

Chapter Three: Counseling Those in Pain

Your friend is going through some terrible physical or emotional suffering, or is overcome with grief over sin or some great loss, and comes to you for help. She does not have a specific behavior that needs to change; she just needs to know how to handle it. How do you give biblical counsel?

Those who are suffering have two needs: comfort and strength. Some parts of the suffering can be alleviated; others cannot. *Comfort* soothes and restores joy in the areas where pain can be reduced or eliminated and *strengthening* enables and empowers the person to endure the portion of the pain that must continue.

Comfort

Definition

The most common Greek word for encouragement (*parakaleo*) appears in the New Testament in a context of sorrow nine times. In that context it means “to comfort or console.” Comfort reduces or eliminates the person’s pain.

Sorrow is a disruption of joy. A person is walking along the path of joy and some painful ordeal slams into him and knocks him off that path down into the deep, dark pit of sorrow. Comforting means coming alongside the person in that pit, taking him by the arm, and helping him make his way up the steep trail toward renewed joy.

The “coming alongside” part is crucial. The word *parakaleo* literally means *to approach*, or *to be next to* the person. It is a word that speaks of personal nearness. Comfort is not merely helping a person get back to joy; it is helping the person *by being near him*.

The person who is in the torment and agony of sorrow is often unable to call to mind anything comforting. He may have a great deal of information in his brain that would be comforting or encouraging, but in the pit of sorrow that information just seems to be locked up in some remote, inaccessible place. God’s design in times like that is for a brother or sister in Christ to come close and speak words of tenderness, hope, compassion and instruction. Even the trained theologian, in times of pain, needs someone else to come near and tell him things he already knows. The suffering saint needs help doing the hard work of putting his current, specific sorrow into perspective so he can apply the appropriate balm from God’s Word to this particular wound. Not just any principle from Scripture will comfort. He needs the right medicine for this ailment, and pain has a way of clouding the mind to the point where the person is unable to call to mind the principles he needs from the Word of God. Never hesitate to speak even the most basic and elementary principles of comfort from God’s Word to the suffering saint.

Comforting a person requires a tender, gentle heart.

1 Thessalonians 2:7,11-12 ... we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. ... [W]e dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

First, Paul compares himself to a gentle mother of little children, then four verses later he uses himself as an example of encouraging, comforting, and exhorting others as a loving father deals with his own children. There is no greater illustration of compassion than a loving parent who is deeply moved by the suffering of a suffering child. This is our model for comforting one another.

One key element of comfort is refreshment.

2 Corinthians 7:13 By all this we are encouraged. In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you.

For Timothy, comfort came in the form of refreshment. The term “refreshed” (*anapauo*) is a beautiful word; it literally means “to be made to rest.” Sometimes a person simply needs rest. In his spirit, he may be fighting, straining, struggling, embroiled in turmoil and strife - close to the breaking point, and more than anything else he needs someone to come alongside him and speak *refreshing* words from Scripture that enable him to draw near to the one who said, Come to me all you who are weary ... and I will give you rest. (Mt. 11:28)

Resistance

Comforting the afflicted is difficult for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the person’s own resistance. Ironically, there is something in us that tends to resist comfort when we are in the pit of sorrow.

Genesis 37:35 All [Jacob's] sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son."

Psalms 77:2 ...my soul refused to be comforted.

Jeremiah 31:15 ...Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted

The beginning point of comfort, then, is helping the person become willing to be comforted. This calls for great wisdom and sensitivity because grief is appropriate for a time and should not be taken away from the person prematurely.

Proverbs 25:20 Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day ... is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.

Grieving can be like a garment. After a horrible loss there is a period of time when the soul just wants to wrap up in a blanket of sorrow and stay there for a while. That is God's design. But it is also His design for times of refreshment and healing to come. There is a time when we must let go of that garment and begin the long, hard trek back up out of the canyon of despair toward the path of joy.

