

# Is God fair?

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Date: 08 March 2026

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'll do keep your Bible open at that passage, Job chapter 34, and we're going to look at the wider passages and chapters surrounding it.! But let me pray and ask for God's help as we look at these verses together.

Thank you, God, for your word. We thank you that you speak to us and your word points us to your son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And so we pray today that through the help of your spirit, you'd help us to hear your voice and to understand what you are saying and to apply it to each one of our lives. For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I wonder this week, how many times have you thought it's not fair? Maybe you've even said out loud, it's not fair.

Young children are well aware when something is not fair. And it's really because that's how we've been hardwired, isn't it? We have got this innate sense of justice about what is right and what is wrong, what is fair, what is unfair.

And so when something isn't fair, then we want justice to be done, whether it's in the law courts, whether at work or in school or in troubled countries, even on the football pitch.

[ 1 : 14 ] We want somebody to say what is fair and unfair. And we struggle in life when things aren't fair, especially when it comes to pain and suffering.

And when it comes to us personally, we find it really tough. And I guess for some of us in this room, you may be feeling that life isn't fair right now as you struggle with personal suffering.

Because it is hard to figure out what God might be doing with what is going on in our lives. Now, as we study the book of Job, and if you're joining us today, we're just coming to the end of Job.

Job's complaint to God in his suffering has basically been that God has been unfair to him. God has treated him unjustly. And so he's been accusing God of injustice, but the direction of travel has been one way.

Job's been accusing God of injustice, but he has not heard anything from God. God has not spoken to him. And then enter this man, Elihu. And Elihu comes up in chapter 32, and he takes up this lengthy section from chapter 32 to chapter 37.

[ 2 : 23 ] And he's a bit of an enigmatic character who somehow just bursts onto the scene, and he takes center stage. Now, remember, if you've been looking at Job with us, there's this lengthy debate that Job has with his friends, three friends called Miserable Comforters.

It takes place from chapter 4 to chapter 27. And each friend has given a speech, and then Job has responded. And then Job, we saw last week, chapter 29 to 31, Job gave his final speech, where he presents his case to God about his suffering, and he wants God to respond, and he wants God to answer him.

But there has been no answer to Job's suffering. And now we reach Elihu here in chapter 32 to 37. And he simply confirms that there is no possible human answer to Job's innocent suffering.

And so we are waiting and waiting, and Job is waiting and waiting to hear God speak. Now, whoever you are today, whether you are a believer in God, or whether you would call yourself an unbeliever, or you're seeking, or you're just not sure what you believe, and whatever you are going through, whether this is a season of suffering for you, or whether you feel life is just going well, Job tells us that we need more than mere human answers to our suffering.

We need to hear what God has got to say. But before God speaks in the book of Job, we hear from this man, Elihu. And his speeches not only prepare the way for God, but they confirm the necessity of why we need to hear from God.

[ 4 : 14 ] And so I'd like us just to ask three questions this afternoon about this man, Elihu. Who is he? What does he say? And then why does it matter? Who is he?

What does he say? Why does it matter? So first of all, who is he? Well, he is an angry young man. Look at chapter 32, verse 1 to 5. So these three men stopped answering Job because he was righteous in his own eyes.

But Elihu, son of Barakel, the Buzite of the family of Ram, became very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God. He was also angry with the three friends because they had found no way to refute Job and yet had condemned him.

Now Elihu had waited before speaking to Job because they were older than he. But when he saw that the three men had nothing more to say, his anger was aroused.

Okay, so this is the first we hear of Elihu. But he's clearly been tracking the speeches of Job and the speeches of Job's friends. He's taken note of everything that they've said.

[ 5 : 19 ] But he is a slightly problematic figure in the book of Job. Commentators aren't really sure what to make of him or of what he says. They're divided on his overall contribution to this big, long stretch of debate about suffering.

In other words, they're asking, Is Elihu a help or is he a hindrance? Is what he says worthwhile or is it worthless? Just like the words of the friends is worthless.

