

Jesus Showed Sympathy



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *2 Kings 13:23; Exod. 2:23–25; Luke 7:11–16; 1 John 3:17; John 11:35; Rom. 12:15; 2 Cor. 1:3, 4.*

Memory Text: *And when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick” (Matthew 14:14, NKJV).*

How much more tragic could it be? A 17-year-old girl, struggling with what most 17-year-old girls struggle with, except with so much more, took her own life. Who could imagine the parents' devastation?

Their pastor came over to the house. He sat down in the living room next to them and for a long time said nothing. He just immersed himself in their grief. Then he, the pastor, started sobbing. He sobbed until his tears ran dry. Then, without saying a word, he got up and left.

Sometime later, the father told him how much he appreciated what the pastor had done. He and his wife, at that time, didn't need words, didn't need promises, didn't need counseling. All they needed, right then and there, was raw sympathy.

"I can't tell you," he said to the minister, "how much your sympathy meant to us."

Sympathy means "with pathos," and "pathos" is related to pity, tenderness, or sorrow. It means being "with" someone but in a profound way. Showing sympathy toward the sorrows of others takes the question of "mingling" with others to a whole new level.

Showing sympathy was also a crucial way that Jesus reached people.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 20.

Hearing the Groans

The universe can seem like a very scary place: vast, cold, and so big we sense our own insignificance and meaninglessness amid it. This fear has become even more prevalent with the advent of modern science, whose giant telescopes have revealed a cosmos much larger and vaster than our imaginations can readily grasp. Add to that the extravagant claims of Darwinism, which in most popular versions dismisses the idea of a Creator, and people can, understandably, struggle with a sense of hopelessness amid a vast creation that seems to care nothing about us.

Of course, the Bible gives us a different view of our place in the creation.

What do the following texts teach about God’s compassion toward His fallen and broken creation here on earth?

Judg. 2:16–18 _____

2 Kings 13:23 _____

Isa. 54:7, 8, 10 _____

Contrary to the popular notion of the God of the Old Testament as stern, mean, unforgiving, and uncompassionate, especially in contrast to Jesus and how He is represented in the New Testament, these texts are just a few of many in the Old Testament that reveal God’s compassion for humanity.

What does Exodus 2:23–25 teach us about how God deals with suffering?

God deeply cares about people (*see James 5:11*). This is a theme that is seen all through the Bible.

“His heart of love is touched by our sorrows and even by our utterances of them. . . . Nothing that in any way concerns our peace is too small for Him to notice. . . . No calamity can befall the least of His children . . . of which our heavenly Father is unobservant, or in which He takes no immediate interest.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 100.

What kind of collective groans are going up toward heaven in your community, and how can God use you to sympathize with and to help those who are suffering?

Our Sympathetic Savior

As Jesus mingled with people during His earthly ministry, He encountered situations that revealed His sympathy and compassion for them. “He came forth, and saw a great multitude, and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick” (*Matt. 14:14, ASV*).

Read Matthew 9:35, 36 and Luke 7:11–16. What do they teach us about how true sympathy and compassion are made manifest?

The word *sympathy* also brings to mind other related words, such as *empathy* and *pity*. According to various dictionaries, *compassion* is pity, sympathy, empathy. *Pity* is sympathetic sorrow for one’s suffering. *Empathy* is the ability to understand or share the feelings of others.

Compassion and sympathy show that we not only understand what others are suffering but want to help alleviate and remedy the suffering.

When you hear about the sad things that have happened to people in your community, such as their house burning down or a death in the family, what is your reaction? Do you just mutter, “That’s so sad,” and then move on, which is so easy to do? Or are your sympathies aroused, *moving* you with compassion for them? True compassion will lead you toward comforting and actively helping friends as well as strangers in practical ways. Whether it is sending a sympathy card or showing even deeper sympathy by visiting and assisting with immediate needs, loving action is the clear result of true sympathy.

Fortunately, people and aid organizations tend to compassionately respond to big disasters. However, sometimes we may not pay as much attention to the “smaller” misfortunes and disasters that deeply affect someone.

