Suicide Has Hit Our Family

Sue Bohlin shares her heart in the wake of her and her husband Ray's son taking his life.

Last week our beloved 44-year-old son Curt took his life.

He had struggled with severe suicidal depression for 26 years, hating almost every day of his adult life and wanting God to take him home to join his sister Rebecca. His depression and anxiety crippled him to the point of moving back in with my husband and me in 2008. He often shared with us his anguish at life in a fallen world, living in a broken body.

Curt eventually lost most of his hearing as the result of serving on the flight line in the Air Force, but when he was honorably discharged he was told it wasn't bad enough to warrant disability benefits. The loss of his hearing meant losing his touch with music, which he loved. It also meant losing touch with his community in online role-playing games, so he lost his sense of belonging and purpose.

His life was very painful. After staying his hand multiple times over two decades, God allowed him to take his life and instantly enter the heaven he had longed for, for so very long.

Some themes have been rolling around in my head since the news of his passing.

First, our grief is mitigated by the relief on Curt's behalf that his suffering is over. When I told my husband the news delivered by a police detective, his first words were, "We've known this day might come for 26 years." We have lived with the darkness of his depression and anxiety for a long time, which included the ever-present threat of suicide because he always thought of it as his ticket out.

Second, God's grace is stronger than I have ever experienced in my entire life. It feels like He has tucked me in the shadow of His wing (Psalm 57:1). I have buried a child before; I know the brutality of grief, but God is holding it back. I winced to realize that a hard, heart-wrenching grief awaits me, but then I reminded myself that He will carry me through those days just as He's carrying me now. And I appreciated my friend who gave me "permission to not be okay" when those days come.

Third, the one attribute of God that comforts me more than any other is His sovereignty. A good and loving God is in control. He chose the day of Curt's birth, and He chose the day of his death. We've been clinging to Psalm 139:16, "All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be." Our son did not die a single day earlier than God had planned for him. And He prevented Curt from following through on all the times he planned to take his life since the first time when he was 17. God ordained for our daughter Rebecca to live for eight days, and He ordained for Curt to live for 44 years.

Fourth, God keeps pouring out His goodness on us every time we turn around. We have been inundated with people wanting to help us with everything we need from money for funeral expenses, to food and paper goods, to willing hands to prepare our home for family coming in for his memorial service. And that includes being willing to clean out his room and haul away all the furniture that reeked of body odor. In case you don't know, severely depressed people usually don't care about personal hygiene, and both our son and his room stank from weeks, sometimes months, of going unwashed. It was a source of sorrow and frustration to us, but we loved him in his mental illness and just lived with it.

Fifth, there is the blessing of *not knowing* so many things. I don't know what he was thinking when something flipped and he went from offering to cook lunch for the family visiting us,

to leaving our home intent on stepping off an overpass. I don't know what he was thinking or feeling on that walk. I don't know what his last seconds were like, and I am most grateful that we didn't have to identify him at the medical examiner's office. I don't know so many things, and I am so glad. I can leave all those questions in the Lord's hands, and I can ask him when I see him again-if it matters at all by then.

And that brings me to the most important idea that has marked these days: HOPE. Hope is future-facing faith. Not wishful thinking, like "I hope it doesn't rain on my picnic." Biblical hope is certainty. Hebrews 6:19 calls biblical hope "an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast." God has used this horrible time to reveal that He has been working in the background to strengthen my future-facing faith. When I say I have hope to be reunited with my son, it's not a wish. I am 1000% certain that he is in heaven and that my husband and I, our other son Kevin, and his wife Lauren will join him there.

I had the privilege of leading Curt to put his trust in Jesus Christ when he was three years old, watching him grow in his faith over the years, watching him bear the spiritual fruit that proved his faith was real. I know he's in heaven, because to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). Our dear friend Dave commented on my Facebook post, "I am heartbroken for your loss but so grateful for your hope that you will see Curt again." That's when I had the lightbulb moment and I replied, "Thanks for using the word HOPE. Future-facing faith. My hope about seeing Curt is as strong as my view of Ray this very minute. Who is sitting three feet from me."

Curt's first week in heaven: it felt like he was just on the other side of the invisible wall separating earth from heaven. Maybe it's the special bond between a mother and the child she bore, maybe it's something spiritual, I don't know. But the reality of my son's new home makes heaven closer to me than it

has ever been. My husband Ray has said for years that heaven is more real to me than anyone he knows. Part of it is knowing our baby Rebecca is there, part of it is longing for my new body untouched by polio and cancer.

Curt's suicide is not okay. Murder is sin, even the murder of oneself. But Jesus' statement on the cross, "It is finished," meaning "It is paid in full," covered every one of his sins, including taking the life God gave him. With God's begrudging permission, apparently. I trust the Lord with it all.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/suicide-has-hit-our-family on July 16, 2024.

