

The Ministry of Presence

The Hush of Heaven – Part I

Job 2:11-13

Introduction

If you are at least thirty-five years old, you probably remember a lady by the name of Erma Bombeck. She was one of the most successful syndicated columnists from the 1950s to the 1990s. She ran a syndicated column about the normal affairs of life – being a mother and housewife. She used her sense of realism and humor to encourage women, beginning in the 1950s – a time when women were not really supposed to say what they thought.

Though Erma was committed to her husband and children, her sense of humor and realism raised eyebrows. Her book entitled, *Families Who Play Together Get Irritated with Each Other* won quite a bit of attention. Her book entitled, *The Grass is Always Greener over the Septic Tank* made her famous.

Erma was also the one who once wrote, “If a man watches three football games in a row, he should be declared legally dead.”

I did not think that was right!

Erma Bombeck died in 1996 of cancer. When she found out she was dying, she wrote a column that someone emailed to me seven years ago for my files. The column is entitled, “If I Had to Live My Life Over”. She wrote,

- I would have listened more and talked less.
- I would have burned the pink candle sculpted like a rose before it melted in storage.
- I would have taken the time to listen to my grandfather ramble on about his youth.

- I would have shared more of the responsibility carried by my husband.
- I would never have insisted the car windows be rolled up on a summer day because my hair had just been fixed.
- I would have sat on the lawn with my children and not worried about grass stains.
- When my kids kissed me impetuously, I would never have said, “Later. Now go get washed up for dinner.”
- There would have been more “I love you’s” and more “I’m sorry’s,” but mostly, given another shot at life, I would seize every minute – [we only have one shot at life and then it is gone].
- I would have spent more time thinking about what God had given me than what I did not have. (summary of several statements)

Isn’t it interesting that some of the best lessons about life are learned in the face of death?

In our last session, I mentioned in one of the services that I would love to hear from your own story of 39 seconds. That was the period of time we have referred to as the time it took for Job to hear the messengers who came, one after another, to tell him that he had lost everything and nearly everyone.

Let me ask you to send me your 39 second story – and some of the lessons about life that you learned through your own tragedy or the tragic unfolding of events in someone else’s life.

My request last Lord's day prompted several people to write. One woman wrote of her husband being killed as a crime was being committed. Another man wrote, who struggled with the loss of his father. I am so grateful for these emails.

One young man in our flock learned some profound lessons by asking some profound questions.

He and his friend had been dropped off by a small Super Cub airplane in the wilderness of Alaska to hunt moose. They were experienced hunters and had all the gear they would need for their hunt, including a satellite phone which they decided to rent and bring along at the last minute. On their last day of the hunt, he spotted a bull moose and fired off one round. The moose did not go down, but instead, started toward him. He reloaded his shotgun and fired, and then felt intense pain. He looked down and noticed the gun had literally broken in half – one half had crashed back into his face, severely lacerating his face and crushing one of his eyes, out of which he still cannot see.

After the accident and the rather amazing rescue by Army soldiers and an Army helicopter – thanks to that satellite telephone – while going through intensive surgery and recovery, still wondering about his ability to see physically and the health of his eyes, he wrote a list of questions. He sent a copy of these questions to me. These are questions that would produce life lessons in the face of suffering and a close call with death:

- What am I doing?
- Where am I going?
- What does God want me to do?
- What does God have in store for me?
- What should I do with God's blessings?
- What should I do with God's trials?
- Will I become resentful?

This young man added near the end, "My only hope is the righteousness of Jesus Christ . . . I am of little strength . . . Lord, please help me."

I would ask the questions:

- How do you answer someone who asks such profound questions?
- How do you begin to become a part of God's solution in the life of someone surrounded by sorrow?
- How do you minister to someone who has recently been diagnosed with something

terminal and would love to have another shot at life?

I want to encourage you at the very outset of our study today that everyone in the body of Christ qualifies to be an expert assistant to the suffering.

You do not have to be brilliant, persuasive, articulate, or experienced. You can be involved in what I will call, "The Ministry of Presence".

Through the ministry of presence, you can have a tremendous ministry to the hurting – without ever being ordained or certified. You do not have to be anything to be a wonderful tool in the hand of God – but available.

This reminds me of a saying that my parents drilled into the young hearts of my brothers and I when we were growing up, "The greatest ability is availability."

Let us watch this happen in the life of Job when he was surrounded by sorrow. The last few verses of Job chapter 2 show us when the counselors of Job got it right.

Job's Counselors

Let us first take a look at who Job's counselors were. Notice Job 2:11.

