Messengers came to Job and told him:

*The Sabeans raided [the oxen and donkeys] and took them away . . . . The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them . . . . The Chaldeans formed three bands, raided the camels and took them away (1:15-17).*

Job’s loss reminds me of what happened when Wall Street’s richest stock speculators were financially wiped out in a matter of hours in the Stock Market

collapse of October 1929. Some began jumping out of office windows. Former millionaires found themselves standing in bread lines. And life was turned upside down for all.

In our day of mergers, outsourcing, and downsizing, many people find a “pink slip” in their workplace mailbox or pay envelope telling them that they have been let go from their jobs. In every such case, believers who are confronted with these dilemmas are faced with a very real test of their faith in God.

The loss of wealth and possessions, however, was not the worst of it for Job.

## **HIS CHILDREN**

In addition to his large flocks and herds, Job also had a large family of 10 children—7 sons and 3 daughters. It appears that these grown children were close, because they

regularly got together for a feast. Some believe that each of the 7 sons had a specific day of the week to host the daily feast (1:4).

Job, however, was concerned that his children might sin against God during their feasting. So he would get up early in the morning to pray for all his children and offer burnt offerings on their behalf (1:5), serving as the family priest.

During one of those family feasts, a tragedy occurred and all 10 of Job’s children were killed. A messenger brought the news:

*Suddenly a great wind came from across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead (1:19).*

Job was devastated. His world was coming apart. First, his wealth had

evaporated, and now all of his children had been taken.

Several years ago, I received a phone call from a leader in the church I was pastoring in Michigan. There had been a terrible accident involving his sister and her family. It was a rainy Wednesday night, and she had been driving her three daughters to church. As she was pulling into the church parking lot, another car collided with theirs. All three daughters were killed, but the mother had survived. My friend was asked to give a eulogy for his three nieces. He wondered if I would help him write out what he should say.

My wife and I attended the funeral. These grieving parents, like Job, had lost all of their children. Hundreds of people were weeping. It was on that afternoon that I began to understand

the depth of Job's loss.

Just recently, during a Sunday evening worship service, I thought again of Job and the loss of his children. We were singing a chorus written by Beth and Matt Redman titled "Blessed Be Your Name." The words we sang reflected the mystery of such a loss:

Blessed be Your name,  
when the sun's  
shining down on me,  
when the world's  
"all as it should be,"  
blessed be Your name.  
Blessed be Your name,  
on the road  
marked with suffering,  
though there's pain  
in the offering,  
blessed be Your name.

The songwriters must have read the story of Job before writing the chorus:

You give and take away,  
You give and take away,  
My heart will choose to say,  
"Lord, blessed be  
Your name."

This was the amazing response of Job to the staggering loss of his 10 children. We read in Job 1:20-21,

*Then Job arose, tore his robe, and shaved his head; and he fell to the ground and worshiped. And he said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."*

When I read those words of almost desperate trust, I have to say, "Job, you are a better man than I am." Why? From 1963 to 1979, the family of my first wife was stricken with cancer. I lost a mother-in-law, then a sister-in-law, then a father-in-law, and then, finally, in 1979 my wife was taken by cancer. An entire family gone. They were all Christians—even church leaders.

Just as Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray in His hour of agony, I had been on my knees pleading for God to remove the cup of suffering in my family—but they all died. In all honesty, I didn't respond with the confident trust of Job. I just kept crying, "Why?" That's a common question asked by those who are suffering, and by their family members as well.

Job passed the first tests of his trust in God, so the enemy decided to turn up the heat with more adverse events.

## **HIS HEALTH**

After the loss of his possessions and his children, Job faced the next challenge to his faith—an attack on his health. This began on another day, with another dialogue and yet another charge from Satan:

*Satan answered the Lord and said, "Skin for skin! Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life. But stretch out Your hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will surely curse You to Your face!" (2:4-5).*

The Lord gave Satan permission to touch Job's health on the condition that he would spare his life.

