

## **YOUTH SPEAKS UP ON SUFFERING**

**Job 32:1–37:24**

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As we continue this series, “More Than a Man or a Woman Can Take,” we look at six chapters, Job 32–37, under the theme “Youth Speaks Up on Suffering.” Before we do that, however, let’s take a moment to see where we’ve been thus far in the Book of Job.

### **I. A Summary**

**A.** Chapters 1 and 2 provide the setting for Job. The drama is set with Satan, the adversary, saying to God, “Job serves you because he’s being well paid for it.” He makes a deal that if disaster strikes Job, Job will curse God. But Job has disaster. He loses all his property and family, but he doesn’t curse God. So Satan comes back and asks for a second deal—that he may be allowed to touch Job physically. Then Job will curse God. But after being greatly afflicted in terms of physical adversity, Job still does not curse God. Chapter 2 closes with Job’s friends coming from afar and sitting down with him in the dust heap for seven days.

Chapter 3 finds Job giving a lament. Finally Job is speaking, showing us he’s a real person and that he has hurts and pains.

**B.** Then from chapters 4–31 we have a series of speeches. They are actually three rounds of speeches by Job’s three friends. Each time a friend speaks, Job makes a response. Somewhere in the last cycle Zophar drops out and we have a lengthy speech by Job, which culminates this section.

In this whole lengthy passage, Job’s friends essentially make three points regarding Job’s suffering. First, they attempt to convince Job that something is wrong in his life. Second, they

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tell him to repent. Third, they say that if Job will repent, God will restore him. All of these things come in nice, logical fashion.

Perhaps in a certain sense we can say these points are not all that bad theology. There are indeed occasions when people have done something wrong and the Lord comes along and says, “Repent.” If you repent God will restore you. He’ll make it new. He’ll repair your soul. But with Job’s situation, as well as many other situations, the theology doesn’t fit the facts they’re being applied to.

Job basically has three responses to his friends. The first response is that he has not sinned. Job 31 is a classic summary by Job in this regard—a marvelous understanding of what it means to live a righteous life. If you’d like to live ethically as God would have you live, then try following in Job’s footsteps of chapter 31.

Job’s strong statement that he had not sinned would appear to be self-righteous. Indeed, there are critics today that say Job really did have sin in his life. There are still people who take the side of Job’s friends: “There’s something wrong with you. What you feared has come upon you. If you hadn’t feared it would have never come upon you.” But Job is not being self-righteous. We know that he is righteous on no less than a testimony of God himself. He twice declares that Job is righteous, that he is guiltless, that he is blameless, that God finds no fault in him. In the first part of the book, God brags about Job because Job is such a righteous person. Job’s righteousness is also vindicated by God in the last part of the book. So Job’s protestations that he is innocent are true.

The second thing that Job does is give an argument against the viewpoint that suffering results from sin in your life. He says there are two reasons why that viewpoint is not true. First, Job

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says, the wicked prosper. If it's true that suffering occurs because you're unrighteous, then why aren't the wicked getting theirs?

In a great statement in Job 21, Job gives illustration after illustration of the wicked living in prosperous ease without a mite of affliction at all. All of us can think of people like this—who have cheated their way into positions of power, responsibility, respectability, and wealth and are rotten to the core. And they seemingly prosper.

The second thing Job does to refute the argument that suffering comes because there's sin in your life is to point to the suffering of the innocent. In Job 9:21–24 and other places he says, “Look at the poor and look at the widow and look at the orphan. There is none to defend them and they suffer. And it isn't because they have done something wrong.” So Job responds to his friends by saying first, “I have not sinned.” Secondly, he says, “It is not true that suffering is the result of sin.” And the third thing he says as he responds to Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar is that his friends have not helped him. In an eloquent lament in Job 6:14–30, he talks about how his friends should have come and helped him. But in reality, they have not.

So that's kind of a summary of the first 31 chapters of Job.

### **II. Now as we come to chapter 32, a fourth “friend” arrives on the scene.**

This man's name is Elihu. He has been there the whole time as we'll quickly see in what he says.

He has been listening to the debate, and he is upset for two reasons.

The first reason is Job's obstinacy in not recognizing his fault and therefore repenting. And he will let Job have a good piece of his mind. The second reason is that Job's friends, the older counselors who have come, have failed to prove their case against Job. He's just as upset with them as he is with Job. These friends have carried the argument so poorly to this point that they have not lodged the arrow in Job's heart to convince him to say, “It's me all along.” He feels in

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failing to win the argument against Job, the friends have let God down in not being more theologically astute and sophisticated.

