

Justice Sought

God is just in His treatment of all people.

“It’s not fair!” Most parents at some point have heard their young children voice this protest of alleged injustice. My wife and I raised four children, with twelve years being the difference between the oldest and youngest. Needless to say, our firstborn, a daughter, matured ahead of her younger siblings. She was the first, for example, to get the OK from us to invite some of her female friends for a sleep-over party at our home. This privilege (and responsibility) didn’t set well at the time with her younger sister, who immediately complained to us, “It’s not fair!”

Ironically, on occasion my wife and I needed to attend functions without the children, so our oldest daughter was assigned the responsibility of babysitting her three younger siblings. If the occasion happened to conflict with her wish to go to a movie that evening with her friends, then we were likely to hear our oldest daughter issue the identical complaint: “It’s not fair!”

While pointing to children’s complaints about life’s unfairness might be amusing, many people seem to carry this same tendency into their older years. Whenever their circumstances become difficult or their plans for success fall flat, some adults quickly turn to the complaint that somehow life is not treating them fairly.

Believers are God’s children. Like Job, sometimes we find ourselves in inexplicably oppressive situations. We may be tempted to think not only that life isn’t fair but to go a step further and conclude that God is not being fair to us. In this session’s Bible passage, we will examine the issue that God is always just (righteous) in His treatment of all people.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

JOB 32:1–37:24

Previously, Job had been one of the most prominent citizens in the region. His prosperity was unparalleled in the community. No one could match

his wealth. By the standards of his culture, he enjoyed a perfect family. His wife had given birth to seven sons and three daughters. His peers never questioned his piety until his abrupt downfall. In a single day, however, his entire fortune evaporated and all ten of his children died unexpectedly. Not long thereafter, Job's health failed. Putrid sores covered his body.

In the days that followed, Job could be found sitting in an ash heap. The disasters were too comprehensive to have been coincidental. Surely God had punished Job for some concealed wicked behavior—or so popular opinion deduced. His three closest friends soon arrived to tell him so and urge him to repent. Their sharp attacks and his extraordinary rebuttals attracted people's curiosity. Evidently an audience gathered to watch and listen.

In the audience was a brash young man named Elihu. The social norms of the time dictated that young Elihu remain quiet while the three older men spoke. However, when the three friends failed to persuade Job to repent, anger overwhelmed Elihu. He launched into a lengthy tirade against Job. With loud self-confidence, Elihu shelled out a litany of theological truths, some germane to Job's situation but others extraneous.

Elihu's lengthy speech in chapters 32–37 echoes the three friends' efforts to persuade Job but offers little support or comfort for the sufferer. Job 32:1-5 is a brief prose introduction to Elihu's long, poetic speech. Unlike the previous rounds of dialogue with the friends, Job did not respond to Elihu's speech. It might be reasonably argued that Elihu refused to give Job any time or opportunity to respond.

In the first section of his speech (32:6–33:33), Elihu defended his right to interject himself into the debate. In the second section (34:1-37), Elihu accused Job of being a blasphemous infidel. The third section of the speech (35:1-16) was an extended attempt to invalidate Job's hypothesis that righteous living was not meant to be a guarantee of worldly prosperity. He insisted that Job's continued suffering was the direct result of Job's not having learned his lesson. In the fourth section of his speech (36:1–37:24), Elihu focused on God's greatness and providence.

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

PURPOSEFUL DISCIPLINE (Job 36:8-11)

Elihu explained that God reveals to humans their need to repent. God makes it possible for them to listen especially in times of suffering. Elihu reminded Job that if he were to repent, then God would once again bless him.

VERSE 8

If people are bound with chains and trapped by the cords of affliction,

Job 36:8-12 contains a series of three conditional statements introduced by the word **if** followed by an announcement of the provisional condition (see 36:8,11,12). Elihu drew his conditional examples from the world in which he lived. Warfare was commonplace in that world. Defeated populations often were deported from their homeland and sold into slavery. Thus, kings sometimes dispatched raids into neighboring regions for the sole purpose of acquiring forced laborers for their building projects. Captives would be **bound with chains** (“fettters,” KJV) and marched into a life **of affliction**. Such prisoners had little hope of deliverance.

Verse 8 also reminds readers of the Book of Job that God periodically used invasions by foreign powers as a means of disciplining His rebellious people. He used the Assyrians to destroy Samaria and the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC (see 2 Kings 17:6-7). He used the Babylonians to demolish Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom of Judah and take tens of thousands of God’s people into exile in 586 BC (see 2 Kings 25:8-12). God’s purpose in these disasters was so that His people might repent and be restored.

VERSE 9

God tells them what they have done and how arrogantly they have transgressed.

