

Rediscovering the Story of the Old Testament – Session 2 Lesson 8

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Main Idea

Yahweh suffers with us more than we know, even from the violence He permits.

Exercise

Why does suffering seem to be a part what it means to love someone?

Core questions

- How do our emotions flow out of the emotions God experiences?
- How is love linked to our suffering?
- Why does our suffering lead to God's violence?

Suffering and the Violence of Yahweh

Yahweh wanted creatures in His image, creatures that He could have a **loving** relationship with, creatures that would be able to **freely choose** to be in that relationship and to be able to freely **respond** with love. To be in a loving relationship these creatures would require two characteristics:

1. To be people that are in **relationships** requires **non-rational** emotions. Relationships require non-preprogrammed responses between one person and another.
2. To be people that can love requires the **freedom** to choose to **love** or not love, that is the freedom to choose to freely **give** of oneself to another. The corollary of that, is that the ability to love requires the freedom to choose to not love.

Even for Yahweh, the choice to be in relationship is a choice to be **vulnerable**, to be open to being received or **rejected**. So when these creatures chose to not love, to **rebel** against his love, Yahweh **suffered** the **pain** of rejection. Despite that, Yahweh still chose to stay with His plan and chose to create a pathway by which these creatures could be **restored** to a loving relationship with Him.

The rebellion also meant that they would **suffer**. In their vulnerability, they experienced the **pain** of **broken** relationships with each other and with Yahweh. The brokenness caused them to suffer **shame** for **violating** those relationships. And yet, Yahweh still chose to **love** – even though their suffering caused His suffering as well.

For Yahweh to continue pursue a **loving** relationship with creatures in rebellion, meant that He could not retract the **freedom** that would **enable** them to love. But that would also mean that until the loving relationship is **restored**, those broken creatures would continue their rebellious ways, causing continual **pain**, rejection and **suffering**, both for themselves and for Yahweh.

In the Presence of Mystery

Often, as we strive to **understand** suffering, we seek knowledge - to know the **why** of suffering. But in seeking the “why,” we face a **mystery**. We look at each situation of suffering and ask why now, why this person, and why in this circumstance. And if sometimes we think we have an answer, we have to deal with the fact that there is **always much** we don’t know.

We need **wisdom** to understand not just the **mystery** of suffering but the mystery that is God. In the end, we discover that what we need most is not an answer but a **person**. As we contemplate the mystery of suffering, we should not rest in opinions or dogma but humbly accept that just as

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there are answers we may only know in part, that we can know the One who knows the answers. Even then we can only partly know the One who Himself will always partly be a Mystery. We need to see imprint of God on creation and in his creatures. We need to learn to know God Himself more than we need to seek knowledge about God.

- Just as in the Japanese art form, Kintsugi, when broken pottery is made more precious by being fixed with a lacquer of gold, silver or platinum, it is after we suffer and are broken, that God's healing touch can make us more precious than we were before.
- Many times, the Hebrew word for good, tov refers to things that fulfill their purpose. Rather than self-centeredly thinking that something is good if it is pleasing to us, we should think for God's viewpoint if something is fulfilling its purpose.
- Instead of simply doing what He knows is best, Yahweh obliges Himself to listen and respond to us as imperfect as our prayers might be.
- Yahweh has chosen to restrain His power, at times limiting His power to the will of His vice-regents and at times accepting those options that are carried out by His vice-regents.
- Reflecting the Trinity, our identity reflects both our individual personhood and the community of all who belong to the Trinity, and both our physical nature and our spiritual nature. It means that we do not suffer alone and that we also suffer with the suffering of others.

The Pathos of Yahweh

We fully reflect the image of Yahweh in our ability to choose to love or not love and in our ability to experience emotions, not just the positive emotions but also the unpleasant emotions such as jealousy, emotional pain, and anger. We differ from Yahweh in that sometimes our emotions control us but Yahweh's emotions are always under control.

- When we feel that Yahweh has forsaken us. It is not that Yahweh has forgotten us or is no longer compassionate or gracious or is no longer around, but Yahweh is limiting his response to allow for human freedom to be fully expressed.
- Yahweh suffers when we suffer, even when our suffering is caused directly because of our rebellion and he uses our suffering to bring us back to Him.
- Because we are made in the image of Yahweh, His attributes are reflected in our attributes. We have emotions because Yahweh has emotions.
- Although it sounds a little strange to our ears, Jesus is the Son of Yahweh. This means that we cannot separate the activity of Yahweh from the activity of Jesus.
- No mystery is greater than how the One who exists outside of creation and from before time, encumbered himself in a human body and while in that human body, suffered being rejected, despised, persecuted, spit upon, and tortured to death; enduring all this treatment by the very people He came to offer forgiveness to and restore to Himself.
- In a remarkable statement, we are told that "he learned obedience from what he suffered."

Completeness in Suffering

As we explore different aspects of our own suffering, we can know that whatever the circumstances, Yahweh suffers with us.