*So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and struck Job with painful boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took for himself a potsherd with which to scrape himself while he sat in the midst of the ashes (vv.7-8).*

David Atkinson writes of the enemy's newest attack: Sickness is added to all the other trials Job has to face. With God's

permission, Job is afflicted by Satan with this intolerably loathsome condition. The painful sores (2:7) from the soles of his feet to the top of his head are variously described as a sort of leprosy or elephantiasis. He takes himself out to where the lepers go: the ash heap outside the city, where he scrapes at his sores with a piece of broken pottery. He who was rich now becomes poor (*The Message Of Job*, InterVarsity Press, 1991, p.24).

You may have a loved one who is suffering. And even though he may not have been tested with the loss of possessions or children, perhaps he's currently facing the loss of his health. He may have had a checkup and anxiously waited for the report. When the call came from the doctor's office

indicating they found something, he probably asked three searching questions:

- Why me?
- Why this?
- Why now?

Perhaps your friend is now in treatment for cancer, but each time a chemo or radiation session is scheduled, he feels the echo of some of the psalmist's questions in Psalm 77:

*Will the Lord cast off forever? And will He be favorable no more? Has His mercy ceased forever? Has His promise failed forevermore? (vv.7-8).*

He's asking questions because he's being tested. That's a natural response, not only for those who are being tested but for their loved ones as well.

This leads to an even more personal test that is added to Job's suffering.

## **HIS MARRIAGE**

Job's wife must have been terribly confused as she watched this truckload of losses being dumped on their family. After all, her husband was a good and honorable man. He was a prayer warrior, provider, and protector. Why should these tragedies befall someone like Job?

Michael Horton, in his book *Too Good To Be True*, shares his personal confusion as he witnessed the mounting suffering of his godly parents. He writes:

At the age of 78, James Horton had been diagnosed with a benign brain tumor that required immediate surgery. . . . This surgery failed, and before long we realized that my father would not recover. . . . The Gibraltar of the family, my mother, fussed over his bedside,

nervously fluffing his pillows at 15-minute intervals. . . . Then, just 2 months before my father's death, Mom suffered a massive stroke while I was driving her from her sister's funeral, where she had delivered a moving eulogy. This strong and compassionate woman who had given her life to disadvantaged city kids and abandoned seniors was now herself dependent on others. . . . In my darker moments, I wondered why God would allow them to experience their worst scenarios in the last act of their play . . . . Shouldn't people whose lives were all about giving to others, especially to the elderly, have a break when it comes to how *they* leave this life? (Zondervan, 2006, pp.12-13).

This same questioning spirit must have been haunting Job's wife as she walked out to the ash heap one day and saw the pitiful sight of Job with all his sores. It was just too much, so she simply said: "Curse God and die!" (2:9).

The famous British pastor G. Campbell Morgan commented that only those who have stood beside the bed of a suffering loved one will fully understand the heart of Job's wife. It's a cry from someone bonded by love to the one who is sick. It says, "I can't stand to see you suffer one more day."

I believe this is the most severe test Job faced. The enemy put the words of the challenge between God and Satan into the mouth of someone Job loved. How clever. The angels must have leaned over the parapets of heaven breathlessly to see if Job would finally cave in.

But Job responded to his anguished wife by saying:

*You speak as one of the foolish women speaks.*

*Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity? (2:10).*

Job's wife may have been angry at God, but we need to remember that God can handle our anger. This honest exchange of emotions between Job and his wife underscores the credibility of this story. Yes, people in the Bible got angry with God—and with one another.

It must have been inexpressibly difficult for Job to lose his possessions, his family, and his health. At first he responded in faith, but then he spiraled downward in despair.

When we have a friend who is suffering and in despair, what do we do? What do we say?