When such divine discipline became necessary for God’s people, God always revealed to them—before, during, and after the events—**what they had done and how arrogantly they had transgressed** (“sinned,” NIV). The Hebrew term rendered *transgressed* denotes a deliberate violation of God’s revealed will. It is as though a sinner looks up at God, shakes a fist in the air, and cries out, “God, I know what You want, but I am going to do what I want!”

Elihu’s statement had an obvious purpose and a more subtle purpose. The obvious purpose was to emphasize God’s just nature. That is, God is never capricious. He only punishes actual sinful behavior, and He always reveals the reasons behind His disciplinary actions. The more subtle purpose Elihu had was to suggest that by now Job must have heard from God regarding the sinful behavior that had prompted the man’s sudden downfall.

VERSE 10

He opens their ears to correction and tells them to repent from iniquity.

The idiomatic phrase **He opens their ears** was a way of stating that God enables His people to hear and understand His will. The apostle Paul explained the same phenomenon in 1 Corinthians 2:13 in this way: “We also speak these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual things to spiritual people.”

The tragic deaths of Job’s children and the loss of his material wealth corresponded on an individual level to military conquest and deportation on a national scale. Thus, Elihu logically interpreted Job’s bitter circumstances as divine revelation regarding Job’s sinfulness. Job needed to listen to what God was saying through those circumstances, to understand his suffering as the language of divine **correction** (“discipline,” KJV; “instruction,” ESV), and **to repent from iniquity** (“evil,” NIV).

As followers of Christ, we can affirm at least this much in Elihu’s statement: God’s purpose through His discipline is always to bring about our repentance and restoration. The New Testament writer of Hebrews emphasized this truth when he wrote, “Endure suffering as discipline: God is dealing with you as sons. For what son is there that a father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline—which all receive—then you are illegitimate children and not sons” (Heb. 12:7-8).

VERSE 11

If they listen and serve him, they will end their days in prosperity and their years in happiness.

This verse contains the second in a series of three conditional statements. The pronoun **they** refers to the people mentioned in verse 8 who are “bound with chains and trapped by the cords of affliction.” God wants His people who are in such situations because of sinfulness to repent (see v. 10). Elihu then declared that **if** God’s chastised people **listen and serve him** (“obey and serve him,” KJV; NIV), then God will surely restore their fortunes. That is, the repentant people of God **will end their days in prosperity and their years in happiness**. The Hebrew verb rendered *listen* means more than simply hearing a sound. It means “to hear and obey.” The verb rendered *serve* refers to honoring the Lord by following His ways. Serving God is not a life of bondage but rather a life of purpose and joy.

It is important to note here that Elihu seemed to be expressing the same misguided conclusion about suffering that the three friends argued previously—namely, that all suffering is evidence of the suffering person’s sinfulness. Some suffering indeed is the consequence of sin, but not all suffering is the direct result of a person’s individual sin. Sometimes people suffer as a consequence of the sins of others.

Elihu also expressed a second questionable conclusion. The idea that God will guarantee uninterrupted wealth and happiness to His people if they remain faithful to Him is as flawed a theological teaching as the modern “health-and-wealth gospel.” To be sure, God does bless those who repent of their sins and are faithful to Him. However, God’s blessings may or may not take the form of material prosperity or good health. In fact, these may be the least of God’s blessings for His people. Spiritual blessings endure throughout eternity. Jesus warned His followers not to lay up treasures on earth because of the temporary nature of these things (see Matt. 6:19-21).

EXPLORE FURTHER

Memorize Job 36:10. What does it mean to you that God opens a believer’s ears to correction? In what sense does repentance remain an important ongoing activity in the believer’s life?

JUDGMENT COMING (Job 36:12-16)

Elihu reminded Job that those who choose to ignore God face His righteous judgment and death. He concluded by proposing that God uses suffering as a means of inviting repentance.

VERSE 12

But if they do not listen, they will cross the river of death and die without knowledge.

Elihu warned Job that suffering could be God’s discipline (36:8-11). While this was not the case for Job, Elihu’s hypothesis was true. Some suffering—but not all suffering—is divine discipline. It is God’s invitation for the sinner to repent and be reconciled to God.

The verb rendered **listen** is the same word that occurs in the previous verse. Here, however, the verb occurs with the negative **do not** preceding it. People should respond positively to God’s discipline by repenting of their sins and obediently serving Him. Sadly, not everyone does so.

Individuals who stubbornly and consistently refuse to repent put themselves in great danger: **they will cross the river of death and die without knowledge.** The words *will cross the river of death* can also be translated “will perish by the sword” (see KJV; ESV; and NIV). The Christian Standard Bible translation puts an emphasis on death as a point of no return. That is, death cements the choices people have made leading up to it.

Furthermore, the phrase *die without knowledge* indicates that beyond death lay no more opportunities for repentance. This is why the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:2b warned, “Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation.” We may not have another tomorrow to trust in Jesus Christ.

