

Even if you never have to face suffering, inevitably you will have to help and encourage someone else who does. God's Word gives some useful pointers to help you.

## Bad Things Happen To Christians Too

The first thing you should be clear about is that the Lord's people do have to face hardship in this world. It may seem superfluous to say this but sadly, there is a growing tendency among Christians to believe that they should not have to suffer. Many believe that if they have enough faith the Lord will take away all their pain, here and now. The effect is only to add an unnecessary burden of guilt to the suffering of those who love the Lord. Watch out for such thinking because often you will find traces of it even among those who have been well taught and should know better. You should be able to prove from Scripture that bad things do happen to good people (see, for example, Job 1:1 & 8, John 15:19, 2 Corinthians 5:4)

Next you should know that three things are necessary for the person who is passing through a time of suffering. First, and most important of all, he needs to have hope. He needs to be able to look down the long dark tunnel that stretches before him and see some light at the other end, and the more brightly that light shines the more he will be encouraged to keep pressing forward. Secondly, he needs to have some sense of purpose. He needs to see his suffering as serving toward some useful end: to be able to answer the question, "Why should I persevere?" Thirdly he needs to be assured that he is someone who is significant: that he is not just a pawn in some cruel game and that his suffering is not of no real account to anyone. If these things are present he can be encouraged to keep going even when the way forward is hard.



*What are the common sources of hope, purpose and significance of those who are not Christians?*

## A Biblical Example

One of the most helpful passages of Scripture, regarding these things, is the First Epistle of Peter. Peter's purpose in writing that letter was to encourage Christians who were facing persecution, and you will find it very helpful to study it in that light. Take special note of how Peter addresses the issues of hope, purpose and significance, before encouraging his readers to persevere and giving them some practical guidance for situations they are going to meet. He gives us a pattern to follow when we try to help someone who is suffering.

- Strengthen his hope.
- Point out the purpose.
- Remind him of who he is.
- Encourage him to persevere.
- Give him some practical guidance.
- Do it all with the right attitude.

Let us look at how Peter does this in a little more detail.

1. **Strengthen his hope.** Peter begins by reminding his readers that they have been chosen and are born again by the grace of God (1:2–3). They have been born to an inheritance which will be fully revealed when the Lord returns and that inheritance will be theirs. That is cast-iron guaranteed: absolutely nothing can prevent them from coming to it (1:4–5), and that is what they are to focus their thoughts upon.

The Christian's promised inheritance is his firm hope and it is this he rejoices in, even though he is temporarily distressed by all kinds of trials (1:6). This is one of the great advantages a believer has when he is faced with suffering. He has a sure and unquestionable hope that is based upon the infallible promise of the unchanging God. Sometimes we forget that. Our thoughts become focused on the problems around us and, only seeing the darkness of the tunnel, we lose sight of the glorious light at its distant end. Those are the times when we need a caring brother or sister in the Lord to come and gently say, "Look up! See the light! This trial is only for a little while. Let's talk about what it will be like when we emerge into the presence of the Saviour."

2. **Point out the purpose.** Right in the middle of verse 6 Peter addresses the next important issue when he points out that there is purpose in all of the Christian's suffering: it is necessary. In other words, there is no other possible way for him to go on his journey to glory.

When you think about it, that makes sense. God loves us too well to ask us to face any hardship unless there is a very good reason for it. We love our own children and we would avoid all pain for them if we could, but how much more will God, whose love is perfect, only bring us through those things that are necessary and best for us.

So, we can say to any child of God who is suffering, "There is purpose in this. Although you may not be able to understand it, this is God's very best for you. There is no better way."

Peter goes a little further in dealing with this matter of purpose. He reminds his readers that the trials they face will strengthen their faith. He reminds them too that when their faith is strengthened it will be a cause of praise, honour and glory to the Lord, when He returns. Now, isn't that the best purpose of all? Surely our whole life is dedicated to bring glory to the Lord, but sometimes it is necessary to be gently reminded of that as well.