## COMFORTING SOMEONE WHO IS SUFFERING

Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, learned about Job's struggles and made plans to see him. When they found him on the village ash heap, Job must have been feeling desperately alone. Initially, his friends did some good things (2:12-13). But later in the story, Job calls them "miserable comforters" (16:2). Let's look, however, at several positive lessons we can learn from these men about how to comfort someone who is suffering.

### GIVE YOUR PRESENCE

*Now when Job's three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, each one came from his own place . . . For*

*they had made an appointment together to come and mourn with him, and to comfort him (2:11).*

It cost Job's friends something to come to him in his suffering—money for travel, a change in their schedule, and time for the three of them to make a coordinated connection in some village. All of this required effort and expense. Still, they came to see Job.

They remind me of the story recorded in Mark 2. This time it is four men who are ready to help an unnamed friend who is crippled. Max Lucado pictures the New Testament scenario in his book *He Still Moves Stones*:

His feet hung like ornaments on the ends of his legs. . . . He could see his limbs, but he couldn't feel them. . . . Someone had to wash

his face and bathe his body. He couldn't blow his nose or go on a walk. . . . "What he needs is a new body," any man in half his mind would say (Thomas Nelson, 1999, p.108).

When Jesus returned to Capernaum for a second visit, four friends of this crippled man came to him and said, "We're taking you to Jesus!" And nothing stopped them from their mission. Their strategy? "If we can't get through the crowds, we will just tear the roof apart to get you to Jesus." They carried him to Jesus on a pallet, but he walked home on new legs—and with his sins forgiven.

Your decision to visit a hurting friend may not be easy. But he or she needs someone near who cares. So, if the Spirit of God prompts you to go, you must go—even if it's inconvenient. Job's friends

sensed a pull to go to the side of their friend, and they responded.

## **SIT IN SILENCE**

*When they raised their eyes from afar, and did not recognize him, they lifted their voices and wept; and each one tore his robe and sprinkled dust on his head toward heaven. So they sat down with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his grief was very great (2:12-13).*

Job's friends expressed their grief in a typically Middle Eastern way—weeping, tearing their robes, and sprinkling dust on their heads. Then they remained silent by his side for 7 days and 7 nights!

It's hard for us—with our 21st-century addiction to

music, conversation, TV, radio—to imagine that week of silence with Job and his friends. But there's nothing wrong with silence. When face-to-face with suffering, you don't need to be afraid of silence. You're not going as a "fixer" or a theological expert. You're going as someone who cares.

Silence can encourage a bonding of hearts with the one who is hurting. Many people who have been in pain have testified that the most memorable visit they received was from a visitor who hugged them, sat in silence, and left by simply saying, "I love you!"

Stanley Hauerwas wrote a book titled *Suffering Presence* in which he talks beautifully about the ministry of silence. His friend Bob was trying to recover from the grief of his mother's suicide, and Stanley dreaded the visit to his home. Like

so many others, he simply didn't know what he should say. Instead, he merely sat quietly with Bob.

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In retrospect, Hauerwas became convinced that his presence alone was what his friend wanted and needed most. There were no futile attempts to explain the psychology of the tragedy of suicide. There was no theological speculation or debate. There was simply a person

choosing to be there—acting silently as a balm of compassion to his wounded friend's heart. That's one of the things Job's friends did right—and we can too.

## **LISTEN**

Following Middle Eastern customs of courtesy, Job's visitors waited for their suffering friend to speak first. After a week of silence, Job finally began to talk from his heart (3:1). And they listened.

Chapter 3 records the tragic reality: Job wished he were dead. I'm glad this is a part of the story of Job. If Job 1:21 ("The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord") is an expression of heroic *spirituality*, then Job 3 is an honest cry of despair revealing Job's *humanity*. Job asked, "Why?" seven times in this chapter (3:11,12,16,20,23). Our

hearts resonate with that word because everyone who suffers is prone to ask “Why?”

