

# Let the Young Speak

by John Piper

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*John Piper emphasizes the importance of both young and old voices in speaking truth, guided by the Spirit of God, as exemplified by Elihu in the book of Job.*

**Scripture:** Job 1:1-32, Psalm 84:11, Jeremiah 20:9, 2 Corinthians 1:9, 1 Timothy 4:12, James 1:19, 1 John 2:14

**Topics:** "Spiritual Wisdom", "Faith And Suffering"

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## Description

John Piper delves into the book of Job, highlighting the initial prosperity of Job and the subsequent trials he faced, showcasing his unwavering faith and refusal to sin against God despite immense suffering. The sermon focuses on the significance of Elihu's speech, emphasizing the importance of speaking under the guidance of the Spirit of God rather than relying on age or youth for wisdom. Elihu's characteristics of being slow to speak, expressing righteous anger, seeking relief in speaking God's truth, avoiding flattery, and providing genuine theological insight are outlined as valuable lessons for all believers.

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## Transcript

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Job 32:7-11

The book of Job begins in chapter one with a description of how good and prosperous and religious Job was. Job 1:1, "Job was blameless and upright and feared God and turned away from evil." He had seven sons, three daughters, 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 she-asses and many servants. He was righteous and he was rich.

Then Satan approached God and said that the only reason Job worships God is because God prospers him with so much (1:9f). So God lengthens Satan's leash to destroy Job's prosperity. The oxen and asses were stole by the Sabeans, the servants were killed (1:14,15), fire from heaven consumed the sheep, the Chaldeans took the camels, and all ten of his children died when their house collapsed. The news of all this came on one day and Job 1:20 says, "Job arose, rent his robe, and shaved his head, and fell upon the ground, and worshipped. And he said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.'" Even though God had permitted Satan to do all this harm (1:12), Job saw God's power and will behind it: the Lord gave and took; the Lord shall be worshipped! And the writer adds in 1:22 "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong." It is not wrong to see God's power and will behind our calamities. What is wrong is to accuse him

of wrong.

In chapter two Satan approaches God a second time and says that Job's worship will turn to cursing if God takes his health away. Again God lengthens Satan's leash, this time to afflict Job with awful sores from head to foot. But when his wife urges him to curse God and die, he says in 2:10, "Shall we receive good at the hand of the Lord and not receive evil?" And again the writer adds, "In all this Job did not sin with his lips."

But as Job's suffering hung on and on, his clear testimony to God's sovereign rights wavered and for the next twenty-nine chapters of this book Job wrangles with Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar about the problem of his suffering in view of God's righteousness and his own integrity. God himself in 1:8 and 2:3 had said that Job was a God-fearing man of integrity and uprightness who turned away from evil. How then could a just God unleash such suffering on Job? The answers of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar prove inadequate, and at the end of chapter thirty-one Job has the last say; and he is just as persuaded as ever that he is innocent before God and that God is not treating him justly. He can only conclude that God is acting like his enemy, at least for now (cf. Job 19:25-27).

During these twenty-nine chapters of argument a young man named Elihu had been sitting by quietly listening to Job and his three aged comforters. When Job finishes defending himself and the three comforters finish defending God, Elihu explodes like a bottle of champagne (32:19); and for six chapters his heart overflows against Job and his friends.

There are a lot of students of the book of Job who think Elihu is no better than Job's three comforters, repeating their same mistakes. But there are four reasons why I think Elihu's speech is intended to be a preliminary word from God before God himself speaks in chapter thirty-eight. 1) If Elihu is simply a repeat of the blunders of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar would the author devote six whole chapters to it? We have just suffered through twenty-nine chapters of half-truths. Surely Elihu marks an advance not a setback. 2) According to 32:2 and 3 Elihu aims to say something different than both Job and his friends. 3) When Elihu is finished at the end of chapter thirty-seven Job is silent. He does not dispute with Elihu as he did with the other comforters. Instead, God picks up and addresses Job directly. 4) When God finally turns to Job's comforters to express his anger at them, he only mentions Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar (42:7), not Elihu. Therefore, I think we should read chapters 32-37 not as another misguided effort to comfort Job with bad theology but as the word of God's special messenger Elihu.

In chapter 32 Elihu tells why he finally must speak. The key verses are 8 and 9, "It is the Spirit (of God) in a man, the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand. It is not the old that are wise, nor the aged that understand what is right. Therefore, I say, 'Listen to me; let me also declare my opinion.'" The lesson Elihu teaches us here is that it is not age that brings wisdom but the Spirit of God. There is no necessary correlation between grey hair and good theology. There is no necessary connection between a wizened face and a wise heart. "It is not the old that are wise nor the aged that understand," says Elihu; "it is the Spirit of God in a man that makes him understand."

