

Elihu: How Can you Say God is not Just?
Job 32–37

Turn to Job 32 please. Have you ever prayed like the beginning of Psalm 22? *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?* The book of Job is a story for you. Have you ever prayed like the beginning of Psalm 13? *How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long?* The book of Job is a story for you.

We're going to talk about Elihu today, the young man who spoke to Job after his three friends had given up. But before we turn to Elihu, I want to summarize the whole story. The message of the book of Job is in the whole story, not in any one part of it.

The Job Story Summarized

Job begins when God brings all kinds of painful troubles on an exceptionally righteous and faithful man. Satan the adversary is a part of the opening, but he's not the explanation for Job's troubles. Satan is obviously a problem, he's against God's people, so why did God give him the time of day at all? The rest of the book does not mention Satan again. In the rest of the book, everyone including God assumes that the troubles come from God himself. You and I need to think about our troubles like this. "God did this to me." Try it on.

And then we have a long section of conversations between Job and his three friends. The friends all assume that Job's own sins and failures have caused God to bring trouble on Job. Job passionately refuses to accept this. He is confident. He's not sinless, but he's done nothing to bring God's severe judgment on himself.

God agrees completely with Job on this. God was angry at those three friends. It is the only time God is angry in this book. God was angry at those three friends, and God insisted that they humble themselves before his servant Job.

We can be so sure that we have spiritual insight that our friends could use to bail themselves out of their trouble. We think we know the spiritual correction they need to make. Let's be careful about talking to others like that. We *don't* know why God has done this.

There was nothing Job could have done any differently, either to prevent what happened to him, or to make it go away more quickly. We must be slow to assume we know why God has done this, and slow to assume we know how they could correct this. God told the friends: "you have not spoken about me what is right as my servant Job has." Twice God said that to them. Let's not do that.

In Job 42, right at the end, it says Job's brothers and sisters came to him and comforted and consoled him over all the trouble that the LORD had brought on him. That's the right response. Job's friends should have stuck with that. Comfort and console him over all the troubles the Lord brought on him. That's how to be friends.

Job himself was offended that God brought these troubles on him even though he was righteous. Job said God had wronged him, God had not been fair to him, God had not been just. Job still believed the same retributive justice as his friends. He wished he could have a court case with God and argue his innocence, and hear what God had to say. That's why Elihu goes after Job, and we'll get to that soon.

And finally God comes to Job and speaks to him, in Job 38–41. And now we need to think about ourselves. We ask God, "My God, why have you forsaken me? Why don't you hear my cries? How long will you forget me? How long will you hide your face from me?" Job's story is also our story.

God came to Job and spoke to him. God had been listening. God was not angry with Job. But God did not answer Job's questions. God asked Job questions. This is for us, people. God wants you and me to listen in on this. God asked Job questions about creation that Job could not answer. God told Job about different amazing things in creation. God said, "who are you to question my plans and purposes when you have no knowledge? How can you watch the world around you and tell me I don't know what I'm doing?"

God did not have an easy time persuading Job, but after God's second speech Job repented in dust and ashes. Until then, Job had not been humble before God, and he had not submitted to what God was doing. But in Job 42, he humbled himself and submitted to God's plan and purpose, which of course he still did not understand at all.

And then God went after Job's three friends, who were sure that if Job could get his spiritual life together he would not have these troubles. In God's words to the three friends, four times God calls Job "my servant Job." God insisted that they humble themselves before "my servant Job."

And at the very end, God gave Job back twice as much as he took, twice as much livestock, and twice as many years. According to Exodus 22, when we take something from someone that we should not have taken, we give back double. At the God did that for Job, apparently agreeing that he should not have taken from Job what he did.

That's the entire Job story in short form, to help you put the parts in perspective. In our troubles and in our friendships, let's take all of this to heart. By means of the Job story, God is giving us a window into our own lives, shining his light on our lives.

Now, let's look more closely at Elihu. Elihu talks about Job at the beginning of his speech, and at the end of his speech Elihu talks about a thunderstorm. We'll look at both of these.

Elihu Burned with Anger – Job 32:2–5

Job's friends stopped talking at the end of chapter 25, but Job himself was not done, and he continued to the end of Job 31. Young Elihu has been waiting all this time, ready to burst, and now he begins. The opening of Job 32 has been tidied up a little by the NIV. The NASB is closer to the mark. Here's my summary of how the NASB puts it.

Elihu's anger burned. His anger burned at Job, because Job justified himself not God. His anger burned against the three friends, because they condemned Job but had no answer. Elihu waited to speak because the others were older; but now that the three friends had stopped, Elihu's anger burned. He's just plain angry, and now that the older people are silent, he uncorks himself.