The Motive for Comfort: Compassion

Another factor that makes the ministry of comfort difficult is that it requires taking upon oneself a measure of suffering. The counselor must be willing to leave the path of joy and jump down into the dark pit of despair to come alongside a needy, broken sufferer and actually bear a portion of the load of this suffering.

This is the purpose of compassion. Only a compassionate heart is a powerful enough motivation to drive us to the heavy lifting of the ministry of comfort.

COLOSSIANS 3:12 ... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Compassion is a powerful motivation because it is painful. Compassion is the pain a person feels on someone else's behalf that compels a response of mercy. The Greek word for compassion is *splagkna*, which literally means *entrails*. The pain of compassion is felt in the midsection. You see someone in great pain and you feel it in your stomach. Compassion makes you a partner in suffering with the person.

The physical pain of compassion is caused by the secretion of acids that irritate the lining of the intestines. Why does the body inflict pain on itself simply because someone else is suffering? It is a God-given mechanism to assist us in loving one another.¹ The Creator ordered our physiology to express His great heart of compassion. Our capacity for compassion is one of the ways that we are created in His image.

Pain motivates. A person with a rock in his shoe may be too lazy to stop and get it out if the rock is not bothering him. But if it is causing sharp pain he will be motivated to stop and remove it. God instilled in our bodies a pain mechanism called "compassion" to help motivate us to be willing to remove the "rock" from our brother's shoe as we begin to feel the pain ourselves.

Compassion arises when one places himself in close proximity to the one suffering and allows that suffering to penetrate his heart. The temptation for the counselor, then, will be to avoid getting that close (and thus bypass compassion). When a brother at church is being plowed under by a devastating trial that has no quick fix, the Christ-like counselor will resist the urge to remain at arm's length, pat him on the back, say "I'm praying for you," and sail out the door without giving it another thought. But God calls us to *clothe* ourselves with compassion. (Col.3:12)

Attempting to comfort a sorrowing person if your heart is unmoved by the suffering will almost certainly fail. Enter into the pain as much as possible so you feel something of the grief before you attempt to offer advice.

How to Comfort

Find Comfort for Yourself from God

Once you feel the proper compassion, then what? As you watch the tears stream down and hear the heartbreaking heaves of sobbing from someone who has lost a loved one or has been crushed by some unbearable sorrow, what is the procedure for comforting that troubled soul? The answer is in 2 Corinthians 1.

2 Corinthians 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the

¹ One wonders how the evolutionist would explain how such a process evolved. It seems that compassion would be the last thing that would make one member of a particular species more likely to outlive those with whom he is in competition for food, mates, etc. for survival. Compassion promotes the survival of the weak.

comfort we ourselves have received from God.

That passage is often misunderstood. Many have taken it to mean if a person suffers some calamity, that person will then be enabled to comfort others who suffer that same calamity. Since he has been through a similar trial he will be able to empathize, and will automatically be able to bring comfort to others who suffer the same kind of hardship.

That is not what the passage says, nor is it even true. There are plenty of people who have lost a loved one or who have been diagnosed with cancer or who have suffered terrible heartbreak in a relationship who have no idea how to comfort someone else who goes through the same thing.

Furthermore, the passage does not restrict the comfort to those who suffer the same kind of trial. Just the opposite – it promises that we will be able to comfort those “in any trouble.”

Why is it that some people who have suffered are able to comfort fellow-sufferers, and others are not? It is because the ability to comfort is not automatic just because you have suffered. The ability to comfort others comes *only when you have received comfort from God*. Look at the text again:

2 Corinthians 1:4 ...we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

The person who suffers but fails to receive comfort from God will not have any increased ability to help others find comfort in God.

Many people never do find comfort in God. They suffer some terrible trial and then drown their sorrows in some indulgence or distraction, or they find comfort from some other earthly source, but they do not know how to take their Bible off to some quiet place and seek hard after God and receive comfort from Him.

