

Sermon – 23/05/2010 pm

Elihu Corrects Job

Study Text: Job 33

The young man Elihu was first introduced by a narrator. He was angry at Job for justifying himself, and at Job's friends for failing to get Job to repent. Elihu then introduced himself. He had listened quietly to Job and his friends arguing, but now the time had come for him to give his considered opinion. He was sure that his words would settle the matter. Where the three others had failed he would succeed. He bursts forth like a damn wall breaking, or as he says like a wine skin bursting. We hear a torrent of words that silence Job by mere volume, not by wisdom.

Job we must remember was still a bag of bones sitting on a rubbish heap and near to death. We must remember because Elihu mentions nothing of Job's condition. The others at least came to comfort Job but this young man was so full of himself and so intent on silencing Job that not a single word of comfort was uttered. *But please, Job, hear my speech and listen to all my words* (33:1). He does at least call Job by name which is more than the others did.

In this chapter Elihu continues establishing his own credentials before pointing out the errors in Job's complaint. He was more than happy to keep on talking about himself. His self assessment was that he was a sincere young man who spoke from an upright heart. He spoke the truth. Job claimed the same thing. All these men claimed to fear God. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. But the fear of the Lord should remove pride and produce humility. *Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up. God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble* (James 4:10, 6).

Jesus said *judge not and you will not be judged* (Luke 6:37). He described how people point out the speck in their brother's eye while ignoring the plank in their own eye. Elihu comes across as a young man somewhat lacking in humility, although different readers assess his character differently.

If you can answer me set your words in order before me (33:5). By use of this legal language Elihu takes the stand of the prosecution. Job had made his summary defence and Elihu was going to answer him. He told Job that he had no need to fear him because he was a man made of clay just like Job. Elihu did not presume to speak for God, although telling Job he need not fear him and that he would not come down heavy on him points to an awareness of this danger. He may have been tempted to say 'thus says the Lord'. God has spoken in the past through the mouths of his prophets, but Elihu was not a prophet.

In these last days God has spoken to us by his Son, Jesus Christ. What God has spoken is here in the Bible, the inspired and infallible word of God. Yet there are those today who claim to have special revelations and so speak additional words from God. By so doing they get other men and women to fear them and submit to their authority. Having a sense of power over others is always a great temptation.

Elihu had heard all that Job said. He claims to bring his charges against Job based on Job's own words (33:8). He makes three basic charges and then attempts to answer them.

Without Sin

I am innocent and there is no sin in me (33:9). Elihu speaks as if he is quoting Job but this is not the case. He was actually putting words into his mouth. At the very beginning of his affliction Job cried

out to God asking why he was being punished. *Cause me to understand where I have erred* he said (7:24). He asked ‘have I sinned’. *What have you done to me, O Watcher of men* (7:20). In his closing speech (chapter 31) Job examined his heart for a whole range of sins and found nothing to warrant the punishment being dished out to him by God.

But this does not mean Job claimed to be sinless or perfect as Elihu made out – and as the others made out before him. Job made reference to his sins, in particular the sins of his youth (13:26). He simply maintained that his present suffering was not the direct consequence of some hidden sin. ‘What Job was claiming for himself was (unknown to him of course) what God had already pronounced him to be (1:8, 2:3). What Job claimed was not sinlessness but integrity’. But Elihu said, *In this you are not right* (33:12).

God Is Unfair

Elihu more accurately quotes Job with regard to this charge. Job had asked God why he regarded him as his enemy, and put his feet in the stocks (13:24, 19:1, 13:27). Job did not understand why God was punishing him. He felt he was doing so without good reason. God was making him a target. He was picking on him. Job felt and he said that God was unfair (27:2).

In this Job was not right either said Elihu (33:12). He was concerned at what Job was saying about God, and rightly so. God is truth. God is just. Moreover *God is greater than man*. It is not for mere mortals to question God (33:12, 13).

What Elihu says here is wise and true – but it was nothing new. Job understood that God is greater than man. But he wanted an explanation for the terrible suffering that he was enduring. Wise men, including this young man Elihu, were not able to provide this, although he does come up with what seems to be a new explanation. We will look at this shortly.

