

I Choose To Bless Why Do the Righteous Suffer?

Job 32-37

Mark Vroegop

5 "Behold, God is mighty, and does not despise any; he is mighty in strength of understanding. 6 He does not keep the wicked alive, but gives the afflicted their right. 7 He does not withdraw his eyes from the righteous, but with kings on the throne he sets them forever, and they are exalted. 8 And if they are bound in chains and caught in the cords of affliction, 9 then he declares to them their work and their transgressions, that they are behaving arrogantly. 10 He opens their ears to instruction and commands that they return from iniquity. 11 If they listen and serve him, they complete their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasantness. 12 But if they do not listen, they perish by the sword and die without knowledge. 13 "The godless in heart cherish anger; they do not cry for help when he binds them. 14 They die in youth, and their life ends among the cult prostitutes. 15 He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity. 16 He also allured you out of distress into a broad place where there was no cramping, and what was set on your table was full of fatness.

17 "But you are full of the judgment on the wicked; judgment and justice seize you. 18 Beware lest wrath entice you into scoffing, and let not the greatness of the ransom turn you aside. 19 Will your cry for help avail to keep you from distress, or all the force of your strength? 20 Do not long for the night, when peoples vanish in their place. 21 Take care; do not turn to iniquity, for this you have chosen rather than affliction. 22 Behold, God is exalted in his power; who is a teacher like him? 23 Who has prescribed for him his way, or who can say, 'You have done wrong?' (Job 36:5-25)

The aim for this series has been to wrestle with the subject of suffering through the life of Job and to help us see that there is far more hope and joy in the "Who?" question as opposed to the "Why?" question. I see this as nothing more than a worship question. Is God so lovely and worthy that He will be worshipped regardless of what He gives or takes away? And the answer that we get from Job and the entire Bible is "Yes! He is so lovely and worthy that we will choose to bless his name regardless of what he gives or takes away."

Packagers of God

To say "I choose to bless" is the goal, but getting there is not easy. It is not easy emotionally because suffering is hard. But it is even more difficult when you have God in a box or when you have created categories regarding how God operates that prove inadequate or unhelpful.

This is what happened with Job's three friends. They saw the suffering of Job, and their only conclusion was that Job must be evil. In their minds there had to be a direct relationship between the extent of Job's suffering and the extent of his sinfulness. Their package of God was simply that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked, and He does so proportionately. In other words, great blessing came from great righteousness, and great difficulties come because of great sin.

Chapters 3-31 contains three cycles of speeches where we hear Job's three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) argue with Job about his innocence. Job, in turn, becomes increasingly hostile and a bit pessimistic about God. The assault of his friends has worn him out, and as you learned last week with Nate, Job is left confused about what God is doing. His friends have not solved the problem with their convenient but inadequate packages of God.

Chapter 31 ends with no resolution. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar believe that Job's wickedness is great – that's why he is suffering (22:5). Job, on the other hand, concludes that he has not committed some sin that warrants this pain, and therefore God ways are just random or arbitrary – "Oh, that I had one to hear me! Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me! Oh, that I had the indictment written by my adversary!" (31:35). Job doesn't see the point.

And so it is at this impasse, between Job's category of God's randomness and his friends' category of Job's sinfulness, that we meet a fourth man named Elihu and he offers a different view.

Who is Elihu?

Before we unpack his view, who is this man? Here is what we know about him:

- He is younger than the other three men (32:6)
- He has waited all this time to speak (32:11)
- He is angry with Job and the three men. Listen to how many times the word anger is used in verses 1-5:

"So these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. 2 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. 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. 4 Now Elihu had waited to speak to Job because they were older than he. 5 And when Elihu saw that there was no answer in the mouth of these three men, he burned with anger" (Job 32:1-5).

- He is arrogant. Elihu has listened for a long time, and it seems that he thinks he has the ultimate solution.

