

The Greatness of God Job 36

This marks our third week studying the words of Elihu who has arrived on the scene after Job and his three friends have finished going round and round with one another. Elihu has much he wants to get off his chest and we have witnessed that recently. He began with a humble tone declaring the purpose of God and quickly shifted to a more harsh tone extolling God's justice. Interestingly this week, Elihu is back to his softer side with an aim of helping Job understand God's greatness.

I. An Interesting Beginning (v.1-4)

Elihu begins his fourth speech with some self-awareness. He recognizes that he has been speaking for a while and on top of that, his words come after several rounds of speeches from the other four men. No doubt that Job is tired of listening. With that said, Elihu implores Job to bear with him just a bit longer.

As we have discussed before, Elihu feels strongly that Job has mischaracterized God. Therefore, Elihu feels compelled to speak on God's behalf. God most certainly does not need a human – His creation – coming to his defense and yet that is what we get from Elihu. On one level it is admirable of Elihu but I am not certain that it is the correct approach – regardless that's what we get.

To Elihu's defense, once again he states that his wisdom and knowledge come from God – his maker. Additionally, Elihu ascribes complete righteousness to God – an extension of his argument for the justice of God in his prior speech. Elihu tells Job that the words he has spoken and the words that he is yet to speak are not false – "I'm telling the truth Job – please listen to me!"

The tail end of verse 4 is where things get a bit interesting. As I mentioned last week, some of these conversations are tough to discern. Commentary after commentary speak of the difficulty of the original Hebrew language – to be clear, some of what has been said and is being said is difficult to make sense of. Last week I mentioned briefly the importance of clarity and here it is again on full display. Elihu goes on to make the statement, "one who is perfect in knowledge is with you." That is quite a bold statement and at first glance can cause us to shutter. Is there anyone here that would make such a bold statement – would declare that they are perfect in knowledge? This seems like quite the stretch for Elihu. One of three things is most likely going on here:

1. Elihu means what he says. It is no secret that he thinks he has the ability to provide Job with an answer when his other friends could not. Elihu self-admittedly burned with anger towards Job's friends and Job himself because he felt as though all parties involved were sorely mistaken about the situation Job found himself in. No one had been able to make correct sense of it and provide an answer. Elihu is confident he is right. If this is the case, Elihu's statement is an interesting way to frame it. It is quite a bold statement that would appear as quite the turn-off.
2. Elihu is not referring to himself, but to God. Most commentators on this passage point out the fact that Elihu is intent here is that he is the one who is perfect in knowledge. However, perhaps he could possibly be speaking of God. In that case, God is perfect in all things. This would be a perfectly acceptable statement from Elihu but if this is his intent, it would appear as though he would have stated in differently – at least more clearly.

3. The third option here, and the one that I prefer to accept as most plausible, is that Elihu believes he is correct. He genuinely does believe that he has knowledge from God that will allow him to speak truth in to Job and his situation while also condemning some of his and his three friends prior speech. The key to this interpretation is that Elihu doesn't believe that he is perfect in knowledge because "he" is perfect, but that he can only be perfect in knowledge because of the wisdom that has been provided to him via the Spirit of God. Elihu knows that God is perfect and if he sticks to the knowledge that God has given him, then he too will be perfect by proxy.

As fallible human beings, we must be careful when making statements such as this. We are not perfect and do make mistakes. If we believe we have something to share in counsel – especially if we believe it to be from God – then it is in our best interest to express it in a way that will tend to produce a listening or inquisitive ear, not in a manner that would easily cause another to turn us off. Perhaps this is being a bit harsh on Elihu because we were not in the vicinity of these four men at the time of this conversation. There most certainly are context clues that we will never get. However, the best way for us to approach this text is to follow the words of Elihu as he continues – to hear him out.

II. A Reminder That God is Just (v.5-7)

Although he has just spoken on the matter, Elihu reminds Job that God is completely just. Although it may feel like it – especially to Job considering the circumstances – Elihu reminds all that are listening that God despises no one and understands all things. There are no secrets to God. He is the creator of all and he has knowledge of all.

