

Job 32-37 'the learning curve of life'

We're back again this morning for our last but one study in the book of Job - so this is number four out of a short series of five! All I can say is this:

just be glad you weren't around in Geneva in the 1500s, in the time of John Calvin, when he preached 159 sermons on Job - he did one a day spanning a period of just under six months! He did so at a time when he was under fierce attack from all quarters because of his understanding of the doctrine of predestination. Coupled with that, he was in bad shape physically and had all kinds of serious medical issues. Hence, his timely series on Job!

Some time later in the 1800s the famous Baptist preacher, C H Spurgeon, of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, preached no fewer than 88 sermons on Job.

I have a couple of pastor friends: the American one preached his way through Job for 25 Sunday mornings; and the other one, an Irishman serving in Plains, Scotland, has just finished doing it over 23 Sunday evenings!

So you're getting off rather lightly with a handful of five! I was half expecting you to smile and break into a round of applause at that point!

Today, we have half a dozen chapters to think about - these have been described by Don Carson as 'the most interesting and the most difficult in the book of Job.' We're shining the spotlight on

chapters 32-37 where we hear sound advice from an old head on younger shoulders!

So far as Job is concerned, and we've covered a lot of ground, life was difficult, enormously difficult ... no one could argue with the fact that his life was punctuated with a potpourri of hurt and hardship, heartaches and headaches. Job could up the ante and take it to another level if he said something like, life is unfair! And, for him, it most certainly was. This is Job's turf ... for you and me to walk on it, it's neither fun nor funny. For the last while Job has heard from his three friends, the original three amigos ... we don't know how long they've been jabbing their index fingers in Job's sternum - it could be a week or two or a month or more - we simply don't know the timeframe ... but it was hard going for Job. So far as Eliphaz was concerned, he gave **bad** advice to Job ... so far as Bildad was concerned, he gave **more bad** advice to Job ... so far as Zophar was concerned, he gave **even more bad** advice to Job. You see, it all began as a mild discussion, which turned into an intense debate and, finally, it ended in a heated dispute. It was nothing but blame, accusation, and insult, times 3 - they are so judgmental and so condemning; their bad counsel is summed up in a brutal one-liner: 'Job, you're getting what you deserve!'

Job's parting shot to the verbal battering he's had is found in chapters 26 to 31 ... I mean, he had an

awful lot to say, and that should not surprise us!
We read in 31:40 a monumental under-statement on closure, for it says that 'the words of Job are ended.'

And that's when Friend Number Four steps out of the shadows and takes centre stage - he's a guy called Elihu. He's the youngest of the quartet - he bided his time for the old guys to get in their tuppence worth. That was the cultural norm in those days.

For what it's worth, I think Elihu talks much too long and says far too little! In what can best be described as 'a long-winded monologue,' he manages to spend a lot of time not saying very much!

It's a bit like some sermons we hear - Elihu is more effective at the beginning and the ending than he is in the middle of his talk! To be honest, in the centre of his oration he gets a little dull and boring. But, in all fairness to him, he shares two excellent points.

First, God disciplines a person to turn him from the error of his way. That principle is as timeless as it is true - God never wastes tests. When God bears down on your life, his goal is to turn the wayward back to himself - as a loving father, he wants to bring the prodigal home. Allied to that, maybe Job, just like Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:7, is suffering because God wants to keep him from sinning.

Second, God governs justly for he is fair. That's another reliable fact; it underlines the great truth

that God is sovereign at all times - he is not only good all the time, he is in control all the time. He is never shocked or surprised by what is going on in your life and mine ... and, in light of Job, there is no obligation on God's part to explain himself.

He doesn't have to tell us why certain things are happening in our lives ... that's when we need to trust him fully. And as the old hymn reminds us, '*they who trust him fully, find him wholly true.*' There are things we can only learn in the dark that we could never learn in the light - for Job, that's the way it is. Life is a learning curve ...!

That's a phrase we hear bandied about these days - we all know what it means ... it's one I've used a lot in recent months as I've tried to get on top of stuff about the house, and especially in the kitchen - I've said to quite a few friends, 'For me, it's a steep learning curve.'

A new job has a learning curve - there's an awful lot to learn in a short period of time, i.e. until the dust settles and you're au fait with it all. The first few weeks in college or uni are no different - it's a challenge until you get your feet under the desk. Marriage and having a family are no different - it takes time to get used to one another, and when kids come along, a whole new routine ... but soon it becomes a way of life! In other words, the first time you do something, it's hard, it's difficult - the more you do it though, the easier it gets.