Unlike the three friends, Elihu agreed with Job that Job was a righteous man. Elihu agrees that Job has *not* brought his troubles on himself by his sins and failures. In that way Elihu is different than the friends. But Elihu does not like how Job speaks of his innocence. Job won't talk about being righteous without making God look unrighteous. Elihu: Job, don't speak of God that way!

Job 34:5–9 Here is how Elihu puts it: *Job says, 'I am innocent, but God denies me justice.... God's arrow inflicts an incurable wound.' Is there anyone like Job [says Elihu], who drinks sacrilege like water? He keeps company with evildoers; he associates with the wicked. For he says, 'There is no profit in trying to please God.'*

Job has done this. Job has said, *God, does it please you to oppress me, to spurn me, the work of your hands, while you smile on the plans of the wicked?* Job 10:3 *As surely as God lives, who has denied me justice, ... I will maintain my innocence and never let go.* (23:2, 6.)

Job has never actually said, "there is no profit in trying to please God," but he has certainly implied it. "You oppress me, God, while you smile on the plans of the wicked." "God has denied me justice." Hearing these things infuriated young Elihu.

The only way Job knows how to defend his own righteousness in his troubles is to question God's righteousness. Job says, "I am a righteous person, therefore the God who brings these troubles is not." Elihu is saying to Job, "you say you are a righteous person, but that is not how a righteous person speaks about God!" And God agrees. For this Job needed to repent.

Elihu has some youthful pride of his own. He says to Job, "Be silent, and I will teach you wisdom! (33:33). "My words are not false, one who has perfect knowledge is with you!" (36:4).

But Elihu is on to something right. Elihu thinks Job needs to humble himself before God, to submit to God. Peter writes to persecuted churches, "*humble yourselves under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time*" (1Pt5:6). That was Elihu's position. God basically agreed with Elihu, although he was not as hard on Job as Elihu was.

What Job got wrong, the writer of Lamentations 3 got right. We are given Lamentations 3 so we can see how humility and patience look when God is very hard on us. And yet, at the end of Job, God defended Job his faithful servant. It is not easy to sort all this out.

So Elihu, for most of his speech, tells Job he needs to be more careful how he speaks about God, because it is absurd to tell God the creator of justice, he does not know about justice. But at the end of his speech, Elihu speaks about the Storm God.

Elihu Hears the Storm God Thunder – Job 36:27–37:24

At the beginning of Job 37, Elihu says, “My heart pounds. It leaps. Listen, Job! Listen to the roar of his voice, the rumbling that comes from his mouth!” It seems that while he’s speaking to Job, Elihu actually sees and hears a storm coming. Beginning in Job 38, God makes two speeches to Job, and both times God speaks out of the storm. So the storm Elihu sees is already God approaching, God beginning to show up.

Our God is, among other things, the Storm God. When God covenanted with Israel, in the days of Moses, God and Israel came to Mt Sinai. When God came to the mountain, there was thunder and lightning and fire and thick cloud. Smoke billowed up like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.

God was not angry, no hostility at all. He wanted to make a covenant with Israel, whom he has carried as a father carries his son. All that storm was just what happens to air and land when God shows up. He was introducing himself. He was not trying to scare, but he is a scary God.

C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. “Aslan is a lion - the Lion, the great Lion.”
 “Ooh” said Susan. “I’d thought Aslan was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.” “Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. “Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.” So also our Storm God.

Psalms 104 says that God makes the clouds his chariot, and rides on the wings of the wind. In the ancient world, when the king wanted to go somewhere, they put a throne on a four wheeled chariot, and they moved the royal presence around on this chariot. In the Bible, a storm with clouds and winds is God’s four-wheeled royal chariot. “*God makes the clouds his chariot, and he rides on the wings of the wind.*”

In Ezekiel 1, Ezekiel has a vision of four heavenly wheels, and four living creatures each with wings. And above it is a throne, with someone on it. That’s God’s royal heavenly chariot. How did Ezekiel’s vision begin? Ezekiel saw an immense windstorm coming out of the north, an immense cloud with flashing lightning. That storm was God’s chariot. “*God makes the clouds his chariot, and he rides on the wings of the wind.*” Elihu and Job know these things. That means that rain and thunder is not just rain and thunder. It is God showing up.

In Elihu's storm section, he talks about rain clouds, and thunder, and briefly the sun. So we'll take up rain clouds, then thunder, then the sun.

A Manitoba Summer Rain Cloud – Job 36:27–29; 37:11–12

God draws up the drops of water, which distill as rain to the streams; the clouds pour down their moisture and abundant showers fall on mankind. Who can understand how he spreads out the clouds?... He loads the clouds with moisture; he scatters his lightning through them. At his direction they swirl around over the face of the whole earth to do whatever he commands them.

