**Learning Compassion towards Those in Trials**

*by Harry Osborne*

In our Wednesday night class on Job, we recently studied one of the deep expressions of his despair. We recall that his “friends” had failed to be of any comfort, but had made his suffering worse. Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar had each made their initial false charges, asserting that Job was suffering due to his own sin. Though the readers are privy to the fact that Job suffered because of Satan’s affliction aimed at reversing Job’s unparalleled righteousness, neither Job nor his “friends” were aware of the suffering’s source. Yet, after honestly searching his own life for sin, Job correctly defended himself against the false charges made toward him. There is no doubt that Job’s grief was multiplied when Eliphaz, rather than apologizing for his false accusations, started a second round by intensifying his erroneous indictments against Job’s character. Just after that misguided diatribe, Job made the following statement:

*I have heard many such things; miserable comforters are you all! Shall vain words have an end? Or what provokes you that you answer? I also could speak as you do,* ***if your soul were in my soul’s place****. I could heap up words against you, and shake my head at you; but****I would strengthen you with my mouth, and the comfort of my lips would relieve your grief*** (Job 16:2-5).

Though none of us would like to think of ourselves as being the modern equivalent of Eliphaz, Bildad or Zophar, do our actions and words follow their examples as we deal with those undergoing times of suffering and hardship? Is it easier for us to dismiss their plight as being “his/her own fault” rather than to step in and do the difficult task of giving strength and comfort? Let us remember that Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar were condemned by God because of their lack of compassion and encouragement. Before we turn a callous eye and hardened heart on those going through times of trial, we should consider the fact that compassion is repeatedly commended by God and its absence is forcefully condemned.

Let us be reminded of God’s expectations for us in reaction to the suffering of others:

*Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ* (Gal. 6:2).

*Now we that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each one of us please his neighbor for that which is good, unto edifying. For Christ also pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached Thee fell upon me* (Rom. 15:1-3, ASV).

*I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive”* (Acts 20:35).

*Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep* (Rom. 12:15).

*Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering* (Col. 3:12).

*Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard* (Prov. 21:13).

*You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them* (Ezek. 34:3-4).

*Then He will also say to those on the left hand, “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.” Then they also will answer Him, saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?” Then He will answer them, saying, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me”* (Matt. 25:41-45).

*Be ye all likeminded, compassionate, loving as brethren, tenderhearted, humbleminded* (1 Pet. 3:8).

If we seek to be like God, we would do well to consider His compassion on man. The Old Testament is full of statements regarding God’s tenderness and loving aid to Israel – even when they rejected Him in sin (Ex. 3:7; Deut. 30:3; 2 Chron. 36:15; Psa. 78:38; 86:15). The divine expression of compassion, selfless sacrifice and ultimate mercy is seen in the giving of Christ to lift the burden of sin from us despite our sins and rebellion (Matt. 11:28-30; Rom. 5:6-11; Jn. 3:16).

One of the most touching portrayals of God’s compassion on man is seen in Hosea’s description of God remaining the loving, caring, providing Father of a rebellious child.

*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them* (Hos. 11:1-4).

Do we fully appreciate the compassion of our God? Does it move us as it should to imitate Him? We have all seen the selfish child, saved from self-destruction by a loving parent, who repays that love and compassion with insolent rebellion or uncaring indifference. Yet, the parent continues to love and seek the best for the child with tears of unending hope that the selfless sacrifices will lead to good. That is God’s example of compassion toward you and me! Are we imitating Him or the uncaring child as we deal with others enduring times of suffering and trial? Let us compare God’s example to some possible responses in an attempt to evade the responsibility of showing compassion.

**“I know he/she is suffering, but I’ve got my own life to live.”** Jesus also had a life to live, but He used it to serve others rather than Himself. In the end, He even gave up that life in selfless sacrifice. As Christians, we are not to put our needs and desires above others, but consider them above self (Phil. 2:3).

**“It drags me down to be hearing about your problems all of the time.”** What if God answered our prayers for help with the same attitude? Where would we be? If we have gone to God as we ought in prayer, we have approached Him with countless trials, problems, illnesses, cares and heartaches. Yet, He has always and will always answer our every anxiety with His unending care for us (1 Pet. 5:7).

**“I’m just not good at being sympathetic – let someone else who is naturally gifted that way do it.”** Is it possible that what we see as a “naturally” sympathetic person is actually the result of a life dedicated to learning how to show such sympathy? Empathy, sympathy and compassion are not traits inherited by birth, but developed by dedicated pursuit from one seeing the value of selfless service and seeking to imitate such love (Eph. 5:1-2).

**“Look at all of the problems he/she has – it’s obvious something is wrong with him/her.”** Have we considered the possibility that the righteous may still be afflicted for their righteousness as was Job? Look at the apostle Paul and his many sufferings (2 Cor. 11:24-31). One who automatically assumes the blame for suffering is on the one who endures such manifests their identification with Eliphaz, Bildad or Zophar.

**“When somebody starts crying, I feel so uncomfortable and don’t know what to say, so I just leave.”** Again, our purpose is not our own comfort and ease, but service (Mk. 10:42-45). There is no doubt that it was “uncomfortable” for Christ on the cross, but He endured it for us! Our discomfort is nothing in comparison. There are times when all of us are at a loss for words to help and strengthen, but our mere presence without a word spoken can give comfort. It tells the one in trial that we care and that can be of more comfort than we may ever know.

**“You know how those people are – they always exaggerate things. It’s not as bad as they say.”** This is only another attempt to blame all problems on the one suffering and exonerate self from responsibility. Would that attitude have been justified in response to the suffering of Job – or Christ? If we would consider how we would feel if the situation was reversed, it would help us understand the most compassionate response and give the needed comfort with heart-felt abundance (Lk. 6:31).

Let us strive to put our soul in the place of the soul suffering through trials and strengthen them with our mouth so that the comfort of our lips might relieve their grief. Learning compassion to those in trials is not easy or comfortable to us, but it is needed if we fulfill our call to be servants of those around us.