

The Second Eight Words: Answering the Hard Questions



IM WAS GONE. MIDDLE-AGED AND QUIET, HE WAS well-liked by his colleagues. And just like that, he was gone. Suffering what appeared to be a heart attack in his cubicle, paramedics were unable to resuscitate him.

Workers sat around in small clusters, waiting for a chance to go home. The office was closed down because of the trauma. They were done for the day, but the emergency vehicles prevented them from getting out of the lot. So they sat quietly, somberly.

“Why do bad things happen to good people?” somebody asked.

The break room fell silent. It was a rhetorical question, really, a way of verbally sighing at the loss of a coworker and friend. But another worker picked it up and directed it at Rita. “Yeah, Rita. You Christians have all the answers. Why do bad things happen to good people?”

If you were Rita, how would you answer? →

Scripture Passages

I Peter 3:15

John 18:10-11

Luke 22:54-60

Introduction

“Why do bad things happen to good people?” The “second eight words” in our testimony. Once people have heard our “I once was blind, but now I see...” story, they often turn to us for more, especially in times of trial and duress.

One of the challenges of being a visible Christian in our workplace is we have to field tough questions. It’s also one of the privileges of being a visible Christian in our workplace. Some questions, like this one, can’t be answered

easily to people who lack an eternal perspective. (And sometimes, not answering hard questions is the kind thing to do.)

But eventually, our coworkers get tired of Christians who duck the hard questions of life. Being prepared to answer some of them offers a unique opportunity to share Christ in the workplace.

Remember my fifth grade Sunday school class? The ones with the eternal perspective? Kids have a funny way of finding the hardest questions. “Mr. Kilgore, where were the whales when Noah built his ark? “How come God tells us not to kill in Exodus, but then

He tells the Israelites to wipe out that city? How come God took my grandmother away?"

Kids will only let us get away with "I don't know" so many times before they lose confidence in us. Coworkers are the same.

The trouble is, when the hard questions come, if we can't "Google" an answer, we often don't have one. That's because Biblical illiteracy is a disease running rampant through the Christian community, and studies show the busier or more successful we are, the less we're likely to know about the Bible.

God doesn't expect all of His children to be theologians, but He does expect us to make use of the information He's made available to us. Scripture is the way God chooses to reveal Himself to us most of the time, and we can't know God if we don't know His Word. Peter is telling us this when he says we must "be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in us." (I Peter 3:15).

In Depth

This is especially poignant coming from Peter. Let's remind ourselves why. Read John 18:10-11. How does Peter react in this account of Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane? Why do you think he reacted this way? What do you think he felt when Jesus stopped him?

Contrast this to how we react when somebody challenges us on our faith. What lessons might we learn from Peter and Jesus in this account?

Obviously, Peter didn't understand Jesus wasn't establishing an earthly kingdom, so he wasn't prepared to respond appropriately when faced with the challenge of the moment. While Peter didn't have the benefit of knowing "the full story," we who live and work today do. We know the triumph of the Resurrection, and if we've captured the essence of an eternal perspective, we even know the ultimate triumph. How much more, then, should we be able to respond with an appropriate spirit even to those who bully us in our faith?

Now let's look at Peter's next opportunities to "give a defense for the hope that is in us." Read Luke 22:54-60. Why do you think Peter denied Jesus these three times?

How do you think Peter felt when Jesus looked at him after his third denial? Have you ever felt that way? If yes, can you describe it?

Can you describe a moment when:

- Someone asked you a question about faith, and you knew your answer was shallow or useless?

- Someone needed comfort but you stayed away because you didn't know what to say?

- Someone caught you doing something Christians shouldn't do?

How did those failures leave you? What effect do you think they had on those who witnessed them?

That's why I Peter 3:15 is so poignant. Despite living and working alongside Jesus, Peter still didn't have enough understanding to be ready to give an answer, or to respond appropriately, to the hard questions and the hard moments in life. From personal experience Peter writes us to describe how we need to prepare ourselves.

