

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES*Karl A. McKinney***JOB 40:1-5; 41:1-10; 42:1-6****Integrity while suffering**

Can we maintain the integrity of relationship with God through suffering? Yes! We learn this from women, the most traumatized group of people in the world. We also learn this from Indigenous peoples all over the world, including the native People of the Americas. We also learn the lesson from the offspring of African people who were formerly enslaved and have been denied justice and righteousness to date.

Also, we learn this lesson through Job. Like Job, we learn we can maintain the integrity of relationship with God through suffering, as imperfectly as we do. Job maintained his relationship with God through his suffering, teaching us that we also can do the same.

We are imperfect and we sin in so many ways. Yet around the world, people in every place and in all times have testified to feeling drawn by the Spirit to worship God, a being beyond description. Everyone who testifies to having been inexplicably drawn to God also talks about an utter sense of unworthiness and depravity as we sought and continue to seek God.

The steadier our search for God, the clearer to us is our imperfection. We are tempted to slink away in shame, but that same Spirit draws us to keep seeking God, keep telling the truth about ourselves: as individuals like Job, we struggle to maintain relationship with God.

The challenge of groups

We also learn from Job's story that when we form groups, the struggle to develop and to maintain integrity in our relationship with God grows more difficult. Groups tend to become adversarial to obeying God.

Congregations today find it hard to resist the temptation to leave one another as struggle emerges and reemerges over innumerable challenges. Congregations often become battlegrounds as members resist suffering together. Job and his friends sat together in silence for a long time before speaking; then they spoke; after a while, they ran out of things to say and the difficult emotions between them made them shut up; they ended their arguments in silence—*with one another*.

It is far more difficult for groups of sinners to maintain integrity of relationship with God. Congregations, small groups, households, families, neighborhoods, and communities, and entire nations are groups. About groups Richard Rohr wrote,

It is easier to belong to a group than to belong to God . . . Group-think is a substitute for God-think . . . [it is] the belief that God is found only by our group. The next step is to establish that identification with our group as the only way to serve God.¹

One conspiracy that can form in and take over groups is to prioritize the group's requirements and alternative demands above *loving God and loving one another*. Groups are challenged to prioritize loving God and loving one another, but they find this has to be intentional, done often, repeatedly. *More often, group processes are designed to pursue the alternative expectations of the group's founder(s)*.

The group demands from members the allegiance only God deserves from each of us and from all of us together. Groups, it turns out, often begin a journey together with God and then form an alliance with the satan, the adversary of our souls. Groups try to leverage the human struggles and propose the group as the solution, its ideas as the path, and belonging to the group as the essence of life. Soon, seeking God and belonging to the group are one and the same.

Individuals in groups who share their trust in God admit their search for purpose and meaning and talk to one another about their struggles with temptation and sin make it harder for groups to leverage these things in service to their alternative "better" commands. It's complicated for groups to obey Jesus together.

Groups create nothing to offer that is of any eternal value; the eternal things members share with one another all was given by God. If you are a part of a congregation or small group that never confesses your faults to one another, does not practice seeking God and receiving from God, and does not have confession of sin built into your daily and weekly liturgies, *why are you together?*

In March 2020, Christian religious groups entered a sabbatical period forced by COVID-19 and punctuated by an outbreak of peaceful protests for justice and righteousness (Amos 9). As the sabbatical drug on, some congregations and denominational bodies began to discuss critical questions about themselves as groups, such as:

- Will our group stay together?
- Will people return to our church, our organization, our ministry, our group?
- What makes us essential to our people? Why would everybody come back together after the virus threat is over?
- Why are we together?

1. Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2012), 28.

- What can we do about injustice and unrighteousness in our country? Why haven't we done anything before, and why have we been so silent about all these things? Do Black lives matter to us?
- Why do white Christians want to remain separated from people of color—especially from Black Christians?
- When did we decide to divide Christ's body into white congregations and everybody else?

COVID-19 gave Christian religious groups time to face questions they did not think to ask before all of us began to suffer in one way or another. Some still are pursuing these and other questions over a year later.

As Ruth Haley Barton has pointed out, the struggle to maintain integrity of relationship with God is far more difficult for a group. Barton reflects on the responses of three different groups in John 9, not to a virus, but to the healing of a man who had been born blind. Barton reminds us that healing of sight is a gift God gives to the blind, to those who are afraid to say to the group they know they all are blind, and to those who think they can see but are blind! God's gift of healing has power for each group.

Describing the healed man's struggle (he is Group 1), Barton says the following about the evil influence and harmful power of the religious group (Group 3). You'll have to read the book to hear the entire story as she tells it; the read is worth the time it'll require!

The healed man in this story, however, stays quietly faithful to his own spiritual journey. He is learning that there is a powerful difference between belonging to a group and belonging to God. It is easier to try to fit in with the group than to be true to what you know. When we have encountered Christ's healing presence in ways that do not fit existing paradigms, we might find ourselves on the outside. That's the bad news.²

Job's ability to distinguish remaining faithful to God by exercising God's gift of faith is immensely valuable and instructive to me. He had to keep that responsibility clear in his head while being part of groups, and his groups do not seem always to have helped him!

