

How to Comfort Those Who Are Grieving

“... and
so we shall
always
be with
the Lord.
Therefore
comfort
one another
with these
words”
(1 Thessalonians
4:17, 18).

The New Testament requires Christians to “comfort one another” (1 Thessalonians 4:18) and indicates that those who have been comforted should then become comforters (2 Corinthians 1:3, 4). The first eleven lessons in this series were written to help individuals cope with the death of a loved one. What you have learned from these lessons should help you not only to be comforted, but also to become a comforter. This lesson is designed to enable you to be more effective as you seek to help others who encounter death and the sorrow it produces.

THE BIBLICAL ANSWER

What can be done to help others who lose people they love? The biblical answer to that question—an answer suitable for faithful children of God—is given in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. There the apostle Paul declared that Christians will live again and will go to be with Christ at His second coming. He concluded the paragraph by saying, “Comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18). Christians are to “comfort one another” by sharing assurance of the blessed promises of God, especially the promise of a resurrection and of eternal life with the Lord!

Some of the advice given to those who would comfort the bereaved seems to be based solely on psychological principles, neglecting scriptural teaching. For example, one otherwise helpful author wrote, “Don’t use clichés like ‘He is at rest.’”¹ However, for the Christian, sentiments like “He is at rest,” “He is better off,” or “He has gone home to be with the Lord” are not mere clichés. They are statements of faith and fact which God intends for us to use in comforting one another.

Of course, while knowing that a loved one “is in a better place” may ease the pain somewhat, it does not altogether remove grief. People are unique and irreplaceable. We will mourn the loss of those we love, regardless of their eternal destination. Consequently, if you desire to comfort others, you should begin with what the Bible teaches but should not stop there. You ought to ask, “What else can I do to comfort the bereaved?” Following are

¹Delores Kuenning, *Helping People Through Grief* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1987), 258–59.

some possible answers to that question.²

SOME USEFUL SUGGESTIONS

Be Present

Perhaps the most important way you can help the bereaved is to be present, to show by your nearness that you are concerned about him. Those who try to comfort the grieving are often too concerned about what to say, when the fact is that “actions speak louder than words.” Do not think you have to solve all of his psychological or emotional problems or that you must have an answer to all of his questions; just stay nearby. Rather than worrying about what to say, just sit with the person who has experienced the loss. Provide a shoulder for him to cry on, ears that are willing to hear whatever he has to say, loving hands to wipe away his tears, and an arm to provide him with a reassuring hug, if that is appropriate.

Serve

Each person will be judged by the service he has rendered to those who are in need (Matthew 25:31–46). People who have lost loved ones are among the neediest in any community. They may need food, their house may need to be cleaned, routine chores must be done, and children may require special care.³ These needs may continue for days or weeks. Perhaps the truest test of one’s Christianity is not what he says to those who are hurting, but what he does to help meet their needs.

Eventually, your service may include encouraging someone who is grieving to overcome his negative emotions and to engage in activities that will help him work through his grief—for example, to seek God’s help, to seek the help of others, and to learn how to help himself. Your aim for your friend, besides wanting him to remain faithful to God, should be to encourage him to develop a new way of thinking about the lost loved one, to adjust to the changes in his life, to find new interests, and to serve others. However,

²A longer list, entitled “Do’s & Don’ts for Helping the Bereaved,” is provided at the end this lesson.

³In the small farming community of Trent, Texas, neighbors rallied together to harvest a man’s crop when he got sick and could not harvest it himself. Similar needs might arise after the loss of any member of a community.

at first, you will serve simply by helping him to survive and allowing him to mourn.

Speak Encouraging Words

While it is most essential to stay nearby and almost as important to serve those who are bereaved, it is also necessary to be careful what you say when you try to comfort them. Christians are instructed to speak that which edifies, or builds up (Ephesians 4:29). Paul wrote, “Let your speech always be with grace . . . seasoned with salt” (Colossians 4:6). Unfortunately, you will not always succeed in saying exactly what you should. As James indicated, we all make mistakes regarding what we say (James 3:2, 6–8). When you say the wrong words, you can hope that the offended person will be forgiving—but you should always *try* to say the right thing.

What is the “right thing”? In general, offer comments that build up—words that will help and not hurt. (1) Do not think you have to say much; sometimes, “I am so sorry” will suffice. (2) Do not say, “I know exactly how you feel,” since it is impossible to know exactly how anyone else feels in any situation. (3) Speak encouraging words about the one who has died; share what he meant to you or some precious memory you have of him.

Listen and Weep

More important than talking during a visit with a person who has lost a loved one is listening. Encourage your friend to talk about how the loved one died, about what he meant to the family, or about how much he will be missed. By encouraging the one who is bereaved to talk, you are also encouraging him to grieve, to mourn, to weep. When he does, you can weep with him (Romans 12:15).

Pray

Prayer is always helpful (1 Thessalonians 5:17; Philippians 4:6; Luke 18:1). Pray for the bereaved, and let him know that you are praying for him.

Practice Inclusion

Include the one who is grieving in social activities; do not exclude him. A common problem faced by a grieving person is isolation. If he has lost his spouse, he may no longer feel welcome

among his friends. Probably, they are mostly married couples; now he is single. He will feel alone and out of place at social gatherings. You can make him feel welcome at such gatherings and try to find ways to keep him from being isolated from others.⁴

Persevere

Those who write about grief are unanimous in suggesting that one of the biggest problems related to comforting the grief-stricken is that people often stop offering consolation too soon. Sometimes it takes weeks for the death to have its full impact on the survivor(s). "The most difficult time [in grieving] is usually between seven and nine months after the death."⁵ Often, people stop visiting and trying to comfort him soon after the funeral. If you really want to be of help to the person who is mourning the loss of a loved one, continue to call and visit and show your care and concern long after the death has occurred.

CONCLUSION

What benefits will you reap from helping another person recover from grief? You will be blessed by giving of yourself. When you forget yourself in service to others, you actually find

⁴Obviously, a person cannot be forced to join in group activities if he wants to be alone. However, you can and should invite and encourage the bereaved to continue to have contact with significant social groups.

⁵Kuenning, 259.

yourself;⁶ serving provides the greatest self-fulfillment. Besides that, you please God, who is glorified by the good works that you do (Matthew 5:16).

More important is the fact that, when you try to console others, you bless them. They are benefited by your efforts. You can be a "comforter." Barnabas was known as the "Son of Encouragement" or "Son of Consolation" (Acts 4:36). A different form of the same word that describes Barnabas is used for the word "comfort" in 1 Thessalonians 4:18 and 2 Corinthians 1:3, 4. Barnabas was one who encouraged people. Determine to imitate Barnabas by being a Christian who makes a practice of comforting others.

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⁶The words of Jesus suggest that by giving of himself a disciple of Christ can find self-fulfillment: "Whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25b).

The Valley of Grief

"Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape. . . . [N]ot every bend does. Sometimes the surprise is the opposite one; you are presented with exactly the same sort of country you thought you had left behind miles ago. That is when you wonder whether the valley isn't a circular trench. But it isn't. There are partial recurrences, but the sequence doesn't repeat."

A Grief Observed
C. S. Lewis