Christ and the Human Condition

Dr. Michael Gleghorn looks at how God has acted in Christ to address those things which ail us most: sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God.



Early in the book of Job, Eliphaz the Temanite declares that "man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward" (5:7). Whether it's the trouble that befalls us as we're simply minding our own business or the trouble we bring upon others (or even ourselves), difficulties, sin, and suffering seem to plague us wherever we turn. Just think for a moment about some of the natural evils which afflict the human race. This class of evils includes both natural disasters like hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes, and earthquakes, and diseases

like cancer, leukemia, Alzheimer's and ALS. While natural evils are bad enough, they are only part of the problem. In addition to these, we must also consider all the moral evils which human beings commit against God, one another, and themselves. This second class of evils includes things like hatred, blasphemy, murder, rape, child abuse, terrorism, and suicide. Taken together, the scope and magnitude of human sin and suffering in the world are truly mind-boggling. What does God have to say about issues such as these? Even better, what (if anything) has He done about them?

The Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga has written

> As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, cooly observing the suffering of His creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering. He endures the anguish of seeing his son, the second person of the Trinity, consigned to the bitterly cruel and shameful death of the cross. Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. Christ was prepared to endure the agonies of hell itself; and God, the Lord of the universe, was prepared to endure the suffering consequent upon his son's humiliation and death. He was prepared to accept this suffering in order to overcome sin, and death, and the evils that afflict our world, and to confer on us a life more glorious than we can imagine.{1}

According to Plantinga, then, God *has acted*, and acted decisively through His Son, to address those things which ail us most—sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God. In what follows, we will briefly examine each of these ailments. More importantly, however, we will also see how God has acted in Christ to heal our bleak condition, thereby giving us encouragement, strength and hope, both now and forevermore.

Moral Evil

When Adam and Eve first sinned in the garden (Gen. 3:6), they could hardly have imagined all the tragic consequences that would follow this single act of disobedience. Through this act, sin and death entered the world and the human condition was radically altered (Rom. 5:12-19). Human nature had become defiled with sin and this sinful nature was bequeathed to all mankind. The human race was now morally corrupt, alienated from God and one another, subject to physical death, and under the wrath of God. The entire creation, originally pronounced "very good" by God (Gen. 1:31), was negatively affected by this first act of rebellion. Like the ripples that radiate outward when a stone is thrown into a calm body of water, the consequences of that first sin have rippled through history, bringing evil, pain, and suffering in their wake. As the Christian philosopher William Lane Craig has noted, "The terrible human evils in the world are testimony to man's depravity in his state of spiritual alienation from God."{2} Indeed, we are so hopelessly entangled in this web of sin and disobedience that we cannot possibly extricate ourselves. This, according to the Bible, is the sorry plight in which all men naturally find themselves.

Fortunately for us, however, God has acted to free us from our enslavement to sin, to disentangle us from the web that holds us captive, and to reconcile us to Himself. He did this by sending His Son to so thoroughly identify with us in our painful predicament that He actually *became* one of us. By identifying Himself with sinners who were under the wrath of God, He was able to take our sins upon Himself and endure God's wrath in our place, so that we might be reconciled to God by placing our trust in Him. The apostle Paul put it this way: God made Christ "who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, we're told that anyone hanged on a tree because of their sins is "accursed of God" (21:23). In the New Testament, Paul picks up on this idea and says that through His substitutionary death on the cross, Christ became "a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). We should not lose sight of the significance of these words. By identifying Himself with the guilty human race, and becoming a curse for us, He has opened the way for us to be freed from our sins and reconciled to God as *we* are identified with *Him* through faith. This is just one of the ways in which Christ has met the desperate needs of the human condition.

Natural Evil

Another reason why we suffer arises from what philosophers and theologians call *natural evil*. Natural evil refers to all the causes of human pain and suffering which are not brought about by morally-responsible agents. This would include the pain and suffering arising from natural disasters like earthquakes, famines, and storms, as well as diseases like cancer and ALS.

