

Journalist Who Is Both Christian and Libertarian Rethinks Social Welfare

The Wired Word for the Week of April 10, 2022

In the News

"We've gone through the biggest challenge to our public character in decades, and the character exposed left much to be desired."

That statement is from Bonnie Kristian, a columnist at *Christianity Today* and deputy editor at *The Week*. She was writing about how public reaction to the pandemic has caused her to have a more positive view of social welfare as a means to help the poor. And given that Kristian declares herself a libertarian, that would be a significant shift in perspective. (Neither *Christianity Today* nor *The Week* are considered libertarian in orientation.)

Libertarianism is a political philosophy that advocates only minimal state intervention in the free market and the private lives of citizens. Individual freedom is a prime value for libertarians. When it comes to welfare, libertarians generally believe that private charity is a better way to help the poor because, they say, it avoids the shortcomings of government programs and therefore reduces poverty and, in the greater libertarian ideal, greatly reduces the number of impoverished people and overall, benefits all people.

Kristian is also a Christian -- she graduated in 2016 from Bethel Seminary with an M.A. in Christian Thought -- and in her *Christianity Today* article about welfare, she includes a summary of biblical passages from both testaments that teach that "God cares for the poor and expects his people to do likewise until the redemption of creation is possible." (For Kristian's summary, see #1 in the "For Further Discussion" section below.)

But she goes on to say, "the Bible doesn't settle how, exactly, Christians should relieve material poverty -- especially in a context like ours, where, she believes, a midsize welfare state stands willing and able to forestall the extreme privation of other times and places. Scripture doesn't explicitly answer the question of individual versus government role in alleviating poverty that divides American Christians."

And though Kristian assumed that many Christians, churches and ministries "would be eager to help," she acknowledged becoming "skeptical that our national voluntarism would adequately rise as welfare receded, more pessimistic about whether a nation in which most profess Christianity would act like Christ if given this chance, more convinced of our selfishness and oblivion toward the common good." Thus, she said, "I've gone soft on welfare."

Certain attitudes revealed by the pandemic contributed to her rethinking of her position. On the one hand, "Some of the loudest voices touting 'faith' as their sole pandemic precaution seemed to have no interest in valuing others and their interests above themselves," Kristian said. On the other hand, "Some self-proclaimed protectors of life and health started ... dancing on the graves

of people who died after critiquing vaccines ... or seriously recommending unvaccinated people be denied medical care," she said.

Thus, she came to the conclusion stated at the top of the "In the News" summary, to which she added, "After surveying two years of pandemic life, plus the growing political bitterness of several years before, I'm no longer confident we'd voluntarily sacrifice our time and funds for one another en masse and long-term in that no-more-welfare hypothetical."

She also said, "this shift in my thinking has changed neither my basic political principles nor my hope in Christ, commitment to the church, and expectation of the redemption of the world."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Why I've Gone Soft on Welfare. *Christianity Today*](#)
[A Libertarian Perspective on the Modern American Welfare State. *Libertarianism*](#)
[Social Welfare: Do Its Advantages Outweigh Its Disadvantages? *The Perspective*](#)

Applying the News Story

It's easy to point out problems with social welfare, including claims that it increases dependency and may diminish a recipient's sense of personal responsibility. But it's also easy to point out claims that it helps meet real needs of children, the disabled and the elderly, who together comprise more than half of the 37 million people in the United States who are below the U.S. poverty line. That line tends to be set at a fairly high level of material comfort, and well above the conditions experienced by the vast majority of humans in history. Libertarians would point out that the rise in the standard of living of the lower income classes is itself a result of libertarian principles.

The libertarian press will, at times, acknowledge that government welfare programs have reduced many of the worst deprivations of material poverty, noting it would be virtually impossible for the government to spend \$23 trillion without benefiting at least some poor people (see "A Libertarian Perspective on the Modern American Welfare State" in the links list above).

On the other hand, it is almost impossible to find examples where the non-libertarian press acknowledges or discusses either the immense costs or the possible harm done by government welfare programs.

Without examining the claims and arguments of both, it is impossible to come to a rational position on what works best -- and then to advocate that as the best Christian response. That is why we are not taking sides here.

It's not our purpose in this lesson to debate either libertarianism as a political viewpoint or social welfare as a remedy for poverty but rather to consider what God, through the Bible, calls us *personally* to do.

