

“The Almighty Gives Him Understanding”

Texts: Job 32:1-37:24; 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

One of the ways in which God demonstrates his graciousness to us is when he restrains our own inherent sinfulness. Sometimes this happens when God reveals to us the error of our ways so that we repent, before we go too far. This is the case in Job chapters 31-32, when Job’s speech comes to an end and Elihu’s speech now begins. In his closing response to his three friends, Job passionately defends his honor. Despite the allegations and innuendos made by his three friends that Job had sinned, which in their minds explains why he is suffering so greatly, Job knows that he has done nothing to bring down God’s covenant curses. Thus Job demands to be vindicated before God. And while Job has not sinned as Satan has predicted that he would—Satan believed that Job would blame God for his suffering and then curse God to his face—Job now comes perilously close to the edge of self-righteousness. While Job does not blame God for his circumstances, in the course of seeking his own vindication, Job has become defiant. His speech has become careless and he has lost proper perspective on his suffering. Because he is gracious toward Job, and even though Job cannot yet see it, God will humble him before he goes any farther. Job has successfully passed his ordeal. God will soon restore him and vindicate his good name. Things will work out in the end because God is good and always keeps his promises. But first, Job will be humbled. He will be humbled because God is being gracious with his righteous servant.

We now move into the concluding section of this book, where Job gets the very thing he’s been demanding—an audience with God. Yes, Job will be vindicated in the end. Yes, he will get an answer to his questions about the suffering of the righteous. It may not be the answer he wants or expects, but it will be an answer nonetheless. But before the happy ending to the story comes about, God will appear to Job from the midst of the whirlwind, bringing this amazing story to a close. Job will learn that true wisdom is to be found in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who is the wisdom of God incarnate. But before God speaks, a forerunner must come and prepare the way for the Lord.

At the end of Job’s final discourse, Job uttered the words recorded in Job 31:35-37: *“Oh, that I had someone to hear me! I sign now my defense—let the Almighty answer me; let my accuser put his indictment in writing. Surely I would wear it on my shoulder, I would put it on like a crown. I would give him an account of my every step; like a prince I would approach him.”* Job has been the recipient of suffering through this divinely-ordained trial by ordeal. Job has endured the loss of everything, all of his possessions, all of his children, and even his good reputation. What is more, Job has received terrible counsel from his friends which inflicted more pain, perhaps, than the sores on his body. As the debate unfolds throughout chapters 4-31, Job’s friends cannot deal with the obvious—the righteous do indeed suffer and the wicked often prosper. In fact, by the time the debate has come to end, Job has gone from being the one receiving terrible theological advice to becoming the teacher of those who seek true wisdom. As we have seen, Job has silenced his friends. But even though he is right, the whole process has embittered him and although he seeks true wisdom from God, he has become careless and has lost sight of the most important thing—that God’s ways are always true and right and that Job’s final vindication can only take place once he is reminded of God’s perfect righteousness.

Having graduated from the school of suffering, and sensing that what is truly necessary to bridge the gap

between the mystery of suffering and true wisdom is a divine mediator, Job is still a sinner. As such, he is about to cross the line in terms of his relationship with God. Job has fulfilled the specific terms of his trial by ordeal—he has not blamed God for his troubles after his possessions and family had been taken from him. Job is a justified sinner whose upright and blameless life reflects his faith in the God of the promise. But even though he is justified from sin’s guilt and even though he has been liberated from sin’s power, Job remains a sinner. It is one thing for Job to demand that God vindicate him from the charges that he has sinned so as to provoke God’s wrath, when, in fact, he has not. But it is another thing to demand that YHWH treat him like a prince because of what he has just endured. Job is now on the verge of becoming utterly self-righteous and demanding in his dealings with God, and God in his grace, is about to humble Job, before he crosses the line and says something he ought not say.

Enter Elihu. The way in which God restrains Job’s sin is quite remarkable in its own right as seen in the lengthy speech of a certain Elihu, who has, apparently, overheard the entire dialogue between Job and his three friends and who can restrain himself no more.

Like Job and his three friends, Elihu does not have the benefit of having read the prologue of the book, so he too knows nothing of the true nature of Job’s trial by ordeal. He does not have all the information needed to assess Job’s situation accurately. But Elihu does see that God has been gracious to Job despite Job’s harsh words about feeling abandoned by God and Elihu’s speech (wordy and repetitive) serves to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord in the whirlwind.¹ Four times in what follows, we will read that Elihu was angry with all four of the participants. In Elihu’s estimation, Job and his friends are wide of the mark when it comes to the matter of Job’s suffering. Job has erred on the side of self-justification. He has lost sight of God’s righteous dealings with all of his creatures, even when they suffer. But Job’s friends also err by condemning Job personally and accusing him of sin because of their faulty understanding of the principle of divine retribution and their cruel application of it to Job. They have not been able to offer any resolution to the mystery of the suffering of the righteous. Job has silenced them.

