

Job 35: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 May 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 35. And Elihu answered and said, Do you think this to be just? Do you say, It is my right before God, that you ask, What advantage have I? How am I better off than if I had sinned? I will answer you, and your friends with you. Look at the heavens and see, and behold the clouds which are higher than you. If you have sinned, what do you accomplish against him? And if your transgressions are multiplied, what do you do to him? If you are righteous, what do you give to him? Or what does he receive from your hand? Your wickedness concerns a man like yourself, and your righteousness a son of man. Because of the multitude of oppressions, people cry out.

They call for help because of the arm of the mighty. But none says, Where is God my maker, who gives songs in the night, who teaches us more than the beasts of the earth, and makes us wiser than the birds of the heavens? There they cry out, but he does not answer, because of the pride of evil men. Surely God does not hear an empty cry, nor does the Almighty regard it. How much less when you say that you do not see him, that the case is before him, and you are waiting for him. And now, because his anger does not punish, and he does not take much note of transgression, Job opens his mouth in empty talk. He multiplies words without knowledge. In Job chapter 35, Elihu gives his third speech, this time addressed to Job. Within this speech, he addresses two key questions that Job has raised. Francis Anderson summarizes them as follows. What is the use of doing good, and why doesn't God answer prayers, particularly the prayers of Job in his suffering? Both of these questions are held together by a concern for the principle of justice, which Elihu raises in verse 2. Do you think this to be just? Behind much of this speech, we can discern Elihu's deeper concern for theological matters. God's character should not be impugned, nor his justice. By suggesting that he has a right before God that God has not acknowledged, Job presumptuously seems to be placing God in the wrong.

That, as far as Elihu is concerned, is completely unjustified. Likewise, in his appeal, he has been putting God, as it were, in the dock, calling God to answer for his actions. Eric Robinson writes, In his second argument, Elihu addresses Job in what can be encapsulated with the idea that God will not be forced to give account for his actions to any person. He is God, for goodness sake, and demanding he play the defendant in court is both unacceptable and ridiculous. Trempe Longman argues that what we see at this point is deficiencies not just in the theology of the friends, and maybe Elihu as well, but also in Job. He writes, Indeed, in an important sense, Job is right to claim that he is right or innocent. That is, he is not guilty of any wrongdoing that would lead to his present suffering. The reader knows this from the prologue to the story in chapters 1 and 2. However, Elihu is also correct in saying that Job thinks not only that he is right, but also that God is wrong. After all, Job wants to pursue God in order to set him straight. Job himself operates with a strict idea of retribution theology. He believes that his suffering is unjust because he does not deserve it, and such a belief depends on the supposition that suffering results only from one's own sin. While there is a measure of truth to Longman's claim, I believe that Job's position has more to be said for it. Job has not merely experienced suffering as such. He has experienced signal judgments, the fire of God descending, catastrophic judgments occurring on a single day. Both Job and the friends are justified in seeing this as not just generic suffering. This is more than just suffering. This is the hand of the Lord. And the question is, why is the hand of the Lord striking his faithful servant? God doesn't just seem to be permitting Job to experience some of the difficulties of life. He is coming against Job as an enemy. Job, the king of his people, is seemingly singled out by the Almighty as a guilty man, condemned to destruction. This is more than just a matter of suffering to be accounted for, and there is a reason why Job's complaint so focuses upon the theme of innocence. Much more is going on here than the question of why do bad things happen to good people. The real question is, why does God so signally strike his faithful servant?

This is the sort of thing that should only happen if the servant is guilty. But as Job rightly insists, he has done nothing to deserve such treatment. While he never disputes that he is afflicted by the same sinful frailty as humanity in general, he has made no catastrophic breach of covenant with God that would deserve such extreme treatment at his hands. The question that Elihu puts upon Job's lips here, what advantage have I, how am I better off than if I had sinned, is one that Job has placed on the mouths of the wicked 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? It is, we should remember, also the matter of dispute between Satan and the Lord. In chapter 1 verses 9 to 11, then Satan answered the Lord and said, Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has on every side?

You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face. Is Job merely a mercenary in his religion, hoping to get some gain and profit for himself? In their differing ways, both Elihu and Satan raised this question. Anderson argues that in his response to this, Elihu argues himself into a corner. From impartiality, he claims, Elihu ends up with indifference. God ends up not caring whether people are righteous or wicked. However, this may not be completely fair upon Elihu. Elihu wants to give Job a sense of God's transcendence, and the purpose of righteousness is one of the issues at stake here as well. Is our righteousness a claim that we have upon God? Is it a matter of entitlement, of the justice that is owed us? Elihu wants Job to recognize that God as the creator of all things is transcendent and above all of these matters. God cannot be rendered beholden to Job for his righteousness, as if God were in some way dependent upon him. No, the beneficiary of Job's righteousness is not so much Job himself as Job's neighbor. Your wickedness concerns a man like yourself, and your righteousness a son of man. This may be making a more general claim about righteousness as well, even on the horizontal level.

Righteousness is not about establishing our own entitlement, either from God or from our neighbor, but about serving and doing good to our neighbor. This said, however, Elihu may be unfair upon Job again here. As we saw in Job's speech in chapter 29, Job was very much concerned to do justice for his neighbor. Job's righteousness and fear of the Lord did not seem to be motivated primarily by self-aggrandizement and service of his own interests, or by the desire to establish a claim upon God and others. The question of justice continues beneath the second question, which is why God doesn't answer the prayers of many who cry out to him. The problem that Elihu identifies here is that many of those who cry out are unjust themselves. To deliver them from oppression would merely give new oppressors the chance to rise up. No, they ignore God, and so God ignores them.

[7 : 13] They're appealing to God purely for their own self-interest, and they have seemingly no regard for God himself as the maker of all things and the giver of all good gifts. They are thankless, yet demanding. When God does not heed them in their ingratitude and sin, they think that they've been wronged by him, yet their own pride is the reason why they cannot be heard. Job is presenting God as if God were in the wrong, yet he is not considering his own posture towards God. Longman writes, Elihu's picture of a disinterested God will be undermined by the Yahweh speeches at the end.

We know that Job's righteousness is important to God. After all, God has entered a contest over it with the accuser. The Yahweh speeches do indeed demonstrate God's greatness and sovereignty, but this sovereign God also deigns to address Job.

A question to consider. How might some of Elihu's criticisms of Job find their target? Are there ways that Job has been presumptuous and wrong in his claims about God?