The Big Questions

1. What external circumstances might lead to poverty? What personal actions might lead to poverty? What obstacles may make it difficult to escape poverty? What personal actions, attitudes or abilities might make it difficult to escape poverty? What factors may help people live with dignity even while on a limited income? Is poverty itself something that limits dignity? What factors are needed to overcome chronic, deep or extreme poverty?
2. Are you now, or have you ever been, poor? How did your poverty then compare to that of the poor in Jesus' time -- or in most of human history? Have you ever been in serious danger of not just missing a few meals, but of starving to death? What do you think "poverty" means -- or are there multiple, confusing meanings? If different meanings, how do you decide which meaning is intended in a discussion -- or Bible passage -- on poverty?
3. How do you think poverty (especially chronic poverty) shapes a person's view of the world? One's view of God? To the extent that you have experienced poverty, what, if anything, have you learned from that experience?
4. When you talk about "helping the poor," what and whom do you mean? Giving them enough to survive? Bringing them up to your income level? Something in between? How do you think Jesus would answer this question?
5. What is God's attitude toward the poor? Why doesn't God eliminate poverty in the world? Why doesn't God eliminate sin in the world?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Luke 2:22-24

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought [Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." (For context, read [Luke 2:21-38](#).)

This is the account of the presentation in the temple by Mary and Joseph of the infant Jesus to the Lord. One of the things notable about it is the sacrifice his parents offered: "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." According to Leviticus 12:6-8, the usual offering when presenting a child to the Lord is a young lamb and a pigeon or a turtledove. However, if the parents could not afford a sheep, two turtledoves or two pigeons could be offered instead.

Because Mary and Joseph chose that option, we know they were in a low-income bracket, which qualified them to offer the less costly sacrifice. It wasn't a government program, to be sure, but it was something similar provided instead by the ecclesiastical structure under God's command and was grounded in the need to treat people differently when they are in different circumstances.

Questions: We learned something about Mary and Joseph in this passage, but what do we learn about God in this passage? What does it suggest about God's view of the poor?

Mark 14:7

For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. (For context, read [Mark 14:3-9](#).)

This text is often quoted out of context, sometimes as a way of saying that since Jesus said we'd always have the poor with us, we probably can't do much about the problem of poverty so we ought to leave well enough alone and tend to religious things. It can even be quoted to suggest that Jesus intends for some people to be poor.

But in this text, Jesus is paraphrasing Moses in Deuteronomy 15:11: "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" And Moses' words are part of a larger passage that says when the people come into their land, they must recognize that everything they have comes from God and thus, they have an obligation to take care of the poor among them.

Questions: What are the limits, if any, of your biblical obligations to the impoverished? What have you done when a low-income person has shown up unexpectedly at church? Do you think you have done too much? Enough? Do you believe there is any solution to the problem of poverty? What are the differences between being "poor" and being "needy"?

Luke 4:16-19

When [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (For context, read [Luke 4:16-21](#).)

At the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus read from Isaiah 61, which he used to define the nature of his mission. By claiming the fulfillment of that scripture that day, Jesus made clear that the prophecy applied to his own ministry to heal the brokenhearted, free prisoners, and provide for the poor.

The larger context of Isaiah 61:1-6 contains the promise that the oppressed would be empowered to restore cities ruined by war and generations devastated by years of exile. People would be gainfully employed in rebuilding infrastructure, and foreigners would be hired as shepherds, farmers and vintners.

Questions: What is the relationship between Christ's "mission statement" found in the Luke 4 verses above and his Great Commission to his followers to "make disciples of all nations, ... teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" found in Matthew 28:18-20? How does his statement in Luke 4 affect your church's mission efforts?

Mark 12:41-44

[Jesus] sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins,

which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." (For context, read [Mark 12:38-44](#).)

The widow Jesus praised was under no obligation herself to pay the temple tax. Only males were required to give. However, even in her impoverished state, dependent upon her relatives and the goodwill of her neighbors, she nonetheless desired to give.

TWW team member Frank Ramirez says, "When I was on the board of a senior citizens' organization, we were taught that we were to accept small donations of one or two dollars from our clients because it was just as important for them to give as to receive." (See also #2 in the "For Further Discussion" section below.)

Questions: When, if ever, have you been in the position of the widow -- having little but finding yourself with an opportunity to help someone else? What did you do? If you have never been in that position, what do you do to help others?

