

What Should We Make Of Elihu?

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Date: 25 July 2021

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn to our Bible readings now. Phil Coupland is continuing his series in this Old Testament book of Job. And this evening we're introduced to this slightly mysterious character called Elihu.

And we're going to read not what's on the screen. We're going to read slightly differently. We're going to read Job chapter 32 verses 1 to 5. And then we're going to turn over and read chapter 33.

So first Job chapter 32. And we'll read the first five verses of that. And then turn over to chapter 33. So Job 32 verse 1.

So these three men ceased to answer Job because he was righteous in his own eyes. Then Elihu, the son of Barakal, 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.

[1 : 14] 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.

Over to chapter 33. And this is Elihu speaking. But now, hear my speech, O Job, and listen to all my words.

Behold, I open my mouth. The tongue in my mouth speaks. My words declare the uprightness of my heart. And what my lips know, they speak sincerely.

The Spirit of God has made me. And the breath of the Almighty gives me life. Answer me if you can. Set your words in order before me.

Take your stand. Behold, I am toward God as you are. I too was pinched off from a piece of clay. Behold, no fear of me need terrify you.

[2 : 23] My pressure will not be heavy upon you. 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 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. 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 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.

[3 : 42] 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.

If there be for him an angel, a mediator, one of the thousand, to declare to man what is right for him, and he is merciful to him, and says, Deliver him from going down into the pit.

I have found a ransom. Let his flesh become fresh with youth. Let him return to the days of his youthful vigor. 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 man 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. 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 a light of life.

[4 : 58] Pay attention, O Job. Listen to me. Be silent, and I will speak. If you have any words, answer me. Speak, for I desire to justify you.

If not, listen to me. Be silent, and I will teach you wisdom. Amen.

This is God's word, and we'll return to it again shortly. Well, good evening, and please do have your Bibles open to Job 33, and we'll come to that eventually.

Well, I wonder if you've ever been in a room where people have been having a serious debate with each other, and the atmosphere is full of tension. I remember once being in a meeting in a place where I used to work.

It was not the drone, but we were in a staff meeting, and a lot of my colleagues were really lashing out at each other in fierce debate. It was horrible. It went on for about three hours, that meeting, and in the end, there was silence.

[6 : 10] Everyone was opposed to each other, and the tension was so thick, you could have cut it with a knife. And that is what's going on at the end of Job chapter 31. There is great tension in the air.

Remember, Job has been in a heated debate with his so-called three friends. They've been arguing about why Job has gone through the horrendous suffering that we read about back in chapters 1 and 2, where wave upon wave of catastrophe swept over Job's life, and he lost everything.

His health, wealth, his great status, and of course, his precious children were all taken from him. Now, we the readers know why Job suffered that way.

In chapters 1 and 2, we're told that the Lord sovereignly allowed Satan to hit Job with all of this suffering in order to prove that Job was a genuine believer in his heart.

Now, we know that, but Job doesn't, and neither does his three friends. And so from chapter 4 to 27, they've been locked in this frenetic debate about why Job has suffered.

[7 : 17] Time and time again, Job's friends have said to him, Job, it is so obvious you've suffered because you're a guilty sinner in your heart who has not walked by repentance and faith.

You're guilty of some gross hidden sin, and you've not confessed it to the Lord, and you're being punished, Job. You're being punished. So you better turn and repent before something worse happens to you.

And their words torment Job. And time and time again, Job defends himself. He says, I'm not guilty of doing what it is you accuse me of doing.

I'm a genuine believer. I feared the Lord, and I've turned away from evil. I'm not sinless, but I walk by repentance and faith. And more than that, Job in his speeches really boldly then turns to the Lord, and he says, you're treating me unfairly.

You've turned against me, and treat me like an enemy for no good reason. Why have you done this to me? And in 29 to 31, the debate has fizzled out.

[8 : 19] The friends have run out of things to say. They can see they're getting nowhere. And Job is still adamant that he is an innocent sufferer. In 31, he rests his defense against his friend's accusation, and he demands his day in court with the Lord.

He wants to put God in the dock so that he will publicly be seen to have been a real believer who's not been punished for sin. And more than that, Job wants answers as to why the Lord has done what he has done.

