

Job 34: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 34. Then Elhu answered and said, Hear my words, you wise men, and give ear to me, you who know. For the ear tests words, as the palate tastes food. Let us choose what is right, let us know among ourselves what is good. For Job has said, I am in the right, and God has taken away my right. In spite of my right I am counted a liar. My wound is incurable, though I am without transgression. What man is like Job, who drinks up scoffing like water, who travels in company with evildoers, and walks with wicked men? For he has said, It profits a man nothing that he should take delight in God. Therefore hear me, you men of understanding. Far be it from God that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty that he should do wrong. For according to the work of a man he will repay him, and according to his ways he will make it befall him. Of a truth God will not do wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice. Who gave him charge over the earth, and who laid on him the whole world? If he should set his heart to it, and gather to himself his spirit and his breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust. If you have understanding, hear this,

Listen to what I say. Shall one who hates justice govern? Will you condemn him who is righteous and mighty, who says to a king, worthless one, and to nobles, wicked man, who shows no partiality to princes, nor regards the rich more than the poor? For they are all the work of his hands. In a moment they die. At midnight the people are shaken and pass away, and the mighty are taken away by no human hand. For his eyes are on the ways of a man, and he sees all his steps. There is no gloom or deep darkness where evildoers may hide themselves. For God has no need to consider a man further, that he should go before God in judgment. He shatters the mighty without investigation, and sets others in their place. Thus knowing their works, he overturns them in the night, and they are crushed. He strikes them for their wickedness, in a place for all to see, because they turned aside from following him, and had no regard for any of his ways, so that they caused the cry of the poor to come to him, and he heard the cry of the afflicted.

When he is quiet, who can condemn? When he hides his face, who can behold him, whether it be a nation or a man, that a godless man should not reign, that he should not ensnare the people? For has anyone said to God, I have borne punishment, I will not offend any more, teach me what I do not see, if I have done iniquity, I will do it no more. Will he then make repayment to suit you, because you reject it? For you must choose, and not I. Therefore declare what you know.

Men of understanding will say to me, and the wise man who hears me will say, Job speaks without knowledge, his words are without insight. Would that Job were tried to the end, because he answers like wicked men, for he adds rebellion to his sin. He claps his hands among us, and multiplies his words against God. In Job chapter 34, we come to Elihu's second speech. David Clines argues that it splits into two halves. The first half, in verses 2-15, addresses the friends of Job, and the second half, in verses 16-37, addresses Job himself. Clines sees evidence for this in the second person singular address of verses 16-17-33. Eric Robinson, however, claims that it is addressed to the friends, once again on the way that we decide this matter, and on whether we see larger sections of Elihu's words here as remixed quotations from either the friends or Job, potentially hang a number of other larger issues of interpretation. Robinson's understanding of the addressees of this passage, along with his belief that a number of passages here are quoting the friends, is a position that might be needed to sustain his positive portrayal of the character of Elihu. Clines, however, while regarding Elihu is much more critical of Job than someone like Robinson does, nonetheless qualifies his account much more than most commentators, for whom Elihu is often viewed as pompous, arrogant, and a bit of a buffoon. Clines writes,

All Elihu's criticism of Job, it should be noted, is about what Job has been saying in his speeches to the friends. Despite occasional appearances, especially verse 8, Elihu does not condemn Job for any deed, nor for anything Job may have said before his troubles came upon him. In this speech, Elihu is concerned solely with Job's reaction to his suffering, and the allegations he is making against God. He wants, of course, to affirm that the world is governed according to the principle of retributive justice, verse 11, and that must mean that Job deserves what is happening to him. But explaining why Job is suffering is not Elihu's main point here, for his focus is on the infamy of Job's complaints against God. Elihu opens by addressing the friends, summoning them to a collective act of judgment, to test the words of Job and to see whether they are in fact righteous and true. Elihu restates Job's own position in verses 5 and 6, and then again in verse 9. Job insists that God has not acted justly towards him. He has not given him his due. Job is a righteous man, yet treated by God as if he were a notorious sinner. He still hasn't given up on his insistence on his righteousness. He hasn't admitted the guilt that others have been imputing to him. Between his quotations from Job, Elihu gives a characterization of Job. What man is like Job, who drinks up scoffing like water, who travels in company with evildoers and walks with wicked men? Elihu here seems to be referring to Job's statements that he had made, throwing God's justice and judgment into question. Whether or not Job himself is an evildoer, he definitely has questionable traveling companions on the route that he has chosen.

[5 : 52] In chapter 15 verses 15 and 16, Eliphaz had characterized human beings as follows. Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones, and the heavens are not pure in his sight. How much less one who is abominable and corrupt, a man who drinks injustice like water. Job stands out from other men.

