

Your God is Too Small

by Ray C. Stedman

We have watched Job as his three friends have tried to help him, but they have only made matters worse. Finally he has come to the place where he cries out in the midst of his torment for an explanation, for some word from God, for some way out of this terrible distress. Suddenly, without any introduction, a young man named Elihu, who has been standing by, addresses Job and his friends. We are not told anything about him; he suddenly appears in that unique way God has of speaking in ways that we could not imagine. But he begins to examine the problems and the thinking of Job and the friends.

The unique thing about Elihu's presentation is that he does not attempt to speak out of his experience. He is not an old man who has been taught certain lessons by life. His claim is that he is speaking out of what God has taught him by the Spirit, and, therefore, that he is sharing the insights and wisdom of God. And as we unfold what Elihu says we can see that is true. It is in accord with the revelation of God elsewhere in Scripture, so that God is speaking and answering some of the cries of Job's tormented heart through this young man.

In Chapters 32 and 33, we saw Elihu's general examination of the problem, but in Chapter 34 he

takes up Job's argument and Job's view of God in some detail. He opens with **an invitation to all who are listening to join in the judgment:**

**Then Elihu said,
“Hear my words, you wise men,
and give ear to me, you who know;
for the ear tests words as the palate tastes
food. [He is actually quoting the words
of Job here.]
Let us choose what is right;
let us determine among ourselves what is
good.” {Job 34:1-4 RSV}**

Very frequently you find in the pages of Scripture this invitation by the Spirit of God to reason with him, to let our minds follow after the paths that God's great mind has already trod. Isaiah said, “‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD: ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool,’” {Isa 1:18 RSV}. In First Corinthians the Apostle Paul says, “I speak as to sensible men; judge for yourselves what I say,” {1 Cor 10:15 RSV}. So here is the invitation to all of us to join in judging the truth of what Elihu is about to say about God. He be-

gins by examining once again Job's view of God, Job's problem with God, and this is the way he puts it, Verse 5:

“For Job has said, ‘I am innocent, and God has taken away my right.’” {Job 34:5 RSV}

That is Job's first problem with God. He says, “I haven't done anything wrong,” and he infers from that that God should bless him. Instead of blessing him, God has denied him that right to blessing. This was the type of theology Job had.

I do not think there is anything more subtle in our lives than this instinctive feeling we all have that if we behave ourselves, God ought to give us blessing and prosperity. You think through your own motives right now and see if that is not underlying much of what you are thinking about God. “If I straighten out my life and watch myself so that I don't get into trouble, and vote right in the election, God is going to take care of me and everything will be all right.” If he does not, if we go through trial, we immediately show how we reflect this view because we say, “What's wrong? Why should this happen to me?” That is one of the most frequent charges against God, and this was Job's charge.

“and God has taken away my right; in spite of my right I am counted a liar;”
{Job 34:5b-6a RSV}

That is what the friends had called him. They had said he was a liar, a hypocrite, that he actually had done some terrible thing that he was not telling them about. So he said, “In spite of my right, I am counted a liar, that is man's treatment of me. And God likewise is unjust.”

“my wound is incurable, though I am without transgression.” {Job 34:6b RSV}

Now that is Job's problem. He sees God as both unjust and unfair, unwilling to explain what is going on, and so Elihu says, Verse 7:

**“What man is like Job,
who drinks up scoffing like water,
who goes in company with evildoers
and walks with wicked men?
For he has said, ‘It profits a man nothing**

that he should take delight in God.’” {Job 34:7-9 RSV}

What a strange argument to hear from a man who had begun with that great cry, “Blessed be the name of the LORD. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away. Blessed is his name,” {cf, Job 1:21b}. Now his position is, as Elihu says, he is like the ungodly. He has the same attitude they have. He says, “What advantage is it to me to behave myself? I might just as well have sinned.” That is the argument that is going to be examined in detail in this passage.