VERSE 13

Those who have a godless heart harbor anger; even when God binds them, they do not cry for help.

Job 36:13-14 further develops the idea of the death of the wicked. Elihu lost sight of the moral ingredient in God’s authority. Instead, he painted an impressive portrait of an unmerciful judge. In Elihu’s thinking, God achieves His way through sheer power. Thus Elihu believed that Job ought to recognize this truth and show the sovereign God appropriate praise.

In ancient Israel, the heart was viewed as the seat of human volition. When a person makes a life-changing decision, the individual’s heart rate increases. The person feels a sensation in the chest. Thus, the phrase **those who have a godless heart** (“hypocrites in heart,” KJV) depicts people who make life decisions with no thought of what God wants or expects. Because God’s will is ignored by such people, their decisions are often driven by wild passions such as pent-up **anger**—a prime recipe for foolish choices.

Elihu went on to say that such people too often fail to interpret the consequences of their foolish choices as divine warnings. The phrase **when God binds them** refers to suffering that comes as a consequence of godless living. Whereas the suffering ought to motivate a repentant **cry for help**, in the *godless heart* it usually produces only more bitterness and anger.

VERSE 14

They die in their youth; their life ends among male cult prostitutes.

Elihu then argued that those individuals who live godless lives eventually experience righteous retribution—sometimes before they expect because **they die in their youth**. Tragic examples of such premature death occurred all too often—in Job’s day and today—among those involved in sexually promiscuous lifestyles. **Male cult prostitutes** in the ancient world usually were young men and boys who were made available to “worshippers” in pagan fertility cults. The underlying (corrupt) doctrine promoted by these pagan temples was that human sexual activity performed as ritual stimulated the gods to give fertility to the earth. The dangerous lifestyles of *male cult prostitutes* may have contributed to the premature deaths of many young men. For Elihu, they were an example of the tragic consequences of godless living.

VERSE 15

God rescues the afflicted by their affliction; he instructs them by their torment.

Elihu summed up his argument regarding suffering in this verse. He contended that **God rescues the afflicted** (“the poor,” KJV; “those who suffer,” NIV) **by their affliction**. In other words, the Lord uses suffering to turn His people back to Him and teach them (**he instructs them**) to trust in Him for help.

We need to remember, however, that the Lord’s working through our suffering for His good purposes is not the same as saying He causes all suffering for some selfish reason. Paul pointed out in his letter to the believers in Rome that “we know that all things work together for the good of those who love God” (Rom. 8:28). He didn’t mean everything that happens to us is innately good. Rather, God is able to work through everything that happens to us—good and bad—to bring us to a mature and fruitful life of faith.

VERSE 16

Indeed, he lured you from the jaws of distress to a spacious and unconfined place. Your table was spread with choice food.

Elihu assured Job that God **lured** (“is wooing,” NIV) him **from the jaws of distress**. That is, through Job’s horrific suffering, God was seeking to lead his righteous servant **to a spacious and unconfined place**. The phrase *jaws of distress* depicts the searing pain caused by the bone-crushing snap of an iron trap or the suffocating bite of a wild predator. Yet, Elihu insisted that God was using Job’s pain to bring the man into a better situation—providing, of course, that Job repented.

In the second half of verse 16, Elihu used a different figure of speech, that of dining at a lavish **table**. The phrase **choice food** literally means “fatness.” Today, health-conscious people generally choose lean meat over fatty meat (if they eat meat at all). In biblical times, however, the best meat was considered to be the cuts marbled with fat. Elihu’s point was that a repentant Job could expect God to restore him to the best life had to offer.

JUSTICE SEEN (Job 36:17-23)

Elihu called for Job to learn from the suffering he was enduring and the discipline being administered by God. Elihu pointed to God’s greatness as a source of hope and wisdom. These verses record Elihu’s interpretation of the events in Job’s life. He was convinced that Job was suffering because of sin. He was wrong. Job suffered because of his righteousness, not his sinfulness.

VERSE 17

Yet now you are obsessed with the judgment due the wicked; judgment and justice have seized you.

The words **yet now** set up a contrast between Elihu's abstract theological reasoning about suffering and Job's explanation of his personal experience with suffering. From Elihu's viewpoint, Job was **obsessed with** ("full of," ESV; "laden with," NIV) **the judgment due the wicked**. That is, Job was no different in his theological reasoning than Elihu or the three friends. Job was fully in agreement with them that God judges sinners for their sins. What Job refused—at least in Elihu's thinking—to see or deal with, however, was the divine **judgment and justice** that had **seized** ("taken hold of," NIV) him! In other words, Elihu accused Job of being quick to see others' sins but refusing to admit his own sins even in the face of overwhelming suffering. For Elihu, Job's suffering could be interpreted in no other way except as evidence of wickedness. He was frustrated that Job would not admit this as well.