That's where suffering and trials are for all of us a learning curve - and none of us is exempt. David penned in Psalm 119:71, 'It was good for me to

be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.' A learning curve, yes, and for his benefit, yes!

Did you notice in 32:1-5 that Elihu is upfront and honest when he admits that he is an angry young man ... in fact, depending on your translation, 3 or 4 times do we read that he was burning with anger. The alarm bells should be ringing ...?

The question is, have you ever blurted something out when you were hot under the collar? I have and it seems to me that that was when we not only said things we wish we hadn't said, we said a lot more than we wish we would have said; but we also may have spoken a few home truths that needed to be said.

He was getting all worked up because he felt that Job was trying to justify his behaviour (32:2b) ... and he was also angry with the three friends - Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar - who had had their say - they said that Job's suffering was because he had sinned. And that, as we know, was a load of codswallop.

It was the Greek philosopher Aristotle who wrote that righteous anger was '... to be angry with the right person, to the right extent, and at the right time, and with the right motive, and for the right reason.'

Then, further down the chapter in 32:6-9, we see that Elihu felt intimidated by the three wise men who went before him ... he was shy and loathe to open his mouth and say anything. That said, he does make an accurate observation when he says that those who are up in years may not be wise -

he's hit the nail on the head for grey hair and old age is no guarantee of wisdom - we all know men who are advanced in years and who, when it comes to wisdom, are as daft as a brush. There are old fools as well as young fools!

It's interesting, but Elihu is a kind of enigma - he's a bit of a mystery. Why do I say that? Well, he is insightful one moment and insipid the next; one minute he can be as sharp as a cookie, then he's as dull as ditchwater.

I'm not sure what to make of him when he says in 32:18 that he is 'full of words' - no doubts there, he is given to verbosity - but I think he's also full of himself and that's a worrying flaw in his character. Being younger, he is rash ... being angry, he talks too long!

Before we unpack his speeches, it's clear that Elihu blew it on four fronts once he started pontificating from his soapbox.

One, he took too long getting started - he went round the world for a short cut! Two, he comes across as pompous - there's a lot of pride oozing between the lines. Talk about dogmatism, this is it ... he's an example of bad practice and how not to counsel someone in need.

Three, he doesn't tell Job anything new - it's old hat so far as Job is concerned. No wonder there was no response from Job - he heard it all from the other three ... it was as if the needle got stuck on the record player.

Four, he comes across as a guy with all the answers when, in reality, nothing could be

further from the truth. He never owns up and says, 'I'm not sure ... I don't know ...'

I'm struggling with Elihu and the way he's going all guns blazing at Job ... ok, there are many good things about the guy, but you can tell that he's a kind of know-all, he's not a learner. He has it all worked out, he has all the answers.

There's no hint of empathy at all ... it's in-your-face stuff ... the chances are, he's never had one boil on his flesh, and Job's body is covered with them from head to toe. Ah, my friends, even if you think you're in the right like Elihu did, you don't kick a dear brother when he's down.

When Elihu gives his spiel to Job it comes in four parts - you can see them there in the Bible - the first is in chapters 32 and 33 where **God is not silent**; the second is recorded in chapter 34 where **God is not unjust**; his third speech is in chapter 35 where **God is not uncaring**; then his fourth and final speech is in chapters 36 and 37 where **God is not powerless**.

You see, let me tease that out for you ... **one**, when Job had had enough and was at the end of his tether, he sometimes mistakes the silence of God for the indifference of God to his plight. **Two**, Job concludes that God is unjust in his dealings with him since he has done nothing wrong to deserve his suffering.

Three, Job assumes, since God does not respond to all of his cries for help, that God must be uncaring. **Four**, even though Job knows that God

is all powerful, he cannot fathom why God has not exerted his power to remedy his suffering.

I don't want to go into all the detail of these few chapters - it's enough for us to highlight some key truths - truths that will help us appreciate more of the character of our faithful God. The first point worth noting is that:

God is not silent (32-33)

A quick summary of Elihu's first speech would tell us that God has not been silent, but his message is not what Job expected! In other words, for him and for us, even when life is confusing and the chips are down, God still communicates - He still speaks. He gets in touch with us and, even if we aren't conscious or aware of it, he stays in touch with us!

One of the ways in which he does it is by dreams or visions, we see that in 33:15-18 ... he may have done that with Job - but remember this, that was back in the day before the full revelation of God in his Word. There are remarkable instances today when God has spoken into the lives of men and women in different parts of the world by means of dreams or visions - that often happens to those who are immersed in Islam. The norm, however, for you and me, is for God to speak to us through his Word ...

Then we find in 33:19 that God was speaking to Job through his severe suffering! Suffering is often the doorway to great learning. It was C S Lewis who said: 'God whispers to us in our

pleasures ... but shouts in our pains. Pain is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.'

