

Job 32-37: Job's Friend, Elihu

This morning we come to the last of Job's friends. This is Elihu, who is the youngest of all the friends of Job. And who until this point in the conversation has been silent and out of the picture. We haven't even known he was around until this chapter 32. This might surprise us, but in ancient times - and really, in most cultures throughout history - the youngest person in the room speaks last. There is an assumption that with age comes wisdom and the younger generation should defer to the older generation.

And, like with many things in the book of Job, that might be true most of the time but it is not true all of the time. Those who are older usually have more wisdom but not always.

I'll be honest, Elihu is a hard nut to crack. My view of Elihu has kind of evolved as I've studied the book of Job. Initially, I viewed Elihu as respectful-ish young punk who kept silent, deferred to the older guys until they ran out of things to say and then he rightly proclaimed the greatness of God and the presumptuous attitude of Job. He was sort of the young boy-wonder who rebuked Job and the 3 friends and defended God's righteousness all at the same time.

And of course at the end of the book God rebukes Job's 3 friends but he doesn't rebuke Elihu. But I think it's also rather curious that he doesn't commend Elihu either. You'd think that if Elihu was the great voice of reason in the middle section of the book of Job he'd get a shout out.

But the more I've looked at Job, the less I think that's the case. He does rebuke the 3 friends and he does rebuke Job and he does talk about how great God is. But a lot of what he says ends up being pretty foolish.

But he doesn't - he doesn't mention him for good or for bad. Some scholars think that since Elihu isn't mentioned here at all then someone must have added his speech sometime after the book of Job was finished. That Elihu is a late addition to the book. I don't think that's the case.

What I think we're going to see here is an angry, proud young man who is frustrated with the older generation. Yeah, they have problems, but he has problems, too.

He thinks that he can better refute Job than they can. He thinks he has better theology, better arguments, he's on "God's side" - he even says he speaks for God! And I think what we see in Elihu is that although he's not as bad as his other friends, he doesn't offer much that's helpful either.

Realistically, of Job's 3 friends, Elihu's section is by far the longest and for all that space he doesn't move the argument at all. So what do we do with him? How are we to understand his section in the big scheme of Job and in the big scheme of the Bible?

The big takeaway I think we have from this is that if you are young - and by young I mean like under 50 - we need to be very careful that we don't have a prideful dismissive attitude toward those who are older than us.

It's very easy for those who are younger, whether teenagers or 20 somethings or 30 somethings or even middle aged folks, to see how older generations are doing things and get fed up with them. "They're trying the same old things that don't work, saying the same old things that aren't true and so I'll change the world! I'll show 'em! I'll tell 'em"

And sometimes there is something to be said for a fresh look at things, fresh ideas. But there is also wisdom in knowing how much we can actually change. One of the reasons the first 3 friends failed was because Job wasn't going to change. No amount of argument was going to change Job.

This is something as followers of Christ we need to understand as well. We know that we are simply ministers of the truth and that how a person receives that truth is up to the Holy Spirit. Whether talking to unbelievers or believers, all we can do is gently and patiently tell people the truth. Whether they do anything with it is up to God.

So I want to look at Elihu. And as with the other friends, we are mostly warned about what not to do. But toward the end I think he does actually offer some helpful perspective. So we'll look at 3 things things not to do, and 2 things that are commendable.

1) The first problem with Elihu is that he speaks out of anger.

One of the hard parts of Job is that we have no body language, no voice inflection. Someone has said that 80% of communication is non-verbal. Well, Job is a book that is almost entirely dialogue. And all we have is the verbal. All we have is the written transcript of what was said. And we can get the gist of most of it, there are parts where it would be helpful to know whether someone was being sarcastic or literal or hyperbolic.

But here, we know the attitude with which Elihu speaks - he speaks out of anger. **Read 1-5**

So this serves as something of a biographical introduction to Elihu. Like the other friends we don't know much about either his ancestry or where exactly he is from. There is some evidence that he is probably from east of Israel like Job and the other friends. But there's nothing we can confirm for sure.