How deep was Job’s despair? It was serious enough for him to curse his own birthday (v.1). It was deep enough for him to wish he had died at birth (v.11). It was painful enough for him to long for death (v.21). After all these expressions of his deeply felt death wish, the closing words of Job 3 reveal the twin emotions of depression and anger. Job reveals this anger at God when he says:

*Why is life given  
to those with no  
future, those God  
has surrounded  
with difficulties?  
(v.23 NLT).*

Job’s friends listened for a time to his complaints and questions and statements of despair. Unfortunately, though, it seems that instead of

hearing the turmoil in his heart, these friends were busy composing theological answers to his problem.

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Men are typically known as “fixers,” and Job’s three friends were determined to fix his dilemma. But they missed the heart issue. I understand this. There was a time early in my first marriage when my wife was struggling with some things, and we would frequently be up late into the night. Sometimes,

like Job's visitors, I would be "tuned out" as I mentally composed a list of verses I was convinced would fix her problem. It took me years to begin listening to her heart.

If you were with Job and listening to his words, how would you help him? If you heard his depression, confusion, anger, and fear, what would you say? Would you diagnose and dissect? Or, after you heard his full range of emotions, would you simply say, "I don't have an answer to the complex problem of human suffering. But I will listen to your heart. I care deeply for you in this season of pain. I'm here for you!"

Listening to your friend and choosing your words thoughtfully would be far better than the caustic words that began to assault Job in chapter 4.

## WHAT DO WE SAY?

Job's friends had been with him for a week. They wept and they listened—but they missed the heart of this suffering man sitting on his ash heap. He was broken emotionally and physically. Now the three friends who set out to do good and offer comfort became examples of what *not* to say or do.

## DON'T PLAY GOD

Eliphaz was the first friend to speak. He started his discourse by acknowledging that Job had helped a lot of people with good counsel (4:3-4). But then he quickly accused Job of not being teachable. He greeted the sufferer with a rebuke:

*But now [suffering] comes upon you, and you are weary; it touches you, and you are troubled (4:5).*

After the rebuke, Eliphaz made another major mistake, and in so doing he became the forerunner of thousands of others who stumble into this error. He played God in Job's life. Listen to him:

*Remember now, who ever perished being innocent? Or where were the upright ever cut off? Even as I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same (4:7-8).*

Eliphaz took the very deep and complex issue of human suffering and reduced the answer to a neat little package: "You're suffering because you have sinned."

In one sense, he was right. We do live in a moral universe. The general teaching that we reap what we sow is certainly taught in Psalm 1 and Galatians 6:7, "Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap." But

in another sense, he was wrong. Eliphaz wrongly concluded that *all* suffering in our lives is a result of our sin. He tried to squeeze Job into his box by accusing him of being a secret sinner in his private life.

Dr. A. T. Pierson, writing on the problem of suffering in *The Bible And Spiritual Life*, reminds us that there are no easy answers:

- Some suffering comes because we are living in a fallen world.
- Sometimes trouble comes because God is building our character.
- Still other struggles come to us just because we are Christians.
- Sometimes our suffering, like Paul's thorn in the flesh, is teaching us to rely on God's power.

Often when people are suffering and confused and grappling with what they have been taught about God's love and their own

personal tragedy, we feel that something needs to be said. We think some explanation needs to be given to alleviate their suffering. But we need to refrain from attempting to explain the inexplicable.

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When we try to provide answers that only God Himself can give, we are playing God.

There's an old hymn

that begins, "If we could see beyond today as God can see." But we can't. So, spur-of-the-moment, easy answers to try to sort out the confusion of those who are suffering only add to the wounds of the wounded! We must guard against crossing over the line to the point of playing God. Only our sovereign and loving Lord knows the reasons for someone's suffering. He's the only One who knows His purpose and plan.