So Elihu goes on to give four speeches of his own, none of which bring a response from Job. In chapters 4–31, every time someone spoke, Job would reply in return. But Elihu is filled with words, and it could be argued that he never gives Job a chance to open his mouth. Job would barely open his mouth and Elihu was off on another speech. Or maybe by this time Job was just so tired out that he wasn't answering. Or he may have been so disgusted with Elihu that he chose not to dignify what he was saying with a response.

So as we begin in Job 32:1–5, the three men have stopped answering Job because he was righteous in his own eyes. But Elihu became very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God. He was also angry with the three friends because they found no way to refute Job and yet had condemned him. Elihu had waited before speaking with Job because they were older than he. But when he saw that the three men had nothing more to say, his anger was aroused.

If you look carefully at these five verses you will note three times that Elihu was angry. Either his anger was aroused, or he became angry with Job, or he was angry with the friends. He is hot under the collar that the people haven't solved this problem.

He reminds me of some people I have listened to within the current movement that associates all suffering with sin. I've found this particularly among the positive confession movement whose words are laced with sarcasm; who ridicule pastors and anyone who takes a position differently than theirs; who strut across the stage and pour heaping scorn upon any who still have sickness in their life or who have financial suffering; who ridicule those persons and say, "It's all your fault." They are very angry. You can tell it in their spirit. You can tell it in their facial

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expressions. And you can tell that in Elihu as well. He is hot because people have not seen the point and gotten deliverance from this terrible problem that Job is suffering with.

### **III. Look through Elihu's speeches.**

Each speech is a little bit different from the others. We'll go through each of them in turn.

**A.** His first speech is found in Job 32:6–33:33. It consists of four parts and begins with a boisterous introduction. He says, "I am young in years, and you are old; [This means he's deferred to his elders by letting them speak first.] that was why I was fearful, not daring to tell you what I know. I thought, 'Age should speak; advanced years should teach wisdom.' But it is the spirit in a man, the breath of the Almighty, that gives him understanding. It is not only the old who are wise, not only the aged who understand what is right. Therefore I say: Listen to me; I too will tell you what I know" (Job 32:6–10, NIV).

What Elihu was saying is very profound. He is saying that there is not always a connection between age and wisdom. In the Near Eastern culture that he was living in, this was the connection many people made. "Elder" was not just the title for those elected to leadership. Elders were, in fact, a generic title standing for those who had come to advanced years in life. They were therefore privileged to be judges and sit at the city gate and make the statement of wisdom. The elderly people in the community had the last word on everything. Now Elihu is coming along and protesting all of that by saying age doesn't make you smart. There are elderly people who can be foolish, who can be petty and crabby and selfish and boisterous. Age does not beget wisdom.

Some believers might do well to listen to the counsel Elihu is giving because it's not half bad.

Elihu is actively reflecting Joel 2 and Acts 2, which say that in the last days God will pour out His Spirit on the young people and they would prophecy as well. But it might be said that if old

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age doesn't guarantee wisdom, neither does being a young person guarantee wisdom. Elihu's problem is he thinks because he is younger, he is also wise. As we'll see, he's not.

There are some funny things about Elihu's speech. It's one of the moments of genuine humor in the Book of Job. He wants to say something to Job, but he's got to get his credentials in first.

He's got to tell how important he is and how wise he is, so he struts for a while. He says, "I can't wait to tell you everything I know."

In Job 32:11–22, the second part of his first speech, he then castigates the three friends—Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. He basically tells them that they should take no comfort in the fact that their arguments have not moved Job. By this time they have basically taken the attitude of "If we haven't moved Job, then we'll leave it to God to take him on. Let God become the initiator of action against him." Elihu's basic position is "If you had made a good case, you wouldn't have to leave the action in that kind of suspense. You wouldn't have to fall back on God to prove the case against Job." Elihu, therefore, is very much set on informing them how they have absolutely failed.

In chapter 33, Elihu takes Job on and lectures him quite severely, saying, "I am about to open my mouth; my words are on the tip of my tongue. My words come from an upright heart; my lips sincerely speak what I know. The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life. Answer me then, if you can; prepare yourself and confront me. I am just like you before God; I too have been taken from clay" (Job 33:2–6, NIV). He's already beginning to wear Job down with his words as he takes the position of a superior lecturing an inferior.

His words in Job 33:8–11 show that he has been listening to Job and Job's protestation of his innocence. He throws Job's words right back at him. In Job 9:21, Job said, "I am pure and without sin." He had said in 10:7 "I am clean and free from guilt." He had said in 16:17 "God

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has found no fault with me.” In 13:24 Job had said, “He considers me his enemy.” And in 13:27 Job said, “He fastens my feet in shackles and he keeps close watch on all my paths.”