How many of us have talked the same way? We must remember that at the beginning of this book Satan declared that he was going to bring Job to a place where he would curse God to his face. There are two things Satan must do in order to make Job curse God. He must make Job distrust God and feel that God has treated him unfairly (that is the first step), and then there will come a time when, in the conviction that he has been unfairly treated, he will actually curse God, shake his fist in God's face, and turn his back upon him. That is what Satan is after. Now you see how close Job has come to this. He has not done it yet and he does not do it. God intervenes by the wise words of this Spirit-filled young man to keep Job from that final step.

Now in Verses 10-30, Elihu takes up the truth about God, **what God is really like.**

First, in Verses 10-12, he says *God cannot be unjust:*

**“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.
For according to the work of a man he will requite him,
and according to his ways he will make it befall him.
Of a truth, God will not do wickedly,
and the Almighty will not pervert justice.”**
{Job 34:10-12 RSV}

He says that no matter how long it may take, God is going to treat the wicked with judgment and

bless the righteous. Now he may not do it right away but he will do it. For, Elihu declares, God cannot deny himself he cannot be unjust. When we say that God treats us unfairly or does something that is wrong we are really saying God is denying his own nature and character. Earlier in the book, several of the friends of Job had argued that God is so mighty that no matter what he says, man has to take it. But Elihu is not saying that. He is saying God is mighty, it is true, but when he does something it is always in accordance with his nature. Scripture teaches us that. In James we learn that God is called the Father of lights with whom is no variation or shadow due to change. There is no changeability in God; he is always true to his character of love and we are invited to believe that no matter what it looks like at the moment. That is where faith will rescue us from the kind of temptation that Job is confronted with now.

Elihu's next point is that *God is beyond accountability to man*, Verse 13:

**“Who gave him charge over the earth
and who laid on him the whole world?
If he should take back his spirit to himself,
and gather to himself his breath,
all flesh would perish together,
and man would return to dust.” {Job
34:13-15 RSV}**

Godless men are always saying to God, in effect, “Leave me alone. I don't need you. I don't want you in my life.” Now what if God did that? What if he actually removed every bit of himself from them? Why they would collapse instantly. God gives them the very breath that they breathe. Their very ability to function comes from the hand of God and the man or woman who speaks out against the Creator and challenges God is doing so by the very power that God himself supplies.

Well then, as Elihu says, “Who gave him charge over the earth? Well, no man did. God is sovereign. He is the originator of all things. He is not accountable to us.

Now, Elihu's third point is that *we get our sense of justice from God himself*; he teaches us justice, Verse 16:

**“If you have understanding, hear this;
listen to what I say.**

**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 no more than the
poor,
for they are all the work of his hands?
In a moment they die;
at midnight the people are shaken and
pass away,
and the mighty are taken away by no hu-
man hand.” {Job 34:16-20 RSV}**

We men who prate so loudly about justice who always want God to treat us with justice are the very ones who respond with flattery to rulers or show partiality to people who are in authority. But God does not do that. Elihu argues here that God governs without partiality, and how can you do that without justice? How can man be more just than God?

His fourth point is that *God does not even require an investigation*. It is very easy to see these days that if man wants to inquire into the justice of something, the first thing he has to do is appoint an investigating committee. Then he has to get funds for the committee and set up their offices and hire the secretaries and after a couple of years labor they finally come up with a conclusion. But by that time somebody has found that they have been bribed or corrupted in some way so we have to appoint another committee to investigate the investigating committee. But Elihu argues that God does not do that. Verse 21:

**“For his eyes are upon the ways of a man,
and he sees all his steps.
There is no gloom or deep darkness
where evildoers may hide themselves.
For he has not appointed a time
for any man to go before God in judgment.
He shatters the mighty without investiga-
tion,
and sets others in their place.” {Job
34:21-24 RSV}**

God does not need to hold a trial in order to condemn us or set us aside if we are misbehaving. He knows what is going on; he sees the depths of the heart; he understands the thoughts of the mind.