There again, God often uses others to speak into our lives - we discover that in 33:23 ... Elihu talks about an 'angel' or a 'messenger'. Whoever it is, they can be used by the Lord to minister into our situation. So, for Job, even when things seemed to be spinning out of control, God was not silent.

The second point to emphasise is that:

God is not unjust (34)

Elihu picks up on something which Job said earlier in 34:9 when he noted that 'it profits a man nothing when he tries to please God.' In other words, life is unfair - he says that he's getting the rough end of the stick, he's drawn the shortest straw, that God is rewarding the wrong man! For you and me, if we feel that God has not treated us right, then our faith will be harmed, our obedience will be reluctant, our hope will be destroyed, and our joy will be poisoned.

Elihu's response is to repeat the truth that God is just all the time in all that he does! God doesn't need to err on the side of caution in his dealings with you and I - because he gets it right first time, every time. God is just! And that's something we all need to be reminded of every now and again - when life seems to have dealt us a poor hand, our gracious God only does what is ultimately best for us.

Look at 34:18-19 for further evidence of God's impartiality ... God doesn't play one up against the other for he has no favourites in his family.

You can almost hear the wheels turning over in Job's mind - maybe he's saying to himself: 'Yeah, it's possible for someone to be just and still be unkind.' And that leads on to Elihu's third point:

God is not uncaring (35)

Ah, even when life seems hard, and it often is, God is not heartless - he knows what we're going through, he knows what makes us tick, he knows how much we can handle - in it all, and through it all, he shows compassion (the Psalmist testified to that more than once).

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that there are 'treasures in darkness' - God is not distant when we suffer, he is not aloof or remote - no, he is in it with us, even though we don't always sense that he is!

There's a lovely cling-to promise down there in 35:10 where God 'gives songs in the night.' The Psalmist Asaph said something similar in Psalm 77:6. Paul and Silas knew the reality of that in a prison cell in Philippi in Acts 16 ...! Ah, there's a big difference between whistling in the dark and a song in the night - one speaks of fear sparked off by tension and anxiety - the other shows quite remarkable courage - we can sing when we are in a dark place of suffering.

Sometimes we can be silenced - we lose our song in the night - and that often happens when we refuse to travel up the learning curve ... we say, it's too fast, it's too much, it's too hard! But this is God's way of helping us onward and upward! No wonder Martin Luther would say: 'I have found

affliction to be one of my best schoolmasters.' I think many of us can say 'amen' to that ...

Elihu makes another vital point when he draws attention in chapters 36 and 37 to the fact that:

God is not powerless (36-37)

And he's absolutely right there - our God can do anything, he is omnipotent! That key truth is set before us in verse 22 where we read that 'God is exalted in his power.' A large chunk in the middle of chapter 36 declares the power of God over sinners ... they may have their say, but they don't get away. They don't get off Scot-free! An eternity awaits them.

Elihu also reminds us of God's power over the four seasons - this is fascinating, for we read of the autumn in 36:27-37:5 ... and the winter is portrayed in 37:6-10 ... followed by the spring in 37:11-13 ... and climaxed with summer in verses 37:17-18.

And so the underlying theme in his final speech is this: when life is unsettled, and it often is, God has not been unseated - he rules and reigns. He's in charge, he runs the show from start to finish! He's on his throne in heaven. He controls all the storms in every changing season ... and he's also in control of the storms in our lives. There is so much in this duo of chapters that it can be summed up in five words: It's all about our God! We know that from his insights in 37:1-5 for here is a God who is prominent and preeminent. One who is majestic in his power, magnificent in his person, and marvellous in his purposes. You see,

it's all about him - and, in many ways, this is an ideal curtain raiser for what is to follow when God does speak in the next chapter.

Here is one who is transcendent - one who is mighty, he alone is awesome. He is all around us, above us, and within us.

Without him there is no righteousness. Without him there is no holiness. Without him there is no promise of forgiveness, no source of absolute truth, no reason to endure, and no hope beyond the grave.

That's why he pleads with Job in verse 14 to 'listen to this, Job; stop and consider God's wonders.' The bottom line is that nothing and no one compares to him.

In the words of that grand old hymn: *O worship the king, all glorious above, And gratefully sing his wonderful love; Our shield and defender, the Ancient of Days, Pavilioned in splendour, and girded with praise.*

The final stanza says it all for you and I, no matter where we are on the steep learning curve of life: *Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail, In thee do we trust, nor find thee to fail; Thy mercies how tender, how firm to the end, Our maker, defender, redeemer, and friend.*