**WHEN THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFER**

**Job 32-37**

**THE WISDOM OF A YOUNG PROPHET**

**INTRODUCTION**

For those who have joined us recently, we have been working our way through the Book of Job since April. Since we’ve taken a few weeks off, let me do a bit of review.

Job is a story of a good man who was also a great man. He was pious, and he was powerful. He walked in the fear of the Lord, and he walked in the blessings of the Lord. He was a humble man, and he was the greatest man of all the people of the East.

Job was a good man, and he was also a great man. But the Book of Job isn’t about that. It’s about how God took away his greatness in an instant, and how that tempted him to give up his goodness as well.

Job lost everything. Job lost all his wealth, all his servants, and all ten of his children in a single day, but that was just the beginning. Shortly after he began to grieve, his body was afflicted with boils from head to foot. He became hideous to the eye and desperate for relief, scraping his sores with pieces of broken pottery because he couldn’t afford anything else. His wife told him to curse God and die. Even his three friends who came to comfort him ended up judging him instead.

Job lost everything. But above all this loss, what he feared most was that he had lost God himself. The God he had given his life to serving, trusting, and worshipping now seemed to have become cruel and unjust, replacing Job’s blessings with curses for what seemed to be no reason at all.

It’s in this context that the Book of Job has wrestled with several key questions about the reality of suffering. There have been big picture questions like “Why do we suffer? Why isn’t life fair? Is God really in control? If he is in control, is God truly good and just?” And there have been more practical questions like “How do we grieve well? How do we comfort those who suffer? And how do we prepare ourselves for the day when we suffer?”

Most of these questions have been asked and at least partially answered as Job has dialogued with his three friends, but that part of the book has come to an end. Job is done speaking, and so are his friends. For readers like us, it seems that the only thing we’re missing now is God. We want God to speak and to finally give us the answers we’re looking for.

But we don’t get God, at least not yet. Instead, we get a young man named Elihu, the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram. Elihu hasn’t been mentioned so far in the book of Job, and he won’t be mentioned again once he’s done speaking. This has prompted some scholars to call him either a false prophet or even a form of comic relief. After all, they say, who does this young man think he is, thinking that he has all the answers to these hard questions? He hasn’t lived long enough to know what it really feels like to suffer. Nor has he studied long enough to have the theological answers. He is nothing more than a brash young man who is embarrassing himself in front of the grownups.

But not all scholars agree. Other scholars see where he is placed in the Book of Job, immediately before God himself speaks, and they say that Elihu functions like John the Baptist. Before God arrives on the scene and speaks, he sends his messenger ahead of him to prepare the way of the Lord with a message of truth and repentance.

That is the view I have taken as well. Elihu may be young, but that’s no reason to write him off. Joseph was young. So were David and Jeremiah. Even Jesus was a young man when he began his ministry. Throughout salvation history, God has chosen both the old and the young to speak on his behalf to prove that age itself doesn’t make you wise. Proverbs 9:10 says that it’s “the fear of the Lord” that is the beginning of wisdom, not age and experience.

Elihu says this in 32:6-10 when he says:

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

This applies to us as well. If we listen to Elihu, God’s promise is that he will help us understand what is right, because Elihu doesn’t ultimately speak out of his own experience, wisdom, or authority, but God’s. He speaks as a young prophet of the Lord by the inspiration of the Spirit and with the authority of God himself.

The title of this sermon is **The Wisdom of a Young Prophet.** I want to highlight three lessons that we learn from Elihu.

(1) **Sin May Not Lead to Suffering, but Suffering May Lead to Sin**

One of the fundamental mistakes that Job’s three friends made was that they believed they knew why Job was suffering. They believed that they could trace the fruit of suffering to the root of sin. Sin produced Job’s suffering. God must have been giving Job what he deserved. He must have been ignoring the poor, exploiting the needy, and selfishly indulging in his wealth to have received such pain in his life.

