

When Someone You Love Suffers, Follow This Biblical Example

As a mother, there is nothing more difficult than watching your child suffer.

When my younger daughter was in high school, she was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder after struggling for months with debilitating panic attacks. Although we eventually found the right course of treatment for her, her junior year was a nightmare for our family. Watching her struggle and being unable to take away her pain was excruciating, and my stomach was continually in knots. For a time, we lived with constant uneasiness and watched her closely for any sign she might be in danger. I struggled to find a balance between hovering over her, constantly taking her emotional temperature, and giving her some space and privacy like a normal teenager. I reminded her again and again God was right smack in the middle of this process with us. Every day was an occasion for prayer and every day a reason for gratitude. We believed in the professionals who guided us, we believed in the process of healing, and we believed in her. With our help, with God's help, Brooke courageously fought her way back and is now a healthy, happy college student. She is one of the bravest people I know.

When we love someone deeply, we open ourselves up to the probability of pain, heartache and loss. By caring for another, we make the brave and vulnerable choice to allow ourselves to be hurt. While many of us consider the rewards of loving someone worth the risks, others find the cost too high and the wounds from previous relationships too deep. Protecting our heart by remaining cautiously at a distance often seems the safer choice.

From the minute Jesus' mother, Mary, received the news from Gabriel of her impending motherhood, she must have wondered what her future held. While she may have dreamed of being a mother, I suspect being the unmarried mother of the Messiah was not something she had ever imagined. Although this baby and the circumstances of His birth were unique, I believe Mary felt the same fierce protectiveness any mother feels the moment she first held Him in her arms. As Jesus grew to adulthood, His destiny unfolded and the inevitability of the cross began to come into focus, I can only imagine the firestorm of emotions swirling in Mary's heart. How could this be God's plan for her baby boy? What could she do to keep Him safe?

Yet, when the time came, there she stood. Instead of turning away to soften the searing pain in her heart, Mary stood resolutely at the foot of the cross staring into the face of her beloved child as He suffered and died. No one would have blamed her had she waited and watched from a distance, but she made the brave choice to wade into the horror and share in His suffering by standing watch. In His final moments, when Jesus made John promise to care for her in His absence, she must have wondered how she would ever survive this excruciating pain and loss. I wish Scripture told us more about their reunion three days later!

Like Mary, sometimes all we can do for a loved one in pain is to stand watch. When someone we love is hurting, our first inclination is to fill the space with words and action plans. While there may be a time for both, in many cases, it is our simple presence that provides the most healing. During a time of suffering, when someone is feeling alone and fearful, a whispered assurance that *I am here and I'm not going anywhere* can make all the difference. Being willing to enter into someone else's pain, without trying to fix it, minimize it or wish it away, is a generous gift of grace.

I can't begin to compare my journey as a mother to Mary's, yet

each of us who enter into the suffering of another know that loving deeply is hard, holy, and brave work. There is no safe way to love, but the joy of connection is worth the cost. Through our relationships with one another, we more fully experience the love God has for us. {eoa}

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