



Articles

Comforting Those Who Have Lost Loved Ones

By Someone Who Isn't Very Good At It

As I study the life of our Lord Jesus, I see that He was drawn towards those who were hurting.



Jim Newheiser • May 24, 2018

I confess that I often fear being the pastoral bull in the china shop in these situations. From time to time those who have suffered loss write blogs listing the things not to say or do. When I read such lists, I am reminded of my own past shortcomings and fear that the next time I am thrust into one of these situations, I will either inadvertently say the wrong things from the list or perhaps invent new items to add to some list. When I was a preaching pastor I would try, whenever possible, to get one of my colleagues who was much more gifted to go to represent the church – not just for my own sake, but also for the sake of those who had lost their loved one so that they would be well-comforted.

So as I have wrestled with my own weakness, here are some principles I have learned for helping people who are grieving with the hope that the Lord can show His strength through our weakness.

1. Go. In my flesh, I want to run away from those who are suffering. Yet as I study the life of our Lord Jesus, I see that He was drawn towards those who were hurting. This is reflected in the incarnation itself whereby He left heavenly glory to take on our flesh and to enter our fallen world ([Philippians 2:5-8](#), [John 17:5](#)). Then in His earthly ministry He faithfully cared for those who were suffering from sickness and grief. God has called us to care for His sheep, which means that when they suffer loss we need to be there for them. When you hear that someone in your circle of care has lost a loved one, go to them. Don't wait for them to ask you. Just go. Be a friend.

2. Listen well. James tells us that we are to be quick to listen and slow to speak ([James 1:19](#)). Proverbs also encourages wise, careful listening ([Proverbs 20:5](#)). Often, one of the best things you can do for those who are grieving is to hear their stories and to silently empathize as they express their sorrow. I have observed that most of the time when people cry in my presence they apologize. There is a time to weep ([Ecclesiastes 3:4](#), [John 11:35](#)). We are called to weep with those who weep ([Romans 12:15](#)). Sometimes I feel that I should seek their forgiveness for not weeping alongside them.

3. Read Scripture. If you don't know what to say, then let God's infallible and all-sufficient Word speak. If a believer has died, there are so many verses which bring comfort ([1 Thessalonians 4:13-17](#), [John 11:25-26](#), [1 Corinthians 15:25-26](#), [1 John 3:1-2](#), [Revelation 22:1-5](#) etc.). Jesus has conquered sin and death once and for all. If you are not sure that the one who died is a believer, those left behind can still find comfort in the Lord. We can always take refuge in Him. He will never leave us nor forsake us ([Deuteronomy 31:6](#), [Hebrews 13:5](#)). The Psalms are especially helpful for reminding us of God's character and faithfulness (Psalm 121).

4. Give thanks to God. When a loved one has died, it is good to offer thanks to God for how he has blessed us through the life of this person ([1 Thessalonians 5:18](#)). We can give thanks based upon what we know about the person who died and we can encourage others to do the same. If the deceased was a believer, we can thank God for saving him or her and for all of the spiritual fruit which He brought forth in their life. Even if the person was not a believer or if we are unsure, we can still give thanks to God for the common grace blessings He gave us through this person. This could include care for family, volunteer work, military service, particular gifts or personality qualities which others enjoyed, etc.

5. Be ready to answer the hard questions. There may be no harder situation than the case of the death of an unbeliever. Recently there was a popular video showing the Pope comforting a boy whose atheist father had died by assuring the boy that his father was in heaven. We cannot offer such false assurances ([John 3:18](#), [14:6](#); [Acts 4:12](#)). Nor

are we compelled, however, to bluntly say that the deceased is under wrath. We can say that we can trust God to do what is right ([Psalm 111:7](#)) and that one day, when we are in His presence, we will more fully understand God's ways. Often there is uncertainty about whether the deceased was a believer or not. In such cases we can say that the past profession of faith gives us hope and so we simply entrust our lost loved one to the Lord.

6. Offer practical help. Those who are grieving probably don't feel like preparing meals so it could be a help and a comfort to bring food. Often a widow or widower feels overwhelmed by the logistics and expense of making funeral arrangements. Sometimes I have accompanied a widow and her children to the funeral home to help them make difficult decisions ([1 John 3:18](#)).

7. Be sensitive about time. Generally speaking, I plan to make my visits brief to those who are grieving. Often families are exhausted. And while they appreciate your words of comfort, the reading of Scripture and prayer, they may want time to be alone with the immediate family, or just to rest ([Proverbs 25:17](#)). On the other hand, there are times when I am preparing to leave and the family insists that I stay longer.

8. Be flexible. The question of how long to stay illustrates why some of the lists of what not to say or do may be limited in value. What may be the right thing in one situation may be the wrong thing in another. This is why we must seek to be aware of the cues we are getting from those whom we are trying to comfort. And we pray that God will help us to help them, in spite of our uncertainty and weakness.

9. Pray. Pray before you go that God will help you to comfort them. Pray with them while you are there, offering praise to God for His glorious attributes and works. Offer supplication to God for the many needs of those who have suffered loss ([1 Thessalonians 5:17](#)). Ask God to give comfort for the grieving, wisdom regarding the logistics of a funeral, help for those left behind as life goes on, etc. God may help you to put into words, through your prayers, what those whom you are visiting feel too weak to express.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." [2 Corinthians 1:3-4](#)

TOPICS: **Grief**

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