



*33:19-36:16: Elihu Makes the Same Mistake*

Elihu is young, but his wisdom is so profound that some think his appearance is a Christophany. Still, Elihu gets too wrapped up in the details, and this pulls him off track.

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Thank you.

Job 33:19-36:16: Elihu Makes the Same Mistake  
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## 1 Job 33:19-33 (ESV)

*“Man is also rebuked with pain on his bed and with continual strife in his bones, so that his life loathes bread, and his appetite the choicest food. His flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen, and his bones that were not seen stick out. His soul draws near the pit, and his life to those who bring death. If there be for him an angel, a mediator, one of the thousand, to declare to man what is right for him, and he is merciful to him, and says, ‘Deliver him from going down into the pit; I have found a ransom; let his flesh become fresh with youth; let him return to the days of his youthful vigor’; then man prays to God, and he accepts him; he sees his face with a shout of joy, and he restores to man his righteousness. He sings before men and says: ‘I sinned and perverted what was right, and it was not repaid to me. He has redeemed my soul from going down into the pit, and my life shall look upon the light.’*

*“Behold, God does all these things, twice, three times, with a man, to bring back his soul from the pit, that he may be lighted with the light of life. Pay attention, O Job, listen to me; be silent, and I will speak. If you have any words, answer me; speak, for I desire to justify you. If not, listen to me; be silent, and I will teach you wisdom.”*

The only thing wrong with what Elihu is saying here is that he’s saying it to Job. Otherwise, it’s a wonderful portrait of God’s grace. He misreads Job but he wouldn’t be misreading me.

God does discipline us. His desire is for us to grow in our knowledge of him and He doesn’t hesitate to give us painful wake-up calls if they’re what we need.

But notice how close to the truth Elihu’s pre-incarnate vision of our mediator is. *If there be for him an angel, a mediator, one of the thousand, to declare to man what is right for him, and he is merciful to him, and says, ‘Deliver him from going down into the pit; I have found a ransom;’*

Christ is much more than the angel mediator that Elihu envisions, but the parallel is still useful. The main function of Elihu’s mediator is *to declare to man what is right for him*. That is, to “translate” God’s will, so that man can know what he’s supposed to do.

Jesus did this in a surprising passage that everyone knows, but no one seems to get.

*On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ – Matthew 7:22-23 (ESV)*

The real goal isn’t doing lots of nice things for Christ; it’s knowing Him and Him knowing you.

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But how? How do I get to know Christ better and have Him know me better?

There’s no special trick to this. In fact, looking for a trick is exactly how to miss the point. If your goal is to get closer to God, then you will. There are some obvious things to do, like love God and love your neighbor. That means study His word and obey it, and do charity.

People fear that it’s possible to be serious about this and yet still fail. Not a chance.

## 2 Job 34:1-20 (ESV)

*Then Elihu answered and 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. Let us choose what is right; let us know among ourselves what is good. For Job has said, ‘I am in the right, and God has taken away my right; in spite of my right I am counted a liar; my wound is incurable, though I am without transgression.’ What man is like Job, who drinks up scoffing like water, who travels 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.’*

*‘Therefore, bear 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 repay 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. Who gave him charge over the earth, and who laid on him the whole world? If he should set his heart to it and gather to himself his spirit and his breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust.*

*‘If you have understanding, bear 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 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 human hand.’*

Elihu sees Job’s defense as an attack on God’s righteousness.

*Far be it from God that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty that he should do wrong. . . . Shall one who hates justice govern? Will you condemn him who is righteous and mighty?*

This would all make perfect sense – if we didn’t already know that it’s wrong. In fact, what is happening to Job is unjust (in a sense). The first part of the book made that perfectly clear.

But Job, Elihu, and the others, don’t know what happened with Satan in the first part of the book, and they don’t know the ending either. They don’t have all the facts, so they draw the wrong conclusions.

That’s the point. Leave out a few facts and it looks like God is nuts, or unjust, or whatever. Actually, He’s up to something. But until His purposes are revealed no one can figure out what’s going on. That’s why they get it all wrong. It hasn’t dawned on them (yet) that God is doing something completely different.

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Later on, everyone will make a similar mistake in not “getting” the incarnation.

It’s a plot twist so creative that even when it’s staring everyone in the face, they can’t see it.

### 3 Job 34:21-37 (ESV)

*“For his eyes are on the ways of a man, and he sees all his steps. There is no gloom or deep darkness where evildoers may hide themselves. For God has no need to consider a man further, that he should go before God in judgment. He shatters the mighty without investigation and sets others in their place. Thus, knowing their works, he overturns them in the night, and they are crushed. He strikes them for their wickedness in a place for all to see, because they turned aside from following 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— When he is quiet, who can condemn? When he hides his face, who can behold him, whether it be a nation or a man?— that a godless man should not reign, that he should not ensnare the people.*

*“For has anyone said to God, ‘I have borne punishment; I will not offend any more; teach me what I do not see; if I have done iniquity, I will do it no more’? Will he then make repayment to suit you, because you reject it? For you must choose, and not I; therefore declare what you know. 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 rebellion to his sin; he claps his hands among us and multiplies his words against God.”*

Elihu paints a wonderful portrait of God’s omnipresence and omniscience. There’s nowhere to hide. *There is no gloom or deep darkness where evildoers may hide themselves.* There’s nothing He needs to learn. *For God has no need to consider a man further, that he should go before God in judgment.* He judges effortlessly. *He shatters the mighty without investigation and sets others in their place. Thus, knowing their works, he overturns them in the night, and they are crushed.*

Oops. Elihu was doing just fine up until those last two sentences. Now he’s talking through his hat. He doesn’t actually know that God *overturns them in the night*. He gets so wrapped up in his poetry that he just starts saying stuff that sounds good.

