

It is Never Useless to Serve God!

November 4, 2018 - Job 35 - Read Online at epmkg.com/job35

3. Elihu's third speech (chap. 35)

In this speech Elihu defended God's sovereignty in answer to Job's charge that God did not reward him for his innocence. Elihu's answer was twofold: (a) Since God is supreme, He is not affected one way or the other by man's innocence or sin, and (b) God was not answering Job's cries because of his pride.

a. Job's inconsistency (35:1-3)

35:1-3. How could Job ever hope to be vindicated **by God** (cf. 13:18) as being innocent while at the same time he insisted that his innocence was of no value before God? Such a position was inconsistent, **Elihu** argued. Elihu had earlier quoted Job as having asked **what profit or gain** he would receive for serving God (34:9; cf. 21:15).

b. Man's inability to affect God because of God's greatness (35:4-8)

35:4-8. Replying to both Job and to the three (**your friends with you** probably refers to the three, not to Job's supposed wicked companions), Elihu pointed out that since **the heavens** and **the clouds** are higher than man, certainly God is higher than man. Therefore God is not affected adversely by man's **sins** or benefited by man's **righteous** condition. (Cf. Eliphaz's similar words about the stars, 22:12, and God's indifference to man, 22:2-3.) A person's **wickedness** or **righteousness** affects only man, not God. When God shows mercy it is not because man has persuaded Him to do so, and if He inflicts judgment it is not because man has injured Him. God is sovereign and therefore self-determining. He is not bribed by man; His standards for judging people are firm, impartial, and uninfluenced. But since a person's moral conduct does affect himself, it *does* make a difference for *him* whether he sins or not (cf. 35:3).

c. Man's inability to influence God because of man's pride (35:9-16)

35:9-11. When people are in trouble (**under ... oppression**) they often turn to **God** for a way out, but they do not turn to Him as their **Maker** (cf. 4:17; 9:9; 32:22; 36:3; 40:19), the One who can give joy *in* times of trouble (**songs in the night**). Nor do they express gratitude to Him for giving them more intelligence than **beasts** and **birds** possess.

35:12-15. Therefore God **does not** respond to people's **empty** (insincere) cries for help, for such prayers stem from pride (**arrogance**; cf. 36:9). If such proud prayers are not

answered, certainly Job's cries of arrogance and impatience would not be heard. Job claimed that he could **not see** or find God (9:11; 23:8–9; cf. 34:29); yet he had placed his **case** in God's hands (13:18; 23:7). But Elihu sensed another inconsistency in Job (cf. comments on 35:2–3): the sufferer was willing to **wait for** God in His justice to clear him, and yet Job felt, according to Elihu, that God did nothing about sin (24:1–12). Elihu here misconstrued Job, for the patriarch did not say God *never* punishes the wicked; though not punished in this life, they *will* receive judgment from God at death.

35:16. For **Job** to talk out of both sides of his **mouth** (wanting God to clear him, and yet being concerned that God does nothing to put down sin) was to make **empty** (*hebel*; cf. comments on this word in Ecc. 1:2) **talk**, speaking many **words** (cf. Job 34:37) without wisdom (cf. 34:35).

Elihu felt that Job could not be cleared by God (35:2) as long as he questioned the value of serving Him (v. 3) and prayed from a heart of pride (v. 12), while thinking that God does nothing about wickedness (v. 15).¹

35:1–16 Elihu's third speech: 'Job should not have complained but called to God'

1–8 Elihu here seems to be taking up again the claim he put in Job's mouth in 34:9, that it 'profits a man nothing, when he tries to please God'. That is not Job's view, nor is it Job who asks, '*What profit is it to me, and what do I gain by not sinning?*' (3). Elihu only imagines this to be Job's question. But he answers it for him by saying it is wrong to expect to gain from being righteous (7). Since God is so great, what happens on earth is of little concern to him (5), even if it is wickedness that happens (6, 8).

9–16 Since Job's complaint has been that God has taken away his right (27:2), Elihu asks why Job has not been delivered from his affliction. He takes the case of oppressed people who cry out because of their load of oppression (9). They are not always delivered. Why not? Because something is lacking in their cry. It has been an involuntary cry and they have not addressed it to God their Maker, who can reverse fortunes by giving songs in the night (10) and who can give greater wisdom to humans than to the beasts and birds (11). They are not answered because they have neglected to cry to him (12); such cries are empty, and disregarded by God (13). The same is true of Job, says Elihu. He has been merely complaining of his suffering and not addressing himself to God (14–16). Once again Elihu misses the mark; for Job has often been addressing God directly!²

¹ Zuck, R. B. (1985). Job. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, pp. 761–762). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

² 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.

ELIHU'S THIRD ANSWER TO JOB**Does it Pay to Serve God?****Job 35:1-16**

Job had argued that under God's government of the world it availed a person nothing to be righteous. This proposition, to which Elihu had earlier referred (34:9), is taken up in depth.

