

Meet Elihu

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[0:00] The following message was given at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! Then Elihu, the son of Barakal, the Buzite of the family of Ram, burned with anger. He burned with anger at Job because he justified himself rather than God. He burned with anger also at Job's three friends because they had found no answer, although they had declared Job to be in the wrong.

Now Elihu had waited to speak to Job because they were older than he. And when Elihu saw that there was no answer in the mouth of these three men, he burned with anger.

This is the word of the Lord. You may take your seats. Scan it.

[1:22] Scan it. This is what the kids say to my wife, Elizabeth, when they find an unidentified plant. Elizabeth has this app on her phone. Maybe you have the same one.

She can take a picture and then she starts to get information about the plant. The time when this information is most vital is when there are berries involved, as you know.

Is this poisonous? Is this edible? Is it bad or is it good? Scan it, Mom. On the side of our house, we planted several raspberries that are growing along our fence.

But on the opposite side of the fence, we have an uninvited creeping vine that has reached its way through the fence and has entangled itself with the raspberries we planted along that same fence. So now we have lots and lots of green leaves and red berries all together. So what do we do? We scan it.

[2:26] Right? We scan it. It turns out some berries are poisonous to people. But birds love them. So are they bad or are they good?

Well, it depends on if you are a bird or a person. You have to know who is going to eat it. You've got to scan it. Well, in a similar way, this morning we come to an unexpected young man named Elihu. Seemingly out of nowhere. He comes on the scene and he gets six consecutive chapters. So where did he come from?

What does he have to offer? Is it bad or is it good? Does he have anything fruitful to offer? Is this the right thing for the right people?

Is he holding out poisonous bird food or delicious berries? That's what we need to know. We've got to scan it. So the smart guys, I'll tell you up front, are very divided on this one.

[3:36] They look at the same verses and they all come to different conclusions. One issue is the glaring omission of Elihu at both the beginning of the book and the conclusion of the book.

He comes out of nowhere, gets six straight chapters, and then he essentially vanishes. So in the end, the Lord addresses Job and the Lord addresses the three friends, but absolutely nothing, nothing, nothing is said about Elihu.

So what does this silence mean? Well, some take the Lord's silence as a commendation. No news is good news, right?

He was not rebuked like the others, so the assumption is that the Lord must be happy with what Elihu laid out. So in that case, Elihu seemed somewhat kind of like a prophet.

But others interpret the Lord's silence as if Elihu's contributions are so worthless that they don't even merit acknowledgement.

[4:52] He's not a prophet. He's a punk young man who fills the air with just more and more of the same unhelpful rhetoric as the friends.

So in this view, it's assumed that when God begins speaking in chapter 38, he's cutting Elihu off because he's wrong, insignificant, or to be ignored.

So is Elihu a prophet or a punk? Is Elihu's contribution good or bad? I've been scanning this thing over and over.

And after scanning it over and over again, it seems to me that the answer is yes. Yes. What I mean is this, that his speeches are similar to the berries on my hillside.

In his conduct, his content, and application, there seems to be this mixture of both good and bad.

So in many ways, Elihu means well, just like the friends.

[6:03] He speaks true things that are not the right things for the situation. Nevertheless, when we scan the speeches of Elihu, even when he's off base in his application, we get a clearer picture of how we can walk forward with one another through times of suffering.

The Lord, he's preserved these speeches in his word for us, for our good. And so I think the main point for us is this, trust in the power, goodness, and justice of our God in the midst of disorienting suffering.

Now, we can't walk through all the chapters, but I hope this will serve as kind of an introduction to Elihu and it pushes you into his speeches for yourself.

I'm going to hold up some of the results from the scan and draw out two aspects, very simply, from Elihu's speeches that I think will help us suffer wisely and well.

So, the bad and the good. That's it, the bad and the good. So we'll start with the bad. The bad. Now, we've already seen the introduction of Elihu in verses 32, 1 through 5.

[7:27] He's a young man. And out of deference to those who are older, he's been holding his tongue. He's been listening to the three friends. However, he can stand it no more.

In 32, 19 through 20, he says, Behold, my belly is like wine that has no vent, like new wineskins ready to burst. I must speak and I might find relief.

