

“I Can’t Take It Anymore!”

(Job 32:1 - 37:24)

The Big Idea

When you suffer, don’t be self-centred; be God-centred

Introduction -

The nineteenth-century German philosopher Nietzsche once famously said, ““That which does not kill us, makes us stronger.”

That’s a very optimistic philosophy of suffering from someone who is known as the father of Nihilism.

But to think that suffering can only bring out the best in us is a dangerous place to be. The truth is, for many of us, suffering can also bring out the worst.

We often hear the wonderful stories of how people have grown closer to God in times of adversity. Joni Eareckson Tada is a well-known Christian writer and speaker who dived into shallow water in 1967, age just 17, and broke her neck, becoming a quadriplegic. But in those moments when she was begging people to help her commit suicide in her hospital bed, a friend opened a Bible with her, and she saw Jesus Christ in a way she had never seen him before. In a 1993 interview, she said: “Heavenly glories above, patience, peace, perseverance, life values turned right side up, these are just a few of the things God has shown me in the 26 years I’ve been in this wheelchair.”¹

But how often have you heard the story of the suffering who’s suffering drew them away from God? Perhaps the war veteran who saw so much pain and suffering that he concluded that God cannot possibly exist? Or the man who was abused as a young boy by church leaders, who only thinks of God with pain and contempt?

Photographer and writer Jessie Golem wrote an article in the online liberal newspaper The Huffington Post a few years ago called *I Was A Hardcore Christian, But This Is Why I Lost My Faith*. In the article, she details how she “accepted Jesus into her heart” in her teen

¹ <http://joniarecksonstada.com/jonis-story-page-3/>
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years. She even went on a year-long mission trip that took across North America and to Ghana in West Africa.

But in her second year of university, she went to visit a friend in Vancouver, Canada. He sexually assaulted her.

Reflecting on the trauma, she writes:

“I reasoned two things to answer my question about where was God, when I was in Vancouver: God either was present and there, and did nothing about it, or God was not there, and does not exist. It is easier for me to think that God does not exist, than to think that God was present and did nothing. A God who is present and does nothing is not all-powerful, and is not all-loving, and I simply cannot forgive a god who stands by and watches while people get hurt after he promised to protect people. If I had the power to stop something bad happening to someone I loved, I would do everything I could to stop it. Of all of the times in my life that I needed God, God was not there. This is where I stopped believing in God — I would rather think that God simply does not exist, then think that God abandoned me.”²

Timothy Keller wisely writes in his book *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering*, **“Suffering is indeed a test of our connection with God.”**³

Suffering is not a one-way street to Christian self-improvement. Sometimes we can handle our suffering very badly, and it really strains our relationship with God. Of course, this was part of the point of Satan’s assault on Job.

As we’ve said before, Job might be blameless and suffering unjustly, but he’s not perfect. He might not have done anything to *deserve* his present suffering, but how has he fared *in* his suffering? And this is what a new character called Elihu exposes in our passage for today.

Eli-who? (32:2-22)

In v2 of chapter 32, we’re introduced to a new character to break the stalemate between Job and his comforters.

² http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/jessie-golem/leaving-the-church_b_4816252.html

³ n.p. *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering*, by Timothy Keller, © 2013, Hodder & Staughton, Apple iBooks.
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Remember, Job's friends are convinced he's guilty of some heinous sin, and God is punishing him for it. Job is convinced that he is innocent, and is crying out to God for vindication.

So who is this guy called Elihu? Where does he come from? Why does he only turn up now? And how come he gets to have a long monologue at Job and his friends?

Well, chapter 32 tells us a number of things about Elihu.

1. He's an angry man (v2-5)

One of the first things you might notice about Elihu in these first verses is that he's a very angry man! Four times we hear about him "burning with anger".

Why is he angry?

Well, we read in v2 that:

"He burned with anger at Job because he justified himself rather than God."

(Job 32:2 ESV)

So, he's angry that God isn't getting the glory he deserves.

We're also told v3 that

"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."

(Job 32:3 ESV)

So, he's angry at the injustice of Job's friends.

2. He's a young man (v4, 6-10)

We're also told that Elihu is a young man. This is given as the reason why he hasn't spoken up before. He's waited to speak because everyone else is older than him.

But he's made an interesting observation about wisdom - it isn't exclusive to those who've lived a lot! If it were, Job's comforters would have said something wise by now.

Instead, he makes the point in v8 that it's not age which gives wisdom, it's the Spirit of God:

"But it is the spirit in man, the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand. It is not the old who are wise, nor the aged who understand what is right."

