

## **Hold My Hand While We Limp to Jerusalem**

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The blessing of Christian fellowship is a wonderful gift! God "comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted" (2 Corinthians 1:3-5). Sometimes though, it is difficult to know how best to offer this comfort even when there is a sincere desire to do so.

The physical and emotional pain of others pulls at our heart strings when we see them suffering, and we want them to feel better as quickly as possible. However, quick responses are not always helpful or based on truth.

In addition, the person whose anguish is raw might hear something different than what is intended. It is important to consider that a person in pain might be sleep-deprived, distracted, and unable to think clearly given the circumstances that are so "present" at the time.

The following points are offered to the person who sincerely desires to comfort and counsel a suffering person. Each point has been included after reflection on my own experiences as well as discussion with multiple other people suffering from chronic illnesses.

### **Being Strong**

"You've always been such a strong person. Look at all you've done and what you've been through. You can do it again." Words such as these do not offer true comfort to a person crumbling under the weight of severe trials, nor do they point the sufferer to the true source of strength.

The sufferer hears... "You can do it! You can do it!"

The sufferer thinks... "I am too weak to do it. I don't know what to do. Maybe there is no hope for me then."

This "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" train of thought points the sufferer away from God rather than to Him. It leads the person to look to herself as the means to endure the trial, while Scripture says otherwise:

And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.  
2 Corinthians 12:9-10

The ability to endure difficult circumstances is dependent on the strength of God and His gracious promise to offer it to us. Isaiah 41:10 explains the sure help that a Christian in need can find when guided directly toward the true source. This brings hope to a heart that is too weary to find its way alone.

"Do not fear, for I am with you;  
Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God.  
I will strengthen you, surely I will help you,  
Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand."  
Isaiah 41:10

## **Trusting God**

The answer to our dilemmas is to trust God, but a person in the midst of a trial may struggle with the application of this maxim she knows to be true. The pit feels so deep, the weight so heavy, and the pain so intense that quickly-offered advice such as "trust God" seems insufficient to handle the magnitude of the burden.

The sufferer hears... "This really is so simple that it only requires two words to explain it. Why haven't you figured it out already? A person with strong faith would be able to do so."

The sufferer says... "I want to trust God. I'm trying, but it's getting harder the longer this goes on. If I'm having trouble trusting God with this, am I even really saved?"

Jerry Bridges explains further in his book, "Trusting God":

Above all, we need to be very sensitive about instructing someone else in the sovereignty of God and encouraging that person to trust God when he or she is in the midst of adversity or pain. It is much easier to trust in the sovereignty of God when it is the other person who is hurting. We need to be like Jesus, of whom it was said, "A bruised reed he will not break" (Matthew 12:20). Let us not be guilty of breaking a bruised reed (a heavy heart) by insensitive treatment of the heavy doctrine of the sovereignty of God.

God's sovereignty, wisdom, and love truly do give reasons for us to trust Him. Point the sufferer to these things gently, perhaps by explaining what you are learning through your own Bible study. She may not be able to organize her own thoughts about how to trust God at the moment or even remember where to turn in the Bible for comfort. Remind her that her salvation means that God hears her cries, knows her circumstances, and intervenes on her behalf, but recognize that the sufferer's feelings cause these truths to be difficult to see in the midst of deep pain.

The Lord will accomplish what concerns me;  
Your lovingkindness, O Lord, is everlasting;  
Do not forsake the works of Your hands.  
Psalm 138:8

## **Tears Falling**

Job grieved but did not sin by doing so (Job 1:20-22). David wept until he had no more strength to weep (1 Samuel 30:4), but God called him "a man after My heart" (Acts 13:22). Jesus wept (John 11:35) but never sinned (Hebrews 4:15). With these examples provided by God in the Bible, why would we counsel a grieving person to "stop crying"?

The sufferer hears... "Your tears are a sign of weakness. You're distressing others by letting them fall. You really should be happier if you are a Christian."

The sufferer says... "I don't want to be this sad and keep crying, but my grief is so intense the tears just keep coming."

I am weary with my sighing;  
Every night I make my bed swim,  
I dissolve my couch with my tears.  
Psalm 6:6

It is true that Paul tells his readers to exult in their tribulations because of the work God is doing (Romans 5:3-5). However, seeing the good work of God may not be possible at first. Many of the Psalms start with an anguished cry to God, followed by a period of struggle, as the psalmist attempts to turn to God while pouring out his concerns.

God hears these cries, sees the tears, and has compassion on us. He draws "near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18); He puts our tears in a bottle (Psalm 56:8); and He calls those who weep, "blessed" (Luke 6:21).

Once the psalmists remembered the "deeds of the Lord" and meditated on all His work (Psalm 77:11-12), they were comforted, but they were not able to simply "stop crying" on their own. The forced cutting-off of a flow of tears did not heal the pain in their hearts; the hope they found with God did. It is key for the sufferer to recognize that, even in grief, we can have hope because God promises to help us during this life on earth and to bring us home to Him one day.

Even to your old age I will be the same,  
And even to your graying years I will bear you!  
I have done it, and I will carry you;  
And I will bear you and I will deliver you.  
Isaiah 46:4

## **Thinking About Heaven**

In our culture, we are accustomed to the belief that all illnesses can be cured; doctors know what to do; we just need to get the right medication or have surgery and then we'll "get better." People suffering from chronic illnesses know otherwise. They have sought treatment, only to be disappointed because their illnesses did not improve or they developed additional problems from the "curative" treatments.

