

# The Wrath of Elihu



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Job 13:28, Job 28:28, Job 32:1–5, Job 34:10–15, Ezek. 28:12–17, Job 1–2:10.*

**Memory Text:** “‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts’ ” (*Isaiah 55:9, NKJV*).

And so it goes, the battle of words between Job and these three men, words that at times are profound, beautiful, deep, and true. How often people will quote from the book of Job, even quotes from Eliphaz, Bildad, or Zophar. And that's because, as we have seen again and again, they did have a lot of good things to say. They just didn't say them in the right place, at the right time, in the right circumstances. What this should teach us is the powerful truth of these texts in Proverbs 25:11–13:

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold  
In settings of silver.

Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold  
Is a wise rebuker to an obedient ear.

Like the cold of snow in time of harvest  
Is a faithful messenger to those who send him,  
For he refreshes the soul of his masters (*NKJV*).

Unfortunately, those weren't the words that Job was hearing from his friends. In fact, the problem was going to get worse because, instead of just three people telling him he's wrong, a new one comes on the scene.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 3.

## Miserable Comforters

Even after Job's powerful expression of faith (*Job 13:15, 16*), the verbal sparring continued. Over the course of many chapters, the men go back and forth, arguing many deep and important questions about God, sin, death, justice, the wicked, wisdom, and the transient nature of humanity.

**What** truths are being expressed in the following texts?

*Job 13:28* \_\_\_\_\_

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*Job 15:14–16* \_\_\_\_\_

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*Job 19:25–27* \_\_\_\_\_

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*Job 28:28* \_\_\_\_\_

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Through all these chapters the arguments continued, neither side conceding its position. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, each in his own way, each with his own agenda, didn't let up in the argument about how people get what they deserve in life; and thus, what came upon Job had to be just punishment for his sins. Job, meanwhile, continued to lament the cruel fate that had befallen him, certain that he did not deserve the suffering. Back and forth they sparred, each "comforter" accusing Job of uttering empty and vain words, and Job doing the same to them.

In the end, none of them, including Job, understood all that was going on. How could they? They were speaking from a very limited perspective, which all humans have. If we can get any lesson from the book of Job (one that should be obvious by now, especially after all the speeches of these men), it is that we as humans need humility when we profess to talk about God and the workings of God. We might know some truth, maybe even a lot of truth, but sometimes—as we can see with these three men—we might not necessarily know the best way to apply the truths that we know.

**Look around at the natural world. Why does this alone show us how limited we are in what we know about even the simplest of things?**

## The Entrance of Elihu

From Job 26 to 31, the tragic hero of this story, Job, gives his final speech to the three men. Though eloquent and passionate, he basically repeats the argument he has been making all along: *I do not deserve what has been happening to me. Period.*

Again, Job represents much of humanity in that many people suffer things that they don't deserve. And the question, in many ways the hardest question of all, is—why? In some cases, the answer to suffering is relatively easy. People clearly bring the trouble on themselves. But so often, and especially in the case of Job, that's not what happened, and so the question of suffering remains.

As chapter 31 comes to a close, Job has been talking about the kind of life he led, a life in which nothing he had done justified what was happening to him now. Then the final verse of the chapter reads: "The words of Job are ended" (*Job 31:40*).

**Read Job 32:1–5. What is happening here, and what is Elihu's charge against Job and the other men?**

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Here is the first time that this man, Elihu, is mentioned in the book of Job. He obviously heard some of the long discussions, though we are not told just when he appeared on the scene. He must have come later, because he was not mentioned as being with the other three when they first came. What we do know, however, is that he wasn't satisfied with the answers he had heard during whatever part of the dialogue he heard. In fact, we're told four times in these five verses that his "wrath" had been kindled over what he had heard. For the next six chapters, then, this man Elihu seeks to give his understanding and explanation of the issues that all these men confronted because of the calamity that struck Job.

**Job 32:2 said that Elihu was angry with Job because he "justified himself rather than God," a distortion of Job's true position. What should this tell us about how we need to be careful in the ways that we interpret the words of others? How can we learn to try to put the best construction rather than the worst on what people say?**

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## Elihu's Defense of God

A lot of commentary has been written over the ages about Elihu and his speech, some seeing it as a major turning point in the direction of the dialogue. Yet it's really not that easy to see where Elihu adds anything so new or so groundbreaking that it changes the dynamic of the dialogue. Instead, he seems largely to be giving the same arguments that the other three had done in their attempt to defend the character of God against the charge of unfairness in regard to the sufferings of Job.