Now the question I want to pose is this: Is there a sense in which Christ is also a solution to the problem of natural evil? And if so, then how should we understand this? When we examine the life and ministry of Jesus as it's recorded in the Gospels, we can hardly help but be struck by the number of miracles He performs. He walks on water, calms raging storms, feeds thousands of people with a few loaves and fish, cleanses lepers, heals the sick, restores sight to the blind, and even raises the dead! Although some might demur at all these accounts of miracles, Craig has noted that "the miracle stories are so widely represented in all strata of the Gospel traditions that it would be fatuous to regard them as not rooted in the life of Jesus."{3}

So what is the significance of Jesus' miracles? According to New Testament scholar Ben Witherington, Jesus' miracles show

him to be God's special agent of blessing, healing, liberation, and salvation, as well as the "one who brings about the conditions associated with the final . . . dominion of God."{4} Since the kingdom of God is portrayed in Scripture as a reign of peace, prosperity, health, well-being and blessing, Jesus' miracles of healing, as well as his demonstrations of power over nature, indicate that He is indeed capable of ushering in such a wonderful kingdom.{5} And if Jesus has the power to bring in an era of health and well-being, both for our physical bodies and for the physical universe, and if he in fact will do so, then he clearly provides a solution to the problem of natural evil. Ultimately, in the new heaven and new earth, which God will give to those who love Him, we are promised that there "will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

Physical Death

The apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, described death as an "enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26). People fear death for any number of reasons. Some fear that the process of dying will be painful. Others dread the thought of leaving behind the ones they love. Some may fear that death is simply the end, that whatever joys and pleasures this life holds, death takes them away forever. But others may fear that there *is* an afterlife and worry that things may not go well for them there. For many people, however, death is feared as the great unknown.{6} Friends and relatives die and we never see or hear from them again. For these people, death is like the ultimate black-hole, from which nothing and no one can ever escape.

But according to the Bible, Christ *did* escape the snares of death, and in doing so He dealt our mortal enemy a mortal blow of his own. I said that Paul describes death as an "enemy," but this is simply to inform us of the fact that our enemy has been conquered by Christ. "The last enemy that will be

abolished," he writes, "is death" (1 Cor. 15:26). But how has Christ conquered this enemy? And how does *His* victory help *us*?

Christ conquered death through his resurrection from the dead and all who put their trust in Him can share in his victory. Pastor Erwin Lutzer has written:

> Thus the resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Standing at the empty tomb, we are assured of the triumph of Jesus on the Cross; we are also assured that He has conquered our most fearsome enemy. Yes, death can still terrify us, but the more we know about Jesus, the more its power fades.{7}

Consider the life and death of the great Reformation theologian Martin Luther. As a young Augustinian monk, Luther struggled with a very sensitive conscience and a terrible fear of death. But once he understood the gospel and placed his trust in Christ, his fear gradually began to fade. By the time he died, his fear was gone. It's reported that on his deathbed, he recited some promises from the Bible, commended his spirit to God, and quietly breathed his last.{8} Believing that Christ had conquered death and given him eternal life, he was able to die at peace and without any fear. And this is the hope of *all* who trust in Christ!

The Weight of Glory

Christian theologians sometimes describe the knowledge of God as "an incommensurable good."{9} By this they mean that knowing God in an intimate, personal way is quite literally the *greatest good* that any created being can experience. It is an "incommensurable" or "immeasurable" good—a good so great that it surpasses our ability even to comprehend. The apostle Paul once prayed that the Ephesians might "know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge" (Eph. 3:19). He understood that "intimate relationship with God . . . is incommensurately

good-for created persons."{10}

Of course, this doesn't mean that one who is intimately related to God will never experience any of the trials and difficulties of life. In fact, it's possible that such a person will actually experience *more* trials and difficulties than would have been the case had they *not* been intimately related to God! Knowing the love of Christ doesn't make one immune to suffering. It does, however, provide indescribable comfort while going through it (see 2 Cor. 1:3-5).

The apostle Paul understood this quite well. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he described himself as a servant of God who had suffered afflictions, hardships, beatings, imprisonments, labors, sleeplessness, and hunger (2 Cor. 6:4-5). In spite of this, however, he did not lose heart. He famously wrote that "momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

But how could Paul describe his sufferings as just a "momentary, light affliction"? Because, says Craig, he had an *eternal* perspective. "He understood that the length of this life, being finite, is literally infinitesimal in comparison with the eternal life we shall spend with God."{11}

The greatest hunger of the human heart is to know and experience the love and acceptance of God and to enjoy Him forever. In his magnificent sermon "The Weight of Glory," C.S. Lewis wrote, "In the end that Face which is the delight or . . . terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or . . . the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be . . . disguised."{12} Incredibly, just as Christ has dealt with the problems of sin, suffering, and death, He has also acted decisively to reconcile us to God. Through faith in him, anyone who wants can eventually experience "an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17).

Notes

2. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 96-97.
3. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 324.
4. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 43-44.
5. Some biblical passages that pertain to Christ's coming kingdom are Isaiah 11:1-9, Matthew 19:28, and Acts 3:19-21.
6. I was reminded of many of these examples while watching the round table discussion on suffering and death in Catherine Tatge, "The Question of God: Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis" (U.S.A.: PBS Home Video, 2004).
7. Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Vanishing Power of Death* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), 13.
8. Mike Fearon, *Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1986), 157-58.
9. See, for example, Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 100.
10. Marilyn McCord Adams, Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 47.
11. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 99.
12. C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 13.

