

# The Wrath of Elihu



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week’s Study:** *Job 13:28, Job 28:28, Job 32:1–5, Job 34:10–15, Ezek. 28:12–17, Job 1–2:10.*

**Memory Text:** “ ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts’ ” (*Isaiah 55:9, NKJV*).

And so it goes, the battle of words between Job and these three men, words that at times are profound, beautiful, deep, and true. How often people will quote from the book of Job, even quotes from Eliphaz, Bildad, or Zophar. And that’s because, as we have seen again and again, they did have a lot of good things to say. They just didn’t say them in the right place, at the right time, in the right circumstances. What this should teach us is the powerful truth of these texts in Proverbs 25:11–13:

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold  
 In settings of silver.  
 Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold  
 Is a wise rebuker to an obedient ear.  
 Like the cold of snow in time of harvest  
 Is a faithful messenger to those who send him,  
 For he refreshes the soul of his masters (*NKJV*).

Unfortunately, those weren’t the words that Job was hearing from his friends. In fact, the problem was going to get worse because, instead of just three people telling him he’s wrong, a new one comes on the scene.

\* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 3.

## Miserable Comforters

Even after Job's powerful expression of faith (*Job 13:15, 16*), the verbal sparring continued. Over the course of many chapters, the men go back and forth, arguing many deep and important questions about God, sin, death, justice, the wicked, wisdom, and the transient nature of humanity.

**What** truths are being expressed in the following texts?

*Job 13:28* \_\_\_\_\_  
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*Job 15:14–16* \_\_\_\_\_  
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*Job 19:25–27* \_\_\_\_\_  
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*Job 28:28* \_\_\_\_\_  
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Through all these chapters the arguments continued, neither side conceding its position. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, each in his own way, each with his own agenda, didn't let up in the argument about how people get what they deserve in life; and thus, what came upon Job had to be just punishment for his sins. Job, meanwhile, continued to lament the cruel fate that had befallen him, certain that he did not deserve the suffering. Back and forth they sparred, each "comforter" accusing Job of uttering empty and vain words, and Job doing the same to them.

In the end, none of them, including Job, understood all that was going on. How could they? They were speaking from a very limited perspective, which all humans have. If we can get any lesson from the book of Job (one that should be obvious by now, especially after all the speeches of these men), it is that we as humans need humility when we profess to talk about God and the workings of God. We might know some truth, maybe even a lot of truth, but sometimes—as we can see with these three men—we might not necessarily know the best way to apply the truths that we know.

**Look around at the natural world. Why does this alone show us how limited we are in what we know about even the simplest of things?**

## The Entrance of Elihu

From Job 26 to 31, the tragic hero of this story, Job, gives his final speech to the three men. Though eloquent and passionate, he basically repeats the argument he has been making all along: *I do not deserve what has been happening to me. Period.*

Again, Job represents much of humanity in that many people suffer things that they don't deserve. And the question, in many ways the hardest question of all, is—why? In some cases, the answer to suffering is relatively easy. People clearly bring the trouble on themselves. But so often, and especially in the case of Job, that's not what happened, and so the question of suffering remains.

As chapter 31 comes to a close, Job has been talking about the kind of life he led, a life in which nothing he had done justified what was happening to him now. Then the final verse of the chapter reads: “The words of Job are ended” (*Job 31:40*).

**Read Job 32:1–5. What is happening here, and what is Elihu's charge against Job and the other men?**

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Here is the first time that this man, Elihu, is mentioned in the book of Job. He obviously heard some of the long discussions, though we are not told just when he appeared on the scene. He must have come later, because he was not mentioned as being with the other three when they first came. What we do know, however, is that he wasn't satisfied with the answers he had heard during whatever part of the dialogue he heard. In fact, we're told four times in these five verses that his “wrath” had been kindled over what he had heard. For the next six chapters, then, this man Elihu seeks to give his understanding and explanation of the issues that all these men confronted because of the calamity that struck Job.

**Job 32:2 said that Elihu was angry with Job because he “justified himself rather than God,” a distortion of Job's true position. What should this tell us about how we need to be careful in the ways that we interpret the words of others? How can we learn to try to put the best construction rather than the worst on what people say?**

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## Elihu's Defense of God

A lot of commentary has been written over the ages about Elihu and his speech, some seeing it as a major turning point in the direction of the dialogue. Yet it's really not that easy to see where Elihu adds anything so new or so groundbreaking that it changes the dynamic of the dialogue. Instead, he seems largely to be giving the same arguments that the other three had done in their attempt to defend the character of God against the charge of unfairness in regard to the sufferings of Job.

