

Acute Shepherding

Detailed Outline
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Introduction

A. Quarantined!

Upon returning from a mission trip to Colombia, South America, I was exhausted and dehydrated—feeling miserable. With alarms of “malaria,” the doctors quarantined me in the local hospital. A well-meaning brother came to minister to me. He shared a mini-sermon, explaining why God allows suffering.

I learned a lot about hospital visitation—how not to do it! I appreciated his intention, but it did little for me. Why? That is because I was not struggling with the “Why does God allow suffering?” question. My faith was not taking a hit—but my patience was! I was bored out of my mind and miserable, I just wanted to get out of there. (Turns out it wasn’t malaria, but an intestinal parasite). The real message I needed was to be patient (no pun intended).

B. As elders, our goal in visitation is to help sick or struggling Christians look to God for their needs. But what do I say when visiting someone to encourage him or her?

C. The writer of Hebrews challenges us to “encourage one another” (Heb. 10:25).

Encouragement is not simply trying to make a person feel good. Literally, the word means “to invite, implore, appeal to, entreat, comfort.” Spiritual encouragement, as Dr. Larry Crabb points out, involves “. . . the careful selection of words that are intended to influence another person meaningfully toward increased godliness.”

D. We must first understand where the individual is at in his or her spiritual struggle.

For me, it was patience. For some, they may wonder if anyone cares. For others, there may be deeper questions and struggles.

E. How do we know what they need?

I. We Need to Pray

A. Prayer puts us in a place of submissiveness.

1. In prayer we submit our wills to God.
2. Even in prayer, we need to be careful about assuming the most important thing is for the person’s physical healing.
3. Certainly we want that, from our limited human perspective.
4. Our hearts ought to cry out for the suffering of others.
5. However, the Lord may be doing something else as well, and that something else may be more important than the physical healing (we will look at the possibilities below).
6. Key word: Attitude

B. Prayer positions us in a state of spiritual readiness.

1. We are more open to discerning the wisdom and the comfort of the Lord that will be most appropriate.
2. Key word: Openness

C. Through prayer, we become more open to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

1. We are more in tune with Him.
2. We must steer away from “claiming” healing. I once heard a pastor pray, “*Lord, we will not let you rest until you heal this person.*” This is audacious and smacks of a superficial understanding of God’s promises—and it can leave people disillusioned or shipwrecked in their faith when God does not heal.
3. Remember also that God, if he so desires to heal a person, can do it just as well through the skill and wisdom of the medical profession as he can through an instantaneous healing.
4. Key word: Sensitivity

D. Prayer enters us into a partnership with God.

1. We are assisting Him, being used by Him—not to direct God in what we want done.
2. Faith means working together with God.
3. Key word: Faithfulness

E. Prayer includes asking God for healing.

1. Something people usually think of first in praying for the sick
2. We can feel free to ask for a person’s physical healing. This of course is biblical.
3. But I put it last because so often that is all there is to prayer for the sick.
4. As we have pointed out, there is so much more involved.
5. Key word: Healing

II. Discerning Their Experience

A. You need to learn to ask good questions.

1. This is the only way to find out what the other person is experiencing or wrestling with.
2. Don’t assume anything, whether by what you think they are feeling or by what others think the person is feeling. Only the person you are visiting can tell you that.
3. But you need to ask the right questions, or you may just get perfunctory or superficial answers. Pastoral care means more than just being present with someone; it means somehow influencing a person toward Christ. Often that happens through having a spiritual conversation.
4. This is not a sermon, or even offering a promise from the Lord. You need to discern the need. Questions are the way to do it. Like mental crowbars.

*A plan in the heart of a man is like deep water, but a man of understanding draws it out.
(Prov. 20:5 NASB)*

B. Questions that may open a spiritual conversation:

1. "How can I pray for you?"
2. "How can I be of help to you?"
3. "What's the most difficult part of this experience for you?"
4. "Do you have any questions?"
5. "What passage of Scripture have you found helpful?"
6. "Would you like me to read to you? Do you have a favorite passage?"
7. "What's God been saying to you through this?"

C. Don't barge into the room, firing away like an interrogator.

After initial "ice-breaker" conversation, using carefully thought-out questions will help move the discussion in a spiritual direction.

D. Asking good questions must be accompanied by good listening.

1. People often don't express themselves well when they are sick or in pain. So, you need to listen closely, carefully watching body language as well as facial expressions.
2. Sometimes people don't want to say what they are really struggling with; it may take a few visits before they begin to open up.
3. Even a visit without deep spiritual intercourse can still accomplish much. Once when I was sick, someone brought me a chocolate milkshake, my favorite snack. That in itself showed me he cared.

III. Respect People When They Go through Faith Struggles

A. If the person is open about struggling with faith, allow them to be honest.

David says, "Surely you desire truth in the inner parts . . ." (Ps. 51:6).