Well, I reckon that Elihu and his speeches are supposed to be deliberately ambiguous. And I know that's a classic sit-on-the-fence position.

But let me just explain why. I don't think Elihu sheds much new light on Job's suffering. He even sounds like the friends in places suggesting that God gives people what they deserve, which is wrong.

And so that's a hindrance. Yet as we listen to Elihu, he moves us away from Job's miserable comforters. And he clearly moves us towards God. And so that's a help.

[ 6 : 27 ] In a sense, he builds up the suspense as we wait for God to speak. And so while he might say much that's true and needs to be said, he is also an angry and an arrogant young man.

And nobody likes angry and arrogant young men. Because as he speaks to suffering Job, I think you discover his bedside manner leaves a lot to be desired.

You might enjoy lecturing Job on the theology and the philosophy of suffering, but he does it with zero pastoral sensitivity. He doesn't recognize Job is going through deep pain.

He needs an arm around his shoulder rather than being lectured. And so now that everybody else has had their say in the book of Job, Job's friends, Job himself, Elihu picks up the mic and he basically gives his tuppence worth.

And his anger is clear. That section we just read, chapter 32, 1 to 5, it says four times that he burned with anger. He was angry with Job because Job justified himself rather than God.

[ 7 : 37 ] And we saw this in chapter 31 where Job claimed his innocence and Job wanted God to answer. Which Elihu regards as outrageous. As if Job, a mere human being, could put the almighty God in the dock and challenge him and question him.

And then also Elihu is angry with the three friends because they found no answer for Job. They declared that Job must be in the wrong. And so he's angry with everybody.

And he wants to respond to everybody. He wants to put everybody right when it comes to God and Job's suffering. But it's interesting because it seems like Elihu is concerned with the honor of God.

That's why he is angry. He's angry because he cares about God being misrepresented and God being disrespected. Which is a right anger to have, isn't it?

But he's not just angry. He is also arrogant. Because as far as he is concerned, he knows what's best. But what's perplexing about Elihu's perspective is that he is not even mentioned when God sums things up at the end.

[ 8 : 53 ] Now we've come back to this passage a lot. Job chapter 42 verse 7 where God basically sums things up. And he notes everybody's contribution. And yet Elihu's is missing.

So Job 42 verse 7 says, After the Lord had said these things to Job, he said to Elipaz the Tenemite, I am angry with you and your two friends because you have not spoken the truth about me as my servant Job has.

So God evaluates God's three friends. He's angry with them. He evaluates Job. He calls Job his servant. But Elihu is ignored.

And I guess that's why his speeches are hard to assess and to value the significance of in the book of Job. And yet the fact that the name Elihu means he is my God.

And that his family tree is mentioned in chapter 32 verse 2, unlike the friends. That this man Elihu gets so much airtime before God speaks. And that he actually engages with some of the things that Job has said and draws from his speeches.

[10:01] All of this suggests to me that Elihu does have something worthwhile to contribute. And even if it's just simply that he picks Job up on his accusations against God.

Of accusing God of being unjust and unfair. Because Job's got to be told that he's got no right to say that God is unjust. He's accusing the perfect and righteous judge of injustice.

And that's a serious as well as a false accusation. Okay, so who is he? That's our first question.

Second question is, but what does he say? Now, Elihu launches into four speeches from chapter 32 verse 6 to 34 verse, sorry, 37 verse 24.

And the first speech is basically chapter 32. Second speech, chapter 34. Third speech, chapter 35.

And the fourth speech, chapter 36 and 37.

And so just like we've done with all the other speeches, we'll summarize each. And there's a summary up on the screen here. So the first speech here is, Elihu rebukes Job and his friends saying that God does speak.

[11:18] So chapter 32 verse 6 to 33. So Elihu, what he does is he takes aim at the friends first. Out of respect, he'd waited. They're older guys.

He's a younger guy. But now he's champing at the bit to say his peace. And basically chapter 32 is his apology for why he can't hold back any longer and he must speak.

So look at verse 6 of chapter 32 to verse 9. So Elihu, the son of Barakal the Buzite, said, I'm young in years and you're old.

