

The Message of Israel's Poets and Writers
Reframing Life: A Faith Perspective
Job 1:6-22; 2:1-10

Intro: Today we introduce the "Reframing Life" series. We have completed the Message of Moses and the Message of Israel's Historians. We will spend five Sundays in the Poets and Writers. Then we will move on to the Major and Minor Prophets.

August 31 we will begin the NT Year of the Message.

The Book of Job has a place among the great literary works of history as well as the sacred canon of Scripture. It tells the story of a very good and successful man who loses his family, his wealth, and his health—the **biggest loser in the Bible**.

Some of you feel like losers. It's embarrassing, confusing and hurtful. You lost your wealth in a business venture wrecked by the Hurricane. You lost your family in a divorce that rocked your world. You lost your health to a disease that no one understands.

I think, if not already, we all get there finally, where we might as well have no wealth because we cannot enjoy it. All our close family and friends are gone--and our health. We nurse our wounds, embarrassed by our weakness—we who used to rule the world.

I. Acknowledge that Suffering is a Great Mystery

A. Accept the Mystery of Pain. Not all pain is equally frustrating. The pain of surgery is difficult, but we see where it can lead to our health. The pain of punishment is hard, but we can see that we deserve it. But the pain that seems undeserved, the pain that comes because we do the right thing—that pain is the most perplexing. And when we see inexplicable pain heaped upon someone who seems to be walking in the Spirit, living faithfully, that has the potential to discourage, confuse, and even enrage us.

Not all pain is surgical. Not all pain is punitive. Not all pain seems purposeful. Sometimes, often, we do not know why specific people suffer in specific ways. Live with this loose end.

B. Confess the Mystery of Pain. The Book of Job does not have a one-sentence answer for suffering, and we should not make one up. You simply cannot distill the problem of pain into a single noun and verb. If I had to give such a simplistic response to someone suffering I would simply say, "God knows."

We do best to avoid the clichés as does the Book of Job. You will not leave this house of worship today with a shorthand answer to the dilemma of your pain. You should not try to give a shorthand answer to someone who is in pain even if that answer works for you. It may not work for them to say, "Everything happens for a reason." You will not find that statement in the Book of Job. It is not a biblical response to pain.

***Eugene Peterson says that "Sufferers attracts fixers the way that roadkills attract vultures." Job's friends descend upon him in his pain, and the same will likely happen to you. If you think you have figured out philosophically or theologically why someone else is suffering, please do not be a fool. Keep your mouth shut.

C. Embrace the Mystery of Pain. Be glad you don't know, and you do not have to know. You are not required as a deacon or pastor to understand why people suffer. You don't even have to know

why you yourself suffer. It is a great relief to give up this dimension of omniscience and enjoy the mental rest and relaxation that lies beyond this debate with no answer. You can and should lay all of the questions upon the shoulders and heart of God.

II. Confess that God Alone Is Good.

A. God alone really knows good and evil.

1. The mystery of suffering is preceded by an even greater mystery, the mystery of good and bad, right and wrong.

***C.S. Lewis insists that the fundamental question is not the one concerning bad things happening to good people. Rather, it is the very existence of a moral law that poses the greatest question.

2. Why is there good and bad? Who knows what is good and bad? Why do all humans act as if they know this law exists?
3. Lewis argues that the existence of God finds its greatest philosophical proof in the existence of the moral law.

B. We want to eat, not from the Tree of Life, but from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This has been the human desire and temptation since the beginning.

The desire itself shows our pride of heart. We want to be like God, knowing Good and Evil, just as the Serpent suggests to the woman when he tempted her with the forbidden fruit.

We as humans do not have comprehensive knowledge of good and evil. What we must seek to know is God himself. The object of our desire must be God and God alone.

Job finds this out at the end of the book. He becomes fully aware that only God should receive glory and honor, that he alone knows the end from the beginning.

C. Jesus made this confession—God alone is good. He did it to counter another human who thought of himself as very good, a rich young ruler who wanted to have eternal life but suspected that he already was on the right track with his very good behavior.

So it should come easy to every follower of Jesus to insist that God alone is good.

***Rabbi Kushner wrote a book entitled “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.” I think Jesus would have objected to the title. It is okay to use the word “good” to describe people, but we should do it provisionally, realizing that no person is ultimately or completely good. Even Job, the most righteous man on earth, is forced by his own conscience to repent in dust and ashes before the Creator God who alone is truly good.

The Rabbi deals with the problem of undeserved suffering, that people who are decent and faithful experience terrible things.

III. Fold the Mystery of Suffering into the Mystery of God

- A. You cannot successfully get your arms around either the mystery of suffering or the mystery of God. If you treat these mysteries as equal, your misunderstanding of suffering will lead to a misunderstanding of God.

This is why the Book of Job reaches its climax in the rapid-fire questions of God from the whirlwind. When Job contemplates the mystery of God he knows this is the greatest mystery of all.

B. Be IN GOD when you are IN PAIN. “The Lord Gave, and the Lord has Taken Away; may the name of the Lord be praised” (Job 1:21). God and trouble come together. Don’t pull them apart.

1. When you are enjoying the presence of God, do not be startled or surprised by the trouble that comes your way.
2. When you are in trouble, start looking around for God. He is in the midst of your trouble somewhere. It may take a while to find him, just as it did Job in Job:23:3, “If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling!” And again in 23:8-9, “But if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him.”

C. Hold on to Your Integrity. Job’s wife was surprised that he was still “holding on” (Job 2:9). This is part of the puzzle.

1. Pain has a time factor. We pass through pain, just as Job was passing through unimaginable pain. But we do pass through it. The question is not about enduring pain without end. It is about enduring this time of pain however long it may be.
2. Pain has an intensity factor. You have seen the little charts that go from smile to frown. The nurse will ask, “Where are you on this chart?” “Holding on” is about intensity. If I turn a garden hose on you, you may not be torn from the tree you cling to. If I turn a fire hose on you, your grip may not hold.
3. Job’s wife identified the thing to which Job clung—integrity. The word “integrity” is the Hebrew *tummah*. It is sometimes translated “innocence” or “blamelessness.” It is from the root *tome* which means “completeness, fullness, wholeness, simplicity.” The idea a finish with completion and purpose.
4. To hold on to your integrity means that you hold on to the devotion to God which integrates all aspects of your life. Everything about you is defined by and connected by your loyalty to Christ. You find in the suffering of Christ God’s greatest answer to our pain—that he is with us and that he understands. You hold on to your integrity when you fold the mystery of your pain into the mystery of God, and you entrust him with all of it.

Conclusion: The perspective of Don Piper in his testimonial, 90 Minutes in Heaven, is instructive. Don tells about his death—or near death—and then goes on for 90 percent of the book to describe how he deals with the daily pain that is the permanent legacy of a terrible automobile accident that mangled his body.

Don saw heaven, and he didn’t want to come back to earth. And when he came back, his life was full of pain in a way that it had never been before. He fought depression for months. He wanted to kill himself.

Pain will do that to you if you are not vigilant. It will make you embrace death rather than life. It will take away from your loved ones mentally and emotionally.

Job’s wife abandoned faith in God. She felt that God needed to be cursed. She felt that death was better than life. She urged her husband to turn from his faith in God and die angry and resentful.

Hear Job’s insistence: *though he slay me, yet will I trust him* (Job 13:15). This is the only place to be in your pain—trusting the One who has brought you into being, who has saved you by his grace, and who keeps you in his care every day.