Some modern disciples of Eliphaz are in our 21st-century churches. Although they are well-meaning, they can be seen in hospitals playing God and explaining to people why the roof has caved in on them. They quote Scripture to patients on their beds of suffering and attempt to unravel mysteries. Wouldn't it be wiser just to let God be God?

Let's not act as if we

know God's mind about the reasons for someone else's suffering. Don't play God.

## **DON'T BE SUPERFICIAL**

Eliphaz continued to tell Job that the simple truth was that the innocent do not suffer. He described a vision he had in the night which proved why Job was suffering—he was guilty of sin.

*Now a word was secretly brought to me, and my ear received a whisper of it. In disquieting thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falls on men, fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones shake. Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair on my body stood up. . . . Then I heard a voice saying: "Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can a man be more*

*pure than his Maker?" (4:12-17).*

Job, who had experienced losses of immense magnitude, did not need counsel based on dreams and visions. He was in need of solid comfort—not superficial, cookie-cutter slogans.

On April 16, 2007, the US experienced the worst mass shooting in its recent history. Virginia Tech, a university situated in the rural city of Blacksburg, Virginia, is in the most tranquil setting you could ever imagine. Yet, as Tech was undergoing a normal spring morning of classes, the cable news channels began to bristle with "breaking news." A troubled young student, with a history of emotional problems, entered two buildings with guns and fired off some 170 rounds. He killed 32 students and faculty before turning a gun

on himself. This shocking act of violence shattered a peaceful Monday morning, and produced unimaginable grief and shock.

Soon the call came out for counselors to bolster the campus staff and community. Hearts were broken and comforting words were needed. There was no time for superficiality or surface answers to people's deep questions about pain, suffering, and evil in the world.

Our friends who are suffering don't need our superficiality either. Our motives may be admirable, but a grieving heart is untouched by slogans like: "God knows best," or "She's far better off now," or "God must have taken your child because He wanted him as His angel," or even "Just remember that Romans 8:28 tells us that all things work together for good."

If you really want to know what to say to someone who is going through a storm, read the insight that Job himself gave his visiting friends.

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## **REFLECT HOPE**

Job wanted reasons to hope. He asked his friends:

*What strength do I have, that I should hope? (6:11).*

At the lowest point in his life, he provided us with a vivid word picture

of this need in his heart:  
*My brothers have dealt deceitfully like a brook, like the streams of the brooks that pass away, which are dark because of the ice, and into which the snow vanishes. When it is warm, they cease to flow; when it is hot, they vanish from their place. The paths of their way turn aside, they go nowhere and perish. The caravans of Tema look, the travelers of Sheba hope for them. They are disappointed (6:15-20).*

Job said his three friends disappointed him like a dried-up brook. Having lived in the Middle East, I can picture this. Every morning my wife and I would take an early walk to beat the heat. We would pass a dried-up brook like the one Job described. He needed refreshing words of hope, but what he heard was as dry as a desert.

Refreshing water was his expectation, but disappointment became his experience.

Pastor Bill Hybels, in his book *Just Walk Across The Room* (Zondervan, 2006, pp.162-63), underscores the need for the hopeless to hear words of hope. He offers these suggestions:

- To those filled with shame, “Grace and forgiveness can come your way.”
- To those bound up in destructive habits, “When the Son sets you free, you’ll be free indeed.”
- To the weak, “Strength from God—the Strength-Giver—can be yours for the asking.”
- To the weary, “Jesus promises rest for your soul.”
- To the poor, richness of spirit.
- To the lacking, provision in due time.

- To the grieving, consolation and comfort.
- To the sick and dying, eternal life and new bodies in the life hereafter.

Those aren't superficial words that we should throw out as easy answers to alleviate another's pain. Words like those, when hope has just about vanished, can be a priceless gift to the sufferer if shared sensitively at the appropriate time.

