

February 13, 2022

A HELPFUL FRIEND AND THE GOODNESS OF GOD

Job 32-37

(5 of 7 in a series through Job)

Amongst all that we've seen to this point in the book of Job and all the difficult details we've had to work out over these first thirty-one chapters, it is actually this section we're looking at today (chs. 32-37) that is the most controversial in the book. The controversy revolves around what we do with this new character introduced to us in chapter 32 named Elihu. Interestingly, commentators are about evenly split on whether Elihu is just one more representative of Job's terrible friends giving Job terrible counsel or whether he's a helpful voice that not only speaks something different from Job's other friends but prepares the way for the Lord's arrival, which we will see in the text next week.

There are a few reasons why people think that Elihu is just another bad friend giving bad counsel. For one, he's young. He notes this at the beginning of his speech, saying, "I am young in years, and you are aged" (32:6). Second, he takes a long time justifying himself before he even speaks. The entirety of chapter 32 and some of chapter 33 are spent with Elihu explaining why he needs to be heard. Also, part of this time is spent expressing his anger. The text says in 32:2-3, "He burned with anger at Job" and "He burned with anger at Job's three friends." This can feel like the way a young, hot-head might speak. And finally, he goes on and on, speaking over six chapters what can at times sound like the same kinds of things Job's friends said, rebuking Job for how he's spoken at times. Consequently, one commentator describes Elihu as "the ultimate young fool,"¹ and many others agree.

However, I think Elihu is actually a helpful voice who prepares Job to hear what God has to say in chapters thirty-eight and following. And I have a number of reasons why I think this, so I'll number these and try to run through them quickly.

1. Elihu is given more of an introduction than Job's three friends.

Eliphaz is simply introduced to us with the words, "Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said" (4:1). That's it. That's all we know of him. And the other two friends are the same. But notice that when Elihu is introduced we read, "Then Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, burned with anger" (32:2). Already, the narrator seems to be elevating the importance and standing of this friend.

2. The book of Job gives Elihu more space than any of the three friends.

¹ David R. Jackson, *Crying out for Vindication: The Gospel According to Job* (P&R: Phillipsburg, NJ, 2007), 111.

Elihu is given six full chapters to speak without interruption. What makes this especially notable here is that you'll remember that Job's other friends spoke less and less as they argued. They argued with Job in three rounds, but by the third round Eliphaz said a bit, Bildad said even less, and Zophar had nothing to say at all. It's as if the narrator is showing us that this argument has been exhausted. So, it doesn't make sense then to give us six more chapters of an argument that has already been exhausted in the narrative.

3. Elihu doesn't simply repeat what Job's three friends say.

This is one of the commonly stated reasons for why many dismiss Elihu; they think he's just repeating what the other friends have said. And I'll admit that there is some overlap of some themes. But not only does he say many things that Job's friends don't see, he also clearly sees himself speaking something different from them. Notice that we're told that Elihu "burned . . . with anger at Job's three friends because they had found no answer, although they had declared Job to be in the wrong" (32:3). He doesn't like what the three friends have said. And in 32:14 Elihu explicitly states to the friends, "I will not answer [Job] with your speeches." In other words, he's explicitly stating that he's not simply repeating the speeches the friends have said. He finds their arguments unsatisfactory, and he's saying something different from them.

4. Job doesn't respond to Elihu.

You'll note that after these six chapters, Job doesn't respond. Now, you could say that Job doesn't respond because Elihu deserves no response. But I think this is hard to defend. After all, even when the arguments of Job's three friends were shown to be petering out by the third round of dialogue, Job didn't slow down one bit. In fact, Job seemed to pick up steam. His friends may have spoken less, but Job didn't. He answered everything they said lest there be any mistake from those around that what they said was right. Moreover, Elihu specifically asks Job to respond to him, saying in 33:32, "If you have any words, answer me; speak, for I desire to justify you." So, it seems odd that Job says nothing—unless, of course, he thinks that Elihu has said something right and worth listening too (which I think is the case).

