



THE HARDEST OF LESSONS

There's a well-known Gary Larson cartoon, of God at His computer about to press the 'smite' key, while watching a man on a monitor with a piano suspended above his head.

Without wishing to analyse the humour out of it, why is this funny? Because we can all relate to it. We're all worried that we might have angered God enough that He might actually *do* this.

I.e. we're all dreading that piano.

But what if we've misunderstood it? What if God isn't angry? What if He's saying something else? That's the point of the next section of Job, and of a new character:

Job 32-33:7

Job has lost almost everything, and his friends have accused him of deserving it. But Job claims the opposite: that God is being unfair (13:20-27). And there's an interesting play on words here: Job or 'yov (spelt *aleph, yod, vav, bet*) is an anagram of 'enemy' or *oviv* (spelt *aleph, vav, yod, bet*). The point being: God is treating Job like an enemy, meaning either Job is bad, or God is (very Carl Jung).

But what if there's another explanation? Enter: Elihu. Elihu ('He is my God' in Hebrew) is younger than the others. And like several young people I've known over the years, he has a lot to say for himself (almost 6 chapters!).

What are we to make of Elihu's arguments? On the surface he sounds a bit like Job's friends. However, there are certain distinctions:

- Elihu refers to his arguments as something different, and contrary, to what has already been heard.
- Unlike Job's friends, Elihu doesn't try to second-guess Job's sin – he merely critiques the arguments.
- Elihu seems to want to defend God for God's sake, rather than out of self-importance or self-defence.
- Unlike his responses to his friends, Job offers no counterargument to Elihu's logic or theology.
- Most crucially, when God finally gives His opinion on things, He rebukes Job's friends – but not Elihu.

But it's in the content itself that we see the biggest difference. Elihu listens to Job, listens to Job's friends, then goes on to explain how God might have other reasons for allowing him – and us – to suffer (chs33-37).

1) God uses it to move us (ch33). Job wants God to speak: Elihu explains that God does speak, all the time – through visions (now the Bible), but also through the challenges of life, to steer us in the direction He wants us to go in. You might be thinking, "That's cruel, Steve." But what if the alternatives are even worse? What if it keeps us from situations that might be detrimental to our walk with God?

That's why Solomon says this, in Proverbs 3:11-12: "My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline, and do not resent His rebuke; because the LORD disciplines those He loves, as a father the son He delights in." Like the rod of a shepherd, trouble can act as a compass to get us where He wants us to be. As individuals, even as communities.

It's God's way of saying, "Not that way. *This way!*"

2) God uses it to teach us (ch34). Job wants justice: Elihu tells him that God will deliver it, but in His time, not ours. In the meantime, God is teaching us something – and He's using suffering to do it. He's teaching those who suffer to keep on trusting; but He's also teaching those who witness that suffering to be caring and considerate.

That's the thought behind Paul's words in Colossians 3:12-13: "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." Most would regard these as among the greatest of human virtues (even divine). But the only classroom where such qualities can be taught, learnt, and applied, is suffering.

I.e. suffering has the potential to bring out the best in us.

3) God uses it to prove us (ch35). Job says he can't see the point of being godly anymore; Elihu points out that this is precisely why suffering is so important to us. It helps us understand ourselves – what really makes us

tick. How else can we be certain that we worship God for the God He is, not just what we get out of Him? Suffering is the only way. It exposes our motives and enables us to go to God and ask Him to purify us, like a precious metal.

Peter makes the same point, in 1 Peter 1:7: "These (trials) have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed."

I.e. suffering is a sign that we matter (not that we don't!).

4) God uses it to bless us (chs36-37). Elihu detects that his audience is getting fidgety, so he introduces one last point – and he uses a gathering storm as a visual aid. Why did God create storms? Elihu gives us 3 reasons (37:13): to discipline us; to enable life on earth to exist; and because He loves us (in fact, Elihu is the only person, apart from Job, to use the word *chesed*, lovingkindness).

Think about it like this: in a universe so brain-explodingly big, why is God so concerned with this tiny little marble of a planet? And specifically, with *us*? As David says in Psalm 8:4: "What is man that you are mindful of him; the son of man that you care for him?" Is it out of spite? No. Indifference? No. Love? Yes!

It may be a tough love sometimes, but it's *still* love.

The Rough With The Smooth

Elihu ends with, "See that storm, Job? Looks like God is about to show up – in person!" And at that moment, Elihu becomes a foreshadow of a certain NT character. Elihu was to God what John the Baptist was to Jesus – His forerunner. And like John the Baptist, in 33:23-26 Elihu prophesies the coming of a *melitz*, a mediator, between us and God – someone who would ransom us and eventually restore us. And that someone is? Jesus.

But for now, we suffer. Because there are some lessons that can only be learnt through suffering. As C S Lewis put it: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our consciences, but shouts at us in our pains. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Or to try, at least.

May we, as His sons and daughters, allow the storms of life to do their job. Not to punish us, but to move us, teach us, prove us, and bless us.

And know that God regards us as friends, not enemies. Even in the midst of such things.