

Shepherding the Afflicted

As a Fellowship Group Leader, you will often be called on to encourage and comfort people who are suffering through a variety of afflictions. How?

THREE WAYS CHRISTIANS CAN HANDLE AFFLICTION

1. "*Falling Apart*". The least mature way. The person is ruled by fears and/or anger, loses control of emotions, and fails to continue a responsible Christian walk.
2. "*Stiff Upper Lip*" (Stoic approach). The less mature way. The person simply represses emotions and tries to "think positively". He grits his teeth until the trouble passes. He refuses to let it "get to" him.
3. "*Growing through Affliction*". The mature way. The person sees the affliction as God's instruction, an opportunity to learn more about himself and about God, to grow closer to God.

THE LEVELS OF PASTORAL APPLICATION IN AFFLICTION.

A. Encouragement Level ("Feelings")

1. Be present. Be warm. Be comforting. Share the principles of "Receive God's Strength" (See below). Build a relationship if there is not already one there. Do not preach or give "straight content" in a lecture form.
2. This level of pastoral care will keep the person from simply falling apart.
3. Scripture: John 13:7; Mat. 6:25-43; Heb. 13:5-6; Isa. 49:14-16

B. Coaching Level ("Behavior")

4. Exhort and urge the person to stay in a responsible walk with God— to continue in fellowship, worship, personal devotions. To continue to serve others. To keep somewhat active, to keep to a schedule. To refuse to be bitter; to forgive where necessary. To obey God even though it is hard. Share the principles of "Grasp God's Perspective" from below.
2. This level of pastoral care will bring the person at least to a "stoic" level of handling the affliction.
3. Scripture: 2Cor. 1:3-12; Deu. 8:1-9; Psa. 56:8-13; Isa. 43:14-16

C. Teaching Level ("Thinking")

1. Show the person that afflictions bring out the worst in us. They show our lack of faith, patience, submission to God, and so on. They reveal all kinds of lusts, anger, pettiness, fear in us. Rather than blaming the affliction for all the misery, realize that the affliction is bringing out your sins. Go to God to confess them, and to discover his grace and strength in new ways. Repent and put to death your indwelling sin. Find renewal. Share the principles of "Understand God's Instruction/disciple" and "Admit God's Rights" from below. Grow in your affliction!
2. Ordinarily, people cannot reach this level of operation without pastoral help. Do so gently, with Bible studies and with personal illustrations or by sending the person other people who reached the "Growing through Affliction" level.
3. Scripture: Phil. 2:12-13; Heb 12: 14-16 (in context of chapter 12); Josh 1:9; 1Cor. 10:13

Reading: *A Step Further*, by Joni Eareckson and Steve Estes. *Letters of John Newton* (Banner of Truth)

With a mature Christian who you already know, a shepherd can often move down through all three levels quickly, even in one visit. In general, however, there is a need to move more slowly. In some cases, people will refuse to let you move down; they will be startled and will react to you as if you had cut them with a knife. Go only as fast as you can without being destructive. If you go slowly, you will at least maintain the relationship until there is finally a teachable moment.

If you do not know whether the person is a Christian, you must go into levels B. and C. evangelistically. You must encourage the person to use the affliction to drive them toward God. Do not simply tell a non-Christian to "grow through affliction". Non-Christians cannot enter the mortification/aspiration cycle without falling into self-righteousness or despair.

BASIC SCRIPTURAL TRUTH ABOUT AFFLICTION

*Receive God's
Strength for those in
affliction.*

1. God will not leave you alone. He is very near those in trouble. He has special love for those who are suffering. He will give you strength and patience especially as you work and strive.
2. God promises us that the Spirit will help us in our needs (Rom. 8:26). He cannot help us until we begin to obey. Similarly, Phil. 2:12-13 tells us God works as we work.
3. In summary, the strength we need for suffering will come in the doing of what responsibilities and duties God requires. Shirk no commands of God. Read, pray, study, fellowship, serve, witness, obey. Do all your duties that you physically can and the God of peace will be with you.

*Grasp God's
Perspective.*

1. All the important things--salvation, adoption, guarantee of heaven--are all safe. This is small compared to what Jesus suffered for you. This is small compared to what glory we will have. God is wise and there are purposes here that no one knows.
2. *Balance suffering's duration against eternity.* Compared to the endless billions of "years" of eternity without suffering, our troubles are brief. If we think of our lives as only 70 years long, suffering will loom large; if we think of our lives as endless, suffering is a fleeting thing. A billionaire will hardly feel a theft of the \$1,000 from his pocket. A middle class man will feel it sorely. Christians are billionaires in glory.
3. *Balance suffering's severity against glory.* When people tell sufferers that "it's not so bad; it could be worse", they help little. When, instead, we compare our suffering now to the joy and glory of heaven, suffering is "outweighed" (II Cor. 4:17-18). When Stephen caught a glimpse of heaven, he got so excited that he seemed to forget the small matter of his execution! (Acts 7:55-56) One second of glory will outweigh 1000 years of pain. To get suffering in perspective takes meditation on God's Word.

