

“Sitting with the Unanswered Question ”
by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
Third in a series about Grief

Job 1-2 (selections)

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Job arose, tore his clothes, shaved his head, fell to the ground, and worshipped. He said: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb; naked I will return. The Lord has given; the Lord has taken; bless the Lord’s name.”

In all this, Job didn’t sin or blame God. [...]

The Adversary . . . struck Job with severe sores from the sole of his foot to the top of his head. Job took a piece of broken pottery to scratch himself and sat down on a mound of ashes. [...]

When Job’s three friends heard about all this disaster that had happened to him, they came, each one from his home – Eliphaz from Teman, Bildad from Shuah, and Zophar from Naamah. They agreed to come so they could console and comfort him.

When they looked up from a distance and didn’t recognize him, they wept loudly. Each one tore his garment and scattered dust above his head toward the sky. They sat with Job on the ground seven days and seven nights, not speaking a word to him, for they saw that he was in excruciating pain.

Afterward, Job spoke up and cursed the day he was born.

Job 1.20-22; 2.7-8; 2.11-3.1
(Common English Bible)

What might we say to someone who is grieving?

Today is our third and final time looking at this, at least for now. So far, I’ve suggested we say things to express our sorrow and allow the other to grieve. Hiding grief does not help. Nor can we make it “less” by finding thin linings of light to a cloud that is impenetrably and inescapably dark.

This time, I want to think about words like these. Do they sound familiar?

“There is a reason for everything”

“She finished what she was here to do and it was her time to go.”

“God wanted another angel.”

“God needed him in heaven.”

“God will only give us what we can bear.”

II

Before I unpack these, here's a tool that might help. Especially when we ourselves are feeling our own sense of loss. Let's call it the "Kvetching Ring." (Kvetching is Yiddish for complaining.)¹

Draw a circle at the centre. This is for the person most affected. They might have an illness, or major upset, or are dying or bereaved.

Now draw a larger circle around the first one. That's for those next closest to the trauma, such as a spouse.

Draw more rings outward as you need to. In each put the next closest people. Parents and children before more distant relatives. Close friends in smaller rings, other friends in larger ones.

Here are the rules. The person in the center ring can say anything she wants to anyone, anywhere. She can complain, whine, moan, and cry out to God.

Everyone else can say those things too, but only to people in larger rings.

When you are talking to a person in a ring smaller than yours, someone closer to the center of the crisis, your job is to listen. If you speak, what can you say to bring comfort or support? Like "I'm sorry" or "This must really be hard for you" or "Can I bring you a pot roast?" Don't say, "You should hear what happened to me" or "Here's what I would do if I were you." Or, "This is really bringing me down."

You can scream, cry and complain. You can say how upset you are, or how bad you feel, or how this reminds of you of bad things you've been through. That's fine. Just do it with someone in rings farther from the centre than you are.

Comfort moves in. Dumping flows out.

III

We just the Scripture from the ancient wisdom book of Job. This man is a wretched calamity of suffering. His dear friends come to him. For seven days they sit with him, on a pile of ashes. They listen to Job. Then, they start talking. "You wonder why this is

¹ Susan Silk and Barry Goldman, "How Not to Say the Wrong Thing" Los Angeles Times (April 7, 2013). www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-0407-silk-ring-theory-20130407-story.html

happening, Job. We have the answer!"

Death assaults our trust. Is the universe fair? Does life have meaning? Is God good?

So we reach for something to make sense of death, and God. But does what we grab, hold up?

"There is a reason for everything"

Is there?

"She finished what she was here to do and it was her time to go."

Are our lives big "to do" lists, or clocks winding down?

"God wanted another angel."

Sorry, God's messenger-angels are not dead people.

"God needed him in heaven."

But we needed him here!

"God will only give us what we can bear."

Does God pile on burdens until we are ready to break? If I could bear less, would I suffer less?