Read Psalm 139 and see how the psalmist cries out in marvel at God's ability to understand his thoughts from afar, even before they take shape in his mind and heart, God knows them all. Elihu goes on, Verse 25:

**“Thus, knowing their works,
he overturns them in the night, and they
are crushed.
He strikes them for their wickedness
in the sight of men,
because they turned aside from following
him,” {Job 34:25-27a RSV}**

That is the issue isn't it? That is the standard of performance which God righteously expects of men. How hard it is for us to learn that the only way we can properly relate to life is to include God and begin with him. He holds the world in his grasp. Anything else is totally unrealistic living. Those who turn aside from him,

**“and had no regard for any of his ways,
so that they caused the cry of the poor to
come to him,
and he heard the cry of the afflicted –”
{Job 34:27b-28 RSV}**

simply are showing they do not want God, and God judges on that basis. There is no other standard acceptable to him.

Verses 29-30:

**“When he is quiet, who can condemn?
When he hides his face, who can behold
him, [How are you going to summon
God to a trial and make him speak?]
whether it be a nation or a man? –
that a godless man should not reign,
that he should not ensnare the people.”
{Job 34:29-30 RSV}**

In other words, who can call God to account or appeal his decision? There is no way we can do this and no need to do it because God is always consistent with himself. And so Elihu concludes (Verses 31-33), with the statement, in effect, that God accepts no substitutes for righteousness. These words are somewhat confused in the Hebrew text and therefore the English is not very clear so I am going to read this section from the New English

Bible which I think puts it a little clearer, Verses 31-33:

**“But suppose you will say to God,
‘I have overstepped the mark, I will do no
more mischief.
Vile wretch that I am, be thou my guide;
whatever wrong I have done, I will do no
more.’
Will he, at those words, condone your re-
jection of him?
It is for you to decide, not me:
but what can you answer?” {Job 34:31-33
NEB}**

Good question, isn't it? What he is saying is that somebody may say, “Well, all right, I got into trouble, I did something that was wrong but I won't do it anymore. I'll reform my life and watch in that area but I'm still going to run my life myself.” Elihu says, “Can you say that to God? He will not accept that.” Reform is not what he is after – it is repentance and relationship that God desires. Surrender of the right to run your life, that is what he is after, and he will accept no other basis of relationship with him.

Now Elihu closes with *God's problem with Job*, Verse 34 and on:

**“Men of understanding will say to me,
and the wise man who hears me will say:
‘Job speaks without knowledge,
his words are without insight.’
Would that Job were tried to the end,
because he answers like wicked men.
For he adds his rebellion to his sin;
he claps his hands among us,
and multiples his words against God.”
{Job 34:34-37 RSV}**

What Elihu is saying here is that Job is obviously speaking out of ignorance of the nature and the true character of God, and therefore he needs further treatment. “Would that Job were tried to the end,” he says. Not because this young man wants to increase his agony but because only that will bring Job to the truth so he asks that it go on until Job sees what he is doing.

Job is a righteous man, his heart is right, he wants to serve God, but he thinks that he can do it by his own just efforts. The toughest lesson God

has to teach human beings is the lesson of seeing the evil in what we think is nothing but good. We always think that our efforts to try to behave ourselves by obeying the truth as we understand it is acceptable to God. The hardest lesson of life is to learn that our righteousness is filthy rags in his sight. It is only dependence upon his gift of righteousness that will ever be acceptable in his sight. That is what Job is finally learning. It is the struggle of Romans 7 way back here in the Old Testament. Paul, whose heart was right, wanted to do what God wanted and was trying his best to do it, but instead it all fell apart, and he cried out, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me?" {Rom 7:24a RSV}. And the word of faith comes in "It is the gift of God," {Eph 2:8}. You are righteous, not by trying, but by accepting what God has said by his gift of righteousness.

