

When Words Seem to Fail

How to Pray for and Encourage Those Who Suffer

By Bishop Harry Jackson



We don't like to talk about suffering. And since we don't fully understand God's purposes in it, we don't know how to act in crises.

At the writing of this article, I am only 50 days past the unexpected death of my wife of 41 years and three months. Dr. Vivian Michele Jackson was a survivor of sexual abuse at age seven, domestic violence in her teenage years, a life-threatening blood disease before she entered college, sexual harassment in her college days, persecution for her stand for Christ as adult, and a ten-year struggle with blood cancer. She was an overcomer—and my covenant partner.

When she passed away, I learned firsthand what a struggle it is for Christians to know how to respond to those who are suffering. In honor of my late wife, and based on what the Lord has taught me through Vivian's life and death, let me share some ways to pray for those going through suffering.

Most Christians have three key questions related to suffering. The following biblical insights and sample prayers can frame

our responses as we engage with those who need our encouragement.

Question 1: What Is the Purpose of Christian Suffering?

Our God is not the author of all the suffering and loss in our world. The enemy of our souls is very real. Jesus told us that the thief (Satan) comes to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10–12). Satan's active, evil influence exists in each of our lives, but God will use these personal battles (the loss and pressures of life) to help us grow.

Pushing back, in a manner consistent with the Word of God, develops our emotional and spiritual lives. The Bible explains this phenomenon in Romans 5:3–5: "Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

Our prayer can be something like this:

Lord, help my friend accept the pain and the process of grieving while choosing to recognize the Lord's opportunity for growth in his or her struggles (James 1:2). Please infuse my friend with the comfort of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 1:4).

Question 2: How Are Christians Supposed to Act When They Suffer?

The answer to this question is simple. We need to keep living, loving, and dreaming. Our well-being depends on how quickly we transition to a godly perspective. Let me explain.

In the Book of Job we find that Satan's goal was to bring a wedge between Job and God. Tools in our enemy's arsenal included sickness, domestic difficulties, loss of possessions,

and the tragic death of loved ones. Satan designed these experiences to overwhelm the heart and mind of this faithful family man and motivate Job to rebel against the person and character of God.

These events were so dramatic that some people who read Job 1 take on a “second-hand offense.” Assuming God is making a bet with Satan about Job’s faithfulness—these people accuse our Lord of being insensitive and arbitrary. But that spiritually and emotionally cluttered perspective creates traps related to suffering. God calls us, like Job, to trust His protective care. In seasons of loss and suffering, there are real manifestations of grief and unique grieving processes we must endure.

Let’s go a little deeper. The following is a definition of grief and some accompanying manifestations (from medicinenet.com):

The normal process of reacting to a loss. The loss may be physical (such as a death), social (such as divorce), or occupational (such as a job). Emotional reactions of grief can include anger, guilt, anxiety, sadness, and despair. Physical reactions of grief can include sleeping problems, changes in appetite, physical problems, or illness.

In the months since my wife’s death, I have experienced an emotional roller coaster, accompanied by many of the grief symptoms listed in this definition. Christians, however, have the Holy Spirit’s power to navigate the waters of adversity.

So how are we to handle our tribulations?

- By carrying out our daily duties and responsibilities, looking to the Lord.
- By forgiving persons who have offended us.
- By not blaming God for “treating us unfairly.”

Our prayer for those going through seasons of suffering can

follow this general approach:

Heavenly Father, I thank You for my friend(s) and their calling in Christ! May they receive the comfort and encouragement of the Spirit of God. Remind them that the comfort they receive from You is also preparing them to help others. Despite the depth of pain, assure them that resurrection-life anointing and grace will pour out of them to others with similar afflictions in the days ahead. Father, remind them that there is Kingdom value in what they are going through. May they also remember that they “are more than conquerors” (Rom. 8:37) and that they will get through this.

Question 3: How Do I Minister to My Grieving Friend?

After more than 40 years in ministry, I have learned that a person’s presence is the most needed ministry in times of grief. Even though I have spent most of my adult life as a wordsmith and orator, just being present with family and friends in their loss can be more precious and powerful than an amazing sermon. I too have experienced this ministry of presence.

I kissed my wife Vivian goodbye on Easter Sunday afternoon. I jumped into a limo with my friend and associate pastor David Parlette and headed to the airport and ultimately Johannesburg, South Africa. By the time I reached my hotel room, my eldest daughter informed me of my wife’s sudden passing.