I must open my lips and answer. So you think he's like this unopened Coke that when no one else is looking, a toddler grabs it. Right? What happens to that Coke?

He's been shaken. Elihu has been shaken by what he has heard. And now, he must speak. He must. We see four times in the first five verses that Elihu burned with anger.

Why is he so angry? Well, we see in verse 1 that the three friends had run out of things to say and Job remained unchanged in his position.

[8:38] I'm innocent. So Elihu burns with anger at both the three friends and Job. Verse 2 says that he burned with anger at Job because he justified himself rather than God.

And then verse 3 says he burned with anger at Job's three friends because they had found no answer. They essentially were giving up trying to change Job's mind.

So Elihu, he's shaken by this unresolved conclusion and he felt he must say something. Now, we don't know much about Elihu.

But from the outset, the author wants us to know this. Elihu burned with anger. That much we do know.

Now, we all know that there can be a thing called righteous anger. Right? I mean, our Lord himself flipped the money changers' tables in the temple because they had turned a place of worship into a marketplace and were defaming the honor of God.

[9:53] So in a sense, it could be argued that this is what is happening with Elihu's anger. Elihu appears to be motivated to defend the honor of God.

He sees the justice of God being challenged. So there's certainly a category. We've got to have that category of righteous anger. However, I would suggest that righteous anger is a very, very small minority in the metropolis of anger.

Right? In this case, Elihu is not challenging a defiant money changer, exploiting poor in the presence of God.

That's not what Job's doing. This man has been stripped of everything, including his wealth, his children, even his own health.

He's sitting on an ash heap with boils. He's sitting on an ash heap with boils. So is it possible that this is righteous anger? Maybe.

[11:01] But I would include it in the bad category on the basis that it could be misguided anger. Well-intentioned, but misguided.

So given the disproportionate volume of unrighteous to righteous anger, we would be wise to be suspicious of our anger.

We would be wise to be suspicious of our anger. This is especially true when dealing with those who suffer. We're not just called to speak the truth, but to speak the truth in love.

The goal of our speaking should not simply be a way of getting just personal relief. I've just got to get this out there. But for that truth to build up, to correct, to console, to restore the one we're speaking to.

So we must be careful not to let truth outpace love. Also, I'm placing Elihu's anger here in this category because it looks like he's fundamentally guided by a faulty conclusion.

[12:19] Specifically, it seems that he's presenting the same core ideas as the three friends we've discussed in the past. The idea that we've called retribution theology.

This has come up a bunch of times throughout the book. And it forms the tension of the entire narrative. You see, Job is suffering. Everyone is trying to figure out why.

Why? And according to retribution theology, God blesses the righteous and curses the wicked in this life.

So if you're getting smacked down with suffering, then you must have sinned against God. So here we have Job suffering intensely.

So the assumption is, God, he's just, right? But if Job is suffering, he must be the one at fault.

[13:25] He must have sinned. But we know the wrinkle in this is that we know from the introduction of Job that God actually put Job forward as a candidate to be tested.

Not because of sin, but because of godliness. The very opposite. He is upright and blameless. So in other words, the whole retribution theology is flipped over.

God is just, and Job is innocent at the same time. But no one in this conversation was in the heavenly courtroom during that conversation.

So everyone here sees Job suffering and assumes God is punishing him for some sin. We see Elihu referencing this principle in Job 34, 10 through 12.

He says, Therefore, hear me, you men of understanding. Far be it from God that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty that he should do wrong.

[14:43] For according to the work of a man, he will repay him, and according to his ways, he will make it befall him.

Of a truth, God will not do wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice. So you see? You can see the faulty assumption Elihu makes.

He knows God can't be wicked, and Job, and God repays people according to their works. So Elihu assumes that either Job is in the right, or God is in the right, but it cannot be both.

He doesn't have a category for what is actually happening. That Job is not suffering because of sin, but he's actually suffering because of righteousness.

So being guided by that faulty premise, Elihu is oversimplifying and misdiagnosing Job's suffering.

[15:49] Since he believes Job, is just calloused in his sin toward God, Elihu looks at him and burns with what he thinks is righteous anger.

