

THE PURPOSE OF PAIN

**SERIES: SHATTERED: THE STORY
OF JOB**



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Job 32:1-22
Fourth Message
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Job 32:1-22

One year in college, my friends and I had a great idea to go to Colorado for a ski trip during Spring Break. That part was great. The not so great part was where we decided to leave right after our last finals on a Friday afternoon and drive straight from Palo Alto to Colorado without stopping for the night.

It seemed to make sense. Who wants to pay for a hotel room? What college student has money for that?

But that decision turned out to be a very bad idea. Around 3 am the next morning, our two cars were driving through the salt flats of Utah, about an hour outside of Salt Lake City. My friend was driving my car, and I was in the passenger seat. Our other friends were driving in front of us.

My friend and I were in the middle of a conversation. There was about a 20-second pause when I noticed the car drifting off to the left. I said my friend's name, but we kept drifting so I repeated it. That's when she snapped her eyes open, realized she was heading off the road and jerked the steering wheel sharply to the right.

We flipped the car five times, landing upside down on the side of the road. Our friends in the car ahead of us watched, horrified. They assumed we had all died. As it turns out, four of us escaped with only superficial injuries. One other passenger lost part of her big toe—all in all, a very good outcome for that kind of an accident.

So here's the question: As a Christian, how do we evaluate that event? Was God trying to teach us something? Was the accident because of our poor decision to drive through the night after a tiring week of finals? Did God want to teach us a lesson without hurting us too badly?

Or was God protecting us? Afterwards, people said that God was watching over us because no one got hurt. But if God was watching over us, why did we have an accident in the first place?

I was the only believer in my group of friends. After the accident, I shared my testimony in the college group at PBC. The first time I gave a talk at this church was in the Fireside Room. All my friends came to hear how I processed the story. Is that why the accident happened?

What was God doing? I want to know why the accident happened. I want to understand. Aren't these the kinds of questions we ask when bad things happen? We look back, and we want answers to explain what happened.

We're in the middle of a series during the season of Lent on the book of Job. This book contains one of the most devastating stories of suffering in the Bible. We've called the series "Shattered" because we see a man's life completely fall apart.

Now amid the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, studying Job takes on new meaning. Every day things seem to change and get worse. The whole world seems to be shutting down. Reactions range the gamut from scared to frustrated to feeling like all of this is an over-reaction. We didn't plan this, but God knew we needed to be looking at Job during this season.

In times like this, we want answers. We desperately want to wrap our minds around the purpose of pain.

Last week Dan Westman walked us through dozens of chapters in Job in which three of Job's friends try to tell him why he was suffering. We saw that they wanted God to follow a principle — a fundamental way of approaching the world where good people get good things, and bad people get bad things.

However, we learned that God refuses to be bound by a principle. God rules not according to a system, but by his wisdom.

Today we are introduced to a fourth friend. At first, we're hopeful that he might have some better answers. His name is Elihu, which means "He is my God." Maybe he has a better picture of God to offer us.

Elihu does have a different view of God. His approach is new. In fact, understanding how he views God will resonate with some of us. I think we'll find that we might view God the same way as Elihu, but his picture of God is no better than the other friends.

Elihu believes that God causes suffering to teach us. He thinks we are all students in this world and we have something to learn. When we make mistakes, God sends pain to instruct us. He corrects us through suffering. If we are experiencing difficulty, we have to figure out the lesson we are supposed to learn, and then God will let up.

I hope we're going to come to see that God wants more than to teach us a lesson. Even as you watch this sermon this morning, my hope is not primarily that you learn something. That's what Elihu would want for you. Instead, I hope that you might encounter God through these words of the Bible. I'm praying that your picture of God would be transformed and you would meet him in a new way.

During this time, when there are so many unknowns, we need to find God. Like no other time, we need to meet Jesus.

We're looking at several chapters this morning, and we'll focus on three ideas that Elihu suggests. We'll ask them as questions. Here's a spoiler: the answers to all of these questions are "no." We'll clear out those false ideas about God so that we can find out who he really is.

Does pain teach us a lesson?

Elihu's introduction is almost comical. He casts himself as a younger person. He claims that he was afraid to speak up because he was trying to let the older ones speak wisdom. But eventually, he couldn't keep quiet anymore. Listen to what he says.

Job 32:18-20:

For I am full of words; the spirit within me constrains me. 19 Behold, my belly is like wine that has no vent; like new wineskins ready to burst. 20 I must speak, that I may find relief; I must open my lips and answer.

