

# Job 32-37

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*How dare you talk to God like that?*

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 6 August 2023

Job: Out of the Storm [8]

## **Elihu: blowhard or prophet? (32)**

Welcome to week 8 of our series *Out of the Storm*, reading and studying the book of Job. I was encouraged last week to hear **JS** some of the things that we've learned from Job so far. We see most of those today – we're getting **JS** close to the end!

At this point of a TV series there's often a lull. The writers have introduced all the characters, we've gone through the main part of the story, and now a couple of episodes before the end there's a lull, a breath, before the exciting conclusion.

It's tempting to think of Elihu like that: the slightly annoying bit you want to skip to get to the end. I used to think of him like that myself. But one of the things I've learned from Job this time round is that perhaps Elihu isn't the blowhard I always thought, but something of a prophet instead.

Let's dive in to those first verses from chapter 32. I'm going to read from the ESV instead of the NIV: the English is a bit more clunky, but it highlights something important **¶**:

So these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. Then Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, **burned with anger**. He **burned with anger** at Job because he justified himself rather than God. He **burned with anger** also at Job's three friends because they had found no answer, although they had declared Job to be in the wrong. Now Elihu had waited to speak to Job because they were older than he. And when Elihu saw that there was no answer in the mouth of these three men, he **burned with anger**.

*Job 32.1-5 (ESV)*

The clearest thing about Elihu's speeches in chapters 32 to 37 is that he is a Very Angry man. He is furious: with Job – how dare he talk to God like that? – and with Job's friends – how can they not find an answer despite all they've said?

Elihu is often written off as an angry young blowhard, so full of himself, so sure he's right – while rehearsing many of the same arguments he's angry with Job's friends for using again and again.

To be honest that's how I've normally read Elihu's speeches. But actually this time round I've learned there is much more to him than meets the eye. Compare these words from Elihu ¶:

‘I am full of words, and the spirit within me compels me; inside I am like bottled-up wine, like new wineskins ready to burst. I must speak and find relief.’

*Job 32.18-20 (NIV)*

Compare those with these words from the prophet Jeremiah ¶:

‘His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.’

*Jeremiah 20.9 (NIV)*

When Elihu says **‘listen to me’** (32.10, 33.1, 34.2 etc) – let's not dismiss him as a blowhard but *listen* to him as a prophet, speaking – imperfectly – with the insight of God's Spirit.

You see one of the main points of Elihu's speeches is that wisdom can't be worked out, nor does it come with age: it comes from God. Wisdom is not something we gain with experience, or from observing the world – because as chapters 1 and 2 tell us, there are things going on behind the scenes that we know nothing about. Wisdom – *true* wisdom – can only come from God.

## Can you listen to God? (33.1-33)

Jess is working this weekend. Yesterday she sent me a message in the afternoon, asking me to get some chicken thighs out of the freezer. This is what she wrote 📄:

‘Meant to say – can you get some chicken thighs out of the freezer? They’re in a horrible yellow clip bag and labelled chicken breast I think. But they do look like thighs from the outside! Wait, maybe a blue one actually.’

It’s a little confusing, but only a little: I’m looking for a blue bag labelled chicken breast, but that contains chicken thighs.

The problem is I stopped reading here 📄, which 📄 changes the meaning – can you guess what I did next? I spent a couple of minutes searching our freezer for a yellow clip bag labelled ‘chicken thighs’. Did I succeed? No. I shut the freezer door.

Then my dinosaur brain told me, ‘Hang on, didn’t she say something about ‘blue’? I went back to the messages 📄. Can you guess what I did next? I spent *another* couple of minutes searching for a *blue* clip bag labelled ‘chicken thighs’. Did I succeed? No. I shut the freezer door and sent 📄 a reply:

‘Can’t find any thighs only breast.’

I went back to my study to carry on preparing my sermon, a little annoyed for the interruption, not least because now I thought I would have to go to the shop before dinner because Jess had made a mistake about the contents of the freezer.

