



ELIHU SPEAKS-GOD SPEAKS THROUGH SUFFERING

Text: Job 32 & 33

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Date: 17th September, 2017

One time at our national Synod we were involved in a difficult debate that came to a stalemate. All the delegates were quiet, when a young minister was just bursting to have a say. Where all the older men of Synod were stumped, this brash young man was going to solve the issue. At first there was a touch of annoyance. If the older wiser men were stumped what would this inexperienced fellow bring to the table? Well he had his moment. A lot of what he said had already been said. But he thought it was new because he said it differently. I must admit there was a hint of an idea in all his brazenness that helped us forward. I say this because it gives you a clue as to what we see happening here in Job 32. Job and his three friends have come to a stalemate. For 27 chapters, they argued over why Job has suffered so terribly. They kept hammering him to confess his sin because his terrible suffering implied he must have done something awfully wrong. But Job insisted he was innocent and wanted God to explain himself. In chapter 31 Job gave his final reply to them, claiming on oath he had done nothing wrong.

So, now we find the three friends have nothing more to say (:1) "*So these three men stopped answering Job because he was righteous in his own eyes*". And now, out of the blue, (:2) we are introduced to "*Elihu son of Barakel the Buzite, of the family of Ram*." We have been given no prior indication that this young man has been sitting in listening. But there he is and he has (:2) "*become very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God*". (:3) "*He is also angry with the three friends, because they found no way to refute Job and yet condemned him*." This angry young man has had enough.

He is bursting to speak. He has been quiet because in that culture only the elderly should speak. The young are supposed to keep quiet. (:4) "*Now Elihu had waited before speaking to Job because they were older than he. But when he saw the three men had nothing more to say, his anger was aroused.*" Elihu can't contain himself any longer.

Now what are we supposed to do with this angry young man. He is all fired up to defend God because he feels Job's friends were too incompetent to do it right. Commentators are divided in their assessment of Elihu. Some see him as a comical relief, because there is now such awful tension in the debate. They see him as an arrogant young man, full of himself, who just blusters forth with little new to contribute. Others see him as a sort of John the Baptist for Job, some one who prepares the way for God to speak. Elihu is regarded as being a theological bridge between what Job's friends say and what God says. He prepares Job for what God will say. So, despite his manner, and some awful things he says, Elihu has a valuable place in this story. Mind you, you need to look for the gems. Elihu has a lot to say. He goes on for five chapters, with four speeches. In his second and third speeches, he gets very worked up with his own oratory and powerful reasoning. As a result, he ends up being very cruel to Job. He does not try to understand why Job claims he is innocent. Instead Elihu pushes what Job says to the extreme. He regards Job as saying he is completely without sin. And for that he tears into Job.

It is interesting isn't it, who God can use to speak as his instrument. It may be the young. In their idealism, they can challenge their elders who have become cynical and lack commitment. It may be the unbelieving workmate who uses taunting words. 'You a Christian? And you do that?' It can be anybody God uses to put us back on track. God can speak to us through all sorts of people. As Martin Luther said, 'God can use a crooked stick to draw a straight line.' Elihu's input is important. At the end of Job, God rebukes the three friends for being wrong, but says nothing against Elihu.

So, what is the significance of Elihu in this part of the story? He comes as the answer for Job's cry to God for an explanation. It seems to Job that God has been silent. Job has been suffering terribly and has cried out to God numerous times. But it seems God gives no answer. Now here is this angry young man who God uses as a sort of mediator. He is keen to set things right, for God and for Job.

In chapter 32:6 we see Elihu starting to speak. And we get some idea of his character, because it takes him about 24 verses to just say: 'Can I say something?' In his very verbose way he simply, politely, says, 'I know I'm young, but I have to say something. I know I'm young but wisdom comes not via age but from understanding that God's spirit gives'. In chapter 33 Elihu actually starts saying what he intends to say to Job. He starts off well. He lets Job know that what he says is from God. He will be honest and without partiality in what he says. He admits he is just like Job, a man taken from clay, that Job has nothing to fear (33:1-7). Then in verse 8 (33:8) Elihu begins to analyze Job's view of God. Here is the problem right through this book. Job, like his three friends, has a narrow view of God. They tend to regard God in terms of their own thinking. God is as limited as their own minds. We still tend to do that. We want to have God, as well as everything else, all worked out. It's our need to be in control. We don't like mystery. A deep sense of awe is not often part of our experience. The book of Job teaches us that God and his ways are way beyond us. We will never grasp all God is doing.

Now, Job's first view of God, according to Elihu, is that God seems erratic. He seems to Job to act without any good reason. It's like we feel God had a bad day and just reacts. Now that's us humans projecting our ideas about God onto God. We know there are those who seem to get out of the wrong side of bed in the morning and are just plain grumps all day. We feel sometimes that's how God acts. As Elihu points out, Job implies God mistreats him without reason. Thus, implying God is capricious, an erratic grump. Elihu's answer to that is brief and to the point. (:12) "*But I tell you, in this you are not right.*" Why? (:12) "*...for God is greater than man*". Let's never forget that. God's ways are much higher than our ways. God always acts out of his character which is love. "God is love". Behind every act of God is a loving heart. We don't always think that when we struggle with our suffering. But when we think like that we are misjudging God. It's not that God does things for no good reason. We just don't see what he is aiming to do.

