

Fifteen

ELIHU—I

So far we have seen Job's sufferings, and how they came about; we have heard the words of Job's three friends, and Job's answer to each of them; we have recognised Job's faith, and the pleading of his cause before God. Next we would expect to find God's own reply to Job. That comes, but before that happens, someone else speaks. It is someone we have not heard of before, though apparently he has been there all along, because he has been listening in on everything that has been happening. He is someone who, after he speaks, is not acknowledged again. His name is Elihu, and what he has to say takes up chapters 32–37.

THE ANGRY YOUNG MAN

Here he is introduced:

32:1 So these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. **2** Then Elihu son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, became angry. He was angry at Job because he justified himself rather than God; **3** he was angry also at Job's three friends because they had found no answer, though they had declared Job to be in the wrong. **4** Now Elihu had waited to speak to Job, because they were older than he. **5** But when Elihu saw that there was no answer in the mouths of these three men, he became angry.

We do not have to take what is written here at face value. It is written from Elihu's point of view. Four times it says that he was 'angry'. Elihu is the 'angry young man', so his viewpoint is likely to be distorted, because we never see things clearly from the point of view of our anger. Thus, when it says in verse 1 that the three friends ceased to answer Job 'because he was righteous in his own eyes', that is how Job was misunderstood by his three friends. We know that Job did say that before God he has walked blameless and upright, but we also know that Job did not say he was not a sinner. He was saying, 'In my sufferings I have not spoken against God, or cursed Him, or blamed Him with wrong'. Also Job was saying, 'There is no good reason for my suffering, and I want God to come and say, if there is anything, what it is. But I believe that, when I come before Him, there will be no good reason for my suffering.' That did not mean that he was totally 'righteous in his own eyes', and arrogant and proud with it. That was a misunderstanding on the part of Job's three friends. They thought that is what he was saying, and they treated him accordingly.

Elihu sees the same thing. In verse 2, it says Elihu 'was angry at Job because he justified himself rather than God'. We have seen very clearly that Job looked to God to justify him, and to justify Himself as God. Verse 3: 'He was angry also at Job's three friends because they had found no answer, though they had declared Job to be in the wrong.' That makes it sound a bit like the whole thing was an intellectual discussion rather than the outworking of life's great issues. That is a bit of a clue to Elihu's approach: he is saying, 'You guys have been arguing about the problem of suffering, and you have not come up with any conclusion'. Whereas we have seen, right from the start, that Job himself was deeply affected by what was going on. It was no intellectual argument for him. If we approach the whole book of Job as an

intellectual argument, then we have not got to the level of where it is at. But that seems to be where Elihu is.

HOLDING FAST, AND PRESSING ON

Elihu reminds me of a young theological student. For theological students, these are great issues: they are discovering wonderful things about God, they are opening up the Scriptures and the great doctrines! I can remember when we were at theological college, and we would stay up until one or two o'clock in the morning thrashing these things out—all up in our minds! That is, perhaps, what Elihu does. We see here that he is young: he had waited to speak because the other three were older than he was. But he says, as we shall see, that he thinks that he knows better than the old—that he has got it all worked out, and that he can tell them a thing or two. We saw that Zophar was a bit like that: he was young and brash, and plain rude with it. Elihu is even younger than he is, but he is more in the nature of one who has his whole theology worked out, and can tell anyone anything—or thinks he can. Anderson's commentary describes it rather well: 'He speaks with that combination of deference and cocksureness'—deference to the aged, but sure that he knows better than they do—'that captures the pose of a youth that sees little, but sees it clearly.' Elihu has some great things to say, but it is also clear that he has misunderstood a lot of what has been said, or is just picking it up and repeating it as if it is something that he has thought of himself. But the things he does see, he sees with great perception, grabbing hold of them very well.

