



*Elihu, do you mean to say ...*

**God has a purpose in allowing the godly to suffer?**

### **Main Point:**

Job was a blameless, upright man who feared God, yet God allowed him to suffer calamity after calamity of untold proportions at the hands of Satan, the accuser. Unbeknown to them, Job's three friends come to offer their explanations for his suffering. Their advice in short was God was punishing him. Then comes the explanation offered by Elihu, a much younger voice. Elihu offers valuable wisdom on the value of adversity in our lives.

### **Intro |**

This week I had to have a medical procedure that can only be described as wholly unpleasant. It is not the operation, nor is it the recovery, but the preparation for the procedure that makes the whole ordeal horrid. The process necessitates a cleaning the pipes to make sure there is no sediment that is clogging the system.

This routine procedure always reminds me of a word of wisdom my father gave me as a teenager when I purchased my first car. He told me it was best not to allow my car to run on an empty tank. Apparently, over time sludge, dirt and water settles in the bottom of your petrol tank. If you don't regularly flush out this sediment, it can cause expensive problems to your car.

Today we are going to discover how our heart can be a little like a petrol tank. Over time a dangerous sediment can develop at the bottom of our spiritual barrel. And this sludge, that lies at the bottom of our heart, very easily remains concealed until something disturbs it, or stirs it up.

And nothing stirs up this toxic sediment like suffering through adversity.

And this bring us to our story of Job, the righteous sufferer.

Last week, we looked at the first two chapters of the story. Job, the righteous man, lost everything – his children, his workers, his livestock, even his own health.

When Job's three friends turned up to comfort him, they scarcely recognised him. So profound was the onslaught of Satan's attack, all they could do was sit in silence.

For seven days and nights his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar did not utter a word, *"for they saw that his suffering was too great for words."*(2:13)

Now in today's message I'm going to attempt to summarise more than 35 chapters of the Bible. That is the dialogue between Job and his friends (chapters 3 to 31). Then, I'd like us to give special attention to the advice offered by a fourth mysterious person named Elihu. What Elihu had to say was a very different perspective to what Job's other friends had offered.

Let's start, however, with looking at Job's response to the tremendous suffering God permitted to be brought against him.

### **Point 1 | Suffering stirs up questions about the value and meaning of life**

The first words that escape from Job's lips are a lament of agony in which he questions the reason for his continued existence through such extreme suffering (see 3:11).

It is not hard for us to imagine why those living with serious impairments or disease would question the value of their life. They understand Job's cry, *"Oh, [God] why give light to those in misery? ... Why is life given to those with no future, those God has surrounded with difficulties?"* (3:20-23)

This reminds me of what Nick Vujicic shared about his struggles as a child. Nick was born without arms or legs. When he was about seven or eight, he could see nothing good in his life, nor in his future and these thoughts prompted him to attempt suicide on more than one occasion.

As Job expressed such doubts about the value of his life, it prompted the oldest of Job's friends, Eliphaz, to respond.

### **Point 2 | Suffering can be due to our own foolishness, the consequences of our own poor choices.**

Eliphaz's words, in fact, express the primary paradigm his three friends held to explain why the righteous suffer.

In Chapter 4, Eliphaz says, *"Stop and think! Do the innocent die? When have the upright been destroyed? My experience shows that those who plant trouble and cultivate evil will harvest the same."* (4:7-8, 22:5, 21, 23)

And Bildad says the same, *"How long will you [Job] go on like this? ... Your children must have sinned against [God], so their punishment is well deserved."* (8:4) and *"But if you pray to God and seek favour of the Almighty, and if you are pure and live with integrity, he will surely rise up and restore your happy home"* (8:5-6).

Then, Zophar, comes in with much the same reasoning. In Chapter 11, *"You [Job] claim 'My beliefs are pure' and 'I am clean in the sight of God.' ... 'Listen! God is doubtless punishing you far less than you deserve."* (11:6) So, he tells Job, *"Get rid of your sins, and leave all iniquity behind you. Then your face will brighten with innocence. You will be strong and free of fear."* (v14-15)

Although they are gentle at first, Job's friends grow in their accusations against him. The only reason they can find for Job's suffering is his sin.

However over and over Job declares his innocence before God. In his second speech Job says, *"Look at me! Would I lie to your face? Stop assuming my guilt for I have done nothing wrong."* (6:28-29, 9:20-21, 23:11-12, 12:4, 27:1-6, 30:14-25, 31:1-40)

In the theology of Job's friends, there is no such thing as a righteous person suffering. To them, all suffering is God's punishment for inward wickedness.

So, Job's declaration of his righteousness before God was offensive to them.

In fact, it is because of Job's refusal to acknowledge any sin, and his continual justifying of himself before God, which made *"his three friends refuse to reply further to him."* (32:1)

So, silence settled in Uz.

Then suddenly, a new person speaks. His name is Elihu. He is not one of Job's friends, but he has heard everything that has been said. He allowed the others to speak because they were older and he was young in comparison.

Now, I have read quite a few commentaries on the book of Job as I prepared this message. Many of them contend that what Elihu had to say was more of the same. And certainly, there are elements of *"Job, you've got what you deserve"* in his speech (34:11).

