

The Search For Meaning In Suffering

Job 35:1-16

Introduction

Elihu begins his third speech.

In the face of tragedy and difficulty we look for meaning in suffering.

In this chapter Elihu accuses Job of self-righteous deception! Why? Elihu was uncomfortable with Job's claims of integrity and innocence! Elihu cannot bring himself to believe that Job's hardships have nothing to do with some personal deficiency. Elihu is willing to concede that God might be using the suffering to stir Job to seek God! Elihu's second charge against Job is that Job suggested there was no benefit in obeying God or righteous behavior since it is possible to obey God and still suffer! In the mind of Elihu this was a gross inconsistency!

The subject: Does godliness really matter? Is there any profit in obeying God? What's the use of being good? Why doesn't God answer my prayer?

The Charges Against Job (vv.1-3)

Job 35:1-16 (NKJV) Moreover Elihu answered and said:

2 "Do you think this is right? Do you say, 'My righteousness is more than God's'?"

The expression 'right' or 'just' (*mishpat-just*) is a legal term! The accusation: Job is acting as if he is more righteous than God! Elihu is building on an earlier accusation made by Eliphaz (4:17). And does the accusation have some merit? Does Job think he is more more fair than God?

Elihu has argued that in spite of Job's protests he cannot be innocent before God.

Elihu interprets Job's argument that Job's righteousness has neither helped or hurt him.

The way Elihu frames the argument this way:

He contends that the presence or the absence of sin has no effect upon God. It can neither hurt God or help God.

"Rather, Elihu maintains that Job is the one who is affected. Elihu is wrong, however; God does receive pleasure from Job's good works of obedience and love (1:8; 2:3; cf. 2 Cor 9:7), and He is grieved by unrighteousness (Gen 6:6; Ps 78:40; Eph 4:30)" (See Believer's Study Bible Crisswell and Patterson).

There is a sense in which Elihu's argument sounds plausible. In the grand scheme of things can human beings help or hurt God? The presence or absence of human beings does not make God greater or lesser. But Crisswell and Patterson are correct. God does receive pleasure from our good works of obedience and love. And God is grieved by unrighteousness.

What we do matters to God.

3 For you say, 'What advantage will it be to You? What profit shall I have, more than if I had sinned?'

The Search For Meaning In Suffering

Job 35:1-16

Does the sufferings Job beg the question; are there any advantages to being good, righteous, obedient to God?

Job did not make a bargain with God. Job did not say—“I’ll be good to you God—if you’ll be good to me!”

Job did say (Job 21:15); “Who is the Almighty, that we should serve Him? And what profit do we have if we pray to Him?” Job is reflecting on the sentiments of the wicked!

God Is Higher Than Human Problems (vv.4-8)

4 “I will answer you, And your companions with you.

5 Look to the heavens and see; And behold the clouds— They are higher than you.

Elihu invites his listeners to peer into the sky.

Elihu’s supposition is rather simple: God is far above man’s wickedness or righteousness. Human behavior has no intrinsic effect on God. The God of the Universe is self-existent; he dwells in holy perfection and justice. Man’s behavior cannot add to His perfection or subtract from God’s perfection. God cannot be helped by righteous behavior or harmed by sinful behavior. Sin only harms the sinner or other people who come in contact with the sinner or the larger society.

The Expositors Commentary: “A person’s wickedness or righteousness affects only man, not God. When God shows mercy it is not because man has persuaded him to do so, and if he inflicts judgment it is not because man has injured him. God is sovereign and therefore self-determining. He is not bribed by man; his standards for judging people are firm, impartial and uninfluenced. But since a person’s moral conduct does affect himself, it does make a difference for him whether he sins or not (cf. 35:3); (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary; pp.761-762).

6 If you sin, what do you accomplish against Him? Or, if your transgressions are multiplied, what do you do to Him?

The wicked or evil person cannot manipulate or scare or threaten God into acting.

7 If you are righteous, what do you give Him? Or what does He receive from your hand?

Whether evil or righteous God cannot be bribed or bought—to generate God’s kindness or favor or respect!

The Search For Meaning In Suffering

Job 35:1-16

8Your wickedness affects a man such as you, And your righteousness a son of man.

In effect Elihu argues; that God has impartially and objectively determined to give to the wicked what their wickedness requires; and to the just or righteous righteous treatment. In effect—Job you are getting what you deserve.

Elihu basically argues that God doesn't owe Job anything—God does not have to show up in court and answer charges leveled against him by Job or anyone else. God doesn't owe an explanation. God was not under any obligation for any work or any deed (see 41:11).

“Who has preceded Me, that I should pay him? Everything under heaven is Mine.”

On the surface it seems that Elihu's answer to the question; does it pay to be good—or what are the benefits of righteousness; it doesn't matter to God—God is unaffected by your behavior—but you are effected and everyone around you is effected. Man not God suffers from man's sin; man not God benefits from man's righteousness.

God Has His Reasons For Unanswered Prayer (vv.9-15)

9“Because of the multitude of oppressions they cry out; They cry out for help because of the arm of the mighty.

