

**Job:
Enter Elihu –
Help at Last!**

Job 32–37

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

November 15, 2000

The three friends have been reduced to silence; they are all "talked out." They have failed in their attempt to get Job to say, "This is all my fault!"

Suddenly, we learn that there is a fourth counselor present, — Elihu by name and younger than either Bildad, Zophar or Eliphaz. Until now, he has been silent, but anger explodes s both at the three inept friends, and also against Job. If we think the three friends longwinded, they are the epitome of brevity in comparison with rambling Elihu!

Three times (four in the Hebrew text) we are told that he was "angry" (32:2 [twice in Hebrew], 3, 5). His anger at the three counselors is understandable. Their unrelenting and unflinching message has been difficult to stomach. Suffering is always the result of God's punishment upon some sin or other, they have insisted. They have sung this song of "instant retribution with no exceptions" to death. "You get you deserve; no more, no less," they have pontificated. There is nothing more they can say. And Elihu's indignation is appropriate. They have been wrong theologically and pastorally. Their manner of approach and their message has shown little understanding or compassion. We, too, are irritated by their monotony and heartlessness.

But, why is he angry with Job? Because, he was "justifying himself rather than God" (32:2). Job has gone too far in his cries of innocence. Somewhat reminiscent of Hamlet's words to Ophelia, "Job doth protest too much!" Elihu says. Interestingly, Calvin in his expositions of Job in the middle of the sixteenth century echoed Elihu by suggesting that no one is as innocent as Job is claiming!

Elihu, and Calvin, are right, of course. There is only one who has lived in this world who is without sin -Jesus Christ. He alone could ask with unqualified conviction, "Can any of you prove Me guilty of sin?" (John 8:46). So confident has Job been of his faultlessness that he speaks with a confidence that is breathtaking. He has entered into an oath in his own defense, signed it and is prepared to "wear it on (his) shoulder and. ..put it on as a crown" (31:35). He has

challenged his accuser to prove him in error, whoever that accuser may be, his friends (collectively); or perhaps God Himself! Either way, Job is ready to go into court and defend himself. Who of us would ever have such confidence? Or is it arrogance?

Before we shake our heads and say, "Job! How can you say that?" We must recall that God has already informed us in the prologue of Job's "innocence." However tempting it is to join Job's critics, we cannot deny that Job has a defensible case. We dare not now capitulate at this late stage and side with the counselors after all and say, "I have this sneaking suspicion that there just might be some secret sin somewhere that has lain unconfessed. That would be to unravel the entire argument that has been carefully defended. No, Job's suffering has nothing to do with his past, and we can be certain of that, because God himself says so.

However, while all that is true of Job *before* the trial, it has become woefully apparent that Job has overstepped the mark *since* the onset of the trial. There were those sublime moments initially when Job responded with such poise and grace: "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. May the name of the Lord be praised," we heard him say. All of us want to be able to respond just like that. But since then, the poise has disappeared. The grace has been clouded. Job has given us more than a little cause for discomfort as he has sought to defend himself. He has by now given more than sufficient reason to say, "Job, you have said too much." Job has questioned the integrity of God. He has called into question God's faithfulness to His covenant children. He has made God out to be his enemy. He no longer has any confidence that God will give him a fair hearing in court.

All of this has ignited Elihu's ire. Job has gone too far! God's honor now needs defending and Elihu is going to do it.

What does Elihu say?

The six chapters, 32-37, contain four speeches. They are a summary of Elihu's contribution to the "problem" of Job's suffering. Many commentators are dismissive of Elihu's contribution, for several reasons, but chiefly the following two: In the first place, he is merely reflecting the same prejudices and simplistic analysis of the three friends. In the second place, there is the matter of God's "silence" in the final closure of the book of Job. Whilst the three friends and roundly criticized by God, Elihu gets away without so much as a mention. This, they suggest, is a silence that speaks volumes. By ignoring his contribution, God does the most devastating thing possible.

There are, however, objections to both of these observations. It is true that Elihu descends into the instant retribution theology that has characterized so much of the earlier speeches of Bildad, Eliphaz and Zophar. The third and fourth speech

in particular sounds little different to that of the "righteousness is always rewarded, sin is always punished" view expressed at length already. But, it is also true that Elihu has some new and insightful elements in his speeches that add significant. Two, in particular, are worthy of deeper investigation.

1. Suffering can lead us to appreciate God's mercy.

Elihu paints an elaborate picture which amounts to this: however much trouble we receive, it is not in accord with that which we deserve when our fallen nature is taken into consideration. In a graphic portrayal of human suffering, Elihu says:

...a man may be chastened on a bed of pain
with constant distress in his bones,
so that his very being finds food repulsive
and his soul loathes the choicest meal.
His flesh wastes away to nothing,
and his bones, once hidden, now stick out.
His soul draws near to the pit,
and his life to the messengers of death.

Then Elihu imagines an "mediator" pleads for him, and he is spared from "going down to the pit" and as a consequence:

...his flesh is renewed like a child's;
it is restored as in the days of his youth.
He prays to God and finds favor with Him,
he sees God's face and shouts for joy;
he is restored to God to his righteous state.
Then he comes to men and says,
"I sinned, and perverted what was right,
but I did not get what I deserved.
He redeemed my life from going down to the pit,
and I will live to enjoy the light." (33: 19-30).