A. A Statement of Job's Position (35:1-4)

Elihu represents Job as maintaining that he has a just cause against God. Did he then have a right to assert this: That godliness profits nothing? If Job could successfully maintain this contention, his cause against God would be right. Elihu promised to rebut this position held by Job and "his companions," i.e., that circle of persons who cherished the same irreligious doubts in regard to God's providence as Job did.

B. A Statement of Elihu's Position (35:5-8)

To Elihu, one glance at the heavens, the infinitely exalted abode of God, must reveal that man's conduct, whether good or evil, cannot affect the Lord (cf. 22:12). He does not profit from man's righteousness, nor does he incur any loss from man's sin. It is in human life that the influence of righteousness or wickedness is seen. Since righteousness and wickedness are poles apart, they cannot have the same effect upon man.

C. Possible Exceptions Refuted (35:9-16)

So how does Elihu explain the anomaly that sometimes the righteous cry to God from under the heel of the oppressors? Why is it that such prayers for relief are not answered? The reason is that the cry is merely the natural voice of suffering; it is no true appeal to heaven. No one says, "Where is God?" This is the language of one who is devoutly seeking the Lord. True faith would recognize that God gives "songs in the night," i.e., sudden deliverances which cause one's mouth to be filled with praise (35:9-10).

God has given to men higher wisdom than he has given to the beasts. He communicates to them continuous instructions through his fellowship, his ways and his word. Their appeal to heaven, then, should not be the mere instinctive cry of suffering, but the voice of trust and submission. Man in his evil pride afflicts the beasts and fowl so that they cry out to heaven. They remain unheard, however, because their cry is "vanity," i.e., empty. When

men address heaven their speech must be much more than the plaintive cry of a wounded beast! (35:11–13).

God will not hearken to the voice of one whose cries are empty, devoid of faith and devotion. How much less will he listen to one who, like Job, complains to him (1) that he cannot see him (as in 23:8); (2) that his government in the world is not righteous; and (3) that he refuses to receive a just appeal (35:14).

Because God does not bring judgment speedily upon the wicked, he seems as if he takes no knowledge of wrong and oppression. From this Job drew the futile conclusion that there was no advantage in being righteous more than in sinning. For this reason Job was opening his mouth in vain (35:15–16).³

35:6–8 Elihu’s statement that human conduct (whether sinful or righteous) has no effect on God is misleading. Although human conduct does not affect God’s essential character, God does respond to human actions. God expresses concern, sorrow, and disappointment over Israel’s infidelity (Hs 11:1–11; Mal 1:6–9). Jeremiah declared that God repeatedly sought earnestly to warn His disobedient people but to no avail (e.g., Jr 7:13; 25:4–7; 32:33–35; 35:14–15; 44:4–6). Jesus lamented over Jerusalem’s stubborn refusal to turn from disbelief and receive God’s appointed means of reconciliation (Mt 23:37). As the believer’s great High Priest, Jesus feels all the temptations that a Christian might face (Heb 4:13–16). The Holy Spirit can be grieved (Eph 4:30). God’s goodness (Nah 1:7; Rm 2:4) toward man, His love for people (1 Jn 4:10), and His forgiveness all demonstrate that God cares for people (1 Pt 5:7) and has concern for their eternal destiny (2 Pt 3:9).⁴

‘God does not hear an empty cry’ (35:1–16)

35:2–4

Do you think this to be just?

Do you say, ‘It is my right before God’,

that you ask, ‘What advantage have I?’

How am I better off than if I had sinned?’

³ Smith, J. E. (1996). *The wisdom literature and Psalms* (Job 35:1–16). Joplin, MO: College Press Pub. Co.

⁴ Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007). *The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith* (p. 774). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

I will answer you

and your friends with you.

In this third speech Elihu follows his usual method. He refers to something Job has said (35:2-3) and he then responds to it. In doing the latter he does not once address the Friends, but he believes that what he has to say to Job is also applicable to them (35:4). Elihu uses the second person singular with reference to Job (35:2-8) and still has him in mind (35:14) although he goes on to speak more impersonally (35:9-15). The conclusion of this speech is stated as a fact for the whole court to hear, as it were, and it refers to Job by name (35:16).

Although Elihu begins by reasoning with Job (35:2), there is a note of reproof in what he says. (Repentance does, after all, begin with the understanding!) Elihu therefore reminds Job that he has not only maintained his own righteousness in serving God, but that he has also denied that there is any benefit to be gained from doing so. He declares that such thinking is not in accord with what is **'just'**, with the way that God rules the world.

God rules the world by having it in his control and carrying out his will in it. He is above the earth as the skies and clouds are higher than those who live on it. Man (in this case, Job) is therefore to look up and not lift himself up. Elihu asserts that God's nature is neither altered by man's (i.e. Job's) sinfulness or by man's righteousness (35:6-7). Just as the clouds are beyond man's reach, so God's blessedness can neither be diminished by Job's wickedness nor augmented by his righteousness. Wickedness and righteousness affect man's character, not God's (35:8). Although God's dealings with man do relate to man's dealings with him, God remains unchanged in himself. By this assertion of God's immutability and impassibility, Elihu does not mean that God is morally indifferent or ambivalent. After all, he is counselling Job in God's name to cease fighting with God and to submit to him.