In terms of the literary structure of the book, Elihu gives us the perspective of a pious believer on what has just happened between Job and his friends. More importantly, Elihu’s speech sets the stage for the Lord himself to speak in chapters 38-39, when we get God’s perspective on this whole debate.² Keeping this in mind, we now turn to the speech of Elihu beginning in Job 32:1. The four debaters have run out of steam and the debate has come to an end and so we read in verse 1, “*so these three men stopped answering Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes.*” How can you argue with someone who thinks he is right and refuses to be swayed by anything that is said? In verse 2, we are introduced to Elihu. “*But Elihu son of Barakel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, became very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God.*” Elihu’s problem with Job is that Job was not nearly as worried about God’s honor as he was with his own. The last speech in which Job referred to himself as a prince who deserves to be treated as such by YHWH, clearly provokes the young man to enter the fray.

But Elihu’s anger is not only directed at Job, it is also directed at his three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar) as well. In verse 3, we read, “[Elihu] *was also angry with the three friends, because they had found no way to refute Job, and yet had condemned him.*” The main point Job offered in his defense has gone unchallenged. The righteous do suffer in this life while the wicked do indeed prosper. The

¹ Kline, “Job,” p. 483.

² Andersen, *Job*, p. 51.

erroneous application of the principle of divine retribution on the part of Job's friends—that God must punish the wicked in such a way that they always live miserable lives and die young—clearly does not sit well with Elihu. It is self-evidently not true, and coupled with the fact that Job's friends were forced to accuse Job of sins he did not commit so as to validate their point, their actions were shameful and did nothing to further our understanding of divine justice. It is no wonder that Job would not budge!

There is a reason as to why Elihu has waited so long to speak his mind. *“Now Elihu had waited before speaking to Job because they were older than he. But when he saw that the three men had nothing more to say, his anger was aroused.”* In the ancient world, age was associated with wisdom. So Elihu was duty bound to keep his thoughts to himself until he was asked to speak by his elders. But with the dialogue at a standstill and with nothing resolved, we read in verse 6. *“So Elihu son of Barakel the Buzite said: I am young in years, and you are old; that is why I was fearful, not daring to tell you what I know.”* But once having dared to speak, Elihu will have his say in full measure.

His speech begins in verse 7. *“I thought, ‘Age should speak; advanced years should teach wisdom.’ But it is the spirit in a man, the breath of the Almighty, that gives him understanding.”* Elihu understands that age and life experience may be one source of wisdom, but all true wisdom ultimately comes from God, which, Elihu understands to come in the form of the spirit of life God breathes into man.³ While Elihu correctly points out that wisdom must come from God, he does not yet understand the role of the Holy Spirit, and the self-revelation of God in his word, which is the true and final source of all wisdom.

This is a point that Paul will later make clear in his first letter to the church in Corinth, when he wrote about the person and work of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, *“We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’ -- but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. . . . We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ.”*

While Paul is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and has the mind of Christ—i.e. and therefore possesses true wisdom about spiritual things—Elihu, at this early stage of redemptive history only knows that such wisdom is needed. He knows that true wisdom must come from God and that the performances he has just witnessed on the part of Job's three friends, clearly indicates that despite their age and preeminent social standing, they do not possess the kind of wisdom that Elihu sees is needed. Thus Elihu has correctly diagnosed the problem—men and women need wisdom from God to understand human suffering and that human experience and opinion are poor substitutes. But he cannot yet fully understand that such wisdom will come through God's revelation of himself in his word. That point will soon become clear enough when God speaks from the midst of the whirlwind. When God speaks, true wisdom is revealed.

³ Kline, “Job,” p. 483.