That is why I was fearful, not daring to tell you what I know. I thought age should speak, advanced years should teach wisdom, but it is the spirit in a person, the breath of the Almighty that gives them understanding.

It is not only the old who are wise, not only the aged who understand what is right. So for Elihu, this is no country for old men. Verse 12, he says there, You might be old, but you're not wise.

[12:21] I gave you my full attention, but not one of you has proved Job wrong. None of you has answered his arguments. He's saying you're a waste of time. And so he distances himself from the friends because they're miserable comforters, because they've been no help.

So he's not taking the friend's side, but neither is he really taking Job's side. Look at what he says in verse 21. I will show no partiality, nor will I flatter anyone.

So Elihu feels he's got to speak and tell everybody what he knows. You see that in verse 10 and then in verse 17. And quite often in life, you do meet people who feel they have got to speak and tell everybody, the whole world, what they know and how right they are.

Well, that's Elihu. But he seems to do this out of a respect for God, his maker. Because he says in verse 22, For if I were skilled in flattery, my maker would soon take me away.

And so I guess some credit must go to Elihu for speaking out on God's behalf when other people were speaking wrongly of God and disrespectfully of God.

[13:35] And I guess today, too many, as a side application, too many Christians and too many church leaders are afraid to speak out for God. Can just be too weak and insipid and do not question or challenge any of the nonsense that we hear today.

Too many church leaders or Christians can show little passion for the honor and glory of God, which is what Elihu is concerned for. Now, Elihu, after he's rebuked the friends, he then moves on and he rebukes Job because Job can't accuse God of being unjust.

So chapter 33, verse 1 says, But now Job, listen to my words, pay attention to everything I say. So he is for Job, but he thinks Job's been wrong in some of what he said.

And so he summarizes Job's position. He picks up on some things that Job has said and then repeats them to Job. So look at chapter 33, verse 8 to 11.

This is a summary of what Job said in other places. But you have said in my hearing, I heard the very words, I am pure, I have done no wrong, I am clean and free from sin.

[14:51] Yet God has found fault with me. He considers me his enemy. He fastens my feet in shackles. He keeps close watch on all my paths. But Elihu just won't accept what Job says.

Verse 12. And he's not trying to force Job into admitting that he is guilty here.

But he's saying, Job, mate, you just cannot keep complaining about God. Job, you need to be careful you don't have too high a view of yourself and too low a view of the God who made you.

Which is what we often have as human beings, isn't it? And so Job needs to be careful about accusing God of being unjust simply because he doesn't have an explanation from God about his suffering.

And so Elihu wants to insist that God does speak. Verse 14. For God does speak. Now one way, now another. Though no one perceives it.

[16:01] He's saying, Job, God is not as inaccessible as you think. God does speak in various ways. And Elihu mentions two ways in particular.

The first is he says that God speaks through dreams. Where the emphasis here is on God speaking through the voice of conscience. In verse 15 to 18.

Where God exposes our sin and makes us feel bad and guilty in order to bring us to repentance. But the second way that God speaks, and the main emphasis here for Elihu, is that God speaks through suffering.

Chapter 33, verse 19 to 28. So verse 19. Or someone may be chastened on a bed of pain with constant distress in their bones. So the picture here he gives is of a man lying sick, suffering ill in his bed.

So he's near death. And then verse 22. A messenger comes and tells this man what's right. And the man prays. Verse 26. And he is restored to God.

[17:09] And so the images of this man being in pain, and yet God uses the pain in order to turn him back. So look at verse 29. God does all these things to a person, twice, even three times, to turn them back from the pit, that the light of life may shine on them.

So there's a reason for suffering that's not been mentioned yet in the book of Job. Where suffering is to save people and to have the light of life shine on them.

It's to bring people back from darkness to life, from darkness to light, from death to life. I think Elihu's point here is made brilliantly by C.S. Lewis.

He's got a great book called *The Problem of Pain*. And in it he says this. He says, God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain.

