

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

## Contents

Main Idea.....	2
Exercise .....	2
Core questions.....	2
Suffering and the Violence of Yahweh.....	2
In the Presence of Mystery .....	3
The Pathos of Yahweh .....	3
Completeness in Suffering.....	4
The Strange Work of Yahweh .....	5
Reframing Yahweh’s violence: A case study, the conquest of Canaan .....	5
Lament: Holding grief and hope during suffering .....	7
Lament: Trust and Let Go.....	7
The Love that leads us to Lament and then will lead to Glory.....	7

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

## 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.

*[NOTE: This analysis does not agree with the theology of the “impassibility” of God, where we posit that because God is “immutable” (i.e., unchanging) then he cannot suffer or experience emotions. The supposed problem is that in order for God to be unchanging then He cannot experience emotions because that would cause Him to change. However, God is not like us. Emotions and suffering may control us, “cause” us to change our minds, but God is not controlled by his emotions. His character is still unchanging.]*

*In another point of theology, some assume that for God to be in total control such that He can know everything that will happen in the future, then he has to micro-control everything so that nothing is left to chance. I would posit that it better shows the power of God when He can still know and set the future without having to control every little detail.]*

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.

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

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 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.

Some will question how if God is all powerful and good, how can God allow so much suffering to go on. It is unbearable for us to look at not only the magnitude of suffering around us, but also how the innocent, even little children, suffer so much. This is a mystery which we cannot explain in an answer, but only in a person. God suffers with us and he will restore us.

### 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.

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

- 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.

- 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.

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

- 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 Yahweh<sup>1</sup>

*Exodus 34:5-7* <sup>5</sup> Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. <sup>6</sup> 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, <sup>7</sup> 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 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**.

---

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 28:21

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

One aspect is that the Conquest narrative is a recapitulation of creation.<sup>2</sup>

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

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 <sup>rd</sup> and 4 <sup>th</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> John Walton, *Material or Function in Genesis 1? John Walton Responds*: Charles Russell, *Dancing in the Kingdom*, p. 64

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

### 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 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

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

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**.

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 since we are the body of God and the fullness of God, God’s glory will be revealed in us.