

Job 36: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Job chapter 36, and Elihu continued and said, Bear with me a little, and I will show you, for I have yet something to say on God's behalf. I will get my knowledge from afar, and ascribe righteousness to my Maker, for truly my words are not false, one who is perfect in knowledge is with you. Behold, God is mighty, and does not despise any, he is mighty in strength of understanding. He does not keep the wicked alive, but gives the afflicted their right. He does not withdraw his eyes from the righteous, but with kings on the throne he sets them forever, and they are exalted. And if they are bound in chains, and caught in the cords of affliction, then he declares to them their work and their transgressions, that they are behaving arrogantly. He opens their ears to instruction, and commands that they return from iniquity. If they listen and serve him, they complete their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasantness. But if they do not listen, they perish by the sword, and die without knowledge.

The godless in heart cherish anger. They do not cry for help when he binds them. They die in youth, and their life ends among the cult prostitutes. He delivers the afflicted by their affliction, and opens their ear by adversity. He also allured you out of distress, into a broad place where there was no cramping. And what was set on your table was full of fatness. But you are full of the judgment on wicked. Judgment and justice seize you. Beware lest wrath entice you into scoffing. Let not the greatness of the ransom turn you aside. Will your cry for help avail to keep you from distress, or all the force of your strength? Do not long for the night, when peoples vanish in their place.

Take care, do not turn to iniquity. For this you have chosen rather than affliction. Behold, God is exalted in his power. Who is a teacher like him? Who has prescribed for him his way? Or who can say, you have done wrong? Remember to extol his work, of which men have sung. All mankind has looked on it. Man beholds it from afar. Behold, God is great, and we know him not. The number of his years is unsearchable. For he draws up the drops of water. They distill his mist in rain, which the skies pour down and drop on mankind abundantly. Can anyone understand the spreading of the clouds, the thunderings of his pavilion? Behold, he scatters his lightning about him, and covers the roots of the sea. For by these he judges peoples. He gives food in abundance. He covers his hands with the lightning, and commands it to strike the mark. Its crashing declares his presence. The cattle also declared that he rises. Job chapter 36 opens Elihu's fourth and final speech. He begins by asking for further patience from the hearer. To this point, Elihu has been fairly long-winded in his statements.

The question of whether this is because of his pomposity, or whether it's a result of his hesitancy, is a matter that divides commentators. Most attribute it to his arrogance, but there's no reason why we must do so. David Clines is one commentator who cautions against jumping to conclusions in this matter.

Elihu presents himself as bearing some great truth. He's carried this knowledge, as it were, from afar, like an argosy bearing great treasures from exotic lands. He wants to speak on God's behalf and in God's defence. He insists upon the truth and blamelessness of his words. These are carefully considered and accurate opinions, at least in his understanding. Within the retribution theologies of the three friends, there seem to be just two characters, the righteous and the wicked. Elihu's theology, however, is a bit more sophisticated. In addition to the characters of the righteous and the wicked, he has the character of the righteous man who falls into sin. For him, judgment can serve a corrective purpose. God is teaching and drawing him back. For instance, we might think about the story of David.

[3 : 50] After his sin concerning Uriah and Bathsheba, God's hand is heavy upon him. Now the purpose of God's judgment in that case is not finally to cut David off as a wicked man. It's as a righteous man to draw him back to himself, to teach him through suffering about the sinfulness of what he has done.

While there is clearly a punitive and retributive element to God's judgment, God's purpose is to draw David back to himself, and so the restorative purpose of the judgment should not be missed. Elihu seems to be developing a similar point here. His focus is upon kings. As we have seen before, Job is a ruler of his people. Elihu had also spoken concerning kings in chapter 34.

God deals with kings in his sovereign providence. He lifts them up and exalts them, and he brings them low and afflicts them. When a righteous king is afflicted, the Lord wants him to respond in an appropriate way. Verse 10, he opens their ears to instruction and commands that they return from iniquity. The king who is afflicted is being graciously treated by the Lord, given a warning so that he might return. But he is in a dangerous position. If he's not careful, he might respond to the affliction by turning away from the Lord, rather than turning to him. In this way, the affliction is also a time of testing and proving. The king who does not respond appropriately to affliction ends up sharing the lot of the wicked. However, the one who responds faithfully will be raised up again. Verse 11, if they listen and serve him, they complete their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasantness. One of the things to notice about Elihu's position here is that God's judgment of this kind is fundamentally a blessing. He judges not because he wants to finish the righteous man off, but because he wants to restore him to himself. Elihu, of course, is not dealing with the case that Job is experiencing. Job is not a righteous man who's committed iniquity.

Job is a righteous man who's suffering without having committed anything that would deserve such treatment. His challenge is less that of repenting than in trusting that God is good, even though all the appearances are that he has come against Job as his enemy. There are a number of occasions in scripture where to test his people, God comes against a faithful servant as an enemy, and this can be a final test for a number of people. We might think of Abraham being told to sacrifice his son Isaac, or Jacob having to wrestle with God at the ford of the Jabbok. The Lord seeks to kill Moses' uncircumcised son in Exodus chapter 4, and in the book of Job, God has come against his servant Job, the one who fears and honors him as an enemy. The lesson that Job needs to learn is that of James chapter 5 verse 11. Behold, we consider those blessed who remain steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. Like Jacob, Job has to wrestle with God and not let go until he is blessed.

The message of Elihu, which again is slightly off target, is similar to that of Hebrews chapter 12 verses 5 to 11. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?

[7 : 05] If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children, and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us, and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time, as it seemed best to them. But he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. While Elihu's message is off target, Job does need to learn to trust God as a gracious father, even when all the appearances seem otherwise. While Job is currently suffering the lot of the wicked, Elihu wants him to be clear that this is not God's final word. This is rather a divine word calling for an appropriate response from Job.

It is imperative that Job responds by turning to God, not by turning to iniquity. By questioning the legitimacy and the justice of God's action in this, Job has taken a wrong turn. Rather, he should trust the hand of God and praise his maker. God is a good teacher, and he knows what he's doing in Job's situation. At the end of this chapter, which leads into chapter 37, which is the conclusion of Elihu's speech, and his speeches more generally, and the speeches of all human beings within the book of Job, Elihu makes a case for creation itself as having some revelatory purpose. God reveals his wisdom and his intricate sovereignty and power within the great and mysterious processes of his creation.

The water cycle is a means by which life is given to the land. God establishes and governs this process. Likewise, he is the master of the thunder and the lightning. He directs it to wherever it should strike. The way of God is mysterious and inscrutable, yet the creation itself gives us good reason to trust that it is wise and good. A question to consider, where else in Scripture do we learn about God's gracious fatherly intent in his judgment of the righteous?