My 10-year-old niece, Bree, once took in a stray kitten that was close to death and nursed it back to health. The cat became the family pet. They named it Sugar, and Bree loved it. Morning, noon, and night Bree would say something about how cute Sugar was. One day Bree was horrified to see a dog attack and kill Sugar. Afterward Bree told her mom she knew it was God’s will, but still she was just crushed by it. The first thing she did was to go into her room and open her Bible and read Psalm 34 about how God is close to the brokenhearted. A couple nights later they were praying with her and she said, “God, thank you for giving me that feeling You gave me in my heart when I asked You for comfort.” There are thousands of people around the world who watched their beloved pet die who have no idea how to show another fellow-sufferer how to find comfort from God because they never received comfort from God. If you suffer a loss, those are not the people you want to come knocking on your door. You want someone like little Bree, who will be able to come alongside you in your grief, show compassion because she understands what it is like, but then not stop at showing compassion, but to also put a Bible in your hand and say – “Here’s what God showed me”:

Psalm 34:18 The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

“And after God reminded me of that verse I prayed and poured out my heart to Him and asked Him for comfort. And when I did I felt a feeling of peace inside me. And even though I was still sad, I could feel God comforting me and giving me strength and hope, and I could tell the presence of God was close to me, and He was drawing near and touching my heart and healing it.”

Those who suffer a loss need more than just someone who can empathize. They need someone who has succeeded in finding comfort from God and who can take them by the hand and show them how to find it. Giving comfort that ought to work in theory very often does not work. What does work is showing a brother or sister a tried and true process of seeking comfort from God that has worked in your life.

How to Find Comfort from God

So how do you find comfort from God in your sorrow? Comfort comes when God grants an experience of the nearness of His presence.²

Zephaniah 3:17 The LORD your God is with you ... he will quiet you with his love

² God is everywhere present, however His presence is not the same in every place, nor is it revealed to man in every place. God observes and knows everything (Jer.23:24), and is upholding and sustaining every molecule in the universe (Col.1:17). Most of the time, however, when Scripture speaks of God's presence it refers not to God's omnipresence in general, or His presence to know or to sustain, but specifically to His favorable presence to bless. God's presence to bless is where God reveals His presence in a favorable way – a way that enables His people to enjoy the benefits of His presence. It is in this sense that God is not present with the wicked. His favorable presence to bless is far from them (Pr.15:29). The great majority of instances in which Scripture speaks of God being present or not present the reference is specifically to God's favorable presence to bless. For that reason, that is how the word "presence" will be used in this book.

Hosea 5:15 ... they will seek my face (presence);³ in their misery they will earnestly seek me." 6:1 Come, let us return to the LORD... he will bind up our wounds. 2 ... he will restore us, that we may live in his presence.

It is when we experience the nearness of God's presence that our troubled hearts are quieted and our wounds are bound up and healed and joy is restored.

Psalms 16:11 You reveal the path of life to me; in Your presence is abundant joy; in Your right hand are eternal pleasures.⁴

Psalms 21:6 Surely you have granted him eternal blessings and made him glad with the joy of your presence.

Psalms 4:6-7 Many are asking, "Who can show us any good?" Let the light of your face (presence) shine upon us, O LORD. ⁷ You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound.

Conversely, when God withdraws His presence (or turns His face away) the result is anxiety, sorrow, wasting or melting away, dismay, and internal anguish (Psalms 32:1-2, 88:14-15, 30:7, Isa.64:7).

The comforting, soul-satisfying, joy-producing effect of God's presence is one of His attributes. It is part of His nature, which means it would be impossible for a person to experience the favorable presence of God and not be comforted, refreshed, and filled with joy. Unlike earthly pleasures, it is not a matter of taste. No matter who the person is, it is impossible for a human soul to experience the nearness of the favorable presence of God and not be fully satisfied. (Ps.16:11)

The Path to His Presence

So how does one draw near to the presence of God? Bree had it right – turn to the Scriptures! Paul did not say, "Encourage each other with human wisdom." He said, "encourage each other with these words" (1 Thess.4:18). Titus 1:9 requires that an elder in the church must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine. If you want to be qualified to encourage others, study God's Word, not the theories of man.

