

COMFORT ONE ANOTHER

An elderly Chinese philosopher was once approached by a grieving mother who had lost her only son. She wanted his counsel and help to overcome her grief. He replied that he would only be able to help her if she brought a mustard seed from a home where there had never been any sorrow. So the woman went off in search of such a mustard seed and the answer to her problems. But every place she visited there had been sorrow. And so she returned to the philosopher and told him she had discovered no mustard seed because she had not encountered any sorrow free home. The philosopher replied that she had in fact learnt the most basic of lessons in regard to sorrow and loss. They are universal, and such understanding might help her help others and so help herself.

Because sorrow and loss are universal, so is the need for comfort. The Bible doesn't have one specific command to comfort one another. Though *GALATIANS 6:2* speaks of bearing one another's burdens and loss and sorrow must surely be such a burden. And Paul in *2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-6* speaks of consoling or comforting others out of his own experience of sorrow. So it is pretty clear we are to comfort one another. It is an act of compassionate love to those who are in special need of it.

To comfort is to come alongside to help someone. It is used to describe the Holy Spirit as one who comes alongside. Our focus will be on comfort in times of loss. This loss need not be the loss of someone through death. We need comfort when we face the breakdown of a relationship; when we face the loss of meaning through loss of job or vocation; when we face disappointment or the fading of a dream; when we leave one place for another; when age or infirmity or geography moves us into a new season of life. Some of these experiences are more profound than others, but we still need comforting. It is a big mistake to think comfort is only required when death is concerned, or where there is an objectively great loss. We need comfort many times over in the normal seasons of our lives.

God through his Spirit is the prime comforter. But God chooses human instruments. To call out to God for comfort is to invite others to comfort us. We need God with skin on in our times of sorrow. So Christians can incarnate or embody the comfort of God.

What makes a good comforter? Paul in *2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-6* gives us one clue. Those who have tasted loss and processed it are best able to comfort others. This perspective actually allows us to endure loss more meaningfully. We see it as a chance to be better equipped to help others. Not that we minimise loss by looking at it this way. It is just that it gives us a bigger and broader picture.

One danger of this, though, is that we can too easily assume my own loss is identical to someone else's loss. While there are common features to all grief and sorrow, each loss is unique. We will be uniquely affected. So beware the phrase, "I know exactly how you feel." You don't and can't. But through your own experience you may certainly know something of how they feel.

To comfort we need to listen. One of the most precious gifts we can give anyone is our focused attention. So often we don't listen. We simply stop talking long enough to gather our own thoughts and prepare our next verbal session. What the other person is saying is sometimes not even heard, or if it is heard, it is not grasped. We simply use it for fodder to feed our own contribution. To listen is to respect the other person and have a focus on them. To listen is to hear their own unique perspective on what might be a very common loss.

Comforters need to be patient. Loss and grief aren't overcome quickly. One prayer, one meeting, one conversation won't do the trick. To rush things is to heal a wound too lightly. To rush things is to feed our own desire that things be sorted out and fixed up. Comforters won't go for the quick fix because they realise there are no quick fixes. In the book of *JOB*, his friends offered all sorts of advice that seemed orthodox enough but didn't really express the heart of God. They were too neat, too intent on blaming and defining and analysing. They couldn't live with mystery and accept

the fact that sometimes we just don't know what is going on and why it is going on. So they wanted to rush things and get it all sorted out. That might help them but it wouldn't do much for Job.

And comforters are to be practical. Listening carefully and speaking wisely are essential. But sometimes we need to act. We actually do something to practically help. It may be offering to mind a child; putting the kettle on; making a meal; offering a lift; answering a phone; cleaning a house.

Comforters must not have a controlling tendency or spirit. So many people want to control others and they seek to do so by offering counsel and comfort. These are the people who will transfer their experiences onto others very readily. Who will meddle and pry. Who will try to be the sole source of comfort. Who will be rather dogmatic with advice and lay on the Bible texts heavily. Who will come on too strong and too often.

The best comforters are well grounded in the truths of the Christian faith. This helps them provide the right comfort at the right time. The best sort of comfort comes not from pop psychology or our own experience. It comes from what we understand of God and his dealings with us. We do, as Paul did, use our own experience. But we put this experience in a wider context of God's dealings with us. Paul himself was deeply aware of the ways of God.

When we comfort, we incarnate or embody the love of God, but also the wisdom of God. We speak from his heart and mind. To do so, we need to know something of his heart and mind. Thus to truly comfort we need to be students of the Bible, regular worshippers, and in significant fellowship with other Christians. Because these are means by which we better know God.

So we best comfort someone when we patiently listen to them, giving them that most valuable gift of our time. We bring to bear on their situation our own experience of loss enabling us to be wise and compassionate, though avoiding the temptation to transfer our own unique experience onto them. We seek to help and be an

instrument of God's love rather than constructing a control over the person leading to excessive dependence. We think of practical ways of helping. We stay deeply in touch with God so our comfort will be deep and wise.

And what will result from such comfort? We help people move on in life. Not to forget the sorrow or bury or deny it. But to integrate it into their memory and life and allow it to enrich their life. This doesn't call the loss good in itself, but rather acknowledges that it can be used for good.

We help people retain hope. Because we can face a lot of loss but when we lose hope we lose everything. We point people to God because he is the source of true hope. He assures us there is a purpose to our pain, there is an end in sight. Faith, hope and love keep on in the midst of our loss and when we comfort rightly we point people to the God who is the source of these.

We become a better church when we comfort others. It reminds us that despite all our shortcomings, we are hurting people who need comfort and who can provide comfort. And we remind ourselves that behind any grand strategy or slick programme there are people who need and who can give comfort. We focus on the uniquely valuable people whom God has given to us in his church.

And then we become better able to be comforters ourselves and so enrich our ministries to one another. My experience of painful loss becomes not a stumbling block but an opportunity for personal growth and the means by which I can better enrich the lives of others. I move beyond my self absorbed focus on my own loss and am freed to minister to others in loss.

This is why we bear one another's burdens. That those burdens of today and yesterday can be transformed by the grace of God into the blessings of tomorrow.