

Sermon Transcript from June 5th, 2016
How to Approach God in Pain & Suffering
Pastor Gerry Breshears, Reality San Francisco

[Dave Lomas]: We started a wisdom series last Sunday called "The School of Life," and the reason why we're calling it "The School of Life" is we think that the wisdom literature found in your Old Testament – right in the middle of your Old Testament – is really about how we're to live wisely in this world. How do we live life wisely? And so, we get almost like a symphony of different literature. So, you have Job, you have Proverbs, you have Ecclesiastes, you have the Song of Songs, and these are all to be taken together. So, we're going to be going through them. We're in Job now, and next week we'll do Proverbs and then Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs as you guys are reading it yourselves. This is really teaching us how to live a good life. How do we live a good life before God; a wise life before God? How do we flourish in our relationship, our walk and our life with God?

And I want to keep thinking about the book of Job this morning. It's one of the most complex and troubling books of the Bible. And even for a lot of Bible scholars that I read and know and theologians, it's the hardest book of the Bible and the most troubling book for them as well, and for good reason. The more that we wrestle with this book, the book of Job, as Peter Kreeft said, as we looked at a quote from him last week, he says this book is, for the rational person – and a lot of us, most of us here think more rationally than anything. We work for jobs where we work with numbers and when we put this number in, this algorithm in, this comes out. When you do that with Job, it doesn't work that way. When you do that with Job, something breaks in the system and the whole system shuts down and you're like, "What is wrong with this?"

But, as you meditate on Job and take Job in, Peter Kreeft says it's like iron in our blood. It adds iron to our very blood. It's good for us. One of the topics that comes up in the book of Job is the topic of evil, and not just the sheer existence of evil, because I think we all would agree that evil does exist. The fact that evil exists is not what Job argues. It's about the personal experience or the personal presence of evil. When evil comes to your front door and you experience injustice, when that happens, what do you do?

And what we find in this book in particular is that life is not a problem to be solved. Life is not a problem to be solved, but it's a mystery that we live in. Life is more like a love story than a detective story. It's a tragic comedy rather than a formula. And this might make you very uncomfortable, and the reason why it makes you uncomfortable is because, when the book of Job is taught, you're taught that you don't have as much control as you thought you had. And that's okay.

But, I want to wrestle with this book for one more week, and so I've invited my friend, Dr. Gerry Breshears, to come and give us his take on the book and his application of it. So, would you please welcome Dr. Gerry Breshears?

[Gerry Breshears]: Now, you notice Dave did say that I throw bombs in the room. What he didn't mention is he throws bombs in the room, too. Well, anyway, we have a great time. It's good to be here. That whole book of Job, how many of you have read it? How many of you have read the book of Job? Okay. So, you know the problem. What do you do when life just absolute turns over on top of you? What happens when everything you thought was set goes away? He loses everything. Family, livelihood, home, health. It's gone. What do you do in a situation like that?

It's just crazy. You come to the book, like Dave said, and you're expecting answers, and there aren't. There aren't. What in the world do you do with this? Well, I'll just say right up front: I hate the book. I hate it. I would tear it out, except I know God would whack me for doing that. But, it is a super super troubling book but, as I've wrestled with that for decades now, I'll just tell you right up front that I don't have answers. But, I've wrestled with it a lot. So, we'll do that here a bit briefly today.

So, I just want to stick some propositions up here. The first one here is this: his friends come and they presume the principle of the Lord is justice and conclude that he has sinned. It's pretty simple. Now, why did they do that? Well, you look at what's happened. There's a thing.

Job 2:7: **"Satan afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head."**

Now, you look at that in light of Deuteronomy 28:35, and here's what it says: **"The Lord**

will strike you on the knees and on the legs with grievous boils of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head."

Does that sound familiar? What his friends are doing is reading their Bible, Deuteronomy 28, the blessing and curse, they're looking at Job, they're applying Scripture and they're saying, "Well, it's simple. You're cursed of God. Change your ways and it'll all be good."