"17 I also will answer with my share; I also will declare my opinion. 18 For I am full of words; the spirit within me constrains me. 19 Behold, my belly is like wine that has no vent; like new wineskins ready to burst. 20 I must speak, that I may find relief; I must open my lips and answer" (Job 32:17-20)

Elihu is far from perfect. His tones are not gracious, and his approach is a bit caustic. However, Elihu offers something that is helpful.

What Does He Say?

There are some people who think that Elihu is just another one of Job's miserable counselors and that he adds nothing new to the debate. But this doesn't seem to be the case for a few reasons:

1. At the end of Job, God says nothing about Elihu but the other three friends are rebuked by God (see Job 42:7).
2. Job is silenced by Elihu. There is no argument back with him, and I think it is because Job sees that there is something in Elihu's argument that is helpful.
3. We've already heard 31 chapters of argument, and yet we have six more chapters so it seems that there must be something important here for that much space in the Bible.
4. Some of the things that Elihu says are very similar to what God says in 38-41.

Therefore, my conclusion is that Elihu's words are helpful doing two things: 1) pointing Job back to the "who?" question (ch 36-37), and 2) introducing the concept of helpful discipline as the reason why righteous people suffer.

I think that Elihu gives us a bridge from the existing stalemate between Job and his friends, the material that we will find in the end of Job, and the New Testament understanding of suffering and discipline. He seems to be preparing Job to meet with God.

What does Elihu contribute to Job's situation?

He sees underlying pride in Job's life

Elihu doesn't agree with his friends that Job has committed a specific sin that created the suffering, but he also doesn't think that Job has been right in everything that he has said. Job's pride was causing him to draw incorrect conclusions about God.

8 "Surely you have spoken in my ears, and I have heard the sound of your words. 9 You say, 'I am pure, without transgression; I am clean, and there is no iniquity in me. 10 Behold, he finds occasions against me, he counts me as his enemy, 11 he puts my feet in the stocks and watches all my paths.' 12 "Behold, in this you are

not right. I will answer you, for God is greater than man. 13 Why do you contend against him, saying, 'He will answer none of man's words'? (Job 33:8-13).

This is not the same thing that the three friends said. Elihu's point is that Job has started making statements as if God was his enemy. And we will see in 42:6 that Job does in fact repent of what he has said.

He helps us see that "righteous" doesn't mean "sinless"

Job is described as "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil" (1:1). True Job is a model of righteousness, but he is not perfect. He still offers sacrifices on behalf of his family, and he gives us evidence of his imperfections in the conversation with his three friends.

Therefore, Elihu sees that there are things in Job's life on which God has placed his finger. Job may be a model of righteousness but he is not sinless.

15 In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men as they slumber in their beds, 16 he may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings, 17 to turn man from wrongdoing and keep him from pride, 18 to preserve his soul from the pit, his life from perishing by the sword (Job 33:15-18) NIV.

Do you see his point? He says that there are things that God does so that a person is turned from wrong doing to keep him from pride. Elihu is offering a new thought: a righteous sinner

He introduces us to loving but hard discipline

Elihu's understanding of this is not fully developed, and he is arrogant in how he says it. But he is on to something. He introduces a third category. Namely that suffering refines the righteous.

Job 33:15-18 indicated that God turns people from evil ways by special revelation (dreams in the Old Testament), but verse 19 expands the list of messengers. Elihu suggests that God uses suffering to do the same thing!

19 "Man is also rebuked with pain on his bed and with continual strife in his bones, 20 so that his life loathes bread, and his appetite the choicest food. 21 His flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen, and his bones that were not seen stick out" (Job 33:19-21) ESV.

29 "Behold, God does all these things, twice, three times, with a man, 30 to bring back his soul from the pit, that he may be lighted with the light of life (Job 33:29-30).

In other words, Elihu tells Job that God uses pain and suffering for his own good. God's purposes are not to punish but to save.