I love that line, "My belly is like wine that has no vent." Elihu is desperate to speak into the situation. His perspective is very simple: God causes pain to teach people a lesson. Job's other three friends thought God was punishing Job. But Elihu thinks God is training Job.

Read his words.

Job 33:29-30:

"Behold, God does all these things, twice, three times, with a man, 30 to bring back his soul from the pit, that he may be lighted with the light of life."

My family and I have a beautiful puppy who is a mix between a boxer and a pit bull. Boone is a little over a year old and has a ton of puppy energy. That's mostly great, except that a 60-pound puppy with tons of energy can sometimes focus energy in unhelpful ways. One of his favorite toys is our TV remote. We've gone through three so far.

We bought a training collar for Boone that has a remote control we can use to vibrate the collar when he is doing something wrong. We're not trying to punish Boone. We're trying to make him uncomfortable so that he learns not to do certain things.

That's how Elihu views God—God is causing Job to suffer to "bring his soul from the pit, that he may be lighted with the light of life."

Elihu states his view in another way:

Job 36:15:

He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity.

Another translation renders that last phrase, "he instructs them by their torment."

This viewpoint is not an unreasonable way to understand suffering. After all, think about how pain often works in our lives. As a child, maybe we see a hot stove. If we touch it, we get burned. That experience serves as a lesson to us: don't touch hot stoves. Most of us have learned that lesson.

Elihu's problem with Job is that he isn't open to learning a lesson. He is not focused on Job's previous guilt that led to the suffering, like his other three friends. Elihu is focused on Job's response to the suffering. Instead of trying to figure out what God is trying to teach him, he's insisting upon his innocence.

We'll come back to what Elihu says about Job, but first, let's consider what he says about God. Is he right about how God works? Job's other three friends had it wrong. Does Elihu finally get it right? Does God cause pain to teach us a lesson?

One megachurch pastor last week preached a sermon entitled "Is the Coronavirus a Judgment From God?" That's a little closer to the approach of Job's first three friends. But the pastor asked a lot of the questions that Elihu would ask.

What are we supposed to learn from this pandemic? What is God trying to show us by making this happen?

Is this how God works? Did God cause this pandemic? And if so, what were his purposes? What is the purpose of this pain? Don't we often react to suffering in this way? Elihu says that God causes pain to teach us. Is that right?

In the case of Job, we know the reason behind his suffering. We may not understand Satan in God's chamber. We may have questions about what was going on. But we know for sure that Elihu is wrong.

The problem with that approach is how we view God's sovereignty in the world. Just because God is sovereign doesn't mean he exerts direct influence over everything that happens in the world. We happen to know from the text that God did not cause Job's pain. The accuser did. We saw that back in the first chapter of Job, and nowhere was there any mention of God teaching Job a lesson.

Yet at the end of the story, we have already talked about how Job ends up in a better place. He has a more intimate relationship with God. So something good does come of Job's suffering, but his experience isn't a lesson, and it wasn't the original motivation.

Instead of thinking that God is a cosmic schoolmaster, we need to re-orient our view of God. We are tempted to think that God causes pain to teach us. In reality, God uses pain to transform us.

The difference between those two statements may not seem very significant at first. It's only a few letters, after all. But there is a world of difference in those few letters.

There's obviously one huge crisis in the world right now, but that isn't all that's going on. We still have all the other issues we had in our lives a few weeks ago. Now

this got piled on top. When stuff like this happens, we tend to focus on looking back. Why would God allow something like this to happen? What was God's purpose behind this?

Instead of asking a question that looks backwards, perhaps we should be asking questions that look forward. How will God use this to transform us? How will we be transformed individually? How will we be transformed as a church? How can we join with God in his efforts to use this situation for the sake of his kingdom?

Often that transformation begins with us. While Elihu gets his view of God wrong, he does get a few things right about Job. Let's look at that to understand how God might use pain to transform us.

Does God owe us anything?

Last week Dan showed us a brief overview of how Job responded to his suffering. Job believed in the idea that good people get good things and bad people get bad things. Since he was getting bad things, Job tried desperately to prove to God that he was a good person and deserved good things.

Job tried many different methods to get through to God:

- He insisted upon his innocence.
(Job 27:6, "I hold fast my righteousness and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days.")
- He challenged God to a legal showdown.
(Job 23:4, "I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments.")
- He questions God's fairness.
(Job 21:7, "Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power.")
- He blames God for ruining his life.
(Job 16:12, "I was at ease, and he broke me apart.")

