

How Big Is Your God?

Job 36:1-33

Introduction

The book of Job reads like a play or drama. And it is rightly placed in the section of our Bible marked ‘poetry’. We are introduced to a man named Job. The book opens with a conversation between God and Satan and a test. A test that will involve the faithfulness of Job—God allows Satan to take all that Job has; Job responds both in worship and sorrow. God allows Satan to inflict Job with a catastrophic illness; a plague of boils. Job is invited by his less than understanding wife to curse God and die; but Job remains faithful. Job is visited by three friends; who at first mourn with him and seek to comfort him; but their presence eventually results in a series of conversations between them and Job. The conversation soon becomes criticism and Job is left not only with the trials and tribulations but also with the task of defending his integrity.

The final series of speeches involve a man named Elihu. Elihu believes he is tasked with correcting Job on what he believes are Job’s wrong assumptions about his sufferings and God. The monologue began in chapter 32 and ends in chapter 37.

Elihu’s lecture series involves four speeches; his theme the sovereignty of God; Elihu maintains that God speaks in dreams and visions (Job 33:15-16) and God speaks in suffering (Job 33:19-22); and God speaks through the special mediating ministry of angels (Job 33:23-26). Now in chapter 36 Elihu suggests that God can use suffering for good (vv.1-15); and invites Job to change his attitude (vv.16-21). Elihu admits that God’s ways are hard to understand—but invites Job to consider how nature demonstrates God’s greatness (chapter 37). In view of such greatness—we can hold out hope.

What does Elihu get right? Elihu is right about God’s majesty and God’s faithfulness to the righteous. Elihu is right that there are many reasons for suffering; and that our reactions to suffering can be helpful or harmful! Elihu is right that God is just and honors righteousness.

Elihu thinks that Job’s suffering can only be explained by God’s purposes—and to teach Job the dangers of sin and the judgment on sinners and the promise of prosperity for who repent.

In this section Elihu claims that he can help Job (vv.1-4). Elihu then offers an explanation of how God deals with people; most importantly people in pain (vv.5-15). Elihu then warns Job (vv.16-25) and invites Job to consider the greatness of God (vv.27-33; and chapter 37:1-13). In chapter 36 Elihu’s theme is the goodness of God and in chapter 37 the theme is the greatness of God.

Elihu’s Claims (vv.1-4)

Job 36:1 (NKJV) Elihu also proceeded and said:

2“Bear with me a little, and I will show you That there are yet words to speak on God’s behalf.

Elihu invites Job to ‘bear with me a little’ stay with me! Elihu’s speech is long! Perhaps Elihu could see Job or the others starting to ‘nod off’ after such a long winded speech! Is Job growing impatient? Elihu asks Job to stay with him a little longer! No matter how tired you are Job; stay with me—I still have some important truths to impart.

3I will fetch my knowledge from afar; I will ascribe righteousness to my Maker.

4For truly my words are not false; One who is perfect in knowledge is with you.

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The more Elihu talks the more Elihu thinks—wow—that sounds pretty good! Elihu’s confidence continues to grow—he thinks he can be real help to Job! It is true that people with incorrect or incomplete knowledge can offer some respite, some comfort and some help?

What is Elihu claiming? “I can help you.” “I have knowledge worth knowing!”

The friends of Job tried repeatedly to convince Job his suffering was due to unconfessed sin in his heart. Elihu hangs his credentials—next to Job on the trash heap. Elihu claims to have knowledge and understanding from ‘afar’—that is from God (v.3a). Elihu believes his words are from God—and not from man; and that his wisdom comes from God. I suspect Elihu believed he had made a careful study of man’s behavior; and a careful study of knowing God and knowing His ways. Elihu claims broad and extensive knowledge (from afar v.3); that his approach will be humble; I will ascribe righteousness to my Maker (v.3); that his teaching is true—not false (v.4); comprehensive and sincere (v.4).

What is Elihu claiming?

1. I have knowledge and understanding that comes from God.
2. I can defend God’s justice (I will ascribe righteousness to my Maker) (v.3c).

