

## Friends to the broken-hearted

### Lessons from the book of Job

The biggest problem we face when our friend suffers a loss is the feeling of inadequacy – we don't know what to do.

There's a sense that our friend needs a professional, someone who understands grief and who has been trained, not someone like us – a fish out of water. Maybe a counselor will need to play a role but mostly what they need are friends.

Job was in bad shape – thrust unwillingly into the acute pain of severe loss. What did he lose? He lost his children<sup>1</sup>; his household & wealth<sup>2</sup>; his health<sup>3</sup>; his social standing and most of his relationships.<sup>4</sup> Months had passed and nothing had changed<sup>5</sup>

I look for someone to come and help me, but no one gives me a passing thought! No one will help me; no one cares a bit what happens to me. Psalm 142:4<sup>6</sup>

Three of Job's friends heard about Job's troubles they met together, traveled at their own expense from their homes to Job with the explicit plan that they would sympathize with him and comfort him.<sup>7</sup> And when they saw him – saw how severe his pain was, they just lost it. They wept, they tore their clothes, and they covered themselves with dust.<sup>8</sup>

So, two bits of advice flow from the story of Job: sympathize & encourage. But, what exactly does this mean? Sympathy means to move with the sufferer. Encouragement means to help them move toward hope. How and when these things are done is the question we will concern ourselves with today.

## Draw near with compassion

### Recruit & meet with others

We will often bear peoples burdens alone but ideally we bear them as a body of Christ.

Since everyone's job is no one's job, we need to keep in touch with other supporters to make sure that life isn't distracting us from their needs.

"Remember . . . them which suffer adversity as being yourselves in the body" (Hebrews 13:3).

### Count and pay the costs

We need to discover and take care of their practical needs

We need to be available (gal.6:2 backbreaking burdens vs. knapsack burdens gal.6:5)

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<sup>1</sup> 1:18-19 Ten adult children consisting of 7 sons & 3 daughters

<sup>2</sup> 1:14-15 oxen & servants; 1:16 sheep & servants; 1:17 camels & servants

<sup>3</sup> 2:7-8 festering sores; oozing (7:5); scabbing (30:30) re-issuing (7:5); 17:7; 19:20 emaciated; disfigured (2:12; 19:19), fetid breath (19:17) & fever (30:30); 30:17 unrelenting pain

<sup>4</sup> 19:13-17, 19 His family & friends headed for the hills (c.f. 6:14-20 is about them not the 4; 19:13-19; only a fool stands next to a tree in a storm); 29:7-8 no longer in the gate but in the dump 2:8; 16:10,20 mocked, slapped, rejected, scorned by friends; 19:14-16 family, friends, servants unresponsive; 29:7-25 how it was viz. respect vs 30:1-19 disrespected by all;

<sup>5</sup> 7:3

<sup>6</sup> Written by David about his experience hiding in the cave from Saul

<sup>7</sup> 2:11

<sup>8</sup> 2:12

This entails bumping up against our limitations which can easily move us away from the sufferer – avoiding, retreating after a brief effort or offering witless wisdom. What are these limitations?

- Your limited time/money.
- Your personal sense of inadequacy.
- Your own pains & losses.
- Your desire for pleasure/comfort/approval.

## Sympathize<sup>9</sup>

(Ro.12:15 – a command to sympathize; 1Cor.12:15-26); this is much more important than answers (Ecc.3:7) (Job's own example 30:25)<sup>10</sup> (Ps.35:13)

*"Weep with them that weep" (Romans 12:15) is not fuzzy, feel-good, sentimental advice. Nor is it hyperbole. It is a divine exhortation. Don't feel compelled to attach some explanation to their circumstances. You need not—and probably don't—have the answer to their affliction. There is a time for counsel (usually when the sufferer solicits it), and there is a time to lay your hand upon your mouth and just weep with them—"a time to keep silence, and a time to speak" (Ecclesiastes 3:7). The open and sympathetic ear of a Christian brother or sister who is willing simply to listen without rushing in to advise, to decipher, or to criticize can be enormously comforting and helpful in working through a difficult experience. Our initial instinctive response to a suffering saint ought to be sympathy, not suspicion or censure, nor even the feeling that we ought to or have to be able to answer their questions and explain their suffering. Admit your ignorance, offer tentatively your insights (if you have any insights), and affirm your love and prayer."<sup>11</sup>*

Moralizing is a poor substitute for sympathy.