Psalms 19:7 The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. ... 8 The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

Psalms 119:76 May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your servant.,

Psalms 119:82 My eyes fail, looking for your promise; I say, "When will you comfort me?"

Psalms 119:92 If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.

It must be noted at this point that the goal in opening the Scriptures is not merely gathering comforting thoughts and concepts. The goal is to use the Word of God to have an actual personal interaction with God Himself. The reason it is possible to read (and understand) a psalm one day and receive no comfort and read it another day and receive great comfort is because the comfort comes not from the act of reading, but from the presence of God.

God has promised never to leave or forsake His people⁵ and to be with them always, even to the end of the age,⁶ so there is one sense in which God was always with His people. There is another sense, however, in which God was sometimes far from His people.⁷ The promise that he is always with his people means fellowship with Him is always *available*. There are some times when greater fellowship is available than other times, but *some* fellowship with God is always available to the believer. There is never a time when seeking fellowship God would be a fruitless effort.⁸ God promises success when his people seek Him.⁹ The genuine, earnest seeker should always expect a response from God.¹⁰

This is wonderful news for the grieving heart because it means there is never a time when joy and satisfaction of soul are out of reach – even in the midst of great pain. Any time a believer is not experiencing satisfying joy, it is always because he is not experiencing something he could be experiencing – fellowship with God.

³ The Hebrew word PANEH is translated either "presence" or "face." When used of God there is no difference. The face of God and the presence of God refer to the same thing.

⁴ Author's translation

⁵ Dt.31:6.

⁶ Mt.28:20.

⁷ Ps.101:2, 13:1.

⁸ Isa.45:19.

⁹ 1 Chn.28:9, 15:2, Pr.8:17, Lam.3:25, Heb.11:6.

¹⁰ J.A. Alexander, *The prophecies of Isaiah*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 186.

While it is true that God is always with his people in the sense that fellowship with him is always available, there is another sense in which it is possible for a believer to be far from God. While fellowship with God is always possible, his people are not always experiencing fellowship with him. To experience fellowship with him the believer must seek it, as David did in times of dryness and distance from God. Such seeking requires considerable effort. In Psalm 63:1 David provides an indication of the degree of effort that is required in seeking God during a time of relational distance: “Earnestly I seek you.” The term “earnestly”¹¹ implies a certain degree of difficulty, as one does not earnestly seek that which is easily found. Finding fellowship with God requires nothing less than *wholehearted* seeking. “But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul.”¹² God is a great and awesome king, and He will not be belittled by allowing Himself to be found by half-hearted seekers.¹³

The way to receive comfort from God, then, is by seeking His presence by means of His Word. The Scriptures open the seeker’s eyes to the glory of God in ways that draw him close to the healing, comforting, joy-giving presence of God.¹⁴

The following are some particularly comforting passages:

Psalm 5 – Protect me!

Psalm 16 – God is my only good

Psalm 18 – God respond to my trouble with creation-rattling zeal

Psalm 23 – The Lord is my Shepherd

Psalm 25 – I look to You for satisfaction, guidance, redemption

Psalm 32 – Blessed is the forgiven sinner!

Psalm 34 – God is near to the brokenhearted

Psalm 36 – The Lord is the source of all good

Psalm 37 – Don’t fret over the successes of the wicked

Psalm 42-43 – I long for God, my soul is downcast

Psalm 46 – God is our refuge and is more powerful than any threat

Psalm 51 – Have mercy on me, a sinner!

Psalm 62 – My soul finds rest in God alone

Psalm 63 – I long for God in a dry and weary land

Psalm 77- I sought and sought after comfort, then I recalled Your past deeds

Psalm 84 – I long & faint to be in Your presence

Psalm 90 – You are our home, satisfy us with Your love

Psalm 91 – God will protect you

Psalm 93 – The Lord reigns!

Psalm 103 – Praise Him for forgiving, redeeming, restoring love!