B. You can inadvertently hinder a person from being honest with their doubts and fears.

1. For example, some well-meaning statements may have the wrong effect:
2. "I came to encourage you, but you have encouraged me."
3. We think this is an encouragement, and it may well be. But it may pressure the individual to make a "good show" while struggling inwardly, for fear that he may be seen as weak in faith (who wants to be seen that way?).

C. When a person begins to open up, avoid saying, "*Oh, don't say that, God is good. He's going to get you through.*" God might not get them through, they may die. Or it may get worse.

D. Consider the struggles of godly men in the Bible.

1. David (as well as the Lord) in Psalm 22:1
2. Moses in the Exodus, Jacob in his wrestling with the Angel of the Lord
3. Job's masterful recollection of his intense turmoil with God

E. Can we as elders resist giving in to the need for giving a pat answer? Only then can we begin to encourage them at the right level.

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IV. What We Need for Visiting the Sick

A. Patience

1. Keeping in mind that “love is patient;” we should not rush to declare a solution to their spiritual need. Remember Job’s advisors! Having said this, we do want to provide a word “in season.”
2. A great burden is lifted from our shoulders when we realize that we don’t have to give a sermon or be a professional counselor.
3. Our role is simply to help the sick person find the Lord in his situation.
4. With this in mind, I always pray just *before* the visit, asking the Lord for humility, sensitivity, and wisdom. These are basic for being a channel God’s of comfort.

B. Wisdom

1. The Lord has promised the Christian wisdom in various trials, if we patiently trust Him (James 1:5–8).
2. This wisdom may be an understanding of the purpose for his suffering—that’s the “why?” question.
3. Or it may be wisdom for handling the trials of suffering—that’s the “how?” question—even if the first question doesn’t get answered!
4. The conscientious elder will study the biblical theme of suffering to determine both the reasons why God allows suffering and the way God wants us to biblically respond in the midst of suffering.

5. Some key passages to consider are:

- a) Learning trust and patience, inevitability of suffering

“Though He slay me, I will hope in Him. Nevertheless I will argue my ways before Him. (Job 13:15 NASB)

For man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward. (Job 5:7)

- b) Experience comfort so we can comfort others

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who 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 by God. (2 Cor. 1:3–4)

- c) Experience grace and grow in spiritual strength

Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to

torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. 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. (2 Cor. 12:7–9)

d) Chastening

“FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES.” It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? (Heb. 12:6–7)

e) Learn obedience at a deeper level

Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. (Heb. 5:8)

f) Glorifying God

For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, (Phil. 1:29)

g) All things work to the good for believers – Romans 8:28

h) Testimony to others – John 9:3

i) God is able – Jeremiah 32:27

j) Some reasons are not revealed – Deuteronomy 29:29

6. Don’t give a theology lesson.

a) Knowing all this doesn’t mean we give a theology lesson when we visit those experiencing adverse conditions.

b) The last thing we want to do is act like Job’s counselors! Understanding the reasons for suffering helps us discern under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, how we might respond with sensitivity.

c) Remember, we can’t possibly know what God is trying to do through the suffering—so we shouldn’t presume to know.

d) God is perfectly capable to show the person the reason for the suffering, if he wants to.

e) Often, God will not give a reason, but simply wants his children to trust him.

C. Verses of Comfort

1. One thing is certain: God loves the individual, and the sick person needs that affirmed.

2. For this, there is an abundance of Scripture you could share.

3. Psalm 23, of course, is the classic.

4. But, you will want to develop a list of other pertinent verses.

5. I would suggest keeping a list of “comfort” verses on the blank pages at the back of your Bible, or keep a list on your smart phone.

6. You can add to it when you come across new verses helpful for comforting.

D. Repeat Visits

1. On the first visit, you might share a few general verses about God's love and care.
2. How often should you visit?
 - a) A good rule of thumb would be that at least once a week for someone with an acute sickness. Time moves very slowly for the person who is sick.
 - b) If there is ever a time when Christians look to their elders for spiritual care, this is it.
3. During subsequent visits, you will become more discerning of God's work in their lives. Often, the person himself will become aware of what God is doing.
4. A good question to ask is, "Where have you seen God in your suffering?" or "How has God spoken to you through this?"
5. If they ask a question, like "Why is God doing this to me?" a good answer might be, "I am not sure."
"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law." (Deut. 29:29)
6. For people with longer illness or shut-ins,
 - a) The frequency of visits depends on a number of factors; each situation will be different.
 - b) It is easy for such a person to feel forgotten.
 - c) Once-a-month visits from people would be desirable, and maybe this effort could be spread among those with the gift of mercies.
7. The person might just simply need to know that God cares for him through you. That may be enough to "provoke" him or her (Heb. 10:24 KJV) to continue on.

E. Resources

1. Stephen Ministries - www.stephenministries.org
2. You might bring a recording of Sunday's message, music recordings, pamphlets, etc.
3. There are excellent "comfort" booklets available, which can be bought in bulk to reduce the cost. But be sensitive—the person you are visiting may have already received ten "special" books to read.