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Job 32-37

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One of the worst pieces of pastoral advice that I've ever heard is that it's okay to be angry with God. I've heard it over and over. I talk to people who have been through something difficult and often they're struggling with faith and eventually they tell me that some pastor or counsellor told them that it was okay to be angry with God. The other version of this bad advice is that they've been told that they need to forgive God for some bad thing he's caused to happen. And when I hear this, it's no wonder these folks are struggling in their faith. Brothers and Sisters, will God ever do something that is wrong? Will God ever sin against you? Will God ever do something for which he needs to be forgiven? The answer is "No". This is why the author of the book of Job has told us that wisdom is to fear—to trust in—the Lord. He is good, he is faithful, and ultimately he is wise. He is wise in ways we, as finite beings, will not and cannot ever fathom. And so we're called to trust in him. That's what human wisdom looks like. But can you fear a God, can you trust a God whom you believe has it in for you or who needs to be forgiven for having wronged you? This is why it's such bad pastoral advice. It might help a person resolve a difficult situation in the short term. It is good advice to forgive someone who's wrong you. But God isn't your friend or your mom or dad or any other human being from your past. God is not a fallen sinner who makes mistakes or commits sins. God is God and anything that undermines that truth will also undermine our faith.

This gets at one of the key points Elihu makes in Chapters 32-37 of Job. In Chapter 32 this newcomer, Elihu, son of Barachel the Buzite suddenly appears in the story. He really pops out of nowhere. So far it's been Job and his

three friends, but now suddenly we find that a fourth younger friend has been sitting by and listening and now he interjects. Job has thrown down the gauntlet and asserted his innocence before God. At this point we're expecting that either the divine silence will continue—which is what Job expects—or that God will, actually, finally speak. Job's got us on the edge of our seats waiting for the resolution. And suddenly this new fourth friend pushes us back into our seats and declares that he's got something important to say.

So who is Elihu? Whereas the other three friends are clearly not Jewish, but represent various flavours of the great wisdom of the East, Elihu is closer to the Jewish audience. His name is Hebrew for "He is my God". He's not Jewish, but he's close. He's a Buzite—a descendant of Abraham's nephew, Buz. And that illustrates the careful way that Elihu's ideas are brought to the table. He rebukes Job and his friends. Their ideas about God are wrong. And Elihu is right in most of what he says, but he's not quite all the way there—just like one of Abraham's nephews: so close to the covenant community, but still on the outside.

But Elihu's also really annoying. He's not only long-winded—but yes, we'll get through his whole speech today—but he's also kind of a twit, who comes across as a disrespectful know-it-all. Look at Job 32:1-5.

So these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. 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. 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. 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.

We usually say that wisdom comes with age and Elihu would hope that, but

Elihu also isn't afraid to point out that sometimes age just causes us to become entrenched in our foolish thinking. He goes on:

**"I am young in years,
and you are aged;
therefore I was timid and afraid
to declare my opinion to you.
I said, 'Let days speak,
and many years teach wisdom.'
But it is the spirit in man,
the breath of the Almighty, that
makes him understand.
It is not the old who are wise,
nor the aged who understand what is
right.
Therefore I say, 'Listen to me;
let me also declare my opinion.' (Job
32:6-10)**

Elihu has done his best to show respect for his elders. He has deferred to them, but in the end their wisdom wasn't very wise. They're saying things about God that are offensive. In particular, he will spend most of his time taking Job to task. And he says that at the end of the day, wisdom doesn't come from age; wisdom comes from God. God made human beings from the dust and animated them, enlivened them with his breath. And Elihu says, wisdom comes from God in a similar way. One would hope that with age one would have greater opportunity to understand the wisdom that comes from God, but not everyone bothers—and Job and his friends have apparently wasted their years. But Elihu will get them sorted out. (See, I said that even when he's right, he's an annoying twit.) The rest of Chapter 32 is Elihu's rather long-winded explanation. He's "full of words" and he can't hold his tongue anymore or he'll burst like a wineskin and promises in verse 22 that he doesn't know how to flatter. (And, we'll see, that's no lie!)

But before Elihu raised his beef with Job, he's got just a few words for Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Look at 32:12-14.

**I gave you my attention,
and, behold, there was none among
you who refuted Job
or who answered his words.**

**Beware lest you say, ‘We have found wisdom;
God may vanquish him, not a man.’
He has not directed his words against me,
and I will not answer him with your speeches.**

They think they’ve told Job what’s what, but Eliphaz rebukes them. If they really knew what’s what, they would have refuted Job, but instead, Job has shut them all up. Zophar didn’t even have a response to Job’s second speech. But Elihu is much wiser. No one’s yet raised the points he’s about to raise.