- **Watch & listen**

"Listen closely to what I am saying. That's one consolation you can give me." Job 21:2

Job's main complaint with his friends is they weren't listening to him.<sup>12</sup> They obviously hear his words because they repeat them back to him in their arguments.<sup>13</sup> How then were they not listening? They weren't seriously considering the things he was saying. If they had paid attention they would have realized that Job was seriously considering their words.<sup>14</sup> In other words, he was listening to them – they weren't listening to him.

- **Be available**

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<sup>9</sup> 'One should be kind to a fainting friend' 6:14

<sup>10</sup> "Have I not wept for the one whose life is hard? Was not my soul grieved for the needy?"

<sup>11</sup> from *Helping Those Who Are Hurting*, Layton Talbert

<sup>12</sup> Easily a dozen times he calls on them to listen to him; (13:6) "Please hear my argument And listen to the contentions of my lips."; (6:26) "do you think your words are convincing when you disregard my cry of desperation?"; 31:35 'oh that I had one to listen to me'; 16:2 he says they are miserable comforters...they just keep throwing the same pitch harder. (32:3,12 Eliphaz notes that they have condemned Job w/o evidence)

<sup>13</sup> 33:9-11

<sup>14</sup> Notice that he says, "Look around you. The good do get calamity and the wicked do prosper" in contrast to their claim (12:6; 21:7-18; 21:27-34 your clichés are lies; ch.24); He says, (6:24) "If I've sinned tell me how b/c I don't see it" (ch.31) in contrast to their vague claims of wickedness (22:6-11 you must have...). 6:28 "Do you think I'm lying?..." He says 6:3 that in his pain he spoke impulsively showing that he heard Eliphaz' warning to be careful what he says.; 20:3 'I listened to your reproof'

"Bear ye one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2). Offer whatever assistance you can—to run errands, keep the kids, help with chores, or provide meals. Call, or write notes, periodically. Simply being present and available gives great encouragement and assurance to the sufferer that he or she is not alone, and that their difficulty is not being ignored or forgotten. Some people have a spiritual gift for ministering selflessly out of themselves, pouring their lives into the sufferer(s). Remember that in the Lord's eyes, when you minister sacrificially and selflessly to a fellow believer, you are ministering to Christ Himself (Matthew 25:34-40)."<sup>15</sup>

- **Be inclusive** (Job's wife lost everything too); secondary suffering is different but just as acute sometimes the primary gets all the support; sometimes the secondary gets all the support; usually someone gets left out.
- **Be sensitive** – sometimes they need to be alone (Jer.15:15-18; Lam.3:25-28); it's about their needs not yours  
"(Proverbs 14:10; 25:20). Availability must be balanced with sensitivity. Visits and calls are often a great encouragement. But there may also be times when your presence is distinctly undesired or inappropriate. Be aware of that possibility and ask before imposing your presence at what may be a particularly difficult time when privacy, not company, is needed. Sometimes the most helpful thing you can be is absent. Do not take that personally. Respect the personalities with whom you are dealing. For some, talking is therapeutic; it helps them process their pain and clear their mind. (Even so, and especially for these kinds of people, individual updates can consume hours.) For others, talking is painful, a groaning burden. Discern that (even by asking directly, if necessary) and adjust accordingly. Avoid presenting issues that will compound their confusion. A consistent complaint of sufferers I have talked to have mentioned the pain and difficulty posed by those well-intentioned (but sometimes untactful) believers who over-zealously push their views on some alternative care or cure. Sometimes they are speaking from experience; sometimes they have only become personally convinced of the value of something. If the sufferer asks, fine; if not, be careful, judicious, tactful, suggestive, and brief in any recommendation you feel inclined to give. Trust to Providence to direct them according to His mind and purpose (which may not always necessarily involve healing)."<sup>16</sup>
- **Be patient.** "'Support the weak, be patient toward all men" (1 Thessalonians 5:14). Working through a trial of any magnitude can take a great deal of time. If the sufferer is exhorted to "let patience have her perfect work" (James 1:4), it is not too much to ask that those around the sufferer to do the same. Suffering is not an inconvenient obstacle to "normal" life or to serving God. It is not a matter of "getting over it" so they can get back to the business of serving God and normal life. For the duration of the trial, this is what God has for them in terms of life and ministry. Also, be patient in terms of your own ministry to them. Expect an extended time of ministry."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid; Note: it may not be all God has for them but it is certainly an important thing God has for them.