(Job 32:8–9 ESV)

3. He's got lineage (v2, 6)

Elihu's lineage is mentioned twice. We're told that he is

"Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram"

(Job 32:2 ESV)

You might have noticed that he's the only person in the book to be given a lineage. Maybe this is just because he wouldn't have been well-known to the original readers, we don't know.

But it seems like the author emphasises his pedigree by mentioning it again in v6. Perhaps he is meant to seem particularly important?

Can we deduce anything from his lineage? Well, not entirely, but there are a few hints.

His name actually means "He is God himself", or "He is my God". The names themselves are also clearly Hebrew names, in contrast to the names of Job and his friends.

Finally, there may be some connection between the lineage of Elihu mentioned here, and the lineage of Abraham mentioned in Genesis 22. It is possible that being a "Buzite, of the family of Ram" meant descending from Abraham's own nephew, Buz, born to his brother Nahor. But this is not conclusive.

4. He's a prophet

I agree with the cautious assertions of a few other Bible scholars that, when we get to Elihu, we're actually dealing with a prophet of the true God.

He claims to speak not with the authority of age, but with the authority of God.

He says in 32:8

“But it is the spirit in man, the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand. It is not the old who are wise, nor the aged who understand what is right. Therefore I say, ‘Listen to me; let me also declare my opinion.’”

(Job 32:8–10 ESV)

And he clarifies this idea still further in 36:1-4:

“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.”

(Job 36:1–4 ESV)

There are also a few things to notice beyond Elihu’s actual words that lend weight to this idea. He gets the most uninterrupted airtime in the whole book - four speeches’ worth. And, as we notice, no-one interrupts him or refutes him.

When we get to the very end of the book, God has something to say about the wrong words of Job’s friends, and the “words without knowledge” of Job, but he doesn’t have anything to say about Elihu’s words. Are we to presume then that he has God’s total approval?

Finally, when God eventually speaks in ch40, it seems like he picks up seamlessly where Elihu leaves off in ch39. It’s almost as Elihu mimics other prophets like Isaiah or John the Baptist, preparing the way for the Lord.

So now that we have a picture of who Elihu is, let’s consider what he says.

Four Speeches: Human Wisdom vs. ... (ch32 - 37)

Elihu makes four speeches in the book of Job, between chapter 32 and chapter 37.

1. ...God's Word (32:6 - 33:33)

Elihu's first speech comes in two parts: the first addressed to the wise comforters, and the second addressed to Job. This speech is really an introduction to everything that follows.

To Job's friends, he calls them out for having failed to answer Job with wisdom.

He says to them in 32:12:

"I gave you my attention, and, behold, there was none among you who refuted Job or who answered his words. Beware lest you say, 'We have found wisdom; God may vanquish him, not a man.'"

(Job 32:12–13 ESV)

But he also calls Job out for his own faults. This is clear in 33:9:

"You say, 'I am pure, without transgression; I am clean, and there is no iniquity in me. Behold, he finds occasions against me, he counts me as his enemy, he puts my feet in the stocks and watches all my paths.'

"Behold, in this you are not right. I will answer you, for God is greater than man."

(Job 33:9–12 ESV)

We can easily miss what Elihu is saying here. He is not just parroting what the so-called 'comforters' have said to Job, that he is unclean and is therefore deserving of his punishment; and if he'd just admit it he would be delivered.

Elihu's problem is not with Job's statement of innocence, it's with Job's logic of suffering. He will go on to demonstrate to Job what the problem is: not that Job is suffering as a response to his sin, but that he is sinning as a response to his suffering. And this is dangerous.

The way he will answer this in the next three speeches is by fleshing out what he says here, simply that, "God is greater than man." (33:12)

Almost as a test case, he responds to Job's complaint that God won't answer him.

"Why do you contend against him, saying, 'He will answer none of man's words'? For God speaks in one way, and in two, though man does not perceive it."

(Job 33:13–14 ESV)

The problem is, Job is narrow-minded about the response he expects from God.

It's a bit like opening your Bible, and searching it for what God is saying to *you*. And after a while, you close it, saying, "I haven't found anything that God is saying to me. He's not speaking to me." Meanwhile, of course, you've got a whole bookful of the words of God - it may not be what you want to hear, because it's more likely to be what God wants you to hear.

Elihu goes on in chapter 33 to explain how God may be speaking to Job *in* his suffering, rather than apart from it. Perhaps God is warning him against some future sin, keeping him humble and protecting him. Perhaps God is speaking to him through his own conscience, which has been shaped itself by the Word of God.