It's his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. That's what Elihu is saying here. God speaks to us through our suffering.

[18:16] So it's like Elihu saying, God is like this skillful surgeon who has got to cut, and there will be pain in the cutting, but he's ultimately doing it in order to heal.

Now I've been in ministry for a long time and long enough to see this happen. But suffering is, yes, of course, it is one of the barriers that people have to believing in God.

But also at the same time, suffering is also one of the reasons that people come and put their faith in God. It's the suffering in their life that has led them to God and to come into a relationship with him.

And that's really what Elihu is saying here. That's the first speech, and that's the longest one, so more quickly than the others. Second, Elihu defends God saying that God is just.

So he's responding here to what Job's been saying. Verse 5 of chapter 34 says, Job says, I'm innocent, but God denies me justice. And so Elihu wants Job to know that he's wrong as far as God's justice is concerned.

[19:27] Verse 10, he says, chapter 34, So listen to me, you men of understanding, far be it from God to do evil for the Almighty to do wrong.

So he's saying God's just, And if God's just, then it's impossible for God to do wrong, which is logical, isn't it? Verse 12 and 13, It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice, who appointed him over the earth, who put him in charge of the whole world.

He's saying God is perfectly just, God has absolute power, and so God can do whatever he wants, because he's God. And Elihu says, If God weren't just, then humanity couldn't exist.

Verse 15, All humanity would perish together, and mankind would return to the dust. He's saying there's no hope for us as a human race if God is not the God of justice.

Now, I don't think Elihu's simply echoing the friends in their mechanical approach to suffering.

[20:41] We're all suffering, they say, is God's punishment for sin. Elihu's got a more nuanced approach by leaving room for mystery.

So verse 29, But if he remains silent, who can condemn him? If he hides his face, who can see him? Yet he is over individual and nation alike.

So Elihu's pointing out that God's silence doesn't mean that God is unjust. And so while Job is not suffering because of his sin, Elihu's saying, Well, Job, you're committing sin by what you're saying about God and against God.

And so he says, Job's speaking without knowledge. He is rebelling against God. 35, 36, and 37. Job speaks without knowledge.

His words lack insight. Oh, that Job might be tested to the utmost. For answering like a wicked man to his sin, he adds rebellion. Scornfully, he claps his hands among us and multiplies his words against God.

[ 21 : 46 ] So Job's got to acknowledge, Elihu says, that he's been wrong to speak about God in this way. And later, Job will actually repent of what he's said.

And so the third speech. The third speech is Elihu defends God, saying that God is great. He suggests God is too great to be bothered with Job.

Look at verse 6 to 8, chapter 35. If you sin, how does that affect him? If your sins are many, what does that do to him? If you're righteous, what do you give to him?

Or what does he receive from your hand? Your wickedness only affects humans like yourself, and your righteousness only other people. So Elihu's presenting a God who is so great that he doesn't care about individual people, human beings like Job.

Why would God want anything to do with sinners? Like us. That's the argument. Verse 12 says, He does not answer when people cry out because of the arrogance of the wicked.

[ 22 : 55 ] Indeed, God does not listen to their empty plea. The Almighty pays no attention to it. How much less then will he listen when you say you do not see him, that your case is before him, and you must wait for him?

Elihu's saying to Job, Job, you cannot just assume that God will listen to you, let alone answer you. And it sounds harsh, doesn't it?

But Elihu's right. He's got a point. God is so great that God does not owe us anything. We've got no right to a hearing with God.

We can't assume that God should be listening to our voices because God is so above us. God is so beyond us that God has no need of us.

God doesn't need any one of us. And yet the amazing thing is that God condescends to us. He comes to us, just as he will to Job.

[ 23 : 55 ] Not because Job is somehow, God's somehow in Job's debt and God owes it to Job to give him an explanation. No, because he's loving.

He loves Job and he loves people like us. And we do well to remember this, don't we? Especially when we're suffering. Because if God appears to be silent, it doesn't mean that he doesn't know and it doesn't mean that he doesn't care.