Now when Job's three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, they came each one from his own place. Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite; and they made an appointment [a pact] together to come to sympathize with him and comfort him.

Isn't this an example all by itself? These friends dropped everything, contacted one another, and said, "Let's go to our friend in need and comfort him."

Eliphaz

The first friend mentioned in the text is Eliphaz. He is mentioned first, more than likely, because he was the oldest.

In each of the cycles of speeches made by these three men, and later by a fourth man who joins them, it is Eliphaz who speaks first.

He alludes to himself in Job 15, as a grey-haired, aged man, much older than Job's father. If Job were around fifty years of age, with ten grown children, Eliphaz may very well have been anywhere from seventy-five to eighty years of age.¹

Add to this the fact that we are informed in Job 2:11 that Eliphaz was a Temanite. Teman was famous for its wise men and their profound sayings of the east. Jeremiah the prophet wrote,

. . . Is there no longer any wisdom in Teman? Has good counsel been lost to the prudent? Has their wisdom decayed [vanished]? (Jeremiah 49:7b)

Obadiah 1:8 refers to the wise men of Teman.

Eliphaz's name meant, "God is fine gold," and he would have been, more than likely, a powerful chieftain from this area of southern Arabia.ⁱⁱ

Wealthy enough to travel; revered and respected in his own right – Eliphaz is one of Job's friends.

Of the other men, Eliphaz will not only always speak first, but his speeches are longer. God will eventually, in Job 42, refer to him as the representative of the other counselors.ⁱⁱⁱ

We can picture, from the text, grey-haired Eliphaz, a man of experience, wealth, and dignity, arriving on the scene of his friend's despair.

Bildad

The next friend is Bildad. Job 2:11 tells us that he was a Shuhite.

Bildad does not show up anywhere else in the Bible, although other documents speak of Suhu, located on the Middle Euphrates River, as probably being named after Abraham's youngest son, Shuah. It is possible that Bildad and Shuah knew one another and, if so, Bildad could have learned incredible lessons about the God of Abraham from Abraham's youngest son.

We do know that Bildad was a friend of Job and this alone served as quite a reference for his character.

Zophar

The third and final friend mentioned in Job 2:11 is Zophar. Zophar means "young bird," and he was probably the youngest member in this trio of friends.

Zophar came from Naamah, which was probably named after the great-great-great-great-great-granddaughter of Cain.

Many believe that Zophar's home was between modern day Beirut and Damascus.^{iv}

Remember that Job lived during the days of the patriarchs and many of them lived as contemporaries.

It is likely that Job was known and respected by all who followed after the God of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Job's three friends heard the news, which took some time to reach them, and contacted one another, which took even more time in order to correspond back and forth, and they agreed to come together to encourage Job.

One author said that if you had one friend who would drop everything and come running – that would be wonderful, but to have three friends like that is truly amazing.^v

The Response of Job's Counselors

We have no idea how long it took Job's three friends to find him. Perhaps they first came to his home and asked for him. Maybe it was one of the remaining servants of the now windswept and desolate estate who points the way to the city dump.

There is the implication in Job 2:12a that someone pointed Job out to his friends, as it says,

When they lifted up their eyes at a distance and did not recognize him, they raised their voices and wept. . . .

Perhaps it was Job's wife who led them to where Job was sitting in the ash heap of the town garbage dump.

The text indicates that someone had to point Job out because he was unrecognizable, "Look, there he is – that man, sitting there."

"No, it can't be! That's impossible!"

The Hebrew text (Hiphil perfect) implies that it was not as much that these men doubted it was Job, as simply that this man sitting on the ash heap did not look anything like Job.

"How can this man be the same man we last saw?"

"It's true," their guide must have said, as he pointed at him from a distance, "that man with the skin open and running; that man scraping away at himself; that man moaning in unspeakable pain, suffering from fever and nausea, whose beard is now tangled and matted, and whose eyes are sunken and encircled with dark bands; that man whose clothing is tattered and caked with blood and dirt, that is Job, your friend."

Job's friends responded in five ways. Let us look at these.

1. First, they wailed in grief and shock.

Look at Job 2:12b.

... they raised their voices and wept. . . .

2. Secondly, they tore their clothing.

Look at Job 2:12c.

... And each of them tore his robe . . .

In the same way that Job had done earlier to represent his broken heart, these friends tear their robes in the custom of the day, from the neck toward their hearts, saying that their hearts are now broken too.

3. Thirdly, they dirtied themselves.

Look at Job 2:12d.

. . . and they threw dust over their heads toward the sky.

This custom identified with Job in his great sorrow. He had been unable to bathe and had grown filthy, so they would join him in dirtying their hair and their clothes.