Everything was going as well as could be expected. These were outstanding friends. But, it's in this next response they began to falter.

In chapter 3 we find that Job is hopeless and wishes he were never born – wishes he were dead. They were only partly prepared to handle the anger, hopelessness, loneliness & depression that accompany loss. Often loss & helplessness leads to anger.<sup>18</sup>

It's pretty clear that the first one to respond to Job, Eliphaz, is so worried about Job's loss of hope that he over-corrects...coupled with his misunderstanding of God...it begins a disastrous turn of events.

**Learn about grief** - Learning about loss & grief is very helpful. Read or re-read good books on grief: "A Grief Observed" "A Severe Mercy" "My Companion through Grief" are a few that can be quite helpful.

Acute pain

Dull pain

Finding a new normal

## Nudge toward hope

### The 'flesh' is the greatest threat

#### Their flesh

The greatest danger in loss is always the flesh. Suffering usually increases self-focus; egocentricity is the primary temptation in suffering.

#### Your flesh<sup>19</sup>

James 4, writing to people in trouble, to cleanse themselves

Jesus says (mote log)

Gal.6:1

16:2 miserable comforters

12:5 they who are at ease mock those in trouble

Be patient (1Th.5:14 support the weak, be patient) ja.1:4 let patience have its perfect work

This isn't a one way relationship...God will also teach you through their responses both good & bad.

### God is the greatest need<sup>20</sup>

Job 23:3,4 – He didn't say, heal me, resurrect my kids, return my wealth...he knew that he needed God.

Jeremiah 17:5-8

So too, we need to draw near the Lord because we need him more than the right words and our friend needs the Lord more than they need the pain to go away.

Let theology inform reality and reality challenge your theological understanding.

Be scriptural in your approach to the sufferer (quoting Ro.8:28 is not helpful) but believing Romans 8:28 is very helpful because you are with them as one who has hope

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<sup>18</sup> God isn't necessarily angry with us because we are angry with him (Ps.13)

<sup>19</sup> 6:15 'as unreliable as a seasonal brook' their compassion dried up once there was a little heat; 6:21 'you have seen my calamity and are afraid

<sup>20</sup> 13:7-12 Job warns them not to misrepresent God in order to defend God; it's not the thought that counts when it comes to representing God to others

We don't change biblical teaching to fit reality. This isn't the problem. The problem is thinking that the true things we believe explain what we're seeing. We can never know everything about God or even completely understand anything about God.

They may want to know why but that may not be an answer God chooses to give. They need to be content to know God when they cannot know why this is happening to them.

Be prayerful (Heb.13:3 the sufferer is in the body with you); pray in their shoes; as you'd want to be prayed for; a biblical request that matches their need; tell 'em that you are and what you are praying;

Be ready to be instructed by the sufferer

### **God's glory is the greatest result**

Crises have a great way of clarifying what really matters.

Often want to get everything back to peaceful rather than, "How can I bring everyone's attention toward God."

1 Peter 4:10 of serving them and being strengthened by God to persist, brings attention to God.

### **Final thoughts**

#### **On stages of grief & kinds of help**

Acute pain<sup>21</sup>

**Compassion & Understanding**

Nudging toward God

Dull pain<sup>22</sup>

**Compassion (practical & emotional needs persist) & Understanding**

Nudging toward God

Healing – the new normal<sup>23</sup>

**Compassion & Understanding**

**Nudging toward God**

#### **On grace**

They will tax you and hurt your feelings

You will be inadequate and you will fail

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<sup>21</sup> Acute Pain – 2 months; intense grief, shock, severe emotional distress, anxiety & fear; maybe some malice & revenge. Tend to avoid those closest to us; might turn toward work, exercise or people we don't know well; a big need during this time is comforters. When C. S. Lewis lost his wife he craved just being around people especially if he didn't need to talk.

<sup>22</sup> Dull Pain – months or years of low energy, lack of motivation & ambition; indifference, passivity & unhealthy introversion. It's chronic nature tends to drive supporters away or drive them to try and hurry the process (avoid being the quick-fix friend); this kind of pressure causes the person grieving to feel guilty about their mood changes & weeping; a big need during this time is intercessors & practical service

<sup>23</sup> The loss can be a kind of bondage .It's hard to know without substantial investment when it's time to be a more challenging friend and not always clear even with investment but people do not successfully reach a new normal without becoming emancipated from their bondage to the loss.