

THE BOOK OF JOB
Job 32-33

By Dr. James E. Potts

Our lesson opens in a vacuum of silence. The Job writer puts it this way, **“So these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes [he continues to believe he was without fault]” (32:1)**. We learn now that there has been a fourth person listening to the discussion or debate, a young man named Elihu. It is obvious this young man has a spiritual heritage because his name means “He is my God.” We are told that he is the son of Barachel, whose name means “God has blessed.” From this description it is likely that Elihu was from a wealthy family.

The Job writer also explains that Elihu was a Buzite (32:2a). A study of the genealogy of that time reveals that Buz was a brother of Uz, which would make him one of Job’s ancestors. In some way Elihu was related to Job. This may possibly account for his presence throughout the discussion.

Elihu was possibly a student at the Wisdom School. It is believed that he had been listening to the back-and-forth arguments and comments of Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Job. And as he listened, he had become very upset and angry, both at Job and at the other three men. As he saw it, the attitude of these older wise men canceled out all that they had taught him.

The reason for his anger was very personal. He was angry with Job because he justified himself while blaming God—he insisted he was righteous but still seemed to blame God for what had happened to him (32:2). At the same time young Elihu was angry at Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar because they continued to believe Job was guilty of sin even though they had no proof of it (32:3).

As we follow his remarks, we will see that he repeats himself and is even boring. But as the story unravels, we will see that he plays a key role in preparing the way for Job’s personal encounter with God. A person in Elihu’s role is always needed when disagreement and conflict lead to a stalemate/deadlock rather than reconciliation.

Elihu’s introductory remarks are almost better than anything else he says. His honesty comes through clearly when he begins by saying, **“I am young, and you are very old, therefore I was afraid, and did not show you my opinion” (32:6)**. With these words he has won the respect of his hearers. He willingly acknowledges his youth

and inexperience while at the same time recognizing the knowledge and experience of the older men in the circle. Yes, he has been moved to anger over what he has heard, but Elihu is no wild-eyed youth who thinks he knows it all. After establishing his identity as young and fearless, Elihu expresses his disappointment in the failure of his elders to speak words of wisdom. Against their failure, he then extends his own credibility for speaking by suggesting that the *“inspiration [breath] of the Almighty”* is not limited by age or experience (32:8). Here is a serious indictment of his elders. Elihu challenges the authority of age as the source of wisdom.

With the *“inspiration [breath] of the Almighty”* as his claim to credibility, Elihu now proceeds to explain the spirit with which he speaks—with a patient spirit—*“I waited for your words”* (32:11) ... with a discerning spirit—*“I gave ear to your reasons”* (32:11) ... with an attentive spirit—*“I attended unto you”* (32:12).

With this kind of insight and attitude no one can accuse Elihu of being a wild-eyed radical, even though he may seem to be mad at the world. Without question he has earned his right to speak. And because Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar have not been successful in their arguments and responses to Job, he believes he is free to enter the discussion.

Still humble to the point of being apologetic, Elihu refuses to get bogged down in the arguments that produced the deadlock. So, he now makes it clear that he will not condemn Job with the same words and ideas they used but will speak for himself (32:14-16); that he will speak with passion (32:18-20); and above all, he will not show partiality or resort to flattery (32:21). In other words, despite his youth and lack of experience, he will be himself, with his inspiration coming from the Lord. His words and his spirit demonstrate the importance of what he has to say.

Throughout all these opening comments not one of the older men interrupted young Elihu. They listened respectfully in silence, possibly aware somehow that although their young student did not have the years of experience and maturity they had, he should be listened to. Yes, youth should listen to and learn from those who are older and more mature. But youth should be listened to as well. No one, young or old, should be written off as lacking insight and wisdom.

With the stage set, Elihu first directs his attention to Job (33:1-7). In these opening remarks, Elihu pleads with Job to listen to him because he is going to speak openly and honestly. He also points out that while he is a man just like Job, the Spirit of the Lord—the breath of God—is with him. Next, Elihu reminds Job that in his earlier discussions he had expressed three complaints against God. First, Job had defended

his own innocence (33:8-9); second, Job had claimed that his suffering was unjust (33:10-11); and third, Job had insisted that God’s silence was proof that He does not care about him (33:10-11).

As we listen carefully to Elihu’s opening words to Job, we catch the tone of an earnest young man who wants desperately to be understood. His words bring to mind the Apostle Paul’s commendation for *“speaking the truth in love”* (Eph. 4:15). The delicate balance of truth and love becomes possible for any of us only when we speak with the “breath of the Almighty”—under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, we err toward one extreme or the other—unfeeling truth or soggy love. It is only when truth and love are balanced and fused by the Spirit of God that our spirits are right and we can be of help and guidance to others.