Of course, there is then no necessary connection between youth and wisdom, either. What Elihu has done is remove age as the dominant consideration in deciding who is wise and understanding. He teaches us that there may be folly in the old and folly in the young; wisdom in the young and wisdom in the old. When we search for a source of wisdom we do not end our search with the question, "How old is he?" We end it with the question, "Who has the Spirit of wisdom and understanding?"

Therefore, Elihu gives us a very needed warning and encouragement. The warning is that as we grow older we must never assume that the ideas we have held longest are the truest. They may be or they may not be. Rather, we must test our oldest ideas against the standard of God as he reveals himself by his Spirit through his word. There is no ground for boasting in the mere accumulation of years. And erroneous notions like those of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar do not gain one millimeter of validity just because they have endured for decades in the minds of religious people. Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.

The encouragement that Elihu gives is this: Let not only the old but also the young speak. If the Spirit of God has filled you with words and constrains you, do not let your youth hinder your proclamation. It is the same encouragement Paul gave to Timothy when he said, "Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Tim. 4:12). It is the same confidence expressed by the apostle John when he said in 1 John 2:14, "I write to you young men because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one." From whom then shall we seek counsel and guidance? To whom shall we listen? To the old? To the young? We will listen to those who give evidence that the Spirit and work of God abide in them--whether old or young.

And so my main point is this: Let us not speak to one another as old; and let us not speak to one another as young. But let us speak to one another as those in whom the Spirit of God is stirring. Let us not be snobbish toward one another as though the freshness of youth or the seasoning of age were the criterion of truth. But let us--old and young--submit ourselves to the Word of God and speak from the fullness of the Spirit within.

Now if we can learn from Elihu what it is like to do this we will be inspired to seek this privilege from God for ourselves and we will more readily recognize it when it happens in others. I see in Elihu's speech at least five characteristics of a person who speaks not in reliance on his age or his youth, but on the Spirit of God.

First, Elihu is slow to speak. He defers to the older men and hopes to listen and learn. Chapter 32, verse 4: "Now Elihu had waited to speak to Job because they were older than he." Verses 6 and 7: "I am young in years, and you are aged; therefore I was timid and afraid to declare my opinion to you. I said, 'Let days speak, and many years teach wisdom.'" Verse 11: "Behold, I waited for your words, I listened for your wise sayings while you searched out what to say. I gave you my attention." The Spirit of God does not make a person hasty or impulsive or impetuous. The Spirit makes us conscious of our frailness, our human fallibility, our need to listen and learn. James 1:19 says, "Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God." It is so easy when you feel you have a message from the Lord to become presumptuous and cocky and lose the meekness and gentleness of a learner. But those whose burden is from the Spirit will be slow to speak, quick to listen and learn and grow. They will remember that the difference between what they know and what they should know is much greater than the difference by which their knowledge surpasses that of others.

Second, there does come a point, however, when the Spirit-driven man gets angry. Verse 2 says that Elihu "became angry. He was angry at Job because he justified himself rather than God; he was angry also at Job's three friends because they had found no answer although they declared Job to be in the wrong." Most human anger is bad. Most of it arises from proud self-asserting hearts which feel like their rights have been denied. And most of it aims at revenge. If we have been put down we will make sure they get their comeuppance. So James says, "The anger of man does not work the righteousness of God" (1:19).

But there is a rare holy anger that comes from and aims at the righteousness of God. The man or woman who is filled with the Spirit will be humble and gentle and slow to speak. They will sit in silence and prayer and soul-searching for perhaps twenty-nine chapters of confused conversation. But there will come a point when the self-justification of man and the accusation of God become unbearable to their holy sentiments and they will get angry. The mark of righteous anger is that it is triggered by the belittling of God not the belittling of ourselves. "He was angry at Job because he justified himself rather than God."

Third, the person who is burdened with a word from the Spirit of God can find no relief until he speaks it. Verses 18-20: "I am full of words, the spirit within me constrains me. Behold, my heart is like wine that has no vent; like new wineskins, it is ready to burst. I must speak, that I may find relief; I must open my lips and answer." It is not as though you lost control like a drunkard. As Paul says in 1 Cor. 14:32, "The spirits of prophets are subject to prophets." And, "The fruit of the Spirit is self-control" (Gal. 5:23). The point, rather, is that the person stirred by the Spirit of God is passionate for the truth of God. He says with the psalmist, "My heart became hot within me. As I mused the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue" (39:3). And with the prophet Jeremiah: "There is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones and I am weary with holding it in" (20:9). O how we need in the church today spiritual leaders with passion for the truth of Christ! We need logic on fire, truth aflame with zeal, the light of sound reason and the heat of strong love for God's glory. Where are the people --young and old--in whom the gospel of the glory of Christ burns like a fire in your bones? The person burdened with a word from the Spirit of God finds no relief until he speaks it.