Psalm 121 – God will watch over you

Psalm 125 – The LORD preserves His people

Psalm 131 – I have stilled & quieted my soul hoping in You

Psalm 139 – You know me thoroughly

Lamentations 3 – His mercies are new every morning

Isaiah 40 – Comfort for God’s people

Isaiah 42 – The Compassionate Messiah

Isaiah 55 – Come, all you who are thirsty!

Isaiah 57:14-21 – Comfort for the contrite

Matthew 5:1-13 – Blessed are the needy and persecuted

John 13-15 – Let not your hearts be troubled

Romans 8 – Nothing can separate you from His love

Revelation 3:7-13 – Hold on until I come!

For specific kinds of suffering see Appendix 2: “Promises to Trust When...”

¹¹ עָרַב here and ἐκζητέω in Heb.11:6

¹² Dt.4:29. See also Jer.29:13, 1 Chrn.22:19, Ps.78:34, 119:2,10.

¹³ Mal.1:6-14.

¹⁴ Do not think of this as a kind of magical incantation. Experiencing the presence of God comes only as a result of correctly interpreting the Scriptures and responding in faith to the truth that is revealed.

The Nature of God

Nothing is more important in comforting the grieving soul than understanding the combination of God's goodness and sovereignty. Those two attributes enable the child of God to rejoice in any suffering.

Few chapters in the Bible are more comforting to the suffering soul than Lamentations 3. The writer of Lamentations was suffering full-blown, clinical depression. And he describes that depression in such vivid detail that one wonders if anything could ever bring him out of such despair. Half way through chapter 3, however, his depression suddenly gives way to hope! What was it that had the power to bring him from the pits of depression to the dawn of hope? It was something he called to mind.

Lamentations 3:21 Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope...

The words that follow are words about the nature of God. Particularly striking are the words in verse 33.

Lamentations 3:32-33 Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. 33 For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men.

It is God who brings the grief. He did not just allow it – He sent it. However, He did not do so “willingly” (literally, not “from the heart”). What could possibly compel God to do something He does not want to do? Why would He bring grief into your life that He does not want to bring into your life? The only thing that can compel God to do that is His love. Just as a compassionate EMT cringes when he does some painful procedure on an accident victim to save his life, so God cringes when His own loves for you requires of Him something that causes you pain.

God would never needlessly bring suffering. There must be a reason. Furthermore, that reason must be great enough to justify the degree of suffering. God would not use excruciating pain to achieve some small benefit that could be achieved some other way.

Think of the torture God is putting Himself through by requiring you to suffer. What would it be like to watch your own child suffer this much? It would be agony for you if you love your child. And God loves you more than you love your child, so watching you suffer is more painful to the heart of God than we can even imagine. Why would God put Himself through the torture of watching one of His beloved children suffer unless the benefit were many times greater than the suffering?

This is a hard principle for many people to accept because they cannot imagine what benefit could possibly come from their suffering. Such people must be reminded that God is not limited by what we can imagine! Picture a man who is in a terrible car accident that breaks all his ribs and causes massive internal injuries. As the EMT's scramble to help him, at one point they ask the man's wife to assist. “Hold him down while I do this procedure – otherwise he will die.” She has to press down tightly on his chest, causing excruciating pain. In the delirium of his suffering the man has no idea what is going on. All he can see is that his wife is inflicting terrible pain on him. He has no idea why, but not even a flicker of anger rises in his heart toward her, because he knows her so well, even though he has no explanation for why she would do this, he knows without a doubt that she would never do something like that unless it was the most loving possible thing for him. That is how we look at God in times of suffering. It is not necessary to be able to imagine how this suffering could be a good thing. It is only necessary to know God well enough to know that He would never do anything other than that which is most loving and beneficial for His children.

Now consider this – how great a benefit would it require for you to be willing to put someone you love through this suffering you are going through? Maybe you have endured 20 years in a terrible marriage, or decades of physical pain, or horrific abuse as a child. What benefit would be enough for you to be willing to put your child through that much suffering? What would it take for you to be willing to go through the agony of watching someone you love suffer that much? Perhaps your answer is, “I can't even think of any benefit so great that it would be worth it.”