So Elihu says, “Job, I’ve been listening to you and I know your argument. Let me refute you.”

In the next part of his first speech, Elihu refutes Job from his experience. Job had raised two objections of the friends’ arguments against him. One was that he was innocent and therefore this punishment was unjust. And secondly, God did not answer him in his time of need. Elihu takes on this second objection first.

Elihu takes up this line of thought and says basically two things. First, God speaks, even if you don’t perceive it—even in visions and in dreams. In Job 33:15–19, Elihu does something that Eliphaz had done earlier in the book when he tried to prove Job was wrong: he cites a spiritual vision he has had. He says, “Job, God has been speaking to you, but you haven’t been listening. If God can’t get through to you while you’re awake, he’ll get through to you while you’re asleep. This is no exception; he doesn’t play favorites. He had to have been speaking to you, but you’ve been so resistant and rebellious that you haven’t been listening at all.”

Then Elihu says, “Not only does God speak to us if need be while we’re sleeping, but God will also speak to us in our sufferings. Job, you haven’t been listening. In fact, God chastens a man on a bed of pain with constant distress in his bones. Yes, Job, God has been talking to you. Can’t you see it? Look at how sick you are. No one could be this sick unless God were trying to send them a message. It’s time you learned your lesson.”

We have statements today that say “God whispers to us in our pleasures and shouts at us in our pains” or “Adversity is God’s way of getting our attention.” Even we as preachers sometimes use the story of the farmer who hits the mule over the head with a big piece of wood to get his attention. Elihu is saying, “Job, God is trying to get your attention.”

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Having said this, he closes his speech in Job 33:23–30 by going back to the tried and tested theme the other three counselors had used, namely, “Repent and God will restore you. That’s all He’s waiting for.” When he has called for this repentance, he ends again with a streak of insufferable intolerance. If Elihu isn’t anything, he’s not a humble person. So he lectures Job. “Pay attention, Job, and listen to me; be silent, and I will speak. [Poor Job hasn’t said a word and he’s telling him to be quiet.] If you have anything to say, answer me; speak up, for I want you to be cleared. But if not, then listen to me; be silent, and I will teach you wisdom” (Job 33:31–33, NIV).

**B.** That leads to Elihu’s second speech, Job 34, because Job doesn’t answer him. In his second speech, Elihu addresses Job’s objection that he is innocent and therefore this punishment doesn’t fit. Elihu points out the logical implication by saying, “Job, if you’re innocent, then there is no profit in serving God because God rewards those who serve him faithfully. And God punishes those who are wicked. If it’s true that you’re innocent and are suffering, then the consequence must be true as well. It doesn’t pay to serve God. And we can’t have the theology going around that it doesn’t pay to serve God. Everybody knows it pays to serve God, right?”

I don’t know how many people I’ve talked to who have begun tithing, and within the first few weeks or months they say, “Instead of the blessing I thought was going to happen, all four tires of my car got slashed.” I believe in the long run, tithing pays; God makes it up to us. But sometimes as a test of tithing, we’ll find that it doesn’t seem to pay off at all. There are people who have been very diligent in giving time and service to the Lord and cheerfully serving him, and then somebody comes along and says some nasty, cutting remark that it doesn’t pay to serve God. You just get criticized.

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Elihu is addressing this concern. He makes a statement of Job's error in Job 34:1–9. Basically what he's saying is, "Job, you're a king's kid. King's kids get treated like king's kids ought to be treated. If you were a king's kid, you'd be walking like one." Look at verses 5–9: "Job says, 'I am innocent, but God denies me justice. Although I am right, I am considered a liar; although I am guiltless, his arrow inflicts an incurable wound.' What man is like Job, who drinks scorn like water? He keeps company with evildoers; he associates with wicked men. For he says, 'It profits a man nothing when he tries to please God'" (NIV). In essence, he's saying, "Job, we know better than this."

We want to amen Elihu at this point. That's our natural instinct. We want to say it pays to serve God and there's truth in that statement. But like all truth, it must be interpreted by Scripture. There are times when it seemingly doesn't pay to serve God. I'd cite Stephen in Acts 7 or James in Acts 12. But if you take it from the vantage point of eternity and see the reward that Stephen and James are going to enter into, then, yes, it always pays to serve God. But there are times in this life where our actions don't seem to get the reward they deserve.