I once had my whole theology worked out. I was well down that track: I started to set it out in a series of teaching booklets, which since have been largely abandoned—though there was good stuff in them, and I have since pulled out from them things that I use in my teaching now. These booklets were doing very well: they were in great demand in other parishes. If anyone would ask me, I would know! I told a few people things that they did not ask me—I volunteered them some information for their benefit! But then I started to see other things that I had not seen before, and I saw them very clearly, and my theology began to change. So then, again, I started laying about with my new knowledge, and telling more people things that they had not asked to know! As I have gone on, I have seen that even the things I thought then, when I had thought that they were everything, were not everything: they were partial, they were able to be filled out, and in places corrected—believe it or not! Also, I found that I was not the first person to think these wonderful things: others had long had a better grasp of these things than I had. Not that the things I knew or had thought before were worthless or useless—there were many valuable insights there—but I needed to realise that they were partial, selective, and often second hand.

How do you get out of that? Perhaps we never will, before we know as we are known (as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:12), face to face with God, when our love for Him will be as His love for us has ever been, and we will know ourselves as He knows us. Maybe till then we shall always be in this provisional, transitional mode, even though we come to great insights in all of that.

What do we do about that? It is good to keep talking to others, and not to close off anything that you think you know. It is good to bounce your mind and what is in it off other better minds. I like doing that: putting something together and then throwing it at someone—perhaps a visiting lecturer, or an experienced teacher—and they say, 'Yes, OK', but then they throw it back to me with some insights of their own, and it

comes back to me in better shape. It is good to submit what you teach to the discussion of others, and be humble enough to say, 'That is as far as I think have got with that, and let others say, 'Yes, but what about this and that?' And you can say, 'Ah, yes!' and readjust what you think and teach, and end up a little wiser as a result. Still without letting go the things that God has made clear to you in your experience of life. Never write all of that off, because God has been working with you in that right through. Paul in Philippians 3:12–15 was looking towards the resurrection of the dead, when he would rise again in Christ, and these things would no longer be big important issues to be worked through, and had these good words to say: 'Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.' A mark of maturity is the recognition that you still have further to go, and more to learn. Do not worry if you have not got it all together, or even if you try to give expression to that before it may be fully formed, because if it is deficient God will show you that as you go along—and that will be good!—and you will learn some more. But if God has shown us something, let us not let it go, or compromise on that, but be sure of it, and claim it. If there is more that we need to know, God will show us that too, as the time comes.

This is good to know for ourselves, and also as we come to consider Elihu. Even though he is young, and thinks he is perfect—he is 'full of words', and they keep coming and coming and coming!—let us also see that he too, like the others, has a heart for God and, even more, God has a heart for him.

'I AM FULL OF WORDS'

Elihu says first why he has not spoken up to now, and why he is going to speak:

32:6 Elihu son of Barachel the Buzite answered:

'I am young in years,
and you are aged;
therefore I was timid and afraid
to declare my opinion to you.

This is his deference, which does not last very long!

32:7 I said, 'Let days speak,
and many years teach wisdom.'

8 But truly it is the spirit in a mortal,
the breath of the Almighty, that makes for understanding.

9 It is not the old that are wise,
nor the aged that understand what is right.

10 Therefore I say, 'Listen to me;
let me also declare my opinion.'

He is bursting to speak, and to give the final answer. He says, 'You can be very old, and can still not have learned a lot'. It is what you learn from the breath of the Almighty: the spirit in you makes you understand. So he says, 'This spirit is what I have: I have my own opinion or knowledge, and I want to tell this to you'.

32:11 See, I waited for your words,
I listened for your wise sayings,
while you searched out what to say.
12 I gave you my attention,
but there was in fact no one that confuted Job,
no one among you that answered his words.
13 Yet do not say, 'We have found wisdom;
God may vanquish him, not a human.'
14 He has not directed his words against me,
and I will not answer him with your speeches.

