

Sunday May 22nd, 2022

Job 35
“Why Be Good?”

A clergyman was walking down the street when he came upon a group of about a dozen boys, all of them between 10 and 12 years of age. The group surrounded a dog. Concerned lest the boys were hurting the dog, the clergyman went over and asked "What are you doing with that dog?" One of the boys replied, "This dog is just an old neighborhood stray. We all want him, but only one of us can take him home. So, we've decided that whichever one of us can tell the biggest lie will get to keep the dog."

Of course, the reverend was taken aback. "You boys shouldn't be having a contest telling lies!" he exclaimed. He then launched into a ten-minute sermon against lying, beginning, "Don't you boys know it's a sin to lie," and ending with, "Why, when I was your age, I never told a lie." There was dead silence for about a minute. Just as the reverend was beginning to think he'd gotten through to them, the smallest boy gave a deep sigh and said, "Oh. All right, he won...give him the dog."

When I was in my undergrad philosophy program at Guelph the one area of philosophy that really grabbed my attention was ethics. Primarily the question of “why be good”? It may surprise you to learn that there are hundreds of books, all the way from ancient Greece, trying to answer that question. For every philosopher writing about the subject of ethics, there is a new twist on a possible answer.

To save you some trouble, you can find summaries on the internet that seek to lay out the different approaches; including religious answers from many religions. To be honest, most if not nearly all of the approaches I have read fall short for me. Most seem self-serving. That is, I should be ethical because it is advantageous to me to be so. That’s the heart of the prosperity gospel. I am good, so God showers me with material goods.

Parents, governments, and even churches use fear to motivate good behavior. Love your enemies or you will fry in Mazola oil for eternity. Be nice to your sister, or Santa Clause won’t come. Job’s story has shown the weakness if not downright failure of many of these approaches. Job was an ethical man, yet still be suffered tremendously. Job anguished, because he firmly believed, as his friends did, that being good gained you good in return.

So, why be good? Why be ethical, when being unethical has some advantage to me, or doesn’t seem to make any difference? This quid pro quo ethical approach is what Elihu takes direct aim at in chapters 35 and 36. He tells Job he has it all wrong. Our ethical activities, or unethical ones, make not one difference to the activities and character of God. Nothing we do on this earth changes anything in God’s realm.

It is not that God does not care that we are moral, on the contrary, he cares a great deal, it’s just that our behavior does not change God’s dispensing of grace. This is a critical matter for the church, because we fret a great deal that others judge God’s love by our behavior. It is illogical for anyone to forgo a relationship with God in Christ because I have messed up. The issue is never, ever, God’s activity in the world.

Sunday May 22nd, 2022

The issue is my faithfulness to God's desire for this world to live in peace and love. People may cry out, "Where is God"? But are they actually praying? Our cries of anguish are out of despair, but our prayers are an act of faith. Elihu then, is saying that the silence of God, is in part, because we do not pray and come to God in faith. The cry of despondent people is not a cry of faith. This is the way Job has been speaking. His words are empty and lacking faith.

Elihu is hitting head on, the natural but sinful inclination for us to think that by our virtue we can put God in debt, and we have a right to have God answer us. Job is thinking too small. As we are prone to. He can only see his immediate circumstance, and thinks that that is all that should matter to God and everyone else. As influential as Job is, he cannot see everything. Only God sees the whole picture, and knows how evil will ultimately be defeated.

Elihu stands on his words because he strongly believes God has given him what to say. The expression "from afar" in scripture, refers to "from heaven or from God". Elihu is determined to "ascribe righteousness to my Maker". (36:3) Elihu claims his words are not perverted, and if Job or anyone wants justice in this life, they must acknowledge who is the source of all justice. Job should bow before the cosmic power of God, trusting that in the end, justice will prevail.

To underscore his point, Elihu begins to unpack how God's justice and power are made evident. God's plans are never thwarted, no matter how it may appear to us. The first premise Elihu states is that Job's three friends have it all wrong. Even the most faithful of people can be "caught in the cords of affliction" (v.8) The righteous do suffer. He even goes on to intimate that this suffering has a grand and vital purpose.

Suffering is like a great bright light shining on our souls. It reveals any pride and self-righteousness lurking within us, even if we and others believe we are righteous. It may shock you that in Hebrews 5:8 Jesus is said to have "learned obedience through what he suffered", although he was sinless. So, Job, pay attention Elihu urges. "Open your ears", to the truth I shall pass along to you.

There are two responses to the loving discipline of God. The positive response is to listen and serve God, humbling ourselves and trusting him in all things. This is the road to blessing. On the other hand, if we so choose to refuse to listen, then we will "perish and die without knowledge." Meaning we will become more resentful and rebellious, and become more and more antagonistic towards God.

Elihu bravely states that God gladly afflicts us to soften our hearts, and draw us closer to him. I've talked at length about the failure of the "Prosperity Gospel" to bring spiritual health. But as Christopher Ash states, maybe we need an adversity gospel that goes much deeper than the prosperity counterpart. Dare we take the same stance as Elihu, and note that our adversity is a demonstration of the extent God will go to keep us humble and in a right relationship with him?

God wants no one to perish and if that means some suffering to accomplish that; well all the better. This is a bold statement, but I strongly suspect Elihu is onto something critical. Something very much in tune with following Christ. To pick up our cross, an instrument of suffering and death, and follow him.

Sunday May 22nd, 2022

It is hard for many people to accept that Christ's call is to death. Death to self, and all that that entails. Now Elihu goes right at Job's circumstance directly. With all these ideas about suffering in mind, what does this say about Job specifically. Elihu says that God has been "alluring or luring" him out of his distress. He says "out of the mouth of distress" which indicates that Job is in the grasp of proud defiance towards God.

