

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO A FRIEND WHO EXPERIENCES DIFFICULTY?

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We live in a rapidly changing world. Can you imagine a world without Sony? Yet, the company has reported it's first negative earning year. While that certainly does not spell its doom, until recently, who would have imagined an America without Pontiac or Dodge automobiles?

Life can change in a heartbeat. One day, after lunch, my father lay down to listen to some music and then could not get up; without warning or awareness he had suffered a debilitating stroke.

Everyone experiences difficulty, from sadness or frustration to loss or disability. And sometimes, when it rains, it pours; troubles seem to run in packs.

What do you say to a friend who is experiencing difficulty? Is there help or encouragement that you can offer as a Christian? I believe so.

But first, let's consider three general principles of understanding, drawn from the Bible.

Principle #1: Trouble comes to everyone.

Job 5:7 People are born for trouble as readily as sparks fly up from a fire.

1 Corinthians 10:13 The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience.

Principle #2: Each day has its own trouble.

Matthew 6:34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

Principle #3: God is ready to help in trouble.

Psalms 46:1 God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble.

2 Chronicles 15:4 When in their trouble they turned to the Lord God of Israel, and sought Him, He was found by them.

What are the sources of our troubles? Where does trouble come from? While this is not an exhaustive list, here are six major sources.

1. Conscience

1 Sam 24:5 David's heart troubled him because he had cut Saul's robe.

2. Consequences

Job 4:8 Even as I have seen, Those who plow iniquity And sow trouble reap the same.

3. Concerns

Luke 10:41 And Jesus answered and said to her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things.

4. Conflicts

2 Corinthians 7:5 For indeed, when we came to Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were troubled on every side. Outside were conflicts, inside were fears.

5. Consternation

(See 2 Cor 7:5)

6. Covering (lack of)

Zechariah 10:2 So my people are wandering like lost sheep; they are troubled because they have no shepherd.

I have mentioned these sources of trouble, although they are relatively inconsequential, because when trouble comes our almost automatic reaction is to ask, “Why?” “Why me?” “What did I do to deserve this?” “Why did you do that?” We have been trained to look for the cause (source). This, I believe, is a grave social error and a spiritual hindrance that arises from a rationalistic, godless worldview that says, “Every cause has an effect, and every effect has a cause.”

It is a social error that is instilled from childhood. When a child is confronted for misbehavior the common approach is to ask, “Why did you do that?” The very question suggests that if a person knows why they behave as they do, they will change their behavior. Paul illuminates this fallacy:

Romans 7:15 I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate.

In fact, this reaction trains children to make excuses for their behavior, since they must provide some “reason.”

The mystery of why we do what we do is the sin that is within us. Knowing that it is sin does not deliver us. Only the forgiving grace of God can release us.

It is a spiritual hindrance because it hides the truth and misleads searching hearts. Even though I have identified this worldview as “godless,” religions are rooted in this principle, like the Hindu notion of *karma* and the concept of reincarnation. Godless, not because they do not speak of god, but because the god of which they speak is disconnected and distant from them, represented by fables and regulations.

Jesus Christ, on the other hand, is personal and approachable — a God who is connected through thick and thin.

I have said that knowing the source of your trouble is relatively inconsequential. Such knowledge may serve to guide your steps and steer you away from the same trouble in the future, but it cannot take the trouble away right now.

So, how can you help a friend?

Here's a key: Your responses should *not* be according to the source of their trouble, but according to the general principles I have described.

Principle #1: Trouble comes to everyone. Therefore, **Empathize, don't criticize.**

When Peter was sinking in the stormy waves, Jesus first lifted him from the water, then reproved his lack of faith. Paul taught that if you find a brother or sister caught in the web of sin, "you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path."

2 Corinthians 3:3 God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. 4 He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.

Principle #2: Each day has its own trouble. Therefore, **Be patient.** Don't aim to fix their whole life, just try to repair today's damage. The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. Take it one day at a time. Don't waste time asking, "Why?" Learning the source may be important, but it's usually NOT the first need or step to relief. To know the answer may make you feel like you're above the trouble, but you'll still be in it. Knowledge will not set you free, but God will.

Principle #3: God is ready to help in trouble. Therefore, **Turn to God for help.** This is perhaps the greatest gift you can give them.

No matter what the cause has been. If it's the result of personal sin, God is merciful. If it's the result of opposition, God is mighty to save!

In every case, the answer will be found by turning to God. When you turn to Him, He will give you all the knowledge you need to deal with the situation.

Ps 50:15 Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me."

Ps 34:6 This poor man cried out, and the Lord heard him, And saved him out of all his troubles.

Ps 27:5 For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in His pavilion; In the secret place of His tabernacle He shall hide me; He shall set me high upon a rock.

Ps 34:17 The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears, And delivers them out of all their troubles.

Ps 107:13 Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, And He saved them out of their distresses. (4x)

Ps 91:15 He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honor him.

Ps 59:16 But I will sing of Your power; Yes, I will sing aloud of Your mercy in the morning; For You have been my defense And refuge in the day of my trouble.

Can you point someone to God? Of course you can! You don't need special, religious language or training. You only need to know Him who is our refuge.

Nahum 1:7 The Lord is good, A stronghold in the day of trouble; And He knows those who trust in Him.

If you trust in Him, you can lead others to trust in Him, too — one step at a time.

John 14:1 "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me.

When your friend is experiencing difficulty, empathize with him or her and be patient (their habits will not all be changed overnight), and help them turn to God in prayer.

Just ask, "May I say a prayer for you?"

Then, as you pray, acknowledge that God is merciful and that He has pledged His faithfulness, saying, "I will never leave you or abandon you. I will be with you until the end of time."

Invite Him to reveal His presence to your friend and strengthen them with courage and patience on the inside.

Ask Him to release them from their trouble and pave their way back to peace.

Then, tell your friend that God will hear them if they ask Him for help in the future. And assure them that it doesn't matter how many times in a day they call!

That's being a good Christian friend!