

*Counselor's Toolbox*

# Using Chaos as a Metaphor in Counseling



by LAUREN WHITMAN

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Each year, the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* announces its word of the year. It selects words based on data from searches on their site. The word, its meaning, and people's interest in it provide a fascinating glimpse into our culture, the current moment we are in, and how people are using language. If you track the winning words over the years, it shows just how adaptable language can be and how we develop and even morph words over time to help express what we need to say.

Indeed, finding the right word for the right time is deeply valuable. Words help us both discover and express meaning so we can know and be known in our experiences. The Bible uses metaphors to capture just how valuable the right words are: "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver" (Prov 25:11). Counselors resonate with this proverb: Finding words to fitly speak to those we counsel is a high priority. We intend for our words to provide the comfort of being understood, known, and supported. When we speak such words, they are as valuable as an apple of gold in a silver setting.

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This toolbox will explore a biblical metaphor that will bring value to the words you speak in counseling. The biblical metaphor is *chaos*. The fact that language is characterized by its flexibility and adaptability will be of benefit as we consider how to use it in counseling. It is important for people to see themselves in the pages of Scripture and to believe that what they are facing is not outside Scripture's purview. Using metaphors is one way to bridge the gap between the world of the Bible and the world of your counselee.

As we use chaos metaphorically, remember that metaphors explore similarities—but important differences can also exist. Rather than expecting an exact one-to-one correspondence, metaphors show connections by drawing comparisons in more symbolic, flexible ways. These connections can help enrich our understanding and lead to deeper insights. Remember these points as we move forward.

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To prepare you to use chaos as a metaphor in counseling conversations, I will provide a brief orientation to the biblical understanding of chaos. From there, we will explore three questions:

- What is a chaotic experience like?
- Who is God in the chaos?
- How does Christ himself experience chaos? And how does he bring about the end of it?

Then I will end with an example of how to apply this metaphor in a counseling situation.

Let's begin.

### **An Orientation to Chaos**

A biblical way to think about chaos is as *de-creation*. In his acts of creation, God brought about life and biological processes and placed them in a setting of order and coordination. In contrast, human sin brought about *disorder* and *discoordination*, a kind of unraveling of God's created order. Think of all that we see and experience that breaks down. Human bodies break down. Natural disasters are a kind of breakdown of the earth, a ferocious unleashing of the elements. Communication

between individuals can break down, leading to conflict and alienation from one another. None of this is natural—that is, as God intended for us to live in his good creation. All the forms of chaos we experience reflect the spiritual truth that God’s judgment is upon sinful humanity. And as we learn from the biblical narrative, this truth necessitates a

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further one—that sinful humanity needs a Savior. Because of the systemic, chaotic breakdown of the earth, of society, and of every individual human heart, we cannot look to one another to heal our troubles. We must look to God and there discover how he, in his mercy, provided the Christ, the sinless one who died in the place of sinners. He brings *shalom*, a word used in

the Hebrew Bible to describe full and complete well-being. In fact, he is called the Prince of Shalom, which is translated in English as Prince of Peace (Isa 9:6).

Jesus’s life, atoning death, and resurrection caused a new spiritual reality to spring forth—new creation. Those who come to Christ in repentance and faith are a new creation, awaiting God’s promise to bring shalom to all of heaven and earth (2 Cor 5:17; Rev 21:1, 5). So here’s the narrative arc:

Creation → De-creation (myriad chaos after the fall) → New creation

As we turn to think about using chaos as a metaphor, we will locate people’s struggles and troubles as forms of de-creation. But as the arc moves forward, we will also consider how to walk forward with strugglers so that they can take hold of what Christ took hold of for their sake.

### **What Is a Chaotic Experience Like?**

To apply this metaphor in counseling, first identify where a chaotic experience happens in the Bible. Sadly, so many stories qualify.

- The narrative of Noah and the flood. This story is rightly read as a de-creation story. Except for Noah’s family and the creatures on the ark, God judged the whole world and all the people on it were destroyed.

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