God wants to bring Job back to a "broad place", a place of freedom and peace. Job, throughout this experience has been severely restricted, to humble him and prepare him for the "fatness" of life. A condition of plenty, or a place of the best of life. But Job is full now, of the judgements that fall on wicked people, and is in a dangerous place. He needs to be ransomed. He cannot save himself. Longing for death is the cheap, easy way out. Instead, he needs to submit to God.

Elihu states that God's power is used by God to instruct and teach people. "Who is a teacher like him?" Elihu says. God is the only one who can bring us back to a place of peace, and glory. No one has told God how to do this, so like Job, we are called on to praise the works of God in saving us. So much of what we sing in church is an acknowledgement of this truth, but so often we have missed it. Too often we think everything is about us, and not about God.

Yes, Job has suffered and suffered terribly; even beyond imagining. Yet, to respond to God with arrogant protests is wrong and dangerous, and Job needs to repent. We need to repent. And just to drive this point home, Elihu launches into a beautiful description of the mystery and loving activity of God in this world and in our lives. Listen to how he describes God. God is inscrutable, that is beyond our understanding.

To try and understand God is ultimately futile. Take the whole water cycle. In Job's day they had no idea about evaporation and condensation, but the result called rain was undeniable. How about thunderstorms and the lightning behind them. Again, Job wouldn't know the science behind it, but the results of scorched earth etc. was undeniable. God's creation of storms is a two-edged sword.

On the one hand, the rain brings an abundance of food, while the lightning and floods can cause terrible damage. The actions of God, like a storm, brings judgment on some and blessings for others. Just because we do not understand this, does not allow us to accuse God of injustice. Elihu continues this illustration of a storm, but now he uses it to describe God speaking. Thunder is his voice. His breath is the wind. All of it should cause us awe and wonder.

God speaks and things happen. All of creation has arisen from God's voice. Can you think of a snow storm this way? Just think the next time you see snow; you remember that God spoke and made it happen. You and I are here because God said it was to be. We will never fully grasp the reasons why, but can we be humble enough to trust that God's purposes are at work in everything.

The wild things that happen in our lives are God's wild things. With them, he blesses and judges, creates, and destroys. Can we, by faith, accept this and live at peace with this? Now Elihu gets really personal with Job. How about you, Job? Do you understand your limitations of knowledge? Do you understand who really is in charge of everything?

Sunday May 22nd, 2022

If God, created, and controls the most unpredictable thing in the world; namely the weather, don't you think God is in control of your life and your circumstance. Job, you know what it is like to experience weather, like the hot desert winds that make it hard to breathe, but you do not understand how it works. Yes, Job, you are intimately acquainted with misery, but you cannot control it or fully understand its purpose.

It is presumptuous and dangerous for Job to think he can draw up a case against God. "Out of the north (remember the word Zaphon meaning holy place) God comes in golden glory. In Isaiah 14:13 the prophet talks about the king of Babylon who said in his heart, "I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God, I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north".

A more modern way to put it might be, "you think yourself so special, so above all the rest of us, that as we go to Tim's for coffee, you pull out your membership card to the club of the gods. Elihu reminds Job that God dwells in the north (not a geographical location, but rather a heavenly realm), far out of the reach of humankind. We cannot understand God, nor reach him on our own. To think otherwise is the height of hubris.

So, Elihu has said the following to Job and by extension us. First, God does speak. God speaks in prophecy, through our conscience, and in our suffering. He speaks to save us. God's speaking is part of how God works out justice for those who trust him. Elihu has also said, that God must be, just simply because of who God is. God created justice, and to deny justice is to deny God's deity.

Elihu shoots down the prosperity gospel, with its challenge to answer the age-old question of why be pious? Elihu says that this is the wrong question, and God will not listen to us while we are being self-centered. We may not like this truth, but nonetheless it is the truth. Finally, Elihu calls Job to focus on the majestic power of God, and trust God to work out justice in his life and indeed all of creation.

The brutal honesty of Elihu's words to Job, cut deep into our souls. Despite our commitments to piety and faith, we know we still struggle to humble ourselves and fully trust God's plan in our lives. We secretly believe that we know what's better for us and our loved ones. "If only God would do this or that", we say. Yet, as Elihu states forcefully, "who am I to ever question how God is handling things in this world and in my life"?

Powerful people rarely lack confidence but, they often lack *Humility*.

Sam Rayburn served as the Speaker of the House of Representatives in the United States Congress for seventeen years. As the Speaker of the House, Sam Rayburn wielded incredible power and prestige. He was third in the line of succession to the presidency.

One day, he found out that the teenage daughter of a reporter friend had tragically died. Early the next morning, Sam Rayburn knocked on the door of his friend. When the door opened, Rayburn asked if there was anything he could do. His friend stammered and replied, "I don't think there is anything you can do. We are making all the arrangements."

"Well, have you had your coffee this morning?" Rayburn asked.

Sunday May 22nd, 2022

“No. We haven’t had time.” said the grieving man.

“Well,” the Speaker of the House replied, “I can at least make the coffee.”

As he watched this powerful man make him coffee, the father suddenly remembered something.

“Mr. Speaker, I thought you were supposed to be having breakfast at the White House this morning.”

“Well, I was, but I called the President and told him I had a friend who was in trouble, and I couldn’t come.”

Sam Rayburn turned down breakfast with the President of the United States to make coffee for a grieving friend. Great *Humility* can be exercised by people of great power. Jesus said, “To whomever much is given, much will be expected”. The more we have and experience, the more we are called on to praise God and serve others. Dare I say, even when that much that is given is suffering and struggle.