Now, it's a little more complex than that, but that's the heart of it. They are simple Biblicists, and "simple" is the wrong word. That's where it goes bad. Job comes and he says – he's still presuming God is just, and he concludes there's something wrong with the system, because he knows he's not wrong. He knows that he is not sinful, and he is defending his ways all the way through. When the people are saying, "You're a sinner, Job. Just repent and it'll be okay," He says, "I'm not. I'm not."

And then what he does is he demands. In this exquisite poetry, he is demanding, "God, You've got to show up. You've got to explain what's going on and, most of all, You have to vindicate my honor because I have been shamed. I am carrying a load of shame on my culture that's overwhelming. God?"

And there's no answer. There is no answer at all. Silence. Silence. Except from the friends. And the longer the silence, the louder Job's agony, because he is lamenting; he is screaming out his agony of loss of everything, and he's reacting strongly against the simple Bible guys. And his demands are very, very, very blatant. "You've got to show up, God. You've got to explain. And you've got to restore my honor. I can't bear the shame."

That's Job's thing. So, what He does is God shows up. In a hurricane. Cat 5 tornado. Not the kindly, compassionate Father. Oh, you're a good good Father, we sang before service. He does not show up the good good Father. He shows up as a storm that's going to tear everything up. And, in four exquisite chapters of questions, I think what God does is He shows that He has built a beautiful creation, a beautiful creation, and He built it. Not Job. God built it.

And then, secondly, and powerfully, I think, is He is saying that He is limiting the chaos. If you look right there, He puts boundaries. He puts doors on the sea, and sea is the symbol of the raging chaos that's a dangerous evil thing. And what He's saying is He's putting limits on chaos. Now, the chaos, of course, that Job is experiencing does not look like it has any limits at all. But, God is saying, "No. I put limits on it, and the moment that chaos is a behemoth and leviathan," – those strange monsters in chapters 40 and 41. And He's saying, "I limit that."

But, it seems to me the heart of that poetry, the heart of those ongoing, never ending questions is the third point, and that is this: He cares about.

He cares about the earth, He cares about the skies and all the animals. The beginning of chapter 39, I have come to love. Because God is there and He's saying, "God, you know, You care about the goats in Your coral because they're Your goats. Who cares about the goats up on the mountains? Who cares about the deer?"

An exquisite poetic question. He said, "When the deer is pregnant and goes into labor and feels the agony of labor of delivering this little fawn and it squats, who's there?" And the answer is, "I am." And He even cares about the jackass. It's in the Bible. He calls it a wild donkey, but we know what it is. It's a jackass. See, deer are kinda cute. Kinda cute. Wild donkeys are not. God cares. Now, some read it "God orchestrates everything." I don't think that's what He's saying. I think He's caring about.

But, He's absent. He's not caring about Job. Of course, that's part of the problem is, "Okay, am I not even up to a little deer up on the mountain kind of level?"

And that's the agony that Job is going through. Job's response in chapter 40 is, "You win God. I've got nothing to say. Chapter 40."

And God comes back to Him and sees there, in his silence with his hand over his mouth, he said, "You stand up and talk like a man. I will not accept you being a victim. You don't get to be the observer. You don't get to play the victim. Now, get up here and talk. You want to talk? I'm here. Get up and talk."

See, and I hear a lot of piety that's Job 40. "Silence, God, You do whatever You want. You're God, I'm not."

Now, that's true, but we don't get to play the victim before God. And a lot of the pieties that are preached are, "Sure, God. Whatever you want. It's all You. Go for it."

See, that's not the piety that God's looking for. The piety He's looking for is the humble, yes, but the respectful "no" protest. God demands that he stand up and talk, and in chapter 42, Job says it differently. He says, "You're God."

In Job 42:5, the heart of it there is, **"My ears had heard of you..."** – which is to say "I've read it in the Bible" – **"...but now my eyes have seen you."**

So, he who has been declared absolutely righteous by God and by his own thing, but mostly by God, is saying Job 42:6. And what does it say?

