

Why Be Good? | The Book of Jōb

“Fatherly Discipline – The Elihu Speech”

Job 32-37 (various verses)

6.2.24

^{32.1} Then these three men ceased answering Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. ² But the anger of Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram burned; against Job his anger burned because he justified himself before God. ³ And his anger burned against his three friends because they had found no answer, and yet had condemned Job. ⁴ Now Elihu had waited to speak to Job because they were years older than he. ⁵ And when Elihu saw that there was no answer in the mouth of the three men his anger burned.

⁶ So Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite spoke out and said, "I am young in years and you are old; Therefore I was shy and afraid to tell you what I think. ⁷ "I thought age should speak, And increased years should teach wisdom. ⁸ "But it is a spirit in man, And the breath of the Almighty gives them understanding. ⁹ "The abundant in years may not be wise, Nor may elders understand justice. ¹⁰ "So I say, 'Listen to me, I too will tell what I think.'

^{33.17} That He may turn man aside from his conduct, And keep man from pride; ¹⁸ He keeps back his soul from the pit, And his life from passing over into Sheol...

²³ "If there is an angel as mediator for him, One out of a thousand, To remind a man what is right for him, ²⁴ Then let him be gracious to him, and say, 'Deliver him from going down to the pit, I have found a ransom'; ²⁵ Let his flesh become fresher than in youth, Let him return to the days of his youthful vigor; ²⁶ Then he will pray to God, and He will accept him, That he may see His face with joy, And He may restore His righteousness to man. ²⁷ "He will sing to men and say, 'I have sinned and perverted what is right, And it is not proper for me. ²⁸ 'He has redeemed my soul from going to the pit, And my life shall see the light.'

²⁹ "Behold, God does all these oftentimes with men, ³⁰ To bring back his soul from the pit, That he may be enlightened with the light of life.

^{36.8} "And if they are bound in fetters, And are caught in the cords of affliction, ⁹ Then He declares to them their work And their transgressions, that they have magnified themselves. ¹⁰ "He opens their ear to instruction, And commands that they return from evil. ¹¹ "If they hear and serve Him, They will end their days in prosperity And their years in pleasures. ¹² "But if they do not hear, they shall perish by the sword And they will die without knowledge.

*^{37.11} "Also with moisture He loads the thick cloud; He disperses the cloud of His lightning. ¹² "It changes direction, turning around by His guidance, That it may do whatever He commands it On the face of the inhabited earth. ¹³ "Whether for correction, or for His world, Or for lovingkindness, He causes it to happen. ¹⁴ **"Listen to this, O Job, Stand and consider the wonders of God.***

Last week we looked at Job's closing argument in the case of his life. He answered the accusations of his fiends by carefully reviewing his moral and spiritual life. "You guys hold that suffering is a punishment from God for sin and I'm stumped because I can't find any unconfessed sin in my life... only virtue. Ask anyone and they'll tell you that Job is upright and therefore doesn't deserve this!"

And then... when the old friends/fiends just don't know where to go...when they're convinced that wise words are wasted on someone so self-justified as Job... So they go silent... and THEN a novice comes forward. He's a

young man claiming to see something no one else has seen in this case... This young man speaks up to put all things in order. His name is Elihu.

This latecomer is focused, even fixated on God being in perfect control of everything in His Universe. That's the basis for Elihu's argument that he's convinced has not been articulated by Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. Elihu is late but he's about to save the day... or so he thinks.

This name in theology for God being in control and for God governing everything that exists is PROVIDENCE. The Presbyterian Catechism defines it, "*God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.*" (WSC #11)

What Elihu says about God's providence or complete control is mainly in keeping with the rest of the Bible but there are some bugs in his presentation. He's kind of a comic figure... he makes us wonder if telling a man in extreme pain and suffering unimaginable loss, we wonder if telling that person that God is in control of everything – including this misery – IS that approach going to help a suffering person? Should YOU, for instance, use this approach in counseling or comforting people in deep agony or pain, "Hey, God's in control!"

Today, the doctrine of providence in the poems of Elihu:

- 1) Providence**
- 2) Benevolent Providence**
- 3) Benevolent, Mysterious Providence**

Elihu comes late but we may know more about him than about the other counselors. For one thing, before we get his name, we learn about his emotional state – in the Hebrew, "BURNED the anger of Elihu." He's comin' in HOT! It literally reads, "*RED HOT was the NOSE*" (as in punched).