IV

Again, Nicholas Wolterstorff teaches me. He is smart, a world-class philosopher. He suffers from the death of his son, Eric, in a mountain-climbing accident. He wrestles within the embrace of his Christian faith.

Nick looks at these common answers that claim God is using Death, and will have none of it.

I find this pious attitude deaf to the message of the Christian gospel. Death is here understood as a normal instrument of God's dealing with us. "You there have lived out the years I've planned for you, so I'll just shake the mountain a bit. All of you there, I'll

send some starlings into the engine of your plane. And as for you there, a stroke while running will do nicely.”

The Bible speaks instead of God’s overcoming death. Paul calls it the last great enemy to be overcome. God is appalled by death. My pain over my son’s death is shared by [God’s] pain over my son’s death. And, yes, I share in [God’s] pain over his son’s death.²

Death is not a tool God uses, but a foe whom God defeats.

V

But when? How?

Death’s grip seems unbreakable. Death’s march continues, uninterrupted.

God?

Wolterstorff confesses:

I have no explanation. I can do nothing else than endure in the face of this deepest and most painful of mysteries. I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and resurrector of Jesus Christ. I also believe that my son’s life was cut off in its prime. I cannot fit these pieces together. . . . To the most agonizing question I have ever asked I do not know the answer. I do not know why God would watch him fall. I do not know why God would watch me wounded. I cannot even guess.

I am not angry but baffled and hurt. My wound is an unanswered question. The wounds of all humanity are an unanswered question.³

Nick sits with the question, the unanswered question.

VI

He doesn’t sit alone, however.

Today, “Reign of Christ Sunday,” we celebrate Jesus’ generous rule, which allows all things to flourish. We celebrate his victory over the powers of Evil, including its potent weapon, Death.

² Nicholas Wolterstorff, Lament for a Son (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 66.

³ Wolterstorff, 67.

But a strange victory it is. A victory which, at times, frustrates me, leaving me bewildered.

For Jesus ascended to his throne only as he was hoisted onto his cross. Victory through Death? Strange. Bewildering.

Jesus broke Death's power and danced out of the tomb. Yet those to whom he came and still comes, still died and still die. Some viciously: tortured, executed, martyred. Many more in more mundane ways. Still, all died. All of us, and all whom we know, will die.

What sort of victory, then, is Jesus'?

Foolishness? Perhaps. Pious hopes, as empty as they might be comforting? Perhaps.

Or, the strange power of God.

If I could know the reason and have the answer, would I grieve less? Would I miss them less? Would I ache less? I'd still suffer, still ache, still miss them terribly.

Still, I reach for the reason, seeking the answer. I grope past the many answers that have been offered to me – offered out of love and care – but which miss the point, let alone the truth. I reach farther, grasping and straining. I never stop.

Yet not because I only find empty nothingness. Rather, I touch hints of the Weighty Fullness, Who is far beyond my hands', heart's and head's capacity to hold.

God sits with me. Silent. Might God with us be enough? At least, for now?

VII

For seven days, Job's friends did a great job. They sat with their friend and grieved with him. They listened to his struggle, his pain. They let him dump out.

Then they dumped in their answers. They proclaimed solutions to Job's cries. That's where they went wrong.

At the end the book, God shows up. Job, who has cried out to God, despaired of hope, struggled mightly, receives God's praise. God, it seems, honours the struggle and blesses those who keep hungering and thirsting.

But the friends, who gave all the answers, God admonishes. "*You haven't spoken about*

me correctly as did my servant Job.”

Grief is chaotically, terribly messy.

So what can I say to someone in their grief? Let me finish with Nick Wolterstorff again.

Your words don't have to be wise. The heart that speaks is heard more than the words spoken. And if you can't think of anything at all to say, just say, "I can't think of anything to say. But I want you to know that we are with you in your grief."

. . . Not even the best of words can take away the pain. What words can do is testify that there is more than pain in our journey on earth to a new day. Of those things that are more, the greatest is love. Express your love.⁴

⁴ Wolterstorff, 34.