

Gracious God, your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love, and strength to follow on the path you set before us; through Jesus Christ, **Amen**

As ever, helpful to follow along- page 533...

If you've been reading the book along with the sermon series, you'll notice that the book is repetitive; Job and his 'miserable comforters' cycle round speeches, and responses, and many of the same themes keep reappearing. So we've skipped on a little. Let's imagine the scene- Job and his friends talking round in circles, about his plight. A crowd of people form round, listening. Job brings his final speech to an end, and it feels like everything has played out. There's a respectful silence.

Elihu has been listening patiently. But as the speeches have gone on, something has got him incensed, and he has to say something.

If you were keeping a scorecard, you'd say that Job had won the argument with his friends. He has shown that suffering cannot be explained simply. Job has shown that he isn't suffering because he was a wicked man. But in expressing this, he has justified himself rather than God.

As the book goes on, Job's instinct of 'why me' has increasingly turned into an increasingly desperate emphasis of his own holiness- *chapter 31, if you get a chance to read it, is essentially a list of Job's exemplary character traits*- and with that comes the implicit sense that God has done something wrong. Job stops short of his wife's advice- 'to curse God and die'. But he does suggest that God may be in the wrong- Chapter 19 vs 6, Job even refers to '*the wrong that God has done me*'.

Soon, God will speak out of the storm and have his say. But before then, we hear Elihu. Elihu is brash, young, and full of himself and his opinions. Like Zophar, he's not going to win any prizes for sensitivity. But Elihu is the only human character here who doesn't get God's rebuke. He sets us up for the final act.

Elihu's speech has three main points in reaction to Job and his friends. Firstly, that God is just. Secondly, that God is not like us. And thirdly, that suffering isn't meaningless, but that God can and does speak to us through it.

Firstly, **God is Just-** Job may be innocent, but that doesn't give Job the right to charge God with injustice. Job has been a little too simplistic in his understanding, falling into the same trap as his friends. As long as the conversation is about Job's goodness (or not), Job is prepared to entertain the view that God is guilty. It's not quite putting God in the dock. But it's sailing close to it.

Elihu won't accept this. Chapter 33 vs 12 - *I tell you, in this you are not right- for God is greater than any mortal.* Elihu isn't saying 'just because God is God, he can do what he likes- it's not some ancient version of Richard Nixon *'if the president does it, it's not illegal'*. What Elihu suggests is that God will have some purposes and perspectives that Job cannot see. Chapter 34 vs 12- *'it is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice'*. We simply do not see the same picture that God does. Any parent, or teacher, or person in responsibility experiences a version of this regularly- *it's not fair.* Elihu's point is that we are simply not in a position to say that about God. God's understanding of what we need, and what is right, is of a different degree altogether.

Augustine wrote of God and our circumstances, "If you understand, it is not God you understand." We can hardly scratch the surface of the creativity and wisdom of God's handiwork. *More on that next time...*

Secondly, intimately connected to this- Elihu emphasises that God is not like us. Job and his friends have perhaps leaned towards talking of God like he was a human being, or at least someone bound by the same rules and restrictions that we are. Elihu- Chapter 35 vs 5-

Look up at the heavens and see;

gaze at the clouds so high above you.

⁶ If you sin, how does that affect him?

If your sins are many, what does that do to him?

*⁷ If you are righteous, what do you give to him,
or what does he receive from your hand?*

*⁸ Your wickedness only affects humans like yourself,
and your righteousness only other people.*

We change, we decay, we grow, and we are affected by things. Not so with God. If I sin, it doesn't hurt God. If I'm righteous, it doesn't boost his self-esteem. God is unchangeable, constantly overflowing with divine

life and joy. The sheer difference and otherness of God is something we can easily lose sight of, because our thoughts lead us towards making God in our own image, making him vulnerable with us. *We'll dwell on that more next time- why it is good news that God is different from us.*

Lastly, Elihu is convinced that Job's pain can in itself be redemptive.

We live in a world that considers pain and suffering to be 'senseless', absurd, meaningless. And if the resurrection of Jesus isn't true, I think the world is absolutely right. Outside of the resurrection, the cross of Jesus- the one truly good person who ever lived- is a victory for absurdity. It shows that everything truly good does get snuffed out eventually. If there is no resurrection, the only sensible way to see the world is despair. But we're on the other side of Easter Sunday. From the empty tomb, we can see the Cross in a whole new way- as a part of God's plan to rescue us. It transforms the suffering and pain of Christ, but it can transform our own suffering too. Elihu hasn't yet seen the fullness of God in Christ that we have- but he shows us some hints towards it.

Elihu tells Job that even in his illness and grief, that God is not silent; he can speak to his people in all sorts of ways. Chapter 33 vs 14-18- dreams and visions, but also that, verse 17, that through suffering they may be 'turned away from their wrongdoing'. Verse 19 'someone may be chastened on a bed of pain'. Elihu pictures God not as an angry judge, but as a redeemer, a rescuer. His pain is not the executioner's axe but a surgeon's scalpel. *We must be careful about generalisations here; any attempt to make hard and fast rules that fit every scenario the same way will mean we end up falling into the same simplistic trap as Job's friends.*

What Elihu is saying is that God can, and does, and will use the pain and suffering of the righteous for their good. It trains us and shapes us.

Hebrews 12: *Our Father disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.*

Jesus can use anything as raw materials to complete his rescue work in us. That's the promise of Romans 8:28- *'in all things, God works for the good of those who love him'*.

One of the ways God uses pain is to wake us up and bring us to himself. Charles Spurgeon said 'I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages'. Chapter 36 vs 15-16

*But those who suffer he delivers in their suffering;
he speaks to them in their affliction.*

*¹⁶ "He is wooing you from the jaws of distress
to a spacious place free from restriction,
to the comfort of your table laden with choice food.*

I suspect that when you've experienced deep pain, it hasn't felt exactly like being wooed. But pain is simply the bodies (or the hearts) way of telling us something is wrong. And sometimes we need that. So if Jesus uses your pain to wake you up, to show you your need for him, then that is for your good. If Jesus uses your despair at the state of the world to yearn for his true, untouchable, heavenly kingdom- then that is for your good. If Jesus uses your loneliness to bring you into his fellowship- then that is for your good. If Jesus uses your pain to bring you deeper levels of compassion for others, then that is for your good. If Jesus uses your pain to grow your endurance and patience, then that is for your good.

If you're a Christian, then there is nothing at all that can separate you from the love of God.