

How to Comfort the Suffering

by Jill Sciacca

In Job's journey through affliction and hardship he had these sad words for his supposed supporters: "*Miserable comforters are you all*" (Job 16:2).

David, on the other hand, could declare during a dark hour of trial, "*As for the saints who are in the land, they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight*" (Psalm 16:3). Their response to another's suffering separated the miserable comforters of Job from the friends of David.

A past season of suffering that God allowed in my life—ten weeks of mandatory bedrest due to pregnancy complications—revealed to me that my ability to endure was very much affected by the ministry of God's people. It also made me reflect—with regret—on times in my past when I mistakenly failed friends in their moments of greatest need because I did not know how to really nourish their souls and alleviate their afflictions.

The bedrest, including two weeks in the hospital, was mandated when it was discovered I was carrying twins, and that a difficult, premature labor and delivery was possible. At that time, with two preschoolers already at home and no

near relatives or financial provision for our family's care, we were cast into a state of complete dependence upon the church and our friends.

Awaiting with anxiety the twins' birth, I found that even among Christians who love me and long for my best, comforting does not necessarily come naturally. As we worked through careless comments made by some, and yet also felt sustained through the ministry of others who creatively cared for us, several practical principles for how to most effectively meet needs emerged from this experience.

These principles now seem worthy to pass on to others, for it was proven to us that suffering has a profound potential for good for all of God's people—and for a watching world that can witness the Lord's love manifested as his people meet one another's needs.

So how can we be like the friends of David, who caused him to rejoice in his sufferings?

YOU CAN HELP

First of all, be aggressive in your approach to help. Don't confront one who is suffering and say, "*If* there is anything I can do, please call me." Rather than relieving responsibility, this creates it.

Instead, offer specifics. "*When* can I come and take your children to the zoo?" "*Would tomorrow* be a good day over and

clean house for you? "*What* do you need from the store?"

How well we will always remember the discouraging day when we returned from the hospital after the bedrest was ordered. We felt overwhelmed and incapable of making decisions. But the sun had not set before a friend appeared and announced that she had already organized ten willing women to regularly clean our house and care for our children.

Meals were scheduled to arrive each evening by another woman, who also made sure that what was prepared satisfied our usual diet and desires.

Another friend took charge of writing a form letter to be sent to former college companions across the country who had drifted in distance but not in heart. The letter outlined our needs and asked for prayer. Through that labor of love many old friendships were rekindled, and many of these friends resorted to prayer which resulted in praise to God as our requests were abundantly answered.

Especially do not hesitate to get aggressively involved if you have suffered in a similar fashion. Your words and listening ear can lend great comfort. An acquaintance, now a dear friend, began to faithfully call me during my time of bedrest. I felt a special freedom to express my innermost fears to her, since she had gone through a similar trial. Her understanding was unique.

It isn't necessary to be close to the suffering one in order to offer comfort. Some of the most meaningful messages to me came from cards and calls from people I had never met.

BE YOURSELF—AND BE CREATIVE

The second principle is to use *your* gifts and talents specifically. Do not put yourself under pressure to perform a task that is undesirable to you. If you do, the chances are great that your attempt to minister may prove meaningless. Instead, carefully consider what you *can* do and *like* to do. Then be creative—the possibilities are endless.

Especially encouraging to me was the emergence of a penpal from a neighboring city. I did not know her until her pen became the vehicle of a profound ministry in my life. Her letters appeared regularly throughout my time of bedrest.

A care package sent to us from faraway friends contained foods fun to munch on, books and magazines, and family photos that brought their presence near.

Fresh bread was brought in often by those who knew well the lift a warm loaf can bring. One friend brought ice cream with cones from our family's favorite ice cream shop.

Only days after our trial began, we anticipated a lonely first Christmas away from our extended family. But when the

day came, we received an unexpected telephone call: Food was on its way.

A family arrived, and while some sat and visited with us in the living room, the daughter and mother spread a feast on our dining room table: turkey, complete with all the trimmings, plus tall, colorful Christmas candles. Our dismal Christmas day was turned into one we will never forget.

REAL NEEDS

Finally, be sensitive to the *real* needs of the one suffering.

It is a myth, for example, that a hurting person constantly needs company. Call before you come to visit, and ask, "Be honest: Would you like to see me today?"

When you do call on the person, resist the temptation to say something profound unless your advice is requested. G. Campbell Morgan wrote, "*Silent sympathy always creates an opportunity for grief to express itself.*" How sweet and comforting can be the simple words (either penned or verbalized), "I am praying for you."

Above all, do not speak beyond your own experience. Telling someone that everything will be all right when you have never known the depth of his or her hardship is an empty statement. Think carefully before sharing Scripture, and ask yourself if what is spoken will communicate comfort or condemnation.

In her book *Affliction*, Edith Schaeffer includes the quote, "*Two men looked through the prison bars. The one saw mud, the other stars.*" There are two possible responses on the path of suffering. One is to be hopeful and able to sense God's presence—to see the stars. The other is to be discouraged and defeated, able only to see the mud. How we go about serving those who walk this path will help determine which way they respond to their affliction.

Suffering takes on many forms and faces, from emotional pains of loneliness and depression to death and destruction. But triumph through any trial is very possible when God's people know how to creatively, aggressively, and sensitively draw alongside the afflicted one to minister His presence and love.

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