
God Is Never Unjust

October 28, 2018 - Job 34 - Read Online at epmkg.com/job34

Job 34

34:1–37 If one can imagine Job listening to this renewed harangue, especially after he has uttered his ultimate cry for an “answer” from God (not a human debating partner; see 31:35 and compare 13:1–12), then Elihu’s demand to be heard in 33:31–33 sounds insufferably arrogant and empty. This impression is heightened in 34:1–3, where Elihu lightly diverts his attention from Job the silent sufferer to the other bystanders, for whom Job’s response to his fate poses a hypothetical but potentially serious religious problem. Job once satirized such superficial ideological word games by saying, “Does not the ear test words as the palate tastes food?” (12:11). In 34:3, however, Elihu appears to repeat the old saying quite seriously, as if it were up to the “wise” (v. 2) to sort these questions out intellectually and “determine among ourselves what is good” (v. 4).

The starting point for theological discussion is Job’s outrageous claim that he is in the right and God is in the wrong in this case (vv. 5–6). Like all the friends, Elihu knows from the start that this places Job in the company of scoffers, evildoers, the wicked (vv. 7–8). The most outrageous of all Job’s claims is that taking delight in God does not pay dividends (v. 9)! Apparently, Elihu cannot conceive of a “delight in God” that is not based on the confidence that such devotion is rewarded. To think otherwise strikes Elihu as blasphemous. Yet *hassatan*, in the heavenly council chamber, raised the question “Does Job fear God for nothing?” on the opposite assumption: If Job’s “delight in God” is driven by the “profits” that derive from it, then his legendary righteousness is only a self-serving charade. Unwittingly, Elihu has probed near the heart of the mystery of Job’s suffering.

In verses 10–30, Elihu restates themes that the friends have consistently stressed: that God is righteous and just and that God requites evil with sovereign wisdom and power, never showing partiality toward people of rank or privilege. Verse 33 suggests that verses 31–32 refer directly to Job: Has Job repented of his iniquity? If not, the implication of verse 33 is that unless Job makes some such confession, his cause is lost. From Elihu’s viewpoint, all truly wise people must concur that Job’s words are ignorant as well as wicked. He is arrogantly flying in the face of God (vv. 34–37).¹

¹ Wharton, J. A. (1999). *Job*. (P. D. Miller & D. L. Bartlett, Eds.) (pp. 145–148). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

'Far be it from God that he should do wickedness' (34:1-15)

34:2, 7-8

Hear my words, you wise men,
 and give ear to me, you who know ...

What man is like Job,
 who drinks up scoffing like water,
 who travels in company with evildoers
 and walks with wicked men?

34:10, 12

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 ...

Of a truth, God will not do wickedly,
 and the Almighty will not pervert justice.

This part of Elihu's second speech is divisible into two parts, as is obvious from the repetition of verse 2 in verse 10. In the first (34:1-9), he presents his evidence against Job and in the second his charge (34:10-15). This is his standard method of proceeding and he is certain that his case will carry weight with everyone who can differentiate between tastes (34:3-4; cf. 12:11). To such, Job's words will not have passed unnoticed.

Job has spoken in such an outrageous way that Elihu can point out—just as Job did with regard to his wife (see 2:9-10)—that he is indistinguishable from the wicked. This does not mean that Job *is* wicked, only that his speech makes it appear that he is. Elihu here borrows a metaphor from Eliphaz, namely, that of a thirsty man gulping down '**water**' (see 15:16), but he makes a significant alteration as he does so. Eliphaz had said that it was 'injustice' that Job swallowed like water; Elihu uses the word '**scoffing**' in order to specify the kind of injustice that Job was guilty of (34:7). It was 'scoffing', or derision. Job was asserting that he was in the right and God was treating him as if he were in the wrong. God was punishing

him as if he were not innocent (34:5–6). Such talk is the language of the wicked (34:8), as is denying that there is any benefit to be gained in serving God (34:9).

That is the evidence that Elihu presents against Job and he responds to it by way of an all-out rejection of the faintest notion that God could be unjust, calling, as he does so, on the Friends to agree with him. Bildad had said, ‘Does God pervert justice? Or does the Almighty pervert the right?’ (see 8:3), and here Elihu seems to be saying exactly the same thing. But there are two vital differences to be borne in mind. First, there is the matter that has already been referred to about how sin and suffering are to be correlated. Secondly, there is also the fact that in what he says Bildad is thinking only of judgement in terms of verdict, and that is made clear by the fact that he goes on to speak about sin and punishment. Elihu is not denying that verdict is a part of God’s justice, but he also wants to emphasize that *edict* is part of it too. After asserting that God will judge (34:11–12), he speaks of God’s government of the earth and of mankind (34:13, 17)—all under the heading of God’s not doing wickedly or perverting justice. As man’s ‘**breath**’ and ‘**spirit**’ come from God, he could terminate life instead of sustaining it, and in an instant all would perish (34:14–15). He is the Creator and Ruler, and all are dependent on him.

