

## **Series Job**

### **This Message Don't Take Away My Hopes**

#### **Scripture Job chapters 32-37**

Since we are so near the end of the book, we might think that the writer of the story has covered all the theological and practical issues that are necessary. It might seem that we are near the climax of the story — that all that remains is for God to speak up with an explanation of the challenge which led to Job's grief and sufferings, provide answers to all the questions, and put everyone in his place, but that is not the case.

Today we will learn about the opinions of a young man named Elihu. He has been patiently waiting for his opportunity to make a few additional comments about Job's suffering. Actually his comments cover seven chapters! Today we will focus on the teaching of Elihu and try to understand his place in this story.

We are introduced to Elihu at the beginning of chapter 32.

#### **Read Job 32: 1-5**

So these three men stopped answering Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. 2 But Elihu son of Barakel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, became very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God. 3 He was also angry with the three friends, because they had found no way to refute Job, and yet had condemned him. 4 Now Elihu had waited before speaking to Job because they were older than he. 5 But when he saw that the three men had nothing more to say, his anger was aroused.

Elihu had been waiting on the sidelines out of respect for his elders. He had been carefully following their heated dispute and, when they became silent, he declared himself ready to prove that the friends and Job were all incorrect in their arguments. He later said that he would not show partiality or flatter anyone (*Job 32: 21*). He was going to give them the truth, and nothing but the truth!

Elihu's anger was intense. There were two reasons given for his anger. It was directed toward Job because he was "justifying himself rather than God," and directed toward the friends because "they had found no way to refute Job." Elihu was convinced that he could clear up all the issues; that he had the solution to all the questions about human relationships with God.

Elihu's began with an evaluation of his qualifications.

### **Read Job 32:6-12**

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. 7 I thought, 'Age should speak; advanced years should teach wisdom.' 8 But it is the spirit in a man, the breath of the Almighty, that gives him understanding. 9 It is not only the old who are wise, not only the aged who understand what is right. 10 Therefore I say: listen to me; I too will tell you what I know. 11 I waited while you spoke, I listened to your reasoning; while you were searching for words, 12 I gave you my full attention. But not one of you has proved Job wrong; none of you has answered his arguments."

Elihu was not a humble individual. In regard to wisdom and understanding, he placed himself on a higher level than the others. He felt that the wisdom of age, as proclaimed by the friends, had been inadequate, and that their emphasis on traditions had failed to move Job from his claim of innocence. Elihu, however, was convinced that he, by the Spirit of God, had the answers for everyone. Later, in his teaching, he stated, "Be assured that my words are not false; one perfect in knowledge is with you" (*Job 36:4*).

Another indication of Elihu's pent-up eagerness to speak is in verses 18-20.

### **Read Job 32:18-20**

18 "I too am full of words, and the spirit within me compels me; 19 Inside I am like bottled-up wine, like new wineskins ready to burst. 20 I must speak and find relief; I must open my lips and reply."

He was so eager to speak that he was about to explode!

The first main point of his monologue was that God had been speaking to Job, but that Job had not been listening. He began by summarizing statements previously spoken by Job.

### **Read Job 33:8-13**

8 "You have said in my hearing — I heard the very words — 9 'I am pure and without sin; I am clean and free from guilt. 10 Yet God has found fault with me; he considers me his enemy. 11 He fastens my feet in shackles; he keeps close watch on all my paths.'"

Job had indeed claimed to be "pure and without sin." (*See Job 6:10; 7:20-21; 9:21; 10:7; 13:18, 23; 14:17; 16:17; 23:11*) Job had claimed that God was treating him unjustly and like an enemy. (*See 7:17-20; 13:24, 27; 19:11*) Job also claimed that God was ignoring his pleas and not listening to his cries. Elihu rather bluntly told Job that he was wrong in these statements and proceeded to explain how God speaks to wicked people. He described three specific ways in which God did this.

### **Read Job 33:14-22**

14 “For God does speak, now one way, now another, though man may not perceive it. 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 grave, his life from perishing by the sword.

19 Or a man may be chastened on a bed of pain with constant distress in his bones, 20 so that his very being finds food repulsive and his soul loathes the choicest meal. 21 His flesh wastes away to nothing, and his bones, once hidden, now stick out. 22 His soul draws near to the grave, and his life to the messengers of death.”

In the opinion of Elihu, God used dreams and visions in order to turn evildoers from their wrongdoing, to keep them from pride, and to keep them “from the grave.” Back in chapter 7, Job had mentioned that God was frightening him with dreams and terrifying him with visions (*Job 7:14*). For Elihu, this was evidence that God had been speaking to Job as a means of instruction and warning, but that Job had missed the purpose of his nightmares.

According to Elihu, the second way in which God communicated to wicked people was by means of sickness and disease. Elihu obviously had Job in mind in what he said in verses 19 through 22. In all likelihood, Job’s “soul was drawing near to the grave.” Elihu wanted Job to know that chastening is not something that God brings on a person without purpose. He wanted Job to understand that there was a good educational purpose behind suffering. The implication was that God’s chastening of people by means of suffering was really an act of love and mercy. I suspect that Job did not appreciate hearing these words.

