

**Advice from the experience of those  
who have received uncomfortable “comfort”**

# You Can Help the Hurting

By Lynn Gardner

**P**hilip Yancey tells of his friends, John and Claudia Claxton. A year after their wedding, doctors told Claudia she had Hodgkin’s disease, a cancer of the lymph glands, and gave her only a 50 percent chance of survival. She had surgery, cobalt and radiation treatments, and visits from many Christians. Unfortunately, her Christian visitors were more confusing than comforting.

A deacon from her church said, “Surely something in your life must displease God.”

A lady came with flowers, singing happy songs. When Claudia tried to talk about her illness, the lady changed the subject, seeking to combat the suffering with cheer.

Another visitor, a follower of television faith healers, said healing was her only escape. “If you have enough faith, just name your promise and claim the victory.”

The next visitor said Claudia should praise God for everything that happens. “You must say, ‘God, I love you for making me suffer like this.’”

Claudia’s pastor said, “Claudia, because of your strength and integrity, God chose you to suffer for Christ as an example to others.”

These remarks left Claudia confused.<sup>1</sup> And she’s not the only one.

For several years I have asked students in my classes at Ozark Christian College, as well as other groups of Christians, to think about times when they faced great pain and sorrow. Too often, like Claudia Claxton, the “comfort” they received



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brought them only more pain. Next week, in the second article of this series, we’ll hear positive examples from their testimonies. But first, consider the following real examples of words meant to help that only hurt.

**“I know just how your feel.”**

When someone says this to a person suffering or grieving, the sufferer will probably think, “Oh, no, I don’t think you do.” It is true that one who has faced a similar loss might be able to understand your situation better than others. But that does not mean that they know exactly how you are experiencing the suffering and grief.

Every situation is different. Each person’s suffering is unique. Each person’s relationship to the lost loved one is different. Grief after an accidental death is different from the grief associated with a prolonged illness that results in death. A husband’s grieving might be very different from his wife’s. The loss is unique to each individual who experiences the loss, and each must cope with it from his personal situation.

When my wife and I were in our early 20s ministering in a church in California, Myrtie Bigelow, a dear servant of God who had suffered a lot in her life, told us never to tell someone, “I know just how you feel.”

**"You must get on with your life."**

Only people unacquainted with deep grief would say this. Our "instant potatoes" culture has a shallow view of suffering and grief. Our "stiff upper lip" mentality encourages getting over mourning quickly and getting on with life. But we each grieve in our own way and on our own timetable. Grieving the loss of a loved one is an adjusting and coping process that continues over many years.

Thomas Attig says that the grief-stricken person must relearn how to live, continuing to love the lost person in their absence.<sup>2</sup> Coping with suffering and grief is a process that takes a long time. A widower said it was three years after his wife died before he felt he could experience happiness again.

Allow the person to proceed at his own pace. Don't force your own timetable on their healing.

**"Something in your life is displeasing to God."**

Job's friends told Job he was suffering because of his sin. God told Job's friends they were wrong. Jesus also rejected this view of suffering (Luke 13:1-3; John 9:1-3).

A father related that when he and his wife learned their firstborn had problems, they prayed that the problems would go away. During months of continued praying they successively learned their child was blind, mentally retarded, and had muscular dystrophy and cerebral palsy. Some people distanced themselves from them, concluding either they were not spiritual enough or they had angered God by their actions. The father at one time wondered if God were punishing him for his former years of atheism. A minister even suggested this possibility to him.<sup>3</sup>

Some suffering is caused by sin (for example, venereal disease from sexual sin), but not all suffering is caused by one's sin. Some suffering is caused by the sins of others (for example, the destruction and death caused by drunk drivers). An innocent person might be the one who suffers in such a situation. Sometimes suffering results from an accident or circumstance where no one is at fault. We encounter suffering because we live in a fallen world.

**"You do not have enough faith."**

Some believers hold that if your prayer is not answered, something is wrong with your faith. A deaf couple left a church that ministered to the

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deaf to become a part of a church that promised healing. They were excited that, through the church's prayers, they soon would be free from their deafness.