Just one word of caution! When it comes to talking about this matter of purpose in trials, be careful not to go too far. Do not fall into the danger of trying to read God's mind to discern more than He has revealed in His Word. He has told us that there is purpose in what we suffer, and often He tells us no more than that, but asks us to trust Him. For example, there are cases where God has brought His children through hardship so that they in turn could encourage others having to face the same situation. But we are not, because that is sometimes so, warranted to say that it is always God's purpose. Sometimes our suffering is purely for our own benefit and His glory. Remember too that not all suffering is a mark of God's chastening: remember Job.

Here is a list of some possible reasons for our times of hardship. Remember to take time to study the passages listed.

- James 1:2–11            To promote spirituality, endurance, wisdom and humility.
- Philippians 4:11        To teach contentment.
- Hebrews 12:3–11        To chasten and to teach righteousness.

- 1 Corinthians 4:9–16 To rebuke pride and cowardice.
- Hebrews 5:8 To teach obedience.
- 1 Peter 2:21 To provide opportunity to immitate Jesus.
- Job 42: 5–6 To instruct the believer.
- 1 Peter 3:14–15 To prove, or test, faith.
- 2 Corinthians 4:11 To manifest the fruit of the spirit.
- 1 Peter 3:14–15 To provide opportunities for witness.
- James 1:12 To provide opportunity for reward.
- 2 Corinthians 1: 3–24 To help others who suffer.
- Job 1: 6–12 To vindicate God’s character and to vindicate the believer.

**3. Remind him of who he is.** When trials are raging it is very tempting to feel lonely, uncared for and worthless: to forget that we are precious in the sight of God. Peter reminds his readers of that very thing (2:9–10), not in a way that builds up false confidence in their own ability, but in a way that points to the grace of God in their lives. This too is an important example for us. It is not helpful, when someone is struggling, to try to build up confidence in his own ability. He may be all too aware of his own inability, but if he realises that his value to God depends upon God’s grace he can be sure that he is valued even when he fails.

**4. Encourage him to persevere.** Have you noticed how Peter is, all the time, encouraging his readers to press forward in holiness? That is the important thing. Live for God! You are a pilgrim passing through this world on a mission. Strive to fulfil your mission and do not give up (1:15–17). Fix your eyes upon the goal and do not be distracted (1:13). As you read through Peter’s epistle you will not be able to help noticing that his whole emphasis is upon perseverance in holy living, no matter what. That is where Peter is directing the whole thinking of these people, and there is no mention of their problems, or the awfulness of their situation. There is no encouragement of self-pity here. It is a call to strength and faithfulness.

Many modern approaches to counselling are far from helpful. They tend to focus attention on problems. They encourage people to look back or to wallow in feelings of misery and gloom. If you are going to help in a biblical way your whole emphasis must be, “Look up and press on!”

**5. Give him some practical guidance.** Although Peter does not focus attention on problems, he does address the practical situations that his readers find themselves in. How are they to react to a government which persecutes them for their faith? (2:13–17) How are they to react when they are beaten by cruel masters? (2:18–25) How should they conduct themselves at home before an unruly husband or wife? (3:1–7)

People who are coping with difficult situations may well need some guidance. Be sure that the guidance you give is from Scripture and not your own ideas, and be sure that it is practical and useful.

**6. Do it all with the right attitude.** Finally, as you try to encourage others through times of suffering, do so out of a heart that is itself set upon the things of the Kingdom of God, but, above all, in your zeal for the glory of God remember to be gentle. Remember that you represent the One of whom it was said. “A bruised reed He shall not break, and the smoking flax He shall not quench.” (Isaiah 42:3).



1 Peter is one example of a passage of scripture which gives encouragement to those who are facing difficult times. Using the table below, list some others you can think of. Now study each of these passages carefully and, in the second column, write down any methods of encouragement used in them which you could adapt to help others.

Bible Passage	Methods Of Encouragement
1. ....	
2. ....	
3. ....	
4. ....	
5. ....	



Why do you think some Christians do not find these passages encouraging?