For Further Discussion

1. Discuss this summary of biblical passages Kristian included in her article regarding God's care for the poor and his expectation that we do likewise: "Israel was commanded to be generous to the poor (Deuteronomy 15:10-11); Job cites sympathy for the poor as proof of righteousness (30:25); the Psalms praise God as a defender of the poor (e.g., 12:5; 14:6). 'Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker,' says Proverbs 14:31, 'but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.' The prophets condemn 'grinding the face of the poor,' as God says in Isaiah 3:15, and God's victory over evil will bring plenty for the poor (e.g., Isaiah 14:30).

"By Luke's account, Jesus began his ministry announcing 'good news to the poor' (4:14-30), and he reiterated commands of generosity, both explicitly (Matthew 25:31-46) and in broader words (Matthew 7:12). The church in Jerusalem kept a common purse and 'sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need' (Acts 2:42-47), and Christian responsibility to the poor is an assumption running through the Epistles (e.g., Romans 15:26; Galatians 2:10; James 2:1-6). Scripture's final vision of a rescued Earth is one of abundance (Revelation 21:1-4; 22:1-4)."

2. Respond to this short story called "Compensation," from TWW team member Stan Purdum's book, [New Mercies I See](#):

"That's my medicine," Louie said.

"I don't think so, Louie," I said, looking askance at the weathered little man at my door, dressed in dirty, mismatched clothes.

His statement was to get me to overlook the boozy aroma emanating from his entire personage and especially from his mouth, which had led me to observe, "You've been drinking."

Louie was one of my "regulars," a person who could be counted on to show up at my parsonage door at least once a month seeking material help to tide him over until his next welfare check arrived.

Our congregation, like almost every church in America, took seriously the biblical injunction to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. We had established a "Local Missions fund" in which resided about \$200, and it was the duty of the pastor to administer it, giving out vouchers that could be spent at area grocery stores and gas stations. Thus it was not uncommon to find people at my door requesting help. For the most part, these were people I'd come to know from their previous visits, though none were church members.

Louie was such a person. His family, such as it was, had been in poverty for at least three generations, and the practice of being permanently unemployed (leading to yet more need) showed no signs of abating with Louie. While I usually gave him a food voucher when he came by, I wouldn't do it when he was clearly intoxicated.

"No, it's really my medicine," Louie said again.

"Sorry. Come back when you're sober." I spoke kindly, because I felt genuine sympathy for Louie, even if his problems were of his own making.

Louie wobbled away.

Handling the Local Missions fund was a part of my work that I liked the least. In other circumstances, helping others can be uplifting, but with the "regulars," I often felt that I was perpetuating a cycle of dependency. In addition, some of those who came were rough-looking characters, who when steeped in alcohol, behaved unpredictably. I'd never been harmed, but one man had punched out the glass in my door when he didn't receive as large a food voucher as he wanted.

More than my own safety, however, I worried about my wife's. I was often out of the house, and it would fall to her to tell people to come back when I would be home, which of course, also told them she was there alone. So far, no one had been belligerent with her, but it was a concern. ...

Jesus observed that "the poor you will always have with you," and for those of us trying to assist them, the whole matter remained unsolvable. One thing you certainly couldn't count on was getting any kind of warm feeling or sense of satisfaction when helping the poor. Some didn't even seem appreciative, and maybe they shouldn't be; it can't be easy standing on the outside and looking at the bounty others have.

But then, you never knew. Take Louie. I never heard what changed in his life -- or if indeed it had changed -- but the next three times he arrived at my door, he was at least sober. And then, I didn't see him for several months.

When he finally came again, I was painting the kitchen, and was thoroughly paint-splattered. Seeing Louie through the door glass, I grabbed my voucher pad. Opening the door, I immediately observed that while dressed as usual in ill-fitting and mismatched clothes, Louie's outfit was clean, and he had on a necktie. His hair was combed and his face was freshly shaved. With him was a woman of similar age, tidily dressed in hand-me-down clothes but so skinny she appeared undernourished. She was smiling.

"This here's Beverly," Louie said. "We'd like you to marry us, Reverend."

Surprised, I said, "All right. When would you like to have the ceremony?"

"Right now. We got the license and everything." He held up a packet of papers.

I looked down at my messy old clothes and the freckles of paint on my arms. "I don't look good enough for a wedding at this moment. How about at 6 this evening?"

"We don't care what you look like. We're all set."

Beverly nodded her agreement.

