

*Elihu's Speeches: Job 32-37*  
 Ben Reaach, Three Rivers Grace Church  
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In chapter 32 of the book of Job, a new figure arrives on the scene. From chapter 3-31 we have heard the dialogue between Job and the three friends. But now we're told that another man has been present through all of this. He has remained silent in deference to those older than him. But he has been listening, and thinking, and formulating his evaluation of Job's situation. And now he speaks. He is introduced in the opening verses of chapter 32.

“So these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. Then Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, burned with anger. He burned with anger at Job because he justified himself rather than God. He burned with anger also at Job's three friends because they had found no answer, although they had declared Job to be in the wrong. Now Elihu had waited to speak to Job because they were older than he. And when Elihu saw that there was no answer in the mouth of these three men, he burned with anger.”

In verse 6 Elihu begins his first speech. He gives four speeches back to back, which continue through chapter 37. He has a lot that he wants to say, and he uses a lot of words to communicate what is on his mind. D. A. Carson says these chapters “are among the most interesting, and the most difficult, in the book.”<sup>1</sup> Elihu is a very interesting character, but it's difficult to discern exactly how he's different from and similar to the other counselors.

Elihu, in one sense, is yet another trial for Job. There are certainly differences between him and the three friends, but there are also similarities. And in the ways that he is similar to the other men who have spoken to Job, Elihu represents another hardship. Job is longing to hear a word from God. He wants to hear a definitive word from the Almighty. But he has to endure 6 chapters of Elihu's long-winded speeches. From a literary standpoint, this section of the book heightens our anticipation of what will come next. The accusations of the three friends are over. Job's responses to them are over. And there is an intense desire for resolution. Especially Job, but the friends too, want to hear God's final word as to who is right. Is Job a man of integrity? And if so, why is he being afflicted? Or is he a wicked, godless man who is rebelling against the Lord, and this is the explanation for his suffering? Everyone wants to know. But enter Elihu, who takes

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), pg. 168.

center stage and monopolizes the spotlight for 6 chapters. So in one sense, this is yet another trial of patience for Job.

But in another sense, there is much that Elihu has to say that is a gracious gift to Job. Elihu's words provide more insight than the others into the reality of Job's suffering. And his rebukes are more accurate, and thus prepare the way for what Job will soon hear from the very mouth of God.

So there are two sides to these speeches by Elihu. He certainly goes beyond the arguments of the three friends, and sheds some new light on the situation. But he is also limited. Like the three friends, he is not privy to the conversations that took place in chapters 1-2. He does not know the full story. He is unaware that Job was chosen for such suffering because he was blameless and upright, a man who feared God and turned away from evil. And because Elihu doesn't know this, he falls into the same assumptions as the three friends—that Job's losses and ailments must be due to sin in his life. As we look at Elihu's speeches, we'll see places where he sounds very similar to the three friends, and we'll also see places where he is far more helpful than the three friends.

Let's begin by looking at these chapters to understand better Elihu's anger toward Job, and also his anger toward the three friends. Then we'll consider a very important truth that Elihu's speeches reveal about suffering.

### **Elihu's Anger toward Job**

Verse 2 says, "He burned with anger at Job because he justified himself rather than God." In 33:8-11 Elihu summarizes his understanding of what Job has said. It's not clear, though, that Elihu has understood Job accurately. He says, "Surely you have spoken in my ears, and I have heard the sound of your words. You say, 'I am pure, without transgression; I am clean, and there is not 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.'" It is true that Job questioned God, wondering if God was his enemy (13:24), his adversary (19:11). It is also true that Job fiercely defended his own integrity. He claimed to be blameless (9:20-21; 12:4). He also said, "there is no violence in my hands, and my prayer is pure (16:17). But I think there's an important distinction to make here. Job was not claiming to be sinless or perfect. He was simply saying about himself what God had said of him at the beginning of the book, that he was a blameless and upright man, who feared God and turned away from evil (1:8; 2:3). Job knew he was a sinner (see 7:21), and he made sacrifices to God in recognition that he needed forgiveness. So he was not claiming sinless perfection, as Elihu implies, but rather was defending his

integrity. He was responding to the accusations of the friends, and saying that he was not living a double life. He was not secretly living a life of wickedness. So Elihu seems to misread Job at this point.

Again in his second speech, Elihu paraphrases Job's argument. In 34:5-9, "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.' What man is like Job, who drinks up scoffing like water, who travels in company with evildoers and walks with wicked men? For he has said, 'It profits a man nothing that he should take delight in God.'" We see here how Elihu is similar to the three friends. He accuses Job of wickedness—drinking up scoffing like water, walking with evil men. But he also offers a legitimate rebuke. For Job has spent a lot of time defending himself rather than defending God. In fact, in his defense of himself he seems to be accusing God—suggesting that God is unfair or unloving or arbitrary in the way He has afflicted Job. So Elihu is right to rebuke Job for this.