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What Difference Does the Resurrection Make?

Sue Bohlin suggests four ways the resurrection of Jesus can make a difference in the lives of believers today.

What difference does the resurrection make—in our lives? It's the most important event in all of human history. Where's the "so what" for today?

I meditated on this question for weeks, eventually creating a list too long for this blog post. So let me share my favorites.

All pain and suffering will be redeemed and resolved.

I've lived in a body with a disability since I got polio at eight months old and was paralyzed from the waist down. I got some use of my left leg and hip back, but I had to wear a steel and leather brace for the first several years of my life. Every step I've taken, I have limped. I had several orthopedic surgeries and 14 years of physical therapy.

We used to sing a song in church that made me cry Every. Single. Time.

> **You Hold Me Now** {1}
> For eternity
> All my heart will give
> All the glory to Your Name
>
> No weeping, no hurt or pain
> No suffering
> You hold me now
> You hold me now
>
> No darkness, no sick or lame
> No hiding, You hold me now
> You hold me now

The first time I walk without a limp will be in my resurrected body, in heaven where there will be no polio, no weakness, no limping. There will be no scooters in heaven. No wheelchairs. No walkers.

No insulin pumps.

No percussion vests for cystic fibrosis.
No cochlear implants for the deaf.
No braille books or signs for the blind.
No dentures or dental implants.
No prosthetics.

All the technology and tools we have developed to help people deal with life in a fallen, broken world will be obsolete and never needed again. The fallen, broken world will be resurrected too! Full of glory and beauty and strength and perfection.

What difference does the resurrection make? It affects how I live through times of pain and suffering. I know I can bear it if there is a purpose and God is going to make everything right.

The resurrection means all pain and suffering is temporary, and there is meaning to it.

The resurrection means God sustains me through the difficult times because He is doing a beautiful thing in me that I will only be able to see and appreciate in my resurrection body.

A second difference the resurrection makes is that ***heaven is real, so we don't have to fear death.***

The resurrection means that if we are believers, if we have trusted in Christ, when we cross over from life on earth to life in heaven, we will be with Jesus and with all the people, starting with Adam and Eve, who put their trust in Him.

It means we can look forward to being reunited with our loved ones who have died.

I'm looking forward to seeing my daughter Becky again. She's been with Jesus 42 years. I'm looking forward to being there when our sons Curt and Kevin meet their sister, who was born and died before they came along. I'm looking forward to seeing

my mom and dad, my grandparents and other family members, including my wonderful cousin George who just moved to heaven last week.

We can look forward to meeting super distant family members and even people we heard about but never met, like the apostles and Saint Augustine and Corrie Ten Boom and Billy Graham.

And since heaven is real, it means we don't have to fear death.

When we put our trust in Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, death is merely a doorway into the next life. We leave our bodies and step across the threshold of heaven to be with Jesus.

There are so many stories of what a difference the resurrection makes in the life of a believer as they face death!

Recently I posted a question on Facebook asking friends to share dying stories of heaven-bound believers. I got so many delightful responses!

"My friend Charla was a hospice nurse for many years. She tells of one man, O.J., on his deathbed. His best friend, Floyd, had gone to heaven several years earlier. O.J. had been comatose for a day or so. Charla said he was peaceful and close to death as she sat with him, holding his hand and speaking soothing words to him. All of a sudden, with his eyes still closed, O.J. broke into a brilliant smile, lifted his other hand up into the air and said expectantly, 'Floyd!' and he went right to heaven! Charla said she'd held his hand on Earth as Floyd grasped his hand in heaven."

"In the last moments of my father's life, he was beaming with joy as he saw his friends on the other side waiting for him. He held up his hands, greeting them by name, 'Brother Harold!

Brother Bob!'"

3 weeks before my believing aunt passed, she saw her husband who had died several years before, in white robes reaching out his arms to her. Then while in the hospital, Aunt Rose walked by a statue of Jesus and paused as if talking to him. My cousin asked, "Mom, are you talking to Jesus?"

She said, "Yes, and He said, 'Hang in there Rosie, you'll be with Me shortly.'" A few days later, she told my cousins what she was seeing as the curtain between heaven and earth grew more and more transparent.

She exclaimed that heaven was so beautiful, so filled with warmth and kindness. Her daughter asked her if it was like Hawaii and she laughed and said, "No, it's like a warm summer afternoon in Wisconsin." The week she died, she started seeing Jesus in a white robe, and then the day before she died the robe turned gold. That night she told my cousin, "Go to bed. You're keeping me from meeting Jesus." She died several hours later.

What difference does the resurrection make? It means when loved ones die, it's just a "see you later" rather than a forever goodbye.