Imagine with me a typical summer rain cloud in this part of the world. This cloud is two miles wide, and it pours down rain for twenty miles. It drops rain on a strip of land that's two miles wide and twenty miles long. The average rainfall in that strip of land is ¼" of rain, or 6 mm if you prefer metric. ¼" of rain on forty square miles. That's a respectable rain cloud, though not exceptional.

For twenty some years I bicycled to Otterburne and back three or four times a week, and I have been caught under clouds just like this. I did some back arithmetic to find out how much water my cloud dropped. The number of gallons or litres is too high to be meaningful. Let's try weight. A ton is 2000 lbs, a little less than 1000 kg.

This cloud dropped 750 thousand tons of water on those forty square miles. Three quarters of a million tons, floating along in this cloud. A large pickup truck weighs about 3 tons. Imagine 250 thousand large pickups floating along in a cloud. They look weightless, poised as they are half a mile in the air. 750 thousand tons.

Science can tell us how this happens, evaporation and vaporization and condensation and so on. They can tell us how it happens, but not why it just so happens to work that way. In the Bible, that's God's wisdom. In the Bible, it is God's wisdom that puts things together like that.

In Job 38, God asks Job, "Job, who tips over the water jars of heaven?" The Steinbach water tower does not look that big from a distance, but if you get right underneath, it's a pretty big jug up there. The cloud I described dropped the water that the Steinbach water tower holds 300 times. 300 jars that size, full of water, floating along like clouds, and when the time is right, God starts tipping them over. The Stnb water tower is on a sturdy carefully engineered pedestal. By God's wisdom, three hundred of them floating in the air, and we see this all the time.

Elihu is thinking, "Job, you want to tell the God who creates and uses rain clouds that he is not running creation properly? You will say that to him? Really?"

Thunder: the Roar of his Voice – Job 36:29, 33; 37:1–2, 4–5

God makes it thunder so that we will know what his voice sounds like. Thunder can be very powerful; I have felt the earth vibrate under my feet from loud thunder. Ps 29 makes a direct connection between thunder and the voice of Yahweh. Listening to loud thunder tells us about the voice of God. That’s how Elihu thinks about this.

*Who can understand how he spreads out the clouds, how he thunders from his pavilion? He fills his hands with lightning and commands it to strike its mark. His thunder announces the coming storm. At this my heart pounds, and leaps from its place. Listen! **Listen to the roar of his voice, to the rumbling that comes from his mouth.** He unleashes his lightning beneath the whole heaven, and sends it to the ends of the earth. **After that comes the sound of his roar; he thunders with his majestic voice. When his voice resounds, he holds nothing back. God’s voice thunders in marvelous ways; he does great things beyond our understanding.***

There is nothing hostile in God’s thunder voice. God is not angry. He’s majestic. He thunders with his majestic voice. God gave us thunder so we would grasp the actual voice of God. It is the closest thing we have to actually hearing God, and God gave thunder so we’d listen and make the connection to his actual voice.

Job, We Can’t Even Look at the Sun – Job 37:21

Elihu briefly mentions the sun in 37:21. We cannot even look at the sun, bright as it is. As thunder shows us the majestic voice of God, the sun shows us the splendor of God’s face. Thunder is the closest thing we have to his voice, and the sun is the closest thing we have to his face. This is not naïve. Ignoring it is staying in our dark blindness. The end of Job makes a strong push for us having a better grasp of our God if we paid more attention to creation around us.

Job wants to meet God in court, and challenge God about how he manages the world. Elihu thinks this is absurd, and dangerous. Elihu wants Job to think again about the wind and the rain, the thunder and the lightning, the clouds and the sun which we cannot look at, much less God.

Elihu says, “Tell us, Job, what we should say to him? Should he be told that I want to speak? Why would anyone ask to be swallowed up?” 37:19–20. Job, do you really think you can instruct God? What makes you think you would survive the conversation?

Elihu does not really resolve Job’s problem. Why is he suffering when plenty of wicked people have trouble free lives? But Elihu takes us in the right direction, especially by aiming us at God’s creation. God himself shows up in after this, and God speaks to Job only of his creation.

Application

Job was very disappointed in God. The Psalms have quite a bit of that too. We are allowed to tell God we are disappointed with him, and to say he's not being fair to us. We have to be careful about accusing God. Job went too far with that, and eventually he repented. But even with Job, God was not unkind, not angry, God was not offended. He just needed to take Job a little farther. But Job never stopped taking his troubles to God.

What does the story of Job, so far, show you about your life, and what does this story of Job, so far, show you about God? Remember that God himself has not spoken yet, so we're not done, but we have already seen quite a bit. What have you seen? Amen.

PRAYER: Father, at the end of Job we read that Job's brothers and sisters came to him, and they consoled him over all the troubles that you had brought on him. Help us be that kind of brothers and sisters to each other. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and into Christ's perseverance. May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times and in every way. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.