35:13-14, 16

Surely God does not hear an empty cry,

nor does the Almighty regard it.

How much less when you say that you do not see him,

that the case is before him, and you are waiting for him!...

Job opens his mouth in empty talk;

he multiplies words without knowledge.

Elihu then comments on the way that those who are oppressed by evil people are not answered by God (35:9). This seems to be unrelated to Job and also to what Elihu has just been saying. But after indicating that the reason for God’s inactivity is the superficiality of the cry for help that such people raise heavenwards, Elihu says, **‘How much less ... you [Job]!’** (35:14). Elihu is therefore preparing the way for confronting Job and not letting him off the hook.

What is it that Elihu calls upon Job to face? It is that he is so wrong to construe God’s silence as if it were indifference or hostility. Job has said that he does not see God and that God does not take notice of him. But God does not always respond when people call on him with an **‘empty cry’**, and Job has been using empty talk about God. **‘Beasts of the earth’** (35:11) that teach that God cares for them (see 12:7–8) also squeal in a trap, but that is not prayer—neither is the clamorous sound of Job’s words.

What is appropriate and acceptable to God from someone in need is a song of praise that God is not far away when his people are in the dark (see 1:21; 2:10). Such knowledge is true wisdom, and Job is no longer showing that he possesses it. This is the point of Elihu’s ministry and its function in the book as we have it. Elihu’s charges against Job relate to how he has conducted himself *during* his suffering, and not prior to it. He has sinned. There all four speakers agree. But three of them say that his suffering is brought about by sin; the other says that sin is brought about by his suffering.⁵

Job 35

35:1–16 In 35:2–3, Elihu returns to what he takes to be a basic flaw in Job’s protest. Job has said there is neither advantage for the blameless nor disadvantage for the wicked in God’s ordering of human affairs (see 9:22; 10:3; 21:7–26). In his own case, Job makes this the basis of his claim to be “in the right before God,” that is, that there is no just reason for the suffering that has befallen him. (God concurs in 2:3.) From Elihu’s point of view, Job’s cry for a trial before God in which his case can be fairly adjudicated expresses a woeful misunderstanding of God’s absolute transcendence. God is so exalted above all petty human affairs that individual actions and attitudes do not move God one way or the other. Such attitudes and actions affect only other human beings for good or ill (vv. 4–8; Eliphaz has made a comparable point in 22:2–3; Zophar concurs in 11:6–11).

For Job, it is just this awesome transcendence of God that thwarts his human appeal for justice (see 9:2–20; 13:20–21; 14:13–17). The delicious secret in the heavenly council is that God cares intimately and personally about God’s servant Job, and that Job’s hellish ordeal is ultimately related to God’s unqualified approval of Job’s life. Is it possible that God

⁵ Jones, H. R. (2007). *A Study Commentary on Job* (pp. 249–251). Darlington, England; Webster, New York: Evangelical Press.

is both infinitely more transcendent and infinitely more personally engaged with human beings than either Elihu or Job has any way of knowing?

Like Job, Elihu is aware that distressed people cry out to God (v. 9) and that God does not answer (v. 12; see 24:12). But Elihu knows a reason for that: It is because those who cry out want relief from suffering, not a trusting relationship with God (vv. 10–11). Absent this wondering trust, their cry is “empty,” and God does not regard it (v. 13).

On these grounds, Job is doubly guilty. Not only is his cry “empty,” but he has had the audacity to lay his case before God and fault God for failure to appear at trial (v. 14)! Moreover, Job has taken advantage of the fact that God is not affected by human transgressions (see vv. 5–8) to indulge in empty and ignorant tirades. Apparently, Elihu’s basic premise, hinted at in verses 12 and 13, is the same as the one Eliphaz relies on in 4:12–21: God’s infinite transcendence of the merely human means that no human being can claim to be righteous in the presence of God (see also 25:4–6). The proper course for suffering people under these circumstances, according to Elihu, is perhaps indicated in verses 10–11: to intensify one’s reliance on God, “who gives strength in the night” and who plants hints of God’s transcendent wisdom even in the natural order.

The Hebrew text of verse 11 can also be translated to mean that God teaches us “by” or “through” the animals and birds, rather than the comparative “more than.” This notion is firmly rooted in wisdom literature (see 12:7–25, where Job learns from the animals lessons that are quite different from those Elihu has in mind; see also Proverbs 6:6; Isa. 1:3; and Jer. 8:7). This seems to run parallel to the advice of Eliphaz in 5:8–16, where people who are inherently unrighteous before God are nevertheless encouraged to commit their cause to God, whose ways are beyond human comprehension but whose justice is sure.⁶

⁶ Wharton, J. A. (1999). *Job*. (P. D. Miller & D. L. Bartlett, Eds.) (pp. 148–150). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.