Jesus didn’t just show sympathy but took that sympathy to the next level: compassionate action. We, of course, are called to do the same. Anyone can feel sorrow or sympathy for someone’s misfortune. The question is, What action does that sympathy lead us to perform?

While eating breakfast, a man was listening to his wife read from the news about a tragedy in another country that had left thousands dead. After talking for a few moments about how terrible it was, he then changed the subject and asked whether the local soccer team had won the match the night before. In what ways are we all somewhat guilty of the same thing, and what, if anything, can we do about it?

Walking in Their Shoes

Read Colossians 3:12, 1 Peter 3:8, and 1 John 3:17. What are these texts saying to us, and how can we reveal this compassion in our lives?

Compassion comes from the Latin word *compati*, which means “to suffer with.” As we ourselves have suffered, we also can understand the sufferings of others; and, no doubt, just as we often crave compassion and sympathy in our suffering, we should be willing to do the same for others in their need as well.

We saw in an earlier lesson the story of the good Samaritan. As He highlights the example of the Samaritan, Jesus says, “But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him” (*Luke 10:33, NIV*). This pity, or compassion, drove the Samaritan traveler to act on behalf of the injured victim. The priest and the Levite likely asked themselves, “If I help this man, what will happen to me?” The Samaritan might have asked himself, “If I don’t help this man, what will happen to him?” In this story the Samaritan unselfishly takes the perspective of the victim and takes action. He risks his safety and his wealth for a stranger. In other words, sometimes being a Christian involves risks and can be, potentially, very costly.

Look at the story of the prodigal son from this perspective as well (*Luke 15:20–32*). What does the prodigal’s father do that makes him vulnerable to criticism and family strife? The compassionate embrace, the robe of belonging, the ring of trust, the sandals of freedom, and the call for celebration reflect the selfless joy of a father who is willing to sacrifice all for the sake of his prodigal son’s restoration. *Prodigal* means wasteful, reckless, extravagant, and uncontrolled. This kind of behavior certainly describes the path of the son in this story. But stop for a moment and consider that, in response to the return of the prodigal, one could justly claim that the father in this story puts all dignity aside and recklessly bestows everything he has on his disheveled son. In the eyes of the older sibling, the father is wasteful, extravagant, and uncontrolled. The father becomes prodigal at the sight of his repentant son, and his heart of compassion triggers the emptying of all resources necessary to restore him.

This level of sympathy and compassion involves setting self aside, and it can make us vulnerable to whatever comes as we suffer with someone and endeavor to move him or her toward restoration. In short, true compassion and sympathy might come with a cost.

Jesus Wept

“Jesus wept” (*John 11:35, NIV*).

What does this verse tell us, not just about the humanity of Jesus, but how in that humanity He related to the suffering of others? *See also Rom. 12:15.*

In John 11:35 Jesus demonstrated sympathy, empathy, and pity from His core. Even though He was about to raise Lazarus from the dead, the grief of a family with whom He was very close affected Him physically and emotionally.

However, Jesus was weeping not only over the death of a dear friend. He was looking at a much bigger picture, that of the suffering of all humanity because of the ravages of sin.

“The weight of the grief of ages was upon Him. He saw the terrible effects of the transgression of God’s law. He saw that in the history of the world, beginning with the death of Abel, the conflict between good and evil had been unceasing. Looking down the years to come, He saw the suffering and sorrow, tears and death, that were to be the lot of men. His heart was pierced with the pain of the human family of all ages and in all lands. The woes of the sinful race were heavy upon His soul, and the fountain of His tears was broken up as He longed to relieve all their distress.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 534.

Think about her words: Jesus, in ways that none of us ever could, saw the “pain of the human family in all ages and in all lands.”

We ourselves barely can stand to think about the pain of those whom we know or with whom we are close. Then add to that the pain of others that we read about in the news. And yet, we have here the Lord, who knows things in ways that we don’t, weeping over the collective grief of humanity. God alone knows the full extent of human woe and sorrow. How thankful we should be that we get only faint glimpses of that sorrow, and sometimes even that seems too much for us. Try to imagine what must have been stirring the heart of Jesus at that time.