So, first, Elihu sums up Job’s argument. Look at 33:9-11.

**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.’**

Elihu doesn’t use Job’s exact words, but I think Job would agree that this is a fair summary of his argument. Job has insisted that he is innocent and his complaint is that rather than treating him as his friend, God is treating him as his enemy. And in verse 12 Elihu makes the central point of his argument against Job:

**“Behold, in this you are not right. I will answer you,
for God is greater than man.**

Basically, Elihu is rebuking Job for thinking that he can out-God God—for thinking that he knows better than God does. Remember the triangle I’ve talked about to help us understand the dialogue in Job. At one corner you’ve got God’s righteousness or justice, at another you’ve got Job’s righteousness, and at the third you’ve got the Retribution Principle. Well, Elihu is going to stand very firmly at the point representing God’s righteousness and justice. That’s what he’s going to defend and he’s very rightly noted that this is the point that Job has attacked or called into question.

Job was wrong and Elihu is right. And at this point, we can agree with Elihu.

Job’s other complaint is that God has been silent. Elihu rebukes that, too, in verse 13:

**Why do you contend against him,
saying, ‘He will answer none of man’s words’?**

God has spoken, Elihu goes on to argue in the following verses. Those horrible dreams that Job has had, that was God trying to get his attention. The Hebrew in Chapter 33 is difficult and I don’t think the ESV captures it very well, but Elihu’s point in the verses that follow is that *he* is essentially the answer to Job’s prayers. Job wants an advocate. Well, here’s Elihu. God has sent him to speak to Job, but Elihu casts his role as more of a mediator. With his help, Job will recover his health and be reconciled with God *after* he makes a public confession of his wrongdoing and of God’s grace. In verses 31-33 he says:

**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.”**

I told you he’s a twit. He’s not wrong, but he is pretty full of himself.

In Chapter 34 Elihu defends the justice of God. We can’t read the whole chapter, but verses 10-15 are a good summary:

**“Therefore, hear me, you men of understanding:
far be it from God that he should do wickedness,
and from the Almighty that he should do wrong.
For according to the work of a man he will repay him,
and according to his ways he will make it befall him.
Of a truth, God will not do wickedly,
and the Almighty will not pervert justice.
Who gave him charge over the earth,**

**and who laid on him the whole world?
If he should set his heart to it
and gather to himself his spirit and his breath,
all flesh would perish together,
and man would return to dust.**

The point is that Job has no right to be angry with God or to say that God has wronged him. God does no wrong and he does not pervert justice. And then he points his finger at Job and says in verse 17:

**Shall one who hates justice govern?
Will you condemn him who is righteous and mighty.**

Without God’s creative and sustaining presence all creation would return to dust. Who are you, Job, to condemn him who sustains creation with his justice? This, Elihu eventually concludes, is Job’s offense. Verses 36-37:

**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.”**

So, Elihu thinks, Job isn’t being punished because of something he did. No, what’s happened is that God has put Job in the press to test him and Job has failed the test. Elihu affirms the Retribution Principle, but he puts a different spin on it than Job’s friends. They assume that Job has sinned. Elihu’s point is that sometimes God’s punishment or affliction isn’t in response to some *past* sin, but is meant to sort of expose and root out *future* sin—and that that’s just what happened to Job. Everything was fine, but God put Job to the test and that test has exposed Job’s wrong thoughts about God. The good news, from Elihu’s perspective, is that all Job has to do is confess and repent and God will make him whole again. Of course, this is where Elihu makes the same mistake the other friends did. He’s assuming Job’s pursuit of righteousness is for the material benefits.

So, again, Elihu understands justice in terms of the Retribution Principle. He puts a bit of a different spin on it, but it's still the Retribution Principle. And since this is his basis for understanding justice, just like Job's other friends, he also assumes that Job's in it for the stuff. That's kind of the only way the Retribution Principle makes sense. And so, in 35:3 he accuses Job:

“[Y]ou ask, ‘What advantage have I? How am I better off than if I had sinned?’

But now Elihu has put words in Job's mouth—and they're wrong—Job has proved that he's *not* in it for the stuff—Elihu proceeds to explain why this reasoning is wrong. But the thing is that even though Elihu is misreading Job, what he says about God is actually true. He begins in 35:5 by reminding Job of his place:

Look at the heavens, and see; and behold the clouds, which are higher than you.

