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## **What to Say When You Don't Know What to Say**

Many of us recall being asked in Sunday school what the shortest verse in the Bible is. Do you remember the answer? It is "Jesus wept." The verse occurs in John's Gospel when Jesus has gone to visit his friends, Lazarus, Martha and Mary. When he arrives he finds that Lazarus has died and his sisters are distraught. Maybe those tears, as Jesus' uncomplicated, honest expression of grief, can be a model for us when we encounter grieving friends and don't know what to do or what to say.

What do you say to friends who have suffered a loss? What should we say to a co-worker or relative whose life has been touched by death? There are several standard responses typically offered by well-meaning folks at such moments. Three of them are, first: "Your loved one is better off now because he/she is with God." Second: "God never gives you more than you can handle." And third: "I know how you feel." Let's take these one at a time and consider whether or not these are helpful to say when you don't know what to say.

First: "Your loved one is better off now because he/she is with God." While the beloved promises of faith that assure us about eternity lend comfort about the well-being of the one who has died, we should be careful not to forget the ones left behind. Deeply grieving family members who hear this promise of assurance might well reply, "Yes, but what about me? I'm not better off!" Time for assurances about God's eternal care can come when the grieving person is ready to hear them. But a more helpful initial response might be, "I know you are hurting and I wish I could take your hurt away. Is there anything I can say or do to help you?"

Second: "God never gives you more than you can handle." Actually, when the Apostle Paul wrote words similar to these, he was writing to the whole church. And so he meant that *together* faithful people could handle anything. Truly, there are situations in life that are overwhelming for individuals. Grief is such a time, and many cannot go it alone then. When someone we care for is grieving and feels unable to go on without the assistance of others, perhaps a caring response to that person might be: "This must seem like more than you can bear by yourself. I want to be with you to help carry the load."

And finally, a standard line offered to someone who is grieving is: "I know just how you feel." The truth is, we can never know precisely how another person feels. We can only guess. We can only, out of love for the

one who grieves, empathize and imagine the pain he or she feels. And so a more respectful comment than, “I know how you feel,” might be “I realize I cannot know how you feel, but I want you to know that I hurt because you hurt.”

As author Eric Linn has said, “Blessed are those that hear with their hearts, not with their minds. Blessed are those who admit their uneasiness and set it aside for love. Blessed are those who know the worth of an individual and do not pretend that they can be replaced or forgotten. Most of all, blessed are those who continue to call, continue to visit, continue to reach out when the crowd has dwindled and the wounded are left standing alone.”

And remember, if all else fails you, and you don't know what to say, the Bible's shortest verse offers us a picture of compassion stronger than words could ever convey: “Jesus wept.”