**Read Job 34:10–15.** What truths is Elihu expressing here? How do they parallel what the other men have said before? And though his words were true, why were they inappropriate for the current situation?

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Perhaps what we can see with Elihu, as with these other men, is fear—the fear that God is not what they think Him to be. They want to believe in the goodness and the justice and the power of God; and so, what does Elihu do but utter truths about the goodness, the justice, and the power of God?

“ ‘For His eyes are on the ways of man, and He sees all his steps. There is no darkness nor shadow of death where the workers of iniquity may hide themselves’ ” (*Job 34:21, 22, NKJV*).

“ ‘Behold, God is mighty, but despises no one; He is mighty in strength of understanding. He does not preserve the life of the wicked, but gives justice to the oppressed. He does not withdraw His eyes from the righteous; but they are on the throne with kings, for He has seated them forever, and they are exalted’ ” (*Job 36:5–7, NKJV*).

“ ‘As for the Almighty, we cannot find Him; He is excellent in power, in judgment and abundant justice; He does not oppress. Therefore men fear Him; He shows no partiality to any who are wise of heart’ ” (*Job 37:23, 24, NKJV*).

If all this is true, then the only logical conclusion one must draw is that Job is getting what he deserves. What else could it be? Elihu, then, was trying to protect his own understanding of God in the face of such terrible evil befalling such a good man as Job.

**Have you ever faced a time when something happened that made you fearful for your faith? How did you respond? Looking back, what might you have done differently?**

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## The Irrationality of Evil

All four of these men, believers in God, believers in a God of justice, found themselves in a dilemma: how to explain Job's situation in a rational and logical manner that was consistent with their understanding of the character of God. Unfortunately, they ended up taking a position that turned out basically wrong in their attempt to understand evil, or at least the evil that befell Job.

Ellen G. White offers a powerful comment in this regard. "It is impossible to explain the origin of sin so as to give a reason for its existence. . . . Sin is an intruder, for whose presence no reason can be given. It is mysterious, unaccountable; to excuse it is to defend it. Could excuse for it be found, or cause be shown for its existence, it would cease to be sin."—*The Great Controversy*, pp. 492, 493.

Though she uses the word *sin*, suppose we replaced that word with another word, one that has a similar meaning: *evil*. Then the quote could read: *It is impossible to explain the origin of evil so as to give a reason for its existence. . . . Evil is an intruder, for whose presence no reason can be given. It is mysterious, unaccountable; to excuse it is to defend it. Could excuse for it be found, or cause be shown for its existence, it would cease to be evil.*

So often when tragedy strikes, people will say or think: "I don't understand this." Or "This doesn't make sense." This is precisely what Job's complaint had been about all along.

There is a good reason that Job and his friends can't make sense of it: evil itself doesn't make sense. If we could understand it, if it made sense, if it fit into some logical and rational plan, then it wouldn't be that evil, it wouldn't be that tragic, because it would serve a rational purpose.

**Look** at these verses about the fall of Satan and the origin of evil. How much sense does his fall make (*Ezek. 28:12–17*)?

Here's a perfect being, created by a perfect God, in a perfect environment. He's exalted, full of wisdom, perfect in beauty, covered in precious stones, an "anointed cherub" who was in the "holy mountain of God." And yet, even with all that and having been given so much, this being corrupted himself and allowed evil to take over. What could have been more irrational and illogical than the evil that came to infect the devil?

**What is your own experience with how irrational and inexplicable evil is?**

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## The Challenge of Faith

Certainly the primary characters in the book of Job, as mere mortals seeing “through a glass darkly” (*1 Cor. 13:12*), were working from a very limited perspective, a very limited understanding of the nature of the physical world, much less the spiritual one. Interesting, too, that in all these debates about the evil that befell Job, none of the men, Job included, discussed the role of the devil—the direct and immediate cause of all of Job’s ills. And yet, despite their own confidence about how right they were, especially Elihu (*see Job 36:1–4*), their attempts to explain Job’s suffering rationally all fell short. And, of course, Job knew that their attempts failed.

