

CONSOLING THE DISTRESSED

Today's Text: (1) Job, Chaps 2-37; (2) John 11: 1-44

Extracts:

1. **Now, when Job's three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, each one came from his own place... for they had made an appointment together to come and mourn with him, and to comfort him. And when they raised their eyes from afar, and did not recognize him, they lifted up their voices and wept; and each one tore his robe and sprinkled dust on his head toward heaven. So they sat down with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his grief was very great [Job 2: 11-13]**
2. **Then, when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how He loved him!" [Jn 11: 32-36]**

Joseph and Joan had been married for 12 years before they had their first child. However, the boy was physically challenged from birth, being crippled on both legs. Two years later, they had a most beautiful daughter who was everybody's darling. While both children were in their teens, word came to the parents one day that their daughter had drowned in the school swimming pool. Family and friends poured into their home to console them. However, the bereaved soon observed that virtually every visitor, by word or gesture, said something like, "Why the good one?" It got to a stage that Joseph and Joan had to shut out all the mourners because they were not helping their grief. They were not comforted because the mourners were actually wishing that it were their physically challenged son that had died instead of the pretty daughter! As far as the parents were concerned, both children were precious and they did not want to lose either of them.

This story reminds us of how difficult it is to console people in distress because we may not know what will work. Even psychologists will admit that what may work in one circumstance may fail woefully elsewhere. Yet, everyday, as parents and siblings, mentors and managers, pastors and priests, etc, we are called upon to console others who are in sorrow or pain for one reason or the other.

In today's lesson, we shall use Job's circumstances to gain some insight into the matter.

1. Distress affects us all!

Matthew was my wife's favourite among my siblings of whom I am the firstborn. He was an agronomy student at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Brilliant, friendly and humble, his stay with us during his summer vacations was always a joy. He would help my wife with mathematics and statistics (towards her business administration degree at the University of Lagos). They were always discussing how they would jointly set up an agro-based business after their graduation. Using his training in agronomy, Matthew also worked the lawn surrounding our home in suburban Lagos. In no time, the grass and plants became lush. Each time he returned to campus, one hundred kilometres north of Lagos, we always missed him.

In April 1979, six weeks to his graduation, he came home briefly for the Easter break. He was unusually quiet. All he desired was to take pictures with our newborn son, Uyi, and to see his other siblings resident in Lagos. On Easter Monday, one of our close friends who was going to Ibadan with his own family offered to drop Matthew off at the university campus. That was the last time we saw him alive. The next day, we received the sad news that he had died in my friend's car that had had a major accident. Matthew was only 22 years old. To this day, I doubt if the Imoisili family has recovered from his death!

I am sure that there are many of you who have experienced (or are right now experiencing) some pains. The death of a parent, spouse, sibling, friend or colleague. A long-standing illness of a close relative or friend that is not responding to medical treatment or prayer. A natural disaster, such as fire, famine or flood, or hurricane. Refugees escaping from religious or ethnic disturbance or economic hardship. Temporary setbacks, such as failure in an important examination, loss of job, distress in marriage, separation or divorce, business failure or bankruptcy. There is so much to cause pain in today's world that is full of strains and stresses, wars and rumours of wars.

If you have ever suffered any distress, there are certain features that are common:

a) *An acute sense of loss*

It will seem as if the stability that you have taken for granted has been shattered. You feel a void or an empty space deep down in your being which refuses to go away. This acute sense of *loss* and gnawing pain can only but draw out your tears.

When Jacob was shown a stained coat by his sons, suggesting that wild animals had killed Joseph, his favourite son, the old man wept bitterly and said, "I shall go down into the grave to my son in mourning" [**Gen. 37: 35**]. In other words, what was the meaning of life from then on without Joseph? When Tabitha (Dorcas) died and the disciples in Joppa sent for

Peter, “all the widows stood by him *weeping*, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them” [Acts 9: 35-39]. In other words, who would now replace Dorcas to make similar things for the widows *from then on*?

b) *How about the day after?*

Mourners can only be around for some time. In the case of death, the number dwindles after the burial of the dead. For the sick in the hospital or those in jail, most comforters drop off after a few visits. Some comforters may offer gifts, advice or help, which can go a long way. *In the end*, your future still lies ahead to deal with *alone*.

