

You are miserable comforters, all of you! Job 16:2

It is so hard to know what to say when someone you love is suffering. It's also hard when someone you only kind of know but really like is suffering. And it is really hard and awkward when someone you don't know well or maybe have a history of conflict with is suffering.

Oftentimes we don't know what to do and so we just make it weird.

We succumb to the pressure of feeling as though we need to speak on God's behalf and we wind up spouting the kind of Christian comfort found on flowery greeting cards. Or we get even weirder and start avoiding the person in need.

We can take a lesson from Job's friends here. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar loved Job dearly and watched him suffer to a degree that few humans will ever experience. Chapter two of Job sees them kind of getting their roles of comforters right; they showed up to be with him, sympathized with him, and spent days with him. In Job 2:11-13 we see that they were by his side for seven days, weeping and tearing their own robes.

I have to give these guys some credit here. While I have comforted many people in my career I have never upped my comfort game to a robe tearing level.

But after seven days of comforting in silence, Job's buddies were ready to speak and here is where they get everything wrong. While they still loved Job and wanted to see his suffering end, they started desperately reaching for reasons why he was suffering and eventually drew the condemnation of God. While much of the speeches they offered up are easily dismissed by us today, how often do we fall into the trap of trying to make sense of tragedy in an attempt to comfort a friend?

I've heard many a grieving person repeat in disbelief some of the well intended statements made by loved ones. I've done plenty of fumbling around myself trying to find the right words in hard situations. Relationships get weird when people just don't know what to say.

We fall into the greatest traps when we feel like we have to explain things for God. Even though we know that people don't hurt on earth as a punishment for shortcomings and we also know that God's plans are bigger and more complex than we could ever hope to explain, it is hard to find the right words.

So how do we help those that hurt? Romans 12:15 tells us that we should "mourn with those who mourn". We should sit with those who hurt, acknowledge their pain, be prepared to admit that we on Earth have no idea what God's plan is, and continually turn the focus back to greatest comforter, our heavenly Father.

Maybe we can draw the line at robe tearing for the sake of empathy.

But try not to make it weird, ok?

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