After a couple of minutes at my desk my dinosaur brain nudged me again. Jess normally has an extremely accurate picture of what is in our freezer, and when she makes a meal plan for the week she checks what we have and what we need. So I looked at her messages again and this time I managed to read **ss** the whole thing.

I went back to the freezer – and can you guess what I found? A blue clip bag, with ‘chicken breast’ written on it, that on inspection from the outside contains chicken thighs. I put it out to defrost, and last night we had some delicious Korean spicy chicken for dinner.

What’s the point of that long story? It’s that we humans are not very good at *listening*: we jump to conclusions; we finish other people’s sentences in our heads without waiting to hear what they’re saying; we ignore things that are inconvenient; we listen with half an ear because we’re in the middle of something much more important; we’re distracted, we’re right, we already know.

This is the main point of Elihu's first speech. Job has accused God of being silent, of not responding (32.13). But **God does speak – now one way, now another – though no one perceives it** (32.14). Elihu says God might speak through a **dream** or **vision** (32.15), through people's **warnings** (32.16) – why?

‘To turn them from wrongdoing  
and keep them from pride,  
to preserve them from the pit,  
their lives from perishing by the sword.’

*Job 32.17-18 (NIV)*

Elihu continues. **Someone may be chastened on a bed of pain** (32.19), unable to eat even **the choicest meal** (32.20), wasting **away to nothing** (32.21), **near to death** (32.22) – yet through all that learn **how to be upright** (32.23) and so be **renewed** and **restored** (32.25) – and then go to others and say,

‘“I have sinned, and I have perverted what is right,  
but I did not get what I deserved.  
God has delivered me from going down to the pit,  
and I shall live to enjoy the light of life.”’

*Job 32.27-28 (NIV)*

¶¶ CS Lewis puts it like this in a famous passage from his book *The Problem of Pain*:

The human spirit will not even begin to try to surrender self-will as long as all seems to be well with it. Now error and sin both have this property, that the deeper they are the less their victim suspects their existence; they are masked evil. Pain is unmasked, unmistakable evil; every man knows that something is wrong when he is being hurt... We can rest contentedly in our sins... But pain insists upon being attended to. ¶¶ God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

*CS Lewis, The Problem of Pain, 80-81*

The three friends have a simplistic understanding of the world: put evil in, get pain back. But Elihu is wiser: perhaps there is more to it than that, perhaps God can work *through* pain to reach and teach parts of us that otherwise remain hidden beneath a veneer of ‘everything’s fine’.

I’ve certainly seen God work like this through my own pain – though it’s hard to see in the midst of it as I am now with my continuing balance problems.

This is a hard teaching to hear, partly because it suggests a picture of God like a **¶** stern Victorian schoolmaster who thinks that caning is the only way children learn anything.

But it's not that at all, it's more like **¶** the cross: God bringing life *through* pain, suffering, defeat and death. The very worst thing humans have done – murdering the author of life itself, killing God's Son – was the moment of Jesus' glory (see John 17.1).

It's more like what we read in Psalm 23 – **¶** God doesn't save us *from* the valley of the shadow of death but he is with us as we walk *through* it – so we do not need to be afraid.

Sometimes it is only when the pain has stripped away all the things we rely on, that we are ready to listen to God, to heed his warnings, to turn back and so find life.

## Can you ignore Satan? (34.1 – 36.21)

Elihu's second speech is written off by one commentator as 'very disappointing'.<sup>1</sup> It's true, he's pretty brutal: **'Is there anyone like Job, who drinks scorn like water? He keeps company with evildoers; he associates with the wicked'** (34.7).



The third speech is pretty similar. It all sounds like what the friends have been saying: Job is suffering, so he *must* have sinned, he *must* be wicked. Do you remember they even started *inventing* sins he *must* have committed (see 22.5-11)!