But Elihu disagrees. He knows that there is such a thing as innocent suffering, that there are times when the righteous suffer, and he speaks about that in 36:7-8:

**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… (36:7-8)

Elihu knew that even the righteous can be “bound in chains” and “caught in the cords of affliction”. He knew that suffering isn’t always caused by our sin. Sometimes we suffer for no explainable reason. That is why Elihu doesn’t try to explain the root cause of Job’s suffering. Not once does he speculate about what Job must have done or make any broad general statements about the things that Job must have done to deserve this.

But he does issue some correction. The difference between him and the friends is that Elihu’s correction is based on what he has heard from Job himself, and what he has heard requires correction, because even if Job’s sin didn’t produce suffering, Job’s suffering produced sin.

Christopher Ash puts it this way:

“It is not true that he is suffering because he has sinned. But it is true that because he is suffering he has said some sinful things. These will need to be corrected.” – Christopher Ash

What are those sinful things that Job has said? First, Job has said some sinful things about God. He has said that God “mocks at the calamity of the innocent” (9:23). He has accused God of hating him (16:9). He has said that God doesn’t forgive sin (10:14), doesn’t offer any hope (14:19), and doesn’t do what is just (30:26). Those are all false, sinful statements about God that need to be corrected.

Second, Job has said some sinful things about himself. He has become obsessed with proving that he is innocent. He has presumed to know the hidden thoughts of God. He has failed to acknowledge that there are things that happen in this world that we just can’t understand.

Verse 2 summarizes this well when it says:

**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.

This made Elihu angry. In fact, four times in the first five verses it says that Elihu “burned with anger”, and rightly so, because he had a holy zeal for God’s glory. He had such a burning passion to see God worshipped as wise, righteous, just, and good, that any assertion that God was not these things made him angry.

Some have criticized Elihu for this, attributing it to youthful zeal or self-righteousness, but there’s nothing in the text that would indicate this. Anger can certainly tempt us to sin, but anger can also motivate us to do the right thing. Righteous anger can produce righteous action. And as we examine Elihu’s speech, it certainly appears that he is righteously angry. He doesn’t mock Job, dismiss Job, or condemn Job. He corrects him, sometimes with strong words, but he never loses control. Unlike Job’s friends, he’s never unfair with him. He is strong but measured. He is wise without being condescending as he responds to the sinful words of this broken man.

There’s a challenge here for us. For those who suffer, it’s a challenge to not just play the victim. It may be true that horrible things have been done to you, but it’s also true that you can respond to those horrible things with horrible things of your own. If people have sinned against you, or if life hasn’t turned out the way you wanted it to, you have to spend less time thinking about what others have done and more time watching your own heart, because God won’t hold you to account for the sins of other people. He will only hold you to account for your own.

The challenge for those who are helping those who suffer is that we are called to comfort, but we are also called to correct. There are times when we just have to put our arms around the suffering and sit with them. But there are other times when we need to speak clearly and gently about how we see them going astray. That is what Elihu did for Job, and that is what we may have to do with those around us.

(2) **Justification is More Important than Relief**

This is yet another contrast between Elihu and Job’s friends. Job’s friends kept offering solutions to Job because they wanted to relieve him of his suffering. “Job, if you just repent of your sin, God will bless you, take away your suffering, and give you more than you ever dreamed of.” As much as they talked about God, their focus was on the here and now, on the blessings of God rather than the person of God.

But Elihu’s desires are much purer. He says in 33:32:

“If you have any words, answer me; speak, for I desire to justify you.” (33:32)

Elihu’s desire is to justify Job. To be justified is to be declared righteous, to have your judge pronounce that you are not guilty. That’s what Elihu wants for Job. He wants Job to be declared righteous before God, because he knew that all the blessings in the world couldn’t compare to the sweet declaration by God that Job is not guilty.

We saw earlier that Elihu was angry with Job, but it wasn’t because Job wanted to be justified. It was because he wanted to justify himself. He wanted God to declare him righteous on the basis of his own righteousness instead of on the basis of God’s righteousness. But Elihu knew that the only way that Job could be justified was if God had mercy on him.

