

God's Voice in Pain

Job 32:1-5; chapter 33

Intro: This morning we come to a new section in the book of Job. From chapter 4-31 Job has been arguing with his three friends and crying out to God. But at the end of chapter 31 we read "The words of Job are ended". Job had nothing more to say and the same is true of his friends. We don't hear another word from them. Job has apparently won the argument – but nothing has been resolved. He's silenced his friends but has not solved the riddle of his suffering.

That's where we are left at the end of chapter 31. The fundamental questions of the book are still hanging in the air. Why has this happened to Job? And where is God in all of this? Why isn't God doing anything??

And so, Elihu steps to the stage at a critical point in the book. Job's devastation is still a mystery – both for Job and his three friends. How are we to make sense of his suffering – and our own? What do you do when it seems like your Heavenly Father has failed to protect you from a tragedy and then remains silent as you grieve?

I received an email this week from a friend asking for prayer for their daughter who has just been diagnosed with breast cancer. She's 29, with a husband and one-year-old child. This week I have talked with several people who are experiencing searing pain in their marriages. There are parents who grieve the fact that their children are not walking with the Lord – and secretly wonder why the Lord doesn't answer their prayers.

So how do we make sense of the Lord's seeming absence and silence in our time of greatest need? This is the question Elihu has set himself to answer.

I. What Do We Make of Elihu?

There is great deal of disagreement concerning what to make of Elihu. Does he speak the truth of God – or is he just another miserable counselor like the three friends? There are many who believe that Elihu is nothing but a young, arrogant, windbag. He's just repeating the tired old arguments of the three friends in new garb.

I heard one preacher say that of all Job's counselors, Elihu is, in fact, the worst; the most unkind. He makes a good speech - but doesn't acknowledge Job's pain.

Others' believe that Elihu actually adds a great deal more to the conversation and we should see him as a John the Baptist figure. He comes to prepare the way of the Lord, to speak some wisdom to Jonah which will prepare him to hear and receive the words of God Himself in chapter 38. I think there are some very good reasons for adopting this latter, positive view of Elihu.

1. Elihu believes he is adding something new. He's been listening to the conversation between Job and his three friends. He is angry because they failed miserably to comfort Job or answer his questions.

Job 32:12 I gave you my attention, and, behold, there was none among you who refuted Job or who answered his words.

And he's committed to avoiding their error. In **32:14** he says to them, "I will not answer him (Job) with your speeches."

2. Job doesn't argue with Elihu. Elihu gives 4 speeches. He pauses between each one and invites Job to respond - but Job never does. That is intriguing in light of Job's responses to his three friends. The most likely explanation for Job's silence is that the words of Elihu have caused him to pause and ponder. Elihu says things that Job finds helpful or at least wise.

3. God doesn't rebuke Elihu. At the end of the book, the Lord sharply rebukes Eliphaz and his two buddies – but He doesn't rebuke Elihu. While Elihu isn't a perfect counselor, he clearly adds something new, and something important to the conversation. And I believe he is a messenger sent from God to prepare Job's heart for his meeting with God. So, what does Elihu have to say?

II. What Does Elihu Have to Say?

So what does Elihu have to say? There are at least two things Elihu adds.

A. *Job is Wrong to Justify Himself at God's Expense.*

32:2 Then Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, burned with anger. He burned with anger at Job because he justified himself rather than God.

And Elihu uses Job's own words to prove his point.

33:8 "Surely you have spoken in my ears, and I have heard the sound of your words. ⁹ You say, 'I am pure, without transgression; I am clean, and there is no iniquity in me. ¹⁰ Behold, he finds occasions against me, he counts me as his

enemy, ¹¹ he puts my feet in the stocks and watches all my paths.' ¹² "Behold, in this you are not right.

Now this may sound very similar to the arguments of Job's three friends - but there is a significant difference. Elihu doesn't say that Job is suffering because he sinned. Job's pain is not because God is punishing him for something he did wrong.

But though Job's suffering is not linked to any sin – *in* his suffering Job has sinned. Elihu charges Job with wrong – and with a very grievous wrong. In vehemently defending his own righteousness, Job has denied or at least questioned God's righteousness. In defending his integrity, he has challenged God's. If you remember, in chapter 30 Job had charged God with being apathetic and cruel.

Job 30:20 I cry to you for help and you do not answer me; I stand, and you only look at me. ²¹ You have turned cruel to me; with the might of your hand you persecute me.

The greatest pain for Job in all his suffering was not the loss of his children but the silence of God. Why doesn't God rush to his aid? Why doesn't God defend him or help him in any way?? And the only conclusion Job can draw is that God doesn't care. And Elihu admonishes him. "Behold, in this you are **not** right."

We can understand why Job would say what he did. Maybe you suffered through a lengthy, painful trial, some great loss or a season of deep depression – and God seemed to be silent. Your prayers seemed to get no further than the ceiling. You wept on your pillow not only because of the pain of your circumstances but because of the heartache of God's silence.

I read a book a few months ago written by Andrew Brunson, the American missionary who was held a prisoner in Turkey for 18 months. He was completely innocent of any crime but was a pawn in President Erdogan's attempt to embarrass the United States and bolster his own approval ratings. He writes of the deep anxiety and near panic caused by the seeming silence of God. He prayed and begged for God to release him, to help him – but the situation just went from bad to worse. And it was devastating. He felt abandoned by God.

