

Walk Through The Bible

*The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
8The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
9The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
10More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
11Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward.
(Psalm 19:7-11. NKJV)*

*25But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.
(James 1:25. NKJV)*

Who Teaches Like Him?

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Job 32-37

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Introduction:

Open your Bibles this morning to Job chapter 32. If you are new today and are just checking in with us on this series, we are looking at the story in the Bible of a man named Job. Job is a good man, a righteous man but he is a man experiencing some serious trouble. In a very short span of time he has lost his business, his prosperity, his health and his 10 children, all of whom were killed in a freak storm. Bad things are happening to this good man and he is wrestling with that and trying to think and pray his way through it. His friends come to bring him counsel and the things they say are ultimately judged by God as being heretical; the things they say are mostly true, but ultimately inadequate and terribly unhelpful in Job's case. The sum of their argument is that based on their understanding of the moral universe, God is holy and man is sinful and so bad things generally happen to bad people and if Job is experiencing very bad things it must be because he has sinned a very bad sin and he needs to find it, confess it and beg for God's mercy. Job is not content with their solution. He agrees that God is holy and that men are sinful but in Job's mind, that logic should then apply to everybody. Everybody is a sinner therefore everybody should suffer. How come then his friends are doing really well and Job is doing really unwell? He sees no great difference between himself and them and he sees no great glaring sin

that would explain his horrible circumstances. Job believes that there must be a missing piece in this story. He trusts that God does right but he feels like God is too holy for him to survive an audience with God to make his case, so he puts his hope in a Mediator and a Redeemer. If God sent a Mediator and a Redeemer, Job trusts that all might be restored. That's how things stand. Job thinks he is a sinner, but no worse than anyone else in the circle and therefore he is convinced that his suffering is not punishment. It has to be something else. His friends disagree but haven't been able to convict Job of any of the sins they have suggested might lie behind this tragedy. They have arrived at a stalemate. Enter Elihu.

Elihu has not even been introduced up until this point. He was not even mentioned among the company of Job's counsellors. He explains that this is due to the fact that he is very young. In that culture young men did not generally speak in the presence of older men out of respect. Elihu has listened, but he has not said a word. But now, he cannot keep silent. He is bursting with insight and he needs to share it or he will explode. Elihu is a fascinating character. He is certainly brilliant, so much so that some scholars have even argued that he was an Old Testament appearance of Jesus. Now, most scholars reject that and there is nothing in the text that supports that, but I share that just to point out that most scholars are amazed at this young man's wisdom and understanding. Other scholars are fond of pointing out that Elihu sounds overly confident and self-assured and that our pleasure in listening to him is somewhat spoiled by these traits. I would suggest that any young man who is gifted by God to have wisdom beyond his years is going to struggle with pride and arrogance. We should not refuse to listen to such people, we should simply pray that they overcome this temptation before it makes them unusable. Elihu is worth listening to. He takes us as far as human insight can take us into the issue of tribulation and suffering. He can't take us all the way, we have to wait for God to show up at the end for this story to reach its climax but Elihu takes us to the limit of wisdom and though he falls short he does point us in the right direction. Like John the Baptist in the New Testament he is not the answer, but he does point our hope and expectation in exactly the right direction. And like John the Baptist, when the Answer does show up, it shows up in exactly the place he pointed to. Elihu points our hope and shows us how to wait and prosper in times of deepest trial. He is worth listening to. Job's three older friends are all rebuked by God as having pointed Job in the wrong direction. Elihu is not. Like an arrow shot at the sun, Elihu is on the right track even while he knows he can never reach the target. God still has to show up. Elihu just tells us where to watch for his appearing.

Elihu's speeches take up 6 chapters so obviously we can't read them in their entirety this morning. Instead we will divide his speeches into three categories by looking first at how he corrects the counsel that has been previously given, then we will notice the truths that he asserts as foundational and then finally we will highlight his guiding principles for suffering well in God's school of affliction. First of all then let's quickly observe how Elihu speaks correction into the off-line counsel of those who spoke before.