So fourth speech, Elihu defends God saying that God is mighty and majestic in chapters 36 and 37. So in his arrogance, Elihu basically claims to be the fount of all knowledge.

Look at verse 3 and 4, chapter 36. I get my knowledge from afar. I will ascribe justice to my maker. Be assured that my words are not false.

One who has perfect knowledge is with you. Imagine saying that, going into a committee meeting at work, saying, one who has perfect knowledge is amongst you. Just be glad I'm here to solve all your problems.

[ 25 : 01 ] That's Elihu. And yet his point is clear in verse 5. He says, God is mighty, but despises no one. He is mighty and firm in his purpose. He's saying God knows exactly what he is doing.

So firm is his purpose. So firm is his purpose that God will ensure that justice is done. God knows what he's about and he will never act or work in a way that is unjust or unfair.

And because of this, Elihu says, God will punish the wicked, verse 6 and 7. But as well as punish the wicked, God will also vindicate those who are righteous by faith.

And so the righteous may suffer like Job, but he's saying God uses it to make them more into what they should be. And this leads to two different responses.

Verse 11, some will listen. Verse 12, others won't listen to God. Now, just as we think about the implications for us, when you suffer, when I suffer, when we suffer, that doesn't mean that God is punishing us.

[ 26 : 12 ] That's been clear through the book of Job. But God does use suffering to achieve his purposes in our lives. And so God is mighty, but God is never malevolent.

He can't be, because he is perfectly just. And so Elihu is arguing here that suffering is used by God for the good of his people, which means our response to suffering can test the genuineness of our faith in God.

And so what Elihu wants to do, I sense, is to encourage Job to persevere in his suffering. And in verse 13 of chapter 36, he says, Job, you should avoid resentment in your heart, but instead, you should cry out to God in your heart.

And so God is mighty, but God is also majestic. Verse 26 of chapter 36, how great is God beyond our understanding. The number of his years is past finding out.

And so Elihu here is expanding upon God's majesty in this magnificent description he gives through to the end of chapter 37 of God, the creator.

[ 27 : 31 ] He says that God commands the fearsome storm and speaks through it. So look at the end of verse 36, verse 33, verse 33, his thunder announces the coming storm.

Even the cattle make known its approach. And then 37, at this, my heart pounds and leaps from its place. Listen, listen to the roar of his voice, to the rumbling that comes from his mouth.

He's talking about a storm. And interestingly, it's from this very storm that's gathering as Elihu speaks that God will speak at the beginning of chapter 38.

And that's why I think that Elihu and his speeches are supposed to be deliberately ambiguous because Elihu is silenced in the end by the appearance of God.

And yet at the same time, it's Elihu's speeches that prepare the way for God to speak. And so his final words give this great description of God's awesome power over all creation.

[ 28 : 40 ] God's voice thunders and the creation does stuff that we cannot comprehend. Snow, lightning, rain, whirlwind, ice, clouds, the sun. He's saying this is all under God's control.

And that's why Elihu appeals to Job, verse 14 of chapter 37. Listen to this, Job. Stop and consider God's wonders.

He's saying, Job, Job, do you know how God controls the weather? Of course you don't. And so he's emphasizing that as human beings, we just don't know better than God about how to order the universe and the creation and the world and the weather.

And so it's sheer madness to speak as if we think we know better than the God who made us. And so Elihu's saying the proper response is to fear him.

Verse 24, therefore people revere him, for does he not have regard for all the wise in heart? In other words, Job needs to shut his mouth, stop thinking that he's wise, and bow down before the just, the great, the mighty, and majestic God.

[ 30 : 01 ] And no sooner has Elihu said this than God reveals himself. It's like Elihu said enough and we just need God to speak.

And that's what happens in chapter 38 onwards. So Elihu, who is he? What does he say? And why does it matter? I think Elihu's speeches matter because he gets us to God.

And the point of the book of Job is to lead us to God. Elihu doesn't resolve the tension, but he lifts our gaze towards God.

