

YOUTH ANSWERS AGE

by Ray C. Stedman

In Chapter 32 we come to a rather sudden and unexpected turn in the development of the book of Job. A new voice is heard, a new name appears without much introduction, but the program notes of this cosmic drama let us in on some further information in the opening verses of the chapter:

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, became angry. He was angry at Job because he justified himself rather than God; he was angry 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 became angry. {Job 32:1-5}

Some of you who remember the days of the radio broadcast called The Lone Ranger, remember the question that was asked so many times on that program, "Who is this masked man?" One is tempted to ask that about this young man, Elihu. Who is this fellow? Where did he come from, and why does he speak at this moment? We learn from this account, of course, that there were others who were listening to this dialogue between Job and his three friends, and among them is Elihu, which means "My God is he." He is also identified as the son of Barachel (that means "God blesses"), the Buzite. In the opening of the book we saw that Job lived in the land of Uz, but there was also another land nearby called Buz (these lands were named for two brothers back in the days following Noah and the flood), and Elihu came from the land of Buz; we know nothing more about him. In Chapter 32 we get, basically, the introduction to his message, and he opens it with a word of courteous explanation for his silence:

**And Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite answered:
"I am young in years,
and you are aged;
therefore I was timid and afraid
to declare my opinion to you.
I said, 'Let days speak,
and many years teach wisdom.'
But it is the spirit in a man,
the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand.
It is not the old that are wise,
nor the aged that understand what is right.
Therefore I say, 'Listen to me;
let me also declare my opinion.'" {Job 32:6-10 RSV}**

Commentators seem to differ very widely as to what to do with Elihu. Some regard him as a rather brash young man with the cocksure arrogance of youth who speaks up to tell the older men what they were doing that was wrong, while others seem to see him as merely repeating in other words the arguments of these friends, without adding much. And still other commentators view this as a kind of meaningless interruption in this dialogue, of which God takes no notice at all.

But I would like to differ somewhat with these and agree with those commentators who see Elihu as a very important part in this book. Let me point out certain things about this young man as we are introduced to him:

First, when you come to the end of the book and you read the rebuke that God gives to the three friends of Job, you will note that Elihu is not included. He is not rebuked for what he says, and he does not have to ask Job to pray for him, as they have to do.

The second thing is that he is given an obvious, prominent part in this drama. His message occupies the next five chapters, and he is allowed to give one of the major discourses of this book.

And third, he always speaks with courtesy and sensitiveness to Job, despite the strong feelings which he admits he has. The other friends were caustic and sarcastic in their approach to Job but this young man is very courteous when he addresses him. He recognizes the depth of Job's suffering, and he always speaks with understanding.

The fourth, and probably most important, thing is that Elihu claims to speak not as the other men did from their experience, but he claims to speak from revelation. That is what we read in Verses 8-9. Elihu says, "It is the spirit in a man, the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand." This is in line with what we have seen previously in Job, that knowledge is something you gain by the years as they go by, but understanding and wisdom is something only God can give. And he can give it to the young as well as the old. It is not the accumulation of the years of experience that makes people wise; it is what God has taught them through the years. And this is a very important point. God can teach a young man or woman as much as an older man or woman. And when we speak from the wisdom of God then we can truly be wise, regardless of what our calendar age may be.

I know we who have been young a long time tend to think it is the years that have made us wise! If we are wise at all, it is not. I am reminded of a schoolteacher who applied for a job and was turned down in preference to another younger teacher who only had three years of experience. The first teacher protested to the principal, "I've had 25 years' experience and why was I passed over in favor of this younger one?" And the principal said, "Well, I have to disagree with you. You haven't had 25 years' experience. You've had one year's experience 25 times." It is quite possible to go through life repeating the same way of thinking over and over again and never learn wisdom. So Elihu is right here. It is not the old that are wise, nor the aged that understand what is right; it is the spirit of the Almighty that teaches us wisdom.