Fourth, the saint who is moved to speak by the Spirit of God does not flatter or show partiality. Verses 21,22: "I will not show partiality to any person or use flattery toward any man. For I do not know how to flatter, else would my maker soon put an end to me." Flattery means calling attention to someone's real or imaginary strengths in order to win some favor from them. Flattery does not swear allegiance to the truth. It may use the truth if expedient. But it may just as easily distort the truth, because its main allegiance is to human favor. Anything to win approval, be accepted, get in the good graces of the important people. It seems to me that behind all flattery is a failure to trust God. We fear that a straight-forward, impartial statement of the truth will make life miserable. And so we show that we don't trust God to fulfill his promise that he will withhold no good thing from those who walk uprightly (Ps. 84:11).

Don't make the mistake of thinking that all compliments are flattery. Sincere heartfelt compliments are the spontaneous overflow of gratitude and delight. These are good and we should share them often. But a compliment calculated to ingratiate and curry favor is despicable. The saint who is moved to speak by the Spirit of God does not flatter. He is at rest in the promises of God and speaks the truth to all people, old or young, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, famous or unknown, white or black or red or brown or yellow.

Finally, when a man is driven to speak by the Spirit of God (rather than by his age) he brings forth genuine theological insight and increases our understanding of God's ways. Elihu did not merely criticize Job and his comforters; he taught them. He disagreed with Job, that he was clean and without transgression (33:9-12; 34:5). Though Job was an upright man who feared God, remnants of pride and rebellion lay dormant in Job's heart. When his suffering became severe and long his sin awakened and revealed itself. But Elihu also disagreed with Job's comforters who saw Job's suffering as God's punishment for sin. He rejected the idea shared by Job and his comforters that God had become Job's enemy. And the answer he gives instead is that the suffering which God has unleashed on Job is not punitive but curative. It is not a punishment but a cure and a purification. It is not the result of God's anger but the remedy of his love. In

love he has afflicted his son that the vestiges of pride and self-reliance might be purged out of Job's heart (just as 2 Cor. 1:9).

We see this mainly in chapter 33 starting at verse 14. Elihu says that God has two ways of speaking to man to guard him from pride and save him from spiritual destruction. One is by his word in dreams and the other is by his providence in pain. He says,

God speaks in one way and in two though man does not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men, while they slumber on their beds, then he opens the ears of men, and terrifies them with warnings that he may turn man aside from his deed, and cut off pride from man; he keeps back his soul from the Pit and his lips from perishing by the sword.

That is the first way God speaks to man for his good. The second is the one that applies to Job. Verse 19: "Man is also chastened with pain upon his bed, and with continual strife in his bones." The description of the sickness follows and how man is moved to seek God and confess all sin. Then verse 29 says, "Behold, God does all these things, twice, three times, with a man, to bring back his soul from the Pit, that he may see the light of life." And 36:15 says, "He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity."

Elihu's answer to Job is not that God only treats people with strict justice and that Job is getting just what he deserves. Nor is his answer that Job is totally innocent of all sin. He is a righteous and God-fearing man (1:1; 2:3), but his suffering has uncovered the remaining imperfections of his heart. And God's purpose in his suffering is gracious and kind. He wills that Job be cured of every trace of pride and self-reliance. Though the therapy is painful, the final condition will be so much more glorious that all Job's pain will seem as but a light and momentary affliction.

Now let's sum up the lessons of Elihu. The main point from verses 8 and 9 is that there is no necessary connection between age and wisdom or between youth and folly. Wisdom comes from the Lord and can be given to the young as well as the old. The question, therefore, is not, "Who is old?" but, "Who is full of the Spirit of wisdom?" Five things will mark these people who are stirred by the Spirit of God. 1) They will be slow to speak, eager to listen and conscious of how much they have to learn. 2) But there comes a point when they get angry at self-justifying, God-belittling men. 3) They have a passionate love for God's truth and can find no relief until they speak it. 4) When they speak, it is not with flattering words. The Spirit has given them rest in the promises of God and they do not need to curry anyone's favor. 5) What they say is genuine insight and it increases our understanding of God's ways, and helps us trust him even through pain.

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