Now that is what we have here. Remember that God initiated this contest not Satan. God said to Satan, "Notice my friend Job here? See what you can do with him."

God had something to teach this man, and maybe that is what God is saying to many of us. When we think our heart is absolutely right before him, we have failed to grasp the one basis upon which we can be right before him and that is why trouble often comes.

We will move through these next three chapters very quickly: Elihu now answers in detail **Job's ignorant argument**: First, he states it, Chapter 35:

And Elihu said:

**"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?'" {Job 35:1-3 RSV}**

That is what Job is saying. "God is unjust, I might as well have gone out and lived like the rest of them. Why should I have kept myself clean? I might as well have been as mean and dirty and vicious and self-centered as anybody else." I have had people say this to me. I have felt it myself. This is a common argument with us, as though the purpose of being righteous is to minister to ourselves.

But now Elihu examines that. First, he says, "*You're very inconsistent.*" Verse 5:

**"Look at the heavens, and see;
and behold the clouds, which are higher
than you." {Job 35:5 RSV}**

That is, you cannot do anything to them. They are up there floating along, and you cannot even reach them. And so, he says, it is like that with God, Verse 6:

**"If you have sinned, what do you accomplish against him?
and if your transgressions are multiplied,
what do you do to him?
If you are righteous, what do you give to him;
or what does he receive from your hand?
Your wickedness concerns a man like yourself,
and your righteousness a son of man."
{Job 35:6-8 RSV}**

In other words, "God is unaffected. He is not acting toward you out of spite, out of personal anger at you. What you do or do not do does not change God or affect him in any way. Therefore, how can he be unjust to you if he is not affected by anything that you do?" And he points out that Job's argument, therefore, is totally inconsistent.

But then Elihu goes on in a most helpful passage to show us *why God does appear to be indifferent to us*, and why he does appear to be unaffected by what happens to us. Verse 9:

**"Because of the multitude of oppressions
people cry out;
they call for help because of the arm of the
mighty.
But none says, 'Where is God my Maker,
who gives songs in the night,
who teaches us more than the beasts of the
earth,
and makes us wiser than the birds of the
air?'
There they cry out, but he does not answer,
because of the pride of evil men." {Job
35:9-12 RSV}**

Why is God silent? Men cry for help, but God knows that what they are crying for is merely relief,

that is all. They want to be taken out of the harmful, painful effects of their selfish ways and then allowed to go right back to being selfish. Nobody is concerned about God's glory and about being taught by God and learning at his hand and at his feet. Rather, they are simply crying out for deliverance, they want to use God, and to that kind of an appeal God is silent. I think this is why our prayers are often unanswered. Our selfishness has produced agony in our life and all we want is to escape the penalty; we are not at all concerned about God himself. And that is one reason for God's silence.

Then Elihu points out there is another reason in Job's conduct, Verse 13:

**“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 35:13-14 RSV}**

This is a reference to Job's words about wanting to have a trial before God, how he would be his own defense attorney, and how he would prove that he was in the right and God's treatment of him was unjust. Elihu says, How can you say that to God? Do you think God is really waiting for you to prove him wrong?" Verse 15:

**“And now, because his anger does not punish,
and he does not greatly heed transgression,
Job opens his mouth in empty talk,
and he multiplies words without knowledge.” {Job 35:15-16 RSV}**

How faithful this young man is to put it as gently as he can; he speaks the truth in love. He says, “Job, the problem is you're going to prove God is wrong and you are right. How then can God respond to that? He doesn't punish you for it, he is patient with you, he doesn't strike you down when you talk that way, but you have utilized his patience to speak words that are without knowledge; you speak out of ignorance.”