We expect God to deliver us from our troubles and when he doesn't – the only conclusion we can draw is that he is punishing us or simply doesn't care. But that isn't the only possible conclusion to be drawn. And that's Elihu's second point – God HAS been speaking!

B. God Has Been Speaking

Job's charge has been that God has been silent throughout his ordeal. But Elihu points out that God is a speaking God. He speaks in at least two ways (vs 14), "**though man does not perceive it**".

One way that God speaks is through visions and dreams.

¹⁵In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men, while they slumber on their beds, ¹⁶then he opens the ears of men and terrifies them with warnings,

Remember, this was the time before there was any Bible. How did God reveal himself to men in those days? Through dreams or visions. Think of the time Abimelech took Sara, Abraham's wife, thinking that she was Abraham's sister.

Gen 20:2-3 "But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife."

This happened around the time of Job. Elihu could have easily used this story as an illustration of his point.

But there is another way that God speaks. He speaks through pain.

33:19 "Man is also rebuked with pain on his bed and with continual strife in his bones, ²⁰so that his life loathes bread, and his appetite the choicest food.

What is God doing as he speaks through dreams and through pain? He's opening men's ears and turning them aside from sin. He's doing something merciful, gracious and good.

33:16-17 "He **opens the ears of men** and terrifies them with warnings that he may turn man aside from his deed and conceal pride from a man."

36:15 He *delivers* the afflicted **by** their affliction and *opens their ear by adversity*.

Elihu's point - and we must not miss it - is that God does not have a speaking problem, people have a hearing problem! God uses pain to open men's ears, to give them the ability to hear His instruction.

Derek Thomas, "Pain is Educative. Pain has an educational value and power. It is able to reach us in a unique way."

It is very hard, when we are living pain-free, carefree lives full of comfort and pleasure and security – it is very hard in those circumstances to really “hear” God. When life is good it is very easy to be deaf to God. And God uses pain to open our ear!

C.S. Lewis. “Pain...is an evil impossible to ignore. We can rest contentedly in our sins and our stupidities....But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” (The Problem of Pain, 93)

This is the shocking insight introduced by Elihu. Job has charged God with being silent in his time of trial. But what if the problem was not that God was silent but that Job was deaf? What if God **was** speaking in the adversity and through the adversity – but Job was so busy justifying himself and demanding God’s help - he couldn’t hear?

Think of how this could change the way we respond in times of trial. It is very common, when we are facing some pain or adversity for us to ask God for help, and then feel abandoned when He doesn’t respond in the time and manner we expected. But what if your trial, your cancer or depression or unemployment or hardship at work or heartache at home – what if your trial isn’t God’s silence, but His voice? It isn’t His anger – but His mercy. What if he was acting in love, opening our ears, instructing us – because He was passionate to do deliver us and do us good?

That doesn’t make the pain go away. But it can give peace to your heart. That would mean God is not absent. He isn’t punishing you or neglecting you. He is doing soul-surgery with infinite love to rescue you from you. He is revealing your wickedness and your weakness so that you might more fully delight in His grace and trust in His power.

Isn’t that precisely the Apostle Paul’s experience in 2 Corinthians 12?

2 Corinthians 12:7–9 So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Prayer Answered by Crosses (John Newton)

I asked the Lord that I might grow in faith and love and every grace,
Might more of his salvation know, and seek more earnestly his face.

'Twas he who taught me thus to pray; and he, I trust, has answered prayer;
But it has been in such a way as almost drove me to despair.

I hoped that, in some favoured hour, at once he'd answer my request,
And by his love's constraining power, subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this, he made me feel the hidden evils of my heart,
And let the angry powers of hell assault my soul in every part.

Yea, more, with his own hand he seemed intent to aggravate my woe,
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed, blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

Lord, why is this? I trembling cried; Wilt thou pursue this worm to death?
This is the way, the Lord replied, I answer prayer for grace and faith.

These inward trials I now employ from self and pride to set thee free,
And break thy schemes of earthly joy, that thou may'st seek thy all in me.

Times of weakness and suffering force us to acknowledge that we need help. We cannot save ourselves. But there is one who can – a mediator.

III. The Work of a Mediator

Job 33:23. If there be for him an angel, a mediator, one of the thousand,
to declare to man what is right for him, 24 and he is merciful to him, and says,
'Deliver him from going down into the pit; I have found a ransom;

Isn't this precisely what Jesus Christ has done for us?? He is the fairest of ten thousand. He appears before God, on our behalf to say "Deliver him, deliver her, from going down to the pit, for I have paid the ransom." And God grants the request of Jesus! And because we have a Mediator, we can pray and be heard and accepted by God.

²⁶ **Then** man prays to God, and he accepts him; he sees his face with a shout of joy,
and he restores to man his righteousness.

²⁷ He sings before men and says: 'I sinned and perverted what was right, and it was not repaid to me. ²⁸ He has redeemed my soul from going down into the pit, and my life shall look upon the light.'

We can know that God accepts us because we have a Redeemer. A ransom has been found! And in Christ, our Redeemer we have been made righteous! And because this is true, we have a song to sing!

"I sinned and perverted what was right, and it was not repaid to me!"
Your suffering is not God is repaying you for your sin. Your sin is forgiven in Christ the Redeemer! ***"He has redeemed my soul from going down to the pit and my***

life shall look upon the light." Your suffering is real – but it is temporary, and you shall soon see His face. That is the hope that can bring joy in pain, and a song in suffering. May God grant it.