Just before Elihu appears, the narrator concludes in Job 32:1, "So these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes."

Elihu has been listening to all of these things. He isn't happy with the way Job responds to his suffering. Here is how he criticizes Job.

Job 35:1-3:

And Elihu answered and 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?’”

Elihu charges Job with exactly what the narrator has concluded. Job is righteous in his own eyes. To be more specific, Job has a kind of self-righteousness that often emerges out of suffering. It was probably there before, but Job’s prosperity masked it.

Think of it this way. Let’s say you have a bag of potato chips. We’ll say it’s Kettle Salt and Vinegar chips, my favorite kind. We buy the chips here in the Bay Area. But then we drive up to Lake Tahoe with them. If you’ve ever done this, you know what happens.

When you go up in altitude, the air is thinner, so the bag expands. Sometimes, the air is so thin that the bag explodes and you have potato chips everywhere.

This is what suffering does. It allows those parts of our lives that were okay before to expand into the rest of our lives. Sometimes it makes us explode into a big mess with potato chips everywhere.

In this regard, Elihu is right. Job has become incredibly self-righteous in the face of this suffering. In fact, this ends up being one of the primary ways that God uses this pain to transform Job. He is forging this self-righteousness out of him.

Elihu challenges this by accusing Job of treating God like other ancient gods. In the ancient world, the gods lived in a mutual relationship with people. They depended on people. The gods needed people to serve them. People needed the gods to control what they couldn’t control: mostly the weather and fertility and crop production.

It was a kind of contractual arrangement. You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours. This is what Job is expecting from God. Job has been a good person—he has done his part for God. So God should treat Job well. This is how most of our earthly relationships work. They are all mutual. You treat me well, and I’ll treat you well.

When things fall apart, we conclude that God isn’t treating us well, and we think it isn’t fair. Haven’t I been good enough? I’m trying so hard. Shouldn’t God give me some happiness in return? In reality, we’re asking a very basic question. Does God owe us anything?

A few years ago, I was talking with a couple who was going through a difficult situation. They were asking the kinds of questions we all ask when we suffer. Why is this happening? When will it change? But they were also asking these questions. We’ve been good Christians. We’ve done all the right things. We thought God would give us good things. After all of our sacrifices for God, why wouldn’t he give us this good thing?

Before their suffering, they wouldn’t have said that they thought their goodness earned them anything from God. But the pain of what they were going through brought this out.

Have you ever felt this way? I know I have. The worst part is that you can’t tell that you feel this way until something bad happens. Then you realize that you were expecting something from God in return for your obedience.

But Elihu tells Job that God doesn’t work that way.

Job 35:6-8:

If you have sinned, what do you accomplish against him? And if your transgressions are multiplied, what do you do to him? 7 If you are righteous, what do you give to him? Or what does he receive from your hand? 8 Your wickedness concerns a man like yourself, and your righteousness a son of man.

Elihu is saying that when we sin, we don’t hurt God. When we are obedient, God doesn’t benefit from that. Our actions don’t take something away from God and they don’t give anything to God. Another way to say this is that God doesn’t depend on us for anything.

When I first started at PBC, I was the College Pastor. I remember spending time on campus at Stanford and realizing how busy most of the Christian fellowships kept the students. I remembered that as a student too. The focus seemed to be heavily weighted on what I could do to serve God. While we certainly ought to serve God, I felt that this focus fed a kind of unhealthy desire to produce stuff for God through our own power.

I had this fantasy of setting up my table for the yearly activities fair with a large banner that read, “God doesn’t need you.” I never did use that banner because I think it would be too easily misunderstood. But the point I was trying to make is the same point Elihu tries to make with Job. God doesn’t need you.

God doesn't need you. He doesn't need your obedience and he doesn't owe you anything because you were a good person. Instead of thinking that God needs you, you need to realize that you need God.

Watching Job suffer is like watching a man turn in upon himself. All he sees is his own pain. He's consumed with his innocence. He can't see anyone else. He is so focused on convincing God that he doesn't deserve this pain.

That's what suffering can do. It can make us self-righteous and self-centered. We don't see anything else. We insist upon what we deserve and our own rights. But once we've moved through that, suffering can also deepen our awareness of how much we need God.

Job had his world change overnight. We know that can happen to us individually. But in the last two weeks, we've seen the whole world change dramatically. Not just for one of us, but for all of us. We have been brought to our knees. All of our technology and capability and determination and we can't control the world around us. If this hasn't made our need for God more visible, I don't know what else can.

