

life matters

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How Not to Flinch in the Face of Suffering

One of the true things Eliphaz said to Job was, "Man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward," (Job 5:7).

It's hard to accept this fact. We dread suffering. Yet, no matter how hard we try, we cannot avoid or eliminate pain.

This isn't to say we shouldn't attempt to find relief wherever and whenever possible, but we must admit our efforts are only temporary and very limited. Suffering will not be permanently eliminated for believers until the new heaven and earth are established.

Until that day, we need not suffer alone. The Apostle Paul noted that whenever one member of Christ's body hurts, others do too.¹ Responses shouldn't be confined to feelings of sympathy, but include tangible comfort and encouragement. There's a seemingly infinite number of ways in which suffering can be shared.

As Proverbs 17:17 says: "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity." The biblical virtue of compassion – meaning 'to suffer alongside' – can only be expressed in the event of another person's suffering. Compassionate responses to terminal illness or a debilitating condition could include financial assistance, physical relief and care, spiritual nourishment, companionship, and more. How awful for that person if the Church flinches in the face of his or her suffering!

**Compassion
and dignity
are best
(perhaps only)
expressed in
adversity.**

Comfort OR control?

As Ecclesiastes 7:2-4 says, there's greater value in spending time in the house of mourning than the house of mirth. Yet, despite the opportunities for growth and ministry it brings, many Christians are uncomfortable with the suffering of others. One reason is the influence of humanistic philosophy which says individuals control their own destinies and can fix whatever is broken by applying intellect and skill.

Secularists also imagine that the vulnerabilities and dependence caused by suffering make a person lose dignity. The Bible teaches, however, that people have dignity because we're made in God's image. Dignity cannot be lost or taken away. Like compassion, dignity is best expressed in the face of adversity. In fact, the greater the trial, the greater the occasion for glorifying God.²

The world offers sufferers no hope, and no basis for working through fears and anxieties. Increasingly, people arrive at the brink of "mercy killing" or assisted suicide by way of overwhelming hopelessness and disillusionment. Equally perplexed and discouraged, their friends and loved ones find little to say or do except feebly assent to the death wish. Thus, the terminally ill are cut adrift, perhaps not physically, but emotionally.

Ultimately, those who promote legalizing assisted suicide are more interested in **control** than **comfort**. Ironically, while imagining they can cheat death, proponents of assisted suicide are actually playing into its hands, making death the victor.

Christians are the only ones who enjoy the assurance that "death is swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor. 15:54).

Despite all that can be done medically, God maintains sovereignty over the beginning of life and timing of death.³ And, as we learn from Job's experience, God also controls the trials we face.

Warning AND welcome

The Church has a tremendous evangelistic opportunity in addressing the issues of assisted suicide and euthanasia. We can give a **warning** and a **welcome**:

- **WE WARN** those without Christ that something more hideous than their present suffering awaits them after death – eternal punishment and suffering in hell.⁴
- **WE WELCOME** them to find hope in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Concerned Christians help the despairing understand His promise of eternal life after death.

Messages about the value of life and the sovereignty of God in human suffering receive a better hearing when mixed with compassionate care. As easy as it is to oppose the theory behind assisted suicide, it's also relatively simple to provide solutions to many individual needs.

Informally, anyone can help with a patient's non-medical problems: child-care, food preparation, housework, yard work, etc. Respite can be offered to family caregivers. Relationships can be sustained, even though they may now require more "give" than "take."

On a more formal basis, your church can implement a LIFT program. To learn more, contact Life Matters Worldwide.

¹ 1 Corinthians 12:26. ² Psalm 149:4-5; 2 Cor. 12:9-10. ³ Deuteronomy 32:39; 1 Samuel 2:6; Job 10:8-12, 14:5; Psalm 139:16; Acts 17:26; Colossians 1:16-17. ⁴ 2 Cor. 5:11a; Hebrews 9:27.