He thinks he has God-given insight. Look at Job 34, 34 through 37. Men of understanding will say to me, and the wise man who hears me will say, Job speaks without knowledge.

His words are without insight. Would that Job were tried to the end because he answers like wicked men, for he adds rebellion to his sin.

He claps his hands among us and multiplies his words against God. So Elihu cannot believe that Job is innocent. He assumes that Job struggled to understand God's justice in light of his supposed innocence.

That's crazy talk. He believes Job adds rebellion to the sin that's already there. Again, he's assuming sin is the starting place of his predicament in the first place.

[17:04] And so we can see that Elihu's supposed righteous anger may actually be built on the false assumption of Job's sin against God that was never there.

And as I was thinking about this, I was reminded of a story that I read about a man named John. John had been experiencing strange tingling sensation in his left hand.

And because of the location of the issue and all the observable symptoms, a local clinic diagnosed him with carpal tunnel syndrome. But the tingling kept growing worse.

And John eventually began to develop other problems with his vision and with his balance even. Eventually his face went numb. He lost the ability to move his eyes. The symptoms landed him in the emergency room.

And it turns out that John did not have carpal tunnel syndrome. It was not the right diagnosis.

[18:12] At the hospital, a neurosurgeon found a cyst in the part of John's brain stem responsible for vision, sensation, and even balance. So the problem was not John's hand.

It was in his brain. So though the symptoms look the same on the surface, a right diagnosis makes all the difference. So Elihu heard Job say two things.

These were the symptoms. He is innocent and God has wronged him. Job has indeed said those things. It's true. But he's also said a lot more than that too.

So in trying to understand the symptoms of Job's situation, Elihu oversimplified what Job has said. And because of that, Elihu reduced Job's problem into an easily treated ailment rather than recognizing it as a very complicated condition as it really was.

I think this is informative for us when dealing with those who are suffering. Not only is it wise to be suspicious of our anger, we would also be wise to listen carefully and to draw slow, slow conclusions.

[19:37] As in the case with Job, there could be some categories of cause that are not quite clear to us. So as we scan Elihu's speeches, there seems to be one more facet to address in this bad category.

And even though we see that he's very zealous and he thinks that he's representing the Lord, it appears that he's overconfident. Look with me at Job 36, 2 through 4.

Elihu says, Bear with me a little and I will show you. For I have yet something to say on God's behalf.

I will get my knowledge from afar and ascribe righteousness to my maker. For truly my words are not false. One who is perfect in knowledge is with you.

Yikes! I mean, yeah, in light of some of those misguided conclusions about Job, these comments are all the more painful to read.

[20:50] Because Elihu assumes he is without error and he has perfect understanding and insight. Elihu's rigid logic here has led him to conclude that Job is not a victim but an obstinate fool who has rebelled against the living God.

I think we should take this as a warning when speaking to people experiencing inexplicable suffering. We should be so careful to avoid speculating about the authority of our advice and our impressions.

Perhaps you feel led to share a scripture or insight with someone that's struggling. I would encourage you to withhold attaching God's authoritative stamp to that.

Just because it's in the Bible does not necessarily mean that your insight is the correct and authoritative application of that truth for this moment. Daniel S.

has helpfully said, sincerity does not always mean accuracy and confidence is not the same as competence. Please hear me.

[21:59] This is not to scare you away from ever sharing with someone in their suffering. That's not what I'm intending. However, when you do share, let this be an encouragement to preface what you share with humility.

I feel like the Lord gave me this to share with you. Not thus says the Lord. Let the Lord confirm the authority of your word through the hearers upbuilding and encouragement.

So these areas of anger, misdiagnosis and overconfidence they're all forms of learning from non-example. They're forms of fruit but they might be better for the birds. However, a scan, if we look at the speeches, also brings into view some very delicious fruit. So let's just take a few moments to consider those. Let's look at the category of the good. The good. One of the first of his four speeches, Elihu recognizes Job has begun to believe that God is against him.

[23:14] God has cut off communication with him. So even though Elihu may believe God is judging Job for sin, which is not true, he rightfully highlights that God is not silent and withdrawn.

in fact, unlike Job's friends, Elihu believes that God is communicating even in the suffering. Elihu contends that God is not silent here. No, not even close. God can even use the crushing moments of life to draw people to himself.