And I think 31 is Job probably his boldest ever in the book, and the tension is so thick you could cut it with a knife. And it's into this tension that we hear a new voice.

Have a look at the start of chapter 32 again. Let me read these verses. So these three men ceased to answer Job because he was righteous in his own eye. That is, he claimed to be an innocent sufferer.

And Elihu, the son of Barachel, the Buzite of the family of Ram, burned with anger. He burned with anger at Job because Job seemed to justify himself rather than God. And 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.

[9 : 37] 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. So here is Elihu.

He's the man who's been there all along whilst this debate has been taking place. And when he starts to speak, our hopes are raised. We think, yeah, beauty. Could this be the man to bring wisdom?

Is this the man with understanding? Will he come and give an answer to Job's agonized why question? Will Job finally receive the care and the compassion that he needs?

Sadly, no. Now if you were to go and read the commentaries on Job, I've read a lot of commentaries on Job over the last few weeks, probably more commentaries on Job than I care to have read, but I've read a lot of them, you will find that there are many, many people who think very highly of Elihu.

Some even go so far as to say that Elihu is a prophet of the Lord. And what he says is super helpful for Job to hear. Well friends, having read Elihu's words again and again and again, I have to say, I just cannot see that at all.

[10 : 47] Let me summarize briefly my take on Elihu. And these will be the points that I'll unpack as we go through this evening. We'll come back to these points throughout the rest of the sermon. I really don't think Elihu is a prophet of the Lord, even though he claims to be that.

We'll have a look at that later. I think Elihu is an angry and a pretty arrogant young man who says some things that are true, but he wrongly applies them to Job and his suffering.

And I think that the manner in which he speaks to Job is unhelpful. And I think that Elihu, in the end, turns out to be just as harsh upon Job as the other friends. He adds torment to Job's previous torment.

Now over chapter 32 to 37, Elihu makes four uninterrupted speeches. We're not going to cover every detail tonight. I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear. But rather, I want us to dip our toe in the water, as it were, touch down on a few bits here and there, so that we start to get a sense of who Elihu is and what he is saying.

And at the end, we'll draw out one big lesson for us to think about on our way home. Well, firstly, let's ask, who is Elihu? Who is Elihu?

[12 : 00] What's he like? Well, let me mention three things beginning with the letter A. The first one is really positive. The other two, not so. First, one positive thing about Elihu is he is attentive.

He is attentive. That is, he clearly has been listening very carefully to what people have been saying, especially Job. Just have a look back chapter 33, verses 8 to 11.

Listen to this. Surely you, this is Elihu talking to Job. Surely you, Job, 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 no inequity in me.

Behold, he finds occasions against me. That's God. He counts me as his enemy. He puts my feet in the stocks and watches all my paths.

Now, these are things that Job has actually said earlier on in the book. They're direct quotes. This is one of the great things that I love about Elihu. One of probably the only things I love about Elihu is that he doesn't misrepresent Job.

[13 : 02] He listens and he accurately sums up what Job has said and he seeks to engage with Job's arguments. Unlike the other three friends.

The other three friends, if you remember, simply dismissed Job right away and they were so busy trying to spout their own mechanical ideas about God that they never, ever properly wrestled with what Job was saying.

Elihu is not like that. He is attentive listener. Well, the next note about Elihu, the next thing to note is not so positive. Elihu is angry.

Elihu is angry. We're told this four times at the start of chapter 32 and his anger has been stirred up by what he has heard. He's been attentive but the things he's listened to have really stirred up anger within him.

He's angry with the three friends because he feels that they've not answered Job properly and indeed they haven't. He's also very angry with Job because he feels that Job has tried to justify himself rather than justifying the Lord.

[14 : 07] In other words, he's angry with Job because Job claims to be an innocent sufferer. And this anger that is in Elihu's heart, it eventually bursts out in his speech and he is very, very harsh on Job, especially at the end of chapter 34 which we'll look at in a few minutes.

He doesn't show Job the compassion or care or pastoral concern that someone in Job's situation desperately needs. Just like the other three friends, Elihu doesn't offer to pray with Job.

He's so wrapped up in his anger and he starts off gentle but it doesn't last long. In the end, he just turns out to be another man who wants to show off his theories and how wise his words are.

It's clear from this anger that Elihu has never actually experienced the type of suffering that Job has experienced. The last thing to notice about Elihu is another A is that he is arrogant.