5. God doesn't rebuke Elihu.

This is perhaps the biggest clue that Elihu says something right and worthy of hearing. In 42:7 we read: "After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: 'My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.'" Now, this comes almost right after Elihu has reeled off six chapters worth of counsel to Job. Surely, if God is willing to rebuke Job's friends for speaking wrong things, then he would also rebuke this young hotshot who spent a lot more time saying more of the same. I think it's more likely, however, that God doesn't rebuke Elihu because unlike the three friends, his counsel has been right.

6. Finally, there is a tight connection between where Elihu ends and God begins.

Let me show you what I mean. In chapter 37 Elihu begins to proclaim the greatness of God, and as he does so, he compares God's appearance and voice with that of a storm. He says in 37:2, "Keep listening to the thunder of his voice and the rumbling that comes from his mouth." In 37:9 he makes reference to God sending the whirlwind. And this kind visual of God coming and speaking in the violence of nature continues throughout the chapter. Then, the chapter ends with Elihu asking Job from 37:14 questions that only God can answer and that reveal Job's inabilities. Similarly, then, when the Lord shows up in chapter 38, he answers Job "out of the whirlwind" (38:1), echoing Elihu's imagery, and he begins asking Job questions that demonstrate Job's inabilities and ignorance which again echoes what Elihu declared in chapter 37.

Therefore, I think that Elihu is not like Job's three friends but is a right and good voice that not only speaks and answers some of Job's declarations throughout this book but prepares Job to hear the words of God that begin as soon as Elihu's speech ends. What is it then that Elihu says? Well, he rebukes Job concerning a couple of matters over which I think Job is convicted. Now, this might cause some confusion for us since Job's righteousness has been clearly affirmed by the Lord in chapters 1-2, so why do we think Elihu's rebuke was correct and Job was convicted about sin from which he needed to repent? There are really two reasons. First, the text explicitly says later that Job repents. After Elihu speaks and paves the way for the Lord's answer to Job, we hear Job say in 42:6, "I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Second, we've noted along the way that the declaration that Job is righteous doesn't mean that Job is sinless. Psalm 1, for example, describes two categories of people—the righteous and the wicked. You're one or the other. And David, for example, would obviously fall into the category of the righteous among the OT believers. However, he was by no means sinless, was he? Well, the same is true of Job. He was righteous, and maybe even sinned less and in less grievous ways than David—but he was not sinless. We might say he was a "righteous sinner."² Therefore, Elihu's rebuke of Job here was not answered by Job, I believe, because Job heard it and was convicted. What then did Elihu point out? Two things. First, Job was wrong to say God is unjust.

Job was wrong to say God is unjust

When Job was arguing with his friends, you may remember that the argument of Job's friends was that Job was absolutely wicked. After all, why would these terrible things be happening to him if he weren't terribly wicked? Job, on the other hand, argued that he was righteous but that God was acting unjustly. In Job's mind, God knew that he was righteous, but God was treating him like he was a wicked man. He thought God was treating him like an enemy. Elihu simply says to Job that he isn't right in responding this way. Let me show you this in our text.

First, notice why the narrator tells us that Elihu was angry with Job. He says in 32:2, "He burned with anger at Job because he justified himself rather than God." In other words, as Elihu heard Job arguing ferociously with his friends that he was righteous and it was evil of them to think of

² John Piper has helpfully noted this category of the "righteous sinner" among OT saints. See, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/holding-on-to-your-faith-in-the-midst-of-suffering-job-part-3>.

him as wicked, Elihu noted that Job didn't have the same ferocious commitment to uphold the righteousness of God. In fact, he's willing to make God look bad in their eyes. If he had to speak ill of God to make sure he came across as justified before men, then so be it. And so Elihu points out that this is simply out of line. He says to Job in 33:9-12, "You say, 'I am pure, without transgression; I am clean, and there is no iniquity in me. Behold, he finds occasions against me, he counts me as his enemy, he puts my feet in the stocks and watches all my paths.' Behold, in this you are not right."