Correcting The Counsel:

Look at chapter 32:9

Great men are not *always* wise, nor do the aged *always* understand justice. (Job 32:9. NKJV)

1. Systems and traditions are not inerrant guides, particularly in times of peculiar trial

Elihu is respectfully making a very significant point. He is saying that systems and traditions are not inerrant guides, particularly in times of peculiar trial and tribulation. Job's three older friends fell back on platitudes and proverbs. "People reap what they sow", "Those who sow iniquity, reap sorrow", "Stupid is as stupid does", "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush", "a stitch in time saves nine". All of those things are true and some of them rhyme but that doesn't mean that they are authoritative or helpful in every situation. To recognize the moral laws of the universe is fine and well and often very helpful, but to fail to understand that in a fallen universe, where God is allowing sin to reign and rule for a period of time and to fail to understand the impact that reality has on personal circumstance and on human culture is arrogance and narrowness and foolishness.

Elihu is respectful of wisdom and tradition. But he understands that human systems and wisdom are always imperfect. We must have the humility to hold our wisdom in an open hand. Now, let me qualify that. There are "closed hand truths" and Elihu is going to state a few of the very relevant closed hand truths in just a moment. But we make a lot of mistakes in life when we treat all of our opinions, all of our convictions and all of our assessments with equal authority. There are some truths I will die for. I will die for the truth of the incarnation, that Jesus Christ is God in

the Flesh. I will die for the truth of penal substitution, the idea that my sin and God's holiness require a mediating sacrifice. I will die for the bloody cross. I will die for the authority of God's Word. Those are closed hand truths in my life. But there are some other truths that I want to hold in an open hand, meaning that I believe them, I think I've got a good handle on it but I am open to correction on these things if you can convince me otherwise. Let me give one quick example. I have openly stated that in terms of eschatology (talk about how things on earth end) I hold the position known as Classic or Historic Pre-Millennialism. I don't believe the Bible teaches a pretribulational rapture and that we all get to eat bar-b-q in heaven while the world goes to hell in a handbasket and the Jews finish the job we were too frightened and lazy to address. I don't buy that, I am really confident in my exegesis and I am greatly encouraged by the fact that fewer and fewer pastors and scholars hold that position in Evangelicalism. I feel good about my convictions. But that for me, is an open hand issue. If you can prove to me from Scripture that my position is wrong, then I will give it up. It isn't do or die for me. I will keep searching God on that and if I need to recant and refine my views on that I can do that. That is a very healthy way of dealing with certain things we believe. Elihu's opening comment is that Job's friends were unwilling to be instructed by Job's unique circumstances. They didn't even entertain the idea that they might need to update their theology. That is a brilliant and cutting observation. Listen to me church, bad things happen to the people of God when we are certain that we are right about everything. Bad things happen when we hold everything in the open hand – like our liberal friends, and bad things happen when we hold everything in the closed hand – like Bildad and Eliphaz. They trusted too much in old thinking.

The second thing that Elihu says by way of correction is equally brilliant. He says:

2. God speaks in new situations and in diverse ways. We often fail to listen.

Look at what he says in 33:14-19:

For God may speak in one way, or in another, *Yet man does not perceive it.*

¹⁵ In a dream, in a vision of the night, When deep sleep falls upon men, While slumbering on their beds,

¹⁶ Then He opens the ears of men, And seals their instruction.

¹⁷ In order to turn man *from his* deed, And conceal pride from man,

¹⁸ He keeps back his soul from the Pit, And his life from perishing by the sword.

¹⁹ *Man* is also chastened with pain on his bed, And with strong *pain* in many of his bones (Job 33:14-19.

NKJV)

Elihu says to Job's counsellors: "You are offering bankrupt counsel because you have closed to your ears to many of the ways that God speaks. God does speak through dreams, he does speak through visions, he does supernaturally open a person's mind to previously hidden truths and he does speak through pain and suffering. If you refuse to acknowledge this, you forfeit your right to bring counsel."