Basically, “God made the heavens. Who do you think you are questioning him?” And, more important, “What could possibly make you think that God needs your righteousness?” In verse 7:

If you are righteous, what do you give to him? Or what does he receive from your hand?

God desire for us live righteously, but he doesn't “need” it from us. Remember how ancient pagan religion worked. The gods had needs and when humans met those needs, it put the gods in their debt. That's how you got what you wanted from the gods. Elihu has falsely assumed that this is the basis for Job's righteousness. He's wrong about that. But he's spot-on about God.

Then he addresses Job's angry cries for God to speak and to justify his actions against him. “Everyone cries out to God thinking that God has done them wrong,” says Elihu. And in verses 10-11:

But none says, ‘Where is God my Maker, who gives songs in the night, who teaches us more than the beasts of the earth and makes us wiser than the birds of the heavens?’

People act like God is at their beck and call or they think they can demand an account of him and are then angry when he doesn't respond. Maybe, instead, they'd actually get a response from God if they pursued him not in anger, but in trust. Maybe they'd actually hear from God if, instead of demanding answers from him, they sought him in humility to learn the ways of his wisdom.

Elihu's big point here is that he thinks that in his self-righteousness, Job has exalted himself over God. He overstates his case, but this is in fact what Job has done. He thinks that God is taking too great an interest in him—as if he's micromanaging him—and he thinks that he can hold God to account by making demands of him.

And so in Chapters 36 and 37 Elihu waxes eloquent about the nature of God. It's one of the highlights of the book of Job, but it's too long to read here this morning. Elihu affirms the mightiness of God, but also that God is not arbitrary. He has “strength of heart”—a literal rendering of 36:5—which has the sense of commitment to his purposes. God has a wise plan and he's seeing it through. Elihu affirms the justice of God. He does indeed punish the wicked and reward the righteous. And that's just what's happened to Job, says Elihu. Again, Job isn't being punished for the sin he committed in the past, but preemptively for this self-righteous attitude he's taken towards God in the midst of testing. So Elihu is right about God in some important ways. God is indeed transcendent. God is indeed just. Elihu goes on at length with some wonderful poetry about God's work creating and sustaining the cosmos. He causes the rain and snow to fall, he directs the clouds and the thunder. And yet no one can understand it. As Jesus will say, “The rain falls on both the just and the

unjust”. Why? Who knows? Elihu would say that God knows, but his ways and his purposes are beyond our understanding. But that doesn't mean his creation isn't ordered—or as Elihu puts it, his ordering of creation is just and reveals God's justice. Again, Elihu is right on all these points. But that doesn't mean he isn't also wrong. He affirms that God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous, but he oversimplifies this—as if you can make a simple equation out of it. He rightly affirms God's transcendence, but he takes it too far. Elihu's God is beyond human reach. But what we'll see next week is that while God is transcendent and beyond human reach, he is also immanent. He does, in fact, condescend to us; he does stoop down to our level to speak. So Elihu brings some needed correction to the dialogue, he adds some nuance to the ideas the others have already expressed, but ultimately Elihu fails. He said he'd provide the answers that the others were grasping for, but in the end he falls into the same error. Why? Because like the others, Elihu is trying to make sense of the cosmos and to make sense of God's actions by holding God to a human-conceived concept of justice. This was the mistake that Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar have all made and it's the mistake that Job himself has made. Somehow we have to get past that, but for that to happen, we're going to have to hear from God himself. That's what comes next.

So in the end Elihu has an important part to play in Job. If we're tempted to idealise Job—which a lot of people have done—Elihu is right in pointing out Job's self-righteousness as it relates to God. Yes, Job is righteous. Even God affirms that. But Job has no business thinking he can question the justice of God or demand an accounting of him. Brothers and Sisters, this part of Elihu's message needs to stick with us. It's a perennial human error to think that if we were somehow in God's position, we'd make better or wiser or more merciful decisions. I can't help but think of the movie *Bruce Almighty*. Bruce has a great life, but he can't see all his blessings. He gets angry with God. He's like an impious Job with first

world problems. On the one hand he thinks that God is petty and punishing him unfairly and on the other that God is ignoring him and won't make an accounting of himself. And so Bruce is suddenly visited by God who hands over his powers for a week. If Bruce thinks he can out-God God, here's his chance. And what happens? Bruce proves to be petty and selfish. He gives himself all the things he wants, but leaves a wake of destruction behind himself.