Remember Job expressed the feeling that God was treating him unfairly by allowing so much suffering. Job was certainly aware that all human beings suffer some loss, some set backs, some difficulties. But poor Job could not wrap his head around the sheer volume of suffering that he was experiencing. It all seemed so unreasonable, so unjust, so unfair, so unkind. In Elihu’s world—God was not unjust—or unfair—but rather Job was guilty of injustice because he accused God of injustice.

3. Elihu believed he was speaking the truth—that his words were full of wisdom and understanding; absent lies or errors (v.4a). Elihu felt that his arguments were logical, sound, defensible.
4. Elihu believes he has a full understanding of the issues (one who is perfect in knowledge is with you). Elihu is claiming one of two things; either he has perfect understanding of the issues surrounding Job’s case; or God has a perfect understanding of God’s case. If Elihu is claiming that he has a perfect understanding of Job’s case—then his claim is false—since Elihu apparently is unaware of God’s conversation with Satan—and that Job is experiencing a test concerning Job’s faithfulness. The young man might be claiming a level of scholarship and understanding in theology, philosophy and anthropology that he does not really possess.

Whatever Elihu’s claims—as a scholar and philosopher—he claims his knowledge comes from God and that he could help Job return to health and prosperity or prepare him for death.

Can everyone who claims they can help you really help you?

Does Elihu have an exaggerated sense of his own insight and ability?

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Romans 12:16; “Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion”.

I Corinthians 8:2; “And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing, yet as he ought to know. (3) But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him.”

Elihu’s Explanations (vv. 5-15)

5“Behold, God is mighty, but despises no one; He is mighty in strength of understanding.

6He does not preserve the life of the wicked, But gives justice to the oppressed.

Elihu’s claims are lofty—and Elihu offers a series of explanations; how God deals with people—how God deals with those in pain and those who suffer. Now Elihu gets to the core—or the root—of his counsel. How does God deal with the afflicted, with the righteous, with those who suffer? He despises no one—he is mighty in strength of understanding. Elihu acknowledges that God is mighty—all powerful—and remains filled with compassion. Whenever someone says God is great and God cares—it should stir up hope! God understands; God fulfills His purposes; whatever God has planned for the world; and whatever God has planned for the individuals in the world—he works all things for His good.

Now Elihu gives examples that point to the fact that God is all powerful and all merciful.

First he executes justice—he does not preserve the life of the wicked (v.6). While it is true that the Lord executes justice on the wicked—he preserves or helps or brings justice to the oppressed. This is a hint (not so subtle hint)—If Job would repent—God would hear him and help him in his affliction. Elihu is in effect offering Job—something—Elihu is claiming that Job need not suffer any longer. Nor was there need to question God; Job need only repent, God would hear his cry and meet his need—either by restoring Job or preparing Job to meet death!

7He does not withdraw His eyes from the righteous; But they are on the throne with kings, For He has seated them forever, And they are exalted.

Now Elihu suggests that God watches over the righteous—he never takes his eyes off the righteous—when believers face catastrophe, trial, heart-break, suffering, affliction, trial, the Lord is with them. The Lord will deliver them whether the temptation or trial or adversity—and then after death—God will reward them—exalt them forever!

Paul speaks of such things in 2 Corinthians 4:17; “For out light affliction, which is for a moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory”. I Peter 4:12-13; “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice, inasmuch as you are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy”.

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“Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivers him out of all of them all” (Psalm 34:19).

8And if they are bound in fetters, Held in the cords of affliction,

9Then He tells them their work and their transgressions— That they have acted defiantly.

10He also opens their ear to instruction, And commands that they turn from iniquity.

11If they obey and serve Him, They shall spend their days in prosperity, And their years in pleasures.

12But if they do not obey, They shall perish by the sword, And they shall die without knowledge.

Elihu offers great insight; that God can and does use suffering for good; for those who face difficulty and trial and affliction.

Paul summarizes this sentiment in Romans 8:28; “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose”.

Job’s friends have offered that Job’s sufferings are due to unconfessed sin.

But Elihu does manage to think a little deeper and offer some other options as to why people might suffer!

What might those reasons be?

1. The Lord can use suffering to cause people to evaluate their lives; making sure that their relationship with Him and others—is what it should be; that they are using their time and circumstances wisely, to honor him and serve him.

2. God can use suffering to isolate and reveal sin—that we can engage in an honest assessment of our lives; we can think about our behavior and how our behavior might be self-destructive or destructive in the lives of others.