Listen to me church, sometimes in our zeal to protect the authority of God's Word we have gone further and said more than we should have. You've heard me say a number of times that there were really two grande rallying cries in the Protestant Reformation, maybe three if we add in the priesthood of all believers. The first two rallying cries were *sola fide*, meaning that we are saved by faith alone and the second was *sola scriptura* which means that the Scriptures alone are authoritative. The Scriptures are unique in their authority, they speak with a voice unlike any other voice in the church. Will you say amen if you believe that? Amen. But *sola scriptura* is different than *solo scriptura*. *Solo scriptura* would mean that the Scriptures are the only voice in the church and no one among the Reformation leaders believed that. No one believed that God ONLY spoke through the Scriptures. They believed that the Scriptures stand unique and alone in primary authority but that below that level there were to be found many other, lesser ways that God speaks. He can speak through circumstances, he can speak through the wise counsel of pastors, leaders and friends and he can speak through various forms of prophecy, dreams and revelation. Why did they believe this? Because the Scriptures teach it:

¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit.

²⁰Do not despise prophecies.

²¹Test all things; hold fast what is good. (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21. NKJV)

The Bible teaches SOLA SCRIPTURA. God will speak in many ways but all secondary ways must be tested against the primacy of Scripture. This is one of those many cases where the road ahead lies between two dangerous ditches. On the one hand we can become so consumed and fascinated by dreams and visions as to effectively abandon the authority of God's Word and descend into sillytown. Let's not do that. On the other hand you can become so impervious to the voice of God and so hyper protective of the authority of the Bible that you despise prophesy and refuse to listen to anything that isn't written in this Book. Let's not do that. The correct road is to hold the Bible as the plumbline and foundation and to accept and believe that God does

speak in diverse ways into each new situation and to test those fresh words against this unchanging standard.

People have come to this church over the last 5-6 years because they have heard that we are not opposed to the Holy Spirit. They come because they want to go to a church that affirms them if they speak in tongues or receive prophetic dreams. They've been beaten and bruised in other churches because of these things and so they come to seek refuge here. Sadly, some of them have moved on because we refuse to grant these special gifts the same authority as God's Word and because we expect them to use these gifts according to the guidelines of Holy Scripture. We are charismatic with a very tight seatbelt in this place and some people don't like that but we will not steer this ship into EITHER DITCH. They are equally unhelpful and we will seek to avoid them both.

I must say one more thing about Elihu's correction before we move. Notice again what he said in verse 19:

"Man is also chastened with pain on his bed (Job 33:19. NKJV)

Elihu says that in addition to prophetic dreams and visions God also speaks through pain and illness. I've said some mean things about dispensationalists and cessationists today so let me be an equal opportunity offender and rebuke some of our extreme charismatic friends. Our charismatic friends love to rebuke the fundamentalists for denying prophesy. And yet many of them refuse to admit that God speaks through suffering and illness. I've had charismatic pastors say to me that they do not believe that real Christians ever get sick or that if they do it is always God trying to reveal a sin and if they repent it will go away. They are so quick to notice what the fundamentalists miss and so blind to what they miss. God does speak through pain and illness. The sick bed is often the amphitheatre of revelation.

Very quickly let me show you a few of the closed hand truths that Elihu says we need to hold onto in times of suffering:

Closed hand truths for times of suffering:

1. God is just

Look at Job 34:10:

Far be it from God *to do* wickedness, and *from* the Almighty to *commit* iniquity. (Job 34:10. NKJV)

We may not always know what God is doing but we can always know who he is. He is just. He is holy. He will do right. This will work out in the end. The end may be further away than you can see, it may be long after you are dead, but God is bigger, he sees further and he will do right.

My friends, this is why, though we may argue over some of the particular details, we must continue to preach eschatology in the church. If people do not understand that in the end righteousness is REWARDED and wickedness is punished, then they will be crushed and devastated when things don't work out for them in the here and now. The only way you can have peace when you are suffering disproportionately is if you know that you will be rewarded greatly in the age to come if you suffer rightly in these present days. We have to remember, that in the end, God is just.