Now think about God. His love for you is greater than your love for your child, and so God's agony in watching you suffer is far greater than the agony of any parent. And God has full power to bring this suffering to an end at any moment. So why doesn't He do it? The only explanation is that the benefit that is being achieved by this suffering is so great that it is worth *this much* suffering! And that means it must be a benefit that is far more wonderful than anything you can possibly imagine (since you can't imagine a benefit that would be worth it). How grand must be the purpose of this suffering for God to be willing to go through the agony of watching you suffer when He does not want to!

The greater the suffering, then, the greater must be the purpose God is accomplishing through that suffering. The sorrows and troubles we face in the process of serving God are more than worth it because they accomplish outcomes so glorious that they cannot even be compared to our sufferings.

Romans 8:18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

We can give the suffering saint this guarantee: “When you see what this suffering accomplishes for you, you will say, ‘I am

so glad that suffering happened!!!’.”

This principle is a wonderful comfort to those who are suffering, but it is only a comfort if they understand both God’s goodness and God’s sovereignty. If the person believes God is good but does not control all things, then this suffering might not have any meaning at all. It may just be a fluke that happened outside of God’s control. And if the person understands God’s sovereignty and not His goodness they may think God is doing it but it is not ultimately a good thing. It is crucial for the suffering Christian to understand that God controls all things and God only does good things.

Psalm 62:11-12 One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, 12 and that you, O Lord, are loving.

Isaiah 46:10-11 ...My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. 11 ... What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.

Ephesians 1:11 In him we were also chosen ... according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will

Deuteronomy 32:4 He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.

It is also important to understand that our comfort comes not from thinking about the fact that it could have been worse (“Well, at least *that* didn’t happen...”). The Christian sufferer must understand that it is the suffering itself that brings about the good things.

2 Corinthians 4:17 Our light and momentary troubles are accomplishing for us from excess to excess an eternal weight of glory.¹⁵

Notice – it is not that God brings about glorious things in spite of the suffering, but rather it the suffering itself that accomplishes the glory.

And for that reason Paul regards his suffering as “light” (referring to weight) and “momentary” (referring to time). Such a description sounds absurd coming from Paul, whose sufferings were extreme to say the least. But they were extreme only in comparison to other things in this life. Compared to what is coming in the age to come (which is the focus in this passage – note the terms “weight” and “eternal”), this life’s suffering is indeed ephemeral and small.

Comfort for the Contrite

There are many different causes for the sorrow in the lives of God’s people. Sometimes it is caused by great loss, other times by fear, relational troubles, physical pain, disappointment, or unfulfilled desire. But the most painful suffering of all for the believer is the suffering of guilt. There is nothing that causes more damage and nothing the child of God hates more than his own sin. And yet, tragically, it is this kind of sufferer that many Christians are the least willing to comfort.

Should our compassion be withheld when someone’s suffering is due to his own sin? Not at all! God has compassion on our sinful condition. In fact, it is to His compassion that we appeal when we ask for forgiveness and restoration after we have sinned.

Psalm 51:1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.

If our sinful condition generates compassion in the heart of God, why not in the hearts of God’s people? Many times it is because of anger. The person’s sin caused pain for those around him, and so those people have no compassion.

In other cases it is because of the misguided idea that it is the Church’s job to punish sinners. It is not. Never is the Church instructed to punish a repentant sinner or “teach him a lesson.” This applies to friends and spouses as well. Chastisement is God’s job, not ours.

In some cases comfort is withheld out of concern for justice. The fear is that if the repentant sinner is comforted he will be “getting away with it.” Again – God will make sure no one gets away with anything. He is perfectly capable of bringing consequences for sin without our assistance. God does sometimes use people as His tools of chastisement, but He also punishes those very people if they are eager to be used in that way. (Jer.50-51)

Our task as God’s people is not to punish or teach lessons, but be the instruments of comfort and restoration. In Corinth, when a man had sinned, been disciplined, and then repented, Paul urged the church to forgive him and restore him to fellowship:

¹⁵ Literal translation.