VERSE 18

Be careful that no one lures you with riches; do not let a large ransom lead you astray.

The initial word in the Hebrew text of this verse is unusual. It can be translated **be careful** as in the Christian Standard Bible and New International Version. However, the Hebrew term can also be connected to the idea of "wrath," as in the King James Version. In either rendering, the warning that Elihu delivered to Job was one of giving sober, reasoned thought to his response thus far to the suffering he was experiencing.

In Elihu's judgment, Job was on the verge of making a catastrophic response to his situation—of being drawn away from trusting God. The temptation dangling in front of Job was similar to being lured **with riches**. The Hebrew word translated **lures** in verse 18 is the same verb that appears also in verse 16. The difference, however, is in the context. In verse 16, the verb describes God's persuasion of the sufferer to learn and repent. In verse 18, the tempter is unidentified, but the implication is that the person is being lured into danger, distress, and ultimate destruction.

VERSE 19

Can your wealth or all your physical exertion keep you from distress?

Neither Job's lost prosperity nor previous abilities could prevent him from experiencing trouble in life. Only God could sustain him in his suffering.

In light of Job's current misery and repetitive protestations, Elihu implied that Job no longer grasped this reality. In Elihu's opinion, if Job would acknowledge that his security had shifted from faith in God to a trust in wealth and human power, then God could begin Job's restoration. Otherwise, God's judgment against Job would grow stronger, and Job's suffering would only increase. The essence of Elihu's remark was that Job could not save himself; only God could deliver him. Ironically, Elihu was theologically correct in his warning, even if he misinterpreted everything Job was experiencing.

VERSE 20

Do not long for the night when nations will disappear from their places.

The first line of this verse likely recalls Job's comments in his opening speech (Job 3:3-10). After a week of silent suffering, Job had expressed the wish that he had never been born. In that wish, he repeatedly employed the analogy of darkness to describe his situation.

The second line of verse 20 literally says "to go up peoples under them." While this rendering may seem unintelligible, a sense of its meaning is that history has seen occasions **when** entire **nations** collapsed and virtually disappeared overnight. For example, Daniel 5 describes the night in which the Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians. Daniel 5:30-31 states, "That very night Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans (Babylonians) was killed, and Darius the Mede (Persians) received the kingdom at the age of sixty-two."

Elihu thus warned Job not to **long for the night**. Death for the unrepentant sinner would bring something even worse than physical suffering.

VERSE 21

Be careful that you do not turn to iniquity, for that is why you have been tested by affliction.

Elihu's admonition not to long for darkness may have evoked a host of wicked intentions in Job's yearning. Elihu lumped all of this potential sinful activity together in the term **iniquity**. The Hebrew word is from a root that means "to twist." It portrays sin as distorting God's instruction to justify unacceptable behavior. The word also was used to emphasize the guilt of the individual committing the sin. In this verse, the phrase **be careful** means "to exercise great attention over." The verb can be applied to tending a garden, guarding a flock of sheep, or caring for a house. It also can refer to guarding a person against harm.

Elihu urged Job to guard himself against becoming guilty of sinful conduct. Whereas this is a legitimate danger whenever people seem to suffer

without cause, Elihu continued incorrectly to blame Job's current suffering on some undisclosed sin. The essence of his counsel amounted to saying, "Job, don't make matters worse by adding more sins to the ones for which God already is punishing you."

VERSE 22

Look, God shows himself exalted by his power. Who is a teacher like him?

Elihu once more stated theological truths about God. God's **power** cannot be equaled. The Hebrew word translated *power* refers to the capacity to act. When applied to God, this term emphasizes God's omnipotence. God's unmatched power elevates Him to the pinnacle of honor. Consequently, it also means that God is **a teacher** like no other. God can (and does) use creation, history, and personal circumstances to instruct His people concerning His truth.

VERSE 23

Who has appointed his way for him, and who has declared, "You have done wrong"?

Elihu urged Job not to accuse God of injustice. The answer to the rhetorical question "**Who has appointed His way for him?**" is "No one!" God is without peer. No one else can dictate what course of action God must follow. He is sovereign. He appoints His way for Himself.

Elihu's second question struck directly at Job. Job had repeatedly complained that God was mistreating him (see Job 10:5-8; 13:26-27; 19:11; 30:19-21). Perhaps by Elihu raising the question, Job's realization of his audacity in accusing God of wrongdoing might shock Job into repentance.

Throughout human history, God has demonstrated His unrivaled power and wisdom. Human intellect and material wealth cannot overcome suffering to the degree God does. God's ultimate deliverance is found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Believers can trust God to be just in His dealings with humanity.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled "Hebrew Language" on pages 723–725 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What are four benefits of studying Hebrew inscriptions from the pre-exilic age for the understanding of the Bible?