So in Job 34:10–37, Elihu goes on in his second speech to refute Job's error. We find Elihu making a marvelous defense of the sovereignty of God. Elihu's whole point is to say that God is a powerful and magnificent and sovereign God, and the only thing that fits is that you have resisted a God who is great. But like Job's other friends, he misses the point. None of Job's friends ever considered the drama that began the book. They don't know that at the beginning of the book God had other purposes in mind in terms of allowing these circumstances to prove Job's integrity. None of them ever even speculated on the possibility that Job is telling the truth, that he is innocent, that God is simply testing his integrity.

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So, having defended the sovereignty of God, Elihu closes his second speech by condemning an iffy repentance. Look at Job 34:31–33: “Suppose a man says to God, ‘I am guilty but will offend no more. Teach me what I cannot see; if I have done wrong, I will not do so again.’ Should God then reward you on your terms, when you refuse to repent? You must decide, not I; so tell me what you know” (NIV). In essence he is saying, “Job, maybe you’re beginning to get weak and you say, ‘So I’ve sinned but I don’t know what I’ve done. God, if I’ve done anything wrong then forgive me for it.’” Elihu is rightly saying that’s not real repentance.

Suppose you go to somebody and say to them, “Maybe sometime I did you wrong. If I’ve ever done anything wrong to you, will you forgive me?” That puts the burden on the other person’s back. They’ve got to tell you what you did wrong, and then you get all bent out of shape. “I never knew,” you say. “You mean you’ve been carrying that all this time? I wish you hadn’t carried it all this time. But if you think I did that to you...” That’s not real repentance. Elihu says, “Don’t play around with God. Get it out. You’ve sinned; you know what it is. Don’t do this iffy stuff. If you’re repenting, don’t play games.”

He closes his second speech by launching another blistering attack on Job. “Job speaks without knowledge; his words lack insight. Oh, that Job might be tested to the utmost for answering like a wicked man!” (Job 34:35–36, NIV). Pour on more pain, God. Put more boils on his feet. Put more blisters on his back. Give him more. Get him down, God. “To his sin he adds rebellion; scornfully he claps his hands among us and multiplies his words against God” (Job 34:37, NIV).

**C.** Job doesn’t respond, and that sets up Elihu’s third speech, a shorter one, in Job 35. This continues along the theme “There is profit in serving God.” In these sixteen verses Elihu is basically saying that there is no profit for Job because his is an empty plea to God, and God will

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not hear an empty plea. If only Job were righteous he would know that God was the one who gave him “songs in the night.”

What a beautiful phrase in verse 10: “But no one says, ‘Where is God my Maker, who gives songs in the night, who teaches more to us than to the beasts of the earth and makes us wiser than the birds of the air?’” (NIV). What Elihu is saying is “Job, if your heart were right with God, He would be teaching you the redemptive purpose of this suffering, and even in the midst of the suffering He would be giving you a song in the night.”

It’s interesting when you look at Acts 16 that Paul and Silas, who are suffering without any reason attributed to themselves—like Job—have found the songs in the night. I think the reason why they have songs in the night compared to Job is they know the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and that gives them a song. Job didn’t have that kind of information.

**D.** In his fourth speech, chapters 36 and 37, Elihu concludes his argument against Job. The opening verses of the fourth speech show that he is not troubled with a sense of modesty. “Bear with me a little longer and I will show you that there is more to be said on God’s behalf. I get my knowledge from afar; I will ascribe justice to my Maker. Be assured that my words are not false; one perfect in knowledge is with you” (Job 36:2–4, NIV). His plea through chapter 36 is “Let God speak to you in your suffering. Learn your lesson.” In verses 8–11, he says, “If men are bound in chains, held fast by cords of affliction, he tells them what they have done—that they have sinned arrogantly. He makes them listen to correction and commands them to repent of their evil. If they obey and serve him, they will spend the rest of their days in prosperity and their years in contentment” (NIV).

Sometimes people will try to prove a theological point or argument by quoting from the Scriptures. Elihu has been quoted to back up the very idea he is advancing: Surely if you repent,

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God will hear you and you'll spend the rest of your days in prosperity. When we interpret Scripture, one of the factors we need to know is who is speaking the words. Not all words that are spoken are really God's word, although they are in God's Word. Does that make sense? Some people who are speaking Scripture at various times are speaking human wisdom. Their words are recorded in Scripture to show us what their human wisdom was. Over against that human wisdom comes the wisdom of God. I would ask that as you develop a perspective on suffering, don't ever quote Job's friends to illustrate biblical truth. At any given time they may be saying something that is true, something that is partially true, or something that is totally wrong. One has to decide on the basis of the text what might apply in any given situation.