"Therefore I..." – what? Oh, sorry. Not yet. Not yet. That wasn't a thumb, that was a finger. What does he say at Job 42:6? I what? Despise myself. Now, here's the most righteous guy in the world, save Jesus maybe, and the height of piety is to see yourself as despicable? Are you kidding me? The man that God says fears God, is blameless, upright, shuns evil. The height of piety is to say, "I despise myself?" God wants me to see myself as despicable? I hate the verse. I hate the whole book, but I really hate this verse, because I just can't believe that God wants us to see ourselves as despicable, though a lot of people say that.

That when we come before God, we come with absolutely no righteousness of our own, only the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ. I said, "You know what? That's not what God is saying."

So, one of the things I do when I read the Bible in close studying is I read the Bible in different translations. This is NIV, and if you look at the ESV – another good translation – what does it say? Wrong answer. What's the problem? It's in the Bible. Well, I normally look at these two. NIV is a more meaning for meaning. ESV is more word for word. But, I also look at another word for word translation. What does this say? Any difference between "despise myself" and "retract?" They must not be in the same Bible. Huh.

Well, I also look at a Jewish translation. The Tanakh. What does it say? Do you see anything there? "I recant and relent." Not "repent," but "relent." Huh. So, that's a meaning for meaning and a word for word and another word for word and a Jewish translation. The other thing I look at is a Catholic translation. New Jerusalem Bible. I what? "I retract what I have said and repent in dust and ashes."

Okay. Something's going on. When good translations from different traditions have that much difference, something's going on. And that's why I read the Bible in close study in four different translations. Meaning for meaning, word for word (I'm using NIV and ESV), I read it in a Jewish translation if it's an Old Testament passage, and I read it in a Catholic translation. The New Jerusalem Bible or New American Bible are two. And then, if you read a foreign language, read it in a foreign language. I read Dutch, so I read it in Dutch. Dissertation. I mean, it's weird. Of course.

And what you see is what's going on. Now, then what you can do – if you can read Hebrew, that's great. If you can't, find a friend who can help you. And why don't you go back and you look in the Hebrew and the word "despise" there is kind of a complex word and there's no object for it.

So, the NIV and ESV follow the Septuagint. "I despise myself." It is in the despise, and what I think it's doing there is "I retract" or "I despise what I said." And that's where several of them go, and I think that's where it's going at. So, the best translation is the GEB translation. What's that? Gerry Everett Breshears translation. What can I say? Therefore, what? "I recant and relent, though still in dust and ashes."

Now, it turns out that D.J.A. Clines writes the article in the New Bible Commentary, which, by the way, if you're looking for a one volume Bible commentary, it's absolutely the way to go. New Bible Commentary. It's edited by Dick France and Don Carson and guys like that. I mean, it's really good. And D.J.A. Clines does the article on Job and it's really good. He takes the same view, and his thing is "I retract my demands." What are his demands? "You've got to show up, you've got to restore my honor. I've seen you, I retract my demands."

Though he's still scratching boils and his kids are still dead and his livelihood is still ruined. Nothing has been restored. Why is it that he can say, "I withdraw my demands?" I

withdraw my angry words?" And man, his stuff goes all over the place in his anger and lament and bitterness and pain and agony. Because he's seen God. So, even though he's still in dust and ashes, his kids are still dead, he's still in agony over whatever these boils are, he can say it's enough. "I don't need an explanation and I don't need my honor restored. I can live with the shame."

And what God does is restore his honor. the last of chapter 42 is God lavishes on him and removes his shame and never answers. Never answers. Leviathan. I think the serpent is in Isaiah 27.

"In that day, the Lord will punish with his word – his fierce, great and powerful sword – Leviathan the gliding serpent, Leviathan the coiling serpent."

I think that serpent is the serpent of Genesis 3. I think the Leviathan, it is a chaos monster in Canaanite mythology. That's true. But, I think the chaos monster of Canaanite mythology is actually pointing to the serpent of Satan in Genesis 3. And what does it say in Genesis 3? The Messiah says, "I'm at war with you. I'm going to bruise your head, I'm going to stomp your head, even as you're striking my heel and killing me."