In 33:12, right after his first summary of Job's complaint, Elihu plainly says, "Behold, in this you are not right. I will answer you, for God is greater than man." Remember how Job responded immediately after the tragedies of chapters 1-2? He lost his wealth and lost his children, and then was also afflicted with his terrible illness. And his initial response was remarkable and exemplary. In 1:21 he said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." Then in 2:10 he said to his wife, "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?" Job was resigned to the will of God. He was humble and hopeful and submissive. He was trusting God and praising God in the midst of the storm. But as the trials set in, as his sickness dragged on, as he faced the accusations of the three friends, Job was not so hopeful or humble. And it's on this point that Elihu rightly reproves him. Elihu has to remind Job that God is greater than man, which helps to prepare Job to see God's greatness in an up-close and personal way beginning in chapter 38.

### **Elihu's Anger toward the Three Friends**

In the introduction to Elihu at the beginning of chapter 32, it says in verse 3, "He burned with anger also at Job's three friends because they had found no answer, although they had declared Job to be in the wrong." Elihu has been listening to the speeches back and forth, and he is infuriated that there has been no resolution. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar had declared Job to be in the wrong, but their arguments were too simplistic and therefore unconvincing. They had not found an answer that would satisfy Job's questions and silence his complaints.

It is interesting to note that Elihu's anger against these three men anticipates God's anger against them, which He states in 42:7. The Lord says to Eliphaz, "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." The three friends assumed that they were entirely right in their understanding of God's dealing with Job. They thought they had the whole situation figured out. But God rebukes them and puts them in their place. We also notice that in the Lord's statement in chapter 42 he does not mention Elihu, either commending him or condemning him, and it's hard to know what to make of this. At the very least we can see that Elihu is distinct from the other counselors. His message is not merely the same thing that has already been repeated over and over again. He has something new to say, and he is not rebuked by God for what he says.

### **Suffering Reveals Our Sin**

Let's look now at what Elihu has to say that is new and helpful. We'll look at an important point that he brings out—an important purpose of suffering that goes beyond the simplistic understanding of the three friends. This new insight is that suffering reveals our sin.

The other counselors were wrong to conclude that Job's suffering was owing to some unconfessed sin in his life. But what Elihu observes is Job's sinful pride that is evident in the way he defends himself. The problem is not necessarily some blatant, secret sin that Job committed prior to his afflictions (that brought on the afflictions), but there *is* a subtle arrogance in Job's heart that is being revealed in the midst of the afflictions. Look at 33:12-20. Again, this is Elihu's response to what he has just summarized of Job's arguments.

"Behold, in this you are not right. I will answer you, for God is greater than man. Why do you contend against him, saying, 'He will answer none of man's words'? For God speaks in one way, and in two, though man does not perceive it. 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. "Man is also rebuked with pain on his bed and with continual strife in his bones, so that his life loathes bread, and his appetite the choicest food."

Here Elihu cites two ways in which God may warn a person. First, He may do so through some kind of dream or vision. Unlike Elihu, we now have the full revelation of God's written Word, and we recognize that God has revealed Himself and His

will for us in this Word. So in dreams and visions, and especially now in the clear revelation of Scripture, we find God's warnings. And notice the purpose of these warnings. Verses 17-18, "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." God rebukes us and warns us and terrifies us in order to divert us away from sin and pride and destruction.

Then the second thing Elihu mentions is pain. This is another very effective means God uses to rebuke us. Verses 19-20, "Man is also rebuked with pain on his bed and with continual strife in his bones, so that his life loathes bread, and his appetite the choicest food. His flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen, and his bones that were not seen stick out. His soul draws near the pit, and his life to those who bring death." Then in verses 23-25 he speaks of the possibility of a merciful mediator who finds a ransom. We understand as Christians the glorious truth that Jesus Christ is our merciful mediator, who provides our ransom. He paid our penalty so that we can go free. It's unclear what Elihu understood of these concepts, but it is wonderful to see these subtle allusions to the ultimate answer to Job's problems.

And then verses 26-28 portray the outcome of this pain that God uses to rebuke us, "then man prays to God, and he accepts him; he sees his face with a shout of joy, and he restores to man his righteousness. He sings before men and says: 'I sinned and perverted what was right, and it was not repaid to me. He has redeemed my soul from going down into the pit, and my life shall look upon the light.'"

The point is that God uses suffering to reveal our sin and to divert us from our sinful ways. He uses trials to convict us of sin and cause us to repent of our sin and seek His mercy. And then as we experience His mercy, we are filled with joy. In allowing us to suffer, God is being so good to us. He is graciously delivering us from continuing in our sin and sparing us the punishment that would result if we did continue in our sin. God is not being mean to us, but merciful, when He ordains trials in our lives. John Piper gives us a helpful illustration in saying that the pain God causes is like the surgeon's knife, not like the executioner's whip.<sup>2</sup> God is operating on us to remove the cancer of sin that will destroy us. He's not punishing us.