Elihu here already shows how different he is from the comforters, and even from Job himself. He is one who listens, not just to the other speakers, but also to God himself. And he concludes that God has purpose in everything that he does, and that purpose is to save.

"Behold, God does all these things, twice, three times, with a man, to bring back his soul from the pit, that he may be lighted with the light of life."

(Job 33:29–30 ESV)

2. ...God's Justice and Goodness (34:1-37)

In the second speech, Elihu is going to give a corrective about God's justice and goodness.

He recalls what Job has said:

“For Job has said, ‘I am in the right, and God has taken away my right; in spite of my right I am counted a liar; my wound is incurable, though I am without transgression.’”

(Job 34:5–6 ESV)

And v9:

“For he has said, ‘It profits a man nothing that he should take delight in God.’”

(Job 34:9 ESV)

Job, as he has suffered, has questioned how absolute God’s justice is, and how real his goodness is.

Elihu’s response to these sentiments from Job is quite simply that God cannot do wrong, because he is God!

““Therefore, hear me, you men of understanding: far be it from God that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty that he should do wrong. For according to the work of a man he will repay him, and according to his ways he will make it befall him. Of a truth, God will not do wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice. Who gave him charge over the earth, and who laid on him the whole world?”

(Job 34:10–13 ESV)

He goes on in the chapter to address Job quite directly and quite bluntly about the danger of denying this. And he tells Job he must repent, not for things he has done prior to his suffering, but for *“words without insight”* that he has spoken in contempt of God during his suffering, how he has *“answered like wicked men”*.

3. ...God’s Changelessness (35:1-16)

The third speech is quite short, only 16 verses, and it’s directed squarely and sharply at Job himself.

He addresses another mistake of Job’s:

““Do you think this to be just? Do you say, ‘It is my right before God,’ that you ask, ‘What advantage have I? How am I better off than if I had sinned?’”

(Job 35:2–3 ESV)

Job’s asking, “What’s the point of living by God’s standards? It hasn’t changed the way God has dealt with me!”

Elihu’s reply is brief, in two parts.

First, he says to Job that it’s the wrong question to be asking! Our sin cannot do damage to God anymore than our righteousness can earn favour with God.

Human righteousness or wickedness doesn’t actually change anything. God is above and beyond the affairs of the world. He is asserting the *changelessness* of God.

Bible scholar A.W. Pink said it well when he said:

“God cannot change for the better, for he is perfect; and being perfect, he cannot change for the worse.”⁴

Second, Elihu turns back on Job’s constant complaint that God won’t answer him in his suffering.

Because of God’s transcendence, he will not answer the cry that does not arise from faith. It’s about being God-centred, rather than self-centred.

““Because of the multitude of oppressions people cry out; they call for help because of the arm of the mighty. But none says, ‘Where is God my Maker ...

Surely God does not hear an empty cry, nor does the Almighty regard it. How much less when you say that you do not see him, that the case is before him, and you are waiting for him!”

(Job 35:9–14 ESV)

⁴ John Blanchard, ed., *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians* (Accordance electronic ed. New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), n.p.

“Job, stop thinking like an unbeliever. Your *“empty talk”* is like that of an unbeliever. Do you think God will really answer such faithlessness?”

This may seem a little confusing, especially as Elihu is so bare in his explanation.

Think about this quote from Bible scholar J.I Packer:

“It is precisely the [changelessness] of his character that guarantees his adherence to the words he has spoken and the plans he has made, and it is this [changelessness] which explains why, when people change their attitude to him, he changes his attitude towards them. The idea that the changelessness of God involves unresponsive indifference to what goes on in this world is the precise opposite of truth.”⁵

4. ...God’s Majesty (36:1 - 37:24)

Finally, Elihu comes back to what he said earlier in 33:12, where he made the point that *“God is greater than man.”*

He gives Job a tour of the universe under God’s majesty, showing him the just justice he meets out on the wicked, the blessing he gives the righteous, his grace in inviting the wicked to repent, his compassion on the afflicted, and his control over the weather.

His point?

“Out of the north comes golden splendour; God is clothed with awesome majesty. The Almighty — we cannot find him; he is great in power; justice and abundant righteousness he will not violate. Therefore men fear him; he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit.”

(Job 37:22–24 ESV)

With this in mind, Elihu invites Job to make some changes.

“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?”

⁵ n.p. *Concise Theology*, by J.I Packer © 1993, Foundation for Reformation. Apple iBooks.
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(Job 36:21–22 ESV)

“Don’t let your own wisdom make you self-centred in your suffering. Would you rather teach yourself, or rather learn eternally valuable lessons the majestic and glorious God of the universe?”