It appears as though Elihu is drawing a contrast between God and man. Man has the tendency to see the differences in individuals and to easily and incorrectly judge. In other words, it is very easy for mankind to fall into the trap of looking down on some while admiring others – based strictly on perspective or worldly standards. Elihu is stating that God is not this way. He is completely just. He doesn't treat everyone the same but in time gives them their just due. He does not show the wicked partiality nor does he forget the righteous and oppressed. Life doesn't always give us what we want or think we deserve but that does not prove God's injustice. Elihu argues just the opposite – while it may not seem like it in the moment, God never forgets the righteous. He goes as far as to say that God doesn't only remember them but He seats them forever with enthroned kings. The righteous will ultimately be exalted forever. There seems to be some similarity here with the words of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:4-7. While the righteous must deal with a fallen world in the present, they also are presently in Christ. Not only is this a blessing in the present, but they will be blessed with a heavenly inheritance eternally!

Job certainly doesn't feel like God is just in the midst of his suffering. He undoubtedly doesn't feel as though what he is experiencing is warranted. However, Elihu is reminding Job that God is perfectly just. Even when it doesn't feel like it, we can trust that God will act in a just manner and will not forget the righteous.

III. A Reminder That God Acts to Save (v.8-12)

The thought process upon hearing the idea that God is just when you feel as though you are not being treated justly would understandably be frustrating or confusing. More than likely, it would raise the question, How does that make sense? If what I am experiencing is indeed the actions of a just God, then what is the purpose?

Elihu tackles this question next by reminding Job that God does act with a purpose. He begins verse 8 by stating “If people are bound with chains and trapped by the cords of affliction.” In other words, Elihu is stating that individuals may very well encounter difficulty and trials in their life. According to Elihu, there are times where these trials are of God – they are His way of communicating to an individual – a way to grab their attention.

Through difficulty and trials, God can reveal an individual’s sin. Elihu appears to be arguing that difficult times can be a prime way that God communicates His love and mercy. As Elihu mentioned previously, God never acts maliciously. In other words, he doesn’t reign down judgement simply so He can pleasure in it. That is quite the opposite of God’s character and purpose. God’s purpose is to save – to bring mankind into His presence. That is what Elihu is telling Job. God afflicts in order to draw men to repentance – that is the purpose.

Elihu goes on to note that there are two potential responses to such affliction.

1. Man listens to God’s instruction and call to repentance. The result is an obedient man who spends the rest of his days serving God. The fruit of this repentance and obedience is a prosperous life and pure joy. You can almost sense John 10:10 echoing from this verse. God desires that man experience the full life that he was designed to live – a life that is only attainable through a relationship with and obedience to God.
2. Man also has the option to not listen. Though God provides an opportunity for repentance and reconciliation, man is not required to oblige. Ultimately, such a response will lead to a man’s death. Failure to live in a manner that God requires will lead to physical death (Gen. 3) but will also lead to spiritual death. That is the implication when Elihu states that such a man will die without knowledge. He will die without experiencing what life was intended to offer through God.

Again, the emphasis here is that God acts with purpose. He moves in such a way as to draw men unto Him. Such actions force a choice - A choice to choose God or to reject Him. Even in his mistakes and sin – to a point – God provides opportunity for a man to reunite himself with his Creator God. How a man chooses to respond is up to him and I believe that is what Elihu feels as though he has an obligation to do – provide Job with an understanding and opportunity to respond correctly to his suffering.

IV. Pride Destroys a Man (v.13-21)

Elihu moves on to again focus on the issue of pride. He declares that the godless harbor anger. Even though their situation produces anger and frustration – when God binds them up so to speak – they do not cry for help – at least for help from God. Elihu previously talked about this, that God does not hear an empty cry. The result for those that refuse to seek God’s help is ultimately death. Elihu declares that they die in their youth. The line “among the male cult prostitutes” appears to be distinctly out of place here. That is possibly a mistranslation or a misunderstanding on our part. More than likely, the point that Elihu is trying to make is that those who refuse God’s help will die with the unclean – they will be unclean.

Verse 15 is really interesting here. This probably should be a point of emphasis for us because this is the last place our mind takes us and rightfully so because just reading these words can may one uneasy.

“God rescues the afflicted by their affliction; he instructs them by their torment.”

What an interesting concept and one that is counter to all that we think and know. Elihu is simply saying again that God acts with a purpose in all that he does. He can use affliction to grab our attention – to wake us up and call us to return to Him. It is through difficulty that He instructs – God uses it to teach us where we have gone astray.