Elihu's point is that suffering can teach something about ourselves. Job may not have been punished for some past sin, but the suffering has disclosed how far he is capable of falling. Job's life may have been blameless before the trial; but the events of these last days have shown just how his own heart can be led into ways that otherwise he might have thought impossible. Suffering can show us the sinfulness of our hearts. Suffering can lead us to appreciate God's love in new ways.

We are to treasure every providence that shows us what we are capable of doing when left to our own devices. What sins are we capable of doing when God withdraws his hand? How far down can we slide into the abyss if God steps back

just a little. When it is just us and Satan, what are we capable of saying? Of thinking? Of doing? Job has begun to discover the sinfulness of heart when trial strikes and he will confess before too long, "I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (42:5-6). Every glimpse of native depravity is to be welcomed. Such providences are God's way of saying to us: "This is what you really are without My grace. Everything that you now are, you are because of Me." Elihu has caught a glimpse of a truth that we need to hold dear: that at our very best, we are sinners saved by grace alone. We will never get beyond that. Even in paradise, we shall bear the collective memory of the work of the Savior that was needed to wash us and cleanse from the pollution of sin.

What Elihu is trying to grasp, and he is only doing so faintly, I think, is the truth that is brought out in that poem of John Newton's, "Prayer answered by Crosses." Here is a Christian eager to grow in grace and asks God for greater holiness and consecration. What is God's answer? Crosses! Pain! Suffering!

I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek more earnestly His face.
I thought that in some favoured hour
At once He'd answer my request;
And, by His love's constraining power,
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.
Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart,
And let the angry powers of hell
Assault my soul in every part.
'Lord, why is this?' I trembling cried,
'Wilt Thou pursue Thy worm to death?'
'Tis in this way,' the Lord replied,
'I answer prayer for grace and faith.'
'These inward trials I employ
'From self and pride to set thee free,
'And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
'That thou may'st seek thy all in Me!'

That is what Elihu is trying to say, I think. God will sometimes abandon us to our own devices and the onslaughts of the devil in order to make us appreciate all the more His tender care and mercy to us.

Elihu has touched in two things: that suffering can teach us the true nature of our hearts and can urge us to trust in the sovereign care of Fatherly God. It can also do something else. It can fill our minds with questions to which there are no easily discernible answers. Suffering can paint the canvas of a providence that is beyond our ability to fathom. It can exalt the majesty of God.

2. Suffering can lead us to appreciate God's greatness.

It is one thing to appreciate God's mercy to us sinners. It is another to appreciate His greatness because we are creatures. Elihu makes this very point in the fourth and final speech: "How great God is beyond our understanding!" (36:26). He makes a similar point in the next chapter: "God's voice thunders in marvelous ways; He does great things beyond our understanding" (37:5).

God is great! And not a little of the implication of God's majesty is the fact His ways can never be understood by men. His ways are not our ways; His thoughts are not our thoughts. (cf. Isa. 55:8). There is a chasm that divides God's mind from ours that is of infinite width. We cannot ever expect to discern what He is doing unless He tells us. Sometimes, what He does looks so baffling and so strange, that all we can do is wonder! It should make us want to tremble a little.

This is part of the lesson that Paul learned with his "thorn in the flesh." This, too, was a messenger of Satan" just as Job's suffering had been (though Job was unaware of it; c.f. 2 Cor. 12:7). Just as it had been for Job, so also for Paul, the suffering was difficult to accept; three times for its removal. Acquiescence and passivity is not implicit in the Christian view of sainthood. It is noteworthy and moving, that even our Savior sought for the removal of the cup in the Garden of Gethsemane. His holiness is evidenced, not in the absence of struggle, but in the submission He eventually offered. Job, too, has been struggling, and not without lapse in his case. Yet the struggle has taught him something that he needs to learn. That sainthood involves submission to the will of God, *even when that will is beyond our understanding.*

Pain can teach us submission in a way that nothing else can. It can drive us to God for help in a way that nothing else does. Paul records having seen "visions and revelations" which he was not permitted to relate (2 Cor. 12:1,4). To ensure that Paul was kept from pride, God allowed a thorn in the flesh to torment him. God permitted Satan to harass him. It is amongst the most mysterious and challenging issues in life: not that Satan harasses us that is understandable. The problem is that God permits it. It is part of His will that Satan sift us as wheat (Luke 22:31-32). Satan cannot do it of his own volition alone. He cannot come straight from hell. He must first appear before God and be given his assignment (Job 1 :12; 2:6). This challenges everything we think we know about God. God sent Satan to keep Paul from becoming "conceited" (2 Cor. 12:1). But the staggering thing is that God did not take it away. Instead, Paul had to learn to endure it; he had to adopt the servant-like attitude which says: "God knows what He is doing. He is able to help me no matter what the trouble may be. His grace will be sufficient."

God knows what He is doing! To this confession Job must finally come. Job must

learn that God is not obligated to answer his demands and give an explanation that will satisfy him. He must learn to lay his hand on his mouth and say: it is not important that I understand; it is only important that He does.

That is where Job will be brought once Elihu has stopped speaking. But Elihu is longwinded and says more than he should and in doing so, undoes what good he has had to say.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).