Elihu especially warns of Job's fixation on wanting to go down to Sheol, the place of the dead. He says in verse 20: "Do not long for the night, to drag people away from their homes. Beware of turning to evil, which you seem to prefer to affliction" (NIV). In other words, Job's talking about death is no good. There Elihu is speaking truth.

Elihu then closes his fourth speech with a hymn of God's greatness, which walks through the cycles of the seasons of the Palestinian year. In each of the seasons he finds in nature a magnificent statement for giving praise to God. What he is doing through these tremendous hymns is saying that God is such a great God and the only thing that accounts for what you're going through is you're such a bad human being. In 36:27–33 he praises God for His work in the autumn when He is sending the rain. In 37:1–13 is a magnificent praise to God who brings the winter and creates the storms and the snow and the frost. Then in 37:19–24 is a beautiful hymn of praise to God who brings the summertime.

The bottom line in Elihu's defense of God is a put-down of Job. He says in closing, "The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power; in his justice and great righteousness, he

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does not oppress. Therefore, men revere him, for does he not have regard for all the wise in heart?" (Job 37:23–24, NIV).

#### **IV. The option that Job's four friends refuse to consider was that suffering may have nothing to do with punishment, and prosperity may have nothing to do with righteousness.**

Easy answers are not valid answers. In looking at the Scriptures I'm convinced that in life, a great deal of the time—if not 95 percent of the time—there is absolutely no connection between suffering and sin. That is, except that death is a judgment resulting from the sin of the human race and in that sense there is a consequence.

The New Testament tells us that there are two kind of suffering in this world. First, there is the suffering that occurs because of our linkage with Adam. We are human beings and subject to the Fall and all the conditions of the Fall that prevail in the world. We're subject to disease, to famine, to natural disaster and the like. Christians aren't exempt from these. They aren't exempt from car wrecks. That's because of our linkage with Adam. Machines fail and drivers get drunk and people are careless and all those sorts of things.

But there's another kind of suffering the New Testament talks about. It's not covered in the Old Testament. It occurs because of our linkage with the second Adam, with Christ. Persecution and suffering come to us solely because we are Christians.

In either case—our linkage with Adam or our linkage with Christ—the suffering cannot be equated necessarily with sin. Jesus, in the close of the Sermon on the Mount, tells the story of two builders—one who builds upon the sand and the one who builds upon the rock. This models the person who builds without Jesus' words in their life and the person who builds with His words in their life. He says the storm comes upon both. They are tested from beneath, from

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against, and from above. They have the same pressure; they have the same adversities. But the one who lasts is the one whose house is built upon the rock.

As we continue to move through this series, I'm going to be looking at some of the New Testament answers to the Book of Job that I think will be rather intriguing and fascinating. Let's strip from our minds the judgment we have of people when bad things are happening in their lives. There is no easy answer to the problem of suffering. But in the New Testament, Paul tells us in an eloquent way in Romans 8:26: "We do not know how to pray as we ought..." but he goes on to say in Romans 8:28: "I know God is working good in all things." Isn't it incredible that in the same breath that Paul says, "I don't know" he says, "I know"? There are things that happen to us and things that happen to other people that we honestly don't know why they've occurred. But in our not knowing, we know. We know Him. We have a relationship with Him, and He's going to help us make it through.

### **Closing Prayer**

Our Father, we come to You and thank You again for Your Word. Your Word helps us to understand that we live in a very complex world where we do not always see the consequences of our decisions. In fact, sometimes what we see is seemingly reversed of what we would expect. We would normally expect to do good and be rewarded. You tell us that, yes, as a foundational moral law, that's true. But the reward may not be soon in coming. It may be reserved for some distant time. It may even be reserved for when we stand in Your presence. Help us persevere in believing that You, the righteous God, will make all things right in Your day and will reveal everything to us. You do not always punish the wicked now. But there will be a day when everyone is called into Your court and will give an account.

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Help us in the midst of our suffering to have courage. Help us to understand that Job is not telling us everything about suffering. When we open the New Testament, we find that through Your acts of grace You bring marvelous deliverances and healings and answers that change our circumstances. Give us the faith to reach out for that as well.

Give us kindness in ministering to and encouraging one another when we are going through difficult times. Help us let You be the judge. And rather than sitting in judgment of another, let us take our place as a friend and be an encourager. We pray for people who are going through great times of suffering in their life. We unite in prayer for them. We ask this in Jesus' name, and in His name we pray. Amen.