When the world falls apart, and we are brought to our knees, it's time to worship. We don't need God more right now. It's just that our need is so much more apparent when everything else is stripped away. You need God.

In this respect, Elihu gets it right. Job needed to be corrected in this way. We need the same correction. But it's time to round out Elihu's picture of God. We've seen that Elihu is wrong about God teaching Job a lesson, and he is right about Job's self-righteousness. But there's one more area where Elihu gets it wrong. And it's another area where we tend to do the same thing.

Is God distant?

After all of his talk, Elihu concludes his speech with a statement about God that makes it clear how he views him.

Job 37:23-24:

“The Almighty—we cannot find him; he is great in power; justice and abundant righteousness he will not violate. Therefore men fear him; he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit.”

Elihu claims that God is completely inaccessible. People cannot find him. He does not regard anyone below him. God doesn't lower himself to concern ourselves with our needs. He is distant and remote. But that's all.

Elihu has a view of God which emphasizes what theologians call his transcendence. God is above, and God is powerful. He is so far from us. But Elihu also thinks of God as a kind of micro-manager. He is causing all these events to happen. Every little thing that occurs is God's way of speaking to us.

The God of Elihu is cold, distant, controlling, and demanding. He is like a distant schoolmaster running this world like a boarding school. From up in his office, he maintains discipline and makes sure everyone stays in line.

I'm worried that some of us see God this way as well. Sometimes I'll talk to people, and they'll describe God in this way and say something like, “I just can't believe in a God like that.” But the truth is that we don't believe in a God like that either.

Particularly when we suffer, we tend to think about God as a schoolmaster. He must have a problem with us. We must have done something wrong. He's either cold and demanding or aloof and unpredictable. Either way, we distance ourselves from him. We're left asking whether Elihu is right. Is God distant?

Once again, we find out immediately that Elihu is wrong. Right after Elihu's words explaining how God doesn't concern himself with us, God shows up. Elihu says “he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit.”

But the next verse begins, “Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind.” That's what we'll look at next week. All we need to know for now is that once again, Elihu is proved wrong. Job has absolutely become wise in his own conceit. He has become completely self-righteous. But still, God speaks to him.

God is not distant. God is near. Especially when we suffer, God is near.

In fact, isn't that what we saw when we studied the Sermon on the Mount? How does it begin? “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

When you are in pain, God is not trying to teach you a lesson. He is not a judge punishing you for something you did wrong. He hasn't broken any deals with you. Let me assure you, when you suffer, God suffers with you. Psalm 34:18 reads, "God is near to the brokenhearted."

It may not seem that way at first, but God is there. So don't ask, "What is God trying to teach me through my suffering?" Ask instead, "How can I come near to God when it hurts?" That's the important question.

It turns out that there are powerful ways to do that. There are ways of praying: listening prayer and contemplative prayer and meditative prayer. There are ways of gathering with other people to share your pain or ask for prayer or receive counseling. We're going to be discovering all sorts of new ways of gathering together during this season. There are ways to celebrate the presence of God through feasting or worship or conversation. There are ways to mourn with God through fasting or silence or solitude.

Dan Westman mentioned when he introduced this series that he and I are fasting on Wednesdays for the season of Lent. That has ranged from 12-hour to 24-hour fasts for us. That equates to skipping one or two meals. I'll repeat Dan's invitation for you to join us; it's not too late to start now.

This coming Wednesday, we'll offer a live-stream prayer time on Wednesday at noon to pray together. When the nation is in crisis, there is no better thing to do than fast and pray. So consider joining us on Wednesday as we come near to God during this time.

Conclusion

Think back to my car accident in college. What was God doing there? Why did that happen? Was God protecting us? Or punishing us? Or instructing us? How can I understand it?

Maybe I can't. Maybe understanding isn't available to me. We can also think about the pandemic crisis going on right now. We have so many questions. How long will it last? How many people will be affected? What will be the long-term effects on our families, our economy, our nation, and our world? Why would God allow this?

But this burning question about the purpose of pain just isn't answered for us in Job. And I'm not sure it ever is. God doesn't give us answers, but he does give us himself. He is not distant. He is not trying to teach us a lesson. But we can recognize in a new way our deep need for him when we suffer.

We know that God is near. We know that his purposes can't be thwarted. Let me leave you with two questions to be asking: How can you draw near to God during this time and how can you allow him to use this for transformation?

Draw near and look for transformation. God doesn't cause pain to do this, but he always uses pain for his glory.