And so Elihu's quest for wisdom frames the following as we read in verses 9-22 when Elihu takes up this quest in earnest. *"It is not only the old who are wise, not only the aged who understand what is right. Therefore I say: Listen to me; I too will tell you what I know. I waited while you spoke, I listened to your reasoning; while you were searching for words, I gave you my full attention. But not one of you has proved Job wrong; none of you has answered his arguments. Do not say, 'We have found wisdom; let God refute him, not man.' But Job has not marshaled his words against me, and I will not answer him with your arguments. They are dismayed and have no more to say; words have failed them. Must I wait, now that they are silent, now that they stand there with no reply? I too will have my say; I too will tell what I know. For I am full of words, and the spirit within me compels me; inside I am like bottled-up wine, like new wineskins ready to burst. I must speak and find relief; I must open my lips and reply. I will show partiality to no one, nor will I flatter any man; for if I were skilled in flattery, my Maker would soon take me away."* Having made his case to be heard by Job and the older men (Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar), Elihu now addresses his comments specifically to Job.

In the first 7 verses of Job 33, Elihu extends a challenge of sorts to Job. *"But now, Job, listen to my words; pay attention to everything I say. I am about to open my mouth; my words are on the tip of my tongue. My words come from an upright heart; my lips sincerely speak what I know. The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life. Answer me then, if you can; prepare yourself and confront me. I am just like you before God; I too have been taken from clay. No fear of me should alarm you, nor should my hand be heavy upon you."* Repeatedly, Job had demanded a trial before God, but then complained that such a trial would overwhelm him. Now Elihu calls Job's bluff. Let Job argue his case with another mere mortal. Let Job respond to Elihu's arguments. In effect, what Elihu is saying is, "You want a trial, Job—I'll give you a trial!"

In verses 8-11 Elihu does his best to summarize Job's main point. *"But you have said in my hearing-I heard the very words-I am pure and without sin; I am clean and free from guilt. Yet God has found fault with me; he considers me his enemy. He fastens my feet in shackles; he keeps close watch on all my paths."* Yes, Job is innocent, in the sense that he has not sinned as his friends have accused him. But Job is still a sinner—a justified sinner—but a sinner nonetheless. In the process of protesting his innocence and demanding vindication, Job's righteous anger and indignation (not wrong in themselves) have become conceit, which according to one writer is "incredibly bald and arrogant [as seen] in Job's final words".⁴ It is one thing to defend your conduct. It is another to demand your rights, especially when, as a sinner, Job has only those rights given to him by a gracious God in the first place! Elihu now points this out.

Thus in verses 12-30, Elihu takes issue with Job, rebuking Job for not taking sufficient account of the need to defend God's honor, and not his own. *"But I tell you, in this you are not right, for God is greater than man. Why do you complain to him that he answers none of man's words?"* Not only does Elihu acknowledge the need for divine revelation, he begins his explanation as to why the righteous suffer—divine chastisement. *"For God does speak—now one way, now another—though man may not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men as they slumber in their beds, he may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings, to turn man from wrongdoing and keep him from pride, to preserve his soul from the pit, his life from perishing by the sword. Or 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."*

⁴ Kline, "Job," p. 483.

Even while people live under the sentence of death because of sin, God does not abandon them. God is being gracious to his people by delivering them from the pit, even when they are in the midst of the depths of despair. There are times when God chastens his people to deliver them. *“Yet if there is an angel on his side as a mediator, one out of a thousand, to tell a man what is right for him, to be gracious to him and say, ‘Spare him from going down to the pit; I have found a ransom for him’-then 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 by 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 soul from going down to the pit, and I will live to enjoy the light.’ ‘God does all these things to a man-twice, even three times- to turn back his soul from the pit, that the light of life may shine on him.”*

As Elihu sees it, one reason why the righteous suffer is because this is one of God’s ways to chasten his servants, so as to rescue those living under the shadow of death. Eliphaz had also brought up the idea of chastening with Job, but Eliphaz believed that the degree of chastening was in direct proportion to the degree of someone’s sin–this is why he was forced to accuse Job of having sinned, because Job’s suffering was so great. Elihu, on the other hand, sees suffering and chastisement as an act of God’s grace. God chastises his own, which means that suffering can be a sign of God’s favor. According to Elihu, God chastens those he loves as a means of drawing them to himself, especially when they come near the pit, (i.e., come near to destruction). Thus Elihu can correctly point out that there is no automatic relationship between suffering and someone’s sin. This also explains why the suffering of the righteous seems so arbitrary to us. We do not always know what God’s purposes are and why some are chastened and others are not. Elihu has succeeded in taking the sting out of the suffering of the righteous and the mystery of the prosperity of the unrighteous.