Job speaks of God at times as if the Lord is an evil tyrant, out to get him though Job's heart is toward the Lord. But not only is that wrong in that God loves and treasures Job (knowing he's righteous), but it also is a slanderous statement about God. Similarly, Elihu notes in 34:5-6, "For Job has said, 'I am in the right, and God has taken away my right; in spite of my right I am counted a liar; my wound is incurable, though I am without transgression,'" again charging God with acting unjustly, counting Job as more sinful than he is.

And Elihu notes that Job is wrong on a few levels with his accusation against God. First, Job is simply wrong to think that God would act unjustly. He says, "Far be it from God that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty that he should do wrong. . . . Of a truth, God will not do wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice" (34:10, 12). God simply is not one who acts unjustly. Second, Job is wrong in thinking of righteousness or justice itself. Elihu asks Job in 34:17, "Shall one who hates justice govern? Will you condemn him who is righteous and mighty?"

Now, the reason condemning God as unrighteous is absurd is because God himself is the standard of righteousness. In other words, righteousness is not some standard, external to God, that he makes sure he's always measuring up to. He *is* the standard. What he does is righteous because he is the standard of righteousness. And everything else that is righteous is only righteous because it accords with God's righteous character.

And finally, Job is wrong to judge God as unjust simply because man is in no place to judge God. Elihu first reminds Job that as humans we are nothing more than clay, saying, "Behold, I am toward God as you are; I too was pinched off from a piece of clay" (33:6). Then, he uses the last part of his speech (ch. 37) to proclaim the majesty of God. Ultimately, he concludes by saying, "The Almighty—we cannot find him; he is great in power; justice and abundant righteousness he will not violate. Therefore men fear him; he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit" (37:23-24).

God is God and we are not. We must remember that. Even as we lament before him, ask him why things are as they are, and share our pain and disappointment in the circumstances that accompany our lives, we must remind ourselves that we are never in a place to stand in judgment over God. C. S. Lewis famously noted, "The ancient man approached God . . . as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge. God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defence for being the god who permits war, poverty and disease, he is ready to listen. The trial may even

end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God is in the dock."³

Now, Lewis was obviously wrong that ancient men didn't struggle with approaching God as if we are his judge, since Job does in this book. Apparently man has always been prone to think we can judge God. But Lewis is right to note the absurdity of it. Who do we think we are to stand in judgment over God? And any time we declare that God has acted unjustly or wrongly in any way, we are simply exposing that we have forgotten that he is the potter and we are the clay. He is God and we are merely human beings. This is the first rebuke Elihu gives to Job. Job was wrong to say God is unjust. Second, Elihu notes that Job was wrong to think God had been silent.

Job was wrong to think God had been silent

In 33:13, Elihu says to Job, "Why do you contend against him, saying, 'He will answer none of man's words?'" We've seen this in Job, haven't we? Again and again he's expressed frustration that though Job rails on and on about his displeasure with what God has done, God has remained silent. But Elihu tells Job he's wrong. God hasn't been silent. It's just that Job hasn't perceived how God has been speaking. Elihu says in 33:14, "God speaks in one way, and in two, though man does not perceive it." This poetic sentence is simply a way of saying that God speaks to us in a multitude of ways that we simply don't recognize as the voice of God. And Elihu names two examples. First, he says in 33:15-18, "In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men, while they slumber on their beds, then he opens the ears of men and terrifies them with warnings, that he may turn man aside from his deed and conceal pride from a man; he keeps back his soul from the pit, his life from perishing by the sword."

Elihu is saying something I imagine we're all familiar with. Perhaps you had a dream in which you were terrified, and it caused you to alter how you're living. Maybe you've been short and unloving with your wife, and then you had a dream in which she died, and you wake up with your heart racing, thinking, "I've got to do a better job of loving her and not taking her for granted." Elihu says that is one way that the Lord can communicate to us that we don't even perceive, and it can be a powerful tool he uses to correct us and bring us back from a sinful path.