After months of praying for complete healing, the couple remained deaf. Promises changed to blame. Concluding that the couple was not healed because something was wrong with their faith, the congregation asked them to leave. A friend of the couple observes that this case "warns us concerning what happens when we become so sure we know what God will and won't do."<sup>4</sup>

All healing is from God whether it is natural or miraculous. God designed the body to repair itself in many instances. He gave humans in-

telligence so they could learn healing skills. He allowed us to develop many products that can be used for healing. God at times acts miraculously and heals a person or brings about events that have no natural explanation. But what happens when God does not intervene and heal miraculously? That does not mean He doesn't like us or that we haven't mustered up enough faith.

Some have told us, "Sickness is never God's will. God wants you well." But the New Testament does not teach that if you have sufficient faith you will never have pain and sickness. Paul prayed three times for deliverance from his thorn in the flesh, but God said, "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9,

*New International Version*). Timothy had "frequent infirmities," and Paul suggested medicinal help (1 Timothy 5:23).

**"God selected you to be an example of faith in suffering."**

Is this supposed to be comforting? Claudia did not think so. Without divine revelation, how could one know this anyway? The problem with this view is that it claims to know that God did it. God might use one's faithfulness in suffering as a strength to others, but that does not mean He caused the suffering. We need to be careful that we do not blame God for the things that Scripture does not say He does.

**"You must thank God for making you suffer. It is God's will."**

There are parts of every circumstance for which we can give thanks. But that does not mean we must give thanks for evil things. The above comment assumes that every event is

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God's will. But that depends on how we define God's will. Sinful and evil acts are not what God wants and wills to happen. Everything that happens is not within God's directive will.

God's directive will is what God desires and directs or commands to happen. For example, Jesus is the only way to God.

God in His permissive will allows and permits both good and evil things to happen. He granted man free will, which included the possibility for evil. This fallen world and our fallen human race are not what God desires or approves, but rather what God has allowed.

**"Let's talk about the weather . . . or my vacation . . . or our favorite team . . . whatever we can find that is happy."**

Some people don't know what to say and feel awkward, so they avoid the sufferer. Or they talk about everything except the reason for the suffering. Some people, for example, are afraid to mention a loved one who has died, for fear of making his relative sad. But if you have lost a family member, you don't want that person to be forgotten. The avoidance hurts worse than talking about the person who has died.

This kind of silence can communicate a lack of caring. You cannot camouflage disease or death by ignoring it. The sufferer must face the reality of the situation.

**"I think I know why this happened."**

Many keep looking for some purpose that God had in a sickness or tragedy. Generally such opinions

are mere speculation and not helpful in times of profound suffering. Grief-stricken sufferers need love and support, not theological lectures or philosophical explanations.

Some things just happen in this fallen world, and we might never know the reasons. Even if we do not know why it happened, we can control our response to the event. We need to see the overall purpose of God in the universe and our lives, but we may never know the reason for a particular tragic circumstance. In most cases, questions about cause are in God's area, not ours. It's best to leave them there.

**"Think only positive thoughts."**

This is escapism. It is better to be honest and realistic about one's grief than to try to muster only pos-

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itive thoughts. If I have a terminal disease, it is neither helpful nor realistic to think and act as if I do not. Everything that happens in this life is not positive. Some good results might come from a loss or illness, but that does not erase the daily need to deal with the harsh realities of the situation. Our living hope enables us to endure trials (1 Peter 1:3-9).

**"All things work together for good."**

Some Christians have read Romans 8:28 in the *King James Version* and misinterpreted what it is teaching us. This verse does not explain the cause of suffering for the Christian, but rather the result of it. A better translation is, "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" (*New International Version*). This text describes the results God can bring out of suffering, but it does not say that God causes the bad situation to bring about good.

**"I knew a person who died from that disease."**

It is neither comforting nor encouraging to tell stories about similar situations that had a bad outcome. Resist the temptation to tell such stories.

We have all made mistakes in what we have said to the hurting. We need to think before we speak so we can avoid these things that do not help.

<sup>1</sup>Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 15-18.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Attig, *How We Grieve* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) and *The Heart of Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup>John Clayton, *Does God Exist?* vol. 29 (May/June, 2002), 8.

<sup>4</sup>Ralph Mehrens, *Contact from Calvary*, vol. XIV (23 January 1984), 2.

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**NEXT WEEK: What Helps the Hurting  
COMING MARCH 23: Why Does God Allow Suffering?**