

How to Be A Better Comforter Than Job's Three Friends Were

When Job experienced disaster, his three friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar were worried. To their great credit, they put their own lives on hold, and traveled great distances “to sympathize with him and comfort him.” When they saw him, “they raised their voices and wept. And each of them tore his robe and they threw dust over their heads” (2:11-13).

They remained there, keeping their silent watch, for seven days.

But it didn't take long for things to go sour. They heard his lament toward heaven, and they heard him protest his innocence before God, and they felt they needed to correct him. There ensued a back-and-forth debate that became long, bitter, and ugly. I'm sure Job initially appreciated his friends' efforts, but his mood changed, and he called his friends undependable like desert streams (6:15), “worthless physicians” (13:4), and “miserable comforters”

(16:2). He sarcastically challenged their claim to be wise (12:2, 13:12), and finally asked them to just leave him alone (19:2).

What happened? Certainly, sympathy turned to debate so that we could read an inspired record of it, in order to learn about God's dealings with mankind throughout eternity, to learn about the existence of innocent suffering.

But, on a practical level, we discover that Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar failed to appreciate certain things about comforting folks who have experienced a great loss.

Brother Phil Roberts pulled together some of Job's complaints about his friends, to provide a practical little handbook about avoiding their mistakes. Here they are, with my own twist:

1.) Be there.

Sometimes people will avoid a grieving person—perhaps out of nervousness about what to say and do, or perhaps not wanting to impose, or perhaps out of wariness of being in the presence of suffering and grief, lest it transfer like a communicable disease.

But, the resulting loneliness deeply upset Job. “My acquaintances are completely estranged from me. My relatives have failed, and my intimate friends have forgotten me. Those who live

in my house and my maids consider me a stranger. ...I call to my servant but he does not answer; I have to implore him with my mouth. My breath is offensive to my wife, and I am loathsome to my brothers” (19:13-21).

To be a comfort to the bereaved, you don’t have to stay long, you don’t have to bring food, you don’t have to bring flowers, you don’t have to bring gifts, you don’t have to do any big deed. Just a quick touch—the fact that you showed up—will be appreciated and remembered for a long time. Such a brief and simple thing will never be thought of as an imposition.

Also, it is important to check on the bereaved in the weeks and months after a great loss. Often that is a greater challenge than the chaotic days immediately following a loss.

Don’t keep your distance. Don’t be a pest; but don’t be a stranger, either. The bereaved need contact more than ever, lest grief take them too far away from the Lord. “For the despairing man there should be kindness from his friend; so that he does not forsake the fear of the Almighty” (6:14). As Paul says, “Weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15).

2.) Silence is golden.

Job’s three friends did their best work when they sat quietly with him (2:13). Often, when approaching the door of a person who has just lost a loved one, or going slowly through the funeral line, we struggle to figure out what to say. Actually, we don’t need to say anything at all! Often, it’s better to give a sympathetic look, a tender hug, and sit down quietly (13:5).

If we do open our mouth, we must be very careful. It is extremely easy to say the wrong thing. Eliphaz, in his first rebuttal, suggested that if Job would be faithful, “your descendants will be many” (5:24). Did Eliphaz realize that he was pouring salt in Job’s wounds? Job had just suffered the death of his ten children! A time of grieving requires extreme sensitivity and care. Don’t put your foot in your mouth with clumsy or rash comments.

Also, please don’t be the insensitive guy who gladhands everybody and tells jokes at a funeral.

3.) Don’t try to play God. It is so tempting to say things like, “God had a plan,” or, “It was his time,” or, “It was better this way.” Perhaps, but who are we to say? As Job said to his friends, “Will you contend for God?” (13:8). Often, these presumptuous assertions just make grieving people angry. Sometimes, they will even lash out.

Bereaved people don’t expect you to make it all better. Job asked his friends, “Have I said, ‘Give me something,’ ...or ‘deliver me from the hand of the adversary?’ ” (6:23). Job wasn’t

looking for solutions, answers, or recompense; just a shoulder to cry on.

It's easy to launch into a lengthy philosophical discourse about the meaning of life when one is not suffering. Job said, "I too could speak like you, if I were in your place" (16:4). Grievors don't need an explanation; they don't need to have all their cosmic questions sorted out. For a while, they just need time and comfort. Later, there will be a chance for trusted advisors to deal with the great questions of life and death, of reason and purpose.

4.) Be patient. Grievors say things they don't mean. There will be times when it seems like God's honor has been questioned or insulted. There will be times when an inaccuracy has been uttered, and there leaps to mind a passage of Scripture to contradict it.

Before correcting every misstatement, reconsider the time and place. Sometimes, bereaved people don't think before they speak, and within reason, they should be allowed a degree of latitude, at least for a while. Almost every time, they later apologize for their unguarded words.

Listen to Job in 6:1-4,

Oh that my grief were actually weighed
And laid in the balances together with my calamity!
For then it would be heavier than the sand of the seas;
Therefore my words have been rash.
For the arrows of the Almighty are within me,
Their poison my spirit drinks;
The terrors of God are arrayed against me.

Who knows what I would say or do, in the depths of such terrible loss? Who knows what unfairness I would accuse God of? "The words of one in despair belong to the wind" (6:26). Let them vent for now, and let the wind carry the words away. Simply provide a nod and sympathy, until cool-headed reason can return.