Look at Job 33, 29-30. Elihu says, Behold, God does all of these things, the suffering, twice, three times with a man.

Why? To bring back his soul from the pit that he may be lighted with the light of life. It's beautiful.

[24:27] Though Elihu wrongfully sees suffering being rooted in personal sin and a need for repentance, he rightfully holds up suffering as a redemptive tool used by God for the good of his people.

Very important. In his book, A Severe Mercy, the author Sheldon Vannikin wrote of the tragic death of his wife in her 30s.

The book argues that suffering can be a tool for God to draw people closer to him. It's a concept that he labels as a severe mercy.

A severe mercy. This, for us, is a valid category of suffering. It doesn't necessarily answer the why of suffering that we long for, but it does help locally locate the believer's severe suffering within the realm of God's sovereign and good, albeit mysterious purposes.

C.S. Lewis put it this way, God whispers in our pleasures, he speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains.

[25:47] It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. I think Elihu accentuates an important truth for us. Suffering does not necessarily mean you are cursed and God forsaken.

His point here is a glorious one. Even in suffering, God is still there. Even in your suffering, God is still there.

He is purposeful. He is moving toward you to bring you hope. That is what he is doing. Elihu, he listened very carefully to Job and even though he does not rightly diagnose the cause of the symptoms, he does rightly catch Job's faulty view of God's justice.

In Job 34, verse 5, he quotes Job saying, For Job has said, I am in the right and God has taken away my right.

That is infuriating to Elihu because Job is implying that he is in the right and God is in the wrong. But here is the problem. The friends and Job both have a faulty view of the situation.

[27:15] The friends believe Job is unrepentant, Job believes God is unjust. That's what's going down here. Even though Elihu starts with the wrong idea about Job, he is right about confronting Job's thoughts toward God in this moment.

Let's hear a most important point comes up. Job is struggling with the question of God's justice. And this is where he goes off the rails. Job does not suffer because of his sin, but he does sin in his suffering.

Let me say it again. Very important. Job does not suffer because of his sin, but he does sin in his suffering. He has believed the lie that God is his enemy and that he must be unjust.

God does not owe Job anything.

It's a really important category for Job and it's a really important category for us too. So often we assume God owes us blessings.

[28:46] And when blessings are withheld, we just assume God must be unjust. This can't be right.

but to believe this view is to assume that we are the standard of justice rather than God.

It assumes that God owes us something. My friends, from our limited fallen perspective, it seems wrong when God removes what we love.

It does, it hurts. Health, relationships, security, or even life itself. But scripture teaches that God's goodness and justice do not depend on our comfort.

comfort. Maybe we have the wrong starting point of justice. Why is it that we assume God owes us anything?

[30:06] Where did that come from? And if he does owe us anything, why wouldn't the starting place be he owes us hell? the reality is that God owes no man.

No man. He is completely and utterly free and sovereign and just in his dealings.

And anything short of eternal punishment for us is because of his mercy. Let that sink in for just a second.

Anything short of eternal punishment is because of his mercy. Every joy and comfort in this life is an undeserved gift of his grace towards us.

With this perspective, it releases justice into the hands of an all wise, all knowing, all powerful, and an all good creator, king, and judge.

[31:21] Tim Keller helpfully said, if we knew what God knows, we would ask exactly for what he gives. If we knew what God knows, we would ask exactly for what he gives.

It is veiled to us, friends. It is veiled to us, we experience and we feel the devastating surprises of suffering. And in our dizzying and in our disoriented moments, we can have a similar temptation to Job.

Is God really just here? It is in these moments that we must remember who we are and who God is. if we knew what God knows, we would ask exactly for what he gives.

Well, Elihu, he picks up on this theme of a big God by pointing to God's providential power, his purpose over all things.

He highlights God's sovereignty over every facet of nature in his final speech. God's depicted as this actor that animates even the sprawling thunderstorms through his speech alone.

[32:42] God personally directs each lightning bolt exactly where he desires. And in this last speech, we're drawn into both the chest rattling storms and the blinding beams of sunlight as these extreme examples in nature of God's sovereign direction over all things.