The things we leave behind

For ten years now, I've been throwing away papers and files. Recently, I've been setting aside everything that should be given to the historical society, waiting for COVID-19 to stop interrupting the donation. I file records, articles I've written, travel documents, teachings and lessons, drafts and final copies. But as each year goes by, a growing sense of the

worthlessness of it all has been fed by a hunger for God: everything else is *trash*. Everything is coming together to emphasize to me not to lose track of following Jesus—even in groups.

Job apparently had not contemplated getting rid of those things he held onto, because before God revealed God to him, Job thought he'd lost everything. Job's thoughts, attitudes, and words about God and other people seemed like possessions he could "hold onto."

When God revealed God to him, Job realized he did not want those things he had held onto and spewed into the atmosphere. His words, his attitudes, the ideas and lies he believed about his culture all had to be reevaluated and experience the scrutiny of flaming fire. When God revealed God to him, Job saw his circumstances more clearly. We also know he saw women more clearly.

When God revealed God to Job, physical pain stopped hurting as spiritual pain immersed him in regret; Job felt pain from having wrongfully accused God by having boasted about his righteousness ("righteousness and justice wore me"). Job despised himself for what he'd thought, felt, and said about God before he understood why—God's revelation propelled Job into shame while he was uninformed!

Job felt shame before he realized why; soon, he understood his suffering as being under the authorization of God. Job responded by "throwing away" everything he'd said.

Job confessed to God, "Now my eye sees you, therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (42:5-6). In these words, Job describes a contrast between his first experience losing everything God had given to him, and his new experience of God revealing God to him. When he lost everything God had given him, Job said he'd lost God's very presence with him. Yet, when God revealed God to Job, he said he despised the only things he had remaining: his thoughts and attitudes about God and about people. Job had lived believing a lie, that what he had possessed had represented God's presence with his family. That was idolatry!

In having God open his eyes, Job saw God in a way that revealed Job to himself more clearly, and seeing himself more clearly while in God's presence made Job despise himself and then repent in dust and in ashes. Job was not leaving his pile of rubble! The place of mourning transformed from a place of self-pity, anger, and resentment into a place of mourning where Job lamented and renounced the lies he'd believed and his attitude toward God.

Job and his daughters

Job also saw women more clearly after God revealed God to him. We know this because of how Job treated his daughters;

2. Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, 28.

however, the summary does not mention Job's wife. We don't know if she lived through these events, but we can assume she did because no other wife was mentioned.

If she lived, Job's wife bore 10 more children, again three girls and seven boys. What Job did with his daughters indicates his encounter with God had been radical, uprooting a widely held pattern of oppression by men of women.

Twenty years ago, Kellie and I were trying to buy a house. We stood on the porch of one house and before opening the door, I said, "This is it." About 10 minutes later after we'd walked through the house, Kellie said, "No, it's not. . . . I don't like the layout."

The children liked the house so together, we overruled Kellie and moved into the house. It was a mistake from the very beginning, primarily because the developer of the house had done nothing right and just about everything needed to be re-done. We called that house 4206. When we sold it many years later, I reflected on our experience with 4206 as I had many times before, wishing I had been a better listener—as I had wished so many times before. I wished I had treasured Kellie and so, her voice!

At one time while we were raising our family at 4206, Kellie did a study of Job. She shared her observations with me at that time. I asked her to share them now, and here's what she wrote:

By chapter 42, we witness the restoration of Job's fortune and also his transformation. Not only restored but transformed. The struggle and loss that Job experienced had a positive transforming effect that we see and is specifically noted in his newfound respect for women, beauty, and relationship. We notice this in the fact that his three daughters are now named, and in the choice of the names he gave them. Jemimah means "dove" or "warmth," indicating Job's newfound value for the beautiful yet frail and harmless (shall we say, powerless).

Keziah is the Hebrew name of the cassia flower, used for making perfumes and beauty treatments. Job honors beauty itself in high esteem in the naming of his daughter,

an attribute that a male-oriented society rarely honors. Yet, somehow through his loss and suffering, Job comes to appreciate the delicate and beautiful as valuable in themselves. Rather like when we hear someone say, "I have learned to value life itself by stopping to smell the roses."

And third, Keren-hapuch means "horn of antimony"; antimony being a widely used material that would be pulverized and used in women's makeup and cosmetics. It's like Job named his daughter Maybelline or Mary Kay, yet more emphasis on beauty (and possibly even femininity in that day). Further evidence is that he gave his daughters, along with his sons (who are unnamed) an inheritance, something unheard of in that day.

As we consider the trials, losses, and suffering of Job, we mostly just want to know how to avoid this for ourselves and if we can't avoid it, we would like to know how to get through it as quickly as possible and hopefully, to come out on the other end with some transformation or growth, certainly not worse off than before. This begs the question, how, why, or when did God finally decide to relent on the suffering and begin to bless Job again? The turning point occurred at the point that Job finally stopped complaining, defending, and arguing with God, and began instead to pray for his "frenemies." When praying for ourselves does not seem to work, looking around at the needs of others (possibly in the same boat). Praying for them instead is a very healing and powerful discipline we must learn.

From Kellie and Job, we learn that we also receive new revelation from God, about God, about ourselves, and about others. Job realized God's gifts of comfort, fragrance, and beauty in his daughters, He spoke them to aloud, he relished the gifts, he cherished his daughters and appreciated each of them as he had not appreciated his 10 children—especially his daughters—who had suffered such tragic deaths.

Job's experience asks us to admit that we need God to transform us into people who live by faith.