And WHY so angry? Because Job, as we saw last week, "*justified himself before God*" AND the friends had turned to FIENDS! They "condemned Job" – i.e., they had no evidence but acted and spoke as if Job was utterly guilty. (3x – "anger burned" [2, 3, 5]) Elihu smells self-righteousness and he's burnin' mad!

Second, he's angry AND he's a Hebrew. The others appear to be Edomite but finally one of God's people shows and we're hoping that Elihu WILL put it right! His name is Hebrew ("*He is God*") and he has a Jewish family tree – a patronymic, "Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram" (v.2, 6). Some scholars think it was pretentious of him to use that whole name as if he were looking for R-E-S-P-E-C-T (it didn't work).

Third, he's apparently deferential and polite toward the older men (as he should've been, esp in THAT culture) but it's a front. As he gets going, you realize, Elihu is rude (32.9) and, really arrogant! In Ch 33, he tells Job, "There's no reason to be intimidated by me, Job" (1-7) (Job must've thought, "OK – little boy.")

Elihu says, "Finally, there's someone here who knows what he's doing" (33.33) and yet he keeps demanding, "*Listen to me!*" (like all his hot air won't even hold their attention!!) He "*speaks for God*" and he'll die if he can't deliver the message.

Fourth, he acts like he's original and fresh – but his logic is sophomoric (“wise fool”). He's not saying much that hasn't already been said. Scholars say the quality of the Hebrew poetry hits a low point in Elihu's speeches.

Fifth, he's at least partly correct and he does introduce an element that's been neglected by the other three guys. He says, “God is totally in control of all the material world. *“God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions.”* (WSC #11) Elihu points to the skies and how God is the One who determines the course of the clouds and winds and rain and snow (an emphasis segues into the speech that follows which is God's speech... So, go Elihu!)

If there's ever any idea about God being unable to stop Job's pain – Elihu disabuses us of that misnomer and corrects us – God doesn't leave anything to chance... in fact, there IS no such thing as chance!

And then Elihu really does add something novel to the conversation and that is – *God is not a puppet master or a kind of cold, calculating, mischievous god like the Greeks and Romans and other pagans have...* He's Good.

“And MAYBE Job, it's not punishment for your sins that you're experiencing – it's salvation from your sins. Maybe what God is doing here on a grand scale is really only what God does ALL THE TIME on a much smaller scale 33.29, *“Behold, God does all these things oftentimes with people – to BRING back a person's soul from the pit, that the person might be enlightened with the light of life.”*

“Job... God is good! He's not like a bully who hurts little animals and smirks at our grief and pain. If God brings pain and major disruption into the lives of His children, it's to get our attention... to bring back our souls from the pit so that we come to Him and may be enlightened with the light of life.”

AND this actually IS the way Job will end (spoiler alert!) – Job will meet God and will see the world differently. He will come to know God intimately and he'll see that HE NEEDS GOD LIKE A FISH NEEDS WATER. Job's ordeal is not something he or anyone would choose for himself BUT it will leave Job... spiritually ALIVE and like never before enlightened with the light of life.

BTW, that phrase (*“the light of life”*), is used only twice in the Bible. The other time is in the Gospel According to John (Ch 8): *“Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.’”* (Jn. 8.12)

The light of life is the light we need to live. The alternative is the darkness of death... that some people go all the way through their lives and never find out what it's all about. Why are we here? What is our purpose? They may be happy or numb or sad or successful, wealthy or poor, but NOT knowing the Author of Life and the Source of Life – their life is spent (as we say) “shooting in the dark.”

Elihu is saying, “Because God is good and because He's all-powerful and in total control of everything, we can trust His providence over our lives...how He rules over us and governs everything... we can trust Him to turn the evil of pain and loss into the light of life.

The Psalmist wrote, *“Before I was afflicted I went astray but now I keep Your word. You are good and do good; Teach me Your statutes.”* (119.67-68) It's a picture of a person clipping along, doing life, trying to be happy and

to be successful... BUT not seeing a bigger purpose. Then, he suffers some sort of affliction...a life-disruption that cannot be ignored.

That is ONE use of pain in God's plan and ways – C.S. Lewis said it so well:

We can rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities, and everyone who has watched gluttons shoveling down the most exquisite foods as if they did not know what they were eating, will admit that we can ignore even pleasure. *But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.* ... it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.

