

Sermon- Elihu the Pile-on

Scripture: Job 35:9-36:21

Sunday, May 3, 2020

So far in our journey through Job, we started with a look at the purpose of the book- which is to address the questions “is God just?” and “why do innocent people suffer?” questions. We looked at three of Job’s friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar as they speak with more and more conviction that Job has to be suffering because of his or his family’s past sins. Then really out of the blue, another character gets thrown in the mix, a young guy called Elihu. Yes you could say, “Eli-who?” 😊 Because Eli-who is a total mystery to us. If you are thinking, I did not know that there was a fourth guy standing around Job, you are not alone, because most people might read through Job’s friends speeches and just get Eliphaz and Elihu mixed up and blow right past Elihu. Why? Because he is the only person who was not introduced at the beginning, Job never replies to him and neither does God. Elihu flashes in and flashes out of the book of Job. But he says and does some interesting things because his speech is four full chapters long from chapter 33 to 37 so today we are going to examine the big elements of Elihu’s speech.

When you look at the beginning of Elihu’s speech, it sounds the same as the rest of his friends. He even starts on a note of humility by saying that he is the youngest of them all and so he was waiting for those with the wisdom of age to speak before he did. So far so good. Elihu’s speech also has some amazing poetry on the majesty and lofty, way above our thinking ways of God.

{ But he does not hold on to his humility all that well later on when he yells in verse 36:4, ***I am telling you nothing but the truth, for I am a man of great knowledge.*** 😊 }

Elihu also has a very interesting perspective on the reasons why God allows suffering. We are going to take a careful look at three points that he makes. But to examine the points for their own merit we will have to set aside for sometime that these statements made to Job while he was going through his valley of the shadow of death. So set aside the context for just a bit. You won't hear me say that often 😊

There are three views on why God allows suffering.

The first is very simple. Through suffering, God gets people's attention. In verse 36:15 Elihu says,

But by means of their suffering, he rescues those who suffer.

For he gets their attention through adversity.

You think there is truth to this claim? I think if you have walked this earth for any length of time and have faith in God, you would be able to see story after story of people turning to God in their adversity. Let me share this simple and remarkable statistic for you. Every Bible publisher is reporting 70 to 150% increase in sales of Bibles in the Covid-19 era. Isn't that neat? You know what else. Google searches for prayer, Bible, God, Sin and Jesus have all gone up but they spiked on April 5th. You know what happened on April 5th? That was the day President Trump for the first time announced that we would have a lot of deaths in the coming weeks. That same day, the US Surgeon General in his address to the nation announced that it would be like Pearl harbor or 911.

When people hear that, suddenly they turn to God. Yes, Elihu is right, God does get our attention through adversity.

But there is a second argument Elihu makes that is also valid when you look at it by itself. He says that God disciplines people through adversity so that they become aware for their sins and repent. Let me read some of the lines for you. In verse 33:19-Elihu says

Or God disciplines people with [pain](#) on their sickbeds

Picking up from verse 23 now he says,

²³ “But if an angel from heaven appears—

a special messenger to intercede for a person

and declare that he is upright—

²⁴ he will be gracious and say,

‘Rescue him from the grave,

for I have found a ransom for his life.’

²⁵ Then his body will become as healthy as a child’s,

firm and youthful again.

Here Elihu is making an interesting point. What he is saying is that sometimes an individual will be put through the ringer and taken all the way to death's door and then pulled back to health again.

But all this torture was for a very good spiritual purpose according to Elihu. Because through this process, the person is sanctified or made right in God's presence. Let me read the next verse, verse 26 for you

^{33:26} When he prays to God,

he will be accepted.

*And God will receive him with joy
and restore him to good standing.*

²⁷ *He will declare to his friends,
'I sinned and twisted the truth,
but it was not worth it.'*^[a]

²⁸ *God rescued me from the grave,
and now my life is filled with light.'*

Elihu does have a point because in Heb 2:10 it says, Jesus Christ was perfected through what he suffered. So if it true that Jesus Christ, who was sinless was perfected through his suffering, then it is certainly true that the instrument of suffering can help you and I can experience spiritual growth.

The way I believe it works is this. When a person is broken through suffering and prompts people to lean on Christ and increase one's humility. They are able to do Rom 12:3 which says, ***Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us.*** The more humble a person is, the more honest a picture they have of themselves. And when they have an honest picture of themselves, they can see their own sins. When they see their sins, they can take them to Jesus for fixing. That is why being broken through suffering can be a great gift. So does Elihu have a valid point? When people go through suffering, are they sometimes humbled enough to see their own sin? I think so! Elihu does have a point here.

There is a third way God uses suffering according to Elihu. And this is the most sophisticated view of suffering I have come across in any source I have read.

Let me start by quoting Elihu as he describes what God does in verse 33:16-18

***16 He whispers in their ears
and terrifies them with warnings.***

***17 He makes them turn from doing wrong;
he keeps them from pride.***

***18 He protects them from the grave,
from crossing over the river of death.***

Elihu is saying God terrifies people and that protects them from pride in the future and that in turn protects them from death. He keeps developing this idea that God has a great purpose for human beings and even specifically for Job to lead him away from danger and into a good place of prosperity and flourishing. This idea hits a climax in 36:21 when he tells Job as directly as possible and with the greatest certainty, ***“Be on guard! Turn back from evil, for God sent this suffering to keep you from a life of evil”***.