"Well," I said, "the day you get married is a special one. And you'll want to remember

that everything was nice. How about giving me an hour to get cleaned up. We'll have the wedding in the church. I've got a camera, and I'll have my wife come and take your picture."

Louie looked thoughtful. "Yes, that would be nice. What do you think, Bev?"

"That sounds really good," Beverly answered.

So that's what we did. Cleaned up and wearing my dark suit, I performed the ceremony. My wife played the wedding march on the piano, and afterward took pictures of the smiling pair. I promised to have them developed and mailed to Louie.

"Thanks, Reverend," Louie said. That's real nice. Then, taking his bride's hand, he led her out of the church.

So passed the awkward moment when newlywed husbands usually handed me an envelope. While I never charged for weddings, most couples gave me an honorarium of between \$25 and \$50. With the small church salary, such gifts were a welcome addition to our income. But when I agreed to officiate for Louie and Beverly, I knew I wouldn't be getting an honorarium.

So I wasn't even thinking about that when Louie came running back into the church. "I almost forgot this, Reverend." Louie thrust a small envelope toward me. Knowing Louie's precarious financial situation, I almost refused it, but something about his eagerness changed my mind.

"Thank you, Louie."

After he left, I opened the envelope. Inside were three one-dollar bills.

I couldn't remember ever being as well compensated.

3. React to this: There are provisions in the Mosaic Law to help people. The laws about gleaning, for instance (see [Leviticus 19:9-10](#)), that Ruth, the foreigner, knew about even if Naomi was too depressed to remember, which made it clear that the poor have a right to take part in the harvest. *It is not charity; it is God's will, and it is your responsibility, and not something to pass onto another entity to take care of.*

4. How seriously do you take the Golden Rule? What actions can you point to as evidence?

Responding to the News

This is a good time to recognize that God's will regarding our help to those in need is not an optional part of the Christian life. Some Christians are naturally generous. Some are not. If you are in the latter category, consider what conscious and deliberate steps you can take to participate in caring ministries.

Prayer

O Lord, help us to follow your Son faithfully and to act with compassion toward those in need. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Other News This Week

Bruce Willis Retires From Acting After Aphasia Diagnosis

The Wired Word for the Week of April 10, 2022

In the News

Bruce Willis, Hollywood star of classic action films such as *Die Hard*, is retiring from acting due to the onset of aphasia, which affects the ability to communicate and comprehend what others are saying. Willis' daughter Rumer and ex-wife, actress Demi Moore, announced the decision March 30.

Over time, Willis had trouble remembering his lines and required more assistance during movie production, which led to the diagnosis of aphasia.

It is estimated that between 1 and 2 million Americans have aphasia, and 180,000 to 225,000 are diagnosed with the neurological disorder annually. But according to Darlene Williamson, the volunteer president of the nonprofit National Aphasia Association (NAA), "pitifully few" people have ever heard of aphasia, even though it is more common than Parkinson's disease, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy or multiple sclerosis. "Just for the word itself to be meaningful is a huge desire for our community," she said.

Aphasia is most common in older people and minorities who are at greater risk of strokes, cardiovascular disabilities and diabetes. But people can develop aphasia at any age.

The brain disorder can occur after strokes, head injuries, brain aneurysm, hemorrhage or tumors, infections, dementia or Covid-19.

When aphasia comes on suddenly, a person's ability to speak, write, type, read and understand language drops precipitously and quickly.

"All of a sudden, you can't express thoughts and feelings as you once could," commented Lyn Turkstra, a professor of speech-language pathology and neuroscience at McMaster University in Canada.

People with aphasia may omit, make up, or mispronounce words or use words out of order, speak in short or incomplete sentences or in long and confusing sentences. They may lose the ability to tell time or read music.

"In one church I pastored, I had a parishioner who was confined in a nursing facility because of aphasia," TWW team member Stan Purdum said. "I was new to that church and had never known her before her illness. When I visited her, she'd try to speak and what came out was a garble of words that made no sense. Not knowing what she might want to hear, or if she even understood what I said, I told her of the recent happenings at the church and news about members I assumed she knew. And then I prayed with her. But whether we connected at all, I never knew."

Malia Miller, another TWW team member, said that her mother suffered from aphasia after a stroke, but it did not impact her cognitive abilities, just her ability to articulate her thoughts.