But what we do find out is that everything Elihu says is an outpouring of anger. Four times in five verses we see that Elihu burns with anger. That is a very vivid description of his wrath. He wasn't mildly annoyed or simply frustrated. This was a deep anger. It's the same phrase that is used by God in **Chapter 42** when God says his anger burns toward Eliphaz and the other 2 friends. Elihu is outraged.

And that rage is going to taint everything he says. That's important to understand because there are parts of what Elihu says that could be taken in a good way or a bad way, but when you understand his response is a response of anger it lends to a more consistent view of who he is.

And maybe since Elihu doesn't get rebuked by God he isn't as bad as the other 3 friends, but after 6 chapters of monologue, he hasn't done anything to help the situation either. He's wasted angry breath for 6 chapters. Six chapters of angry ranting. That's the same size as the book of Galatians or Ephesians or 1 Timothy worth of angry ranting that ultimately accomplishes nothing.

And he's mad because he's not getting what he wants. And what he wants, just like the other friends, is for Job to admit some kind of fault. He wants Job to admit that what he got was what he deserved from God.

In **Vs. 2** we see he burns with anger at Job because Job is still justifying himself. He's still saying "I did nothing wrong." Instead Elihu thinks Job should be saying "God did the right thing by punishing me."

He burns at the friends for the same reason. **Read 3**

"Can't you guys do anything right? Can't you argue the case and get a confession out of Job?" He thinks if only they had been quicker on their feet, or been able to argue the case better than Job would have been caught in his words. **Read 5**

"You guys are just going to give up? You have nothing more to say?"

Maybe they have nothing more to say because Job isn't going to change his mind because Job, in fact, did nothing wrong to deserve this. Which, of course, is what we've known all along. The confession that Elihu and the other friends want is not going to happen because there is nothing for Job to confess.

James 1:20 says that the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. That is, when we act and speak based on anger very rarely is righteousness the result.

Prov. 27:4: Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy?

Is there a case for righteous anger? Yes there is. God is righteously angry at the 3 friends at the end of the book. There are times when anger is a proper response to sin. But because we are sinful people, those times

are few and far between. It's like trying to walk across the room with a coffee cup that is filled to the brim. Can you make it across the room without spilling? Sure. Will you make it without spilling? Probably not.

That's how anger is - can we respond to people in a helpful way when we're angry? Yea. Do we usually respond to people in a helpful way when we're angry? No.

2) Second problem is that Elihu is arrogant.

So I'm going to read the rest of this chapter here in a moment, but basically what Elihu is going to say is the same thing Zophar did back in **Chapter 11**: I gotta say something. I can't not talk!

Yeah, so news flash, when that thought crosses your mind, you know what you should probably do? Not talk.

Elihu is going to talk about how he waited as long as he could. He listened to the old guys - but turns out they have no wisdom. Now, he's about ready to burst apart. **Read 6-22**

So the summary here is: The old guys didn't refute Job, so I guess I'll have to do it. Really, it's a heart of arrogance. He knows better than these other guys and he certainly knows better than Job.

Now, here's the thing. Up to this point, has Elihu even offered an argument to Job for why all of this is happening? No. Elihu hasn't offered any new information for us to consider. He's given us no new insights. He hasn't made any positive argument except to say he needs to make an argument.

In fact, he makes no argument here, and he makes no arguments in chapter 33 either. The first 2 chapters of Elihu's monologue are basically "I'm gonna tell you something really, really great. You guys didn't say anything good, but I'm going to tell you something good. I can't not tell you this great thing. The great thing I have to say is awesome. You guys are old and didn't say anything worthwhile. You guys wasted a lot of breath not saying anything. But I guess I've got to do the job."

It takes him 49 verses to say that. To some extent, Elihu is like a politician who somehow has the ability to keep producing words but never actually saying anything of substance.

This is part of his arrogance. Arrogance says I've got to talk, because people need to hear me, but I'm not sure what to say so I'll just keep on talking anyway.

Prov. 10:19: When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.