Elihu has great confidence in his words. This is obvious from the patronizing and condescending tone that he speaks in throughout these chapters and just look on please to chapter 36 verses 1 to 4.

[15 : 27] Listen to this. And Elihu continued and said bear with me a little and I will show you for I have yet something to say on God's behalf.

I will get my knowledge from afar and ascribe righteousness to my maker for truly my words are not false. One who is perfect in knowledge is with you.

Elihu claims to be perfect in knowledge. He seems to be putting himself forward as a representative of the Lord himself. If he really was a prophet of the Lord speaking the Lord's truth then how do you explain the fact that in chapter 38 the Lord himself comes personally to Job to have a speech with him.

If Elihu really was a genuine prophet then surely there would have been no need for the Lord to come at all. But the Lord's coming surely shows that Elihu is not what he claims to be.

So what's he like? Well he's a tentative which is his best feature but he's also angry and I think deeply arrogant. Well that's just a short introductory to what he's like and what he's like as a person.

[16 : 40] Let's ask our next question and this is the biggest section of our sermon this evening. What does Elihu say? What are some of the main points that Elihu makes?

And in this section of the sermon I'd like to briefly just touch down give a short overview of his four speeches. We'll spend a lot of time in the first two and we'll scoot over the last two speeches because there's a lot of repetition.

So I hope you can follow me along that's what we're going to do. It's a hot night. Let's maybe give your shoulders a wee shake. Edward gets us to do this all the time and usually I sit there and go oh no don't make me move in church.

There we go. I've just made you do it so there you go. Right. Let's have a look at the first speech in chapter 33. Chapter 32 is really Job teeing up Elihu teeing up himself and talking about the fact that he's been waiting to speak and in chapter 33 we really get the heart of his first speech and he says some true things.

He says lots of true things but he takes these truths and he badly misapplies them to Job. So in 8 33 verse 8 to 13 Elihu accurately summarizes stuff that Job has said earlier in the book as we saw a minute ago.

[17 : 58] Job has said let me sum up what Job has said God has become an enemy of mine for no good reason and God is refusing to answer me when I cry out to him for an explanation.

And in verse 14 onwards Elihu seeks to correct Job's thinking. Let's read these verses again. 33 verse 14 to 18 Elihu said to Job for God speaks in one way and 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. So in verse 14 Elihu says Job I don't agree with what you've said about God. God does speak repeatedly to men like us all the time and Job he has probably been speaking to you but you've just missed it.

You've not perceived it. Verse 15 sometimes God speaks to us in our dreams. When we're asleep verse 16 God will send warnings into our lives and into our heads when we sleep in order to get our attention.

And why does he do these things? Well verse 17 in order that man may repent not become proud in order that man may be turned away from disaster and be saved from the pit that is from death and from ruin.

[19 : 38] And in verse 19 to 28 Elihu says that God also speaks to men through suffering and pain. God will bring suffering and pain upon a man's life in order to give that man a message that he is headed for eternal ruin.

He is headed for destruction and that he must turn away from evil and pray to the Lord and when a man does that he will be spared and he will have right relationship with God again and be full of joy.

Elihu seems to be making the same point that C.S. Lewis would later make in a book called The Problem of Pain. Let me read this to you from C.S. Lewis. He says this The human spirit will not even begin to try to surrender self-will as long as everything seems to be well with it.

Error and sin both have the property that the deeper they are the less their victim suspects their existence.

They are masked evil but pain is unmasked unmistakable evil. Every man knows that something is wrong when he is being hurt.

[20 : 47] we can rest contently in our sins but pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures speaks to us in our conscience but shouts at us in our pains.

It is God's megaphone that is suffering is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world. And that is what Elihu is saying to Job here in verse 9-28. He is saying Job the suffering you are going through it is really God showing you a severe mercy because you were about to head down the wrong way in life.

It is obvious that that is what has happened to you Job. The Lord brought the suffering upon you in order to stop you from going away to turn you around to come back to the Lord.

Now friends what Elihu says here about God using suffering about him showing this severe mercy to wandering people that is true that is a way God operates it's biblical that is a way that God treats his runaways so that they will turn back to him and be saved.