3. The Lord can use suffering to stem the tide—to correct sinful thinking and sinful behavior; to stop us from doing further harm to ourselves or others; to prevent people from causing further damage, further pain, further suffering.

4. The Lord can use suffering to cause people to repent, to turn from sin, to turn from shameful behavior; to cause them to cease and desist before they destroy themselves or others, before they contribute more evil, more lawlessness, more disobedience.

5. God can use suffering to cause people to remember his wonderful promises—if they obey him and serve him—he can cause them to prosper and experience health (v.11); they can experience abundant life, be victorious over trials, and experience the strength to live for God and be prepared to die with a clean conscience before God.

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6. God can use suffering to warn people—if they disobey him, they will perish. Sadly they will die—never knowing God—never experiencing His presence or forgiveness or abundance.

In expressing these things—Elihu invites Job to consider his own life. Or perhaps to answer the question—of why God was allowing Job to suffer.

13 “But the hypocrites in heart store up wrath; They do not cry for help when He binds them.

14 They die in youth, And their life ends among the perverted persons.

15 He delivers the poor in their affliction, And opens their ears in oppression.

What other explanations does Elihu offer? He offers reactions to people’s affliction and suffering!

The unrighteous respond to suffering by harboring bitterness or resentment (v.13a). What happens to some people who experience great loss, great pain, great affliction? The godless, the unrighteous, the hypocrite—does not live for God or Jesus. They live for this world, for the comfort, for the assurances for the necessities and sometimes luxuries. They want to live in comfort and in pleasure and in security. When suffering interrupts their plans or life-style they become bitter and discouraged. The godless walk on earth without God; they do not have His presence to comfort them or protect them; they do not know God or cry out to God for help (v. 13b). “They do not cry for help when He binds them;” as a result—according to Elihu—they die a premature death (v.14) “they die in youth”. The godless suffer—among the unclean of the world and then die sooner; like the immoral idolaters.

The righteous respond differently (v.15). They open their hearts to God. They seek God. They want to know the purpose for their suffering. The Scripture says God speaks to them in their affliction—so they listen and understand and learn from the experience. And if need be—they repent—they change. Then God either delivers them from their suffering—or through there suffering. In either case God helps and sustains the righteous.

Whether Elihu is speaking in broad sweeping generalities or has Job specifically in mind becomes a matter of debate.

Does Elihu believe that lessons can be learned from suffering? Yes. Can God speak to us and through us—in suffering? Are we able to love and trust God in suffering?

Jesus says, “Let not your heart be troubled: you believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:1-2).

Elihu’s Warnings (vv.16-25)

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16“Indeed He would have brought you out of dire distress, Into a broad place where there is no restraint; And what is set on your table would be full of richness.

Elihu’s claims—and explanations—now turn dark—and Elihu issues several warnings!

1. Elihu warns Job—that he is being pursued by God—lovingly pursued—God is after Job! In what way is God after Job? Elihu claims that God is pursuing Job through His suffering. Elihu is convinced that God wants to allow Job’s sufferings—to use God’s sufferings for good.

This is a great big idea. Can God use suffering and somehow make suffering accomplish good purposes? In light of this Elihu thinks that Job should repent of his stubbornness and arrogance and listen to what God has to say in the midst of the pain. In Elihu’s way of thinking—God was trying to correct Job from some deadly sin—some enormous trespass—and free Job and restore Job.

17But you are filled with the judgment due the wicked; Judgment and justice take hold of you.

18Because there is wrath, beware lest He take you away with one blow; For a large ransom would not help you avoid it.

19Will your riches, Or all the mighty forces, Keep you from distress?

The Wall Street Journal: “Money is an article which may be used as a universal passport to everywhere except heaven, and a universal provider for everything except happiness.”

20Do not desire the night, When people are cut off in their place.

21Take heed, do not turn to iniquity, For you have chosen this rather than affliction.

22“Behold, God is exalted by His power; Who teaches like Him?

23Who has assigned Him His way, Or who has said, ‘You have done wrong’?

24“Remember to magnify His work, Of which men have sung.

25Everyone has seen it; Man looks on it from afar.