**Even with our understanding of the story’s cosmic background, how well are we able to rationalize and explain the evil that befell Job? Read Job 1–2:10 again. Even with all this revealed to us, what other questions remain?**

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With the opening chapters of Job before us, we have a view of things that none of these men did. Nevertheless, even now the issues remain hard to understand. As we saw, far from his evil bringing this suffering to him, it was precisely Job’s *goodness* that caused God to point him out to the devil. So, the man’s goodness and desire to be faithful to God led this to happen to him? How do we understand this? And even if Job had known what was going on, wouldn’t he have cried out, “Please, God, use someone else. Give me back my children, my health, my property!” Job didn’t volunteer to be the guinea pig. Who would? So, how fair was all this to Job and to his family? Meanwhile, even though God won His challenge with the devil, we know the devil has not conceded defeat (*Rev. 12:12*); so, what was the purpose? And also, whatever good ultimately came out of what happened to Job, was it worth the death of all these people and all the suffering that Job went through? If these questions remain for us (though more answers are coming), imagine all the questions that Job had!

And yet, here’s one of the most important lessons we can take from the book of Job: that of living by faith and not by sight; that of trusting in God and staying faithful to Him even when, like Job, we cannot rationalize or explain why things happen as they do. We don’t live by faith when everything is fully and rationally explained. We live by faith when, like Job, we trust and obey God, even when we cannot make sense of what is happening around us.

**What are the things you have to trust God for, even though you don’t understand them? How can you continue to build that trust, even when you don’t have answers?**

**Further Thought:** In a discussion concerning the question of faith and reason, author John Hedley Brooke wrote about the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and his attempt to understand the limits of human knowledge, especially when it came to the working of God. For Kant, “the question of justifying the ways of God to man was one of faith, not of knowledge. As his example of an authentic stance in the face of adversity, Kant chose Job, who had been stripped of everything save a clear conscience. Submitting before a divine decree, he had been right to resist the advice of friends who had sought to rationalize his misfortune. The strength of Job’s position consisted in his knowing what he did not know: what God thought He was doing in piling misfortune upon him.”—*Science and Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 207, 208. These men in the book of Job, and now Elihu, thought they could explain what happened to Job in a simple cause-and-effect relationship. The cause was Job’s sin; the effect was his suffering. What could be more clear-cut, theologically sound, and rational than that? However, their reasoning was wrong, a powerful example of the fact that reality and the God who created and sustains that reality do not necessarily follow our understanding of how God and the world He created work.

### Discussion Questions:

- ① As we saw, in all the long speeches about poor Job’s situation and why it happened, the devil was not once mentioned. Why is that so? What does it tell us about how limited these men were in their understanding, despite all the truths that they had? What could their ignorance teach us about our own, despite all the truths that we have?
- ② “When we take into our hands the management of things with which we have to do, and depend upon our own wisdom for success, we are taking a burden which God has not given us, and are trying to bear it without His aid. . . . But when we really believe that God loves us and means to do us good we shall cease to worry about the future. We shall trust God as a child trusts a loving parent. Then our troubles and torments will disappear, for our will is swallowed up in the will of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, pp. 100, 101. How can we learn this kind of trust and faith? That is, what choices are we making now that will make our faith either stronger or weaker?

## Doing God's Business: Part 1

This story is not about me. It's about what God is doing through me and what He can do through anyone who's willing to let Him use them.

I've always loved business. I founded my first company selling computers to schools when I was 21. From the beginning God was my partner, and He has blessed me so much.

Later, I bought a software franchise that grew fast. In five years, it grew from one employee to 50 and earned a lot of money. I gave a lot to missions, but I felt empty. Over time I realized that although I was supporting the church's mission, I wasn't personally involved in mission. My wife and I agreed that we needed to be a part of God's outreach to humanity.

Our business interests continued to grow, but I felt God leading me to sell the biggest company. I left the sale in God's hands, and the company sold quickly for more than I had expected.

I knew that God doesn't need my money, but I began to realize that what God wants from me is my time. Mission isn't something we do on Sabbath. It's something we do full-time. I wanted to be personally involved in mission. So, I asked God what He wanted me to do for Him.

One day as I was talking with a fellow Christian businessman, a member of Adventist-laymen's Services and Industries (ASI), I told him about my burden to be personally involved in an evangelistic mission project. I didn't care where the project was, I just wanted to be God's hands. I asked him if he had any ideas for such a project. He said that he'd think about it.

Just then his phone rang, and he excused himself to take the call. When he returned, he told me that the call was from a church leader who told him about a project that's in a country that isn't open to evangelism.