*Understand God's
Instruction/discipline*

Suffering reveals our weakness and is an important opportunity to see one's sin more closely and experience God's grace more deeply. It is a time to draw much closer to God, to experience Him.

1. **He has hidden purposes in everything that happens.** Rom. 8:28 - God works all historical circumstances together for your good, if you are a Christian. At the foot of the cross, many people may have thought: "how could God let this good man die? how could God bring any good out of this?" God will work all thing together for good, but he does not promise to show exactly how any one incident fits into the complex fabric of history. To try to show us that would be like trying to pour a million gallons of truth into a one ounce brain.
2. **He has revealed purposes in suffering.**

a. In Hebrews 12:1-10 and elsewhere, the Bible teaches us that we should not try to "guess" at God's hidden purposes in tragic incidents, but rather seek his revealed purpose, namely, that we grow in grace.

b. God uses suffering to:

1. Break our self-confidence and pride. Suffering doesn't really make us helpless and dependent on God. It just shows us we always have been vulnerable and dependent and forces us to acknowledge the fact.
2. Make us examine ourselves. Suffering and trials will bring out the worst in us. Our weak faith, sharp tongue, laziness, insensitivity to people, worry, bitter spirit, and other weaknesses in character will become evident to us (and others!). We will be forced to see and work on these faults.
3. Strengthen our loyalty to God. In suffering we will be tempted to rebel against God. In times of health and prosperity, it is easy to obey, but when it costs us to obey, we waver. During trials, we hear God say: "Oh! Were things all right between us as long as I waited on your hand and foot? Now we can see if you are really out to serve me or whether you only expect me to serve you!"
4. Make us more compassionate. When we have suffered, we become more tender-hearted and able to help others in suffering. We become more useful (II Cor. 1:3-4).
5. Enable us to witness for Him. The world will be impressed by a Christian's uncomplaining endurance of suffering. They will say, "Well! He must have quite a God to take all this. His God must be real."

*Admit God's Rights
over us.*

Until we suffer, we may give lip service to the idea of God as our sovereign King, but until we suffer we do not see how little we really submit to his will. We want to be our own God.

1. Much of a person's misery in any situation consists of his anger and surprise that the suffering has happened to him.
2. Surprise can be dealt with if a Christian sees where suffering comes from.
 - a. John 9:1-5 and Luke 13:1-5 show us that natural disasters and sickness are not usually punishment for particular sins that we have done.
 - b. Romans 8: 19-23 (cf. Gen. 3:16-18) shows us that the world is filled with disease, death, and natural disasters because of sin in general. It is the curse on the human race.
 - c. Therefore, a Christian expects suffering and knows, that as part of all sinful mankind, he/she deserves it. This diminishes the confusion and surprise when it happens.
3. Anger can be dealt with if a Christian recognizes God's rights over us.
 - a. God created us and sustains us. He owns us. We owe him everything; he owes us nothing. (Job 9:12)
 - b. Nevertheless, He blesses us far beyond that which we deserve (Ps. 103:4), and if we would ever ask God to be "fair" we would be instantly destroyed. Angry self-pity has no place.

Bible passages: Heb. 5:8; 12:1-17; 13:5; Rom. 8:18-30; 2Cor. 1:3-12; 4:7-5:5; 1:24-12:10; 1Cor. 10:13; Phil. 4:10-15; Mat. 6:25-34; Is. 43:1-2; Ps. 55:22; Josh. 1:9

SPECIALIZED SHEPHERDING APPLICATIONS IN SUFFERING

Anxiety

1. Understand worry. Worry is excessive concern which needs to be channeled into two activities. 1) Planning and work. Often, there is so much to be done that the matter is worried about. Matt. 6:34 2) Prayer with thanksgiving. Often worry is over a matter about which the person can do nothing. In such a case, worry is a lack of submission to God's will. Phil. 4:6 ff.
2. Make a plan.
 - a). If your problem is a lack of planning and work, sit down and plan what you will do about it. Schedule it. Then don't think about it until it is time to act.
 - b). If your problem is mainly a lack of faith in God, confess to God that you are insulting his wisdom and power. Pray about the matter briefly and thank God ahead of time for what he is going to do. Then turn to other jobs and duties. Get busy.