He speaks of this in 33:23-28:

**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. (33:23-28)

Elihu is speaking about a heavenly being, a mediator, who will speak to God on Job’s behalf. Job has spoken about this mediator as well. He has called him his witness in heaven, his redeemer who lives, his advocate who will stand up in God’s courtroom and defend him.

Job’s friends didn’t know about this mediator, but this young man, speaking as a prophet of God, knew that this mediator is merciful. This mediator would cry out, “Deliver him from going down into the pit; I have found a ransom”. He has found a ransom to set him free from sin, Satan, and death and to bring him into the joy of God’s presence.

Who is this merciful mediator? It’s none other than Jesus Christ himself, and the ransom that he has found is himself. Jesus said, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45). This is good news for all who place their trust in Christ. Your ransom has been found, and it has been paid. It has been paid by your merciful mediator, who didn’t just speak on our behalf. He died on our behalf on the cross, so that sinners like us could be set free from sin, Satan, and death.

Elihu may not have known how all this was going to work out, but the Spirit gave him just enough revelation to know that our only hope of being justified before God was through the merciful work of this mediator.

That’s what Elihu wanted most for Job, and that’s what we should want most for those who suffer as well. The greatest need of those who suffer isn’t relief from earthly suffering. It’s salvation from eternal suffering, and that only comes if we are justified. We must be justified, not on the basis of our righteousness, but on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, if we are to be right with God.

Sometimes that means that we need to suffer, because our suffering is the very means by which God opens our eyes to the fact that we can’t save ourselves. It’s when life becomes unbearable that we finally cry out, “Lord, have mercy on me a sinner!”

In one of the most memorable verses in this entire book, Elihu says:

“He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity.” (36:15)

Notice what it says. It doesn’t say he delivers the afflicted *from* their affliction. It says he delivers the afflicted *by* their affliction. He doesn’t open our ears *despite* adversity. He opens our ears *by* adversity so that we can hear his voice of mercy calling us to trust him.

Our greatest need isn’t to be delivered from our affliction, because affliction may be the very means of our deliverance.

That is why Elihu isn’t interested in finding solutions to Job’s suffering in order to give him relief. He wants Job to learn from the suffering that God has ordained for him so that he could be justified. That doesn’t mean that we never do anything to alleviate people’s suffering. It is a wonderful thing to come alongside the suffering and help them. But when the suffering remains, when the burdens remain heavy, we understand why: “He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity.”

(3) **God Still Speaks When He Seems Silent**

One of Job’s biggest complaints is that God doesn’t seem interested in answering him. He’s been crying out to God and asking questions, but all he’s received in return is silence.

If you’ve gone through long seasons of suffering, you know what that’s like. You’ve looked for a job for months but nothing seems to work out. You’ve been praying for a loved one for years but they’re still as rebellious as ever. You cry out to God for healing but you still wake up in pain. How do we go on trusting the Lord when his silence seems to indicate that he doesn’t care?

Elihu says that we have to learn to listen, because even when it seems that God is silent, He’s still speaking. He may not speak in the ways we expect, and it may not be with the answers that we want, but He is still speaking, and we can hear him if we would just listen.

Elihu gives us three ways in which God speaks to us. First, he speaks to us in dreams and visions in 33:13-16:

**13**Why do you contend against him,  
    saying, ‘He will answer none of man's words’?   
**14**For God speaks in one way,  
    and in two, though man does not perceive it.  
**15**In a dream, in a vision of the night,  
    when deep sleep falls on men,  
    while they slumber on their beds,  
**16**then he opens the ears of men  
    and terrifies them with warnings,

It appears that Elihu is a charismatic. He reminds Job that sometimes, God speaks when we least expect him to: when we’re lying in bed, deep in sleep, having lost all control over our rational minds.

We at Sovereign Grace believe that God still does this. It may not be the normative means of his communication with us – only Scripture plays that role – but once in a while, God speaks to us in dreams and visions.

This can obviously be abused, and it has been abused by false prophets and teachers who claim to possess special revelation that is actually straight from the pit of hell. But if we hold up our dreams and visions to the ultimate authority and standard of Scripture, I have no doubt that we can still benefit from them. It’s happening among people who live in countries that are closed to the gospel. Men and women are being converted because Jesus appeared to them in a dream and revealed himself to them as their Saviour.

