

# Suffering in the Presence of God

## Job 35

Intro: What's the point in being good? Have you ever asked that question?

Boys and girls imagine that you wanted a special gift for Christmas. Maybe an expensive toy or a puppy or even a pony! And so you decided that you would clean your room every day, do all your chores without complaining, and even be kind to your brothers and sisters – all in the hopes that your parents would notice how good you were and give you that special gift. But when Christmas came you got some new pajama's and a book. Think of how disappointed you would be. And to make matters worse, your friend Jimmy, who didn't try do anything good – got exactly the present you were hoping for! You might be tempted to wonder, "what's the point of being good?".

God's people often wrestle with this question when they experience some great trial, hardship or heartache. They have earnestly served the Lord, prayed to him, gone to church, read their Bible, abstained from grievous sin - and then He allowed a great tragedy into their life. And they can feel betrayed. I obeyed the Lord and my husband still cheated on me. I obeyed the Lord and my child still got cancer. What is the point of being good?

Job wrestled with this and Elihu addresses it in his third speech. It is a central issue of the book. If you remember, back in chapters 1-2, the Devil had charged that Job only served the Lord because the Lord made it pay. The charge was that no one worships and obeys God purely because He is glorious and worthy. God has attached material benefits to being good and His worshipers are interested in His gifts, not His glory. People obey because it pays.

So, the great challenge was this: will Job still obey when it doesn't pay? Will he still worship when there are no material benefits to being good? Satan said, "he will curse you to your face." But Job had proven the Devil a liar. When Satan took away all the gifts, what did Job do?

**Job 1:20** Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped....The Lord gives and the Lord takes away.

That's how Job began. However, in the course of his suffering, Job has begun to waver.....just like we are tempted to do. Job asked the question we are tempted to ask. If God is willing to bring devastation into our lives irrespective of our moral behavior - What's the point in being good? But Elihu has a few questions of his own.

## I. A False Assumption (vs 2-3)

<sup>2</sup> “Do you think this to be just? Do you say, ‘It is my right before God,’ <sup>3</sup> that you ask, ‘What advantage have I? How am I better off than if I had sinned?’

Though Job hadn’t specifically said these words, he had clearly implied the question. He had pointed out that unlike him, the righteous man, the wicked flourish in their wickedness. They live happy, successful lives and die in their beds surrounded by their children. The wicked aren’t sitting on the ash heap. They haven’t lost every single thing they owned and all their children in a single day. Elihu has neatly summarized Job’s own words. What’s the point of being good?

It’s an honest question and there are a variety of ways we could respond to it.

- We could point out that though the wicked may flourish in this life, they are destined for wrath and judgment in the life to come. That answer gave Asaph relief in Psalm 73. “I was envious of the wicked ...until I saw their end.”
- Or we could point to 2 Corinthians 4:17 and remind Job that, as grievous as his trials might be, they are “light and momentary afflictions preparing for him an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison”. We could show Job that the benefits to being good might not be seen in this life but will be certainly seen in the life to come. And that would be true. But it isn’t how Elihu responds.

Elihu responds in a way that might seem to our modern ears to be harsh and uncaring. He doesn’t comfort Job by telling him that the benefits will come. He rebukes him. Elihu has noticed a seed of sin in Job’s responses – the cancerous seed of entitlement before God. Job’s question isn’t well-meant. It’s a charge as much as a question. There is a bitterness to it. Job looks at his righteousness and then at his suffering – and his question, “what’s the benefit”, reveals that he believes he is **owed** a benefit! That’s entitlement: The **belief** that one is inherently deserving of or entitled to certain privileges. Job clearly believes that God owes him something – at the very least, an explanation!

This sin of entitlement is at the root of the vast majority of our complaining – we assume that we are owed something different, something better, something else. I read an article recently entitled: “[Entitlement is Poisoning the Church](#)”.

“Have you ever heard of anyone confessing that they have an entitlement problem? ...Let me get a little more personal. Have you ever confessed it? Me

either. Entitled people don't know they are entitled. This is why it is the silent killer of the church – it's undetected."

We don't confess the sin of entitlement because it doesn't feel like a sin to us. We just want what is our due. But the bitterness gives us away and others can spot it, as Elihu did! And so Elihu responds by speaking to Job of the simple truth of God as God.

**35:5** Look at the heavens, and see; and behold the clouds, which are higher than you. <sup>6</sup>If you have sinned, what do you accomplish against him? And if your transgressions are multiplied, what do you do to him?

Someone has well said, "your arms are too short to box with God." You can multiply sin and throw a temper tantrum and stand on your head if you'd like. But - what do you accomplish against him. You can spend your whole life angry and bitter against God – what do you do to him? Nothing.

Elihu is describing what theologians call the "impassability of God". Classic Christian orthodoxy teaches that God is not subject to suffering, pain, or involuntary passions. He is never surprised, or emotionally moved by some new information. God isn't like us. God doesn't say "ow" when you sin against Him. We cannot cause God to suffer or impact his essence in any way.

**Dr. Joey Pipa**, "Though every sin is *against* God – the only ones we hurt are ourselves and the people around us."

On the flip side of the coin – when we obey, we are not we are not benefitting God.

<sup>7</sup> "If you are righteous, what do you give to him? Or what does he receive from your hand?"

That's a powerful question. What do we give God in our obedience – so that God is in some way indebted to us? What do we give God that he didn't have before? Nothing. God owns and possesses all things. So, our obedience never, ever obligates God to bless or protect us from hurt and pain.