But that's not what Elihu is doing here. He's warning Job and calling him to repent: **¶ Job isn't suffering because he sinned, but his suffering is causing him to sin *repeat*.**

In these chapters Elihu doesn't imagine what Job 'must have' done, he quotes and summarises what Job has actually been saying – he says Job has gone too far; and we know he has. God is *not* Job's enemy (33.10) – we've seen that already (1.8, 2.3). It is not *God* who has afflicted Job (34.6) it is Satan (2.7) – with God's permission and within limits set by God. Job says it doesn't matter whether we sin or do what's right, if we end up suffering anyway (35.3); he's dangerously close to proving Satan's original accusation that Job only serves God because of the good he receives from God.

Job says he's innocent, and has accused God of all sorts of things, so Elihu has grown **angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God** (32.2). **Job isn't suffering because he sinned, but his suffering is causing him to sin.**


This is all part of Satan's plan. You see, Satan wants to turn us away from God, and he doesn't care how he does it. Sometimes he does it by accusing *us*, by focusing our attention on our flaws, our faults, our failings. 'How can God possibly love *you*,' Satan says, pointing at us cowering in the corner. That's what Job's friends did: it must be *your* fault, they say, you *must* be wicked!

But sometimes Satan turns us away from God, not by accusing *us*, but by accusing *God*. We can see Satan behind the scenes, not only in chapters 1 and 2, but throughout the book as he whispers lies to Job, accusing God: God is your enemy, God is unjust, God is weak, God is not in charge, God is cruel. We start to look down on God, to think we know best, to justify ourselves rather than God – exactly what Job was starting to do.

**Job isn't suffering because he sinned, but his suffering is causing him to sin.**

That's why Elihu is strong with Job in his speeches. Some of his words might grate, but Job is in danger of *actually* becoming God's enemy, so like a prophet Elihu calls him back, he calls him to repent. And as we'll read in a couple of weeks' time, that's *exactly* what Job does. Elihu was right: we need to learn to listen to God who is trustworthy, and to ignore Satan who lies.

## Can you see? (36.22 – 37.24)

I like to make things. Mostly what I make is software – I find it a great way of being creative. I also like making LEGO. The Chalmerses very kindly  lent me some kits when I was off work earlier in the year – I probably need to return them! – and here is a model I was given for my birthday this year.

What are some of the things you like to make?

That creativity we have is, I believe, part of what it means to be made in the image of God, which is why making things is often so fulfilling. It expresses something of who we are deep inside.

Elihu ends his speeches by talking about God as Creator – not of LEGO kits but of the mountains, the thunder, the snow, the rain, the driving wind, the lightning, the golden splendour of the sun. He speaks breathlessly of God's awesome power, majesty and might. **'How great is God,'** he says, **'beyond our understanding!'** (36.26). **'Listen! Listen to the roar of his voice, to the rumbling that comes from his mouth'** (37.2). **'Out of the North he comes in golden splendour; God comes in awesome majesty'** (37.22).

'Lift up your eyes,' Elihu tells Job. Don't listen to Satan's lies: see who God *really* is: worthy of worship, trustworthy and good.

Like the prophets, Elihu wants to direct our gaze away from this life with its **light and momentary troubles** (as Paul puts it – 2 Corinthians 4.17), and towards the Almighty God in praise. We shouldn't be surprised Elihu points us to God like this – his name means 'he is God'.<sup>2</sup>

Elihu wants to remind us of who God is, to call us to trust that 'God's got this'. We won't understand God's ways – in fact we *can't* understand God (36.26); but we *can* trust him.

Like the prophets, Elihu is calling Job back to what he once was: a true worshipper who trusts God, not because of the blessings, but because God is worthy of our trust – no matter what happens.

Like the prophets, Elihu is inspired by the Spirit of God (32.8, 32.18, 36.3) – so we shouldn't be surprised that where he ends is exactly where God picks things up. But that's for next time.

Elihu was angry – *very* angry – at the way Job was talking about God. 'Instead of listening to Satan,' Elihu tells Job, 'You should listen to God – and trust him even when you don't understand. For God alone is mighty, and worthy of our worship.' Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Atkinson, *The Message of Job*, 126.

<sup>2</sup> ESV Study Bible, 871.