As the months and years wear on and nothing improves in the sufferer's physical condition, she starts to think more about heaven. She pictures meeting Jesus in all His glory. She will have a body that is no longer painful or tired, be able to do things she is no longer able to do on earth, and see people she hasn't seen in a long time as well as people she has never met. There will be no more tears about anything; there will be no more sin in this place Jesus calls "Paradise" (Luke 23:43). What could possibly be a more beautiful meditation for a weary sufferer? She would like to share this bright shining light with a friend, especially given that she rarely has any "good news" to share about her health when asked, but she is met with a rebuff at her introduction of conversation regarding heaven.

The sufferer hears, "Don't think about death, you're not going to die."

The sufferer thinks, "I'm having such a hard time enduring this pain. If I had no hope of it ever ending, I don't know what I would do. The fact that my pain will one day end and I will be with Jesus is the best thing I can possibly think of right now. It gives me hope which helps me endure to the end."

And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

Revelation 21:3-4

Many sufferers hang onto these verses with all their might. They have come to realize that the things of this earth can be destroyed by moths and rust (Matthew 6:19) and cannot provide true hope. It is pleasing to God that we come to realize this and desire Him more than we desire anything else. Heaven is our true home, and it is good to dwell on this pure and lovely blessing which is worthy of praise. It is the joy that is set before a believer, and it helps a sufferer to keep her eyes fixed on it.

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.

Phil 3:20-21

Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

Colossians 3:1

### **Having Difficulty Hearing That Right Now**

It is true that "all scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). However, some verses are more

helpful than others when a sufferer is in the throes of agony. Consider what the sufferer might "hear" if the following verses were offered during a very difficult time:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.  
James 1:2-4

A joyful heart is good medicine,  
But a broken spirit dries up the bones.  
Proverbs 17:22

The sufferer hears, "If you would just be happy, God could do His work in you and you would be healed."

The sufferer thinks, "Maybe I'm not being a 'good' Christian."

We can consider all things "joy," because God is working good in all situations, even the painful ones. However, hearing that she is supposed to be joyful when she is in deep pain is very difficult for a sufferer, and she may not be able to process the rest of the words contained in these verses to develop full understanding at the moment. It may be hard to examine the difference between "counting something as joy" and "enjoying the situation." A time may come that the sufferer could reflect upon her circumstances and see the good God is working, but a comforter should consider whether that time is now or not.

As previously discussed, tears of grief are not sinful, and God is the one who will provide strength and healing for the brokenhearted. Verses that point the sufferer to God's loving care for her are comforting during times of distress.

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."  
Matthew 11:28-30

Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears our burden,  
The God who is our salvation. Selah.  
Psalm 68:19

The Lord is good,  
A stronghold in the day of trouble,  
And He knows those who take refuge in Him.  
Nahum 1:7

## **Holding My Hand**

Job's comforters initially wept, tore their robes, and threw dust over their heads toward the sky because of the great suffering their friend was experiencing. Then, they "sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great" (Job 2:12-13). In other words, they wept with a friend who was weeping (Romans 12:15). They shared his grief while they kept him company, but they didn't say a word for those seven days. After this time, the words they spoke were of no comfort to Job because they did not speak what was right about God (Job 42:7).

Then Job answered,  
I have heard many such things;  
Sorry comforters are you all.  
Is there no limit to windy words?  
Or what plagues you that you answer?  
Job 16:1-3

A similar account is shared by Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Estes in their book, "A Step Further":

This past year a friend of mine, Jeanette, and her husband lost their three-year-old son to cancer. Cute little Bradley, blond and blue-eyed – for a year and a half his parents had known death was coming. And, of course, when he died their grief was very deep. But throughout the whole ordeal they were never bitter toward God. They continued to love and serve Him, trusting completely that He cared for them and knew what He was doing.

About two weeks after Bradley's funeral Jeanette attended a women's Bible study at her church. Afterwards, as she walked down the hall with some other ladies, she spotted a little boy standing tiptoe atop some small steps, straining to sip from the water fountain. The sight immediately recalled memories of her own little Bradley who had always made a big production of climbing the little stairs to drink from that very fountain. She began to sob.

Walking beside her was one of her closest friends who sensed what had happened. This friend didn't say a word, just put her arms around Jeanette and silently held and comforted her. It was what she needed.

Then another woman, who didn't know Jeanette, saw her crying and obviously wanted to help. Coming up, she patted Jeanette and said, "I'm praying for you, honey. Praise the Lord."

The words stung like fire.

Later, Jeanette expressed how she felt at that moment. "I really had to ask God to help me with my feelings about that woman. I know she only wanted to help. But the way she said

‘Praise the Lord’ made me feel like I didn’t have any right to cry if I was trusting the Lord.”

In each account, the sufferer was most encouraged when the comforter simply helped bear the burden while staying quietly close. Sometimes, the best help a comforter can offer a sufferer is simply to "be there." This is a difficult sacrifice, because it is hard to watch someone suffer, but it is a loving gift that is pleasing to God.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

John 13:34-35

Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

Galatians 6:2

The sufferer sees and feels, "This friend is sticking with me despite my problems. She loves me, because she loves God. I don't have to pretend that all is well when it isn't. She loves me anyway. She is an imitator of God (Ephesians 5:1)."

The sufferer says, "I know it's been a long time; I'm sorry. I'm not enjoying the prolonged nature of this trial, but I appreciate your understanding and your willingness to stick with me. Thank you for weeping when I weep. Someday, a time will come when we can rejoice together at the marriage supper of the Lamb. Until that time, please be there for me, keep in contact with me, let me cry on your shoulder, and hold my hand while we limp to Jerusalem."