In the next several verses Elihu described a third way in which God graciously reached out to wicked people. The information is a little bizarre.

### **Read Job 33:23-30**

23 “Yet if there is an angel on his side (the side of the evildoer) as a mediator, one out of a thousand, to tell a man what is right for him, 24 to be gracious to him and say, ‘Spare him from going down to the grave, 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. 26 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. 27 Then he comes to men and says, ‘I sinned, and perverted what was right, but I did not get what I deserved. 28 He redeemed my soul from going down to the grave, and I will live to enjoy the light.’ 29 God does all these things to a man, twice, even three times, 30 to turn back his soul from the grave, that the light of life may shine on him.”

Elihu apparently had in mind the expressed desire of Job for a mediator / redeemer to plead his case before God (*Job 9:33*). According to Elihu, God might send an angel to be such a mediator, “to tell a man what is right for him.” If this angel announced that “a ransom had been found for him,” then the physical condition of the person who was being chastened with sickness and disease would be restored. The body would be returned to the health and appearance of a child’s body. The person would be spared from the grave. He would once again be able to pray, find favor with God, see God’s face, shout for joy, and be restored by God to his righteous state. According to Elihu, the angel would lead the sinner back to righteousness.

The “ransom” in verse 24 is not explained. However, there is no implication in these verses that the “ransom” is part of eternal atonement and redemption. Rather, Elihu was speaking of the avoidance of physical death. The individual who was near death in verse 22 would be “spared from going down to the grave.”

Elihu summarized the possible results of his teaching in verse 30: The soul of the sinner would be turned back from the grave and the light of life would once again shine on him.

From Elihu’s explanation about God’s communications with evildoers, we can begin to understand his theology. It was really not that much different than the theology of the three friends. All of them supported the doctrine that humans deserve the bad things that happen to them and that the righteous enjoy the favor of God. All of them presupposed that Job was suffering because of some sin in his life, and they all urged him to repent.

Elihu differed from the friends in one respect: he declared that the sinner’s suffering could have a positive educational effect in that it could lead the sinner to make confession and be restored to fellowship with God before the onset of death. Elihu viewed the affliction of suffering as a means of steering a person away from death rather than as a means of punishment. The three friends emphasized the punitive effect of suffering — for them suffering represented punishment for sins committed. For Elihu, suffering was God’s way of getting the attention of the wicked person and reminding the person that a change in attitude and behavior was necessary. The three friends focused on the cause and origin of suffering, which was sin; Elihu focused on the purpose of suffering, which was restoration. For the friends, restoration depended on the initiative of the sinner; for Elihu restoration depended on human response to God’s initiative.

Interspersed in Elihu's monologue were frequent appeals for Job to "pay attention," and "listen carefully" to his words. He genuinely wanted Job to be vindicated and not die, but he insisted that this would be possible only if Job stopped being "self-righteous" and repented.

In chapter 34, the emphasis shifted to the topic of the justice of God. Elihu got into this theme by again quoting words of Job.

### **Read Job 34:5-6**

5 "Job says, 'I am innocent, but God denies me justice. 6 Although I am right, I am considered a liar; although I am guiltless, his arrow inflicts an incurable wound.'"

Elihu ridiculed Job for making these statements.

### **Read Job 34:7-9**

7 "What man is like Job, who drinks scorn like water? 8 He keeps company with evildoers; he associates with wicked men. 9 For he says, 'It profits a man nothing when he tries to please God.'"

Elihu then began his defense of God's justice with these words:

### **Read Job 34:10-12**

10 "Far be it from God to do evil, from the Almighty to do wrong. 11 He repays a man for what he has done; he brings upon him what his conduct deserves. 12 It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice."

In making these comments, Elihu was in perfect agreement with the friends. He had promised to be impartial and to not answer Job with the same arguments used by the friends (*Job 32:14b, 21*). However, at this point in his lecture, he was using words that were almost identical to those previously spoken by the friends. All of them accused Job of being a wicked scoffer who kept company with evildoers.

They had all heard Job say, "It profits a man nothing when he tries to please God," or words to that effect. Job had come to this conclusion based on his observations of others and from his own experience. He knew that innocent people were just as likely to meet disaster as the wicked, and that wicked people were just as likely to be prosperous as the righteous. This thought was totally unacceptable to Elihu and so he launched into a zealous defense of God's justice and impartiality. He based opinions on the premise that "it is unthinkable that God would do wrong." Notice this theme in the following verses.

### **Read Job 34:21-27 (excerpts)**

21 "His eyes are on the ways of men; he sees their every step. 22 There is no dark place, no deep shadow, where evildoers can hide. ... 25 God takes note of their deeds, he overthrows them in the night and they are crushed. 26 He punishes them for their wickedness where everyone can see them, 27 because they turned from following him and had no regard for any of his ways."

It is commendable that Elihu was eager to defend the justice of God, but his application of justice was limited to the punishment of evildoers, and he assumed that Job was one of them. Hence he condemned Job with these words:

### **Read Job 34:35-37**

35 "Job speaks without knowledge; his words lack insight. 36 Oh, that Job might be tested to the utmost for answering like a wicked man! 37 To his sin he adds rebellion; scornfully he claps his hands among us and multiplies his words against God."

