

***Question: What advice do you think Jesus would give about how to deliver bad news, especially news about the death of a loved one?***

There are at least two helpful illustrations in the Bible of someone taking news about death to a person. In the Old Testament, the Lord told the prophet Isaiah to go tell good King Hezekiah that he would not recover from his current illness. Although the account is very brief, the prophet did not come into the room and blurt out, “You are going to die.” Instead, he graciously said: “This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover” (2 Kings 20:1). Hezekiah reacted by turning his face to the wall where others would not see his tears. We should not be surprised that he felt the need for a moment of solitude. But Hezekiah also prayed, thus demonstrating continued faith in the goodness of God.

In the New Testament, we are told how Jesus prepared his disciples for the death of their beloved friend Lazarus of Bethany (John 11:1-16). Upon receiving news of the illness of Lazarus, the disciples would probably have been deeply concerned. Therefore, Jesus gave them encouraging words of hope. He said to the disciples: “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory” (John 11:4). Later, he told them: “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up” (John 11:11). However, the comforting reference to death as sleep was misunderstood. The disciples thought he was speaking of natural sleep. Finally, Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead” (John 11:14).

Today, those who deliver messages of death may find their attempts to speak graciously misunderstood, and they must eventually speak plainly. But they can also offer hope much as did Jesus. The reason Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead after four days, was to teach all generations about the hope found through faith in Jesus and his resurrection (John 11:13-26). Death does not have the final word (1 Corinthians 15:55-57).

Along with these two biblical illustrations, the person who must be the bearer of bad news should also consider this teaching of Jesus: “Do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12), and the principles of kindness, compassion and loving truthfulness. We need to place ourselves in the shoes of the one who must receive this kind of news. If we have not already experienced it, there will come a time when each of

us must receive bad news. May we have the compassion to treat one to whom we must deliver this kind of message in the way we want to be treated when our time comes to receive such information.

With the above teachings from the Bible in mind, I suggest the following steps for bearing bad news, especially news of a death: (1) Be sure the news is accurate and can be confirmed. It would be unkind to put a person through the trauma of having to deal with a loved one's death unnecessarily. (2) Do not wait to go deliver this news. You will lose credibility if a person learns that you unnecessarily delayed news of such importance to him or her. (3) Take a moment to pray for the Lord's help for you and for the recipient of this news. (4) Consider your words carefully before approaching a friend with bad news. Do not wait and carelessly say whatever comes to mind at the moment. (5) Attempt to control your emotions. This is a time for calm, soft and gentle words, not alarming expressions of desperation. (6) Avoid relaying this kind of information in a public place. Try to find a place more private so that your friend can express shock and grief without public embarrassment. (7) Lead into the bad news with words that clearly gain attention and prepare the friend for the worst part of your message. Perhaps you need to say: "I'm sorry to come to you with some sad news . . ." This way you ease into the message as much as possible. (8) Stay with your friend to help him/her deal with the immediate shock. Then, offer to pray with him/her and to help in any way you can.

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