4. Fourthly, they sat with him.

Look at Job 2:13a.

Then they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights . . .

This was the customary period for mourning the dead. They are not only mourning Job's condition, but are mourning the death of his children as well.

We see this mourning period in other passages when we read that:

- The men of Jabesh Gilead mourned the death of King Saul for seven days. (I Samuel 31:13)
- Joseph mourned for his father Jacob for seven days after Jacob died in Egypt. (Genesis 50:10)

Even though the seven days of mourning for the loss of Job's family and servants are long past, these friends, in great respect for this man, hold, in a sense, another private funeral service out of respect for his great sorrow.

5. Their fifth response was remarkable – they remained silent.

Notice Job 2:13b.

... with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great.

When Job's Counselors Were Correct

Let me give the ways that Job's counselors were correct.

1. First, they identified with his sorrow.

Job's friends thought, "If Job's hair and clothing is dirty, we'll get our dirty too. If he's sitting in the ash heap of the town dump, we'll sit here with him. We won't worry about the stares or who comes to watch."

2. Secondly, they joined in his grief.

- Earlier, in Job 2:11, we are told that these friends came to "sympathize" with Job.

The word in Hebrew means much more than a quick hug. "To sympathize or console," in this text, means literally, "to shake the head or to rock the body back and forth as a sign of shared grief".^{vi}

You might do this today, when you hear the news of someone's 39 seconds of pain. All you can do is cover your mouth with your hands and shake your head and rock back and forth in stunned silence and sorrow.

This is what these friends did with Job. It was no longer Job crying alone – it was now four men crying together at the city dump.

- Another key word in Job 2:11 is the word "comfort," which was an additional motive of these friends in coming to Job.

Someone who comforts is someone who seeks to share the pain and give a hand to aid the sufferer.

Isaiah used the word to refer to a mother tending to the needs of her helpless child and thus, comforting him. (Isaiah 66:13)

This word is used to describe the work of the person who will tenderly care for the needs of the grieving. Whether it is tending to literal wounds, or cooking a meal, or cleaning a house, or caring for another child, or cutting the grass, or paying the rent – it is true comfort.

It is thrilling to hear nearly every week, of someone in our church who was helped in a tangible way – whether through random acts of kindness; through IServe, involving our teenagers and special projects; through Carpenters for Christ, involving nearly a hundred men in our church dedicated to building and repairing for Christians in need; through the tens of thousands of dollars distributed from our Deacon benevolence fund to needy brothers and

sisters in Christ. I wish you could hear all the stories of gratitude that I get to hear.

This is true religion. False religion says, “Be warmed and filled.”

True comfort, in the biblical sense, puts on overalls, and swings a hammer, and writes a check, and cooks a meal.

True comfort, in this text, is seen in three friends sitting down at the dump, in the ashes, surrounded by rotting garbage, with Job!

Have you ever been to the dump? Have you ever been to a landfill? Just go – and smell. I have been there, and if the smell of rotting refuse and garbage does not send you away in seven minutes, I cannot imagine that you would stay seven hours, and I cannot fathom that you would stay seven days. Beyond that, I have never curled up and tried to sleep in the dump – that is beyond what I can imagine. Job’s friends did – seven days and seven nights.

These friends identified with Job’s sorrow and joined in his grief.

3. Thirdly, they showed respect for his grief.

Job’s friends are mourning with Job, by the way, the death of his children and servants. What a mark of friendship this is. They showed up – and they showed respect for his grief.

Those who exercise the ministry of presence do this. Have you ever noticed that no one is ever invited to a funeral? Invitations are never mailed out.^{vii}

Friends do everything they can to simply come – and if they cannot come, they send flowers, notes or cards to communicate to the sufferer, “Listen – count me in. I want to show my respect and awareness of your grief.”

4. Fourthly, they allowed him to speak first.

Do not miss this – underline it in your mind – Job spoke first.

Warren Wiersbe applied this passage in Job by writing, “The best way to help people who are hurting is to just show up. Say little or nothing . . . do not try to explain everything; explanations never heal a broken heart.”^{viii}

By doing all of these things, Job’s friends come to number 5.

5. Fifthly, they earned the right to speak.

To exercise the ministry of presence, you do not have to have anything figured out. You can be

positively inspiring in your silence, but you might err when you speak.

You may have heard the anonymous quote, “I have often regretted my speech, but never my silence.”

Application

Before we leave this profound scene with three eminent, dignified, wealthy, revered men sitting in the dust with Job, their beaten, weary, suffering friend, let us try to learn some practical lessons regarding this ministry of presence. It is a ministry without a word.