Putting these three points together we see that Elihu helps us by introducing us to the fact that hardship makes even the godly person aware of his or her remaining sinfulness and turn from it. "He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity" (Job 36:15-16). He agrees with Lamentations 3:37 – "It is good for a man that he bear the yoke {of suffering} in his youth." And he nearly says what Psalm 119:71 communicates: "71 It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes."

"The suffering of the righteous is not a token of God's enmity but of his love. It is not a punishment for their sins but a refinement of their righteousness. It is not a preparation for destruction but a protection from destruction."¹

Suffering refines by revealing, even in the most righteous man or woman, the remaining residue of sin. You might think of it like a 2 liter bottle of Coke. It looks fairly safe and tame. But if you knock it over, bump it, or unsettle it, the bottle becomes a fizzing time bomb. Simply open the top and you will be surprised what comes out.

That's what happens to us when it comes to suffering doesn't it? Hardship has the sanctifying value of showing us what is lying inside of us. It shows us the reality of what is still in us.

But there is one more thing that Elihu says, and I don't think he even knows fully what he is saying

He links loving discipline to a gracious mediator

There is a fascinating passage in Job 32:23-28. Listen to what it says:

23 If there be for him an angel, a mediator, one of the thousand, to declare to man what is right for him, 24 and he is merciful to him, and says, 'Deliver him from going down into the pit; I have found a ransom; 25 let his flesh become fresh with youth; let him return to the days of his youthful vigor'; 26 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. 27 He sings before men and says: 'I sinned and perverted what was right, and it was not repaid to me. 28 He has redeemed my soul from going down into the pit, and my life shall look upon the light' (Job 33:23-28).

Do you see it? Elihu doesn't even know what he's talking about! Notice what he's looking for:

- A mediator – someone to go between God and himself

¹ John Piper, "Job Rebuked in Suffering", July 21, 1985, www.desiringgod.org

- Someone to tell people what is right
- Someone to deliver people from the pit
- Someone who finds a ransom to make the mediation possible
- Someone will make Job and him acceptable to God
- Someone whose actions will cause people to say, "I sinned and perverted what was right, and it was not repaid me. He has redeemed my soul from going down into the pit, and my life shall look upon the light" (v 28)

Do you see who he's talking about? It is Jesus. He is the mediator (1 Tim 2:5). He was the full revelation of the Father (John 1:14). He was the one who delivered people from the pit (Rev 1:18). Jesus was the one who ransomed people back to God (1 Peter 1:18-19). Jesus is the one who makes people acceptable to God (Rom 5:1). And the result is that the punishment for my sin was poured out on Christ (1 Pet 2:24).

This book is pointing us to Jesus! He was the ultimate righteous sufferer. He was sinless and yet he bore the full penalty for sin so that those who receive him could be forgiven of their sins. He creates all righteousness. He bears all the punishment for sin.

So part of the problem in Job is that no one sees the full picture. Job is a good man, but he is not sinless. God does punish sin but he did so fully on Christ. Elihu is unknowingly opening the door for the gospel!

Therefore, I would tell you that you cannot understand suffering nor can you make it through suffering unless you know Jesus. He changes everything, including suffering. For the person who understands the beauty of the gospel, suffering becomes the means of becoming like the One who you love more than anything else in all the world. After I receive Christ, suffering makes me like Jesus.

28 "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son..." (Rom 8:28-29)

2 "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4).

"...but Our Heavenly Father disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb 12:10-11).

Suffering doesn't make any sense unless you know who Jesus is. The answer to the "Who?" question is not just God! It is Jesus!

Why do the righteous suffer? Suffering comes as "individually designed, expert therapy by the loving hand of our great physician. Its aim is that our faith might be refined, our holiness might be enlarged, our soul might be saved, and our God might be glorified."²

The righteous suffer to make them more like Christ!

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com

² John Piper, "Job Rebuked in Suffering", July 21, 1985, www.desiringgod.org