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- The hope that the Christian has is that no matter the circumstance, Yahweh is able to use whatever bad or difficult circumstance we experience, transforming it into something that can work for the good of the believer.
- Just as for Jesus who suffered before He received His glory, our sufferings and wounds are not meaningless but will precede our glory.
- In the same way that Jesus became complete through His suffering, we also can become complete through our suffering. Yahweh can redeem our suffering and direct it for our benefit or for the benefit of those around us. (Rom 8:28).
- It is through suffering that we can grow in faith and maturity, become transformed more into the likeness of the One we desire to follow.
- We are called into the community of Christ, to be in communion and fellowship with all His followers, to share in their sufferings and to weep with those who weep. Within that fellowship we can become transformed, to become more like Christ in this life, that in this life we weep with those who weep so that in the next life we can rejoice with those who rejoice.
- Throughout history the church has served the poor and sick, rescued people from the streets and established hospitals.
- What in the world's eyes seems broken, is part of tapestry of great beauty; that Yahweh can take our brokenness and mend us, transforming us more into His image.
- It is easy for us to think of that suffering as a distraction, but it is through those means that Yahweh can grab our attention.
- When Yahweh allows difficult things happen in life, it is not to punish us but to draw us to himself.
- Our strength comes through our weakness and suffering which makes us dependent on Jesus, who is then free to show His power without our mistaking His power for ours.
- The suffering and persecution of the is not a sign of Yahweh's displeasure, but a sign of their identity in Christ, that as we become more like Christ then they suffer like Him.
- When we are in comfortable circumstances, we can question how strong our faith truly is. Our faith can be tested and strengthened when we find ourselves in circumstances where we run out of our own resources and need to depend on Yahweh.
- In a Central American prison women responded to the story of Hagar (Genesis 16), a woman who found that Yahweh had seen her in the midst of her suffering.

The Strange Work of Yahweh¹

Exodus 34:5-7 ⁵ Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. ⁶ And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”

People sometimes misunderstand Exodus 34:5-7, focusing on the perception that the God of the Old Testament is a violent God compared to the New Testament. But notice that the verse is mostly focused on things like love and mercy. The last part of the verse is actually talking about

¹ Isaiah 28:21

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the repercussions of sins that carry through from one generation to the next. In the meantime, the verse balances that with the mercy shown to thousands. And then elsewhere, God expresses the desire that all people will turn from their sinful ways and turn back to him because He desires to have a relationship with all people in which love is given and received.

Yahweh suffers when we experience injustice, and He responds in anger as he seeks justice for us. His anger is not a part of his character but is a response to the injustice we suffer.

The God portrayed in the Old Testament is not different from that in the New Testament. Even Jesus did not totally avoid violence.

It is for love that we were created in Yahweh's image, that Yahweh suffers with us in our suffering, that causes Yahweh's anger when our suffering is due to injustice and causes Yahweh to invoke violence.

Reframing Yahweh's violence: A case study, the conquest of Canaan

Israel's conquest of Canaan brings up a variety of issues associated with Yahweh's approval of and initiation of violence. Studying this conquest provides an opportunity to study the various issues dealing with the violence we attribute to Yahweh.

The Bible is not a universal moral rule book, nor a book of genocide. The sparse language of the Old Testament hides the fact that it is sophisticated literature. The narrative contains history of real people and real events, but it is not presented in the fashion of modern history books. It is first and foremost a theological text intended to draw us to the person and the work of Yahweh.

One aspect is that the Conquest narrative is a recapitulation of creation.²

Creation narrative	Exodus/Conquest narrative
Separating the waters so that dry land could appear	Crossing the Red Sea
Order is imposed on the waters of chaos. (In the ANE narrative, the great sea serpent is vanquished.)	Army of Pharaoh being destroyed. The Canaanites are chaos creatures.
Provide a place where God can dwell with humanity	Israel can “rest” in the land
Eden as a place where God dwells with his people	Canaan as a place where God dwells with his people
Angel guarding the way into the garden	Angel guarding the way into Canaan
In Adam's deep sleep (<i>tardemah</i>), he had a vision of a woman being created from his side to serve with him in extending God's kingdom into the world	In Abraham's deep sleep (<i>tardemah</i>), he had a vision of his descendants being freed from slavery and extending God's kingdom into the world

²John Walton, *Material or Function in Genesis 1? John Walton Responds*; Charles Russell, *Dancing in the Kingdom*, p. 64

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Yahweh's violence questioned	
Point	Counterpoint
Israel suffered during siege of Babylon	if Israel and Judah had been obedient from the beginning, Yahweh would not have brought in the Assyrians and the Babylonians
Israel told to “totally destroy” (<i>herem</i>) Canaan	by the time the era of Judges arrives, there are still many Canaanites around that God intended to remain in order to bother the Israelites
Yahweh's agents to bring justice used excessive violence	When Yahweh's agents exceeded their authority, they also experienced justice
Innocent people suffer in war	Yahweh gives warnings to repent. Parents are Yahweh's vice-regents over their children. Yahweh's violence ultimately reduces ongoing suffering. Death is not the end and Yahweh will do what is right.
Verses like Ex 20:4-6 which speak of Yahweh's “punishing” children to 3 rd and 4 th generation	“paqad” is best translated as “visiting” the children to further generations which typically experience the aftereffects of parental sins. In the meanwhile, Yahweh is merciful to the thousands who love him.