‘For his eyes are on the ways of men’ (34:16–33)

34:17–19, 21

Shall one who hates justice govern?

Will you condemn him who is righteous and mighty,
who says to a king, ‘Worthless one’
and to nobles, ‘Wicked man’,
who shows no partiality to princes,
nor regards the rich more than the poor,
for they are all the work of his hands?...

For his eyes are on the ways of a man,

and he sees all his steps.

At this point Elihu begins to reason with Job. He uses a singular verb in order to address him directly. Borrowing an analogy from the realm of human affairs, he says that if people do not tolerate injustice in a human judge (34:17), how dare they [in other words, Job] censure the one who is righteous and mighty—namely God? In the ancient world kings or their equivalent combined power and authority. There was no separation between the

judicial and executive branches of government, and tyrants could reign. But God is no stronger than he is just. It is therefore preposterous to think of God (with all that that word connotes) being anything less than absolutely impartial in his rule. Kings and nobles, rich and poor are all treated alike (if they are wicked) because they are all his subjects. God removes them in a moment and without any notice or help because they are all his creatures (34:19–20).

Elihu has something else to say about God’s just administration of affairs and people in his world. It is that God rules on this most solid basis because he is omniscient (34:21). No physical darkness can conceal man’s ways from him and he does not need to conduct a painstaking investigation in order to ensure that a proper moral basis exists for a judgement to be made (34:22–23). The God who exalts also abases (Ps. 75:7). God sees immediately and he acts invincibly, whether by night or day, whether secretly or publicly (34:25–27). He does this in answer to the cry of the downtrodden and the afflicted (34:28) in order to prevent a tyrant from continuing to reign by means of craft to the detriment of the people (34:30).

34:29

When he is quiet, who can condemn?

When he hides his face, who can behold him,
 whether it be a nation or a man?

Verse 29 is marked as a parenthetical statement in the ESV and that is helpful. It indicates that during a period marked by God’s ‘silence and inactivity’—that is, between a cry for help and an intervention by way of answer—it is not permissible for either a nation or an individual (34:28) to censure God, as Job has done. Job’s afflicted condition is therefore a case in point.

34:31–32

For has anyone said to God,

‘I have borne punishment; I will not offend any more;
 teach me what I do not see;
 if I have done iniquity, I will do it no more’?

What God does and when he does it is his prerogative to decide and so, having censured Job for his impudence, Elihu now points the way forward for him. He tells Job what he ought to say to God, namely that he should admit his guilt, resolve not to be wayward in future and

ask God to show him what he is ignorant of, even the sin he has committed.¹⁰ Elihu calls for the penitent submission to God that he had mentioned earlier (see 33:27).

'Job speaks without knowledge' (34:34–37)

34:35–36

Job speaks without knowledge;

his words are without insight.

Would that Job were tried to the end,

because he answers like wicked men.

Elihu concludes this speech with the same sort of appeal as he began it, perhaps including a wider group of observers, or even city elders, and not just the Friends. He is confident that everyone who has the faintest glimmer of understanding will agree that Job (he now names him twice) has shown colossal ignorance and used the most intemperate language against God. Elihu longs that Job should be thoroughly examined because he has spoken so impiously of God. But if Elihu can only say this, who is going to do it?²

C. Elihu's Response to Job's Charges (34:10–30)

Elihu first expresses his rejection of such sentiments as those of Job. They are contrary to right thoughts of God. Elihu rebuts the charge that God is unjust on the grounds of impiety. God cannot be thought of as acting in the way Job asserted (34:10–12).

Elihu argues that no motive for injustice in God, the creator of all, can be discovered. God of his own will made the world. He filled the creatures therein with his spirit of life. If God thought only of himself and withdrew his life-giving spirit, all flesh, including man, would perish immediately (34:13–15).

Elihu further argues that the foundation of government is justice. Injustice in the highest ruler is inconceivable. Partiality or injustice is not to be thought of in God, for all people, rich and poor, are alike the work of his hands. Suddenly and without anticipation ("at midnight") the people "are shaken and pass away." "Without hand," i.e., without human agency, the mighty ones of the earth are taken away (34:16–20).