It means that as you get rolled from pre-op to the operating room and get ready to undergo anesthesia, you can relax in peace knowing that if anything were to go wrong during surgery, you'd wake up in heaven.

It means being legitimately concerned about the dying process hurting, but not concerned about what happens one minute after death.

The resurrection means death has been robbed of its power and its sting.

Another difference the resurrection makes is that ***we become***

more aware of the unseen, eternal world.

Since Jesus said He had come from heaven, and that He would rise from the dead in 3 days—*and then He did!*—that validates everything He taught about the unseen and eternal dimension of life.

We can become more aware of the fact that we live in two worlds at the same time, the seen and physical world and the unseen spiritual world (2 Corinthians 4:18).



I love to snorkel in the Caribbean. I love being able to look at the beautiful fish and corals of the underwater world while effortlessly breathing the air of the above-water world. I love functioning in two worlds at the same time.

What difference does the resurrection make? It means we can operate in two worlds simultaneously.

It means we can learn to focus on the unseen, eternal realm as more real than the temporal realm.

It means we can intentionally become so much more effective in our prayers because we start to see we truly do release God's power into other people's lives and situations when we pray.

Operating in two realms at the same time means we can sit in our living rooms and release the light of God's truth and power into legal and political situations in our nation's capital.

We can be walking or driving in our cars wherever we are and

pour the grace of God's power into the hearts of persecuted Christians on the other side of the world.

We can read or hear the news on the internet or the newspaper and lift up events and needs and problems to the throne of God no matter where they are.

The resurrection means we can wear "invisible snorkel gear" and operate in the earthly realm and the spirit realm at the same time.

A final difference the resurrection makes is that ***we will be married to Christ.***

The church, the body of Christ, will be married to our heavenly bridegroom Jesus.

The greatest earthly marriages are still only a foretaste of the ultimate, perfect marriage between the Bride of Christ and the Lamb.

The best, healthiest earthly marriages are still between two broken, fallen sinners who hurt and irritate and annoy each other and are in constant need of forgiveness.

The very best marriages are not ultimately fulfilling and completing because only Jesus can fill and complete us. There are still times of loneliness and not being understood and wondering, "Is this as good as it gets?" Yes, because earthly marriages are not the ultimate purpose of your life.

If you are single, even if by God's grace you are content in your singleness, there is still a longing for connection that eludes you on earth because you were made for a deep and perfect union and connection with Jesus.

What difference does the resurrection make? It means we will be bound up with the rest of the body of Christ to become His bride.

And these three differences that the resurrection make, I believe, are only the tip of the iceberg.

1. Hillsong Music, words and music by Joel Houston & Aodhan King

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/what_difference_does_the_resurrection_make
on April 16, 2019.

What Not To Say When Someone is Grieving

Last week my dear friend Sandi Glahn wrote another boffo blog post about the myths of infertility, which included some of the dumb things people say.

It may be insensitivity or a lack of education that spurs people to say things that are unhelpful at the least and downright hurtful much of the time. I still remember my own daggers to the heart after our first baby died nine days after her birth. And for the past several years, I have been collecting actual quotes said to those already in pain.

So here's my current list of What Not To Say when someone is hurting:

Don't start any sentence with "At least. . . ."
- "At least you didn't have time to really love her."
- "At least he's in heaven now."
- "At least you have two other children."

• “At least that’s one less mouth you’ll have to feed.”
• “At least it didn’t have to go through the pain of birth.”
• “At least you’ve had a good life so far, before the cancer diagnosis.”

Don’t attempt to minimize the other person’s pain.
• “Cancer isn’t really a problem.” (e.g., Shame on you for thinking that losing your hair/body part/health is a problem.)
• “It’s okay, you can have other children.”

Don’t try to explain what God is doing behind the scenes.
• “I guess God knew you weren’t ready to be parents yet.”
• “Now you’ll find out who your friends are.”
• “This baby must have just not been meant to be.”
• “There must have been something wrong with the baby.”
• “Just look ahead because God is pruning you for great works.”
• “Cancer is really a blessing.”
• “Cancer is a gift from God because you are so strong.”

Don’t blame the other person:
• “If you had more faith, your daughter would be healed.”
• “Remember that time you had a negative thought? That let the cancer in.”
• “You are not praying hard enough.”
• “Maybe God is punishing you. Have you done something sinful?”
• “Oh, you’re not going to let this get you down, are you?” (Meaning: just go on without dealing with it.)

Don’t compare what the other person is going through to ANYTHING else or anyone else’s problem:
• “It’s not as bad as that time I. . .”
• “My sister-in-law had a double mastectomy and you only lost one breast.”

Don’t use the word “should”:
• “You should be happy/grateful that God is refining you.”