The people 'cry out' (*za'aq*); 'for help' (*shawa*); because the people need deliverance from the oppressions of rulers; not because they acknowledge God as Creator.

Elihu draws a conclusion that many have embraced; people tend to cry out to God when they are in trouble! People cry out to God when they suffer. Elihu reasons that God does not answer these prayers—because they are simply cries for help or deliverance with no real intention to acknowledge sin or turn from sin. They cry out for help because 'of the arm of the mighty'—the oppression; injustice; inequity.

In the Bible the people of Israel often cried out to God for deliverance from oppression; but their cries for deliverance were not always rooted and grounded in a profound awareness of sin and the need for a Savior!

Do some people cry out to God—not for relief from sin but relief from pain? I think the answer is yes. Elihu suggests that Job's motives are impure!

10But no one says, 'Where is God my Maker, Who gives songs in the night,

Elihu acknowledges a principle; some unanswered prayer seem rooted and grounded in the problem of pride. Songs in the night seem to be those songs that we sing in hardship, sorrow,

The Search For Meaning In Suffering

Job 35:1-16

pain and affliction. Songs in the night are the Hebrew equivalent of the 'blues'. Songs in the night are the symbols of human sin and human suffering.

Under crushing loss and unrelenting pain and the silence of God; Job has lost his song. For those of us tempted to judge him or blame him we must wonder whether or not we would sing in similar circumstances.

Wiersbe comments; "But even if God doesn't relieve the burden, He can give the trusting sufferer "songs in the night" (v.10; Ps. 42:8; 77:6). "Any man can sing in the day," said Charles Spurgeon. It is easy to sing when we can read the notes by daylight; but he is the skillful singer who can sing when there is not a ray of light by which to read." The Lord gave "songs in the night" to Jesus before He went to the cross (Matt.26:30) and to Paul and Silas in the prison in Philippi (Acts 16:25). If God doesn't see fit to remove our burdens, He will always gives strength to bear them—a song to sing while doing it!" (see BE Patient; Waiting on God in Difficult Times-OT Job; p.136).

Spurgeon also said, "Songs in the night come only from God; they are not in the power of man." Spurgeon said that we can sing of the day that is past, the night that is not all darkness, and the morning that is to come.

Remember it was not always night with thee. . .remember that God who made thee sing yesterday has not left thee in the night, He is not a daylight God, who cannot know His children in darkness; but He loves thee now as much as ever: though He has left thee a little, it is to prove thee, to make thee trust Him better and serve Him more" (quoted in McKenna; p. 259).

What are the benefits for those who know God and trust God? They can sing in the night. They can find true comfort in real pain and trouble. God is willing to instruct us ('who teaches us more than the beasts of the earth; and makes us wiser than the birds of heaven?'" (v.11).

Job has sung a song. "I know that my Redeemer lives." Job has sang; "When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold" (23:10).

You can't see God? He still sees you!

11Who teaches us more than the beasts of the earth, And makes us wiser than the birds of heaven?'

The sentence on its face does not appear to be all that profound; but it hints at further revelation offered by God in general revelation. Does the physical world have much to teach us? The answer is yes. But can the physical universe tell us everything about God? No. It requires a special revelation. That special revelation comes in the Word of God and the Word made flesh.

The Search For Meaning In Suffering

Job 35:1-16

Later God will interrogate Job about ‘the beasts of the earth’ and the ‘birds of the air’ (Job 38:39-39:27).

We know that we are to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. We pray for God’s presence. Does that mean we are forbidden from praying for relief? Relief from suffering, relief from oppression, relief from broken relationships. In moments of honesty we might admit that some of our prayers are not for God’s presence; we rush to prayer—and take little thought that it is God to whom we are praying! We greet God like our servant or repeat prayers learned in childhood.

12There they cry out, but He does not answer, Because of the pride of evil men.

Elihu attempts to answer the question of unanswered prayer! Elihu’s explanation: unanswered prayer—even the prayers of a righteous man—is due to a lack of faith (v.10); pride (v.12) and to the emptiness of the prayer (v.13; cf. James 4:3); (The Ryrie Study Bible; notes p.799).

Does Elihu have Job in mind? It is interesting that in Job’s cry for help—and a cry for a hearing—Job’s friends see a person filled with pride—unwilling to acknowledge fault—boasting in righteousness—and coming to the conclusion that God refuses Job’s prayer because of arrogant pride and deceitful demands.

“God will not answer a call for deliverance only, says Elihu. Men must call upon God’s mercy and seek the wisdom of their Creator, who gives “songs” even in hours of darkness. The righteous person who relies upon the providence of God can sing hymns even in affliction (cf. Acts 16:25). God has given man a higher nature than the brute “beasts” (v. 11), and this nature should teach him to carry his burdens to God with a spirit of trust in and commitment to divine providence. If one does not cry out to God in this spirit, i.e., humbly and without personal pride, he will not receive an answer (v. 12)” (Again Believer’s Study Bible Criswell & Patterson).