General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, said, “If you can’t cry over the city, we can’t use you.”—Roger S. Greenway and Timothy M. Monsma, *Cities: Missions’ New Frontier* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Pub. Group, 2000), p. 246. **What should those words say to each of us?**

Another Kind of Comforter

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor. 1:3, 4, NKJV).

What is Paul telling us here about how our own suffering can help us be more effective in showing sympathy and comfort to those around us? How have you experienced (if you have) the reality of these words in your own life?

The word *comfort* comes from the Latin *com* (together, with) plus *fortis* (strong). As Christ strengthens us in our suffering, we can pass this strength to others. As we have learned from our own sorrows, we can more effectively minister to others in theirs.

Churches generally have members who suffer and members who comfort. This combination can transform your church into a “safe house”—a “city of refuge” (see *Numbers 35*) as well as a river of healing (see *Ezek. 47:1–12*) that flows to the community.

Showing sympathy and comfort is an art. Here are some suggestions:

- Be authentic. Listen more than you speak. Be sure your body language reinforces your attempt to sympathize and comfort.
- Show sympathy out of your individual personality. Some people give sympathy by quietly crying with the troubled person. Others don’t cry but show sympathy by organizing something that is a comfort to the bereaved.
 - *Being* a presence is often more important than speaking or doing.
 - Allow people to grieve in their own way.
 - Become acquainted with the stages of processing grief that people often go through.
 - Be careful about saying “I know how you feel.” Chances are that you don’t.
 - There is a place for professional counseling.
 - Don’t say “I’ll pray for you” unless you really intend to do so. When possible, pray with, unhurriedly visit with, and share encouraging Bible promises with suffering ones.
 - Organize support groups (if available) at your church or in your community.

Further Thought: Read Deuteronomy 24:10–22, Jonah 3, Malachi 3:17, Matthew 15:32–38, Mark 6:34–44, Galatians 6:2, Hebrews 10:32–34; Read Ellen G. White, “Be Sympathetic to All Men,” p. 189, and “Thoughtful of Others,” p. 193, in *My Life Today*; “The Privilege of Prayer,” p. 100, in *Steps to Christ*; “This Is Pure Religion” and “The Parable of the Good Samaritan,” chapters 4 and 5, in *Welfare Ministry*.

A few families with their small children got together during a holiday and made packages of food and toiletries to give out to the many homeless in their city. After working for a few hours, they got into their cars, went to the city center, and, in about a half hour, distributed the goods. They then went off to a museum and, afterward, out to dinner. As they were walking back to the cars, one of them said, “I’m glad we did this. But do you realize that by now most of those whom we fed are probably hungry again?”

No question, there are so many people out there who need comfort, sympathy, and help that it can seem overwhelming, almost to the point where one could think: *What’s the sense of doing anything? We can barely make a dent!* Numerous problems exist with that line of thinking, however. First, if everyone thought that way, no one would help anyone, and the needs, as terrible as they are, would be even worse. On the other hand, if everyone who could help others would, then the needs, as terrible as they are, wouldn’t be as bad. Second, we have never been told in the Bible that human pain, suffering, and evil would be eliminated this side of heaven. In fact, we have been told the opposite. Even Jesus, when here, didn’t end all human suffering. He did what He could. We are to do the same: bring comfort, sympathy, and help to those whom we can.

Discussion Questions:

- ① How can your church be made into a safe, healing place for the brokenhearted?
- ② Discuss in class the following quote: “Many wonder why God doesn’t act. God wonders why so many of His people don’t care.” —Dwight Nelson, *Pursuing the Passion of Jesus* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2005). Do you even agree with the premise of the challenge? If so, what can we do to change?
- ③ Look at this quote from Ellen G. White: “Kindly words simply spoken, little attentions simply bestowed, will sweep away the clouds of temptation and doubt that gather over the soul. The true heart expression of Christlike sympathy, given in simplicity, has power to open the door of hearts that need the simple, delicate touch of the Spirit of Christ.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 30. What should this tell us about the incredible power for good that kindness and sympathy can have as we reach out to help the grieving?