And yet when Elihu applies this truth to Job and his suffering he is so wrong and we know that's true from chapters 1 and 2 that is not why Job has suffered in the way that he has suffered.

[22 : 08] So Elihu he says true things but in speech number 1 he is so so wrong. Now let's move on to his second speech this is chapter 34 and things go from bad to worse really.

In chapter 33 Elihu's tone was fairly non-threatening he was pretty gentle with Job but in chapter 34 that goes out of the window and Elihu's anger seems to burst out.

Please look at verse 5 and 6. This is Elihu again accurately recounting a complaint that Job made. Elihu says 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. So Elihu says Job I've heard you claim that you are an innocent genuine repentant believer and you also claim that the Lord has caused you to suffer for no good reason.

Therefore the Lord has denied you justice. And in verse 7-9 Elihu responds to Job's complaint in words that pretty much echo the other three friends from the rest of the book.

[23 : 21] Let's look at verse 7-9. What man is like Job who drinks up scoffing like water who travels in company with evildoers and walks with the wicked men for he has said it profits a man nothing that he should take delight in God.

His words are full of indignation at Job and basically the argument for the rest of the chapter what Elihu says is that God is absolutely sovereign and absolutely just and therefore Job's complaint must be totally wrong.

The Lord is just he does not allow innocent faithful believers to suffer. So therefore Job must be a wicked man a great sinner says Elihu. And just look at the end of chapter 34 look at verse 35-37 look at how he ends this speech.

Imagine saying these words to Job as he sat there covered in sores and pain and unanguish. He says Job speaks without knowledge his words without insight.

Would that Job were tried to the end because he answers like wicked men for he adds rebellion to his sin he claps his hands among us and multiplies his words against God.

[24 : 42] Friends I said earlier that I'm really not convinced that Elihu is a prophet of the Lord and these verses surely must confirm that because Elihu's assessment of Job is so utterly different to the assessment of the Lord's take on Job that we find at the end of the book.

At the end of the book the Lord is going to appear publicly and he will vindicate Job and say this is my servant who whilst he said heated things he has spoken rightly of me he's a real believer my servant whereas here this man who thinks he's a prophet of the Lord clashes with that take and he says Job is a terrible rebel a sinner who's spoken wrongly of the Lord so again in his second speech Elihu gets Job terribly wrong we'll pick up the pace in Elihu's third speech in chapter 35 he addresses the subject of God's detachment so Job has complained that God is silent he says God is so silent he's so distant I'm desperate for the Lord to come to me and to give me my day in court so that I can talk over this with him and Elihu says in response to that he says well Job you've talked about God's silence and detachment but it shouldn't surprise you Job because the Lord is so great so transcendent why should he ever be bothered to come and answer a mere mortal like you and just look at chapter 35 verse 12 to 14

Elihu speaking to Job says they that's suffering people cry out but he God does not answer because of the pride of evil men surely God does not hear an empty cry nor does the almighty regard it how much less Job when you say that you do not see him that the case is before him and you are waiting for him so essentially Elihu is saying to Job that he is a proud evil man he's a hypocrite and God will never take any real notice of his case it's so cruel and also it's deeply unbiblical because whilst God is the almighty sovereign transcendent king over all things he is also the God who knows and deals personally with every member of his precious flock personally listen to Bob Fowl the great Bob Fowl on these verses he says this Elihu alleges that God does not listen to human cries because those who cry are hypocrites now that can be true in some cases but this is emphatically not the case with Job indeed if

Elihu is right God simply will not appear to Job and thus it's difficult to imagine a greater marginalizing of Elihu than the spectacular appearance of God which is shortly to happen now Elihu rightly states that God is great and beyond our understanding there's truth in what he says here there's truth in the fact that the Lord doesn't listen to unbelieving hypocrites when they cry out to him but again Elihu is misapplying these words to Job Elihu needs a good dose of Isaiah 40 where the overwhelming grandeur of God if you remember that chapter it's actually celebrated as a reason for trusting the Lord because the Lord who is above all things the king of the universe the maker he also comes down to those who hope in him and he renews their strength they will soar like eagles and they will run and not grow weary they will walk and not be faint that is what Job will experience at the end of the book so again in speech number three

