

A Word in Season

The ability to encourage others with our words is a rare gift, but it can be learned by anyone who opens his heart to the wisdom available to us all.

“The Lord God has given Me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to hear as the learned” (Isa. 50:4).

“A man has joy by the answer of his mouth, and a word spoken in due season, how good it is!” (Prov. 15:23).



The speaker in the Isaiah passage is the Servant of the Lord (v. 10), commonly understood to be Jesus the Messiah (compare v. 7 and Lk. 9:51-53). Jesus had an uncanny ability to “speak a word in season to him who is weary,” or as the ESV renders it, to “sustain with a word him who is weary.” This verse sheds light on Jesus’ competence as an encourager—and gives us guidance in developing our own skill in strengthening others with our words.

This verbal healing is desperately needed today. Our world is filled with people for whom life has become a cruel burden. A long string of disappointments and setbacks has beaten them down, and the future promises only more of the same. Sometimes their weariness is the result of their own foolish mistakes; sometimes it’s the result of circumstances beyond their control; often it’s a combination of the two. Whatever the source, they are trapped in a vortex of

gloom that threatens to crush them. They need help, but money can’t fix what ails them. More than anything, they need *hope*, a message of reassurance that will boost their flagging spirits and empower them to cope with the difficulties in their life. “A word in season” can be like a refreshing drink of cold water on a hot day.

Jesus encountered many such people in the course of His ministry, and He always knew exactly what to say to each one. His counsel was not glib pie-in-the-sky generalizations, but carefully crafted language that targeted their specific needs. When addressing individuals whose lives were derailed by faulty ideas and behaviors (e.g., the Samaritan woman at the well), His rebuke was firm but gentle. Faced with a multitude who were “weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd” (Matt. 9:36), He could deliver a message that touched on the core issues that troubled their souls (like the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5-7). People appreciated that kind of honest and compassionate tutoring.

How did Jesus know what to say to these people? Isaiah’s Servant gives us a clue: “*The Lord God has given Me the tongue of the learned. . . He awakens My ear to hear as the learned.*” His skill was a divine gift—but a gift developed with the using. In his comments on this verse, George Adam Smith (*The Expositor’s Bible*) notes that “grace is poured upon the lips through the open ear.” That is, the ability to encourage others grows as we open our ears and minds to the wisdom God sends our way. We encounter that wisdom from two sources: first, directly from God’s word; then from our own experiences in daily life, as we learn what “works” and what doesn’t. In both cases, we must train our hearts to be sensitive to the deeper truth being revealed to us. Over time, we will gradually develop the sensitivity to know how and what to say to those who are struggling. The know-it-all who is too proud to listen to God or to learn from his own experiences will never be an effective encourager of others, because he cannot comprehend their needs.

Job’s friends respected him for his ability to help others with his inspiring speech: “Your words have upheld him who was stumbling, and you have strengthened the feeble knees” (Job 4:4). May we all strive to develop that skill, as we open our ears and minds to the wisdom God sends our way, and get involved in the great task of speaking “a word in season” to the weary.

— David King