In the middle of the dark and depressing dialogue with his friends, Job burst out of his personal darkness with some of his own bright words of hope. We may want to share these words as we minister with compassion to our friends who are suffering. What Job declared is the ultimate word of hope:

*I know that my Redeemer*

*lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another (19:25-27).*

That's a passage worth filing away in our memory bank and leaning upon heavily in our ministry to those who are hurting.

Another Scripture that can be helpful during times when our loved ones are suffering and questioning God is Matthew 11:28. Issues of life, death, and loss can push people to challenge the wisdom and love of our Father in heaven. But Jesus extends this invitation to them, which you may want to share when the time is right:

*Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (NIV).*

When those who are suffering run to Jesus' strong embrace, they will discover the rest that God has provided through the cross—an assured future in heaven and a walk with God on their earthly journey. The most help we can give our friends when they are going through difficult times is to place them in the arms of our wise and caring God. That's where hope is found.

## **SPEAK KINDLY**

Job also told his three counselors something else he needed:

*To him who is afflicted,  
kindness should be  
shown by his friend  
(6:14).*

Job 6 gives us an honest look into Job's heart. The man who had been identified as "the greatest of all the people of the East" (1:3) became that land's greatest sufferer.

After listening to the painful accusations of his visitors, he longed for words that were kind but truthful, compassionate but honest.

You have to search long and hard to find a kind word spoken by any of Job's three friends in their lengthy dialogues. The closest expression of kindness I can find is in Job 4 when they acknowledged that in the past his words had supported those who had stumbled and that he had strengthened faltering knees (vv.3-4).

But Job yearned for far more because his pain was deep and loneliness was settling in like the early morning fog. Listen to him:

*He has removed my  
brothers far from me, and  
my acquaintances are  
completely estranged from  
me. . . . Those who dwell  
in my house . . . count me  
as a stranger (19:13,15).*

No wonder Job was longing for some kindness. In effect, he was saying, “I need kindness—not arguments.”

I suffered the loss of my first wife in 1979. As she was dying of cancer, her final months on earth were spent in a hospital bed in our Indiana home. Hospice cared for her on a daily basis. Additionally, friends found a way to show love to our family. Meals were delivered, phone calls were made, and cards were sent. Most of the personal notes on the cards of encouragement helped. People who had been counseled and helped by my wife before she got sick took the time to express their gratitude. Their words were kind and hopeful—the sort of words Job was longing for but never heard from his friends.

So if you desire to be a concerned friend

who delivers kind words to someone who desperately needs them, what can you say? Words from your heart are best. For example, tell him what a good friend he has been to you. Share an unforgettable memory of a time you were together. Tell him he can count on you for anything he or his family needs. Say, “I love you!” Let him know he can call you anytime. Share the ways he has helped you in your walk of faith. Express your caring heart.

There’s a time to recall good memories and provide spiritual hope for the future. But there’s also a time to be courageous and honest with people who are suffering.

## **SHARE HONESTLY**

In 6:25, Job confronts his accusers and demands straight talk—“right words.”

*How forceful are right words! But what does your arguing prove?*

He wanted to know what they had found in his life that would be the cause for such an intense degree of suffering. Where had he spoken falsely?

When our loved ones are suffering, they may have serious questions about what is happening to them. Because tragedy will take them on an emotional roller-coaster ride, it's important to listen, to be sensitive to their feelings, and to allow them to lead the conversation. It could also be helpful to cautiously yet courageously ask what questions they are struggling with. Do they have doubts and fears of the unknown?

Patients who know their illness is terminal have confessed that they want to talk with someone about their condition and how they are feeling. They want a friend who will ask them about their fears and, yes,

about dying. Ask God to show you if you should elevate the conversation to that level of honesty.

Suppose the pain your loved one is experiencing is the agony of divorce. You can be available with a listening ear and a compassionate heart. But you can also go to another level. Job said that honest words can be painful (6:25). And Solomon wrote, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Prov. 27:6). So what kind of words could be considered honest in the first several months of divorce recovery? Words like:

- "Right now you're in an extremely vulnerable position physically and emotionally. Please guard your heart, your mind, and your body."
- "It might be best not to make any quick decisions about

- finances or housing.”
- “You’ll want to be ready for the confusion in the lives of your children when they experience visitation rights.”