Don’t use clichés and platitudes:
• “Look on the bright side.”
• “He’s in a better place.”
• “She’s an angel now.” (NO! People and angels are two different created kinds! People do not get turned into angels when they die.)
• “He’s with the Lord.”

Don’t instruct the person:
• “This is sent for your own good, and you need to embrace it to get all the benefit out of it.”
• “Remember that God is in control.”
• “Remember, all things work together for good for those that love God and are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28 is powerful to comfort oneself, but it can feel like being bludgeoned when it comes from anyone else.)

What TO say:
• “I love you.”
• “I am so sorry.” You don’t have to explain. Anything.

What TO do:
• A wordless hug.
• A card that says simply, “I grieve with you.”
• Instead of bringing cakes, drop off or (better) send gift certificates for restaurants or pizza places.

And pray. Then pray some more. It’s the most powerful thing we can say or do.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/what-not-to-say-when-someone-is-grieving/ on January 20, 2009, and you can read the many comments there.

“We Need Encouragement After Repeated Miscarriages”

Recently, my wife and I suffered our third miscarriage in a little over a year. I am feeling so many emotions right now from anger and frustration to confusion. We have no kids currently, but would like to one day. I am having trouble reconciling these miscarriages and was hoping for some encouragement I guess. Where can I look in the Bible for something that helps?

My hurt aches for you and your wife. I am so very, very sorry for the tsunami of pain and disappointment and grief you and she are experiencing. My husband and I are also in the “Parents Who Have Lost Babies” club. Burying our daughter after nine days of life was devastating to us, but God has greatly redeemed every bit of the pain in the years since then.

I think the encouragement you seek will come from being able to see the bigger picture, one that includes God’s tender love for you and His tears for your pain as He works out His purposes in your life and character. May I suggest a couple of resources that may help? My Probe article “The Value of Suffering” is intensely practical in terms of understanding a biblical view of pain and suffering: The Value of Suffering

At our last Probe Mind Games conference, where we equip students to be confident in their faith before they get to college, I recorded my teaching session on this subject, which I sensed was very much anointed by God. I pray you find it helpful and comforting: www.box.net/shared/66gn28bubc (It opens with the sound track to the video I show first, Rob Bell’s NOOMA video “Rain.”)

You may also find Caleb Ministries helpful; they help people

who are in exactly your position.

I send this with the prayer that you and your wife experience the warmth of God’s comfort wrapped around your soul like a warm blanket on a cold and rainy day.

Again, I am so sorry for your losses.

Sue Bohlin

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“The JW Argument ‘There Is No Soul'”

One of the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ arguments is that if Lazarus was dead and his soul was in Heaven, why would Jesus resurrect him? They argue, why would Jesus take Lazarus away from what surely is a beautiful and wondrous place. Thus, there must not be a soul and when we die we just die. How do I answer this?

Thanks for your letter. The issue of personal survival after death (but before the resurrection) is best dealt with by an appeal to the authority of the Bible. If the Bible is a trustworthy revelation from God, and if the Bible teaches a conscious intermediate state between death and resurrection, then it logically follows that human beings do experience personal, conscious existence after death. So what does the Bible teach on this issue?

The Bible clearly speaks of personal conscious existence between death and resurrection. Indeed, even The New World

Translation (1961), written by the Jehovah's Witnesses, seems to imply this. In Revelation 6:9-10 we read:

"And when he opened the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those slaughtered because of the word of God… And they cried with a loud voice saying: 'Until when, Sovereign Lord holy and true, are you refraining from judging and avenging our blood upon those who dwell on the earth?'"

Here the author of the Revelation sees the SOULS of those killed on the earth. These SOULS are in the presence of God and clearly conscious because they ask God a question and even receive an answer (see v. 11). But how can this be if they do not really exist between death and resurrection?

Other verses which teach conscious existence between death and resurrection include Philippians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:6-8; and of course Luke 16:19-31. There are many other which I will not take the time to list.

The JW's want to know why Jesus would raise Lazarus back to earthly life if he was already in a better place? First, although there may be a connection between Luke 16 and John 11, this is nowhere stated explicitly. Second, the Bible only hints at why Jesus raised Lazarus. It indicates that He raised Lazarus to inspire faith in His disciples (John 11:14), to reveal God's glory to the people (11:40), and to help the people believe that Jesus had come from God (11:42). But WHY Jesus raised Lazarus isn't even the issue. Jesus may have raised Lazarus for very good reasons that He didn't bother to tell us. The real issues are:

1. Is the Bible a trustworthy revelation from God? and
2. Does the Bible teach that we have a soul/spirit that continues to exist between
death and resurrection?

If the answer to both of these questions is "Yes," then it really doesn't matter if we can say why Jesus raised Lazarus.