As he told me about the project, I realized that God was answering my prayer! The project was in a country I was familiar with. I knew the language and the culture of the people in that country, and as a businessman I could help the church leaders make it happen. I knew that I could travel there, a place that many others wouldn't be able to enter.

*To be continued in next week's Inside Story.*



## *The Lesson in Brief*

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► **Key Texts:** *Job 32:1–5, Ezekiel 28:12–17*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Analyze Elihu’s speech from its promising beginning to its disappointing end.

**Feel:** Sense the vexing nature of the origin of evil and the impossibility of explaining it adequately.

**Do:** Approach the big questions of life with a good dose of humility, especially in answering them for other people.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: The Pitfalls of Youthful Anger**

**A** What was hopeful about the beginning of young Elihu’s speech—a speech that is subsequently marred by impatience and anger?

**B** How does Elihu’s conclusion relate to the answers that the three other friends provided to Job’s suffering?

**II. Feel: The Inexplicable**

**A** How can we explain that the most perfect being ever created, Lucifer, turned his back on his Creator?

**B** In light of our answer to the preceding question, why, then, do we try again and again to explain the inexplicable, that is, the suffering in our lives and around us?

**III. Do: Practicing Humility**

**A** What is the opposite of humility, and where has it shown up in the great controversy?

**B** What role does our own humility play in the response to suffering and the pursuit of truth?

► **Summary:** When Elihu appears on the scene, there seems to be a breeze of fresh air. He is young and angry, waiting for his turn to arrive. However, he also lacks humility, and at the end of the day his words are no different from the other friends. Evil remains inexplicable, and only a humble faith can give us hope.

## Learning Cycle

### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Spotlight on Scripture:** *Job 28:28, 32:1–5*

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** Elihu's speech promises to be different, but he falls into the same theological trap of retribution theology as Job's other friends. His words are angry, hurtful, and characterized by a spiritual pride that actually plays into the hands of God's enemy, whose initial fall was caused by lack of humility and angelic pride. Only a humble approach to the question of suffering can provide honest answers that are grounded in the fear of the Lord.

**Just for Teachers:** As we look around our churches worldwide, we can perceive that there is a generational conflict playing out. Studies have shown that the church in North America is especially susceptible to not engaging Millennials (those reaching young adulthood around the year 2000). In other places in this world, there are a lot of young people in the church, but very few of them are participating in the leadership of the church, which is reserved for the old and experienced. Discuss with your class how the relationship between young and old (and the in-betweens) plays out in your local church.

**Opening Discussion:** Finally, some young blood with some new perspectives! Finally, somebody who will put things right and fight against the theological establishment! This is the feeling one gets when Elihu, the son of Barachel the Buzite, appears out of nowhere and angrily starts his discourse.

Anger often has been the motivating power of youth. Anger against the established opinions on war, racial segregation, economics, social injustice, and so on, has motivated protest movements worldwide that mainly have been spearheaded by younger generations. A lot of these movements also have brought positive changes to society. Elihu's is not a political agenda but a theological one. His approach was anger paired with a good dose of impatience (*Job 32:4, 5*). His appearance definitely causes a stir.

How do you see the power of youth playing out in your church? What can the youth do that their elders cannot accomplish? What role does anger play here?

## ►STEP 2—Explore

**Just for Teachers:** Ellen G. White has some significant statements about the “army of youth” in our church, which can be summarized in the following quote: “With such an army of workers as our youth, rightly trained, might furnish, how soon the message of a crucified, risen, and soon-coming Saviour might be carried to the whole world!”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 271; compare *Christian Service*, p. 30. It would be interesting to see how this “army of youth” is present in your church. How visible is it, and in which direction is it marching? Read some of the other quotes in *Christian Service* to your class.

## Bible Commentary

Elihu’s message spans six chapters in the book of Job (*Job 32–37*), the longest continuous speech of the whole book. It follows after Job’s words end (*Job 31:40*) and is motivated by a fourfold statement about his anger in the prose introduction to his speech (*Job 32:1–5*) that deserves a comment: Elihu understands Job’s plea of innocence as an attempt at arrogant self-justification. He is also angry with the three friends who fail to convince Job of his guilt. His whole speech is born out of anger, which isn’t a good point of departure for any argument, even if it is presented as holy and righteous wrath.