God's strict justice may be seen in his government of the peoples and their princes alike. God's justice is unerring, for it is guided by omniscient insight. "His eyes are upon the ways of a person." No dark place can hide the sinner from the all-seeing eye of God. The supreme

² Jones, H. R. (2007). *A Study Commentary on Job* (pp. 245–249). Darlington, England; Webster, New York: Evangelical Press.

judge needs no corroborating evidence or testimony in order to bring judgment on the wicked. God’s observation of the sin is a sufficient basis of judgment. Mighty men are broken in pieces in ways which cannot be anticipated. Others are set in their place. Such is the way in which God manifests his just rule over peoples and princes (34:20–24).

Armed with such omniscient insight, God takes knowledge of men’s works, and his judgment overtakes them without fail. He “overturns” the wicked in the night, thus destroying them. At other times he strikes them “in the open sight of others.” Those who are swept away in judgment are (1) those who had turned aside from following the Lord; and (2) those who through oppression had caused the cry of the poor to come up to God (34:25–28).

Elihu upholds the sovereignty of God. Who can question him when he “gives quietness,” i.e., rest or relief, to those who are oppressed? On the other hand, when he “hides his face,” i.e., withdraws his favor or help in anger, who is able to “behold” him, i.e., obtain his favor? In either case, no one can condemn God’s sovereign rule whether it be expressed with respect to individuals or with nations. God’s operations are directed by the great purpose of the good of men, that the nations be righteously and mercifully ruled (34:29–30).

D. Application to Job (34:31–37)

Elihu imagines a situation in which a complainer under affliction protests his innocence. He disclaims knowledge of any offense and desires to know what his sin was. He professes his readiness to desist from that sin when it is made clear to him. Elihu sees such a complaint as an effort to regulate the government of God, to dictate to him how he should act. Elihu distances himself from any such position: “You shall choose, and not I.” Elihu encourages Job to specify what retribution he would regard as superior to that observed in God’s rule of the world (34:31–33).

Elihu’s second speech concludes with a verdict which all men of understanding must render regarding Job’s demeanor. First, they would conclude that “Job speaks without knowledge, and his words are without wisdom.” Second, they would desire that Job “were tried until the end,” i.e., that his afflictions might be continued till he should desist answering in the manner of wicked men. Job’s “answers” are his speeches in reply to the three friends, which are characterized as such as only ungodly men would utter (34:34–36).

Third, by his conduct Job had added “rebellion” to his “sin.” His “rebellion” is his unsubmitive, defiant demeanor against God in his speeches; his “sin” is that of his former life, for which he has been cast into afflictions. Fourth, Job has shown his defiance against God openly (“among them”) by “clapping his hands,” a gesture of mockery and contempt (34:37).

Elihu here reveals his attitude toward Job. His judgment is that Job was a sinner in his former life, and a defiant rebel under his afflictions. Whereas Elihu had assured the three counselors that he would not use their kinds of arguments, yet in this speech he follows their lead. The language here exceeds in harshness almost anything that the three friends had said.

Was Elihu right? He certainly was right about God's authority, omniscience and power to judge sin. Elihu was right in reprimanding Job for demanding that God answer him by showing where he had sinned. However, in defending God's justice Elihu impugned Job's honesty about his innocence. None of the human speakers in the book knew anything about the contest between God and Satan. Consequently Elihu's assessment of the reason for Job's suffering was incorrect.³

10–15 Here Elihu is saying that God will not be unjust (10–12) and so Job is wrong to charge God with any form of injustice. God's justice is, for Elihu, an automatic consequence of his being the almighty Creator (13–14). But that is a dangerous position, for it amounts to saying that 'might is right'.

16–30 Elihu continues arguing that the governor of the universe cannot be unrighteous. God is righteous and mighty (17). He has the power to judge kings and nobles (18), to shatter them without need of investigation (24) since he already knows their steps (21). He can overturn them in the night (25). His works of might are in strict accord with his justice. He shows no favoritism to princes or the rich (19), he rewards people according to their deeds (25) and strikes wrongdoers down for their wickedness (26) because they have disobeyed his laws (27) and oppressed the poor (28). So if ever God is silent and does not offer a vindication when it is called for, who can condemn him and say that what he does is unjust? (29)

31–37 Job's constant demand for vindication adds rebellion to sin (37), for it puts God in the wrong. Elihu now imagines someone who has been punished for his sin and then repents of it (31–32). According to Elihu, Job's theology does not allow God to forgive such a repentant sinner, for Job expects anyone who has suffered at God's hand to demand vindication and reject forgiveness (33). But this is unfair to Job, since Job does not claim that all suffering is innocent.⁴

³ Smith, J. E. (1996). *The wisdom literature and Psalms* (Job 34:10–37). Joplin, MO: College Press Pub. Co.

⁴ Clines, D. J. A. (1994). Job. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 480). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.