



ASK THE  
CHRISTIAN  
COUNSELOR



# SOMEONE I KNOW IS GRIEVING

CARING WITH HUMILITY  
AND COMPASSION

EDWARD T. WELCH

“As someone who is grieving the death of my wife, I was deeply moved by Ed Welch’s wisdom, compassion, and humility as he explores impactful ways to love those who are in my position. If you are looking for sensitive and practical ways to walk with anyone who is mourning the death of someone they love, this is the book to read.”

**Ron Lutz**, Pastor Emeritus, New Life Presbyterian Church, Dresher, PA

“This Christ-centered book is a treasure chest of biblical wisdom and practical guidance for becoming a conduit of compassion. Reading it made me want to be more like Jesus. I look forward to seeing how the Holy Spirit uses it to help individuals and churches grow in humility and grace.”

**Paul Tautges**, Pastor; counselor; author of several books, including *A Small Book for the Hurting Heart: Meditations on Loss, Grief, and Healing*

“Having been a pastor for many decades, I have personally witnessed the lack of sensitivity in the words of folks who think that they are comforting a bereaved person but are actually having the opposite impact. Welch’s practical book is exactly what we need as we search for the right words (and actions) to truly comfort others in their time of need. Very helpful to me were his suggestions of words to avoid!”

**Timothy Witmer**, Author of *The Shepherd Leader*; emeritus professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary

“This book is a treasure. It does far more than show you how to respond with humility and compassion. Ed reveals how to become the kind of person that suffering people long for—and need. I’m going to do everything I can to make sure that all of our GriefShare leaders know about this powerful book.”

**Sam Hodges IV**, President, GriefShare

“Just like all of Ed’s teaching and resources, this book is beautifully Christ-centered, gospel-driven, and thoroughly practical. It marvelously and helpfully answers the essential question of how to help our friends and family in their suffering. All believers need to grow in how to comfort one another in Christ!”

**John C. Kwasny**, Executive Ministry Director,  
Pear Orchard Presbyterian Church, Ridgeland, MS;  
director, One Story Ministries; author

“As I began reading through this great little book, I cringed at memories of unhelpful or untimely words I’ve heard others speak. But as I continued to read, my disappointment in others morphed into a conviction regarding my own shortcomings. Ed Welch humbly and gently ushered me into the lives of the grieving and showed me both the ways I’ve lacked compassion and the way forward in love. I am wiser and more seasoned for having read it, and I am eager to get it into the hands of our entire church family.”

**Scott Mehl**, Pastor, Cornerstone Church of  
West Los Angeles

“It’s all too easy to misunderstand or mishandle people in mourning. In this insightful resource, Ed Welch helps us to consider how to become humble conduits of God’s comfort instead of hasty counselors who speak hurtful words. If you want to grow in your ability to speak *with*—not *at*—someone who is suffering grief, this book is for you.”

**Christine Chappell**, Author of *Midnight Mercies*; host,  
*Hope + Help Podcast*, Institute for Biblical Counseling &  
Discipleship

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TO PAUL TAUTGES,  
*a humble and compassionate pastor.*

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# Chapter 1

## RESPONDING WISELY TO SUFFERING

*My joy is gone; grief is upon me;  
my heart is sick within me. (Jeremiah 8:18)*

**H**ave you ever been open with your own troubles, and then you were hurt even more by someone's response?

Ask that question of *anyone*—they still remember those words.

“I confided in my mother about being sad that I could not have more children. She said, ‘At least you have one.’”

“I am in a small group at my church, and the men meet once a month. A few months ago I mentioned that this has been the hardest season of my life . . . and no one has said a word.”

“My ten-year-old son was playing soccer at recess with some of the older boys when one of them started calling my son names and then tripped him while



they were playing. My son was left in tears from both the humiliation and the fall. When I mentioned this to a neighbor, she talked about how this is the way boys get a thicker skin.”

A teenage girl said, “I don’t talk about hard things with my friends anymore because they will either tell other people or they talk about *their* hard things.”

We all have similar stories, and we have most likely contributed to these stories.

Yet there are other stories we could tell too. Have you ever been open with your own pain and someone said just the right thing?

“This is horrible. I am so sorry.”

“I am so sorry. You really loved your father. Could you tell me more about him?”

“That is overwhelming. Please, tell me what happened.”

[After receiving a text] “I’m on my way.”

As you look back, you understand that these were gifts from God himself as his people functioned on his behalf.