**Read** Job 34:10–15. What truths is Elihu expressing here? How do they parallel what the other men have said before? And though his words were true, why were they inappropriate for the current situation?

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Perhaps what we can see with Elihu, as with these other men, is fear—the fear that God is not what they think Him to be. They want to believe in the goodness and the justice and the power of God; and so, what does Elihu do but utter truths about the goodness, the justice, and the power of God?

“For His eyes are on the ways of man, and He sees all his steps. There is no darkness nor shadow of death where the workers of iniquity may hide themselves” (*Job 34:21, 22, NKJV*).

“Behold, God is mighty, but despises no one; He is mighty in strength of understanding. He does not preserve the life of the wicked, but gives justice to the oppressed. He does not withdraw His eyes from the righteous; but they are on the throne with kings, for He has seated them forever, and they are exalted” (*Job 36:5–7, NKJV*).

“As for the Almighty, we cannot find Him; He is excellent in power, in judgment and abundant justice; He does not oppress. Therefore men fear Him; He shows no partiality to any who are wise of heart” (*Job 37:23, 24, NKJV*).

If all this is true, then the only logical conclusion one must draw is that Job is getting what he deserves. What else could it be? Elihu, then, was trying to protect his own understanding of God in the face of such terrible evil befalling such a good man as Job.

**Have you ever faced a time when something happened that made you fearful for your faith? How did you respond? Looking back, what might you have done differently?**

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## The Irrationality of Evil

All four of these men, believers in God, believers in a God of justice, found themselves in a dilemma: how to explain Job's situation in a rational and logical manner that was consistent with their understanding of the character of God. Unfortunately, they ended up taking a position that turned out basically wrong in their attempt to understand evil, or at least the evil that befell Job.

Ellen G. White offers a powerful comment in this regard. "It is impossible to explain the origin of sin so as to give a reason for its existence. . . . Sin is an intruder, for whose presence no reason can be given. It is mysterious, unaccountable; to excuse it is to defend it. Could excuse for it be found, or cause be shown for its existence, it would cease to be sin."—*The Great Controversy*, pp. 492, 493.

Though she uses the word *sin*, suppose we replaced that word with another word, one that has a similar meaning: *evil*. Then the quote could read: *It is impossible to explain the origin of evil so as to give a reason for its existence. . . . Evil is an intruder, for whose presence no reason can be given. It is mysterious, unaccountable; to excuse it is to defend it. Could excuse for it be found, or cause be shown for its existence, it would cease to be evil.*

So often when tragedy strikes, people will say or think: "I don't understand this." Or "This doesn't make sense." This is precisely what Job's complaint had been about all along.

There is a good reason that Job and his friends can't make sense of it: evil itself doesn't make sense. If we could understand it, if it made sense, if it fit into some logical and rational plan, then it wouldn't be that evil, it wouldn't be that tragic, because it would serve a rational purpose.

**Look** at these verses about the fall of Satan and the origin of evil. How much sense does his fall make (*Ezek. 28:12–17*)?

Here's a perfect being, created by a perfect God, in a perfect environment. He's exalted, full of wisdom, perfect in beauty, covered in precious stones, an "anointed cherub" who was in the "holy mountain of God." And yet, even with all that and having been given so much, this being corrupted himself and allowed evil to take over. What could have been more irrational and illogical than the evil that came to infect the devil?

**What is your own experience with how irrational and inexplicable evil is?**

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## The Challenge of Faith

Certainly the primary characters in the book of Job, as mere mortals seeing “through a glass darkly” (*1 Cor. 13:12*), were working from a very limited perspective, a very limited understanding of the nature of the physical world, much less the spiritual one. Interesting, too, that in all these debates about the evil that befell Job, none of the men, Job included, discussed the role of the devil—the direct and immediate cause of all of Job’s ills. And yet, despite their own confidence about how right they were, especially Elihu (*see Job 36:1–4*), their attempts to explain Job’s suffering rationally all fell short. And, of course, Job knew that their attempts failed.