He's declaring war with the serpent, and I think this war actually precedes creation. I think God is at war with the gods, these powerful spiritual beings, and I think that's what's happening here. So, John 8. Who's this talking about in John 8? Who's it talking about? It's talking about the devil. What does it say? He is a what? He's a what? Murderer. Murderer from when? The beginning. What's the beginning? That's Genesis 1:1. At the time of Genesis 1:1, when God created the heavens and the earth, Satan is already a murderer and a liar. Satan is already telling lies, destroying truth and ruining what is good and beautiful. That war is already going on, I think. And I think Genesis 1:1 and creation is done in a war zone.

And this war zone in 1 Kings 11 – Solomon: good guy or a bad guy? Solomon: good guy or a bad guy? Like, read it. Okay? Good guy or a bad guy? Mixed. Very mixed. Seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines in case those don't work out? I mean, weird. And what about those wives? They'll turn your heart to their gods and you keep reading in the chapter. Ashtoreth, the goddess of Sidonians. If I'm looking for a Sidonian today, where would I go? If I'm looking for a Sidonian today, where would I go? I'd go 30 miles south of Beirut, Lebanon to the town of what? Sidon. Remember Tyre and Sidon? Who is the god of Sidon? Ashtoreth. Who is the god of Ammonites? Amman, Jordan, today. There are gods, powerful spiritual beings, hostile to God, trying to destroy everything He is good at. They're stealing worship from God. Stealing it from Him. And people worshipped them. And all through Scripture, there's this theme of the worship of other gods, and it's saying, "Don't do it."

Because, when you do it, you end up doing injustice too. And the two great sins of the whole Bible is worshipping other gods and doing injustice, because that's what they're about and God is at war with that. So, Job is presuming the principle of God's justice includes something's wrong in the system. Remember what Dave showed you last time? This triangle between God's justice, Job's righteousness and the retribution principle? He says something's wrong in the system. And I think what's wrong in the system, basically, that doesn't cover the detail. It doesn't include Satan, the gods and the personal forces of evil.

I'm going to talk a lot about that tomorrow night when we talk about the whole stuff with the Odyssey. Just let me ask you a question from Job. There's a lot I could ask you. But, here's the question: Job is not showing us the answer to suffering or the answer to evil. There isn't any. Evil is irrational. And when you're looking for the "why," I just promise you disappointment. That ain't going to work. It is not going to work. There is not answer to the "why" question. Well, sometimes there is. Sometimes you've sinned or somebody else sins and you bear the consequence. But, for a lot of times, innocent people suffer. That's what the book of Job tells us. Do innocent people suffer? The answer is absolutely. It doesn't mean everybody who's suffering is innocent, but innocent people do suffer.

What Job tells is, I think, is how to suffer. In all the exquisite poetry, all the exquisite poetry is telling you how to suffer. Just like the book of Psalms. And what did Job do? He screams out his agony. He accuses God of being an unjust, roaring lion playing with me the way a cat plays with a mouse. Is that theologically true? Of course not. Job, when he has good days, would not say that. But, God, in his agony, he does. Here's the key: who does he say it to? To God. To God.

He didn't play the pious, "Oh, God. Whatever." Actually, he does at one point and God slaps him for it. What does he do? He screams out his feelings. Doubt, denial, despair, agony, faith, "You are good, God." The whole thing. And see, here's the lesson: when you're in agony, will you go searching for another god? And we do. Will you stay loyal to Yahweh

even when you don't understand what's going on? And I think that the lesson of Job, to the extent there is a lesson, is where will you go with your agony?

And where you go with your agony is to God – who is not there or seems not to be there – and to your friends who will wrestle with you, even if they're really bad at it. So, here's the question: when you're in agony, will you do a long Facebook rant against God? Will you talk about God on Twitter feed or whatever? Or will you agonize with the gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, faithful, loving, forgiving, doesn't let the wicked in? That is the lesson of Job.

Let's pray together.

Father, I confess to You I hate this book. It's true, because it's so painful. And we just come to You, Lord, and say how much we need You. Will You show up whether it's in the soft, gentle spirit You showed up to Elijah or You come in the roaring tornado? But, Lord, come. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