Helpful words draw us together. Friends both share their hearts with others and hear the hearts of others. Know and be known—that is an essential feature of our humanity.

Unhelpful words distance us from each other. In response, we keep our misery to ourselves rather than allow a community to bear it with us. We learned a lesson: keep your sorrows to yourself.

## **WE HAVE A PROBLEM**

Let's agree that we have a problem. At our best, we would like to go through life without hurting other people. We especially don't want to hurt those who are already hurt. But we do. Though we can have the best of intentions, we have all said unhelpful or hurtful words to suffering people, or, perhaps even worse, we said nothing at all. When grieving people most need words that encourage, we can be at our most inept. Suffering is isolating in itself; insensitive words intensify it even while we know that the Spirit has been given to bring us as one. All this dulls our display of the "God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3). With this in mind, our project is about wisdom. Wisdom is about God-given life skills. Among those skills are words that help the hurting, and those words can even be beautiful to the one who receives them. "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver" (Proverbs 25:11).

The goal of what follows is simple: to care very well for those who suffer; to bring life to those who are hurting. As we grow in this goal, the body of Christ will be drawn both toward Jesus and toward each other.

Imagine a church community in which you share your heart with someone and their words or deeds bring comfort.

Imagine being in a small group. You carry the weight of an anniversary of a loved one's death, but you decide to say nothing about it because you don't

want to complain or bring attention to yourself. Then someone notices that you are not quite right. Soon, you are pouring out your heart, and the person cries along with you.

Imagine a church community in which you are open with your struggles and people pray for you. A week later they track you down, let you know how they are still praying for you, tell you what Scripture they are actually praying, and ask if there is another way they should pray.

The goal is simple; the consequences in a community are profound. If you and a few others are inspired to grow in the way you care for those in pain (and all of us live with many troubles), those you care for will pass on that care to others, and your community will arrive at a tipping point where love is more obvious, people are joined together, and the name of Jesus is honored.

And the community you influence can reach beyond the church. Most of us who have put our faith in Jesus want to represent Jesus well to the world around us, and most of us believe that we fall far short of doing that well. We think of what we could have said about Christ *after* a conversation. We have relationships in which we are timid to talk about Jesus. Now consider the people you speak to during the week whose lives are especially difficult. A friend, coworker, neighbor, or staff at a store or restaurant. If you know of a particular burden in their lives, you have already been let into their hearts.

Now compassion can lead the way. You can say *something* about those hardships.

“I’ve been thinking about you. I am so sorry.”

“My husband and I believe that God hears and he is filled with compassion, so we have been praying for you.”

Compassion is in high demand all around us, and most people receive very little. When given, it brings people together and sets us on a path that leads toward Jesus.

## **YOUR RESPONSE TO YOUR OWN SUFFERING**

Think of the work ahead as a group project—like a Wikipedia article—in which we all learn and we all contribute. Everyone comes to this task with some experience already. We have some idea of words that have been helpful for us. Let’s bring that experience and then build on it. Sprinkled throughout this book are bulleted, italicized questions for discussion and reflection in italics. Take the time to work through them on your own and with others.

For now, start by considering how you respond to your *own* troubles and grief. How you respond will shape how you help others. Different personalities respond to suffering in different ways—God does not prescribe a formula we must follow. But one thing is clear: in God’s kingdom—that is, in his house—he invites us to talk to him and to others.

This is how human beings are intended to live. Suffering is not something that we keep to ourselves.

### **Do you speak with other people about your own grief?**

As you care well for those you love, you invite them to open their hearts. It is difficult to care when the other person is not known. Now turn this principle back to yourself. Are *you* willing to speak openly when your life is hard? Do you ask for help? As a general rule, we ask others to do what we have already done. It would be odd if you valued openness for other people but you have not practiced it yourself. Before long you would sound like a teacher more than a friend, and we all know that such a role is not ideal, especially in our initial attempts to care for people. Here again, we discover that life in God's kingdom is different from what we might expect: it is not so much the expert who is most helpful to others, but it is needy people that God uses. And needy, of course, is not easy.

We prefer to project competence rather than ask for help. Men are particularly hesitant here. We might admire other people who can be open with their sufferings, but our pride leaves us silent. When we acknowledge our own hardships we admit that we are weak in ourselves, and, of course, we are not keen to state the obvious. Though weakness is the essence of faith, we can be reluctant to say that daily life is beyond our own capacities. With this in

mind, both our compassion *and* humility will become prominent in what is ahead.