The forgoing suggests that consoling the distressed is much more than what the *experts* can teach us. We need to go into the word of God to learn how we can effectively do it. This is an important assignment because Jesus has promised mourners that they shall be comforted [Matt. 5: 4]. We are the ones that God will use because we are commanded to “weep with those who weep” [Rom. 12: 15]. Let us see what we can learn from how Job’s friends consoled him.

2. Job’s friends console him in his distress

a) *What Job needed*

As we saw in last week’s lesson [“Satan has your number!”- Vol. 5, No. 14: 16 May 2004], following the permission that God had granted him, the devil attacked Job’s household, destroyed his material wealth, killed his seven sons and three daughters, and left him with painful boils from his head to his feet. When Job’s friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, heard what had befallen him, they came to “mourn with him and to comfort him” [Job 2: 11]. The Job they saw was not the one they had known and tears poured out of their eyes. Before we examine how they then went about to “mourn with and comfort” their friend, let us appreciate the distress that Job was passing through and the kind of mourning and comforting that would give him relief.

In Job’s words, here are the key elements of his distress:

- His flesh was caked with worms and dust and his skin was cracked and always breaking out afresh. As a result, he could not sleep [Job 7: 4-5]
- His bones clung to his skin and flesh and he was merely hanging to life “by the skin of my teeth” [Job 19: 20]
- His breath was offensive to his wife, and his maidservants now treated him as a stranger and with scorn [vv. 15-17]

- He was deserted by brothers and relatives, acquaintances and close friends [v. 13]

As a result, his bones pierced in him at night and “my gnawing pains take no rest.” His bones burned with fever [Job 30: 17, 30]. A person in that state is bound to be delirious. Therefore, you can now appreciate why Job spoke the way he did when his friends came to visit.

What kind of comfort did Job need? He put it himself this way in response to his friends’ efforts: “*If your soul were in my soul’s place, ... I would strengthen you with my mouth, and the comfort of my lips would relieve you of your grief*” [Job 16: 4-5]. In other words, if you want to *successfully* console the distressed, you have to go by the road of *empathy*, not sympathy. You are to strengthen and comfort, and relieve the grief. To what extent did Job’s friends satisfy those criteria?

b) *Here come the preachers!*

Job’s friends started quite well. When they heard of his adversity, they came in person to see him. They wept when they saw an emaciated Job and sat with him for seven days and nights without uttering a word [Job 2: 11-13]. If it were these days, many of us would think that a phone call, a condolence card or a quick visit would be enough. His pastor would be too busy conducting a televised crusade to worry about the plight of a major tithe payer in his congregation. If he cared so much, he might send some of the junior prayer warriors to go and lay hands on the sick!

As Job’s unending pains forced him to start rambling, he made a statement like, “The thing I greatly feared has come upon me, and what I dreaded has happened to me. I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; *I have no rest for trouble comes*” [Job 3: 25-26]. What kind of response should that draw from a comforter who *really* intends to strengthen, comfort and relieve grief?

In three separate “sermons,” each of Job’s friends strove to convince him that he was a hypocrite, that the kind of affliction that he had could only come to those that God was correcting for their sins! Eliphaz thundered at Job, “who ever perished being innocent? Or where were the upright ever cut off? ... Those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same” [Job 4: 7-8]. Bildad added, “Does God subvert judgment? Or does the Almighty pervert justice? *If your sons have sinned against Him, He has cast them away for their transgression*” [Job 8: 3-4]. As Job tried to defend his innocence, Zophar asked him how he dared claim innocence, and reminded Job, “Know therefore that God exacts from you less than your iniquity deserves” [Job 11: 6].

