

MINISTERING TO THE SAINTS IN ADVERSITY

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Several years ago our family was struggling through a season plagued with sickness. The illness was working its way through the seven of us when it infected, with devastating effects, our middle son. Christmas morning he suddenly and unexpectedly became delirious and stopped breathing. There was no time to call for help; we wrapped him up in a blanket, carried him to the car and rushed to the nearest hospital.

Shortly after our arrival, we found ourselves in the “mourner’s room” with the head nurse advising us to get our thoughts in order and to think about whom we might need to call. This room was familiar to me, I had been there often, but suddenly there I was, sitting on the plastic couch, staring at the non-descript paintings, struggling to understand what was going on and whether the Lord was asking me to surrender my son to His ultimate will.

Presently, we were called out of the cubicle and the prospects looked good. We were allowed to see our son in the treatment room and he talked with us in a thin weak voice. He seemed to be better. After a while we were sent out as the staff performed what they thought was a necessary procedure. We returned to find our boy much worse for the experience; within minutes he was in violent convulsions and we were removed from his presence and escorted back to the mourner’s area. Again the head nurse appeared and told us to prepare for the worst. It was at this point that a true peace and calm came over me, and I could pray thoughtfully, “Thy will be done.”

The Lord did not take our son home that day, and after a grueling week of all-night-vigils, he was released from intensive care having survived the infection; but something else also survived that experience, a lingering emotional and physical trauma that was smoldering just under the surface. One year later, almost to the day, it erupted, crippling me physically for over a month. It was at that point that the spiritual battle took on a more vital depth.

I’ve used this very personal opening illustration to remind us that in dealing with people who are facing critical situations, the practical, spiritual implications may be very broad. Comforting and counseling someone under such circumstances is not just a matter of helping him to come to grips intellectually with the reality that the Lord allows trauma into our lives and that He is not unjust in doing so; it is much more. It is therefore important that anyone who is going to deal with these issues be prepared. This includes being equipped theologically, spiritually, emotionally, generally, and prayerfully for the task. Some preparations must wait until just before help is required, but a great deal can be done before the demands of that critical moment.

Theological Considerations

Our reformed theology, based soundly on the Word of God, offers great consolation and helps us to understand how the presence of sorrow and misery in this life is not inconsistent with the love and justice of God. It is crucial that the officers of the church have a good working understanding of this point. Some seminars on this subject for all of those who may find themselves as counselors in such situations ought to be planned and effected.

A good mixture of Scripture evidence, theological works, and practical resources should be included. The more you wrestle with these questions in non-critical situations, the better prepared you will be for that inevitable question, "If God loves me, why has He done this to me?"

Some of the other questions that might be covered in these sessions are: "Is God punishing me for my sins?", "How can God be glorified in this tragedy?", "This is all my fault, isn't it?", "I've been so faithful to the Lord, why is He allowing this to happen to me?"

There are many other theological points that could be dealt with under this general heading. Being prepared to discuss with people the difference between punishment and the natural consequences of sin, for example, is very important, and the life of David makes a practical illustration in such cases.

Spiritual Considerations

It is one thing to be academically prepared to deal with these issues; it is something else to be spiritually prepared. For example, the Westminster Confession of Faith teaches that "God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy." (WCF, Chapter V, Paragraph I) This is a beautiful statement that incorporates all that the Bible teaches about God's holy providence, but there is a difference between knowing this and believing it, trusting in it, and resting in it in the midst of some personal tragedy.

If we hope to be a help to others in these matters, we must be convinced of them ourselves. Our own faith should be of what was called a century ago, the "experimental" kind. That is, exercised, practiced, and applied. Uncertainty of faith, hidden in the study, can easily be betrayed at the mourner's side. Thankfully, the Lord promises to put our faith to the test, but it is also good for us to think about these things ahead of time and to test our own hearts on them before we go out to teach and comfort others.

Emotional Considerations

In this area there are several things for which to be prepared, including our own emotional reactions to tragedies. Walking into a room where someone who is very dear to us has just lost a loved one by accident or violence can be very unsettling. Helping him to reconcile it

with the goodness and justice of God can be complicated by our own feelings and reactions. It's important to take time to pray and prepare for such encounters.

Commonly, a pastor tends to feel hurt or even rejected as a counselor if the person he is trying to comfort and reconcile does not respond as expected. Patience is vital in dealing with people under these circumstances; they may seem to reject what they consider to be your "theological" justification for God's actions against them, but if they are truly the Lord's, the Word will not return void. The important thing is not to take these reactions personally.

Be ready also to be available in the long run. Being emotionally prepared to help someone reconcile his personal tragedies with God's goodness and justice may require a substantial commitment of time and understanding; it is a good thing to know that initially. Some of the most profound spiritual battles resulting from critical incidents can take place much later than the actual events.

In dealing with these matters it is also important to recognize that there are helps that can be enlisted, other than your own counsel. It is important to make use of them without offense, even if they prove more effective than your own efforts. There are many contemporary works available for this purpose, and they are easily accessed, but don't forget the much neglected works of the past. Four Puritan classics which have been very helpful are *A Lifting Up For the Downcast* by Bridge; *Advice to Sufferers* by Bunyan; *Christian Contentment* by Burroughs; and *All Thing For Good* by Watson are all powerful tools in dealing with this world's miseries and the justice of God. It may be helpful to update these works in a prayer meeting study, laying the ground work for future needs among your people.

Physical Considerations

No matter how the Lord may use you to help someone handle these issues, physical reactions may interfere or follow the efforts of the best counselor and the person's understanding. In dealing with people it is important to prepare them for and help them with these as well. A violent physical reaction to the trauma of personal tragedy does not necessarily mean that there is a lack of faith or confidence in God.

Physical responses should be expected, and it is good if you can give some counsel ahead of time, so that Satan can not easily make use of them. Those who have been exposed to some personal tragedy should avoid sugar, caffeine, salt, and alcohol. They should also get all the physical exercise they can stand and plenty of rest. Long, private walks are very helpful. These provide a good opportunity to pray earnestly.

Prayer Considerations

This is the key to the mourner's peace of mind and the counselor's effectiveness. Encourage them to pour out their hearts, to confess their fear and doubts, and to call on the Lord to send the comfort that only He can. Be constantly pointing them to Christ and coaxing them to

call on Him. Even if someone is mad at God for what he consider to be an injustice, and he is truly the Lord's by faith, let him carry the charge to the throne of grace, look into His loving face, and confess it. His mercy will soon melt the heart and send peace. "It is said of Hannah," writes Burroughs, "that when she had been at prayer her countenance was no more sad (1 Samuel 1:18), she was comforted: this is the right way to contentment." (*Christian Contentment*, Burroughs, Banner of Truth)

Similarly, no counselor can be prepared to deal with these issues without prayers of his own. These petitions for usefulness should be offered generally, as well as for specific cases, because you never know when you may be called on to reconcile for some saint the goodness and justice of God and his suffering. Walking through the hospital one day, I was summoned into a room full of weeping people. They sought me out because they saw me go by with my Bible. Quickly it was explained that the mother lying in the bed was about to undergo brain surgery and that the doctors had told them that she would awake from the operation with no memory of her husband, children, or parents, and they wanted me to pray with them and to comfort them and to help them understand—what but prayer can prepare a mortal for such a moment.

It is not an easy task to deal with the tragedies, temptations, and heartaches of men while striving to maintain the honor of God, but this is what every faithful counselor and pastor must strive to do. In the Lord Jesus Himself we have our example. May God give us the grace to follow (2 Cor. 1:3-11).