Elihu gets it so so wrong then in his final speech chapters 36 to 37 which will be the quickest summary of all these chapters some of you will be pleased to know I'm pleased to know because the sweat is dripping off of me right now don't look too closely please do not zoom in on the cameras but in this final speech Elihu starts off by recapping some of the arguments that he's already made about the Lord using suffering as a severe mercy he also argues that suffering is sent by God in order to teach people lessons and to give them a deeper understanding about his ways and again that's all true but he doesn't need to say it to Job because Job has never been in any doubt about the unfathomable greatness of God just go back and read chapter 9 later on when you go home you will see that that's the case Job's problem is not doubting the power of

[29 : 35] God rather Job's problem is that it seems that the all-powerful God that he's known and trusted in and looked to for mercy has turned against him for no apparent reason but nevertheless Elihu carries on talking again and again and again he loves the sound of his own voice and actually if you were to take chapter 37 out of context it is a really good chapter full of loads of rich doctrine loads of truths about the Lord I think it's actually Elihu at his best he describes the almighty power of the Lord and the way in which the Lord sovereignly works through the created order and he says the Lord is to be feared which remember was the big big take home message of the central chapter of the book in 28 it's the key thing that we are to do in whatever circumstances of our lives to fear the Lord and yet as Elihu says this I think the author wants us to picture a little comedy moment

Elihu's standing there on the ash heap and he's waxing lyrical to all of his audience he's going on and on about the majesty of God putting himself forward as a spokesman for God saying that he is bringing wisdom to the situation the final word and up above him at the start of chapter 37 it is implied that above him is gathering a thunderstorm and the thunderstorm is getting louder and louder and louder and little does Elihu know that above his head is no ordinary thunderstorm but the Lord God himself getting ready to appear to come in that storm and to speak to his suffering servant Job and to give Job answers well we hope to give Job answers come back next Sunday where God willing we shall listen to what the Lord says to his suffering servant well as we close let's just consider one big lesson one big lesson

I think it's clear that Elihu is yet another example given to us of how not to speak to a suffering Christian friend he is attentive and that is a good thing and we should be like that with people who suffer we should give them space listen to them take what they say seriously engage with what they say but his anger his arrogance are things that we must shun yes our suffering friends might say heated things against God Job says heated things against God but surely we must show them compassion and realise that when people are in the pit they will say things that are heated and we don't need to respond with anger we need to respond with care and compassion and if we're to speak words of challenge to them we must be so careful of how we take biblical truths and apply them to the situation and again listen to

Bob Fowle on these Elihu chapters he says this there is a salutary lesson that even the speaking of truth if it's not done from a heart of love is more likely to lead to blindness and confusion than to transformation Elihu takes great slabs of truth truth and constructs a monstrous edifice without doors or windows worse he uses these same slabs of truth as missiles to rain down upon Job's head he knows it all and thus he can learn nothing from the living spirit thus it is that those who want to apply the living truth to their contemporaries must approach it in a spirit of humility humility and a willingness to learn themselves Elihu's comments are not marked by the spirit of prayer they are the words of someone convinced that he is right and the atmosphere that he produces is like the cold icy wind of which he speaks of in chapter 37 so friends this is a challenge to us are we going to be good counsellors to those who suffer we as a church we have a major responsibility to look out for one another at all times but especially during suffering and so what must we do now to prepare for that day well the answer is we must fear the

Lord in our hearts and we must have teachable spirits that are praying to the Lord all the time that we might grow in wisdom and understanding and that we might take biblical truths and apply them well and not recklessly certainly not arrogantly let's learn from the woeful pastoral care of Elihu well let's be quiet for a moment take some time to respond to God's words in our own hearts and then I'll pray for us oh gracious heavenly father you are the Lord God almighty the all powerful the all sovereign Lord of the universe and let you are yet you are the

[35 : 08] God who also draws near to your people you are the God who graciously hears the cries and the distress of your people we praise you that that is so even when you seem distant and detached we pray father that you would give us humble hearts hearts that want to shun arrogance hearts that don't think that we know all that there is to know please help us to fear you and teach us so that we might be better equipped to comfort and counsel one another and support one another to speak the truth and love to one another especially at times when someone in the church is suffering help us to have hearts that are not full of anger but are full of compassion and care hearts that are very much like the Lord Jesus heart and we pray this in his name and for his sake amen amen amen to a ■ a oh a a a a a