Job 37 draws us into his final comments 21 through 24. And now no one looks on the light when it brights, when it's bright in the skies, when the wind has passed and cleared them.

Out of the north comes golden splendor. God is clothed with awesome majesty. The Almighty, we cannot find him. He is great in power, justice, and abundant righteousness.

He will not violate. Therefore, men fear him. He does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit. So Elihu, here at the end, he skillfully draws our attention to creation in order to reveal the activity of the creator.

As in the storm, God is also present in the radiance of the sun. sun. It's like you stare at the sun is going to blind you.

[34:03] It hurts. To look at God in his splendor is as blinding as staring at the sun overhead. So his point here is that we can be engulfed, completely surrounded by the beams of his presence, aware of him, without the capacities to fully comprehend him.

just like taking in sunlight with our bare eyes. This is the God, he says, this is the God who is moving toward us in our suffering with hope.

This is that God. If you grew up singing hymns, maybe you're familiar with the man named William Cooper. We talked a little about Cooper's stories in previous sermons.

and if you remember, he lived with what we would probably now consider to be a mental illness. He fought severe depression his whole life.

And in fact, he became a Christian because of the influence of a Christian who worked at the mental institution while he was in a deep bout of depression. Well, he continued even after being a Christian to go through these severe waves.

[35:22] And on one night, it was very misty and he was especially low. So he called for a horse-drawn carriage and asked to be taken to the London Bridge on the Thames River.

He intended to commit suicide by jumping from the bridge. But he rode in the coach for over two hours through the mist, which was way longer than anticipated.

eventually, the coachman driving confess that he couldn't see through the mist and he was lost. He had no clue where they were.

So Cooper, he's disgusted at the delay. He gets out of the coach and he's decided that he's just going to abandon the carriage and he's going to find the bridge on foot.

So he walks just a short way through the mist before he finds himself at his own doorstep.

[36:26] The carriage had been going in circles through the mist for the last two hours. He was feet away from his own doorstep.

The God whom he thought had abandoned him. The God who is sovereign over the storm and the mist. This God was not against him.

He was for him. On the contrary, even the seeming silence and pain of that evening and in the mist, God was moving toward him.

Cooper was immediately convicted by this and he recognized this restraining hand of God. He turned toward God, put his trust in him. And as he reflected on this experience, Cooper wrote these marvelous lyrics.

God moves in a mysterious way. His wonders to perform. He plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm.

[37:34] Deep in unfathomable minds of never failing skill, he treasures up his bright designs and works his sovereign will.

Oh, you fearful saints, fresh courage take. The clouds you so much dread are big with mercy and shall break and blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord with feeble sins, but trust, trust, trust him for his grace. Behind a frowning providence, he hides a smiling face.

Oh, do you feel as though you're in the carriage, circling on the misty roads? do you feel as though God may actually be against you?

Do you feel hopeless? Let me encourage you in this. You may feel alone in the carriage, in the disorienting mist of your suffering, but your carriage has stopped this morning by God's kind providence at the doorstep of God's house.

[39:05] And I believe he intends to encourage all of his children who are wondering, is he really for me? Is he really for me? My friends, I believe he's brought you here to hear these words.

Yes. Yes, I am just. And yes, I am for you.

I am for you, so much so that I poured out all my just wrath against your sin on Jesus Christ. I am so for you that I am not against you, even in the painful midst of suffering, I am with you.

I will make all things right. I will do it. I will. I who did not spare my own son, but gave him up for you all, how will I not also with him graciously give you all things, my beloved child?

So after scanning Elihu's words, here's a fresh call to trust. Trust. Trust in the power, goodness, and justice of our God in the midst of disorienting suffering.

[40:37] May God help us. Father in heaven, we pray to you, to whom else will we go? You alone have the words of life.

nor this morning. We humble ourselves. We don't have all the answers, but we do know the most important answer fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the sent word of God the Father to redeem us from the pit, to give us hope, not just in this life, but for all eternity, to be reconciled with you and to be with you in your presence, never to wonder again, are you with us, but to know that in its fullness for all eternity.

We entrust ourselves to you afresh, and we trust you. In Jesus' name, amen. You've been listening to a message at a Sunday celebration at Trinity Grace Church in Athens.

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