This is one zinger of a statement but for now, just disconnect it from the fact that it is Elihu speaking to Job and focus just on the concept here. Elihu’s third point about suffering is that God is using suffering to shape the individual in such a way as to help them avoid evil behavior in the future. The question is, is there some truth to this scenario? I think this is entirely possible as well. I remember when I was school age, my best friend had just got a bicycle and he was so thrilled to be able to ride it. Now I can tell you I really coveted that bicycle so badly. Never mind that I did not really know how to ride a bicycle well at the time. We were in our school playground and so I asked him if I could take a turn on his brand new bicycle. He let me. I was so thrilled. I got on it and started peddling. The bicycle gained speed and it was so amazing and irresistible that I kept peddling harder and kept going faster. The only problem was before long I was going too fast to be able to control the bicycle and I crashed straight into the wall, hitting my head really hard. I literally saw stars and chirping birds going around my head like in the cartoons. That whole incident was horrible on many levels. While I did not get

a fracture or anything, my head hurt for a long time. In those days nobody checked for a concussion or anything. But I had also crashed my best friend's brand new bicycle out of my desire to feel the thrill of riding a bicycle superfast before I knew how to ride well. Now it may be because of the pain it cause me then or maybe it was the hidden concussion, but it did humble me to where it certainly knocked down my desire to covet other people's stuff because it got engrained in me that when you covet other people's stuff bad things happen. 😊 So does God use suffering to shape us so that we are saved from doing bad things in the future? I think it is entirely possible.

But here is the deal, if you are relaxing on your friend's porch and discussing concepts like "why does God permit suffering in the world?" or "does God let innocent people suffer?" in an abstract and neutral sort of way then Elihu's contributions to this discussion are indeed very helpful and thought provoking.

But here is the problem in this case. We are not sitting comfortably on our front porch discussing ideas. We are in fact sitting literally on an ash heap with Job who is grieving extreme loss in his life.

So when you add the context back in, Elihu is not discussing the concept of innocent suffering, he is talking to Job who is going through extreme loss and deeply grieving. When you take this context into consideration now Elihu's words take on a very cruel and ignorant tone. In fact Elihu gets so mad at Job because Job is lamenting his condition to God that he tells Job in chapter 34

34

***³⁶Job, you deserve the maximum penalty
for the wicked way you have talked.***

³⁷For you have added rebellion to your sin;

***you show no respect,
and you speak many angry words against God.***

What Elihu is doing here is go beyond anything Job's friends have said. You see Job's friends had only implied that Job might be suffering because of some hidden sin. Elihu goes beyond that by saying that the way Job is talking to God is his sin. He says that Job has spoken to God without respect and with anger. And that he says is rebellion against God and it requires the maximum penalty! This is the most cruel thing that Elihu has said.

Job's friends were bad for implying that there was some sin at the root of Job's suffering. Elihu takes it a step further and says Job's laments are his sin.

That is why I have called Elihu a pile-on in the title of this sermon. You see when Job's friends were getting on Job's case, here comes Elihu who starts lecturing Job when what Job needed was not a lecture but comfort in his extreme grief.

Based on Elihu's behavior I want to give us three ways on how not to be a pile-on or an Elihu.

First, we have to be very careful that our actions are not driven by some herd or mob mentality. Just because we sense the wind blowing a certain direction, that may not be the direction that God wants us to go. Now anytime we are going upstream it is going to be tough. But is only when things get difficult do we start depending on God, right? So God often makes us swim upstream. And that is ok.

The second point about not being an Elihu is to make sure that just because we have a great theory about something, we should never apply it to a situation where we cannot know if our theory applies. When people ask you "why" did so and so do this or even "why" did God do this, if we don't have a written answer from the Bible for that "why" it is very important to acknowledge the limitations of your own knowledge. We cannot get

into any human beings head and know their “whys” so how much less can we know God’s “whys”. So even if you have some theory about “why” people do what they do, or “why” God let something happen to someone, don’t fall for the temptation of assuming you know the “whys” because in most cases it is impossible to know the “whys” so leave the “whys” to God.

The third point in how not to be an Elihu, is to make sure that when you are approaching a grieving person, you have to lead with compassion and not anything else. Not your theories, not your convictions, not judgment, not lectures, just compassion. Elihu was judging the way Job was grieving by saying that the way Job was talking to God was sinful. It clearly was not. But when you lead with compassion, you actually save yourself from a lot of sins, especially the sin of being judgmental, the sin of being cruel to someone who is suffering and the sin of a lack of love. Lead with compassion and love and all kinds of good things happen, especially when you are with someone going through grief.

Three things to not be an Elihu. Don’t blindly join an attack because everyone else is doing it. Don’t assume that you know the “whys” to someone’s pain and always lead with compassion and love. I hope we can overcome our inner Elihus 😊 as we deal with the Jobs in our life. Let us pray.