What are the other warnings? Let’s look at them quickly;

2. Elihu warns Job—that he was suffering because of sin—and God’s judgment has come upon Job—because of his accusations against God. Like all wicked people—Job has become weighed down by God’s judgment. Like a heavy stone or a crushing weight. Elihu imagines some unconfessed sin; has entangled him and God’s heavy hand of condemnation weighs him down. Job needs to understand this—and stop insisting he is innocent. If he would learn from God’s judgment, confess and forsake his sin—all would go well.

3. Job must guard against trusting wealth rather than God (vv.18-19). Elihu remembered Job’s comment of his deep longing for his former life of prosperity. Elihu may have drawn the idea that Job’s comment—was a willingness to trust wealth—rather than trust God. Elihu warns that wealth cannot save from suffering or deliver from suffering. Only the Lord can do that.

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4. Job must guard against thoughts of suicide (vv.20-21); against longing for death. Job had expressed his desire to die. Elihu was disturbed by those remarks. It was Elihu's opinion that Job should not long for death—as the means to escape suffering; but rather Job should be willing to embrace the lessons that suffering offers. What is it that God is trying to teach you?

5. Job must guard against giving up hope—or giving in—to a life of sin (v.21). There is no proof that Job ever said that he would prefer a life of wickedness absent pain. But Elihu doesn't really know Job's heart. Was there any chance of Job embracing deliberate sin or turning from God to a life of sin? Probably not. There is no evidence that Job preferred evil to suffering.

6. Job needed to embrace a fresh vision; the ability to see the beauty and majesty and all sufficiency of God and his exalted power (vv.22-25). God is the supreme teacher. The supreme judge. God never does what is wrong. He always does what is right. His power and majesty and works are wonderfully revealed in nature. People can observe God's works from afar; the work of his Creation! Creation reveals His majesty—his incompressible wisdom, power and glory. Elihu issues the warnings out of a deep concern for Job. Does all that Elihu imparts apply to Job? Probably not. Does much of what Elihu says apply to us? Probably so.

Are you suffering? God is concerned for you. Are you relatively pain free? It may not always be so.

Tribulations and sorrows and afflictions and persecutions are never very far for the true believer.

Elihu's Admonition (vv.26-33)

26“Behold, God is great, and we do not know Him; Nor can the number of His years be discovered.

God is incomprehensible; eternal; God controls the autumn storms; he forms clouds, gives rain, showers blessings on the human race. Who can understand the clouds and rain and thunder; he spreads lightening over the earth and sea.

Elihu describes God's ability to control storms; he speaks of the autumn storm, the winter storm and the spring storm. He then declares that God had establishes the laws that control all of them.

Note—what he doesn't say—that God is the storm or the rain!

27For He draws up drops of water, Which distill as rain from the mist,

28Which the clouds drop down And pour abundantly on man.

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The book of Job describes precipitation!

29Indeed, can anyone understand the spreading of clouds, The thunder from His canopy?

30Look, He scatters His light upon it, And covers the depths of the sea.

31For by these He judges the peoples; He gives food in abundance.

What is Elihu saying? God uses the cycles of the earth to warn people of coming storms; to warn the cattle;

32He covers His hands with lightning, And commands it to strike.

33His thunder declares it, The cattle also, concerning the rising storm.

God established the laws that govern physical processes. In Job's day people did not really understand cloud and rain and thunder. But everyone understood that rain—brought life giving moisture; food; and the withholding of rain—brought famine and judgment. God controls the storms, the lightening to get people's attention and make them aware and urge them to listen to him and obey him.

Conclusion

We know that our problems are not greater than our God. When our vision of God expands our problems shrink in comparison. Many people envision a god who is too small to handle all the problems of personal sin and personal suffering. Job knew that God is a big God. Job knew that he could wrestle with the mysteries of God and not diminish God's character or power in any way.

How big is your God?

Swindoll: "Big enough to intervene in your life? Big enough to heal your past wounds? Big enough for you to hold Him in awe? Big enough for you to offer Him your ultimate trust and respect? Big enough to handle all of your pain and all of your worries? Big enough to love you unconditionally despite your sin and failures? Big enough to comfort you and restore you to a right relationship with Him?" (see Job: Interactive Study Guide; based on Job; A Man of Heroic Endurance; p.176).