This is a critical point. Many people lose their faith and assurance right here. They are bitter and angry with God because they did "everything right" and God still caused them to suffer. God let them down. The only way you can say that is if you believe that your obedience obligates God to act in a certain way.

This gets to the heart of Job's problem with God. Job has come to believe that God, in some way, owes him an answer for what has happened to him. But the fact of the matter

is that God does not owe him an answer. God doesn't owe him anything. He doesn't owe **anyone** anything! God reminds Job of this in chapter **41:11**,

<sup>41:11</sup> "Who has first given to me, that I should repay him?"

The Apostle Paul quotes that verse in his doxology of praise to God in Romans 11.

<sup>33</sup>Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

<sup>34</sup>"For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?"

<sup>35</sup>"Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"

The glory of God is that, as God, He is not indebted to anyone or anything outside of His own glory and goodness! When we obey Him, we are not doing Him favors and obligating Him to bless us. Remember what Jesus said to his disciples:

**Luke 17:10** So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.' "

So, back to the question: "What is the benefit of being good?". And the answer is - there is **NO** benefit to being good - if you are assuming that being good somehow obligated God to bless you. He is NOT obligated. He is God.

Elisabeth Elliot suffered tremendous tragedies in her life, most of them in the context of serving Christ as a missionary. You would think, if there was anyone who had a right to expect God to bless her, it would be Elizabeth Elliot. And yet she suffered tremendously, including the murder of her husband Jim by the very people they were trying to reach with the gospel. But she didn't demand an answer and warned others about trying to find a "silver lining" that would justify what had happened.

"We know that time and again in the history of the Christian church, the blood of martyrs has been its seed. We are tempted to assume a simple equation here. Five men died. This will mean x-number of Waorani Christians. Perhaps so.....perhaps not. God is God. I dethrone Him in my heart if I demand that He act in ways that satisfy my ideas of justice." <sup>1</sup>

God is God. To ask, what benefit is there in being good – is just the wrong question. It fails to see God as God.

Elihu suggests one more reason why Job's demands are not right – when he prays, he asks amiss.

## II. A Flawed Appeal

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Tim Keller, *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering*, 174

<sup>9</sup>“Because of the multitude of oppressions people cry out; they call for help because of the arm of the mighty. <sup>10</sup>But none says, ‘Where is God my Maker, who gives songs in the night,

In other words, in this world of multiplied sorrows – people cry out to God. People who have never prayed in their life will pray when they are in great pain or danger. But the purpose of their prayer is not to know God. They are not seeking their Maker – but simply seeking relief.

Haven’t you ever prayed like this? I know I have! God please do such and such. Please remove this pain. Please shield me from this danger. Please forgive me of my sin. I’m seeking God’s blessings, His gifts – without seeking God: without asking for His Name to be hallowed, His kingdom to come, and His will to be done.

Elihu says that God doesn’t answer those prayers.

:12 “There they cry out, but he does not answer,”

:13 “Surely God does not hear an empty cry, nor does the Almighty regard it.”

Prayer that asks for Gods’ gifts without seeking God’s face is an “empty cry”. And God does not regard it. So often people will get angry with God and say, ‘prayer doesn’t work’. Well, it all depends on what you’re trying to do with it.

- If you are asking for God’s gifts with no desire for God’s person – prayer won’t work for that.
- If you are asking with the assumption that your pain obligates God to help – you’re right – prayer won’t work for that.

**Ash:** Elihu “is challenging head-on our natural but sinful expectation that by our virtue we can put God in our debt and that in our painful cries we have a right to have God listen to us. Neither is true.”

Neither is true because God is God. Now, that may sound harsh to us. But we need to realize that this is the very point God Himself makes when He appears. He peppers Job with 77 questions to make one thing perfectly clear. God is God. He isn’t like us and He does not owe us anything – not even an answer. Notice, Job never got one.

So how does this help us in the valley of suffering?

1. It rescues us from the deadly bondage of a self-oriented, self-righteous, self-serving religion. All the religions of men are created, by men, to control their

gods. Many use Christianity in the same way. The attitude of many professing Christians in our country is: "We are good people, we believe good things and do good things, and if that isn't enough to get you into heaven, I don't know what is." The God they serve is a god who owes good people a good life and the life to come. Elisabeth Elliot calls this god the "god-of-our-plans". But as long as we are serving the God-of-our-plans we will never know the God who actually is. God is God and that means He does not owe you anything. Bring this truth into the reality of your life and even your pain - God owes you nothing.

2. How does that help? Because it is precisely the God who owes us nothing who loves us and gave us everything. It's even better than that. The God who owes you nothing but judgement is the very God who loved you while you were hating Him and gave you the inestimable gift of His very Own Son – to receive the curse you deserved and give you blessings you could never earn.

"Blessed be the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ."

As long as you think God owes you something – you will not worship Him. You will just be bartering. And your life will be filled with bitterness and complaining. But when you realize that though God owed you nothing but hell, He freely and lovingly gave you everything in Jesus Christ – you will worship. When you realize that every single good thing in your life is a pure gift, rooted in absolutely nothing but Gods' love for you, you will stop bartering and begin trusting.

As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, Jesus invites us to commune with Him as He truly is – our Loving Savior and Sovereign Lord. As you eat the bread and drink the wine, remembering all that He has done for you, Jesus invites you to trust Him for all the rest. Trust this Jesus, who gave His life because He loved you, trust Him with your health, with your family, with your loneliness, your sin. Trust Him with your future and all your fears. He is God. And He loves you. Let's worship Him.