13Surely God will not listen to empty talk, Nor will the Almighty regard it.

The Lord will not listen to those prayers that are full of pride and absent pure motives.

The Bible speaks of a number of things that may be a hindrance to prayer; including a refusal to confess sin (Ps. 66:18); a lack of sincerity (Matt. 6:5); carnal motives (Ja.4:3) and unbelief (Ja. 1:5-6). But sometimes supernatural forces are at work (Dan.10:10-13). Another hindrance seems to be a refusal to submit to Biblical teaching (Prov.1:24-28); a refusal to forgive or even to be forgiven (Matt.5:23-24); marital strife; refusing to help the needy (Prov.21:3).

14Although you say you do not see Him, Yet justice is before Him, and you must wait for Him.

The Search For Meaning In Suffering

Job 35:1-16

You can't see God? He still sees you. God is not unfamiliar with your case. God is just and Elihu believes that perhaps Job might still need a little help in recognizing just how great God really is (chapters 37-38).

Elihu suggests that Job's circumstance won't change because of talk or words—and Job's only option is to wait and trust!

15And now, because He has not punished in His anger, Nor taken much notice of folly,

Think about what Elihu is saying; 'although you say you do not see Him, Yet justice is before Him; Job even though you say you can't see God or suggest that God has been unfair and unkind; you might want to wait until God actually rules on your case!

Elihu's Conclusions: The Charges Against Job Are Sustained (v.16)

16Therefore Job opens his mouth in vain; He multiplies words without knowledge."

Elihu is convinced that Job's logic is flawed and only served to expose his pride. Elihu draws the only conclusion he can reasonably embrace—Job's claim of righteousness is false and his words are empty and foolish.

Elihu with a single sweeping statement dismisses all the questions and complaints and arguments as empty and vain.

What does Elihu really believe? That Job is guilty of secret sin and that God is punishing Job for that secret sin! Elihu is really no different than the other three friends. Elihu believed Job multiplied his sin by multiplying his words. He believes Job's words are foolish and arrogant words against the Lord!

In Elihu's mind there is only one solution to Job's problems; repent, turn from the sin and seek the Lord's forgiveness. Then perhaps the Lord would restore him. If Job proudly and stubbornly refused to repent, God would continue to ignore his pleas. Job would have no hope of being exonerated or accepted by God. According to Elihu Job has been proud (v.12), impatient (v.14), and foolish (v.15).

We have waded through 100 verses of Elihu! (check 32:6-chapter 35:14!!).

And he's still not through!!!

Elihu believes he is helping Job understand where things went wrong. Elihu believes that you can't force God's hand (chapter 35:1-8); you must submit to God's timing (chapter 35:9-16); and now Elihu will seek to persuade Job that God can use suffering for good (chapter 36:1-15); and that means that Job must change his attitude (chapter 36:16-21).

The Search For Meaning In Suffering

Job 35:1-16

Conclusion

For the sin of pride Elihu says; ‘repent’; for impatience he demands that Job wait; and for saying the wrong thing—shut your mouth. The advice under normal circumstances—is not all that bad—except—Job’s prosperity was not dependent upon Job’s righteousness and Job’s deepest desire was for God’s presence!

Part of the challenge we face as readers or hearers is the unsettling conclusions we might draw. Remember we have read the first two chapters of Job. We know that God considers Job a friend and righteous. And yet we look at Job’s pain—and struggle and ask ourselves; has Job said some things unwise—and do Job’s remarks reveal some pride?

And yet we know that Job’s guilt is no where near the callous accusations of Elihu or the others. Job had done nothing to warrant the kind of catastrophic suffering he was experiencing; and yet here he is—suffering! God’s reasons for allowing the suffering remains—and yet the one reason that Job’s friends—return to—sin and guilt—and deliberate sin—and Job’s claims of innocence and righteousness are ignored.

Elihu’s answer to the question; “does it matter if we are good”? Comes up short. Elihu rightly affirms the transcendent nature of God—but suggests that God remains untouched or unaffected by man’s sin. The implication is that God is indifferent or unconcerned by the human condition. It is true that His nature is unaffected by sin—but it is not true—that God is unconcerned—or that God does not experience grief over sin. God is grieved over sin and pleased by righteousness. How else do we explain God’s comment at the opening of the book; “Have you considered by servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and shuns evil” (1:8).?

Elihu is right about so much—and wrong about so much. Even the question itself; “What’s the use of being good”? Is a right and wrong question (McKenna p. 255). “What’s the use of being good?” assumes that righteousness is motivated by rewards rather than by a relationship with God. “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him (13:15) is the commitment that renders the question invalid. Likewise, “Why doesn’t God answer prayer?” assumes that God must respond on our terms. True prayer is to seek first and unconditionally the presence of God as an end in itself. Only in his presence comes the faith to deal with the mystery of suffering and the understanding of its meaning” (McKenna; p.261-262).

Can we request relief from suffering and neglect God Himself?