

Explore: Am I on the Right Path?

June 20, 2013

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for July 7 focuses on Job 33:13-22; 36:8-12.*

As we come to this passage, we might imagine no more words are left to say. In fact, Job 31 concluded by declaring, “The words of Job are ended” (31:40). In short, Job and his three friends finished their statements and arguments.

Yet more is said, though by a new character, Elihu, a young man who has been listening to at least part of the back-and-forth between Job and his friends. Scholars long have puzzled over the presence of Elihu in the book, mainly because he does not necessarily add anything new to the conversation. Nonetheless, his words serve an important function within the book of Job as a whole.

Spirit gives understanding

Elihu is introduced to the readers as someone who is angry with Job and the three friends. After showing deference to his elders by remaining silent, Elihu speaks up by stating: “But it is the spirit in a person, the breath of the Almighty, that gives them understanding” (32:8).

This is meant to level the playing field between the old and the young, but it also claims for Elihu something like divine inspiration. He later confesses the depth of this inspiration: “For I am full of words, and the spirit within me compels me; inside I am like bottled-up wine, like new wineskins ready to burst. I must speak and find relief; I must open my lips and reply” (32:18-20).

This at least rhetorically sets Elihu apart from the three friends. Rather than using human experience and observation of the world to determine what had happened to Job (as had Job and his friends), Elihu says he has a word from God.

He says as much by noting how he will not repeat the mistakes of the earlier rounds of discussion: “But not one of you has proved Job wrong; none of you has answered his arguments. Do not say, ‘We have found wisdom; let God, not a man, refute him.’ But Job has not marshaled his words against me, and I will not answer him with your arguments” (32:12-14).

God can speak in many ways

Elihu responds to Job’s accusation that God does not answer him by stating God can speak in many ways: “Why do you complain to him that he responds to no one’s words? For God does speak—now one way, now another—though no one perceives it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, ... he may speak in their ears and terrify them with warnings” (33:13-16).

He continues by noting even physical pain and affliction such as Job is experiencing can be a method of communication for God (33:19-22). Thus, Job is wrong in his claims against God. God is answering; Job is not listening.

To our eyes and ears, texts like these are difficult to read and hear because we certainly know that not every pain and injury is a message from God. Some are simple accidents—tripping and falling down the stairs—while others are the result of others’ poor behavior—people killed in a drunk-driving crash.

Further, we all have known at least one person who displayed a Christ-like life, yet experienced tremendous suffering. To say God is speaking through this suffering is a difficult—and potentially damaging—claim for Elihu to

make.

Notice Elihu has not said much different than Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. The three friends told Job he was guilty according to the wisdom/covenant tradition that sees blessing as the reward for obedience and cursing and suffering as the punishment for disobedience. Elihu says the same thing: “If they obey and serve him, they will spend the rest of their days in prosperity and their years in contentment. But if they do not listen, they will perish by the sword and die without knowledge” (36:11-12).

Tradition on trial

Even though this is not his intention, Elihu’s presence intensifies this tradition and raises it up to the point of placing it on trial. If Job is vindicated, then this way of viewing the world will be called into question. While we may appreciate certain aspects of this “formula-based holiness,” our life experience tells us an equation to understand human suffering is too simple and causes more problems than it solves. Just ask Job’s friends.