In the presence of God is pure joy and abundant life – when we step out of God’s presence that same abundance and joy vanishes and through affliction and difficulties our senses can be awakened to what we once had in His presence. Through difficulty God draws us back to Himself.

Elihu goes on to say that this is what God is doing with Job. It is interesting that the KJV translation looks to translate verse 16 in the present/future tense while other translations tend to translate this verse in the past tense. In my opinion, the future tense seems to make more sense in this context. Elihu is trying to make the point that God is attempting to instruct Job, to draw Him back to Himself through this affliction.

The problem, at least from Elihu’s perspective, is that Job is too obsessed with what he thinks should be the judgement on the wicked compared with how he should be treated. It doesn’t line up for Job and Elihu is trying to tell him that his focus is on the wrong thing. Elihu is arguing that Job’s focus is on the wicked and their due justice when instead his focus should be on God. Elihu is warning that this is a prideful position – that Job thinks he knows better than God. Therefore, Elihu warns Job to not be led astray by this sin of pride or potentially the sin of taking things into his own hands.

It is a bad place to be – wishing for the demise of others and Elihu warns Job not to go there – not to question the justice of God and certainly not to take matters into his own hands. According to Elihu, Job is being tested and Elihu wants him to pass this test.

Essentially, Elihu is asking Job, what kind of man are you going to be? One that trusts God or not?

V. God is Greater Than We Know (v.22-33)

Perhaps the next question that Job or another individual nearby could ask is, why should I trust God? Especially given my circumstances, why trust Him?

That is where Elihu takes us next, he is going to spend the remaining time in this chapter detailing the unknowable greatness of God.

He begins in verse 22 by stating that the greatness of God is exalted by His power. There is no other with power like Him. Similarly, his greatness is exalted by His teaching (Elihu is really hammering the point home that God acts with purpose). No other can teach like God can. Elihu also circles back around to the idea we saw last week that God alone is in charge – no one appointed Him to His position – He has always been in control – He is the creator.

As such, who is in a position to question the actions of God? There is no one. Instead, all creatures under God’s authority should praise Him and His work. That is what Elihu is calling Job to – to praise God even in the storm. Elihu declares that people all throughout time have sung about the greatness of God – they have seen His greatness with their own eyes. However, Elihu also makes a very interesting point here by stating, “people have looked at it from a distance.”

The idea that Elihu is introducing here is that people obviously know about the greatness of God. They can see it in their own experiences as well as the day to day experience of life. Even though they see it, what they see is only a glimpse of His complete greatness. The human mind cannot begin to fathom how great God is. Elihu continues and expands on this idea.

“God is exalted beyond our knowledge” – We cannot even begin to know how great God is.

The simplest concept of age is even unknowable with God. While we clearly know how long we have been alive or how long those in our life have been alive, we cannot begin to grasp the age of God or the concept of eternity.

Elihu also speaks briefly about a few natural processes and nature – something we will also see God speak of in the near future. Elihu uses the clouds and a storm as an example. Rain is a fairly simple concept. You see the dark cloud and you have a pretty good idea it is going to rain. However, there is much more complexity to this concept and only God can truly understand it. For example, how do the clouds hold all of that water? At what point does the rain fall? What makes it fall? How do the minute details of that process work? What about the lightening? How does that work? How is it's destination known and determined?

The so called intelligent mind today may look at that and think – those are easy to understand processes and yet it is easy to push back on that. As advanced as we consider meteorology to be, how accurate is the weather forecast? Do we know when it is going to rain – the exact moment? Can we predict lightening? The simple reality is that we can't. We can't cause it to rain, we can't accurately predict the rain or storms. Only God can do those things and that simple example of His greatness is only a drop in the bucket. We cannot even begin to understand.

I believe the great implication here from Elihu is this:

Job, if you can even begin to understand the greatness of God, then how can you question his justice, his purpose, and his ways?

Next week, we are going to finish up with Elihu as he continues to speak on the greatness and majesty of God. While he began speaking of God's greatness through a storm, we will soon see that an actual storm is forming and will announce God's presence. He will soon speak.

Personal Implications

1. Complete Knowledge Comes From God
2. How Do We View Others
3. How Do We Respond To Discipline, Correction, or Difficulty
4. Taking Time To Ponder The Greatness of God