Job was so incensed by what his friends were saying that he called them “miserable comforters” [Job 16: 2], “forgers of lies” and “worthless physicians” [Job 13: 4-5]! If indeed sinners were the ones afflicted as in the case of Job, why were his friends not in a similar situation since they were worse sinners than Job? That was why Job told them, “What you know, I also know; *I am not inferior to you*” [v. 2].

With his friends unable to comfort him or relieve him of his grief, Job had to turn to God. In a remarkable show of faith, Job made the following affirmations, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him” [Job 13: 15] and “I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth. *And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God*” [Job 19: 25-26]. This total reliance on God was the source of Job’s strength, comfort and ultimate relief from his distress. God Himself confirmed that when He said later to Eliphaz, “My wrath is aroused against you and your two friends, for you have not spoken of Me what is right, *as My servant Job has*” [Job 42: 7].

3. Lessons

Here are some useful lessons that we can learn from Job’s story:

a) *Be a credible comforter*

“You cannot give what you do not have” is a rule in law. In like manner, if you do not have any credibility, you cannot successfully console others. Job’s friends were worse sinners and yet they had not suffered Job’s kind of affliction. They then turned around to accuse Job that he was suffering because he harboured unconfessed sins! A case of the pot calling the kettle black!

It was Jacob’s sons who had sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt, soaked his coat of many colours in animal blood, and brought it to their father, pretending that the young man could have been killed by wild animals. As the old man mourned the death of his favourite son, “all his sons and daughters arose to comfort him, but *he refused to be comforted*” [Gen. 37: 34-35]. They had no credibility!

b) *Comfort with empathy*

You should put yourself in the place of the distressed in order to understand and appreciate their situation. Otherwise, you may find yourself making wrong assumptions. You have to *first* strengthen and comfort *before* you seek to relieve the grief.

When Jesus came to comfort Mary and Martha on the death of their brother, Lazarus, His sole purpose was to raise Lazarus from the dead. That would certainly relieve the two sisters of their grief. However, Jesus started by strengthening and comforting them. When He assured them that Lazarus would rise again since He Jesus is “the resurrection and the life” and that whoever believed in Him would rise again, even though he were dead, they did not appear strengthened nor comforted. However, when Jesus also wept, the other mourners said, “See how He loved him!” [**Jn 11: 25-36**]. Jesus knew that He was going to bring Lazarus back to life. Therefore, He did not *need* to weep. However, He did it to demonstrate that He understood how the sisters felt about their dead brother. They were strengthened and comforted by His gesture. When their brother came back to life, they were relieved!

c) *Only God can comfort*

Human comforters failed Job because their knowledge of God’s righteousness and judgment was very limited. We know that “the people who know their God shall be strong and carry out great exploits” [**Dan. 11: 32**]. Job did and he was comforted, in spite of the failure of his friends. Therefore, you should ask God for spiritual guidance before you go out to comfort others. You may be surprised about the wonderful results that you could get thereby. After all, the Holy Spirit is the Comforter [**Jn 15: 26**].

Forty days after His resurrection, Jesus led His disciples out of Jerusalem up to Bethany, preparatory to His ascension into heaven. That meant that His disciples would not see Him again as they had done during the last three years of His earthly ministry. That should make them distressed but they were not. Jesus the Comforter blessed them and commanded them to wait for the baptism of the Holy Spirit a short time hence. Soon after, He disappeared out of their sight! Were the disciples consoled? Yes, for “they worshipped Him and returned to Jerusalem *with great joy*, and were continually in the temple, *praising and blessing God*” [**Lk 24: 49-53**]. That is the best practice on the subject!

Are you a comforter? Go to the Lord for guidance. Are you distressed? Go to the Lord for comfort. It is *only* when the Holy Spirit leads both the comforter and the distressed that you can give or receive *comfort, strength and relief*.