Then in verse 13 Elihu moves to the second thing Job complains about God, which is that God has been silent. He hasn't answered Job. Cf. 33:13-14. That too is one of our problems, isn't it? God seems silent. He doesn't seem to answer our prayers or be with us in our struggle. Elihu helps us here. He says God does speak, but in ways we don't always realize. There are two ways, Elihu suggests. First God speaks in dreams. Cf

33:15-18. Elihu says that God's objective is to protect us. Even to protect us from ourselves. Humanity seems bent on its own destruction. Just watch the news each day! We cause our own biggest problems. There is so much stuff we often bury inside ourselves and refuse to deal with. The things God puts our way, the distress, the pain, the warnings, are designed to keep us from hurting ourselves and each other.

Now when we say God speaks in our dreams does that mean we go all Freudian and start analyzing those dreams? There are several ways to understand Elihu here. One is that God often did speak to his people in dreams in the Old Testament. That was his revelation to his people then. Those were the days before there was the Word of God as we have it now. So today we can say God is always speaking to us in the Bible. Read the Word and hear what God is saying. And there is a lot in that. Often, we think, why doesn't God speak to us? But we haven't read our Bibles for days or weeks. God is speaking, but we aren't listening. But there is also the sense in which we need to take heed to our dreams. A lot of stuff we need to deal with in our lives, we suppress, we don't want to think about it. But it can come up in our dreams. The mind is always active, bringing up stuff that is troubling us. God can use that to speak to us, to say 'Isn't it time you and I dealt with this area in your life, before it wrecks you?!' If God can use the words of the brazen youth, or the angry neighbour, he can use our own dreams to knock on our door. Are we listening?

The second thing Elihu says is that God also speaks through pain. Cf 33:19-22. Here Elihu's argument seems to describe all that Job has gone through. The young man is saying: 'God is speaking to you Job. He is not silent. You think he is not saying anything? He is! Your very sufferings are God speaking to you. Now, it's not the case, as your three friends make out, that God is punishing you for something you're refusing to admit. But God is helping you to understand something that you don't get. The pain is making that possible'. I think you can understand what Elihu means. When your life has been threatened, your view of life is changed. What you value changes. C.S. Lewis says this about pain: 'We can rest contentedly in our sins and stupidities. Anyone who has watched gluttons shoveling down the most exquisite foods as if they did not know what they are eating, will admit that we can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world'. Have you ever had God shout at you through pain? A man once said: 'I lived for a long time thinking that my business

was the most important thing in my life. But then I had a heart attack and, believe me, God got my attention.' Why do we have to wait for the drastic to happen before we hear God? It might well be God in his love brings suffering on us so we will hear what he has to say.

Now it is interesting that Elihu says for pain to speak to us and for us to grow we need a mediator to tell us what is right and to provide a 'ransom' c.f. 33:23-28. What an amazing preview this is of the gospel. We need a mediator to speak to us, to act for us. As Elihu speaks of *"One in a thousand"*; someone very special. Just having pain will not tell about God and his grace. Suffering without mediation produces bitterness and even anger against God. It's no wonder many who have suffered have become staunch atheists. But suffering, when it is interpreted by the mediator God provides is a blessing. We see that in Jesus. We see in his death and resurrection the astonishing love of the Father for his people. We see the lengths God will go to save us. In Jesus' suffering, we see the just judgment for sin and understand why there is so much pain in the world. In Jesus we see the answer, we see he is the 'ransom' for our sin. In Jesus, we see how God can use awful suffering for amazing good. That in pain there can be amazing grace. In Jesus, we see that God does not punish us for our sin. That's all been dealt with by Christ on the cross. So, we see that pain can be for our eternal protection. Pain makes us see something is wrong. It helps us return to God. As 33:28 says *"He redeemed my soul from going down to the pit and I will enjoy the light"*.

The major contribution Elihu brings to the debate in Job, is the shift from thinking all suffering is punishment for sin. Elihu helps us realize suffering may be God's way of speaking to us to protect us from eternal destruction. Suffering then is not a punishment but a creative act of grace. It means we don't look back at the past and search for some wrong. That's the paradigm Job's friends were operating under. In suffering we should look forward. We look to see what purposes God has for us, gracious purposes to save us. Grace to grow us in faith and maturity. When we try to tell people about Jesus often they have no interest. Until there is a suffering that shakes their world. The Bible makes it clear that spiritual maturity often comes through the difficult times. The grace of God is seen also in verse 29-30 *"God does all these things to a person- twice, even three times-to turn them back from the pit, that the light of life may shine on them"*. Isn't God patient! He keeps coming back to us speaking in our

situation. Whether through his Word, dreams, or if need be, God uses his megaphone of suffering.

It comes down to this. Be in awe of God who is way beyond us. Trust him. He always acts out of his love. Listen to God. He may speak via that brash youth, that dream, or your pain. Above all listen through our mediator Jesus, especially as he speaks in the gospel. Always trust we are in God's grace.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.

- What are the different ways God speaks in a person's life? Do you recognise how God has been speaking in your life? What is he saying?
- How can pain be a "creative act of grace"? Have you felt it that way?
- Why do we need a mediator to help us understand what God is saying in suffering?