Now I believe that Elihu therefore comes into the book as the answer to Job's cry for an explanation. God has been silent, it seems, and though Job is suffering and cries out for help, no answer is given. But in God's wonderful way of answering, I think this is his reply to Job, and he replies in a way that Job did not expect. This young man who has been listening all along suddenly speaks up, and he appears as a witness to a mediator for whom Job has been crying out all through the book. I see Elihu as a kind of John the Baptist of the Old Testament, if you like, in the book of Job. He gives witness to the Mediator who is God himself, and just as John said, he was a voice crying in the wilderness, pointing to one who would make a ransom between man and God. So Elihu appears as the one who gives a witness to what Job is crying out for, an umpire who can lay his hand upon both man and God. This is the part he plays in the book. He begins where the friends began and he ends with words very similar to the voice of God when God appears on the scene.

So now in this introduction, in Verses 11 and on, he speaks of his patience that is now rather exhausted:

**"Behold, I waited for your words,
I listened for your wise sayings,
while you searched out what to say.
I gave you my attention,
and, behold, there was none that confuted Job,
or that answered his words, among you.
Beware led you say, 'We have found wisdom;
God may vanquish him, not man.'
He has not directed his words against me,
and I will not answer him with your speeches." {Job 32:11-14 RSV}**

Then speaking of the friends, he says,

**"They are discomfited, they answer no more;
they have not a word to say.
And shall I wait, because they do not speak,
because they stand there, and answer no more?" {Job 32:15-16 RSV}**

So, with that courteous word of explanation, he begins to speak. He says he has to say something; he feels the pressure within:

**"I also will give my answer;
I also will declare my opinion.
For I am full of words,
the spirit within me constrains me.
Behold, my heart is like wine that has no vent;
like new wineskins, it is ready to burst." {Job 32:17-19 RSV}**

Have you ever felt that way listening to an argument? You just had to say something because you see it is going astray, or it is illogical, and you can hardly restrain yourself from speaking. Elihu says "I must speak, that I may find relief." Then he reassures Job and the friends, Verse 21:

**"I will not show partiality to any person
or use flattery toward any man.
For I do not know how to flatter,
else would my Maker soon put an end to me." {Job 32:21-22 RSV}**

Chapter 33 is Elihu's address to Job. It opens with an invitation to dialogue:

**"But now, hear my speech, O Job,
and listen to all my words.
Behold, I open my mouth;
the tongue in my mouth speaks.
My words declare the uprightness of my heart,
and what my lips know they speak sincerely." {Job 33:1-3 RSV}**

Here is his promise that he is going to give honest words. He is not going to flatter and he is not going to speak out of experience; he is going to speak from what he has been taught. His words will be honest and without partiality. And further, he goes on to say they will come from a humble heart, Verse 4:

**"The spirit of God has made me,
and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.
Answer me, if you can;
set your words in order before me; take your stand.
Behold, I am toward God as you are;
I too was formed from a piece of clay.
Behold, no fear of me need terrify you;
my pressure will not be heavy upon you." {Job 33:4-7 RSV}**

What a difference that is from the way the friends came on Job! This young man says "No I'm just a man like you. What I may say to help has come from what God has taught me. But I'm just like you are, and I'm not going to accuse you or come on heavy against you. I'm speaking merely as God has taught me as the spirit of God has given me life."

Then, beginning with Verse 8, he begins to analyze Job's view of God. That is the problem all through this book. Job like the friends, had a narrow, limited theology which did not include room for God's way beyond the normal thinking of men. This is what often happens with our theology. We try to narrow God down to our way of thinking and what this book teaches us more than anything else is to see that God is always beyond man.

Now Job's first view of God, according to Elihu, is that he saw God as capricious, i.e., he acted without any good reason he acted just out of his feelings (like people do), according to his mood. Many people see God this way. I think they project their view of themselves into infinity and they say, "God acts the way we do. He can get up in the morning and be grouchy and hard to live with and you have to live with that kind of a God all day." And Job felt that way about him. Elihu points this out. He says, Verse 8:

**"Surely, you have spoken in my hearing,
and I have heard the sound of your words.
You say, 'I am clean, without transgression;
I am pure, and there is no iniquity in me.
Behold, he [God] finds occasions against me,
he counts me as his enemy;
he puts my feet in the stocks,
and watches all my paths.'" {Job 33:8-11 RSV}**

Here he summarizes all that Job has been saying -- that God mistreats him without a reason; that he is doing these things without justification in a capricious way. Now Elihu's answer is in one short word, Verse 12:

"Behold, in this you are not right. I will answer you." {Job 33:12a RSV}

And here is his answer.