In verses 31-33, Elihu applies his understanding of this point directly to Job. *“Pay attention, Job, and listen to me; be silent, and I will speak. If you have anything to say, answer me; speak up, for I want you to be cleared. But if not, then listen to me; be silent, and I will teach you wisdom.”* We can fill in the gap and assume that Job was both blessed by what Elihu had to say, and yet given Job’s silence, he must have also become aware that many of the things he said in his defense were uttered in self-righteousness and that he did not acknowledge that God had been gracious to him, even in the midst of his pain. Job is probably relieved to hear Elihu’s point, and yet at the same time, convicted of his sinfulness.

Since the next part of Elihu’s speech (found in Job 34) is repetitive, we skip to verses 10-28, but where Elihu addresses the subject of God’s righteousness. Since Job has been insisting that he is righteous, how about considering God’s righteousness first? That will put Job’s situation, as well as the false understanding of God’s retributive justice on the part of his friends, in their proper perspectives. In verse 10 Elihu asks the debaters, *“So listen to me, you men of understanding. Far be it from God to do evil, from the Almighty to do wrong. He repays a man for what he has done; he brings upon him what his conduct deserves. It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice.”* Yes, God must punish sin, but will do so in his own time and ways. God is sovereign *“Who appointed him over the earth? Who put him in charge of the whole world? If it were his intention and he withdrew his spirit and breath, all mankind would perish together and man would return to the dust. ‘If you have understanding, hear this; listen to what I say. Can he who hates justice govern? Will you condemn the just and mighty One? Is he not the One who says to kings, ‘You are worthless,’ and to nobles, ‘You are wicked,’ who shows no partiality to princes and does not favor the rich over the poor, for they are all the work of his hands? They die in an instant, in the middle of the night; the people are shaken and they pass away; the mighty are removed without human hand. ‘His eyes are on the ways of men; he sees their every step. There is no dark place, no deep shadow, where evildoers can hide. God has no need to*

examine men further, that they should come before him for judgment. Without inquiry he shatters the mighty and sets up others in their place. Because he takes note of their deeds, he overthrows them in the night and they are crushed. He punishes them for their wickedness where everyone can see them, because they turned from following him and had no regard for any of his ways. They caused the cry of the poor to come before him, so that he heard the cry of the needy.” God gives all life. God judges with perfect righteousness. He knows all the facts. He does nothing capriciously or improperly. Job needs to consider this matter carefully, since he claims to believe this, as do his friends.

To even question God’s goodness is folly. In verse 29 Elihu asks, *“But if he remains silent, who can condemn him? If he hides his face, who can see him? Yet he is over man and nation alike, to keep a godless man from ruling, from laying snares for the people. ‘Suppose a man says to God, ‘I am guilty but will offend no more. Teach me what I cannot see; if I have done wrong, I will not do so again.’ Should God then reward you on your terms, when you refuse to repent? You must decide, not I; so tell me what you know. ‘Men of understanding declare, wise men who hear me say to me, ‘Job speaks without knowledge; his words lack insight.’ Oh, that Job might be tested to the utmost for answering like a wicked man! To his sin he adds rebellion; scornfully he claps his hands among us and multiplies his words against God.”* Notice that Job remains silent. He does not reply. He realizes he may have said too much and overstated his case. His words come close to sounding like those of an angry pagan.

In the opening words of chapter 35, Elihu continues to speak to Job, asking him to think about his charge that God has not vindicated him. *“Then Elihu said: ‘Do you think this is just? You say, ‘I will be cleared by God.’ Yet you ask him, ‘What profit is it to me, and what do I gain by not sinning?’ ‘I would like to reply to you and to your friends with you. Look up at the heavens and see; gaze at the clouds so high above you. If you sin, how does that affect him? If your sins are many, what does that do to him? If you are righteous, what do you give to him, or what does he receive from your hand? Your wickedness affects only a man like yourself, and your righteousness only the sons of men. ‘Men cry out under a load of oppression; they plead for relief from the arm of the powerful. But no one says, ‘Where is God my Maker, who gives songs in the night, who teaches more to us than to the beasts of the earth and makes us wiser than the birds of the air?’ He does not answer when men cry out because of the arrogance of the wicked. Indeed, God does not listen to their empty plea; the Almighty pays no attention to it. How much less, then, will he listen when you say that you do not see him, that your case is before him and you must wait for him, and further, that his anger never punishes and he does not take the least notice of wickedness. So Job opens his mouth with empty talk; without knowledge he multiplies words.”*

Job’s problem is not that God is indifferent to his people, but that his people are indifferent to him. They do not seek God because of who he is, but they only turn to him in times of trial, when they want or need something. With these words, Elihu summons Job back to his original words of faith, recorded in Job 1:21, *“the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.”*⁵ Yes, Job has suffered much, but he needs to be careful and not allow himself to be carried away with self-righteousness. To do anything else is to abandon the quest for true wisdom.