But there's another—important way—Elihu notes that God speaks to us. He says, "Man is also rebuked with pain on his bed and with continual strife in his bones. . . . Behold, God does all these things, twice, three times, with a man, to bring back his soul from the pit that he may be lighted with the light of life" (33:19, 29-30). Elihu notes that God speaks through our pain. He may allow great pain to come into our lives in order to reveal things that need to be addressed—sinful tendencies that might remain dormant apart from the suffering that brings them to the surface and exposes them.

³ Accessed at <http://merecslewis.blogspot.com/2011/04/god-in-dock-ie-god-is-on-trial-part-3.html>.

Now, before I go into that more, we may find ourselves resistant to this, noting that Elihu sounds like the other friends. After all, didn't we note that Job isn't suffering because he's a wicked man? That's right, but as we also noted, to be righteous doesn't mean to be sinless. And Elihu—unlike the three friends—has a category for the righteous man encountering suffering. He says in 36:7-10, “[God] does not withdraw his eyes from the righteous, but with kings on the throne he sets them forever, and they are exalted.” Now, we see clearly he's talking about the righteous. So note what he says next: “And if they are bound in chains and caught in the cords of affliction, then he declares to them their work and their transgressions, that they are behaving arrogantly. He opens their ears to instruction.”

Do you see this? He's saying that God speaks to us sometimes through our suffering, allowing us to walk through difficult times so that he might make our ears more open to receive his instruction and perhaps our eyes more open to see areas where we need sanctification. For the wicked, it is not that way. Elihu says, “The godless in heart cherish anger; they do not cry for help when he binds them” (36:13). Godless people suffer and simply grow in their anger and do not turn to God. But of the righteous, he says, “He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity” (36:15). In their affliction he is delivering them, and by their adversity he is opening their ears. That is, God uses adversity in our lives because he loves us too much not to keep working for our holiness.

For the unrepentant, unrighteous man, God gives him over to his sin (Rom 1:18-32). But for his children, he sends sanctifying adversity to open our eyes and ears and hearts so that we might continue to grow in holiness. Apart from such affliction, we might remain stagnant, and our sin might remain dormant. Doesn't this remind us of what we saw in 2 Corinthians as Paul opened that book saying, “We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death” (2 Cor 1:8-9a). That is some serious affliction. And then Paul adds, “But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.” (2 Cor 1:9b). Paul is saying that his affliction came with a design, a purpose. It was for his sanctification—to teach him more and more to rely on God. And there's no reason to think that God loves us one ounce less than Paul or wants our holiness any less than his.

That's what Elihu is saying to Job. Job has been railing against God, wondering why God is treating him like an enemy when the reality is that God has been treating him like a son. For just as a father shows his love for his son through formative discipline that helps his son grow in what is good, so that's what God does in our affliction. We'll never know all the purposes of our suffering—God's wisdom is beyond our understanding—but we can always know that it's used as a formative discipline in our lives. It is always used for our sanctifying good. Elihu knew that Job wasn't suffering because he had sinned so grievously, but he was also had seen that Job's suffering had brought to the surface some sin in his life that God wanted to drive out.⁴ In other

⁴ Hywel Jones has rightly noted, “[The friends] said that Job was suffering because he had sinned. Elihu says that Job has sinned because he was suffering.” Quoting by Anthony T. Selvaggio in *Considering Job: Reconciling Sovereignty & Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021), 126.

words, Job had not only been wrong to charge God with injustice and to think that God was silent, but Job had been wrong to question God's goodness.

Notice that every example that Elihu uses—whether speaking in a dream or speaking through pain—God is always doing good. He's saving from the pit, opening his child's ears, or delivering the afflicted by their affliction. Whatever he's doing, it's good. And this is helpful for us to see. God is not unjust. Nor is he silent when we feel like he's distant. In fact, he's always working for our good, to further make us like his Son. And sometimes he's speaking by our affliction to deliver us from something much worse than suffering—hidden and buried sin in our lives. He knows what is required to bring it to the surface, and he loves us too much to do any less.

Therefore, as we walk through suffering and even mourn and lament greatly before our God, let our only judgment of God be, "I know he is good and is working for my good." Trust him. After all, he did not spare his own Son, but handed him over to death and raised him from the dead so that we might be his redeemed children. Amen.