I'll be honest, as someone who basically talks for a living, this is something I have to be careful of. I think we all do. In our pride and arrogance we often think we need to make some contribution to a situation where actually we might be better suited simply to ask more questions or gain more information. We're not experts at everything, and we don't know everything about everyone. Yet we often feel compelled to speak.

Matt. 12:36: On the day of judgment people will give an account for every careless word they speak.

That's scary. But I think it's common for many people to think they need to say something. To fill the dead space.

Now, Elihu does say some things, but he doesn't actually address any of the issues that Job brings up. He sounds like he has wisdom. But I just want you to imagine a friend of yours saying what he says to you. How would you take this? Notice how he starts off. He basically says "I'm upright and I speak for God." **Read 33:1-11**

"See, Job, I'm upright! I'm without sin! God made me. **Look at 36:1-4. Read**

Did you catch that? One who is perfect in knowledge is with you? Well, I wonder who Elihu thinks that is?

You're the one saying "I'm pure" but look at your life, buddy."

Can you imagine a friend saying that to you? "My heart is upright and pure and I'm speaking to you from God" all the while condemning you for being sinful when you're not?

Elihu goes on. Remember one of Job's complaints is that God doesn't answer him. Job wants an audience with God to ask God questions. Admittedly, Job was stepping out of line in some of his statements. But Elihu's response is that God has answered Job.

He gives 2 ways that God answers people. The first is that God gives nightmares to people. The second is that God makes people sick. **Read 12-18**

Elihu says one way God answers people is through dreams. Actually, the idea is more like nightmares or night terrors. And to some extent this is a common thing in the OT. But this doesn't seem to be something that everyone experiences all the time. So "Hey, if you're messing up God will give you nightmares" is not the best observation. Neither is sickness. **Read 19-28**

Now, remember, Elihu is talking to Job who is currently covered from head to toe in sores that have been scraped open because they are so painful. So this is a subtle nod to the retribution principle we've seen all through the book. Retribution principle is that God rewards righteousness immediately and he punishes wickedness immediately. He's saying, "Well, if you looked in the mirror you'd know God was answering your questions. He is speaking to you."

Now, does God sometimes use physical pain to get our attention? Sure. Paul says he had a thorn in the flesh that he might learn to rely on God. Sometimes God does give us a physical trial - but not always. Is it good to maybe examine our lives to see if there something we need to change when we have physical ailments? Sure. But we need to be careful second-guessing God. Just because we have something physical going on does not mean we are in sin and this is a clear answer from God. Sometimes it is, but not always.

This is much more subtle than the other 3 friends. But it's still the same old argument repackaged. Elihu says: you want answers from God? This is how he answers. **Read 29-33**

Again, the arrogance. "I'll listen to you, but I really have all the answers and I'll be the one to teach you wisdom"

3) Elihu repackages all the same arguments.

We've seen the retribution principle before - God always rewards obedience quickly and always punishes disobedience quickly. Elihu makes that exact same argument - maybe a little more subtle, but this is exactly what he says: what God has done is righteous. **Read 34:1-15**

So he paraphrases Job's arguments - Job says "I am in the right" and what God has done is not right. That's a rough approximation to what Job has said all along.

And so he rebukes Job. He says Job drinks up scoffing in Vs. 7. What does that mean? Is Job really an evildoer after all? No. The idea is: if that's what you believe, you're essentially walking in the ways of scoffers.

And then he goes on to talk about the retribution principle. The same principle we've seen every single friend make. God is not wicked, he only does the right thing. Is that true? Yes. So what he's doing to you right now is justice. Oh - so close.

The irony here, is that Elihu spent 49 verses talking about how incompetent the other 3 friends were at convincing Job - and then he uses the exact same logic that they used.

4 + 4 =8; 4 + 4 =8; 4 + 4 =8 - you guys don't know what you're talking about. Let me explain it: 4 + 4 =8.

It's the same arguments, just repackaged. Maybe not quite as harsh as some of the other friends, but the same argument, nonetheless. He talks about how God is wise and just and sovereign over all things.