He drinks scoffing like water, but to a greater degree than other human beings. Elihu is clearly quite troubled by this. It is one thing for Job to bewail his condition. It's another thing for him to impugn God's honor and his righteousness. In verse 9, Elihu presents Job as striking at the very base of true religion. He characterizes Job as saying it profits a man nothing that he should take delight in God.

Job has indeed said some things that are similar to this. For instance, in chapter 21 verse 15, What is the Almighty that we should serve him? And what profit do we get if we pray to him?

However, that was a characterization of the opinion of the wicked, and Job presumably distances himself from that. Job's own words in chapter 9 verse 22 were, It is all one, therefore I say he destroys both the blameless and the wicked. Elihu's concern in the verses that follow is to defend God from the apparent claim of his unrighteousness, or at least of his omission of justice in the case of Job.

God, Elihu highlights, is the one who is the creator and sustainer of all things. He's the Almighty. He's the judge of the whole earth. He providentially rules and upholds all things by his power.

[7 : 19] Elihu wants Job to reflect upon what it might mean to claim that such a God is lacking in justice or failing in his duty. This would be a radical claim of an even more than cosmic scale. It would throw everything into uncertainty and disarray. Might hear something similar to Abraham's statement to the Lord in chapter 18 verse 25 of Genesis.

Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked. Far be that from you. Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?

Elihu goes on to argue this case further. By its very definition, to govern is to execute justice. To imagine an unjust God at the helm of the universe is a radical thought, a thought which Job has probably not followed through. Besides, the impartiality of God in the ruling of the affairs of man can clearly be seen. He shows no partiality. He's not in any particular camp's pocket. He brings down one prince and raises up another. He does not treat either the rich or the poor with a special preference. He is equipped to judge as the one who is omniscient. He sees and knows all things about his creation. No creature can hide from his sight. The friends in Elihu may be investigating the case of Job. God does not have to investigate in that way. He already knows. He overturns unfaithful kings and puts others in their place. He cannot be controlled or summoned by any human being. He's above human power and demands, even of the richest and most powerful. He owes man no explanation for his ruling and human affairs. He has his reasons and purposes, but they may be beyond human understanding.

He cannot be summoned to any human bar to give an explanation of himself. God Almighty, who sovereignly brings down kings and his power and authority, relates to Job's situation in a very particular way. Job, of course, is a ruler of his people. Toby Sumter writes, Job's whole nation is at stake, so Elihu ties his second speech directly to kings. He says that people do not just go up to kings and correct them. On the other hand, God is not partial to men in authority either. God can speak to those people and correct them, and he does not regard the rich more than the poor. They are all the work of his hands. Therefore, Elihu says it is God's place to rebuke kings and nobles. He does this providentially, when bad things happen to them, when calamities strike suddenly. Perhaps the implication of all of this is that since God has brought down Job, the matter has clearly been decided and settled. Eric Robinson reads this argument differently. He writes, Elihu's argument is that God has put the governors of people in place as he has chosen. He removes those who no longer have a heart for him, and there is no evidence that Job is not a righteous judge.

God knows what he is doing and will leave a person in place who will come to him at the proper time, and it is not a wise man's place to say when that time should be ended. God is not obligated to punish or rebuke according to these wise men's ways. As Lightheart has pointed out, Elihu desires to justify Job. Chapter 33 verse 32. Therefore, their arguments against Job are moot on the basis that, 1. They have no evidence to charge Job with wrongdoing, since he is an impartial judge.

[10 : 29] Chapter 34 verses 17 to 19. And 2. God knows exactly what he is doing in Job to bring him inwardly to the proper position before God. The concluding verses of this chapter are very difficult both to translate and to interpret. For instance, even after considering naughty questions of translation, we are still left to determine whether the concluding verses of the chapter are the words of Elihu, or the words of the men of understanding and the wise man that he begins to quote in verse 34.

Is Elihu identifying himself with these opinions, or is this something that he is just reporting to Job? Clines writes, for instance, Elihu would like to envisage himself as being truly on Job's side, but he is aware, so he says, of a groundswell of opinion against Job. The view among thinking people is that, in his assaults on God, Job has taken up the position of the godless, verse 36b, getting himself deeper and deeper into sin by the tone of his speeches, verse 37. Others are saying that such a stubborn Job needs to suffer even greater trials, verse 36a. Elihu himself, so he professes, is not saying anything so harsh. He is encouraging Job to give up his recalcitrance and take the penitent stool, but he cannot hide the fact that others are being far less sympathetic. A question to consider, where else in scripture do we encounter portraits of God's righteous providential rule over kings and empires?