2 Corinthians 2:7 Now ... you ought to forgive and comfort (*parakaleo*) him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

The unrepentant sinner must be reproved and rebuked, but the *repentant* sinner is to be comforted and restored, not punished. The enemy is letting loose all his crippling, discouraging, demoralizing accusations on the person, and that person probably feels it is wrong for him to defend himself, and so he allows himself to be pummeled to the ground by the enemy. It is our job to step in with the life-giving, redeeming, restoring promises from Scripture about God's forgiveness to keep our brother from being destroyed by the enemy by "excessive sorrow."

When a person is crushed with guilt and regret, remind him of the sufficiency of the cross. The price Jesus paid was enough for that sin! Remind him of the eagerness with which the father ran to embrace the prodigal son in Lk.15. Comforting passages from God's Word about forgiveness are easy to find. Some especially wonderful ones are Ps.103:8-14, Isa.57:15-19, Micah 7:8-9, Ps.30:4-12, Ps.53, Ps.32:1-7, and 1 Jn.1:9.

Strengthening

As important as comfort is, it is not the only thing the suffering person needs. God has given us the power to reduce and even eliminate some kinds of pain, but not all of it. In some cases, a great deal of pain will remain. So in addition to comfort the suffering person also needs strength.

It is hard to imagine the despair that must have gripped David while he was running for his life from King Saul—God's anointed whom David honored and respected. It was then that Jonathan caught up to David at Horesh and did something which serves as one of the great illustrations of Biblical Counseling in Scripture.

1 SAMUEL 23:16 And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God.

That is the role of the biblical counselor when a brother is suffering.

Acts 15:32 Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers.

1 Thessalonians 3:2 We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith....

1 Thessalonians 5:11,14 ... encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. ... And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

The word translated *timid* is literally *little-souled*. It refers to someone with a weak, timid, or frail spirit who needs to be fortified, built up, and strengthened. The weak person doesn't have the strength to do what he should do (for example, to seek godly counsel!). Sometimes strengthening the timid and weak begins with taking the initiative to pursue them and offer encouragement even when they have not asked for it.

Willingness to Suffer

One of the most important ways to infuse strength into the suffering soul is to provide a biblical perspective on suffering. For the world, suffering is an intolerable, unacceptable intrusion into life that must be eliminated at any cost. This makes sense for them. This life is all they have, so if it is spoiled with suffering then all is lost. But we are citizens of another kingdom, and our comfort is there, not here. Furthermore, God has promised that all our suffering achieves grand, eternal purposes that benefit us and glorify Him.¹⁶

If a person thinks of suffering as an intolerable intrusion, ongoing suffering will be unbearable. When a person thinks, *I must feel better. My only hope for happiness is to find a way to escape this pain!* – enduring long-term suffering with no end in sight becomes overwhelming. The anxiety of worrying about the inability to escape the pain, and the fear that relief may never come compounds the pain of the suffering when the person believes that relief is essential for happiness. In some cases depression lingers on mainly because of the fear of not being able to recover from the depression! Some people have actually recovered from depression simply by saying, *Father, if this is what You have for me right now, I will accept it from Your hand. If You say this is what I need for now, then it's OK for me to feel this way*. Where there is a clear understanding about the crucial role suffering plays in the Christian life, that knowledge alone can help a great deal in enabling the person endure it.

¹⁶ Ro.8:17,28, 2 Cor.4:17.

1 Peter 4:12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.

Acts 9:15-16 ... I will show [Paul] how much he must suffer for my name.”

2 Corinthians 1:8-9 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

Every parent knows what it is like to struggle with a toddler who does not want to be held. He desperately wants down – not understanding that there is busy traffic or some other threat from which he must be protected. The more the child struggles the more tightly his father has to grip him – causing even still more discomfort. If there is pain it is caused by his own resistance. If he would simply submit to his father and accept the fact that he must be held at this moment, he could be at rest in his father’s arms. Very often it is our resisting and struggling and refusal to accept suffering that is the cause of much of our pain. So one way to strengthen a person who is experiencing the “mighty hand of God” (suffering) is to encourage him to simply stop resisting and accept it from God’s hand.