In chapters 36-37, Elihu initially returns to the theme of the suffering of the righteous, reminding Job that God is gracious to us, even when we suffer. In verses 5 and following, Elihu declares, *“God is mighty, but does not despise men; he is mighty, and firm in his purpose. He does not keep the wicked alive but gives the afflicted their rights. He does not take his eyes off the righteous; he enthrones them with kings*

⁵ Kline, “Job,” p. 485.

and exalts them forever. But if men are bound in chains, held fast by cords of affliction, he tells them what they have done—that they have sinned arrogantly. He makes them listen to correction and commands them to repent of their evil. If they obey and serve him, they will spend the rest of their days in prosperity and their years in contentment. But if they do not listen, they will perish by the sword and die without knowledge.” In the dim light of the early stages of redemptive history before the coming of Christ, Elihu believes that the righteous suffer, not because they have committed some particular sin, but because the Lord is correcting them, teaching them, restraining them, given their inherent sinfulness. God owes them nothing, but graciously gives them life. What is more, God has promised to reward all the graduates of the school of suffering in the end. His promise—they will be enthroned with kings!

But in verse 13, Elihu discusses how God’s sovereignty is seen by unbelievers. *“The godless in heart harbor resentment; even when he fetters them, they do not cry for help. They die in their youth, among male prostitutes of the shrines.”* But for believers it is different. *“those who suffer he delivers in their suffering; he speaks to them in their affliction. He is wooing you from the jaws of distress to a spacious place free from restriction, to the comfort of your table laden with choice food.”* Job needs to see how he has become embittered and proud, and sounds just like the unbelievers to whom Elihu has just referred. *“But now you are laden with the judgment due the wicked; judgment and justice have taken hold of you.”*

Having considered the greatness of God’s purposes, throughout the balance of chapters 36 and 37, Elihu is moved to praise God for all his goodness, seen throughout the glories of creation. *“God is exalted in his power. Who is a teacher like him? Who has prescribed his ways for him, or said to him, ‘You have done wrong’? Remember to extol his work, which men have praised in song. All mankind has seen it; men gaze on it from afar. How great is God—beyond our understanding! The number of his years is past finding out. He draws up the drops of water, which distill as rain to the streams; the clouds pour down their moisture and abundant showers fall on mankind. Who can understand how he spreads out the clouds, how he thunders from his pavilion? See how he scatters his lightning about him, bathing the depths of the sea. This is the way he governs the nations and provides food in abundance.”* Elihu has no idea that he is speaking not only as a worshiper of YHWH, but as a prophet as well. Elihu is about to hear the very thing he has been trying to describe through his words of praise—the voice of God. And without knowing it, he has prepared the way for the coming of the Lord in the whirlwind.

In chapter 37, Elihu continues to praise YHWH. He has no idea of what is about to happen. *“At this my heart pounds and leaps from its place. Listen! Listen to the roar of his voice, to the rumbling that comes from his mouth. He unleashes his lightning beneath the whole heaven and sends it to the ends of the earth. After that comes the sound of his roar; he thunders with his majestic voice. When his voice resounds, he holds nothing back. God’s voice thunders in marvelous ways; he does great things beyond our understanding.”* Continuing his praise of the Almighty, we skip ahead to verses 20-24 and the end of Elihu’s discourse. *“Should he be told that I want to speak? Would any man ask to be swallowed up? Now no one can look at the sun, bright as it is in the skies after the wind has swept them clean. Out of the north he comes in golden splendor; God comes in awesome majesty. The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power; in his justice and great righteousness, he does not oppress. Therefore, men revere him, for does he not have regard for all the wise in heart?”* Elihu’s speech now ends. He has directed Job back to where he started—the gracious and sovereign God. Elihu has also prepared the way for the Lord. For the next words we read in Job in 38:1 are *“Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm.”* Everyone has spoken. Job, Bildad, Eliphaz, Zophar and Elihu have all had their say. Now the Lord will come and speak and whole the earth will be silent! Here is the wisdom all have been seeking. For the suffering and obedience of Job points us ahead to the doing and dying of the man of sorrows, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the very wisdom of God incarnate. In him, we find all that we need, including

the resolution to the mystery of suffering and the revelation of the saving purposes of God. Amen!