In chapter 35 Elihu addressed the desire of Job for a hearing before God, a face-to-face meeting in which he would proclaim his innocence. It was Elihu's opinion that such a meeting was impossible. According to him, the reason why God had not answered Job's pleas was that God was so lofty and remote that neither human innocence or sinfulness had any impact on God. He told Job to think about the distance between himself and God.

### **Read Job 35:5-8**

5 "Look up at the heavens and see; gaze at the clouds so high above you. 6 If you sin, how does that affect him (God)? If your sins are many, what does that do to him? 7 If you are righteous, what do you give to him? Or what does he receive from your hand? 8 Your wickedness affects only a man like yourself, and your righteousness only the sons of men."

According to Elihu's argument, God was transcendent above the clouds and stars, so far removed from the people of earth that He could be neither adversely affected by the sins of humanity nor benefited by human righteousness. If God would show mercy, it would not be because He had been induced by man's goodness, and if He inflicted judgment, it would not be because He had been injured by the man. The lesson for Job was that he was not going to be able to draw God into a meeting; that he would never have an opportunity to plead his case.

From a practical standpoint, Elihu and the friends assumed that the punishment of wicked people and the blessings for righteous people happened in an automatic way, and was not due to any direct action on the part of God. (*See Job chapter 22:2-5*) They assumed that God set the earth in motion and then let the earth and the people on it function on the basis of cause and effect. According to their thinking, this was just part of the order and justice in the world.

After laying that bit of his theology on Job, Elihu continued with an additional thought related to verse 8: He said that a person's character and behavior attitude did have an influence, but only on himself and other people, not God. Earlier, Elihu had said that God tried to communicate with humans who were suffering in order to get their attention and to educate them about their behavior; in order to spare them from the grave and to restore their blessings. According to Elihu, the reason more wicked people did not benefit from God's communication effort was their inability and unwillingness to hear (*Job 33:13-20*). In the following verses, Elihu gave another reason why God was silent. It was because humans call to Him with an improper attitude.

### **Read Job 35:12-13**

12 "He does not answer when men cry out because of the arrogance of the wicked. 13 Indeed, God does not listen to their empty plea; the Almighty pays no attention to it."

These verses imply that God hears the cries of wicked people even though it was previously stated that He was not influenced by them. According to Elihu, an "empty plea" would be an appeal which was devoid of sincerity and voiced in arrogance. Elihu wanted Job to understand that his cries would not be answered because they were voiced with a spirit of arrogance and impatience. His concluding comments were

### **Read Job 35:16; 36:17**

16 "Job opens his mouth with empty talk; without knowledge he multiplies words."

17 But now you are laden with the judgment due to the wicked; judgment and justice have taken hold of you."

Elihu continued to speak for two more chapters, but we won't look in detail at these chapters because, for the most part, Elihu continued with his thoughts about God's justice and sovereignty.

He delivered an eloquent and lengthy wrap-up to his teaching. He described the sovereignty and power of God over nature — He explained how God controls the clouds, lightening and thunder, the seasons. Job was encouraged to "stop and consider God's wonders" (*Job 37:14*), and to reflect on the greatness and remoteness of God. His concluding statement:

### **Read Job 37:23**

23 "The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power; in his justice and great righteousness, he does not oppress."

Job had spoken favorably about the sovereignty and justice of God in the dialogue with the friends, but he had also complained about the injustice of God concerning his oppressive suffering. It was the juxtaposition of these two attitudes, Job's affirmation of God's justice and his complaints against God, that Elihu could not accept. In his mind the two attitudes could not go together.

To the person who does a quick reading of the book of Job, Elihu sometimes seems to make good points, but from Job's standpoint his words would have been a bitter disappointment. The main point of Elihu's teaching was that there was no way for Job to meet God. According to Elihu's understanding, no man could ever manage to meet with God, who was sovereign and remote. Hence there could never be a way to confront God in matters of justice. According to Elihu, any attempt to argue a case with God in self-defense would only result in self-destruction.

Elihu's special place in this story was to extend the arguments of the friends in order to kill the hopes of Job for vindication. In his teachings, Elihu made a deliberate effort to get Job to give up his hope of vindication. This was actually a strategy based on his theological orientation. His objective was to convince Job that his only available option was to confess his sins and repent. The friends also had this objective. If Job would confess and repent, they believed that Job would escape his sufferings and once again start receiving God's blessings. Of course, in encouraging Job to take this action, they were tempting him to use God for personal benefit, and if Job had followed their advice, he would have confirmed the Accuser's proposition that human beings are totally self-serving in their worship of God.

Fortunately, the friends did not get Job to budge from his insistence that he was undeserving of his sufferings. They therefore concluded that he was an ignorant, obstinate, and wicked man with a self-righteous attitude. There is no indication that Job gave any reply to Elihu. As far as we know, he was not swayed by the words of Elihu. What could he say to a self-confident, hard-headed, insensitive, know-it-all? Hope was all he had.