Secondly he closes his hand over the truth that:

2. Suffering in the here and now is not proof of punishment, it is test of faith

Because Elihu is absolutely certain that God is ultimately just, he holds on to the logical consequence of that truth; that suffering in the here and now is not proof of punishment; it is test of faith.

Look at what he says in chapters 34 and 35:

Yet He is not partial to princes, Nor does He regard the rich more than the poor; For they *are* all the work of His hands. ²⁰In a moment they die, in the middle of the night; the people are shaken and pass away; the mighty are taken away without a hand. "For His eyes *are* on the ways of man, and He sees all his steps. (Job 34:19-21. NKJV)

Although you say you do not see Him, yet justice *is* before Him, and you must wait for Him. (Job 35:14. NKJV)

Elihu says that God is impartial in handing out hard times. It isn't as though bad people get punished with sickness and good people get blessed with prosperity; everyone gets a taste of suffering because it is not punishment it is a test of faith. God's eye is on you when you suffer, even if you can't see him.

Do you want to know something interesting about Elihu? Many Biblical scholars believe that Elihu is some sort of great nephew to Abraham. We can't be sure how many "greats" to throw into that but it seems clear that he is some kind of nephew. We are told that he is Elihu the Buzite, or Elihu of the family or the son of Buz. We meet Buz in Genesis 22:

²⁰Now it came to pass after these things that it was told Abraham, saying, "Indeed Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor:

²¹Huz his firstborn, **Buz his brother**, Kemuel the father of Aram,

²²Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel." (Genesis 22:20-22. NKJV)

So in Genesis 22 we are told that Abraham has a nephew named Buz. Now we meet a Buzite who understands that not all suffering is punishment. Sometimes it is a test of faith. Where do you think he might have picked up that little nugget? Maybe from uncle Abraham. In Genesis 22 the same chapter we meet Elihu's daddy or granddaddy we are told:

¹Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham (Genesis 22:1. NKJV)

Do you think its possible that Uncle Abraham told his nephew Elihu the story of how God asked him to sacrifice his son, his only son Isaac whom he loved, not to punish him, but to TEST HIM, to see if his faith was real? Do you think its possible that Abraham taught young Elihu that sometimes the loss of a beloved child, or even the potential loss is not proof that you have sinned, it may just be an opportunity to show God that you love him, not just the gifts that he has given. Is that possible? Is that the way it happened? It may well be, though we can't say for sure. All we know is that Elihu understood that God is constantly communicating with his children through the language of challenge and response. You may not see him when you are suffering, but he sees you. His eye is on you and he is looking to see how you respond.

With that Elihu enters into his third and final area of concern. He wants to help Job do well in God's School of Affliction. He asks in 36:22:

“Behold, God is exalted by His power; who teaches like Him? (Job 36:22. NKJV)

Elihu says that God is a Master Instructor and he enrolls his beloved children in the School of Affliction and Elihu wants Job to do well and so he leaves him with these three passing principles.

Passing principles in the School of Affliction:

He says in essence: when you find yourself sitting in the front row in the School of Affliction under the testing gaze of God, here are some principles you must heed well.

1. The faithful person perseveres in worship even in times of trial

Look at 36:24:

²⁴Remember to magnify His work, of which men have sung. (Job 36:24. NKJV)

Do not stop worshipping God when you go through times of trial and loss. When we stop worshipping, when we let pain steal our song, we prove to God that we love his gifts more than we love him. We say to God: “If you take my gifts then you take my reason for loving you. I only love you when you play Santa. I love the blessings, not the Blesser.” Don’t say that. The most beautiful songs in the ears of God are those sung through tears of loss and sorrow. The highlight of this book was passed long ago. In chapter 1 in his suffering Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head and he fell to the ground and WORSHIPPED. Naked I came from my mother’s womb and naked shall I return there. The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the Name of the Lord. That is how you pass these tests of faith. You love the giver and you release the gifts.

