

Bearing the Grief of Others

Jesus wept.—John 11:35

A heart is cold indeed that feels no compassion or sympathy for his fellow men when tragedies befall. Genocidal slaughters accompanied by cruel tortures and rapes in Chechnya, Rwanda and Bosnia sadden all decent minded people. The needless innocent victims claimed by such terrorist attacks as the Oklahoma City bombing and the sabotage of the Pan American flight over Scotland numb the mind. These massive tragedies are no less painful to their victims than the smaller tragedies are to theirs: children drowned by their mother, a teenager randomly killed in a drive-by shooting, or one succumbing to cancer or AIDS.

The Compassion of Jesus

Jesus of Nazareth was known for his compassion. "But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd" (Matt. 9:36). He expressed his sorrow in tangible ways—healing the sick and feeding the hungry (Matt. 14:14; 15:32). His very demeanor showed the depths to which the sorrows of others affected him. When his friend Lazarus died, even though he knew he had the power to raise him again from the dead, the record is that "Jesus wept."

The prophetic description of him noted this characteristic: "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted" (Isa. 53:3, 4). The next verse of Isaiah's prophecy is even more direct: "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed" (v. 5).

His compassion for the sorrows of the people around him was thus expressed in both a contemporary healing of their diseases and the provision for their ultimate permanent healing by giving himself a ransom or atonement for the sins of all mankind.

There is yet a third way his compassion will be expressed. Because Jesus has borne the experiences of mankind he is in a unique position to understand what man is going through and thus to be a sympathetic aide to help man recover from the various traumas that affect him. "Wherefore in all things it behooved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succor them that are tempted" (Heb. 2:17, 18). Again, in Hebrews 4:15, 16, "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."

The Compassion of His Followers

As Jesus wept over the grave of Lazarus, so we weep over the sorrows of others. Our hearts go out to many but how can we express that sorrow? What comfort can we give? We cannot do as Jesus did by healing the sick and raising the dead. Financial aid, though often needed, seems cold and words seem weak.

What more can we do? We can do at least five things to express sorrow for the grieving ones and show support for them in their hour of trial.

Be Touched

In order to be genuine, any effort to reach out to others in their grief must begin within ourselves. True politeness and polish emanate from the heart. The weeping of Jesus over the grave of Lazarus is a good example of such true tenderness.

We, too, are admonished to feel deeply for others: "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep" (Rom. 12:15). King David cultivated this spirit of mourning over the adversities of another when the afflicted were his enemies: "But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom. I behaved myself as though he had been my friend or brother: I bowed down heavily, as one that mourneth for his mother" (Psa. 35:13, 14). Jeremiah, likewise, when considering the destruction of Jerusalem, wrote: "Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" (Jer. 9:1). Job, a man of affliction himself, was not unmindful of the afflictions of others, but said, "Did not I weep for him that was in trouble? was not my soul grieved for the poor?" (Job 30:25).

Words of Comfort

Frequently the sorrowing one is overwhelmed by grief, and like the biblical Rachel weeping for her children, refuses to be "comforted for her children, for they were not" (Jer. 31:15).

Expressions of comfort, consolation, and sympathy are the most common forms of assuring one of care and encouragement in such trials. Such comforting words may be spoken orally or trusted to pen and ink.

Often correspondence is the most helpful for it can be reviewed over and over again at a later date. It also permits the writer more time to put his own thoughts in order. While a card with a well-selected scripture is appreciated, one who has lost a loved one is comforted even more by a personal recollection of the writer with the deceased. Such thoughts keep the memory of the one who has died alive, and encourages the bereaved to talk about their loved one.

Deep grief has a way of disorienting the mind. Time of contemplation, meditation, and prayer are required to sort out one's thoughts.

We are often at a loss of what to say. Repeating such phrases as "I am so sorry," "be assured of my prayers," and "I know how you feel," though expressing true heart-felt feelings, somehow seem inadequate. The expression "you will get over it" is also cold comfort for one does not "get over" grief but rather learns to cope with it and, it is hoped, learns from it.

The Apostle Paul suggests that we "comfort them which are in any trouble by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God" (2 Cor. 1:4). We are also directed to the only true source of this comfort in Romans 15:4: "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope."

Whether the one overcome by grief is mourning a loss through death or is going through one of a myriad of other grief-producing trials, the core of any comforting message lies in the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. For the one bereaved by the death of a loved one the message is direct. "Your loved one shall live again." Though this comfort may seem remote, as it did to Martha in the case of Lazarus ["I know he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day," (John 11:24)] we can further offer the assurance that that last day is not far off. This we can quickly show from the prophecies of the signs of the times.