He did it, and regardless of the reason why, the story demonstrates that human beings experience personal, conscious existence between death and resurrection.

Hope this helps.

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

"How Do We Explain the Spirit to Children?"

Recently I attended the viewing and funeral of a dear Christian sister. One of her sons has two little children, a boy four years old and a girl two. They explained to them that Grandmother is asleep but her spirit went to be with our Lord Jesus Christ in heaven. They seem quite comfortable with this.

At the viewing celebration the mother asked me a question. She said, "My son asked me what is the spirit. How do I answer him?" This really made me think about how we can explain this type of Christian understanding to little children in a way they might be able to understand, yet will not seem frightening, confusing, or spooky to them.

Thank you for your help and your web site.

Probably the best way to explain the spirit to children is by saying that it's the part of us that thinks and loves and talks and chooses. That part is invisible and on the inside, just like our body is visible and on the outside.

I would also use an analogy with a visual aid by picking up a glove and showing them how lifeless it is when just lying on the table. But when you put your hand in it and start to move your hand, the glove “comes to life,” even though you can’t see the hand. Our spirit is like the hand—it’s what makes our outsides move and talk and love. So the children’s grandmother went to heaven, leaving her body on earth, the same way that you can take your hand out of the glove and leave it behind on the table.

Does this help?

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

A Doctor’s Journey with Cancer

When you suddenly learn you might have only 18 months to live, its a good time to sort out what really matters in life.

Last December, Yang Chen, MD, dismissed an aching pain under his shoulder as muscle strain. Five weeks later, as the pain persisted, a chest x-ray brought shocking results: possible lung cancer that might have spread.

A highly acclaimed specialist and medical professor at the University of Colorado Denver, Yang knew the average survival rate for his condition could be under 18 months. He didnt smoke and had no family history of cancer. He was stunned. His life changed in an instant.

I wondered how I would break the news to my unsuspecting wife and three young children, he recalls. Who would take care of

my family if I died?

Swirling Vortex of Uncertainty

When I heard his story, I felt a jab of recognition. In 1996, my doctor said I might have cancer. That word sent me into a swirling vortex of uncertainty. But I was fortunate; within a month, I learned my condition was benign.

Yang did not get such good news. He now knows he has an inoperable tumor. Hes undergoing chemotherapy. Its uncertain whether radiation will help. Yet through it all, he seems remarkably calm and positive. At a time when one might understandably focus on oneself, hes even assisting other cancer patients and their families to cope with their own challenges. Whats his secret?

I learned about Yangs personal inner resources when we first met in the 1980s. He worked at the Mayo Clinic and brought me to Rochester, Minnesota, to present a seminar for Mayo and IBM professionals on a less ponderous theme, Love, Sex and the Single Lifestyle. With the audience, we laughed and explored relationship mysteries. He felt it was essential that people consider the spiritual aspect of relationships, as well as the psychological and physical.

Later he founded a global network to train medical professionals how to interact with patients on spiritual matters. Many seriously ill patients want their doctors to discuss spiritual needs and the profession is taking note.

Reality Blog

Now a patient himself, Yang exhibits strength drawn from the faith that has enriched his life. He has established a websitewww.aDoctorsJourneyWithCancer.netto chronicle his journey and offer hope and encouragement to others. The site presents a compelling real-life drama as it happens.

As a follower of Jesus, Yang notes biblical references to Gods light shining in our hearts and people of faith being like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. He sees himself as a broken clay jar through which Gods light can shine to point others who suffer to comfort and faith.

As he draws on divine strength, he reflects on Paul, a first-century believer who wrote, We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair.

A dedicated scientist, Yang is convinced that what he believes about God is true and includes information about evidences for faith. Hes also got plenty to help the hurting and the curious navigate through their pain, cope with emotional turmoil, and find answers to lifes perplexing questions about death, dying, the afterlife, handling anxiety, and more.

With perhaps less than 18 months to live, Yang Chen knows whats most important in his life. He invites web surfers to walk with me for part, or all, of my journey. If Im ever in his position, I hope I can blend suffering with service while displaying the serenity and trust I observe in him. Visit his website and youll see what I mean.

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Castro's Staying Power

"I threw a rock at Castro!" my young friend beamed in our junior high classroom. He had recently migrated to Miami, part of a mass exodus fleeing the Cuban revolution.

Over the intervening years, many others have thrown rocks—real and figurative—at El Comandante. An Energizer Bunny of world

rulers, he just kept on going. Only Britain's queen and Thailand's king had served longer as heads of state when Castro recently announced that, due to declining health, he would not continue his presidency.

Survivor

The aging socialist warrior has staying power. The *Guinness Book of Records* says his 4 hour and 29 minute UN speech in 1960 remains a UN record for length. His longest recorded speech in Cuba lasted 7 hours 10 minutes.