"God is greater than man." {Job 33:12b RSV}

That is what we must always remember about God. He is beyond us. His range of understanding is so much greater than ours. Man is too ignorant, too limited, too easily deceived (his history proves it), to ever lay a charge of capriciousness against God. God always acts in accordance with his nature of love. Behind every act of God is a loving heart. And when we do not think so, it is we who are deceived it is we who are misjudging; we do not see what he is after. This is the continual argument of the Bible from beginning to end. In the ninth chapter of Romans Paul says the same thing. He says, "Who are you O man, that replies against God? Why, you're nothing but a creature with a very limited experience with very limited understanding. You don't even know all the facts involved. How then can you raise a challenge against the Creator who sees so much more?" God is greater than man. So with that brief word Elihu puts that to rest.

Then he moves to the second thing Job saw about God and that was his problem with the silence of God, Verse 13:

**"Why do you contend against him,
saying, 'He will answer none of my words'?
For God speaks in one way,
and in two, though man does not perceive it." {Job 33:13-14 RSV}**

Once again, one of the major problems we have is the silence of God -- unanswered prayer, as we see it. We say our prayers are not answered because we prayed ten minutes ago and the answer has not come yet. We think God is responsible to come back with an immediate answer. But Elihu helps us here with this. He says God does speak, but in ways sometimes we do not understand. There are two ways, Elihu suggests.

First, God speaks in dreams, Verse 15:

**"In a dream, in a vision of the night,
when deep sleep falls upon men,
while they slumber on their beds,
then he opens the ears of men,
and terrifies them with warnings,
that he may turn man aside from his deed,
and cut off pride from man;
he keeps back his soul from the Pit,
his life from perishing by the sword." {Job 33:15-16 RSV}**

Notice how clearly he states that God's objective with man is always to stop him from destroying himself. It is man who is bent upon destruction and God's efforts that cause distress and pain and warning are designed to keep us from hurting ourselves and each other -- "to keep back his soul from the Pit, his life from perishing by the sword." One of the ways God does that is to speak in dreams. Now you say, "Surely you're not going to tell us we have to start analyzing all our dreams." And it is true that not all dreams represent God speaking to

us. (Some of them come from eating pizza too late at night, indigestion, or other causes!) But psychologists tell us, as one voice, that dreams are a way by which reality suppressed comes into our consciousness, whether we like it or not.

We all tend to deceive ourselves. Things that we do not like we put away, we shove down into the subconscious, and so they appear in our dreams. Oftentimes they do take the form of warnings in which we see ourselves doing things that we are ashamed of or horrified by, and it is a warning that the tendency, the possibility of doing that, is deep within us all. Watch out what you are thinking. It is beginning to show up in your dreams. And though I am not trying to lay a case for interpreting dreams, the Scriptures are full of instances where God does speak to men in dreams. Daniel and Ezekiel and others of the prophets understood much from God by means of dreams. And I believe that this is indicating that God does speak to us sometimes, not so much in predicting the future, but in showing us what we are trying to hide from ourselves in the present.

Then the second thing Elihu says is that God also speaks through pain, Verse 19:

**"Man is also chastened with pain upon his bed,
and with continual strife in his bones,
so that his life loathes bread,
and his appetite dainty food.
His flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen;
and his bones which were not seen stick out.
His soul draws near the Pit,
and his life to those who bring death." {Job 33:19-22 RSV}**

Here Elihu's argument almost seems to describe all that Job has gone through. The young man is saying, "God is speaking to you. Job. You think he is not saying anything? He is. Your very sufferings are speaking to you. But not so much as the friends were arguing. to punish you for something you did that you're trying to hide, because that isn't true. God is helping you to understand something that you don't understand, and pain is what makes it possible."