**Even with our understanding of the story’s cosmic background, how well are we able to rationalize and explain the evil that befell Job? Read Job 1–2:10 again. Even with all this revealed to us, what other questions remain?**

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With the opening chapters of Job before us, we have a view of things that none of these men did. Nevertheless, even now the issues remain hard to understand. As we saw, far from his evil bringing this suffering to him, it was precisely Job’s *goodness* that caused God to point him out to the devil. So, the man’s goodness and desire to be faithful to God led this to happen to him? How do we understand this? And even if Job had known what was going on, wouldn’t he have cried out, “Please, God, use someone else. Give me back my children, my health, my property!” Job didn’t volunteer to be the guinea pig. Who would? So, how fair was all this to Job and to his family? Meanwhile, even though God won His challenge with the devil, we know the devil has not conceded defeat (*Rev. 12:12*); so, what was the purpose? And also, whatever good ultimately came out of what happened to Job, was it worth the death of all these people and all the suffering that Job went through? If these questions remain for us (though more answers are coming), imagine all the questions that Job had!

And yet, here’s one of the most important lessons we can take from the book of Job: that of living by faith and not by sight; that of trusting in God and staying faithful to Him even when, like Job, we cannot rationalize or explain why things happen as they do. We don’t live by faith when everything is fully and rationally explained. We live by faith when, like Job, we trust and obey God, even when we cannot make sense of what is happening around us.

**What are the things you have to trust God for, even though you don’t understand them? How can you continue to build that trust, even when you don’t have answers?**

**Further Thought:** In a discussion concerning the question of faith and reason, author John Hedley Brooke wrote about the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and his attempt to understand the limits of human knowledge, especially when it came to the working of God. For Kant, “the question of justifying the ways of God to man was one of faith, not of knowledge. As his example of an authentic stance in the face of adversity, Kant chose Job, who had been stripped of everything save a clear conscience. Submitting before a divine decree, he had been right to resist the advice of friends who had sought to rationalize his misfortune. The strength of Job’s position consisted in his knowing what he did not know: what God thought He was doing in piling misfortune upon him.”—*Science and Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 207, 208. These men in the book of Job, and now Elihu, thought they could explain what happened to Job in a simple cause-and-effect relationship. The cause was Job’s sin; the effect was his suffering. What could be more clear-cut, theologically sound, and rational than that? However, their reasoning was wrong, a powerful example of the fact that reality and the God who created and sustains that reality do not necessarily follow our understanding of how God and the world He created work.

### Discussion Questions:

- ① As we saw, in all the long speeches about poor Job’s situation and why it happened, the devil was not once mentioned. Why is that so? What does it tell us about how limited these men were in their understanding, despite all the truths that they had? What could their ignorance teach us about our own, despite all the truths that we have?
- ② “When we take into our hands the management of things with which we have to do, and depend upon our own wisdom for success, we are taking a burden which God has not given us, and are trying to bear it without His aid. . . . But when we really believe that God loves us and means to do us good we shall cease to worry about the future. We shall trust God as a child trusts a loving parent. Then our troubles and torments will disappear, for our will is swallowed up in the will of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, pp. 100, 101. How can we learn this kind of trust and faith? That is, what choices are we making now that will make our faith either stronger or weaker?

## Doing God's Business: Part 1

This story is not about me. It's about what God is doing through me and what He can do through anyone who's willing to let Him use them.

I've always loved business. I founded my first company selling computers to schools when I was 21. From the beginning God was my partner, and He has blessed me so much.

Later, I bought a software franchise that grew fast. In five years, it grew from one employee to 50 and earned a lot of money. I gave a lot to missions, but I felt empty. Over time I realized that although I was supporting the church's mission, I wasn't personally involved in mission. My wife and I agreed that we needed to be a part of God's outreach to humanity.

Our business interests continued to grow, but I felt God leading me to sell the biggest company. I left the sale in God's hands, and the company sold quickly for more than I had expected.

I knew that God doesn't need my money, but I began to realize that what God wants from me is my time. Mission isn't something we do on Sabbath. It's something we do full time. I wanted to be personally involved in mission. So I asked God what He wanted me to do for Him.

One day as I was talking with a fellow Christian businessman, a member of Adventist-laymen's Services and Industries (ASI), I told him about my burden to be personally involved in an evangelistic mission project. I didn't care where the project was, I just wanted to be God's hands. I asked him if he had any ideas for such a project. He said that he'd think about it.

Just then his phone rang, and he excused himself to take the call. When he returned, he told me that the call was from a church leader who told him about a project that's in a country that isn't open to evangelism.

As he told me about the project, I realized that God was answering my prayer! The project was in a country I was familiar with. I knew the language and the culture of the people in that country, and as a businessman I could help the church leaders make it happen. I knew that I could travel there, a place that many others wouldn't be able to enter.

*To be continued in next week's Inside Story.*