And he has confirmed, if we haven't grasped it yet, that all of our human efforts to understand suffering will never satisfy. You can listen to so much debate, you can listen to so many speeches, hear so many lectures about suffering, the theology of suffering, the philosophy of suffering, and human efforts to understand just don't satisfy.

That's what the book of Job has been telling us. We can talk and debate all we like, but never get the answers that we seek. This is what we read in the prophet Isaiah, Isaiah chapter 55.

[ 31 : 19 ] For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

And that's Job's experience, isn't it? Job never gets an explanation for his suffering. But his patience means that he hears from God, because it's an encounter with God that is the resolution to Job's suffering.

Not the answer, but the resolution to his suffering, because it gives Job this deeper experience with God and a real relationship with God.

And I think that's why in the New Testament, James, in his letter, he highlights Job as an example of endurance or of perseverance in the face of suffering.

So yes, Job was perplexed, but he persevered. And because he persevered in the end, he was commended by God, indicating that God was working his purposes out through Job's suffering. [ 32 : 30 ] And so Job is meant to encourage us, whether we are suffering now or whether when we suffer in the future, it's meant to encourage us to keep going. To keep going because of what the Lord will finally bring about in our lives.

As in Job's case, God does use suffering to accomplish his purposes in our lives. I think there's a great illustration of this in the children's story, *The Velveteen Rabbit!*

by Marjorie Williams, which our kids loved when they were young. And *The Velveteen Rabbit* is basically a story about this stuffed rabbit and his quest to become real.

So let me just quote some of it for you. What is real? Asked the rabbit one day when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender before Nana came to tidy the room.

Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle? Real isn't how you are made, said the skin horse. It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become real.

[ 33 : 42 ] Does it hurt? Asked the rabbit. Sometimes, said the skin horse, for he was always truthful. When you are real, you don't mind being hurt. Does it happen all at once, like being wound up?

Or, bit by bit. It doesn't happen all at once, said the skin horse. You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or who have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept.

Generally, by the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in your joints, and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are real, you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.

It's a great way just to describe how suffering can make you real, a person of substance, the person that God wants you to be.

And yeah, it's never pleasant, and it is painful, but it can't be pointless. And so like Job, we might struggle to see any purpose in our suffering, but that doesn't mean that God doesn't have any.

[ 35 : 01 ] And that's why everything about the book of Job, the more I read it, its style, its substance, its speeches, its suspense, it forces us to acknowledge that there are no human answers to this issue of innocent suffering.

There aren't any. Because the gulf between God, our Creator, and us as creatures is so great that we've got to listen to Him if we're to make any sense of life, and especially suffering.

God often works in ways that defy human understanding. And of course, the supreme example of this is at the cross where Jesus died.

because it was through the suffering and death of Jesus that God was working to accomplish His great salvation plan. And so from a human perspective, the cross was foolish.

What appeared to be weak and shameful, the death of Jesus, was in reality God's plan for defeating Satan and sin and death so that one day He could defeat suffering for good.

[ 36 : 16 ] And that's why Job just actually doesn't make sense without the cross of Christ. But while God gave Satan permission to allow Job to suffer, God gave His one and only Son because He so loved the world.

and Jesus willingly suffered and gave up His life on the cross so that we shall not perish by suffering eternally but have eternal life instead.

So you could not be more loved by God. God is for you but He's not done with you yet. He's not done with any of us.

There's still so much work to be done in you and in me as we become what God wants us to be.

And so it's only as we hear God speak to us through His Son Jesus Christ and believe in Him that suffering will ever make any sense.

Let's pray together. Thank you God for your love for us. That love displayed in the death of your Son. In what was the worst suffering and pain as Jesus hung on the cross.

[ 37 : 33 ] All of that shows to us that you are the God who is for us and not against us. For Jesus died on the cross so that we can be forgiven and accepted by you and live with you forever in your perfect new creation where there will be no more pain or suffering or tears or death.

Thank you God that you are powerful. You're great. you use everything as you work out your plans for this world and for our lives and so we pray that you would help us to trust you even in our

suffering for we pray in Jesus name.  
Amen.