"The general public assumes that if someone doesn't respond, they are intellectually challenged," said Roberta DePompei, a retired professor of speech-language pathology at the University of

Akron. "They are treated like a child, when inside, they are still the same person. It becomes humiliating to be treated that way."

"Not being able to say a full sentence, or saying a sentence where the words sound garbled, is extremely frustrating," explained Dr. Swathi Kiran, director of the Aphasia Research Laboratory at Boston University. The inability to express oneself can cause feelings of embarrassment or shame, "so they would rather choose not to speak anymore," Kiran added. As a result, aphasia sufferers can become increasingly isolated.

Language is "one of the things that make humans really human," said Dr. Mario F. Mendez, a behavioral neurologist at UCLA.

Glenn Teal, a retired pastor in Grand Rapids, required surgery after suffering a brain bleed in December. After the operation, he was diagnosed with aphasia.

"Aphasia is scary because you feel a loss of control. You can see and understand, but you can't fully communicate," Teal remarked. "In order not to panic and feel a sense of peace and inner calm, for me, my faith in the Lord has been a huge part."

Teal benefited from nine days of post-surgery in-patient treatment and ongoing semi-weekly outpatient therapy for aphasia. He has found it helpful to review vocabulary and read the Bible and Dr. Seuss books at home.

Some people develop primary progressive aphasia brought on by more gradual degeneration. In such a case, symptoms may be mild and almost imperceptible at first, often beginning with what is sometimes called the "tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon," when people have trouble finding the word they want. Their aphasia gets worse slowly over time, but it is possible to slow the rate of deterioration.

Claire Antvelink, a speech-language pathologist, said "there's a lot of different factors that go into the prognosis and the recovery time" for aphasia patients. "It does depend on the severity level at the start and it depends on the injury the individual sustained."

DePompei said today treatment protocol for aphasia involves "addressing not just the mechanics of speech but the social and psychological dimensions related to its loss."

"Each of us has something we want to communicate," she said. "Finding out how to keep an individual with aphasia supported in the community in which they have always lived is essential."

"I think the most important thing for families to understand is that despite the fact that they don't seem like themselves, they still are," says Brenda Rapp, a professor in the department of cognitive science at Johns Hopkins University. "Trying to navigate those often dramatic changes can be really difficult. They really need a lot of support."

Medical experts say that aphasia is treatable, even if not yet curable, and research in the field looks promising, so patients and their caregivers should not give up hope.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Bruce Willis' Aphasia Battle: Living in a Country Where You Don't Speak the Language. *Los Angeles Times*](#)

[What It's Like Living With Aphasia -- and How to Support a Loved One With the Condition. *TIME*](#)

[What Is Aphasia? An Expert Explains the Condition Forcing Bruce Willis to Retire From Acting. *The Conversation*](#)

[Understanding Aphasia, the Condition Impacting Bruce Willis' Acting Career. *NPR*](#)

[Bruce Willis Diagnosed With Aphasia: The Science Behind the Disorder. *Live Science*](#)

The Big Questions

1. Who are we when we cannot communicate?
2. How do we navigate relationships with others when their physical or mental abilities change? When they can no longer express themselves or understand others?
3. What does our faith teach us about how God values people when they lose capabilities that once seemed to define them?
4. How do we guard against dismissing people who are having problems with communication and comprehension as "less than"?
5. How can the church best support people whose skills are declining due to illness, aging or cognitive decline? How can we help them continue on their faith journey?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Exodus 4:10-12, 15-16

But Moses said to the LORD, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Then the LORD said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak." ... "You shall speak to [Aaron] and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him." (For context, read [Exodus 4:10-17](#).)

When God called Moses to deliver his people from slavery, Moses objected that he was inadequate to the task of speaking. He even asked God to send someone else (v. 13)!

Questions: How did God address Moses' concerns?

Why do you think God didn't just call Aaron instead of Moses to speak to Pharaoh, if Aaron had the gift of fluency that Moses lacked?

How do we sometimes rationalize our unwillingness to accept a task God has for us? What do you think God might say about our objections?

Luke 1:22, 62-64

When [Zechariah] did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ... Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. (For context, read [Luke 1:5-24, 59-69](#).)

When Zechariah, an elderly priest, was serving in the temple, he was chosen to offer incense to the Lord as the people prayed outside the sanctuary (vv. 5-10). An angel appeared to him, and he was terrified, but the angel assured him that God had heard his prayer for a son (vv. 11-17).