One author called this ministry, “sacred silence”.

1. First, reject the view that quoting scripture will eliminate sorrow.

This is the thought that the truth has not been represented if scripture has not been quoted.

Do not misunderstand this – the Bible is sufficient for our need, but Proverbs also talks about the timely use of it.

Solomon recorded,

Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in timely circumstances. (Proverbs 25:11).

In Proverbs 15:23, he wrote,

A man has joy in an appropriate answer, and how delightful is a well-timed word.

You do not walk into the presence of a Job and say, “Hey, guess what I read this morning in my quiet time? Man, this verse was perfect for you. Oh, by the way, I got you this coffee mug with a smiley face on one side and a picture of the cross on the other.”

The Bible is not a band-aid. Do not go around sticking that favorite verse of yours on suffering believers, believing it will somehow eliminate their pain.

Scripture is not aspirin for your suffering friends. Do not say, “Here, take two of these with a cup of tea in your new smiley face mug and call me in the morning.”

Physical injuries take time to heal – so do internal injuries of the heart. They take time to heal.

What the sufferer needs is the truth of scripture demonstrated in and through your life, as you minister to them with your presence.

2. Secondly, refrain from the temptation to say something profound.

You might think you have to come up with the nugget in order to help. You might think that you have to be able to summarize the work of God in a sentence or two.

The truth is that suffering often exposes us to the mystery of God – not an explanation from God.

Romans 11:33b tells us,

. . . How unsearchable are [God's] judgments and unfathomable His ways!

I Cor. 2:16a says,

For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him? . . .

Proverbs 25:2a tells us,

It is the glory of God to conceal a matter...

We are running around trying to glorify God by explaining the matter, while He intends to be glorified by concealing the matter. We have to learn to say, "I don't know what's going on."

Let me tell you – applying this as a pastor can be a little challenging. Imagine someone calling me, pouring out their story of suffering, and then, asking for an explanation. How well is it going to go over for me to say, "Man, I haven't got a clue. I am completely stumped!"

Most of you know the end of this book called Job, but let me remind that while:

- Job demanded an answer, God responded with His attributes;
- Job wanted an explanation, God revealed His reputation;
- Job wanted a premise behind God's actions, God declared His power behind the action.

Reject the view that quoting scripture will eliminate sorrow and refrain from the temptation to say something profound. Let me add to this thought by saying it a little differently.

3. Thirdly, refuse any expectation of eliminating grief by your insight or wisdom.

If you have not learned by now, learn through this scene – you do not eliminate sorrow, you share it. By sharing it, you lighten the load.

Get rid of the idea that mature believers never grieve; that deep Christians do not cry. If that were the case, then Jesus Christ was shallow. When He showed up at the tomb of Lazarus,

Jesus wept. (John 11:35)

4. Fourthly, resist the perspective that you must speak in order to express love.

When the Lord finally showed up at Lazarus' grave, He could have preached a sermon on His love for Lazarus; He could have made sure everyone knew how much He cared for His friend. Yet, when all He did was weep, the Jews saw this and without hearing Him say a word, they said,

. . . "See how He loved him." (John 11:36b)

You do not have to have something to say. You drove two hours to just be there and exercise the ministry of presence.

In Chuck Swindoll's commentary on Job, he quoted from Joseph Bayly's book entitled, *The Last Thing We Talk About*. Joe and his wife Mary Lou lost three of their children. They lost one son following surgery when he was only 18 days old. Their second son died at age five from leukemia. They lost a third son at age 18 after a sledding accident. He writes,

I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God's dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly; he said things I [already] knew were true. I was unmoved, except I wished he'd go away. He finally did.

Another came and sat beside me for an hour and more; listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply and left. I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go.^{ix}

This person had demonstrated the power of presence.

We do not have to be brilliant, articulate, Biblical scholars – it is true that the greatest ability as a friend is availability. Just show up – and you exercise the ministry of presence.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/25/2007 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ William Henry Green, Conflict and Triumph (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), p. 57.

ⁱⁱ John E. Hartley, New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Job (Eerdmans, 1988), p. 85.

ⁱⁱⁱ Roy Zuck, Job (Moody Press, 1978), p. 20.

^{iv} Hartley, p. 86.

^v Mike Mason, The Gospel According to Job (Crossway Books, 1994), p. 49.

^{vi} Hartley, p. 85.

^{vii} Charles Swindoll, Job: A Man of Heroic Endurance (W Publishing, 2004), p. 50.

^{viii} Warren Wiersbe, Job: Be Patient (Victor Books, 1991), p. 21.

^{ix} Swindoll, p. 53.