“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.”

(Job 36:24–26 ESV)

“Hear this, O Job; stop and consider the wondrous works of God.”

(Job 37:14 ESV)

All he’s really saying to Job is, “Stop looking at your navel, and look instead at how amazing God is.”

As we said, Job might be blameless and innocent to not deserve suffering as a punishment for sin, but he has said some pretty thoughtless and dangerous things as he has suffered. And Elihu wants to warn him of the danger, and call him out of self-centred self-pity.

We’ll see in a couple of chapters that when Job finally does this, he will experience true vindication, and true redemption.

Evaluating Elihu

It’s been common in studies of the book of Job to downplay the role of Elihu. Some think he’s a late addition to the book that doesn’t fit with the rest of the narrative.

Some think he’s in there as some kind of dark comic relief, with all his bombastic declarations.

I think it’s fairly clear to see that his contributions to the discussion have actually been the wisest so far, and have begun to provide answers where the comforters have only provided “empty nothings”, “proverbs of ashes” and “defences of clay”.

He's also the only one who addresses the things he knows Job has done wrong, rather than what he thinks Job might have done wrong. And he's not doing it out of arrogant confidence in his own wisdom, he's doing it because he actually desires to justify Job, as he says in 33:33, and to ascribe righteousness to his Maker, as he says in 36:3.

The lesson we ought to take away from Elihu's speeches is simply this:

When you suffer, don't be self-centred; be God-centred.

The temptation when we suffer is always to look inward instead of upward. To look at God through the lens of how we experience our suffering, instead of looking at our suffering through the lens of who God is.

Job helps us to look forward to Jesus not just in the ways in which he is like Jesus, but also in the ways in which he is so unlike Jesus!

When we look at the ways in which Jesus suffered, we find one who also suffered unjustly, like Job, but one who kept fixed in his mind God's unchangeable character, his unalterable purposes, his sure and certain promises, and his absolutely right pursuit of his own glory.

He knew the road to the cross was the only way to redeem God's people from the curse of sin. And though it terrified him, and cost him dearly, the Bible says, as we read last week in 1 Peter 2:23, that he:

"...continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."

(1 Peter 2:23 ESV)

You can see this in the way Satan tempted him in the wilderness. Forty days without food, and here Satan is offering him easy way out after easy way out, even supposed shortcuts to achieving God's purposes. But each time, Jesus didn't answer with his own wisdom, he answered with God's own words.

And we see this also in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus begged that God might save the world another way.

"...he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.""

(Matthew 26:39 ESV)

As Paul contemplated his own execution in Roman prison, in 2 Timothy, he also demonstrates this God-centredness:

“But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.”

(2 Timothy 1:12 ESV)

Likewise in Philippians 1:20

“it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honoured in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

(Philippians 1:20–21 ESV)

The danger in suffering is that, instead of drawing us closer to God, it draws us deeper within ourselves, and we get more and more concerned for our own comfort, our own security, or own deliverance. We sometimes also tread the dangerous line of denial about our suffering, and try to ignore the voice of God speaking to us through suffering to mould us to be more like Jesus. And we are tempted to sin and rebel against God in our own self-pity.

We need to pray for the Spirit’s help that, when we suffer, we may learn to *“stop and consider the wondrous works of God”*, and *“take care, and do not turn to iniquity.”* Suffering has a great ability to bring out the worst in us, but it can also bring out the best in us, for God’s glory.

There is a healthy questioning of God in our suffering, but it’s more about him and what he’s doing than about us.

We need to allow God to be our teacher in our suffering, for *“who is a teacher like him?”* We need to ask the questions, *“What is God like?”* *“What is his goal for his creation?”* *“What is he teaching me through my suffering?”* *“How does my suffering fit into his great plan to bring all things under Christ?”* *“What promises of God can I trust as I suffer?”*

In his 1940 apologetic book, *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis quotes from George MacDonald, a Scottish Christian minister and writer from the 19th century who was a

mentor to Lewis Carroll, who wrote *Alice in Wonderland*, and was major influence on Lewis himself, J.R.R. Tolkien, W.H. Auden, among others.

MacDonald is quoted as saying, and we'll close on this:

“The Son of God suffered unto death, not that men might not suffer, but that their sufferings might be like His.”⁶

Why don't we pray?

⁶ George MacDonald, in *Unspoken Sermons, First Series*, quoted in C.S. Lewis *The Problem of Pain*, quoted in n.p. *Walking With God Through Pain and Suffering*, by Timothy Keller, © 2013, Hodder & Staughton, Apple iBooks.