Zechariah questioned how that could happen, since both he and his wife were getting on in years (v. 18). The angel Gabriel responded that because Zechariah didn't believe him, he would "become mute, unable to speak" until the child was born (vv. 19-20).

After Zechariah finished his service in the temple, he went home, and Elizabeth his wife became pregnant. When the boy was born, everyone thought he would be named after his father, but Zechariah wrote that his name was John, the name the angel Gabriel had given him for the baby (v. 13).

Instantly, Zechariah regained his ability to speak, and out poured nine months of pent-up praise to God (vv. 67ff).

Questions: What do you think Zechariah learned during the time when he was unable to speak?

Have you ever had a period of "enforced silence," when you could not speak to others and/or hear what others were saying to you? What, if anything, did God teach you through that silent period?

Mark 7:32-35, 37

They brought to [Jesus] a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. ... They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak." (For context, read [Mark 7:31-37](#).)

We don't know whether the man in this passage suffered from aphasia or whether something else caused his deafness and speech impediment. We don't know whether he had these infirmities for a long or short time, nor do we know whether his condition came upon him gradually or suddenly. Whatever the case, he was limited in his ability to express himself and to comprehend what others were saying to him.

But he did have people who spoke up for him, who interceded for him, who advocated for him. And Jesus responded, opening his ears and his mouth so that he could hear and speak plainly.

Questions: Why do you think Jesus took the deaf man aside, away from the public eye, to heal him?

Put yourself in the sandals of the deaf-mute man. What is the first thing you would want to hear? What is the first thing you would say?

For whom are you advocating and interceding before God?

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

... but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (For context, read [2 Corinthians 12:1-10](#).)

Paul felt obliged to defend his apostleship and authority, because he spoke the truth that the Corinthians needed to hear. At the same time, he expressed reluctance, not wishing to boast or to put himself on a pedestal, as though he was something special because he was taken up into the third heaven (vv. 5-6). So to keep Paul "from being too elated" (to keep him humble), he was given a thorn in the flesh, "a messenger of Satan" to torment him (v. 7). Though he asked God three times to remove it, God's answer was in the negative. Instead, God said he would give him the grace to bear it.

In a culture that places such a high value on creature comforts, we may find it challenging to believe that God might have a purpose for weakness or hardship. We might pray, as Paul did initially, for the removal of pain and trouble, and if that doesn't happen, we could become bitter, resentful, or angry toward God. But we would be wise to consider what God wants to accomplish in and through us, which is much bigger than our personal preferences and pleasure.

Questions: How can we cultivate contentment "with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities"? In what sense can we be strong whenever we are weak? What kind of power is made perfect in weakness?

For Further Discussion

1. The issues of invisibility and isolation come up in other groups as well. The winner of Best Picture at the Academy Awards this year was the movie [CODA \(Child of Deaf Adults\)](#), which

featured a mostly deaf cast.

People sometimes assume that both those who have aphasia and those who are deaf and/or mute are unintelligent. Classic movies *The Miracle Worker* and *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* both demonstrate the stigma, misunderstanding and isolation people often face when they lack the ability to hear and speak.

How can such artistic portrayals help bridge the communication gap between the hearing/speaking population and the deaf-mute community?

2. Surviving in a world that is oriented toward those who can hear and speak is challenging enough for those who are deaf and/or mute. Imagine the added difficulties these members of society face in the middle of a war! Check out this piece, [Navigating War Without Sound: Ukraine's Deaf Refugees](#), and then discuss.

3. Some people who have intellectual challenges have difficulty communicating and are often hidden from daily life. How do you make those people and their families welcome in your church?

Responding to the News

What individuals or groups in your community have something to say that has not been heard yet? How can you amplify their voices? How can you open your ears to listen to them?

Prayer Suggested by [James 5:13-18](#); [Romans 8:26-27](#); [Deuteronomy 31:7-8](#); [John 14:16-18](#); [John 17:20-21](#)

O God, your word tells us to pray if we are suffering, and to call for the elders of the church to pray over us when we are sick. Teach us to come to you when we feel alone, to rediscover that you are with us and never forsake us. Remind us that when we have no words to express our deepest longings, your Son Jesus and your Spirit intercede for us. Help us also to humble ourselves before one another, confess our sins and failures to each other, and pray that you will forgive those who have sinned against us. May our prayers be instruments of healing and restoration, O Lord, our strength and our deliverer! Amen.