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Those who are in a painful situation need the honest, helpful words of a true friend. Tiptoeing around the truth often creates unnecessary tension.

I remember when our children were young and

their grandmother was dying of cancer. We packed up our kids and traveled many miles to make a difficult visit. What made it so hard was that no one had talked honestly and openly with her about her illness and impending death. Discussions at her bedside dodged the truth and were kept on a superficial level. There was an “elephant in the room” that nobody wanted to talk about.

Downstairs in the kitchen, however, honest conversations about dying were held in whispered voices. Our 7-year-old son heard the words, “Grandma is dying.” And in his childhood innocence, he went upstairs to her bedroom and simply said, “Grandpa says you’re going to die.”

God used that little boy to be the truth-teller.

Although not in the best way, the code of silence was broken. Tears flowed, hugs were given, and we could at last talk honestly. We had entered the world of reality and could deal with the issues at hand in an open, loving, and sensitive way.

Children can get away with blurting things out. We, on the other hand, need the Lord's help to learn how to give honest words to help our suffering friends in the midst of their difficult days.

## FACING THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING

Life is marked by events of suffering, both great and small. Some (like Hurricane Katrina) are the byproduct of a natural disaster impacting entire communities with loss, grief, and sorrow. Others (like the Holocaust) are the fruit of human evil that has

a profound effect on the world. Still others are intensely private, affecting an individual person or a single family.

In all these cases, a common thread is found—the struggle to understand suffering and why it happens.

I wish that the closing chapters of Job had the answer. If you read the book of Job up to chapter 38, when God finally speaks, you expect some kind of definitive answer to the problem of human suffering. Instead, the story takes a sharp turn. God doesn't give answers, He just asks questions—science questions, in fact, covering the fields of zoology, astronomy, and meteorology, among others.

Job stood before almighty God in dumbfounded silence. He wanted to know “Why?” but God

responded with “Who.”

The lesson for Job (and for us) is this: *If God can run the universe in such a spectacular way, we can trust His love and wisdom with the inexplicable and puzzling mysteries of life.*

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***If God can run the universe in such a spectacular way, we can trust His love and wisdom with the inexplicable and puzzling mysteries of life.***

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Read Job 38 and 39 when you're facing the mystery of suffering. And when you're listening to the questions of those who are going through difficult times, trust God to be the ultimate Comforter.

## REACHING OUT

**J**ob's story ends with his three friends being rebuked by the Lord and with his own amazing restoration. He prayed for his miserable comforters who were such a disappointment to him. Then the Lord turned Job's circumstances around by giving him "twice as much as he had before" (42:10). Ten more children were born and their happy squeals filled the rooms of his plantation. What a great ending to 41 chapters filled with pain!

So how does the ending of Job's story help us as we minister to a friend who has suffered great loss? Job got his flocks back and a new family. Does this indicate that we can promise people a happy ending?

The great faith chapter of Hebrews 11 can help us

answer this: Some “escaped the edge of the sword” (v.34) and some “were slain with the sword” (v.37). Just as there is a mystery in suffering, there is a mystery in recovery.

We don’t know what the Lord will do in the future for our friend or loved one who is struggling. But we can be an encourager who takes the time to listen and to use words of hope, kindness, and honesty.

So in the hour of someone’s need, go to the one who is struggling. Go with confidence. Go with a listening ear. And go with Jesus’ words of promise spurring you on:

*“For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I*

*was in prison and you came to Me.” Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” And the King will answer and say to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (Mt. 25:35-40).*

As you reach out to hurting people with the compassion and care of Christ, you are extending His own love. In fact, as you serve the suffering, you serve Him.



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