Castro counts 634 attempts on his life, ranging from poison pills to a toxic cigar. {1} Ten US presidents have served during his command. He survived the US-backed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis the following year.

I remember as a child sitting on our living room floor watching JFK demand the Soviets remove their missiles. We were only 235 miles away, well within range. The world approached the brink, Khrushchev blinked, Fidel…and humanity…survived.

Several years later my parents' airline flight was hijacked to Cuba. Their surreal night in the Havana airport included individual government interviews, genuine risk of not being allowed to return to the US, and relief at finally taking off for home.

The controversial dictator inspires affection from compatriots who appreciate Cuba's high literacy and universal health care. Relatives of his political prisoners hold him in considerably less regard. And Cuba's economic woes are legendary.

He's Not Gone Yet

In stepping down, Castro emphasized he isn't planning to disappear: "This is not my farewell. My only wish is to fight as a soldier in the battle of ideas. I shall continue to write

under the heading of ‘Reflections by comrade Fidel.’ It will be just another weapon you can count on.” {2}

What reflections are in Castro’s future at a frail 81? Even globally influential leaders must face life’s finish line. Often spiritual matters creep into one’s thoughts during autumn years. Castro has reflected on them in surprising ways in the past.

In 1985 he said, “I never saw a contradiction between the ideas that sustain me and the ideas of that symbol, of that extraordinary figure (Jesus Christ).” {3}

Certainly Jesus displayed compassion for the poor and oppressed, significant Marxist concerns. But it’s hard to envision the one who said “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”{4} jailing folks for disagreeing with him.

Years ago, Fidel wrote about a fallen comrade:

> *Physical life is ephemeral, it passes inexorably…. This truth should be taught to every human being—that the immortal values of the spirit are above physical life. What sense does life have without these values? What then is it to live? Those who understand this and generously sacrifice their physical life for the sake of good and justice—how can they die? God is the supreme idea of goodness and justice.{5}*

Jesus, whom Castro admired, commented on this theme: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish.” {6}

Fidel Castro’s physical life will, of course, eventually end. His ideas and influence could survive for generations. But as he approaches that personal threshold we all must cross, might

thoughts of his own spiritual future intrigue him again?

Notes

1. Reuters, Weird and wonderful: the facts about Fidel Castro, The Independent tinyurl.com/24yqvn, accessed February 19, 2008.
2. Reuters, Text of Fidel Castro's Announcement, New York Times, February 19, 2008; at www.nytimes.com/reuters/world/international-cuba-castro-text.html, accessed February 19, 2008.
3. Reuters, FACTBOX-Quotes from Cuba's Fidel Castro, February 19, 2008; at in.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idINIndia-32028720080219, accessed February 19, 2008.
4. John 8:32 NIV.
5. Andrew Buncombe, When Castro believed in God: letters from prison reveal atheist leader's spiritual side, The Independent, 26 February 2007; at tinyurl.com/36xnrs, accessed February 20, 2008.
6. John 11:25-26 NLT.

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"If Judged at Death, Why Judged Later?"

I found your article on what happens at death. My question is, if we are judged at death immediately, why do we say the in the creeds that at the second coming Jesus will judge the quick (living) and the dead since the dead have already been

judged? Anxious to hear back from you. Thanks.

Thanks for your letter. There is what some have called a "judgment of faith" which takes place immediately at death and a "judgment of works" which takes place at some time afterward.

The "judgment of faith" may be in view in Hebrews 9:27. A good biblical example is the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. Notice that the rich man finds himself in "Hades" after death, while Lazarus is in Paradise. This judgment is based on one's relationship with the Lord and has nothing to do with works per se.

However, the Bible also speaks of a "judgment of works." For unbelievers, this judgment will apparently take place just prior to the creation of the new heavens and new earth (see Rev. 20:11 – 21:1). Notice that even death and Hades are cast into the lake of fire at this time (Rev. 20:14). In other words, "Hades" (where the rich man went at death) is not to be equated with the lake of fire (which is where unbelievers will spend eternity after the Great White Throne judgment).

Believers will also experience a "judgment of works" at the judgment seat of Christ (see 1 Cor. 3:10-15). This judgment does not determine whether the person is saved or not, for this judgment only includes those who are already saved. It rather determines whether one will receive eternal rewards or not. Apparently, some believers will not receive any rewards (1 Cor. 3:15). Theologians do not agree on precisely when this judgment will take place. But most believe that it follows the initial "judgment of faith" at some later time. It certainly occurs before the creation of the new heavens and new earth (where resurrected believers will spend eternity in joyful fellowship with God and one another).

Hope this helps clear up some of the confusion.

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn

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