Elihu’s ability to balance truth and love is clearly seen as he refutes Job’s complaints against God. In responding to Job’s claim of being innocent and without fault (33:9) Elihu refers to what he understood Job to say about God’s unjust treatment of him despite his innocence, *“Behold, he findeth occasions against me [criticizes or finds fault with me], he counteth me [treats me like] his enemy, He putteth my feet in stocks [He confines my feet], he market all my paths [He watches everything I do]”* (33:10-11). After quoting or paraphrasing Job’s accusation against God, Elihu then tells him that is where he is wrong. *“Behold, in this thou art not just [right]”* (33:12a). Because of this, he is not innocent but is guilty of sin—the sin of arrogance.

In response to Job’s position that God’s silence is a sign of indifference, Elihu reminds him that God speaks in many ways, including dreams and visions (33:14-16). This reminder must have stung Job, because up until now he had insisted that God answer him on his own terms—face to face and point by point in something like a courtroom setting. On the contrary, dreams and visions are not that straightforward but are composed of symbols that can only be understood by intuition.

Modern research reveals different functions for the right and left side of the human brain. The left side controls rational thinking, whereas intuitive perceptions center in the right side. Truth can be discovered either way—by reason or intuition—but there needs to be a balance. Job, in his search for truth would be diagnosed as a left-brain person. But now Elihu seems to be suggesting that he needs to develop the right side of his brain also.

The point being made is that God has something to teach Job about sin and pride through his perception as well as his reason, and all his experience is a part of God’s

plan to save him (33:17-18). In other words, through suffering which cannot be understood by reason, God wants Job to learn that there is more than one way of knowing truth and gaining wisdom.

It is easy for us to be critical of Job as we work our way through these lessons. It is true that probably none of us has suffered the losses Job had, but from our vantage point we could likely think that, among other things, he should have known better than to expect God to speak to him only on his own terms. Yet, how often we are guilty, one way or another, of the same thing. When we have a special need, we think God ought to meet it our way and in our timing. And if He does not produce the way we see it, we start complaining and asking why. We rebel against the advice of the Wisdom writer who said, ***“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding” (Prov. 3:5).***

Truth stings again when Elihu suggests that pain may also be a way of God’s teaching (33:19). We must admit that our most meaningful learning experiences come, not when we are calm and comfortable, but when we are struggling through hard times or suffering.

In this part of our Scripture lesson, Elihu takes a bold step in turning his attention to the lasting question, *“Why do the innocent suffer?”* In response he suggests that pain and suffering may be the protective that God uses to keep us from going down into the pit of death and destruction (33:18-19). We say a great deal about God’s saving grace, but we place all too little emphasis on the grace of God that works in us each day “preventing” us from committing spiritual suicide. As believers we live an hour at a time and a day at a time by the keeping and sustaining grace of God. He not only saves us; He keeps us. It is His gift of grace to us.

Why doesn’t Job react violently now as Elihu has suggested that God may be teaching him through his suffering? When Eliphaz suggested the same idea, Job flew into rage. But the difference is in Elihu’s tone and spirit. Elihu sees the purpose of Job’s suffering as redemptive—not punishing as Eliphaz had.

Above all, with prophetic insight Elihu appears to look ahead across the centuries as he offers the promise of a Mediator, ***“one among a thousand,” who will show Job not only the justice of God but also His grace through ransom that will deliver Job’s soul “from going down to the pit” (33:23-24).***

There can be no doubt about the spirit with which Elihu is speaking. In some mysterious way he is a prophet who foresees Jesus Christ as the Mediator between

God and people as well as the Savior who ransoms the human soul through His own suffering. In Christ, the balance between truth and love is personified.

Now, Elihu's expression of God's promise makes sense, "***His flesh shall be fresher than a child's: he [Job] shall return to the days of his youth***" (33:25). In other words, he will be restored to his youthful vigor—because of the Redeemer's ransom and not because of anything Job does or has done. Inspired by the "***breath of the Almighty,***" Elihu has foreseen the "***new creation***" in Christ Jesus of whom Paul wrote (2 Cor. 5:17).

All of Job's complaint against God fall like dominoes under Elihu's word of truth spoken in love. God is not silent; He speaks in many ways which Job needs to hear. God is not unjust in permitting Job to suffer; He wants to teach Job the discipline of pain and prevent him from falling into the pit of death and destruction. And most of all, God is not indifferent to Job's suffering. Graciously and patiently, He comes to Job time and time again with a Mediator of truth and a Savior of love to ransom him from the captivity of sin.

Inspired by the Spirit of God, Elihu has given us a glimpse of God that matches Job's vision of the living Redeemer (19:25). To Elihu, God is a creative teacher who speaks in many ways, watchful guardian who keeps us from destroying ourselves, a living Redeemer who gives Himself as our ransom, and a patient friend who forgives us time and time again (33:24-30).

Yes, Job has met his match. When Elihu invites him to speak, the man who proudly said he would enter the presence of God like a prince before the king, falls silent for the first time. At the feet of a young man, in a scene which shatters all the tradition of the ancient East, we see Job ready to obey when Elihu reverses his role as a silent bystander and says to his elder, "***Harken unto me: hold thy peace, and I shall teach thee wisdom***" (33:33).

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