We forget that the problems of the world—whether it's the little problems in our own lives or the big ones we see in the newspaper—are the result of human fallenness. Instead, we think more highly of ourselves than we should and try to blame God for all these things. We dream up simplistic solutions that ignore the complexities of the real situations. We forget that the only real solution is the elimination of sin and for God to make all things new. And, again, we even think of that in overly simplistic ways. Why can't God just put an end to evil, we think. But we forget that to do that would mean putting an end to us—to all of us. We forget that it would mean cutting short his redemptive plans for the human race and for Creation. We forget that each of us, in our own way, contributes to the problem, because each of us is fallen. And yet we persist in thinking that, given the chance, we could manage the world better. Elihu gives us a much-needed reminder that we can't. God is the one perfectly just, perfectly merciful, perfectly wise, not us.

Second, I think we can learn something from Elihu's insistence that Job would be wise to seek God for what he might teach rather than demanding that God speak and explain or account for his actions. Elihu is right. God is wholly other. He isn't working customer service. That said, Elihu goes too far. He suggests that the way we need to view God is as the wise God who is busy running the cosmos. We can and should trust in his just governance of everything—he's right on that point—but that we have no business bothering him with our petty concerns. That's where Elihu is wrong. The fact is that

for all his transcendence, God has also drawn near to his people—particularly and most dramatically in Jesus. God does, in fact, invite our prayers. St. Peter tells us to cast all our anxieties on him, for he cares for us. But, again, as much as prayer gives us access to God, Elihu has a point. The purpose of prayer is not to question God, manipulate him, or try to influence him. More than anything else, prayer should be a means by which we humbly approach the God who created and maintains the cosmos in wisdom and in goodness. Prayer should be a means of expressing our trust in him.

Finally, what about Elihu's assertion to Job that his pain and suffering have been God's means of speaking and that he's been using them to try to communicate to Job that he's guilty? I think we often think the same way when we're faced with pain and suffering. What did I do wrong?, we often think. When we see some kind of mass or global tragedy, there are always Christians quick to point out that it's a message from God or an act of his judgement. Just look at some of the pronouncements that have been made about the current pandemic. Is Elihu right? Well, again, yes and no. In *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis wrote, "Pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts to us in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."¹ Lewis was right. There's no ignoring pain. It shouts at us and it can't be ignored. And the Bible does teach us that God sometimes uses pain to get our attention—and often as a response to sin. God does afflict the wicked. But Job's friends, as they try to reduce this down to a simple formula, remind us that things aren't that simple. God rarely, if ever, fits our generalisations. Sometimes God does use pain to shout at us and to get our attention. God does punish the wicked—sometimes to death and other times bringing them to repentance. But there, overshadowing any attempt we might make to generalise about God's involvement in our pain and suffering, is the cross.

There hangs Jesus, mocked, beaten, scourged, nails through his hands and feet, dying. There hangs Jesus the bearing pain and suffering—and even the death—that we deserve. There hangs Jesus bearing it on our behalf. It defies any formula we might think up. And yet, Brothers and Sisters, from the cross pain does indeed shout at us. It shouts to the world. It shouts to the world that this God who is transcendent, who is wholly other, who has created and governs the cosmos with wisdom far beyond our understanding, this God who does indeed punish wickedness and will on day wipe every last trace of it from his Creation, also draws near in love, in mercy, and in grace. This God who is so big and other, has also become one with us in Jesus, sharing our smallness and knowing our curse of death, that we might once again truly know his greatness and fear him as we were meant to.

Let us pray: Father, we thank you this morning for your word, even when its words are hard as they are in the book of Job. Thank you for reminding us that you have created and sustain the cosmos in wisdom and justice, thank you for the reminder of your greatness. But thank you, too, that you do not leave us hanging with the words of Elihu or even with your final speech to Job. Thank you for the words of the Psalmist and the words of the Prophets that remind us that you are just as near to us as you are far away from us, that for all your transcendence, you are also immanent, that you are also close by. And thank you, most of all, Jesus in whom you have shared our humanity, our smallness, and even our death that we might live. As we think on these things, teach us the balance between your greatness and your smallness, your being so far away and yet your being so near, your hatred of sin but also your redeeming love of your sinful people. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.

¹ (New York: Macmillan, 1977), page 81.