2. The faithful person recalls the multiplicity of God’s concerns and the mystery of Providence

We find that counsel in 37:13. Elihu is reflecting on the complexity of God’s Providential oversight of creation. He is talking about storms and natural disasters, such as the one that killed

10 of Job's children and he says that we must not assume that everything that happens to us is directly caused by us. We are not the only factor God attends to in exercising his Providential oversight. Of storms he says:

He causes it to come, whether for correction, or for His land, or for mercy. (Job 37:13. NKJV)

If a hurricane should strike where you live, you mustn't immediately assume that it came as God's correction upon your sin. It may just have happened because hurricanes serve a purpose, they move cold air around and function as the world's airconditioner and if God removed hurricanes then the world would be unlivable in all but the northernmost regions. So maybe the hurricane was correction, but maybe it was just weather. Maybe it was hardship for you, but mercy for someone else. The storm that hit you with pain, may have brought rain on some poor farmer's field. God has a lot of concerns and you are very important but you are not the only person in the world and sometimes things happen for the good of other people even if they result in your short term loss.

Now, that is an important truth people have to wrestle with very carefully in times of trial. Think hurricane Katrina. Many Christian people were quick to suggest that that hurricane was God's punishment on American wickedness. That it struck a symbol of American sin – New Orleans. A place that holds parades celebrating the most aberrant human behaviours. And so they quickly drew line between A and B and said this storm addressed that problem. But Elihu says: "Hold it now, you can't do that. There are too many complex factors influencing God's Providential decisions for you to draw lines from A to B. You can't do it. Sometimes you will never be able to make rational sense of your suffering. The world is too complex and our sense of justice is always too regional, too personal and too immediate. There is mystery in God's Providence. Remember that when you are suffering. How you handle that truth reveals a lot about how you view God and how you view yourself.

The third passing principle that Elihu suggests to Job while in the School of Affliction is that as a faithful man enduring hardship he must press on in seeking the Excellency, the Majesty and the Intimacy of Almighty God.

3. The faithful person seeks out the Excellency, the Majesty and the Intimacy of Almighty God.

Listen to his counsel in chapter 37 starting at verse 14:

“Listen to this, O Job; stand still and consider the wondrous works of God. (Job 37:14. NKJV)

Take some time in your troubles and lift up your face from your trial and tribulation and remind yourself of the goodness of God. Get yourself a right size image of God and your sufferings will begin to shrink into scale. He goes on to say in verse 22:

He comes from the north *as golden splendor*; with God *is* awesome majesty. ²³ *As for* the Almighty, we cannot find Him; *He is* excellent in power, *in* judgment and abundant justice; He does not oppress. ²⁴ Therefore men fear Him; He shows no partiality to any *who are* wise of heart.” (Job 37:22-24. NKJV)

Elihu says: “Don’t lose faith in God my friend! Just because you can’t see him right now through your tears does not mean that he is not there and it does not mean that he has changed. He is excellent. He is powerful. He is beautiful. He is large and he is in charge and he does not oppress. There is a reason that men and women have worshipped God throughout the ages Job, because he is good and he is God and you will see that if you just hold on.” That’s good counsel.

Conclusion:

My friends, Elihu has not told us all we need to know to endure hardship and tribulation but he has pointed us in the right direction. When you are suffering don’t ever think that God isn’t speaking. He is. Trust in his Word. Dive into Scripture and let it speak to you. And also open your heart to the kind and beautiful truth that God will whisper. He will send you dreams and give you visions and your sickbed may be the amphitheatre of His revelation if you let it. God speaks in our pain if we would listen. He may speak into our suffering and purify our theology. You may not understand how important that is, but God is very concerned that you think rightly about him. God is convinced that if you know him well, you will live well and live eternally. So he is very concerned about that, whether you are or not. Expect to be educated in your trials and in your losses. Expect to let go of some things you used to know. But please, hold on to some things you must never lose. Never let go of God’s goodness or justice. Never lose sight of the

final judgement and recompense. Remember to worship and remember that God's ways are higher than our ways. Do not expect to understand everything. But do expect God to show up. If you listen you can hear even now his presence and his approach in the whirlwind. God is not absent in the storm. He will show up if you wait for him in faith. This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Levi will you come and lead us?