The presence of Pastor Dave was amazingly supportive during the more than 36 hours it took us to get back home. We prayed together and ate a few meals together, but most importantly I felt comfortable enough with him to sit in silence—in a state of shock mixed with thankfulness and horror.

Our prayer for friends going through suffering might include this kind of focus:

Lord help me practice the ministry of presence for my friend. Let me understand and perceive that person's love language. I want to be an answer to his or her needs, not a self-absorbed intruder. As I attend to the things You assign me that will help my friend in practical ways, please send other servants motivated by love to express and minister Your comfort. Let the body of Christ be my friend's "bridge over troubled water" and a conduit for the love of God.

When we gain insight into God's perspective on suffering, we can practice the presence of encouragement—with or without words! And our prayers will bring God's peace and comfort to friends in need.

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Prayer Guide for Those Who are Suffering

By Sandra Higley and Danielle Schofield

Suffering comes in all shapes and sizes: chronic illness, persecution, relational heartaches, loss of a loved one, senseless tragedy, stresses of many kinds. We all face suffering at one time or another. In addition to praying for specifics centered on individual circumstances, here are a few ways to pray, based on what Scripture says about suffering.

Kingdom Warfare

Father, this child of Yours has gone through unspeakable distress. Help those who are suffering to worship You in the midst of circumstances they don't understand. Lift them out of the hurtful details of what is happening so they get the bigger picture of its Kingdom impact. Help them trust You and hold on to the end, knowing You have a plan in mind for them. May they know You in a deeper, more meaningful way as a result of this circumstance (Job 1–2; 42:1–6, 10–16; Ps. 71:20).

God's Glory

Father, if this suffering is intended to bring You glory, let it be so! Give Your suffering children the strength and joy to honor You during this difficult time. Deepen their understanding of the inheritance issues at stake when they share in Christ's sufferings. Help them to recognize that what they are going through is no comparison to the glory that will be revealed in them; help them wait for it with eager expectation. As they run the race through this trial, help them resist confusion and instead manifest the fruit of the Spirit (John 11:4; Rom. 8:17–19; Gal. 5:7–8, 22–23).

God's Grace

Lord God, help Your servants embrace Your no as well as Your yes. Assure them that You see and hear them. Enable them to see Your power at work through these difficult circumstances. Show Yourself strong through their fragile state. Thank You that in spite of everything they are not crushed, driven to despair, or abandoned by You. Help them get up when circumstances knock them down so that Jesus' life shines through them (2 Cor. 12:7–10).

Identification with Christ

Jesus, help Your beloved to see that this hatred they are experiencing is visible proof they belong to You and not the

world. Encourage them to take a humble view of this identity as they continue to obey Your teaching and walk in love. Help them to fully know You and the power of Your resurrection, even as this situation causes them to become more and more like You. Let every act of unjust suffering commend them to God (Isa. 43:1; John 15:18–21; Phil. 3:10; 1 Peter 2:18–20).

Faithful Friends

Heavenly Father, give Your suffering children true friends who seek to lighten their load rather than cause additional heartache. Give friends and family empathy for what the sufferers are going through; help them resist the urge to judge or assume they would handle things differently if put in the same situation. Help friends and loved ones to look for ways to encourage rather than chastising, condemning, or minimizing these overwhelming situations. Hold accountable those who profess to speak for You. Help sufferers to forgive and pray for any who allow the enemy to use them as unjust accusers. Help those afflicted to bless and not curse (Job 42:7–10; Luke 6:28).

Proper Discernment

Father, give these dear ones a proper understanding of what is going on through this trial. Give them wisdom and courage to ask the right questions about fears, concerns, and needs. While it is commendable to suffer without cause, show Your children if there are other reasons this suffering has come to them. Without guilt or condemnation, help them to recognize any sin in their lives that needs to be dealt with according to Your Word. Help them to find a trustworthy person to come alongside them in prayer and confession if needed—someone in right relationship with You (Rom. 8:1; James 5:13–16; 1 Peter 2:18–20).

Forbearance to Wait on the Lord

Father God, give Your hurting child the forbearance to wait on

You, knowing we go through various seasons and each one has its purpose. Thank You that while weeping lasts for a night, You bring joy when the night is past. Turn their mourning to dancing! (Ps. 30:5, 11; Eccl. 3:1–3).

–SANDRA HIGLEY is an author and the editor of Real Life Downloaded (Youth Edition), an online Sunday school curriculum supplement that is free of charge. Download the free Real Life Downloaded app. She co-authored this article with her daughter, who has a debilitating (sometimes fatal) disease with no known cure. Note: Danielle went to be with Jesus in the summer of 2020.