There are other stumbling blocks to our openness too. Perhaps we thought that the culture of God's house was not much different from the world, in which people live in their own worlds with their silent burdens. Though the Psalms are proof of his enthusiasm for us to speak to him, it is still hard to believe. For me personally, one of the hardest things to believe is that God actually desires to be present and close to his people, and, from that place, he delights to hear us and bless us.

- *Is it hard for you to believe that God wants you to speak openly to him? What are the roadblocks for you in being open with God and others?*

Even our pride or lack of knowledge does not tell the whole story. We can also be reserved because other people have not invited us to speak and have not cared when we do. Our own pasts can add to our

silence. We only need one brush with someone's disdain for weakness.

"Well, life is hard."

"You should be thankful that it wasn't worse."

Or perhaps we shared our pain with someone who simply changed the subject. The disinterest of others will certainly teach us that life is safer when we keep our troubles to ourselves.

When silent, we appear in control and self-sufficient, but the truth is that we are not actually in control or independent, and we truly need God and the help of others. Anything different is to go against the grain of the human condition and is unsustainable. Such a lifestyle has consequences. For one, we become more isolated, and *that* intensifies our suffering.

- *How have other people contributed to your silence?*

- *What have they said or not said that was hard or hurtful?*

- *Was there ever a moment in which you decided that you would not share your heart again?*

### **Do you put your trust in other people?**

Now go one step deeper. The answer is not only that we become more open with others and ask for their help. We always look for a refuge when life is beyond our ability to manage. That refuge could be



work, activities, entertainment, pornography, food, or drugs. Or—and this is our favorite refuge—it could be other people. We can be sure it will be in something.

Do you speak openly of your suffering to other people but not to the Lord? When we have good friends and confidants, we naturally speak to them about the persistent hardships of life. That is good and right, unless our vulnerability stops there. Scripture warns us that our hearts are at risk from trusting in people rather than the Lord (Jeremiah 17:5–7). One of those ways we can trust in people is by pouring our hearts out to them yet being silent before the God of power and love whose “ears are attentive” to our cries (Psalm 34:15). Even our sins cannot separate us from his love. If we are slow to speak from our heart to the Lord, we are finding refuge somewhere else.

- *Are other people your refuge? This doesn't mean that you should avoid talking to them. It means that you aim to talk to Jesus more.*

Do you speak to the Lord when hardships overtake you?

Your words could be as simple as, “Jesus, help.”

They could be the same words you speak to a friend: “This week has been so hard. I feel like death itself is close. I feel like I am coming undone.”

They could be words borrowed from a psalm or a hymn.

Do you speak to him when troubles overtake you? Do you speak to him first or only after you have exhausted most other forms of help and solace?

Yes, our goal of wanting to care well for others gets personal—it’s about you before the Lord. This, of course, is the tradition in God’s house. Before we invite others to speak from their hearts, we respond to his plea to “pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge” (Psalm 62:8 NIV). He is “our ever-present help in trouble.” We begin with our own neediness. As we learn of our own need before God and others, this becomes the primary qualification for helping others in need.

- *Take time to speak to the Lord about what has been hard. Practice doing that now. The basic rule is this: you speak to him knowing that he is the one who formed the ear because he hears.*

**How have other people blessed you when your life has been hard?**

Even if we are slow to speak openly about our troubles, we *have* spoken, at some point, to someone. We naturally want to speak to others about the wonderful things of life and the painful things. We have confided in others, and sometimes it went well. What have you learned from people who have encouraged your own heart?

- *Who are your safe and trustworthy people?*

- *What makes them trusted stewards of your troubles?*

- *What have they said or done that has been good for your soul?*

Our wisdom project has begun, and we can gather at least three insights. First, if we are to offer healing words, we must have heard those words from Christ for our own hearts. Our care for others will depend on us settling into God's house and receiving his comfort.

Second, we understand why so many people have decided to keep their troubles to themselves. Like us, they have been hurt by foolish comments. Why would they be open again? But we also know this: since we were designed to be an interdependent and open people, that design will compel us to violate any vows of silence and, once again, share our hearts with someone who seems to care. In other words, we *want* to share our troubles. A trace of compassion is enough to invite them out.

Third, we already have experience in hearing both helpful and unhelpful words. We want those experiences to warn us and guide us.

- *How would you summarize the most important insights you have for helping others when they are hurting?*