God still speaks in dreams and visions, but he doesn’t always say what we want to hear. Elihu says that God will speak to Job in dreams and visions

**17**that he may turn man aside from his deed  
    and conceal pride from a man;

Job wanted answers, but God wanted to humble him. God doesn’t always speak in the ways we expect or give us the answers we want, but he does speak, and when he does, we would do well to listen.

Second, God speaks to us in our pain. 33:19:

**19**“Man is also rebuked with pain on his bed  
    and with continual strife in his bones,

We say we want God to answer us in our pain, but we miss the fact that that pain itself is God’s message. C.S. Lewis made this famous when he wrote:

“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

If you’re in pain, God is speaking to you. He is shouting at you. And do you want to know what God is saying? “You are weak. You are limited. You are completely powerless to do anything apart from my grace. But I am not weak. I am not limited. I am strong, infinite, and good. So trust in me, not in yourself, and I will accomplish powerful things through you.”

Third, God speaks to us in creation. Notice how many times this passage references God’s voice in 37:1-5:

**1** “At this also my heart trembles  
    and leaps out of its place.  
**2**Keep listening to the thunder of his **voice**  
    and the rumbling that comes from his mouth.  
**3**Under the whole heaven he lets it go,  
    and his lightning to the corners of the earth.  
**4**After it his **voice** roars;  
    he thunders with his majestic **voice**,  
    and he does not restrain the lightnings when his **voice** is heard.  
**5**God thunders wondrously with his **voice**;  
    he does great things that we cannot comprehend.

This continues through Chapter 37, and the point is that creation itself speaks to us. It speaks to us on God’s behalf, and it says “Look at the lightning that flashes across the sky. Listen to the rumbling thunder in the night. Look at the clouds dropping their heavy loads of rain and snow. Look at the beasts that go into their lairs and remain in their dens. Look at the whirlwind, and the frozen waters, and the skies, and the sunrise. Look at what God has made and *tremble*. Let your heart tremble at the infinite power and wisdom of God.”

Elihu knew exactly what Job needed. He needed to stop thinking about the suffering of man, and he needed to start thinking about the Holiness of God, because when we’re searching for answers, when we want to understand *why*, we need to understand just who we’re talking to: we’re talking to the Creator and Sustainer of everything that exists.

God is not a man. Nor is he a supersized, superpowered version of a man. He is God, the One who created the universe, who sustains all things by the word of his power, who ordains and governs every single thing that happens, from the clouds in the sky to the worms in the ground. Everything exists under his sovereign and wise rule. So who are we to think that we can understand him?

And so, Elihu concludes:

**23**The Almighty—we cannot find him;  
    he is great in power;  
    justice and abundant righteousness he will not violate.  
**24**Therefore men fear him;  
    he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit.”

**CONCLUSION**

People who suffer don’t just need therapists and counsellors. They need prophets who will preach God’s Word and declare the mystery and beauty of God’s transcendent power. They need people who will say what Elihu said in 37:14:

**14**“Hear this, O Job;  
    stop and consider the wondrous works of God.

“Stop trying to find all the answers. Stop dissecting your pain. Stop thinking about how your childhood messed you up, and start considering the wondrous works of God.”

There is a time and a place for therapy and counselling, for understanding what we’ve suffered and learning practical tools to cope with it. But if we are to overcome our suffering and find grace to endure it when it doesn’t go away, we need to stop and consider the wondrous works of God, especially the wondrous work of the cross. It was on that wonderful cross where Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our merciful mediator took our sin and suffering upon himself, so that whatever we face in this life, we could say:

“For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Corinthians 4:17)

Will you stop and consider the wondrous works of God today? Will you stop trying to find all the answers, to rationalize your pain, to make sense of everything that has happened to you and consider instead the wondrous works of God? If you do, your heart will tremble with delight, your soul will be fortified for suffering, and your hope will sustain you until the day when you appear before God your Saviour.