We often suffer the same malady. Though the Bible is more readily accessible to us than at any time in history, Bible reading continues to be a forgotten practice among many believers. It cannot remain so if we are serious about sharing our faith with our coworkers.

But how do we go about equipping ourselves? What steps do you think are necessary?

What other things do the following verses give us to consider?

- Colossians 4:3-6

- Luke 12:11-12

- Ephesians 4:11-13

- II Timothy 2:15

- II Timothy 3:16-17

Like Peter in the Garden or outside Jesus' trial, the tough moments in our lives and in the lives of our coworkers seldom present themselves when we have time to go and look up answers. The Bible teaches us to front-end load the information it offers us, and then the Holy Spirit will serve as our search engine, bringing back to our memory the things we've learned from our previous study.

Here are some other things to consider:

1. Except in rare circumstances where fellowship is not possible (in which case God usually supernaturally sustains people), Christians cannot stay strong in their faith outside of fellowship with other Christians. They also risk making wrong interpretations of what they do read in Scripture. Not only must we study, but we must test what we understand Scripture to be saying to us by comparing it to what we learn in the fellowship of other believers.
2. Bible study isn't optional, but it's harder and harder to do for two reasons: Pace and short attention spans. In another study we list some ways to jump-start our short attention spans around Scripture. Pace is a matter of making wise choices about what's important on our eternal balance sheet.

I hope you're saying "Wait!" If you're paying attention, we never did get around to answering that question that in some version always seems to be the "second eight words" people want to hear about God: "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

People need assurance there's someone in control; that the things that shock us, make us sad or angry, or break our hearts serve some purpose. Often, when they ask such a question on the heels of a tragedy, the best answer is "We just don't know." Trying to explain the reality of eternity, or the consequences of a fallen world, when people are facing trials is often confusing and frequently hurtful. Rather we should sit with them and comfort them. But at the same time we must not be desolate! We have the hope of eternity, and the certainty one day every knee will bow to Christ, and God will ultimately make sense of the chaos of Creation.

It helps, too, if we understand the answer we're giving them is the correct answer: We really don't know.

When things happen to us, especially bad things, they may happen for one of the following reasons:

1. It's a consequence of a fallen world. Sin skewed a perfect Creation, and only God's mercy prevented Him from merely erasing humans from earth. Each day He waits is another day full of recovered (redeemed) souls, even though the consequences of sin continue to sadden Him, and us.
2. It's a consequence of rebellion by us.
3. It's a consequence of the sin of others around us, and we're collateral damage for that sin.
4. Satan is using it to discourage us.
5. God is using it to achieve a result:
 - a. Bring glory to Himself.
 - b. To discipline us.
 - c. Encourage growth in us.

While many of us try to guess why hard things are happening, the truth is we seldom (in fact, almost never) can know which of these reasons is true in someone else's circumstances. We can, however, ask God to show us (when it's us that's involved), or ask him to show others when it's happening to them.

But the bottom line is we can't really know for certain why this bad thing is happening, and so our best and most gracious answer is usually "we really don't know."

However, remembering we only get so many "I don't know's" before people give up on us as ambassadors for Christ, we should be study earnestly in order to limit the "I don't know's" we do give.

Common Sense and Eternal Principles

- Peter is speaking from personal failure when he urges us in I Peter 3:15 to “be ready to give an answer.”
- Our coworkers only give us so many “I don’t know” as answers to their hard questions on faith before they turn to somebody else who will tickle their ears.
- Growing in our faith isn’t merely so we can cope with life ourselves, but also so we can share the hope we have with others in a rational, intelligent fashion.
- If we don’t have answers before a crisis hits, we aren’t likely to find them in a timely fashion.
- Biblical illiteracy is inexcusable in our culture. The Bible is more readily accessible to us than at any other time in history. Our lack of knowledge is a form of rebellion that punishes us and those who rely on us.
- In addition to making His word readily accessible to us, God also provides pastors and teachers to equip us for His service in the workplace and the culture at large. How we make use of these resources is also a matter of obedience and discipline.