Scripture passages: Prov. 12:25; 14:30; 17:22; 28:1; Matt. 6:24-34; Luke 8:14; 10:38-42; James 4:13ff.; I Peter 5:6-7

Grief

1. Help the person through the initial stage of disruption. During the time of shock, simply provide a listening ear and your presence.
2. Help the person through the longer period of regrouping. Using I Thess. 4:13 show that grief is right, but it can become sinful despair if Christian hope is not focused on.

Scriptures: Psalm 23, 42, 31: 9 ff. 77; Prov. 14:13; 15:13; 16:1,3; 17:22; John 11; II Cor. 1; 4; Phil 4:13.

Loneliness

1. There is no need to be ashamed of loneliness. Adam was lonely even when he was without sin. See Gen. 2:18-25
2. Therefore, although you may have lost many old friends, you need to make new ones. You must remember how that is done. Listen. Be kind. Be open about your thoughts and feelings. Invite others to do things with you. Don't be possessive. On the qualities of a friend: Prov. 14:20; 19:4,6,7; 17:17; 18:24; 27:10 ("constancy"), 27:6; 29:5; 28:23 ("candor"), 27:9, 17 ("counsel"), 25:17; 27:14; 25:20; 26:18,19 ("tact").
3. Clear out other problems which may be causing isolation. Guilt, bitterness against others, bitterness against God, self-pity all aggravate loneliness. Scriptures: Rom.8:28; 5:3-5; Heb. 12:1-15; James 1:1-2; Prov. 12:18; 16:18,28; 17:9,13-14,18-20; Psalm 51; Matt.5:21,22
4. Strengthen your friendship with God. Scriptures: John 14:23; 15:14-15.
5. Do not simply attend church. Become involved in a class or group. Heb. 10:24-25

Self-pity

1. Remember that no one has ever gotten what he or she deserves. We deserve nothing! Everything we have is a free gift. I Cor. 4:7
2. Consider the things we have permanently that are more valuable than anything we can lose. Salvation (Heb. 10:22,35-36; I John 3:18-22), Heaven (Ps. 16; Rev. 21; I Peter 1), God's presence, guidance, love, care (Matt. 5:5,6; 6:24-34; Phil 4:6-12; John 15:12-17.
3. See how the Psalmist handled self-pity in Ps. 73. See how Paul could always stay content in Phil. 3:7-11 and 4:10-13.
4. The most important antidote to self-pity, and to depression in general, is to serve someone else. (Is. 58: 10).

AN EXAMPLE: HANDLE TRIALS WITH AN EYE ON GOD

John Newton wrote the following letter on August 19, 1775:

"Your sister is much upon my mind. Her illness grieves me: were it in my power I would quickly remove it: the Lord can and I hope will, when it has answered the end for which he sent it. I trust he has brought her to us for good... I wish you may be enabled to leave her, and yourself and all your concerns, in his hands. He has a sovereign right to do with us as he pleases; and if we consider what we are, surely we shall confess we have no reason to complain: and to those who seek him, his sovereignty is exercised in a way of grace. All shall work together for good; *everything is needful that he sends; nothing can be needful that he withholds...* You have need of patience, and, if you ask, the Lord will give it. But there can be no settled peace till our will is in a measure subdued... Look upon him as a physician who has graciously undertaken to heal your soul of the worst disease, sin. Yield to his prescriptions, and fight against every thought that would represent it as desirable to be permitted to choose for yourself. When you cannot see your way, be satisfied that he is your leader. When your spirit is overwhelmed within you, he knows your path: he will not leave you to sink. He as appointed seasons of refreshment, and you shall find that he does not forget you. Above all, keep close to the throne of grace. If we seem to get no good by attempting to draw near him, we may be sure we shall get none by keeping away from him."

Level 1: Trust God's time. (IPet 1:6 - "for a little while") God has his schedule and reasons. Begin to trust God by *doubting your own schedule and insight*. Note: how does Newton (above) urge his friend to do this?

Level 2: Obey God's Word (IPet.1:8 - "you love him...believe in him"). A Christian continues to obey; don't fall into sin actively or passively. An ounce of sin is more destructive than ten tons of suffering. Obey. Note: how does Newton (above) urge his friend to do this?

Level 3: Learn God's lessons. (IPet.1:6 - "you may have had to"). "I am in the gymnasium? What am I supposed to learn here--what is God working on?" Don't guess his "historical" purposes; seek his spiritual growth purposes. Note: how does Newton (above) urge his friend to do this?

Conclusion: Look at Christ, if you want to know how to turn sufferings into glory! Want to learn? Look at God's wisdom in Christ. Want to trust? Look at God's goodness in Christ. Want to obey? Look at the greatness of Christ.