Then in Chapters 36 and 37 we have a **great revelation of the glory of God**. Notice how it be-

gins, with a claim on Elihu's part to speak with *divine authority*, Chapter 36:

**And Elihu continued, and said:
“Bear with me a little, and I will show you,
for I have yet something to say on God's
behalf.
I will fetch my knowledge from afar [i.e., it
is not coming from me],
and ascribe righteousness to my Maker.”
{Job 36:1-3 RSV}**

That is the place to start in all human reasoning. God is right, and therefore anything that deviates from what he says is wrong. That is the way you can tell the difference. Do not start with, “I'm right because I feel this way.” That is what gets us into trouble. Start with, “God is right, and I must agree with him.” And this is where he starts, Verse 4:

**“For truly my words are not false;
one who is perfect in knowledge is with
you.” {Job 36:4 RSV}**

Now some of the commentators have thought that by that he means himself, and that would be a brash and arrogant statement. But that is not what he means. If you turn over to Chapter 37, Verse 16, you will notice who he refers to when he says, “*one who is perfect in knowledge*.” He asks Job,

**“Do you know the balancings of the clouds,
the wondrous works of him who is perfect
in knowledge?” {Job 37:16 RSV}**

Obviously he means God. Therefore, his claim here in Chapter 36 is that he is speaking with the wisdom and the authority and the knowledge of God.

In Verses 5-15 he declares that *God is both merciful and just*:

**“Behold, God is mighty, and does not despise any;
he is mighty in strength of understanding.
He does not keep the wicked alive,
but gives the afflicted their right.” {Job
36:5-6 RSV}**

God is merciful and he is just. And this he demonstrates, first by his treatment of kings, Verses 9-12:

“then he declares to them their work and their transgressions,” {Job 36:9a RSV}
“He opens their ears to instruction,” {Job 36:10a RSV}
“If they hearken and serve him, they complete their days in prosperity,” {Job 36:11a RSV}
“But if they do not hearken, they perish by the sword.” {Job 36:12a RSV}

And then God demonstrates his justice by his treatment of the proud. Once again we have a passage (Verses 13-14) that is rather confused in the English. Let me read what it says in the New English Bible:

“Proud men rage against him and do not cry to him for help when caught in his toils; So they die in their prime, like male prostitutes, worn-out.” {Job 36:13-14 NEB}

Surely there is nothing more pathetic than a middle-aged fairy! That is what Elihu says here. Proud men wear themselves out against the greatness and the power of God, and die in their prime, like male prostitutes, worn-out.

That leads Elihu then to show *how God uses affliction*, Verse 15:

“He delivers the afflicted by their affliction, and opens their ear by adversity.” {Job 36:15 RSV}

Is God trying to get your attention by some pain or adverse circumstance, some pressure that you are going through? He is opening your ear. He wants you to listen to what he is saying to you and to me.

And that brings us then to a very vivid description of *Job's perilous position* which this young man points out in faithfulness, Verse 16:

“He also allured you out of distress into a broad place where there was no cramping,

and what was set on your table was full of fatness. [God had blessed you, Job, in the past]

But you are full of the judgment on the wicked;

judgment and justice seize you. [You're preoccupied with justice, here, as though that were the ground on which you could stand before God.]

“Beware lest wrath entice you into scoffing; and let not the greatness of the ransom turn you aside.” {Job 36:16-18 RSV}

That is another confused verse in the Hebrew. The Authorized Version is better here:

“Because there is wrath, beware lest he take thee away with his stroke: then a great ransom cannot deliver thee.” {Job 36:18 KJV}

Then he concludes that section *by warning Job*, Verse 19:

“Will your cry avail to keep you from distress, or all the force of your strength? Do not long for the night, when peoples are cut off in their place. Take heed, do not turn to iniquity, for this you have chosen rather than affliction.” {Job 36:19-21 RSV}

His final word to Job is a great and beautiful passage in which he sets forth in marvelous language **the glory of God**. It runs from Verse 22 through Chapter 37. Let me just give you the highlights of it:

First, *God is beyond men's instruction* (Verses 22-25). Notice how he begins:

“Behold, God is exalted in his power; who is a teacher like him?” {Job 36:22 RSV}

Then another “behold” in Verse 26: *God is beyond men's understanding*:

“Behold, God is great, and we know him not; the number of his years is unsearchable.” {Job 36:26 RSV}

Then another “behold” in Verse 30: *God acts beyond men’s rigid categories and reasons:*

**“Behold, he scatters his lightning about him,
and covers the roots of the sea.
For by these [by storm and lightnings] he judges peoples;
he gives food in abundance.” {Job 36:30-31 RSV}**

God uses his natural powers for both blessing and judgment alike.

And then, beginning with Chapter 37, we have such a marvelous description of *a great electric storm* that many of the commentators feel that this was an actual occurrence, that a storm began to break out at this moment and Elihu used it as a vivid example of what he had been saying about God. If any of you have ever been out on the prairies and seen an electric storm break out (as we North Dakotans have), you will know what a terrifying and awe-inspiring experience it is – with the lightning crackling and splitting the sky and the roaring of the thunder. It is an awesome experience, and this is what Elihu begins to describe, Chapter 37:

**“At this also my heart trembles,
and leaps out of its place.
Hearken to the thunder of his voice
and the rumbling that comes from his mouth.
Under the whole heaven he lets it go,
and his lightning to the corners of the earth.
After it his voice roars;
he thunders with his majestic voice
and he does not restrain the lightnings
when his voice is heard.” {Job 37:1-4 RSV}**

Then he goes on to speak of how God sends the snow and the rain; he sends tornadoes, the whirlwinds and the frost; he controls the cycles of the weather. (Next time you are listening to a weather report on television, and they show you the satellite picture, notice how it appears in spirals. The weather comes in cycles, and this is what he refers to in Verse 12):

**“They turn round and round by his guidance
to accomplish all that he commands them
on the face of the habitable world.” {Job 37:12 RSV}**

And then he tells us why, Verse 13:

**“Whether for correction, or for his land,
or for love, he causes it to happen.” {Job 37:13 RSV}**

God has many reasons for doing things; we are not always certain what they are.

And then *God’s wisdom is inscrutable*. He goes on,

**“Do you know how God lays his command upon them ...?” {Job 37:15a RSV}
“Do you know the balancings of the clouds,
...?” {Job 37:16a RSV}
“Can you, like him, spread out the skies,
...?” {Job 37:18a RSV}**

Job can do none of these things: Job cannot explain them (Verses 14-16); Job cannot duplicate them (Verses 17-18); Job cannot command them (Verses 19-20). He closes with a beautiful picture of *the matchless majesty of God*, Verse 22:

**“Out of the north comes golden splendor;
God is clothed with terrible majesty.
The Almighty – we cannot find him;
he is great in power and justice,
and abundant righteousness he will not violate.
Therefore men fear him;
he does not regard any who are wise in
their own conceit.” {Job 37:22-24 RSV}**

All the way through the Bible, from beginning to end, the only man or woman who ever receives anything from God is the one who comes with a humble and contrite heart. If you think you have got something to offer him, or that you have made achievements that nobody else can equal, you cut yourself off from the wisdom and knowledge of God. But the man who comes humble, contrite, waiting upon God, asking him to teach him, will find that God will pick him up in grace and power and glory and restore him.

That is what is going to happen to Job. The very next voice you hear will be the voice of God himself speaking directly to Job, as the 38th chapter opens.

Prayer:

Father, our hearts are humble as we see how mighty are your ways. We pray that, if nothing else, this great book will teach us the majesty and the glory and the wonder

of our God. What a marvelous Being you are, Lord. Help us to take the place of the learner and be taught out of humility and weakness, that we might be strong, because of the grace of our loving God. Teach us, Lord, to accept what comes from your hand, knowing that you will take us through the struggles and bring us out into a broad and wonderful place, as you did Job. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.