

PASTORAL VISITATION

A POCKET MANUAL
DAVID SHORT & DAVID SEARLE



RUTHERFORD HOUSE
and
CHRISTIAN FOCUS





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Introduction

The value of a visit

Simply visiting and befriending a lonely person is a Christ-like act. The Master said: 'Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me' (Matt. 25:40). It is impossible to imagine a greater privilege than that. Pastoral visitation and friendship are important, and essential for effective ministry. The basic requirements are to be there; to be sensitive to any particular needs; to be practical and helpful; and not to stay too long. The first visit is generally only the beginning of pastoral relationship and there is evidence that additional visits are even more appreciated.



The best gift to take

If a visit is to have maximum value, it must be a means of bringing God into the situation in some way. Have you ever noticed how Jonathan encouraged David? At a period of David's life when he was constantly on the move, a fugitive





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from the murderous designs of King Saul, we are told: 'Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him to find strength in God' (1 Sam. 23:16). Undoubtedly, Jonathan's friendship in itself would have been an encouragement. As a friend, he could have encouraged David by logic and argument, pointing to his skill in evading capture, or by promising to do all in his power to protect him from the king. But we are told he 'helped him to find strength in God'. How exactly he did this is not spelled out, but it could well have been by reminding him of God's promise implicit in his anointing as God's chosen king.

God's promises are utterly reliable, and the most valuable service we can render to those we visit is to help them to find strength in God, by leaving with them a relevant promise or statement from God's Word. The same applies to correspondence, whether by post or e-mail. The Word of God is a seed (Luke 8:11).

What this book provides

In the choice of promises and short Scripture passages, I have been selective. God's Word contains many great and precious promises – but not all the promises, when read in their proper context, are directly applicable to every circumstance in which Christians find themselves





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today. We are, however, able to use all those which remind us of the unchanging character of God, and also those which are introduced by the word 'whosoever' or its equivalent. In the book, therefore, I have identified a number of suitable Scripture promises, which may be helpful in a fairly wide range of circumstances.

Those who are conducting pastoral visits must themselves select one or two Scripture passages which are likely to be most appropriate to the special needs of the person to be visited. Because we may not know fully the circumstances of those we are visiting until we have actually talked with them, I felt it necessary to have a choice of Scripture verses. For instance we may go expecting the problem to be fear of an impending operation, and find the real problem is actually a sense of guilt. Since we do not know what we may find until we have spent some time listening during the visit, the best resource is to be familiar with several of the chapters in this book and then to be sensitive to the Spirit of God who promises his guidance. We should not assume that the one we are visiting has firm assurance of faith in Christ as Saviour.

I have concentrated on verses rather than on longer passages from the Bible, because they are more easily remembered, and can often





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be more easily grasped. That is not to say that sometimes longer passages of Scripture may not be appropriate.

I have added a brief comment under each verse to try and help in applying it to the person in need. In this, I have drawn heavily on *The Living Bible* translation, on Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, and also on Charles Haddon Spurgeon's *Daily Readings*.

Use of hymns

I have attached a suitable hymn to each chapter and suggested some other relevant hymn verses from the index at the end of the book. I believe hymns which make objective statements about God and his grace towards us can be valuable in helping us to memorise truth. It is significant to note that when God wanted to impress his warnings on his people Israel, he instructed Moses to write his message in the form of a song (Deut. 31:19). And what clearer justification of the use of songs of praise for encouragement than the Book of Psalms!

A problem may arise from the old-fashioned language of some of our great hymns. Many have been successfully updated, as in contemporary hymn books such as *Hymns for Today's Church* and the more recent *Praise!*¹





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However, some hymns lose their original character and meaning if they are significantly changed. We must remember that they have been a source of blessing to countless Christians over the years, and still have an immense power to encourage, comfort and instruct.


Preparation for a visit

All of us will often feel totally inadequate in trying to help those in need. In such circumstances, we must draw encouragement from the apostle Paul's statement 'I can do everything through him who gives me strength' (Phil. 4:13).

In attempting to focus on things spiritual, it can be helpful to ask those being visited: 'Do you pray?' If the answer is affirmative, then ask, 'What do you pray for? What special providences of God – in the sense of particular reminders of his care and concern – stand out in your memory?' Encourage them to count their blessings, and to name them one by one! Sometimes we can ask them what they would like us to pray for. The basic truths that undergird our pastoral ministry are that God knows everything that happens to us; his grace is sufficient for every need; he brings positive benefits from adverse circumstances.

Andrew Bonar's *The Visitor's Book of Texts*² (sadly no longer in print) contains wise advice born of





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long experience. The following points broadly follow Bonar's instructions to visitors, though some have been altered slightly:

- Pray for the Lord's presence and the Holy Spirit's help.

We might echo the prayers expressed in Frances Ridley Havergal's hymns: 'Take my lips, and let them be filled with messages from Thee' or 'Lord, speak to me that I may speak in living echoes of Thy tone.'

- Make time for meditation and preparation beforehand – though the Lord is well able to bring an appropriate Scripture to mind in the course of conversation.

- Seek to win the sufferer's confidence: be really sympathetic, that is, being *alongside* them and taking a genuine interest in their daily concerns and family.

It may be worth asking if there have been any particular Scriptures or hymns in their mind but we should not assume that a person's faith is resting firmly in Christ alone; they may be trusting in their own paltry efforts (see ch. 18).

- As well as expressing the 'alongside-ness' of sympathy, try also to empathize, that is to imagine what it must be like to be in their situation; empathy will express itself in responses from the visitor such as, 'I sense you are feeling very lonely...' or, 'You must have been thinking there was no one who really cared...'



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- Be honest and faithful with the person you are visiting.
- Don't argue, though you may need to disagree – graciously and gently – with some things they say in order to resolve real difficulties.
- Try always to pass on a text from God's Word, solemnly spoken in his name.
- When visiting those unfamiliar with the Bible, it is usually advisable to start with one of the more familiar verses.
- If possible use a verse that has been helpful in your own experience – Andrew Bonar advises that the text should flow from our heart's fullness.
- Confine yourself to the simplest view of Scripture, and repeat.
- It is a good idea to leave a card with the text on it.
- Pray earnestly with the sufferer.
- Words and prayer should always be brief.
There is a time to be silent (Eccl. 3:7), following the example of Job's three friends (Job 2:13).

David Torrance's advice regarding the prayer life of the pastor is most appropriate to conclude this section.³

- Pray every day for the gift of love.
- Pray to be conformed to the likeness of Christ.
- Pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit.





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- Pray to be a good listener.
- Pray for wisdom and practical insight.
- Pray for courage.
- Pray that God will graciously work his miracles of grace.



Endnotes

- ¹ *Hymns for Today's Church* (ed. Michael Baughan), Jubilate Hymns, Torquay, 1982; *Praise!*, Praise Trust, Darlington, 2000.
- ² *The Visitor's Book of Texts*, Andrew Bonar, Third edition, Edinburgh, 1859.
- ³ *A Passion for Christ*, David Torrance, Handsel Press, Musselburgh, 1999.

