

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Seventh Week - Fourth Day

ELIHU'S ARGUMENT

"Then the wrath of Elihu, the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, was aroused against Job; his wrath was aroused because he justified himself rather than God. Also against his three friends his wrath was aroused, because they had found no answer, and yet had condemned Job. Now because they were years older than he, Elihu had waited to speak to Job" (Job 32:2-4).

A very large number of people have taken the position that all which Job says is right and that all, or nearly all, of what his three friends say is wrong. Consequently, they are surprised that Elihu is not only dissatisfied with the arguments of the friends but with those of Job himself. Elihu is regarded by them as a forward young man thrusting himself needlessly into the controversy and arrogantly undertaking to decide it; and as some might urge, he is as much in the wrong as any of the others. Now if this opinion were correct and the sacred writer did not mean to set Elihu forth as a fair, enlightened, and true umpire of the dispute, then it is difficult to see why he should have been introduced at all! His appearance would have been a hindrance to the progress of the poem. But if he is right in his assessments, then his appearance is perfectly harmonious with the design, comes in at the proper place, and moves us forward to the conclusion.

It remains, therefore, to show that Elihu is right in his condemnation of Job as well as of Job's three friends, and also right in the solution which he himself produces. For this purpose it is necessary to recapitulate the argument. The proposition to be solved is, How the sufferings of the righteous may be reconciled with the perfect justice of God.

The solution of this problem is not to be found in the speeches of Job. Indeed, he is as clearly as possible described by the sacred writer himself as having been in grievous error. It is only after he had humbled himself that he found favor with God. We have already pointed out the implication from chapters 1:22 and 2:20 when compared with 3:1--that Job is represented as charging God foolishly and sinning with his lips. And if we go on to chapter 32:1, 2, we shall see that this consisted in the fact that "he was righteous in his own eyes, and justified himself rather than God." No one who reads his words with attention can fail to see that in the midst of much sound matter and correct views this temper pervades his speeches.

There is also great contradiction in his views at different times, in which we trace the varying feelings and impressions natural to a man under extreme affliction and who was not in possession of any fixed principle on which he could rely for a solution. He is embarrassed by it to the last, and the only point of which he feels any assurance is that his friends are in the wrong. Job erred chiefly in not acknowledging the sin inherent in him, notwithstanding his integrity and sincere piety. This prevented him from apprehending the objectives of the calamities inflicted on him, led him to regard God's punishments as arbitrary, and made him despair of better days. Yet Job is loud in acknowledging the wisdom of God, and at times he allows himself to indulge in cheering hopes for the future, although this cannot justify him even if it seems to greatly excuse him. Therefore it is much to Job's praise that when the true state of the case is set before him by Elihu, he remains silent and ultimately acknowledges his fundamental error of justifying himself rather than God.

Still less shall we find the true solution in the words of the three friends, good and well-meaning as they were (though somewhat obstinate). Their demeanor is distinctly reprov'd by the Lord himself and involved such positive sin as to require a propitiatory sacrifice, which Job offered on their behalf. Their arguments were even more unsound than those of Job, while their backwardness in the acknowledgment of error (an acknowledgment which Job readily made of his own) evinced such sinful obduracy as demanded this expiation. They saw sin only in its external aspects; and inferring its existence from the presence of calamity, they were led to conclude that Job was guilty of heinous crimes in proportion to his afflictions.

If they had been duly sensible of the fallen nature of man, if they had understood themselves, then on seeing the misery of Job they would have been led to smite upon their own breasts and cry out, "God be merciful to me a sinner," rather than falling so furiously upon him. They were right in the general perception of the connection between misery and sin, but they failed and stumbled in the application of this central truth. In fact, the essential errors of both parties come from the same source, that is, the lack of a sound insight into the nature of sin. Job conceived himself righteous and not deserving of such afflictions because he had not committed any heinous crimes; and his friends can only account for his great misery by assuming that he had committed them. Elihu was therefore justified in his censure of both parties.

The leading principle of Elihu is that calamity, in the shape of testing, is inflicted on the best of men; but God allows a favorable turn to take place as soon as its goal has been realized. As Hengstenberg remarks, "It affords the key to the events of Job's life." Though a pious and righteous man, he is tried by severe afflictions. He does not know for what purpose he is afflicted, and his calamity continues. But when he learns from Elihu and God the purpose of affliction, he humbles himself and is relieved from his burden; and ample prosperity compensates for the afflictions he has sustained.

Add to this that (1) the remaining portion of Elihu's speech, in which he points to God's infinite majesty as including his justice, is substantially contained in the addresses of God; (2) that he

foretell's God's appearance; (3) that he is not rebuked by God as the three friends were; and (4) that Job by his very silence acknowledges the problem to have been solved by Elihu--and his silence is all the more significant because Elihu had urged him to defend himself (33:32) and because Job had repeatedly declared that he would hold his peace if it were shown him "wherein he had erred" (6:24).