

How to Help Those Who Are Hurting ... And How Not To

By Pastor Bud Talbert

I am just coming from the passing of a man into eternity as I begin writing this. It can be an awkward time for a pastor, to know what to say and what to do, what is appropriate and will be appreciated, or what will be a problem. **We** might feel more comfortable if we just avoid the situation. But **they** need us. It is our time to be there. The question is, what do we do?

Romans 12:15 commands us to “*weep with those who weep.*” Maybe you have had trouble with this command because you cannot “turn on” the tears. But it is a command to be sympathetic with others in their joys as well as in their sorrows. We are not required to explain or advise or criticize. Just being there and listening is helpful. Job’s friends did it for a week. It’s too bad they stopped.

Three times in Scripture (1 Timothy 6:15, Revelation 17:4, & 19:16) Jesus is called the *King of kings*. This means that as God He rules over all things. More personally, this loved one of mine did not die outside of the will of Jesus, but in it. It was His will to take him/her. Sometimes we want to believe that God could not control the death of my loved one. If He love me how could He do that to me? But God was in perfect control of that circumstance. Moreover, He did it in love, both to that person as well as to all the survivors. How do we know? We know because *God is love* (1 John 4:8, 16). He cannot do anything that is not motivated by His love. I may not be able to understand His love, but my personal pain is not a reason for me to become suspicious of His loving loyalty. As far as we know, Job never understood why God allowed him to suffer. But Job brought glory to God when he endured in faith. He did not have to understand to believe, and we don’t either. God’s Word is true no matter how I feel. Remember what God said about Job’s miserable comforters: *Ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right* (42:7). We must be careful that in a time of sorrow we do not misrepresent God.

Galatians 6:2 commands us to “*bear one another’s burdens.*” The term used for *burdens* here refers to a load too heavy for any one person to carry. That’s why they need help. Then a few verses later (6:5) Paul commands the believers to *carry your own burdens*. The term used here is different. It is the term for a *backpack*. These are the trials of life that everyone has to deal with. But during a time of grief or suffering, even these little burdens become difficult to carry. Therefore, offer to help with those everyday burdens. People may not want to impose on you, so they will not ask. It is up to you to offer, especially near the time of loss. Remind them by your care that they are not forgotten.

When we read through the book of Job, it is easy to forego any sympathy for Job’s wife. After all, she responded badly, didn’t she? But remember, she lost all ten of her darling children at one time. How many of you ladies could guarantee that you’d not respond badly too? And yet there is not a word of comfort for her. Be attentive to “background sufferers” – spouses, children, siblings and other family.

Hebrews 13:3 tells the reader to *remember them which suffer adversity as being yourselves in the body*. People going through hardship and loss need our prayers, and if we are righteous those prayers avail much, James says. More than this, pray **with** them. A sufferer may not know what to pray, or may be so overwhelmed with emotion that he/she may not have the liberty to address God with any more than, “*Help me!*” You give them words when you pray, and lead them to where their soul needs to be – with God.

First Thessalonians 4:13 speaks of Paul’s desire to inform these believers as to the disposition of the Christian dead, *that ye sorrow not*, he says, *even as others which have no hope*. Some believers have the idea that sorrowing over human loss is somehow an indication of weak faith. Jesus Himself wept over the loss of Lazarus, and the grief of his sisters. Notice that Paul does not want them not to sorrow at all, but only that they are not to sorrow like pagans. Let the survivors grieve. The departure of this one – saved or lost – is a present loss to them. God was good to give whatever joy they had with this person, and now He has taken it away. It is right that they should be sorry.

A little farther down in the same book (5:14) Paul commands Christians to *Support the weak, be patient to all men*. I remember when my father left my mother years ago after 23 years of marriage. My mother was so upset, and tentative, and indecisive, and emotional. And it was very foolish of me when I

impatiently urged her to “*Get over it!*” She could not just “*turn off*” that emotion of love, that feeling of betrayal, that emptiness inside. So we ought to be patient with sufferers, always encouraging them to look to God and to hope in His mercy. The term translated *support* has the idea of holding up something for someone who cannot do it themselves. Like Aaron and Hur *held up* Moses’ arms in prayer, so we should support those who are suffering.

Dr. Layton Talbert, my brother, gives the following helpful anecdote. “A family I know well endured the extended excruciation of watching their child fight a losing battle with neuroblastoma. I later asked the father to [relate any lessons from his experience] he thought would be helpful. One of his insights was directed to fellow sufferers: *Beware of the “nobody-knows-how-I-feel” syndrome*. This can breed a twisted kind of pride, an unnecessary solitude that cuts you off from the valid help of others. You end up accepting counsel only from those who have suffered similarly and therefore seem to you to have credibility, while discounting the help of those who haven’t. Besides, the assumption is dead wrong. There is always *someone* who knows how you feel. And Someone *always* knows how you feel.”