

“That Was Awkward”
Job 2:11-13
Series: The Rest of the Story
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- There are a lot of awkward moments in life.
- You say to a woman, “Congratulations! When’s your due date?” and she’s not pregnant.
 - You give a really friendly wave to someone and they don’t know you.
 - You complain about your boss in an email, hit send and it accidentally goes to your entire company.
 - The person you are talking about behind their back is behind your back.
 - You are telling a joke, the room is entirely quiet, everyone is listening and you forget the punchline.
 - Someone says they are going to a funeral and at the end of the conversation you automatically unthinkingly say, “Have a good time.”

Funerals are especially difficult times. You go through the receiving line and you feel the pressure to say something profound. But what often comes out is awkward. We mean well. We don’t intend to harm or hurt those who suffer or grieve. It’s just awkward:

- “What did you do to deserve this?” Why do you think I did something to deserve it?
- “I know how you feel.” No one ever knows how another feels.
- “God must have needed her up in heaven.” But I need her here on earth.
- “At least he is not suffering now.” Yes, but I still miss him.
- “God did this for a reason.” I can’t see any reason for this.
- “Where is God in this?”
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That is the ultimate question – the one that shakes faith to its foundation. This awkward question is at least as old as the book of Job. In the first two chapters we watch wave upon wave of calamity crashed down upon Job. He loses his property, family, and health. At first he stands firm against these onslaughts and does not lose his faith in God.

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.” In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing. (Job 1:21-22)

Yet if anyone talks of “the patience of Job” they haven’t read past chapter 2. From chapters 3 to 37 Job cries out to God with bitter complaints. He curses the day he was born and begs for death so this will all be over. He wants to plead his case before God. He even tries to put God on trial.

“Even today my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning. If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say to me. (Job 23:1-5)

Who can blame Job? We all have those questions we want to ask God when we get to heaven. When your suffering is as severe as Job’s, those questions and complaints multiply like flies.

Now this is where it gets awkward. Job’s friends don’t know what to say. They don’t know the mind of God or plans of the Lord. Yet they feel compelled to speak, to explain, to justify and defend God. Maybe they think, as we often do, that giving an explanation will give comfort, ease suffering, help Job to think positively. So, perhaps with good intentions, they say the most awkward things – the words no one should say: they blame Job. Bildad says:

When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin. But if you will seek God earnestly and plead with the Almighty, if you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself on your behalf and restore you to your prosperous state. (Job 8:4-6)

Over and over, throughout the book of Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar reason that Job’s suffering is the evidence that he and his family have sinned against God. This was a common belief in the ancient world. Since God is just and fair, the righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished. Thus, no matter how righteous Job appears, his suffering proves otherwise. And this is supposed to comfort him. Eliphaz replies to Job,

“Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it. At the breath of God they perish; at the blast of his anger they are no more. (Job 4:7-9)

‘And that includes you Job.’ That is not just awkward. It’s awful. These “friends” pour salt on his wounds.

Why do we say awkward or awful things when our real desire is to offer comfort? Maybe because we’ve been trained to solve problems with explanations. Stumped by a math equation? Hear a strange noise under the hood? Trying to halt global climate change? Reason works really well on those. More information, more technology, more formulas will fix these problems. Yet there are many pains in your life and mine that reason can’t resolve and formulas can’t fix. Your marriage breaks up. Your child acts out. Disease invades. Disaster strikes. You lose your job. You lose your beloved. When these arise, we desperately search for a rational explanation. ‘What did I do wrong?’ ‘Why is God punishing me?’ ‘Is this a test?’ ‘There must be a higher purpose to all of this.’ If these thoughts are not in our minds they may often be found on the lips of those around us. They may also add, “It’s not that bad. Cheer up. It could be worse. Think positively.”

We feel awkward so we want to fix the problem and make it go away. Yet these are those moments when reason and mere words do not work. They only make it more awkward.

Job knows that suffering is not handed out fairly. The wicked prosper while the innocent are abused. Job cries out:

Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power? They see their children established around them, their offspring before their eyes. Their homes are safe and free from fear; the rod of God is not on them...They send forth their children as a flock; their little ones dance about...They spend their years in prosperity and go down to the grave in peace. Yet they say to God, 'Leave us alone! We have no desire to know your ways. Who is the Almighty, that we should serve him? What would we gain by praying to him?' (Job 21:7-9,11,13-15)

Job teaches us a few lessons about suffering and pain. **Evil stalks the earth.** In the very first chapters Satan says he has come "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it" (Job 1:7). **Evil is not rational.** There is no easy explanation. Suffering is not a sign of God's punishment. When Dylann Roof pulled out a .45 caliber hand gun and killed nine members of a Bible study in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church that was not a sign of God's punishment. That was a work of evil pure and simple. Evil always defies explanation. **Evil is permitted by God.** The Lord allowed Satan to take everything from Job. From the Garden of Eden onward, we have seen in The Story how God allows humanity and even His chosen people Israel to refuse, rebel and reject him. Like a parent with a wayward child, God gives us the freedom to turn our back on Him, to turn toward evil. Yet there are two more points I want to mention: **God is with us in the evil** and in the end **God will pay the price for our suffering and evil.** We'll look more at those next Sunday in our last message on Job.

For now, what can we do for those who are suffering or mourning? Job has had enough of his friends' awkward words.