### I. Elihu’s Speech (*Review Job 32–37 with the class.*)

Elihu’s appearance is marked by an illustrious ancestry that possibly connects him to Abraham (Buz was Abraham’s nephew, *Gen. 22:21*) and even makes him a forefather of David (Ram was an ancestor of David, *Ruth 4:19*). He is definitely a Hebrew in contrast to the three friends, who are Edomites. Thus, Elihu begins his speech by claiming direct divine inspiration (*Job 32:6–10*), which finally moves him to speak against the older and presumably wiser men (*Job 32:11–22*).

In chapter 33, Elihu sums up Job’s previous speeches and promises restoration to him if he listens to what he has to say. The suspense is almost unbearable at this point, and one expects the answers to all of Job’s sufferings. However, chapter 34 is almost anticlimactic in presenting Elihu’s solution, which, in the final analysis, coincides exactly with what the other three friends have suggested—God repays everybody in accordance to his or her deeds (*Job 34:10–15*). Retribution theology once more! And, worse, Elihu added rebellion to Job’s sins (*Job 34:36, 37*) in insisting on his innocence.

Chapters 35 and 36 paint a dismal picture of God, describing Him as a distant Being, far removed from the human sphere and not interested in the individual lives of humanity. Interestingly, Elihu uses storm imagery in the last chapter of his speech (*Job 37*), claiming that he speaks for God, only to stand corrected when Yahweh then really speaks, in chapters 38–41, out of the true divine storm (*Job 38:1*). At the end of Elihu’s speech one cannot but think: a lot of words, a lot of wind, but nothing substantial that could provide any answers—a big disappointment.

**Consider This:** Was Elihu’s angry approach justified? Why, or why not?

## II. Nonsense (*Review Ezekiel 28:12–17 with the class.*)

Ezekiel 28, usually in connection with Isaiah 14, is used to study the origin of evil, as well as the fall of Satan. Indeed, the Bible study guide has studied these texts before in this context. However, there is one other aspect that arises from this epic lament that initially seems to describe the King of Tyre. (Tyre was a Phoenician city famous for its involvement in the cruel Mediterranean slave trade.) But then it turns toward a more universal and cosmic tone that goes far beyond the description of an earthly king. It becomes a description of Lucifer in heaven, the most perfect being ever created. The text does not leave any doubt about the incredible beauty of the “anointed cherub” who resides on the holy mountain of God. This scene is then set in stark contrast to the deepest fall a created being could ever experience. From the very presence of God into the depth of demonic depravity, Satan’s fate will eventually end in a lonely millennium and ultimate destruction (*Revelation 20, 21*).

This does not make sense! And this is exactly the point. Sin and suffering do not make any sense; they are nonsensical. We could rationalize them away, but to do so would be to excuse or defend sin. So, in this vein, all the intentions of the three friends, plus Elihu, to make sense of Job’s suffering are doomed to failure. As a matter of fact, God eventually declares them to have sinned themselves through their speeches. Maybe we, too, should no longer try to explain the nonsensical.

**Consider This:** Why could rationalizing sin and suffering eventually lead us into sin ourselves?

## III. Humility and Truth (*Review Psalm 45:4 and James 4:6 with the class.*)

A beautiful coronation psalm wishes the following characteristics onto the newly crowned king: “truth, humility and justice” (*Ps. 45:4, NIV*). The pursuit of truth needs to be connected to humility, and only the humble will find truth, because he stands ready to be corrected. Elihu displays the opposite

quality; that is, arrogance and pride; and it is exactly these that hinder him (and the three other friends) from coming any closer to truth. God gives grace to the humble but strongly opposes the proud (*James 4:6*). Pride brings us right back to the fallen cherub.

**Consider This:** Is it possible to claim to have the truth, as we as Seventh-day Adventists sometimes do, and still be humble? Explain.

### ►STEP 3—Apply

**Just for Teachers:** Elihu's extended speech is a big disappointment, although it starts out promising. We need to find practical ways to help us avoid the trap Elihu fell into, otherwise we will also be going in circles.

#### Thought/Application Questions:

① How can we differentiate righteous wrath from a self-righteous anger?

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② How can we keep from falling into the same trap as Elihu, who just rehashed the other friends' arguments and added his self-righteous wrath to it?

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### ►STEP 4—Create

**Just for Teachers:** Elihu's young radicalism was more illusion than reality, and his extended speech ends up being a big disappointment.

#### Class/Individual Activities:

Bring to class a beautiful container (for example, a silver cup with a lid) and let your students admire it. Then open it and show the inside of it, which should be prepared beforehand with some offensively rotten food. Read Matthew 23:27, 28 and discuss with your class their reaction when you opened the lid.