God Is Silent

‘Why do you complain that God does not answer you’ is the third charge Elihu brings against Job (33:13). Job felt God was ignoring his suffering by refusing to answer him. He kept crying out to God in prayer but God was silent. Although apprehensive at what God might say, he kept on in this prayer. Elihu pointed out to Job that God can speak in all sorts of ways. Man is at fault for not recognizing how and when God speaks.

Words of Correction

After making these three charges against Job, Elihu goes on to set him straight. He has some interesting things to say but does he really say anything new? *God speaks in dreams and visions of the night* he informs Job (33:15). On his bed a man stops to think about his life and recount what he has done. Sometimes he cannot sleep because of his troubled conscience. What a blessing it is to be able to kneel down beside your bed and pray to the Lord before going to bed. When we confess our sin the Lord forgives us. He gives us peace in our hearts through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Elihu, however, was not talking about being able to sleep. He was talking about deep sleep and dreams. Just how God speaks in dreams to stop men *going down to the pit* or the grave is not clear (33:18). Eliphaz claimed to speak words given to him in private revelation (4:12), but these words were of no help to Job. God may give direction through dreams or visions as he did to Peter and Paul, but he does not reveal truth or wisdom in this way. We have God’s revelation in the Bible and it is complete.

Elihu next states that God can speak through pain. *A man may be chastised on a bed of pain* (33:19). It was Eliphaz in his first speech who told Job not to despise the chastening of the Lord (5:17). But he said this in the context of God correcting him. He did not indicate that such chastening might be preventative rather than punitive. Elihu simply refers to chastening as a way in which God can speak to us. He may use suffering as way of teaching. Elihu describes severe chastening – *his bones stick out* (33:21). A man may be brought near to death in order to save him from the grave. Clearly he had Job in mind.

‘This is Elihu’s most noble contribution to the argument of the book’ writes Thomas. ‘Gods purpose in suffering might well be educational. Job’s suffering may be God helping him to grow in righteousness and faith’. As readers of this book we know that this was not the primary reason for Job’s suffering. For his own heavenly purposes and his own glory God was allowing Satan to attack Job. Yet Job would emerge stronger in his faith. Job’s perseverance became proverbial.

If there is one thing we learn from the book of Job it is that suffering is not necessarily God punishing us. We learn that God’s ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts than ours (Isaiah 55:9). On the other hand we see the human side of suffering as a man who fears God suddenly loses all his possessions and falls terribly sick. We see Job struggling, yet persevering and clinging to God. We see that in the end God blessed Job. After all he went through Job must have been a man of great wisdom.

‘God whisper to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience but shouts in our pain; it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world’. So wrote C. S. Lewis in his famous book ‘The Problem of Pain’. God can use suffering to steer us away from pride and towards himself, to make us depend more on him and less on ourselves.

Suffering does build character, as we are told in Romans 5:3-4: *we also glory on tribulations knowing that tribulation produces perseverance and persecution character and character hope*. God may use our hurts to transform us into the image of his Son. True children of God are disciplined. It is illegitimate children that are not disciplined (Hebrews 12:7-8).

Elihu says there is a third way in which God may speak. He may use a messenger/angel (33:23). This angel can act as a mediator. Just what this young man was thinking is not clear. Job had of course cried out for a mediator between God and man, not *one among a thousand* but just one (9:33, 19:25). God may speak though an angel to declare that a man is upright. He may intercede for a man and save him from the grave – as in the case with Lot.

Elihu again has Job in mind as he describes the flesh of the suffering man returning to its pristine condition. This man will pray to God and God will delight in him (33:26). He will say *I have sinned and perverted what was right* (33:27). This sounds like a return to the argument of the three friends. They promised Job a return to health and wealth if he admitted his sin. Elihu promised redemption from the grave and the light of life.

God speaks in these various ways to save men from going down to the grave. He speaks in these mysterious ways to bring men to the light of life. We might agree that this young man added to the arguments of the others, but it is doubtful if Job was convinced by his words. In any case he was not interested in hearing Job’s response. He was intent on speaking further. He was intent on teaching Job wisdom whether he wanted to hear it or not (33:33). *I desire to justify you* he said (33:32) but we suspect that this will depend on Job repenting of some sin.

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