Elihu is saying to these three, 'I have been listening to everything you say, and I held my tongue while you said it, but none of you have really answered Job! Here he is, saying these incredible things, and you have not answered him. You might sit back and say, Well, it's not up to us—God will fix him. But if we have something to say, then we ought to say it! So that is what I am going to do: I'm going to say it! When I answer him, even though he hasn't spoken to me, I will answer him, but it will not be with the kind of thing you were trying to dish up. I'm going to give him the proper answer!' Well, let's see if he does. He is almost scornful of these other friends:

32:15 They are dismayed, they answer no more;
they have not a word to say.
16 And am I to wait, because they do not speak,
because they stand there, and answer no more?
17 I also will give my answer;
I also will declare my opinion.
18 For I am full of words;
the spirit within me constrains me.
19 My heart is indeed like wine that has no vent;
like new wineskins, it is ready to burst.
20 I must speak, so that I may find relief;
I must open my lips and answer.
21 I will not show partiality to any person
or use flattery toward anyone.
22 For I do not know how to flatter—
or my Maker would soon put an end to me!"

So this is Elihu: I am full of words—I am busting to speak! We can commend him, that he has not spoken through the first thirty-one chapters, but he is certainly letting fly now!

Have you ever been so full of what is on your mind that you do not really hear what other people are saying? Or, if not, have you ever been speaking to someone like that? You are only waiting for the opportunity to say what *you* want to say. Fair enough: it is very important to you. But it does not always make for clear hearing. Elihu has picked up some things they have said, but he has not always got it right.

In verse 22, he is no respecter of persons. He is not going to beat around the bush, he is not going to flatter people or butter them up: he is going to come straight out with it. Eliphaz might be old and hoary, and Job might be a very honoured and respected man, but that is not going to stop Elihu from saying what needs to be said! 'I don't know how to flatter people', he says. Being no respecter of persons can sometimes mean that you are no respecter of feelings either, and can make you a little bit insensitive.

Those words, 'I . . . will declare my opinion . . . I am full of words', or, as he says later, 'one who is perfect in knowledge is with you' (36:4), sum up Elihu. He is fit to burst with what he has to say.

That might sound a bit like Jeremiah 20:8–9, but it is very different. Jeremiah was commissioned by God to speak the word of the Lord. He found that a real trial and a struggle for him, because it was a word that the people did not want to hear. It was a word also about God's people that seared Jeremiah himself, and cut him to the core: the things he was saying about what would happen to God's people were not something that he wanted to have to say, because of his love for God's people. Jeremiah says, 'For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,"—if I try to take the easy way out, and not speak this word that is so difficult to speak and to hear, then, he says, that will not be the easy way out. That will make it harder—'then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.' So Jeremiah had no choice but to speak the word of the Lord. Not because he wanted to, but because the word itself in him demanded to be spoken, and would not let him rest until it had been spoken. That is rather different from what Elihu is saying. He is speaking because he wants to speak. He has got his own opinion, and he wants to get it across. Jeremiah did not necessarily want to speak, but had to. Elihu certainly wants to speak, and nothing is going to stop him.

In verse 14 he says, 'I will not answer him with your speeches'. It is interesting that when he does answer, the things he comes up with are pretty much the same as the comforters themselves had spoken, with some modifications. He has virtually just picked up what they were saying, and does not really take it any further than they have.

MISREPRESENTING JOB?

In chapter 33, Elihu begins a little self-consciously:

33:1 But now, hear my speech, O Job,
and listen to all my words.
2 See, I open my mouth;
the tongue in my mouth speaks.

You can almost hear it flapping!

33:3 My words declare the uprightness of my heart,
and what my lips know they speak sincerely.
4 The spirit of God has made me,
and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.
5 Answer me, if you can;
set your words in order before me; take your stand.
6 See, before God I am as you are;
I too was formed from a piece of clay.
7 No fear of me need terrify you;
my pressure will not be heavy on you."

He is sure of his own rightness, he is sure of the uprightness of his heart, and of his own sincerity—which we must allow him. He is sure of his divine inspiration, although in verse 4 he may be referring to what he says in verse 6: 'I too was formed

from a piece of clay' (compare Genesis 2:7, when 'the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being', which appears to be known here to Elihu). Elihu is saying: 'I am a creature, made that way, the same as you are, Job, and so I should be able to speak as you do: we are both before God on an equal footing, and so I have a right to speak, and you should listen to what I have to say'.