But, what makes Elihu's words stand out is this:

When we get to the end of the book, God identifies that Job's three friends have not spoken accurately about him (42:8). But Elihu is not included in this rebuke.

As well, if we look at how the book is structured, the writer allows the advice of Job's friends to drizzle out. Even Zophar doesn't get a closing argument. After 29 chapters of dialogue, the author then devotes five chapters to Elihu's explanation.

Why? When we see what Elihu has to say we do indeed get a new perspective on why the righteous suffer. It is a perspective that was totally absent from Job's three other friends.

Let's turn in our Bibles to Chapter 32.

### **Point 3 | Suffering stirs up the pride that settles deep within our hearts**

Elihu has listened to all that has been said by Job, by Eliphaz, by Bildad and by Zophar – and he held his tongue while they all offered their explanations – including what Job had to say – and all their talk had made him angry!

Firstly, he was angry at Job, because Job had justified himself rather than God. (32:2)

Elihu thinks that Job has been wrong in some of what he has said—indeed, he sees pride and arrogance in Job's attitude (see 33:17; 35:12; 36:9).

Secondly, he was angry at Job's friends because, while they had said some good things, over and over they accused Job of wickedness and sin, yet provided no proof to support their accusations.

In 33:8–12 Elihu puts his finger on Job's error:

*"You say, 'I am pure, I am without sin; I am innocent, I have no guilt. God is picking a quarrel with me and he considers me his enemy...' (v9-10) Elihu says, 'But you are wrong, and I will show you why.' (v12)*

Job is wrong to claim innocence at the expense of God's grace. We know that Elihu is right about this because after experiencing God in the whirlwind, Job does in fact repent: *"I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance."* (42:6)

While we can indeed emphasize with Job's complaints against God, we notice that his determined grip on his integrity had driven him to say things about himself that were overly optimistic (read Job's final protest of innocence in 31:1-40). And he had said things about God that were disrespectful. For example, he even went so far as accusing God of treating him as his enemy (13:23–24).

Even though Job was a righteous man, he was not a sinless, perfect man. What Elihu saw in Job's justification of himself was a sediment of pride that had begun to cloud the purity of his life – and this sediment of pride had been stirred up by the experience of suffering.

### **Point 4 | Pain and suffering come not as punishment but as a vehicle to save**

If you'd like to look at Chapter 33, verses 14-19.

Elihu explains that God speaks to people in two ways: through dreams and visions and through suffering.

*"He makes them turn from wrong doing; he keeps them from pride.*

*He protects them from the grave, from crossing over the river of death. (v 17-18)*

*God disciplines people with pain on their sickbeds, with ceaseless aching in their bones."* (v19)

And Elihu has one more word of wisdom to offer.

In Chapter 36, Elihu says,

*"[God] never takes his eyes off the innocent,*

*but he sets them on thrones with kings and exalts them forever.*

*If they are bound in chains and caught up in a web of trouble,*

*he shows them the reason. He shows them their sins of pride.*

*He gets their attention and commands that they turn from evil."* (6-10)

So, according to Elihu the righteous can and do suffer. And then he gives the reason, verse 15

*"But by means of their suffering, he rescues those who suffer.*

*For he gets their attention through adversity."*(v15)

Words similar to these are offered in Psalm 119,

*"My suffering was good for me for it taught me to pay attention to your decrees."*(v71)

John Piper sums up what we learn after wading through the sea of Job's discussions,

"the suffering of the righteous is not a token of God's enmity but of his love. It is not a punishment of their sins but a refinement of their righteousness. It is not a preparation for destruction, but a protection from destruction."

### **Application | Suffering disturbs the sediment that sits undetected at the bottom of our hearts**

Usually when we encounter seasons of suffering, we seek to understand its purpose.

What Elihu offers is a purpose.

We learn that suffering is not dispensed willy-nilly among the people of God. It is apportioned to us as individually designed, expert therapy by the loving hand of our great Physician. And its aim is that our faith might be refined, our holiness might be enlarged, our soul might be saved, and our God might be glorified.

Is that not what Peter wrote to the godly who were suffering,

*"In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ."*(1 Peter 1:6-7)

### **Discussion and reflection**

Those who wish to explore the concept further, may wish to read a few chapters from the book of Hebrews. In Chapter 12 the writer explains how God disciplines those he loves. In fact, he goes further in showing that God proves his love for his children by disciplining us.

I wonder what your thoughts are on how God disciplines us? How does the Lord correct you? After reading chapter 12, focus on verses 10-13 which says,

*<sup>10</sup> For our earthly fathers disciplined us for a few years, doing the best they knew how. But God's discipline is always good for us, so that we might share in his holiness. <sup>11</sup> No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way. <sup>12</sup> So take a new grip with your tired hands and strengthen your weak knees. <sup>13</sup> Mark out a straight path for your feet so that those who are weak and lame will not fall but become strong.*

In what areas of your life are you experiencing the disciplining of the Lord? How has God used this season of the pandemic to teach you more about holiness and right living with him?

### **A Month of Daily Devotions on the book of Job**

For those who would like further reflection on the story of Job, a month-long devotional has been developed. This devotional journeys with Job through his long and arduous time of testing.