I was that "rebel soul" as many of you know my story. And I DO have that verse memorized, *"Before I was afflicted, I went astray but now I keep Your word... YOU ARE GOOD!"* God can speak Light into darkness (*"Let there be LIGHT" ...*) and out of the worst tragedies and out of unspeakable evil He can bring goodness, truth and beauty. The ultimate example of this is found in St. Peter's first sermon after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And speaking OF Jesus Christ, Peter boldly claims to that puzzled crowd, *"this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death."* (Acts 2.23)

Wait...what was that? Did Peter say that God planned the death of Jesus OR that the clergymen of Ancient Jerusalem "nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death." And of course, the answer is YES. God planned it and we carried it out... not because we were forced but because it seemed like THE thing to do.

The infinite, eternal, unchangeable God became physical and He came to His own people and we rejected Him who made us... We could NOT be happy *until God was choking and wheezing, sweating and bleeding and covered in flies and human spit... WE DID THAT...* and God planned that – the worst moment in all of human history – the Creator rejected by His creation.

We DID it and God planned it – that's providence AND out of that came the greatest achievement in all of human history – everyone desperate enough to believe, found in Jesus Christ, His life, death and resurrection – forgiveness of sins and New Life. We become, somehow, a vessel of Life, the Light of Life is IN me as God has somehow come to live in me. And it's all has convinced me (and many of you) that God is not only All-Powerful, governing everything, but that He's good: *"Benevolent Providence."*

And before I was afflicted... I thought it was a nice story...scary...I hoped it was a myth...a religious power scheme BUT in that hospital bed... at 19 years of age, when faced with pain and fear and guilt and fear and considering having to give an answer for my life before a God I had offended a million ways that I tried to tell myself was ...you know... because "who's perfect" – but suddenly the Light of Life entered my room... my heart... my motives... I got clarity.

"But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

It's not this way for everyone... some DO come through pleasure or an encounter with beauty or truth... Some have an overwhelming sense of their own guilt and need of forgiveness even without the experience of suffering or loss. But (Elihu says in 33.29) *"God does all these things oftentimes with humanity – to bring our souls back from the pit, that we might be enlightened with the light of life."*

Truth is we often don't know why God does things and especially the really painful stuff (last week's landslide in Papua New Guinea – some 2,000 people buried – boulders the size of cars) – I don't know why God brought this about except that in our very passage, second-to-last verse it says there are a variety of ends that God accomplishes with (what we call the forces of nature – used to be called "acts of God") *"Whether for correction, or for His world or for lovingkindness (hesed!) He causes it to happen."*

And that's our final and briefest point – it's a benevolent providence but also a mysterious providence; that's to say, just as there are so many things we don't know about the oceans or outer-space or the human body, so TOO... God's ways are just higher than ours. (Isa 55.8ff)

Maybe why that's why this section ends with Elihu saying to Old Job, *"Listen to this, O Job, stand and consider the wonders of God."* (I wondered when I read the whole book in preparation for this series if this verse might be the theme verse/thesis of the whole book: *"Listen to this, O Job, stand and consider the wonders of God."*)

It's all a wonder. Christians ought to be the first to say, "Yes! I really believe I have the light of life – that I've been reconciled to God and that I know the meaning of life – 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever' BUT that's not to say that life is easy or that we have it all figured out (we're all a little agnostic about these things). It's not to say that we should emulate *"Elihu the clown"* who got some things right but was apparently a real jerk...

We should beware of approaching hurting people with simplistic answers... But, on the other hand, *let's NOT act and live as if we know nothing* (Deut 29.29). Some have claimed the theme verse of the entire Bible is from *Genesis* Ch 50 where Joseph says to the brothers who abducted him, threatened to kill him and ended up "trafficking" him to Egypt... And at the end when his brothers were reunited and trembled that Joseph would take revenge and begged him for mercy. *"But Joseph replied to them, 'Don't be afraid; am I in God's place? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.'" (50.19-20)*

And of course the NT equivalent from Romans 8, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (v.28) – Only be clear to define GOOD as God defines it – it's actually the very HIGHEST GOOD – all things converge, in God's providence, to make the Christian more like Jesus in the way we love people and love God...

It's a mystery and it often feels a little like death... but (as Carol Taylor once told me), "That God is good is an article of our belief" and to add, "The resurrection of Jesus makes it believable."