This results in his being a little patronising towards Job. Just imagine this young whipper-snapper talking to such a fine old man, and saying: 'Job, you don't have to be afraid of what I am going to say to you—it's all right: I won't be too hard on you! I will deal very gently with you, in my great wisdom!'

33:8 Surely, you have spoken in my hearing,
and I have heard the sound of your words.
9 You say, 'I am clean, without transgression;
I am pure, and there is no iniquity in me.
10 Look, he finds occasions against me,
he counts me as his enemy;
11 he puts my feet in the stocks,
and watches all my paths.'"

That is sort of like what Job had been saying, and we could look up various passages to see that this is the case, such as 9:20–21, when Job had said: 'Though I am innocent, my own mouth would condemn me; though I am blameless, he would prove me perverse. I am blameless; I do not know myself; I loathe my life.' That was when Job was coming before God and thinking that it was going to be hopeless trying to say anything really, even if he was innocent—one of Job's more despairing moments. In 10:5–7, asking of God: 'Are your days like the days of mortals, or your years like human years, that you seek out my iniquity and search for my sin, although you know that I am not guilty, and there is no one to deliver out of your hand?' In 16:17, Job had said, 'there is no violence in my hands, and my prayer is pure'. In 23:7, again, coming before God, Job has said: 'There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.' We have looked closely at those passages, and we have seen and sensed the feeling of what Job was saying there. Remember also the whole of chapter 31, where Job asked to come before the Lord, and said all the things that he had been accused of, and denied them, and called on God for just judgement and justification. Elihu has heard these things, and certainly there is a sense in which Job has said, 'I am clean, without transgression'—although we have also looked at the passages where Job did not deny his sin—but Job never said: 'I am pure, and there is no iniquity in me'. That is an implication that Elihu has picked up and put on Job. It is an exaggeration.

It is easy to set up a straw man, to knock him down. That is what Elihu is tending to do here. Sometimes we can say: 'Oh, so-and-so is just this, this, and this', and then to knock them down, without actually hearing what they are saying, or seeing what they are on about. Be wary of that. It is an easy thing to do. It is harder to come to grips with the true situation, with what someone like Job is really saying, as we have taken some pains to do.

THE GREATNESS OF GOD

Here comes Elihu's answer:

33:12 But in this you are not right. I will answer you:
God is greater than any mortal.”

We have actually heard that before. It is pretty obvious, and if that is the best he can come up with, then things have not been taken further. It is true: God is greater than we are. Maybe it is something that Elihu has just come to realise: perhaps he has just had a great experience of God to make him realise this, and now he wants to convey it to the others. This is a bit like Eliphaz. This was the line that he took: God is greater than human beings; therefore do not think that what you are going to do, one way or the other, is going to affect God.

GOD SPEAKS

The implications that Elihu draws from this, however, are different from what Eliphaz said. Elihu says that God in His greatness communicates with us:

33:13 Why do you contend against him,
saying, ‘He will answer none of my words’?
14 For God speaks in one way,
and in two, though people do not perceive it.
15 In a dream, in a vision of the night,
when deep sleep falls on mortals,
while they slumber on their beds,
16 then he opens their ears,
and terrifies them with warnings,
17 that he may turn them aside from their deeds,
and keep them from pride,
18 to spare their souls from the Pit,
their lives from traversing the River.

This is one of the strong positions that Elihu takes up. He has got it all sorted out. He says: ‘You are saying that God is not answering you, but I know that God does answer people. Let me tell you how God does answer prayer: He speaks in one way, or two. Maybe you are so thick, Job, that you cannot hear Him speaking to you! But I know that God speaks: He speaks in dreams, and visions of the night, when deep sleep falls upon us, and he opens people’s ears, and terrifies them with warnings, to turn them around, and rescue them.’ One of the things that Elihu had grasped was that, when God acts, He does it to save and redeem—to correct, rather than just punish and wipe out. Maybe there he is in advance of what Bildad said: the good gets rewarded, the bad gets punished, and that’s it. Elihu does say that, but he says that God brings chastisement to redeem people and to take them on to something better. That may be Elihu’s saving grace, for in this we see Elihu himself being taken on further, to a certain extent, by God.

