

Pastoral Responses to Suffering and COVID-19

A GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUP LEADERS

Small Group Leaders play a vital role in helping their group move through the times we are living in. Our hope is that people grow stronger and deeper with Jesus in this period through prayer, meditation on God's Word, and healthy reflection together. As a result, we would have a greater awareness to pain, grief and loss, and to the mystery and complexity of life.

Small Groups are a primary place where people may voice both feelings about what is happening in our world and opinions about 'why'. Small Group Leaders have a key voice in steering such conversations so they are pastorally sensitive and theologically clear.

To that end, here are 10 thoughts that may be useful in helping people navigate conversations that may arise:

1. Life is fragile and impermanent.

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." (James 4:13-15)

Job said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." (Job 1:21)

"If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will He not much more clothe you – you of little faith?" (Matthew 6:30)

2. Some suffering and trouble is inevitable in a fallen world.

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. (1 Peter 4:12-16)

3. Suffering is to be endured, and not necessarily ever explained.

You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings – what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted... (2 Timothy 3:10-12)

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. (2 Corinthians 1:8)



God never actually answers all Jobs questioning...

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? (Job 38:1-2)

"I am unworthy – how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer – twice, but I will say no more." (Job 40:4-5)

4. Are viruses are made by the devil?

It is debatable whether viruses are part of God's good creation or part of the fall. You could argue that a virus is no more corrupt than bacteria or mosquitoes or floods, and they appear to play an important positive role in the right context. For example, viruses have a symbiotic role in the development and life cycle of some flora and fauna and limiting the spread of some bacteria. However, viruses can become especially dangerous when they successfully jump across species and mutate, such as in the swine flu or COVID-19. Disease and suffering is, however, a product of a broken creation and not in God's good design for life.

The book of Job reminds us the devil has divinely placed limitations on his power. He is elsewhere referred to as the accuser, the deceiver, the tempter, a liar. Therefore, Satan primarily exploits calamity, trauma, hardship or just plain free will by animating fear, greed, insecurity, shame, unbelief etc. in the human heart – so that, like Job, we will ultimately curse God and walk away. Satan's end game is that people worship anything apart from God.

5. Viruses or any hardship are not God's judgement.

The main way we are absolutely sure that God is not just punishing us is in the revelation of His Son. Jesus perfectly reveals the Father, and Jesus' ministry was always to reverse the curse through healing and, ultimately, the cross. Jesus takes our death sentence in order that we might be freed from the finality of judgement for our sin, and death. Either we accept that it was finished on the cross, or we admit that the cross was not enough.

"He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." (1 Peter 2:24)

*And through the cross Jesus wins a victory over the power of Satan to condemn us eternally...
"I say to you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him! Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? Yet not one of them is forgotten before God. (Luke 12:4-6)*

6. God doesn't orchestrate suffering but works redemptively through suffering for our good and for His Glory.

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. (James 1:17)

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. (Genesis 50:20)



“The thief [devil] comes only in order to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it in abundance.” (John 10:10)

The “good of those who love Him” is a transcendent, “according to His purpose”, big picture kind of good – not our pleasure, prosperity or comfort.

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. (John 9:1-3)

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that His life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. (2 Corinthians 4:7-12)

7. God doesn’t protect us from all trouble, but protects us in and through trouble.

You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life. (Luke 21:16-19)

‘Not a hair perishing’ relates to our eternal security in Christ, not in anything we find our meaning in life in. Anything over and above God is fundamentally not safe at all and will be eventually be lost (e.g. career, prosperity, family). We may love these things, but we love them in relation to God, not instead of God. “Set your loves in order,” wrote Augustine, “Love all things in God.”

So we may suffer great loss and, yet, when our life is built with God at the centre, then that which is most definitive and precious can never be taken away – not a hair on our head will perish.

A note on the Psalms:

A thousand may fall at your side, and ten thousand at your right hand, but it shall not approach you. You will only look on with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked. For you have made the Lord, my refuge; even the Most High, your dwelling place. No evil will befall you, nor will any plague come near your tent. (Psalm 91)

Psalms like this are misinterpreted as formulaic promises from God, and it should be noted that the devil uses this same Psalm to tempt Jesus to doubt the Father (Matthew 4). Essentially the devil said to Jesus, ‘If God really loves you He will protect you, you won’t suffer or even stub your toe.’ The Christian can read a Psalm like this and may also assume some kind of cloak of protection. So when trouble comes (which it will), they may then be tempted to doubt the goodness of God or the power of God or the heart of God; that God doesn’t keep His promises, or they did something wrong. This is why we need to be careful how we understand such promises because, clearly, Christians are also dying of COVID-19.

Two simple hermeneutical principles will assist you as a Small Group Leader when interpreting the Bible:

1. *Scripture must interpret scripture.* If one passage seems to stand in contrast to others, it needs to be re-read in the light of the whole counsel of scripture.

2. *Jesus is our interpretive lens for understanding all scripture, for all scripture is ultimately about Jesus.* If a passages' interpretation doesn't seem to line up with the revelation we have of Jesus then we must reconsider our interpretation of the passage because Jesus most accurately reveals the Father.

8. God's promises are ultimately fulfilled on a greater scale than we can comprehend.

God is working for a future we simply can't see. Just like Joseph: "you meant it for evil but God meant it for Good". The good we are looking to is often not visible in the moment; sometimes not even a lifetime.

"Christianity offers not merely a consolation but a restoration – not just of the life we had but of the life we always wanted but never achieved. And because the joy will be even greater for all that evil, this means the final defeat of all those forces that would have destroyed the purpose of God in creation, namely, to live with his people in glory and delight forever." (Tim Keller)

9. The gospel is the best framework for understanding suffering

Unlike Buddhism, suffering is real. Unlike karma, suffering is fair. Unlike moralism, suffering is not your fault. Unlike Atheism, suffering is meaningful. Unlike secularism, suffering will be redeemed.

"While other worldviews lead us to sit in the midst of life's joys, foreseeing the coming sorrows, Christianity empowers its people to sit in the midst of this world's sorrows, tasting the coming joy." (Tim Keller)

God intimately understands the nature of our suffering because he suffered.

He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. (Isaiah 53:3-4)

Jesus resurrection offers the only solid reason for hope

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14)

10. An emotionally honest response to suffering is biblical and healthy

But I, O Lord, have cried out to You for help, And in the morning my prayer comes before You. O Lord, why do You reject my soul? Why do You hide Your face from me? I was afflicted and about to die from my youth on; I suffer Your terrors; I am overcome. (Psalm 88:14-15)

"Hear my prayer, Lord, listen to my cry for help; do not be deaf to my weeping. I dwell with you as a foreigner, a stranger, as all my ancestors were. Look away from me, that I may enjoy life again before I depart and am no more." (Psalm 39:12-13)

Grief, anger, sorrow, crying out to God is necessary and not a lack of faith. Scripture seems to constantly invite people into the place of emotional transparency, questioning God, and doubt.

How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? (Habakkuk 1:2)

As Christians, we can authentically embrace the mystery of suffering and avoid pat answers and over spiritualisation. We should allow people to feel what they feel and not rush to setting them straight when they have doubts or when their faith wavers. Rather, we empathetically listen and invite them to look to Jesus, to meditate on God's Word, and to wait and pray.

And pray we must! Despite the presence of suffering, we hope and trust and pray, anticipating God's goodness and glory to be revealed.

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