I think many of us have had the experience of feeling a threat to our life from some illness, and it tends to do marvelous things to our view of life; our value system changes instantly. We begin to think of certain things as far more important than we had ever thought before. C.S. Lewis says this about pain:

We can rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities, and anyone who has watched gluttons shoveling down the most exquisite foods as if they did not know what they were eating will admit that we can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

Have you ever had God shout at you through pain? A man said to me the other day, "I lived for a long time thinking that business was the most important thing in life, but then I had a heart attack and believe me, God got my attention." Why do we have to wait until after our second heart attack before God gets our attention? God in love brings these things upon us that he might speak to us, that we will hear what he has to say.

Now Elihu goes on to bring out a second thing, Verse 23:

**"If there be for him an angel,
a mediator, one of the thousand,
to declare to man what is right for him;
and he is gracious to him, and says,
'Deliver him from going down into the Pit,
I have found a ransom;
let his flesh become fresh with youth;
let him return to the days of his youthful vigor.'" {Job 33:23-25 RSV}**

Those last words seem to describe the experience that we would call today being born again, a return to the

freshness and vitality of youth. And what brings it about? Well, as Elihu says, it is the presence in our pains of a mediator, one of the thousand, who declares to man what is right and provides a ransom for him. What an amazing fore-view this is of the Gospel of the grace of God! Remember Paul argues this in Romans 5. He says, "We rejoice in our sufferings," {Rom 5:3 RSV}. Why? "Because in our sufferings we're being taught by God that he is working out purposes that we do not understand but are for our good. And through the love of God shed abroad in our hearts we can realize that God's love is training us, steadying us and teaching us through the time of stress," {cf, Rom 5:3-4}. That is why suffering, when it is interpreted by the mediator that God provides, is a blessing to us. But suffering without that mediation produces bitterness, resentment, anger, frustration, revolt and rebellion against God's will. Therefore there must be a mediator, Elihu says.

Now I think this is a reference to the slow and certain light that has been growing in Job's heart all through this time of suffering. He is beginning to understand something about life that he never knew before, and there are references to it we have seen all along. Remember, in Chapter 9 he cried out, "There is no umpire between us that may lay his hand upon us both, man and God." Then, in Chapter 16 he said, "Even now, behold my witness is in heaven, and he who vouches for me is on high." God is going to be the mediator. In Chapter 19 he comes out clearly and cries, "I know that my redeemer lives, and on the earth shall stand. And though the skin worms destroy my body, yet in my flesh shall I see God face to face." And then in Chapter 23 he has learned, as he cries, "He knows the way that I take. When he has tried me, I shall come forth as gold." Now here Elihu reminds him of that ministry of the mediator and tells him that if he allows that mediator's work to guide him through this time, he shall be restored, his flesh will come fresh with youth, and he will return to the days of his youthful vigor. And then he gives him the means of doing it, Verse 26:

**"Then man prays to God, and he accepts him,
he comes into his presence with joy.
He recounts to men his salvation,
and he sings before men, and says,
'I sinned, and perverted what was right,
and it was not requited to me. [God did not punish me for what I did.]
He has redeemed my soul from going down into the Pit,
and my life shall see the light.'" {Job 33:26-28 RSV}**

Now pain did that and so Elihu exhorts Job, Verse 29:

**"Behold, God does all these things,
twice, three times, with a man." {Job 33:29 RSV}**

How patient God is! How long he waits and allows us to meditate on and struggle with these things. And he will sometimes bring us back to them again and again till we understand. So Elihu cries, Verse 31:

**"Give heed, O Job, listen to me;
be silent, and I will speak.
If you have anything to say, answer me;
speak, for I desire to justify you.
If not, listen to me;
be silent, and I will teach you wisdom." {Job 33:31-33 RSV}**

And the silence of Job at this point seems to indicate that at last he is ready to listen. God is able to teach him what the heart and the meaning of all his suffering has been in his life. When Elihu finishes, God himself begins to speak, as we shall see.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your loving care of us. We thank you for the ministry that has mediated on our behalf before you. We thank you for the Lord Jesus who came as the great Mediator, who found a ransom for us in his own life's blood poured out on our behalf; who has found a way to set aside the daily contamination of our sins and helps us to face every day fresh and vital, forgiven, alive, without guilt, without a sense of rejection, having

found an adequate power by which to live, by which to do the things we ought to do. Lord, we thank you for him, for this marvelous ministry, for the peace, the joy, the hope and the love that he has brought into our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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