Lament: Holding grief and hope during suffering

The Bible is filled with lament. We see time and time again that when the God's people are faced with evil, injustice, oppression and turmoil, the Biblical response is often lament. Sometimes the lament is focused on us, sometimes it is focused on others.

(2 Chronicles 35:25; 2 Samuel 1:17-27; Psalm 10:1-4; 13:1-4; 102:1-2; Jeremiah 4:8; 7:29; Lamentations 7:29; 2:5; Micah 2:4; Esther 4:1; Matthew 2:16-18; John 11:31-33; Acts 8:2)

- In the midst of suffering, when we feel like God has abandoned us, we need to look to the cross. Jesus does understand our suffering, and there are things we don't suffer because He suffered for us.
- Lament recognizes that beyond the suffering and woundedness of current circumstances is Yahweh who hears our prayers and who offers peace.
- We should not ignore the reality of the pain that we and others are feeling. Yahweh feels the suffering, too, and endures that pain along with us and offers us the comfort of His presence.
- In our lament we can pray most fully “thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” Our pain makes us most aware of our needs, that the world is not as it should be, that we wait for the Lord's return and for everything to be made whole.
- Until we and the earth are transformed, the cause of lament, our sin, runs through each of us. Our lament should be shaped by the suffering that we and others have contributed

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to that suffering, but a lament that leads to hope and the ultimate joy we will fully experience in His presence when we are no longer encumbered by sin.

Lament: Trust and Let Go

In Lament, we trust Yahweh. We trust that he knows our hearts. We trust that he forgives what we confess. We trust that he will respond to our needs.

In Lament, we let go of hiding; we recognize that Yahweh knows everything. He knows our thoughts before we speak them. In Lament, we let our voice freely and honestly speak what we feel and do not try to hopelessly hide behind “sugar-coated” words.

In Lament, we let go of our control. We do not control what Yahweh knows. We do not control what others do. We do not control our circumstances. We do not control our future or anyone else’s. We let go. We let God.

In Lament, we let go of our burdens. We do not hold on to our burdens but place our burdens in the arms of Yahweh and release them to his care. He holds our burdens, our emotions, our confidences, our suffering, our sins, our future,

After we open our hands and let go of our hiding, our control and our burdens, our hands are now free to hold onto the one we trust and who knows our heart, our needs and our future.

The Love that leads us to Lament and then will lead to Glory

Only by integrating the two Testaments that we can gain a fuller understanding of who God is and how we can better understand our part in Creation. We will still need to lean into mystery of God and how he has shaped us and will continue to shape us more into his image; a process that is sometimes difficult, but we are never alone. Yahweh has created us to be in relationship with Himself, a relationship of love and emotion.

In Deuteronomy 6:5 we are told to ahav Yahweh with all our heart and soul and strength. *Ahav* has many dimensions from the responsibility of husband to “provide for and protect” his family and neighbors to the spontaneous, pleasurable feeling of sexual love. It encompasses our body, emotions and mind, all of who we are. But the all-encompassing love we have is only a response to the all-surpassing love that Yahweh has for us. He loves us with all of His being. And so it is with the suffering that we endure; we endure our suffering together with the One who loves us and suffers along with us.

Much of our suffering is due to the sin and injustice we endure – and that invokes anger from the One who cares for us. Yahweh allows sin and injustice, because He does not want to take away the freedom He gave us so that we could truly love Him as He loves us. For that sake, He limits His responses. He cannot totally ban injustice without revoking the freedom that allows us to love.

This anger is not a primary attribute of Yahweh but is a response to the sin that causes injustice. If there was no sin, there would be no anger. It is only because of our rebellion that our freedom has led to the sin that causes injustice and violence – and leads to Yahweh’s anger. And it is from that anger, that Yahweh sometimes uses violence as a means to address the sin and violence in the world as a means to bring justice.

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Yahweh did not revoke our responsibility for the stewardship of His creation, and He uses humans to tools of His justice. But because of our rebellious nature, the humans used to bring about justice often go beyond what they should do and yet bring about more unnecessary violence and injustice. And the cycle goes on – and will go on until Jesus returns to fully establish His kingdom on earth.

In the meantime, our tragic situation leads us to lament. It is a lament we share with Yahweh, who laments with us. Our lament recognizes that sin runs through each of our hearts making us a part of the pain and suffering in the world. But our lament is not despair, because we still hold onto the hope that eventually all will be made right. And so our lament is directed to the One who laments with us and who will ultimately bring about justice and eliminate the sin, including the sin in our own hearts.

And that is the hope we cling to. The One who loves us clings to us. We suffer together, lament together, love together, hope together – and someday we will rejoice together when the glory of Yahweh will finally be revealed in all His glory. And part of that glory will be in how Yahweh has shaped us more closely in His image.