How does God answer prayer? How does God speak to us? He does speak to us in all those ways. But there are times when he is deliberately silent. Job was going through one of those times when God was deliberately silent. We know why that was, from the setting in chapter 1. It wasn’t that Job was being thick, and could not hear God speaking. This is one of the things we need to learn in wisdom.

PRAY FOR HEALING!

Elihu also sees that God deals with people through suffering:

33:19 They are also chastened with pain upon their beds,
and with continual strife in their bones,
20 so that their lives loathe bread,
and their appetites dainty food.
21 Their flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen;
and their bones, once invisible, now stick out.
22 Their souls draw near the Pit,
and their lives to those who bring death.”

That could be a good description of what has happened to Job. So Elihu appreciates that. But, he says, there is a way out of that. There are prayers for healing, and you can be saved from sickness:

33:23 Then, if there should be for one of them an angel,
a mediator, one of a thousand,
one who declares a person upright,
24 and he is gracious to that person, 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 vigour.’
26 Then he prays to God, and is accepted by him,
he comes into his presence with joy,
and God repays him for his righteousness.
27 That person sings to others and says,
‘I sinned, and perverted what was right,
and it was not paid back to me.
28 He has redeemed my soul from going down to the Pit,
and my life shall see the light.’

That is a wonderful experience to have, when God delivers you from sickness, and when He actually teaches you something in that sickness and in that deliverance. This is the kind of experience that Elihu is referring to.

In verse 23, ‘a mediator, one of a thousand’: some say this is Elihu preaching the gospel to Job, and putting him on the right track. But I don’t think it is Christ he is talking about there. He is talking about the great company of angels that are here to serve the redeemed. Somehow, through those, God brings to this person who is suffering the opportunity to pray for healing, and so he prays. Perhaps Elihu is a bit of a charismatic! He has seen prayers for healing, and they have worked, so he says to Job: ‘That is all you have to do! Pray, and the Lord will lift you out of that, and it will be good for you!’ We know that often that does happen. But there can be circumstances, like Job’s situation, of testing and trial, where that is not the answer. Paul had the same thing: three times he besought God that his ‘thorn in the flesh’ be removed, but God said, No: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness, (see 2 Corinthians 12:7–9). Elihu refers to a genuine experience, and tries to apply it across the board, but that is not necessarily where it belongs. Nevertheless, he says:

33:29 God indeed does all these things,
twice, three times, with mortals,
30 to bring back their souls from the Pit,
so that they may see the light of life.
31 Pay heed, Job, listen to me;

- be silent, and I will speak.
32 If you have anything to say, answer me;
speak, for I desire to justify you.
33 If not, listen to me;
be silent, and I will teach you wisdom.'

I'm not sure how long he stopped there, to listen to Job, to see if he did have any answer. There is none forthcoming, and so he speaks on.

It is interesting that Elihu says to Job, 'I desire to justify you' (verse 32). There is a temptation when we see someone in suffering to try to put them in the right, or to explain what is happening to them, or to show them the way out of it, rather than, as we said before, simply being with them, and letting what is happening to them have its impact on you. Sometimes trying to justify someone out of their situation can display your own discomfort with it, and unwillingness to face it in its full depth. Perhaps that is why Elihu comes out with these testimonies to God's great goodness to people in suffering, and urges Job to take them up. Again, not always in a sensitive way: Job knew all these things that Elihu is telling him. It had been many times his experience of answered prayer before—that is why he was so bemused by his suffering this time. He had, more perhaps than two or three times in his life, heard God speaking to him in great consoling and blessing ways, bringing him back from the Pit. Job knew constantly the need to go to God with the sacrifices for forgiveness, and to walk in fellowship with God. Perhaps Elihu was one who had recently had a wonderful conversion experience, and had been rescued from the Pit, whereas Job perhaps had always been in the light of God's fellowship. We do not know. While the things that Elihu is talking about here are very real, they may be out of place in being put to Job. Job does not reply.