The message of the resurrection is no less comforting in other trials, because this message gives purpose to all human experience.

Prayer

Prayer for those afflicted by trials is always in order, these prayers are not for the removal of the trial but for the strengthening of spirit to bear the experience and to learn the intended lessons. The very assurance to those suffering grief that they are being remembered in prayer is salutary. They recognize that others care, and they are not left to go through their trials alone.

The words of James 5:16 are to the point, "Confess [air out; discuss openly] your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." It is needful for the sorrowing heart to air troubles. Care must be taken not to intrude oneself into another's heartaches and become a "busybody" in affairs not our own.

"Consider [study thoroughly] one another to provoke unto love and good works" (Heb. 10:24). All individuals are not alike. Each needs to be approached according to his own needs and at the appropriate time. Each of us feels inadequate for such a task, yet it is wise to remember the words of the motto, "the Lord does not only want our ability, but also our availability."

All approaches need to be made with great tenderness and sensitivity to the desires of the one suffering grief. Job's comforters, miserable as they were, "sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great" (Job 2:13). Silence is frequently appropriate, as is the shedding of a tear and the "body language" of a prolonged hug to show our mutual sharing of the emotions of the hour.

Additionally, they are encouraged to discuss the experience with their prayer partner. Those bearing grief need to be encouraged to share their sorrows. It is often said in a marriage ceremony that "joys shared are multiplied and sorrows shared are divided." This is true of any sharing experience. Deep-seated feelings need an outlet. They need to be uttered aloud. The presence of a good friend, a listening friend, can be a solid incentive to this end.

Help and Assistance

Because the individual bearing hard trials is often stressed to the limit, they frequently find performing the mundane tasks of daily living an added burden. The proffer of assistance with the carrying on of life's responsibilities is most appropriate. One of the lesser known heroes of the early church was Dorcas. Known for her giving of alms, she was apparently also a seamstress and many were the beneficiaries of her talent. The help one can give to the bereaved depends on many factors. It may be the simple provision of a meal or the offering of financial assistance to cover the multitudinous expenses which accompany many trials. Perhaps helping with the voluminous paperwork today's society requires would be appropriate. No matter what the physical need, the biggest asset to offering help is to give of ourselves. The best single gift is often the mere presence of a friend in the aftermath of a traumatic experience.

Frequently the words are uttered, "if you need anything, call me." Because this offer is so general, it is often not used, whereas a more specific offer may be more helpful. One suggestion might be to suggest to the bereaved to write out a list of what needs doing and offer to set up a time to assist in accomplishing the tasks.

The early days following a loss, as in death, are usually met with a large outpouring of sympathy, love, and encouragement. However, as time goes on, the strong surge of support begins to wane. This may be when friendship and help are most needed and can be most appreciated.

The Experience Itself

In God's economy the sorrows of life provide rich grounds for growth for both the mourner and the comforter. The mourner has the opportunity to experience first-hand one of the traumas common to all men. "There hath no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it (1 Cor. 10:13). For the comforter, it is an opportunity to broaden the heart and to copy the compassion of his Lord. Then he learns the truth of the wise man's words, "it is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting" (Eccl. 7:2).

Grief is a bitter experience but a rich testing ground for the higher graces of the spirit. Overcoming grief develops "good grief," because of the rich legacy it leaves behind. As Jesus said in the sermon on the mount, "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4).

A Son of Consolation

Barnabas, one of the noted brethren in the early Christian church, was so faithful along these lines that he earned the title, "son of consolation" (Acts 4:36). A study of his life shows his constancy in not forgetting unpopular ones. He befriended Saul of Tarsus upon his conversion to Christianity and later encouraged him to take part in this ministry (Acts 9:27; 11:25). Later he parted company with Saul (now named Paul) by insisting on bringing John Mark along on their second missionary journey.

This aspect of never giving up is a central feature to comforting and consolation. Paul congratulated the Hebrew brethren for enduring a great fight of afflictions. "Partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used" (Heb. 10:33).

"A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity" (Prov. 17:17). This is simply because "love never gives up" (1 Cor. 13:8 Phillips). Such constancy in the application of love one to another is one of the ways we can fulfill the admonition in Galatians 6:2, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the love of Christ."

"Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16).

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