

Job 33: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 33. But now hear my speech, O Job, and listen to all my words. Behold, I open my mouth, the tongue in my mouth speaks, my words declare the uprightness of my heart, and what my lips know they speak sincerely. The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.

Answer me if you can, set your words in order before me, take your stand. Behold, I am toward God as you are. I too was pinched off from a piece of clay. Behold, no fear of me need terrify you, my pressure will not be heavy upon you. Surely you have spoken in my ears, and I have heard the sound of your words. You say, I am pure, without transgression, I am clean, and there is no iniquity in me. Behold, he finds occasions against me, he counts me as his enemy, he puts my feet in the stocks, and watches all my paths. Behold, in this you are not right, I will answer you, for God is greater than man. Why do you contend against him, saying, He will answer none of man's words? For God speaks in one way, and in two, though man does not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men, while they slumber on their beds, then 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.

He keeps back his soul from the pit, his life from perishing by the sword. Man is also rebuked with pain on his bed, and with continual strife in his bones, so that his life loathes bread, and his appetite the choicest food. His flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen, and his bones that were not seen stick out. His soul draws near the pit, and his life to those who bring death. If there be for him an angel, a mediator, one of the thousand, to declare to man what is right for him, and he is merciful to him, and says, Deliver him from going down into the pit. I have found a ransom. Let his flesh become fresh with youth. Let him return to the days of his youthful vigour. 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. He sings before men, and says, I sinned and perverted what was right, and it was not repaid to me. He has redeemed my soul from going down into the pit, and my life shall look upon the light. Behold, God does all these things, twice, three times with a man, to bring back his soul from the pit, that he might be lighted with the light of life. Pay attention, O Job. Listen to me. Be silent, and I will speak. If you have any words, answer me. Speak, for I desire to justify you. If not, listen to me. Be silent, and I will teach you wisdom. The character of Elihu introduced to us in Job chapter 32 continues his opening speech in chapter 33. Finally, after all of his throat clearing, he gets to speaking to Job. In contrast to the three friends, Elihu quotes from Job's speeches at various points. Verses 1 to 11 and 31 to 33 correspond quite closely with elements of chapter 13 verses 17 to 28 and Job's appeal for a divine hearing. Although we were told that he was burning with anger at the beginning of chapter 32, Elihu adopts a more sympathetic tone towards Job and presents him with a way by which he might be restored. The sort of tone that he adopts is not something that we've really heard since chapter 4 and 5 and the first speech of Eliphaz. As in the preceding chapter, the manner of Elihu's address to Job has led to commentators referring to him as pompous and patronising. Once again, however, this may be unfair on him. He may be more hesitant than patronising. He claims to speak from an upright heart and from the wisdom given by the Spirit of the Lord that dwells within. Even though many commentators see him as patronising, this is not something that he's claiming for himself. He presents himself as standing on the same level ground as Job himself. I am toward God as you are. I too was pinched off from a piece of clay. He tries to assure Job that he's not meaning to be hard upon him. His speeches don't contain the sort of harsh rebukes and castigations that we see from the previous speeches of the friends. He represents Job's own position, drawing upon Job's words. For instance, in chapter 9 verse 21, Job had said,

[4 : 20] I am blameless, I regard not myself, I loathe my life. He picks up that language. He also picks up language from chapter 10 verses 5 to 7. Are your days as the days of man, or your years as a man's years, that you seek out my iniquity and search for my sin, although you know that I am not guilty, and there is none to deliver out of your hand. However, the most pronounced parallels are to be found with chapter 13 verses 17 to 28. For instance, verse 24 of that chapter, Why do you hide your face and count me as your enemy? That's picked up in verse 10 here. Behold, he finds occasions against me.

He counts me as his enemy. And verse 11 picks up verse 27 of chapter 13. You put my feet in the stocks, and watch all my paths. You set a limit for the soles of my feet. Elihu's objection to Job's position seems to be that he's playing a zero-sum game with God. By the manner of his insistence that he is in the right, he is putting blame at God's door. In contending with God, he's engaging in a futile endeavour. Job has also made a claim that Elihu wants to dispute. He will answer none of man's words. God does speak, Elihu insists. He speaks in a number of different ways. Human beings may not perceive or understand what God is saying, but he speaks nonetheless. He gives examples of dreams, visions of the night, deep sleep, and slumber in the bed. Dreams we might think of the dreams that are given to various kings in scripture, to Nebuchadnezzar, to Pharaoh, or to Abimelech in chapter 20 of Genesis. In Daniel chapter 7, he speaks of visions of the night. The deep sleep falling upon man might remind us of chapter 15 of Genesis, and the vision of the fire passing between the divided parts of the animals in that chapter, a vision that Abraham received while placed into a deep sleep. Elihu offers a different way of seeing some of these things. God speaks to man not merely to rebuke or to punish, but also to correct and to educate. This is, at the very least, an improvement upon what was offered by the three friends. God can also communicate to human beings, if they will listen to him, through suffering and pain. Elihu presents the hypothetical case of an upright sufferer in verses 19 to 28. Norman Harbell summarises the elements of this. A. Severe illness as a trial taking place within the sufferer. B. Acute consciousness of death as a threatening presence. C. Intervention of a personal angel as advocate before God, pleading an appropriate ransom for the sufferer. D. Restoration of the sufferer to physical health. E. Cultic manifestation of the divine presence, and consequent restoration of the sufferer to righteousness. F. Confession of sin and praise for redemption from death. As Harbell notes, we see several elements of this pattern on various occasions within the Psalms.

The reference to an angelic mediator might call our mind back to Job's wish for a redeemer. I know that my redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. In chapter 19 verse 25, Eliphaz had denied the possibility of such a one interceding on Job's behalf. In chapter 5 verse 1, Call now, is there anyone who will answer you? To which of the holy ones will you turn? The angel, a sort of attorney for the defence, calls for the sufferer to be delivered, and then also to be restored. Let his flesh become fresh with youth. Let him return to the days of his youthful vigour.

The angelic mediator seems to make some appeal on the basis of the righteousness of the sufferer. Although the righteous sufferer is not seen to be perfect and without fault, his life is regarded as having a general tenor of righteousness. On his restoration, he praises God and repents of his sins. The suffering in Elhue's understanding does not relate to the sins so much as a direct punishment for a fault, but as something to educate Job towards the position of repentance. Job having been restored and having learnt from the experience, the suffering will have served its purpose. In verse 32, we find an element that might be surprising.

Having spoken of the way that God restores and brings people back, Elhue expresses his own intentions in his speech. I desire to justify you. Elhue is not intending to crush Job. He never intends to prove Job to be some sort of notorious sinner. He holds that Job is fundamentally righteous, but he wants to prove that Job is righteous without playing a zero-sum game concerning God's righteousness. God is perfectly and spotlessly righteous. Job is not righteous in that same way, but while not completely perfect, Job is righteous nonetheless. Elhue's position is not that of Eliphaz.

[8 : 58] A question to consider, what are some of the insights that Elhue has into suffering that move his position beyond that of the three friends?