I have heard many things like these; you are miserable comforters, all of you! Will your long-winded speeches never end? What ails you that you keep on arguing? I also could speak like you, if you were in my place; I could make fine speeches against you and shake my head at you. (Job 16:1-4)

What can we do for a friend or loved one who is suffering like Job? Believe it or not, the answer comes from Job's three friends. When they find Job sitting alone among mounds of ash, scraping the painful sores that speckle his skin, they are shocked. They cannot believe it is the same man who once was prosperous, pious and the picture of health.

When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and

seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was. (Job 2:11-13)

In these opening verses Job's three friends do a number of wise and helpful things for their grieving friend.

They **Stay With Him**. Job's friends clear their schedules, travel great distances, and commit to sit beside Job in his grief. They even symbolically enter into Job's sorrow by tearing their clothes and sprinkling their heads with dust. To simply stay with someone in the darkness of grief feels useless, yet it is often the greatest gift we can give. Suffering is a lonely journey. Words cannot change the situation. They often cannot stop suffering. They can never bring the person back. Yet to stay with a friend, to willingly walk with them through the valley of the shadow of death tells them they are not alone, they do not have to bear this grief alone. I often hear from members of the Woodside family how much they appreciated the presence of others who visited them, sat with them, shared meals with them, and stayed with them while they mourned.

Job's friends also **Weep With Him**. Tears are the evidence that a sliver of another's pain has wounded you. We can never fully enter into another's sorrow. Nor is it helpful. I once heard a wise description of the difference between apathy, sympathy and empathy. When a person is deep in the pit of despair, apathy is standing on the bank and watching. Sympathy involves getting down in the pit so deeply you lose your objectivity. In effect, you get stuck in their despair. It becomes hard to offer a way out. I have even witnessed a person become so involved in the pain of another that the grieving person begins comforting the comforter. Empathy opens one up to another's pain and, at the same time, keeps a foot on solid ground. This makes it possible to offer a helping hand. This is why the Apostle Paul tells believers to "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15). So be open to another's pain but not overwhelmed by it.

Third, Job's friends are **Patient With Him**. They spend seven silent days and nights with him. They did not rush Job through his grief. Very often, someone in grief feels pressure to finish grieving and get on with life. This may come from friends. I also hear those who mourn say, "I should be over this by now." Grief doesn't work that way. There is no timetable. It rises and falls in waves. In one sense we are never the same. Grief really begins after the funeral is over, family members leave, friends get back to their schedules and you are left alone. Friends don't mention the deceased for fear it will cause tears. The one going through grief is afraid to talk for fear they will sound like a broken record that no one wants to hear. When someone says to me, "Why am I still crying? Why is this still raw?" I often reply, "Be gentle with yourself. Give yourself time. Your heart is broken. All wounds take time and patience to heal."

Finally, they **Listen To Him**. At least at first. The friends do not say a word until Job speaks. Unfortunately, the minute they open their mouths everything goes downhill. Simply stated, good listening involves questions not answers. It puts the focus on the one who is suffering. "How are you today?" "How can I help?" "What is troubling you?" When I meet with a family to prepare for a memorial service I usually ask just one

question, "Tell me about your loved one. What was he/she like?" Then I just listen. Even if I've known the people for twenty years, I discover something new...and often so do the family members. This simple question releases all kinds of emotion: sadness, tears, anger and even laughter. I don't have any answers for them. But I gently try to lead them to the One who is the Answer – Jesus.

Nancy Guthrie walked up to a cosmetics counter and asked the salesgirl, "Will this mascara run down my face when I cry?" The girl behind the counter assured her it wouldn't and then asked with a laugh in her voice, "Are you going to be crying?" "Yes," Nancy answered. "I am." Nancy's six-month-old daughter Hope had just died. In her book, *Holding onto Hope: Drawn by Suffering to the Heart of God* she recalls,

We had Hope for 199 days. We loved her. We enjoyed her richly and shared her with everyone we could. We held her during her seizures. Then we let her go. The day after we buried Hope, my husband said to me, "You know, I think we expected our faith to make this hurt less, but it doesn't. Our faith gave us an incredible amount of strength and encouragement while we had Hope, and we are comforted by the knowledge that she is in heaven. Our faith keeps us from being swallowed by despair. But I don't think it makes our loss hurt any less."

It is only natural that people around me often ask searchingly, "How are you?" And for much of the first year after Hope's death, my answer was, "I'm deeply and profoundly sad." I've been blessed with many people who have been willing to share my sorrow, to just be sad with me. Others, however, seem to want to rush me through my sadness. They want to fix me. But I lost someone I loved dearly, and I'm sad.

Ours is not a culture that is comfortable with sadness. Sadness is awkward. It is unsettling. It ebbs and flows and takes its own shape. It beckons to be shared. It comes out in tears, and we don't quite know what to do with those tears. Many people are afraid to bring up my loss. They don't want to upset me. But my tears are the only way I have to release the deep sorrow I feel. I tell people, "Don't worry about crying in front of me, and don't be afraid that you will make me cry! Your tears tell me you care, and my tears tell you that you've touched me in a place that is meaningful to me and I will never forget your willingness to share my grief."¹

Is there someone you know who has lost hope?

First, be with them. It will be a gift that is beyond words.

¹ Nancy Guthrie, *Holding onto Hope: Drawn by Suffering to the Heart of God* (Tyndale House, 2002), 9-11