As his speech wears on, it seems that Elihu changes course a little. There are still elements of poor logic and some of the same rhetoric that the other friends have, but I think there's also some good we can glean from Elihu.

4) Elihu rebukes Job's poor logic. What Elihu does here is to take some of Job's own arguments and refute them. Elihu picks 2 simple arguments that Job has made. First: that Job has some kind of right to seek an audience with God. The other thing Elihu takes issue with is Job saying maybe it doesn't really matter if I'm righteous or not since God seems whimsical." **Read 35:1-3**

So those are the 2 paraphrases from Job's own words from earlier in the book. And maybe we sympathize with Job a little bit. Don't we have a right to ask God why he's doing what he's doing? Don't we get an audience with him? Maybe even at the judgement? And if the wicked are often better off than the righteous, does it really matter what we do?

Those are honest questions and I think if we're honest people we've probably asked them from time to time. What good does being honest do me when someone who lies often gets ahead? Does God really care? Elihu says he does. He answers in reverse order. **Read 4-8**

His answer to the second question - How am I better off than if I had sinned - is a little unusual. It's basically this: our sinning doesn't set God back in the grand scheme of things. Does God want us to sin? No. But is God's design somehow thwarted when we sin? No.

Elihu doesn't quite get there, but the logical conclusion of what he is saying is: the reason we obey is not because we get something good out of it, but because it pleases God. Our sinning and our righteousness don't add to or take away from God. But it's better to seek to please him.

Here's the response to the first question: It is my right to get an audience with God. Elihu says that it depends on your heart. **Read 9-16**

Elihu says: there are a lot of people who suffer oppression in life. And they call out to God. But God doesn't listen to those who are proud. He doesn't listen to the ones who deride God saying "where is my maker?" As though God existence somehow evaporates just because we have a trial.

Those are empty cries. And what I think he's getting at is something we need to take to heart: how we approach God in a trial is very important. If our heart is proud and angry toward God, God is right to discipline us. He doesn't regard empty words.

What he wants are words of humility. Thy will be done, Father. This is what God wants.

5) Elihu gets the majesty of God in creation.

Chapter 37 actually serves as a great segway into the Lord's response that follows because it's essentially what God would say. **Read 37:1-13**

What he is appealing to here is that God is sovereign over all things - ice, wind, water, animals, clouds, lightning and thunder - and he uses it all to accomplish his purpose.

One of the neat things about the scientific age is that we have more understanding of how the world around us works. We don't always know why it works. We don't understand quantum physics - but we can describe to some extent. The ancients didn't know any of that. For them the issue was never how it worked, but who made it come to pass.

At the end of the day, all weather, all life, all of creation was subject to God's will. That's still true, but we often forget it. Elihu says God causes it to snow and thunder so that the beasts go into their lair and then God sends

the winter. We might be sitting there going “Man, another rainy day” but God is up in heaven preparing his creation for winter time.

And what we’ll see is God go into detail about how he’s got a lot going on all the time in all of the universe. Our story and our lives are just one little part of that. We might not like some aspects of it, but God’s got all of creation in mind.

Elihu actually ends with a pretty amazing summary. **Read 37:14-24**

That’s a pretty grand view of God. A lot of these questions God is going to ask in a similar way in the very next chapter.

Maybe our angry, arrogant punk isn’t all bad after all. It’s interesting to me that no one responds to Elihu. Not Job, not the friends, not even God. Maybe that’s because his section isn’t worth noting. The bad things he says have all been said before. And the good things he says, God will repeat.

Maybe one note of application is that sometimes those who are not very helpful in their rebuke are still sometimes worth listening to. If we only listen

If you think about Jesus’s response to the disciples it varied. Sometimes it was internal grief, sometimes it was a pointed question, sometimes it was “get behind me, Satan.” No matter how harsh or gentle, it was always worth listening to.

And in the same way, God’s people know that God uses imperfect vessels in our lives. Sometimes the rebuke is right on, sometimes the rebuke is off base, sometimes it’s somewhere in between. But in humility we should listen to it no matter the content that maybe by God’s grace we would be further conformed to his image.

Pray