1 Peter 5:6-7 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Authoritative Encouragement

In order to infuse strength into a weak brother or sister the counselor must encourage compassionately, humbly, skillfully, wisely, and *authoritatively*. The authority with which God has called us to encourage one another is an often neglected, yet crucially important principle in our efforts to strengthen one another.

It is often assumed that unless the counselor has personally experienced the same kind of trouble the counselee is enduring, he is in no position to offer comfort, strength, or instruction. This belief has bred a generation of pain snobs. Pain snobs are people who think you have nothing to offer them because you have not experienced what they have experienced. (*You can't comfort me because you don't know how I feel – no one knows how I feel!*)

It is a good thing to recognize that the person’s suffering might be beyond anything you have experienced. We really ought to cut people some slack when they are suffering, and we need to realize that doing the right thing might be much, much more difficult for them in their situation than it is for us. However, no matter how extreme their suffering, it is not beyond the reach of the power of God’s Word.

“But don’t I have to first earn the right to be heard?” No – unless what you are offering is human wisdom. If you are going to urge someone to put his savings into a particular investment, or if you are giving medical advice, the value of your counsel is related to your expertise in those areas. But if you are merely repeating something that someone else has said, your expertise is irrelevant. The only thing that matters is the expertise of the one you are quoting. Therefore anytime you tell a person something directly from the Bible, you have every right and responsibility to do so with authority because you are quoting God. To the person who says, “You don’t know how I feel” we respond, “You’re right, but God knows how you feel. That’s why instead of giving you my wisdom I am only going to offer you God’s Word.”

This principle applies whether the goal is comfort, or strengthening, or exhorting.

AUTHORITATIVE COMFORTING

When counseling a person who has experienced something horrible, such as the loss of a child, the counselor does not have to sheepishly say, “Maybe this will help but probably not ...” The comfort offered in Scripture is, without any question, the kind of comfort a hurting human soul needs. It is God’s comfort. The promises of God *will* do him good if he believes them.

AUTHORITATIVE STRENGTHENING

When a person is crushed under the weight of some trial and is so weak and fragile that the task of strengthening him enough to be able to bear the load seems impossible, the faithful counselor will remember that the Word of God in the hands of the Holy Spirit is more than enough to strengthen any child of God enough to carry the load God has placed on him.

Colossians 1:9-11 ...we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life

worthy of the Lord ... being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience

AUTHORITATIVE EXHORTING

Not only do we have the right to offer people comfort and strength from God's Word, we have the responsibility to *command* them to accept God's Word.

Titus 2:15 Exhort and rebuke with all authority.¹⁷

What about a situation where someone has been abused, raped, or tortured—do you have a right to demand that the person respond in a godly way? Obviously it would be wrong to do so in a harsh, uncaring, or insensitive way. We must always maintain compassion—especially when a person has endured great suffering. We must also recognize, however, that we have no choice but to humbly, gently, lovingly *require* of people what God requires in Scripture. We are not justified in editing or dialing back what God has said because of our own self-styled ideas about what is truly compassionate. If God delivered something in His word as an imperative, and we morph it into a suggestion, we are false witnesses who are misrepresenting God's Word.

A doctor who knows for sure he has the medicine for your sickness does not tap-dance around the solution offering apologies and caveats. He simply says, "Take this!" Instruction from the Word of God is what a suffering person needs. He may not want it, but it is the best thing for him and it is wrong to withhold it, or to offer it as something less than what it really is. We must tell people the truth about what God requires. So in that sense, we must "demand" what God demands. Anytime you proclaim the Word of God, whether it is behind a pulpit or sitting on a couch with a friend, you have the responsibility to proclaim it with authority.

¹⁷ Author's translation.