This isn’t merely mistakenly assuming that God always judges man in this life. Now Elihu is describing exactly how God judges man – describing things he has not seen.

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What Elihu is doing is completely normal. We all do it. It’s so deeply ingrained in our behavior that we rarely notice it. The word for this is “embellishment.” We don’t normally talk as if we’re testifying in court. We exaggerate, use metaphors, and generally over dramatize things. It makes our speech more entertaining, and often adds comic relief, but it’s not literal.

OK, so were not literal. What’s the big deal? The big deal is that we create a smooth continuum between truth and falsehood. By blurring the distinction, we impair our ability to tell the difference.

Then lies don’t jump out as being all that different – because they aren’t all that different.

#### 4 Job 35: 1-16 (ESV)

*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?’ I will answer you and your friends with you. Look at the heavens, and see; and behold the clouds, which are higher than you. 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.*

*“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 heavens?’ There they cry out, but he does not answer, because of the pride of evil men. Surely God does not bear 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! And now, because his anger does not punish, and he does not take much note of transgression, Job opens his mouth in empty talk; he multiplies words without knowledge.”*

Now Elihu shifts gears – and gets to the point. Job thinks that his suffering has some huge significance. That’s where he’s wrong. God’s priorities aren’t just different from Job’s; they’re larger.

Consider the two trials that Satan hit Job with in the beginning. Did you notice anything wrong with the prioritization? The attack on Job’s body is considered the greater trial.

But isn’t the death of all his children much worse? The less significant trial seems greater to Job because it’s “closer.” His normal sinful nature over-emphasizes his own importance.

Now, generalize this concept. Job naturally (i.e., sinfully) thinks his trials are a big deal. Thus he thinks he deserves some kind of explanation.

Elihu’s answer to Job isn’t to explain why God did what He did; it’s just to say, “So what?”

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This is technically correct, but obviously isn’t a great line to use with someone who’s suffering. That’s why the book of Job is so important. By teaching this principle in the abstract, using Job as a case study, we prepare people for the inevitable trials life brings.

The classic application of this lesson is dealing with unanswered prayer. The reason God doesn’t give us exactly what we ask for is rarely easy to discern.

Instead of a quick explanation for why we don’t get what we want, we may just get a collection of principles that form an interpretive lens to help us see God’s higher purposes.

5 Job 36:1-16 (ESV)

*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 get my knowledge from afar and ascribe righteousness to my Maker. For truly my words are not false; one who is perfect in knowledge is with you.*

*“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. He does not withdraw his eyes from the righteous, but with kings on the throne he sets them forever, and they are exalted. And if they are bound in chains and caught in the cords of affliction, then he declares to them their work and their transgressions, that they are behaving arrogantly. He opens their ears to instruction and commands that they return from iniquity. If they listen and serve him, they complete their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasantness. But if they do not listen, they perish by the sword and die without knowledge.*

*“The godless in heart cherish anger; they do not cry for help when he binds them. They die in youth, and their life ends among the cult prostitutes. He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity. 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.”*

Elihu starts off on a really bad foot here with, *“I have yet something to say on God's behalf. I will get my knowledge from afar and ascribe righteousness to my Maker. For truly my words are not false; one who is perfect in knowledge is with you.”*

Good grief, who does he think he is anyway? More to the point, who is he? Some commentators wonder if Elihu might be more than just some young guy. Is he an angel or something?

What he says next confirms that he's human. He repeats the basic error of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar when he says, *“If they listen and serve him, they complete their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasantness. But if they do not listen, they perish by the sword and die without knowledge.”*

Elihu is young. In that primitive age, he might have only met a few dozen people in his entire life. At most, he has met a few hundred. Life back then was incredibly local; that's why the phrase, *“knowledge from afar”* is supposed to be impressive. Elihu doesn't know enough people, and hasn't been around long enough, to witness how things end for various types of folks.

He's just repeating what he's been taught.

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Yet God will give Elihu a pass. He'll call out Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar but not Elihu. Why?

Despite some errors, Elihu mostly spoke truth. He didn't misrepresent God either. So God, displaying grace, lets him go. Elihu will learn enough just from watching what happens to Job and his friends.

There's a great lesson in this. You can avoid learning things the hard way by paying attention to what happens to other people.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Do you do things specifically for the purpose of getting closer to Christ? How do your Christian activities relate to that goal?
2. We're so used to the Christmas story that we don't realize how surprising the incarnation was. There are other plot twists in history. What's your favorite? What's your favorite plot twist in the Bible?
3. Embellishment is everywhere. Every story seems to be spun to reflect an agenda. We don't like this, but it's so common we can do it without even realizing it. When is this OK, and when is it not?
4. Have you ever wondered why God would care about your prayer requests?
5. Does God seem to hold you to a higher standard, or cut you a lot of slack? Have you noticed a pattern in who God expects a lot of and who He doesn't?

*Items for prayer:*