

The Book of Job

Lesson 13: The Speeches of Elihu -- Job 32:1–37:24

For thirty-one chapters the conversation has gone in circles. Three older men have argued, Job has answered, and the room has fallen silent because the friends, we read, ceased to answer Job because he was righteous in his own eyes. And then, out of the corner where he has been sitting the whole time, a young man stands up. His name is Elihu, and he has been holding his tongue out of respect for gray hair, but he cannot hold it any longer. He is angry. He is bursting. He says, in effect, I am full of words, the spirit within me constrains me, my belly is like wine that has no vent, ready to burst like new wineskins. Have you ever felt that? Sometimes the youngest voice in the room has been listening hardest of all.

Elihu is a fascinating figure, and we have to handle him with care. He is angry at Job for justifying himself rather than God, and he is angry at the three friends for condemning Job while finding no real answer. So he tries something the three friends never did. Where they kept insisting that suffering must be punishment for hidden sin, Elihu opens a door they never opened. What if some suffering is not punishment at all but discipline? What if God, who is too great to be unjust, sometimes wounds in order to warn, instructs through pain, and opens the ears of men through their affliction? That single idea, that God speaks through suffering, is the freshest thing said by any human being in this whole book.

We will not pretend Elihu is the hero. Scripture neither rebukes him with the three friends in chapter forty-two nor crowns him as the book's verdict. He is long-winded, he overstates, and he claims more certainty than a young man can honestly carry. But he is not wrong about everything, and on at least two enormous things he is gloriously right. He is right that God is greater than we can imagine, and he is right that affliction can be a refining fire rather than only a courtroom sentence. As the chapters build toward the storm in chapter thirty-seven, Elihu lifts our eyes from the argument on the ground to the thunder in the heavens, and without quite knowing it, he is clearing the way for God Himself to speak.

So come and sit with us in this room. Listen to a young man who is sure he has the answer, and watch how God can use even an imperfect messenger to say true and needed things. As you read, ask the Lord to show you where your own pain has been a teacher, where He has been opening your ears in the night, and where you, like Job, may have grown a little too sure of your own righteousness. The fear of the Lord is wisdom, Job has said. By the end of these speeches, with the wind rising, we are nearly ready to learn what that fear really means.

Group Discussion: Elihu insists that suffering can be God's way of speaking, warning, and refining rather than only punishment for sin. As a class, where do we tend to assume that hardship in someone's life must mean they did something to deserve it, and how does Elihu's larger view help us comfort one another more wisely?

Personal Reflection: Think back over a season of pain in your own life. Looking now with some distance, can you name a way God may have been opening your ears, instructing you, or refining you through it, even if at the time it felt only like loss?

Read Job 32:1–37:24

Study Questions

1. What does Elihu say qualifies a person to speak wisdom (Job 32:6–10), and what does this teach us about where true understanding actually comes from?
2. Elihu waited a long time before speaking, then admitted he was ready to burst. When have you struggled to know whether to hold your tongue or speak, and how do you discern the difference?
3. In Job 33:14–18 Elihu says God speaks in ways people fail to notice, in dreams and visions, to turn them back and keep them from the pit. What does this reveal about how patiently and persistently God pursues people?
4. Elihu describes God opening the ears of men and sealing their instruction (Job 33:16). What is one way you can become a better listener to God in the ordinary moments of your week?
5. According to Job 33:19–30, what redemptive purposes can God have in allowing suffering, and how is this different from the three friends' view that pain is simply punishment?

6. Job 33:23–28 pictures a mediator who declares a person upright and ransoms them from the pit. How does this longing point your heart toward what you have in Christ, and how should that shape your gratitude this week?
7. In Job 34–35 Elihu defends God’s perfect justice, insisting that the Almighty will not do wickedly nor pervert judgment. What does it do for your faith to be certain that God can never be unjust, even when life looks unfair?
8. Elihu warns against the pride of saying our righteousness profits God or demanding that God answer to us (Job 35:2–8). Where do you catch yourself keeping a quiet scorecard with God, as if He owes you?
9. In Job 36:5–15 and the storm hymn of chapter 37, Elihu insists that God uses affliction to discipline, warn, and refine the righteous, drawing them away from pride and opening their ears, not merely to repay the wicked. How does seeing affliction as a refining tool in the hand of a great and just God reshape the way you carry suffering?
10. As the wind rises at the end of chapter 37 and Elihu cries that we cannot find the Almighty but should fear Him, what is one specific way Jesus is teaching you to trade your need for explanations for a deeper reverence and trust?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Hebrews 12:5–11, suffering as the loving discipline of a Father who refines His children; Psalm 119:67, 71, the psalmist confessing that affliction taught him to keep God's word; Romans 11:33–36, the unsearchable depth of God's wisdom and judgments that Elihu only begins to glimpse; 1 Timothy 4:12, the young who, like Elihu, may still speak with weight when they speak truth.

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