Think about this in your own life, in trials you've been through in the past or trials that you are going through right now. We must not suspect that God is punishing us for our sin, as the three friends did. Instead we should be closely examining our lives to see how God is wanting to refine us and transform us in the midst of our suffering. Think, for instance, of the sin of pride,

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<sup>2</sup> Sermon on Job 32-37, [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org)

which Elihu mentions in verse 17. How might God be using His Word, as well as trials in our lives, to chip away at the pride in our hearts?

Pride makes us think that we are independent, self-sufficient. Pride makes us think that we don't need anyone else—we can get along fine on our own. But when a hardship comes into our lives, when we are laid low by health problems, or financial hardship, or bitter disappointment, we begin to realize that we are *not* self-sufficient. By God's grace, He uses these trials to show us how much we need Him, and how much we need one another. I challenge you, in whatever trials you face, to see it as an opportunity for growth, specifically in the area of humility. May all of our trials, however small or great, be reminders to us that we are utterly dependent on God for everything, and also that we are dependent upon each other for encouragement and support and help.

Let's not harden under the weight of our trials, thinking that we just have to work harder or fight more fiercely in order to make things work out the way we want them to. Instead, we should be softened and humbled by the realization that things are not going to work out the way we might want them to, but God is in control! Everything *is* working out according to His plan, and He has a good plan for us that is better than the plans we have for ourselves.

I read about a missionary in Pakistan who faced the severe trial of losing her six-month-old baby. After the baby died an old Punjabi woman came to the missionary and told her, "A tragedy like this is similar to being plunged into boiling water. If you are an egg, your affliction will make you hard-boiled and unresponsive. If you are a potato, you will emerge soft and pliable, resilient and adaptable." The missionary said that she wondered if it sounded funny to God, but she would often pray, "O Lord, make me a potato."<sup>3</sup> That is how we should pray, that God will soften us in the boiling water of affliction.

God has very good purposes in our trials, and we must not resent Him for allowing these hard things to come into our lives. How often do we pray for God to change us, to sanctify us, to make us more like Christ? And how do we think He's going to answer those prayers? Do we think it's going to be easy? Do we think it's going to be painless? We probably don't think about that much. We probably hope that God will simply snap his fingers and we'll be holy and Christ-like people. O God, make me like Your Son, but don't let it hurt. Is that our attitude and our assumption—that the process of sanctification will be easy and

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<sup>3</sup> Cited by Derek Thomas, *The Storm Breaks: Job Simply Explained*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Evangelical Press, 1995), pgs. 261-62.

comfortable? That's not how God has chosen to work. He has not ordained that holiness and ease go together in this world. And the sooner we realize that the better. A holy and pure life is forged in the blazing hot furnace of suffering. There's no easy path to holiness. There's no comfortable, pain-free plan for sanctification. Listen to this poem by John Newton. It's entitled, "Prayer Answered by Crosses."

I ask'd the Lord, that I might grow  
In faith, and love, and ev'ry grace,  
Might more of his salvation know,  
And seek more earnestly his face.

'Twas he who taught me thus to pray,  
And he, I trust has answer'd pray'r;  
But it has been in such a way,  
As almost drove me to despair.

I hop'd that in some favour'd hour,  
At once he'd answer my request:  
And by his love's constraining pow'r,  
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this. he made me feel  
The hidden evils of my heart;  
And let the angry pow'rs of hell  
Assault my soul in ev'ry part.

Lord, why is this, I trembling cry'd,  
Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?  
"'Tis in this way," the Lord reply'd,  
"I answer pray'r 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 mayst seek thy all in me."

This is Elihu's important contribution in this book of Job, and in our struggle to understand God's sovereignty over suffering. God has good purposes for us in the midst of our pain. He uses pain to divert us from the way of destruction. He uses it to bring us to a point of repentance and dependence on Him, so that we might rejoice in His mercy.

I want to close by appealing to unbelievers. And I would encourage you believers to appeal in this way to unbelievers whom

you know who are going through some kind of trial. If you are not a Christian, if you are living out your life apart from Christ, then I want to challenge you repent of your pride and humble yourself before the Almighty and Good God who has revealed Himself to us in these Scriptures. Don't continue in hardness of heart as you face the hardships of life. Don't dig in your heels in opposition to God. Don't think that you can fix things on your own and make everything in life turn out right. You have a far too lofty view of yourself, and it may be that God has carefully tailored the trial that you are going through right now for the very purpose of bringing you to your knees before Him. Open your eyes to the folly of your own pride. And open your eyes to the beauty of God's gracious plan to save sinners. Repent of your sin. Repent of your independence and self-sufficiency. And cast yourself on the mercy of Jesus, who suffered more intensely than we can even imagine, in order that He might be our mediator, our ransom. O unbeliever, may God use the trials in your life to draw you to Himself. I pray that He will change your heart and humble you and give you the joy of delighting in Him.