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God's correction of the righteous man who sins. Shepherding the flock of God.

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Transcript

Job 36, and Elihu continued and said, And if they are bound in chains, and caught in the cords of affliction, then he declares to them their work and their transgressions, that they are behaving arrogantly. He opens their ears to instruction, and commands that they return from iniquity. If they listen and serve him, they complete their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasantness.

But if they do not listen, they perish by the sword, and die without knowledge. The godless in heart cherish not the truth, but the truth of the Lord. He says, They do not cry for help when he binds them.

They die in youth, and their life ends among the cult prostitutes. He delivers the afflicted by their affliction, and opens their ear by adversity. He also allured you out of distress, into a broad place where there was no cramping, and what was set on your table was full

of fatness.

But you are full of the judgment on the wicked. Judgment and justice seize you. Beware lest wrath entice you into scoffing.

Let not the greatness of the ransom turn you aside. Will your cry for help avail to keep you from distress, or all the force of your strength? Do not long for the night, when peoples vanish in their place. Take care, do not turn to iniquity, for this you have chosen rather than affliction.

Behold, God is exalted in His power. Who is a teacher like Him, who has prescribed for Him His way? Or who can say, You have done wrong? Remember to extol His work, of which men have sung. All mankind has looked on it, man beholds it from afar.

Behold, God is great, and we know Him not. The number of His years is unsearchable, for He draws up the drops of water, they distill His mist in rain, which the skies pour down, and drop on mankind abundantly. Can anyone understand the spreading of the clouds, the thunderings of His pavilion? Behold, He scatters His lightning about Him, and covers the roots of the sea.

For by these He judges peoples, He gives food in abundance, He covers His hands with the lightning, and commands it to strike the mark. Its crashing declares His presence, the cattle also declare that He rises. Job chapter 36 opens Elihu's fourth and final speech.

He begins by asking for further patience from the hearer. To this point Elihu has been fairly long winded in his statements. The question of whether this is because of his pomposity, or whether it is a result of his hesitancy, is a matter that divides commentators.

Most attribute it to his arrogance, but there is no reason why we must do so. David Clines is one commentator who cautions against jumping to conclusions in this matter. Elihu presents himself as bearing some great truth.

He's carried this knowledge, as it were, from afar, like an Argosy bearing great treasures from exotic lands. He wants to speak on God's behalf and in God's defence. He insists upon the truth and blamelessness of his words.

These are carefully considered and accurate opinions, at least in his understanding. Within the retribution theologies of the three friends, there seem to be just two characters, the righteous and the wicked. Elihu's theology, however, is a bit more sophisticated.

In addition to the characters of the righteous and the wicked, he has the character of the righteous man who falls into sin. For him, judgement can serve a corrective purpose. God is teaching and drawing him back.

For instance, we might think about the story of David. After his sin concerning Uriah and Bathsheba, God's hand is heavy upon him. Now the purpose of God's judgement in that case is not finally to cut David off as a wicked man.

It's, as a righteous man, to draw him back to himself, to teach him through suffering about the sinfulness of what he has done. While there is clearly a punitive and retributive element to God's judgement, God's purpose is to draw David back to himself and so the restorative purpose of the judgement should not be missed. Elihu seems to be developing a similar point here.

His focus is upon kings. As we have seen before, Job is a ruler of his people. Elihu had also spoken concerning kings in chapter 34.

God deals with kings in his sovereign providence. He lifts them up and exalts them and he brings them low and afflicts them. When a righteous king is afflicted, the Lord wants him to respond in an appropriate way.

Verse 10, he opens their ears to instruction and commands that they return from iniquity. The king who is afflicted is being graciously treated by the Lord, given a warning so that he might return. But he is in a dangerous position.

If he is not careful, he might respond to the affliction by turning away from the Lord rather than turning to him. In this way, the affliction is also a time of testing and proving. The king who does not respond appropriately to affliction ends up sharing the lot of the wicked.

However, the one who responds faithfully will be raised up again. Verse 11, if they listen and serve him, they complete their days in prosperity and their years in pleasantness. One of the things to notice about Elihu's position here is that God's judgment of this kind is fundamentally a blessing.

He judges not because he wants to finish the righteous man off, but because he wants to restore him to himself. Elihu, of course, is not dealing with the case that Job is experiencing. Job is not a righteous man who has committed iniquity.

Job is a righteous man who is suffering without having committed anything that would deserve such treatment. His challenge is less that of repenting than entrusting that God is good, even though all the appearances are that he has come against Job as his enemy. There are a number of occasions in scripture where to test his people, God comes against a faithful servant as an enemy.

And this can be a final test for a number of people. We might think of Abraham being told to sacrifice his son Isaac, or Jacob having to wrestle with God at the ford of the Jabbok. The Lord seeks to kill Moses' uncircumcised son in Exodus chapter 4. And in the book of Job, God has come against his servant Job, the one who fears and honors him as

an enemy.

The lesson that Job needs to learn is that of James chapter 5 verse 11. Behold, we consider those blessed who remain steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

Like Jacob, Job has to wrestle with God and not let go until he is blessed. The message of Elihu, which again is slightly off target, is similar to that of Hebrews chapter 12 verses 5 to 11. If you are a people without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we have respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time, as it seemed best to them. But he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.

For the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. While Elihu's message is off target, Job does need to learn to trust God as a gracious father, even when all the appearances seem otherwise. While Job is currently suffering the lot of the wicked, Elihu wants him to be clear that this is not God's final word.

This is rather a divine word calling for an appropriate response from Job. It is imperative that Job responds by turning to God, not by turning to iniquity. By questioning the legitimacy and the justice of God's action in this, Job has taken a wrong turn.

Rather, he should trust the hand of God and praise his maker. God is a good teacher and he knows what he is doing in Job's situation. At the end of this chapter, which leads into chapter 37, which is the conclusion of Elihu's speech and his speeches more generally, and the speeches of all human beings within the book of Job, Elihu makes a case for creation itself as having some revelatory purpose.

God reveals his wisdom and his intricate sovereignty and power within the great and mysterious processes of his creation. The water cycle is a means by which life is given to the land. God establishes and governs this process.

Likewise, he is the master of the thunder and the lightning. He directs it to wherever it should strike. The way of God is mysterious and inscrutable, yet the creation itself gives us good reason to trust that it is wise and good.

A question to consider, where else in scripture do we learn about God's gracious fatherly intent in his judgment of the righteous? 1 Peter chapter 5 Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. 2 Humble

yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

3 Be sober-minded, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 4 Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world.

5 And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it. She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark my son.

Greet one another with the kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ. 1 Peter chapter 5 concludes the epistle with some parting instructions and greetings.

He turns to address the elders at the beginning, and his reason for doing so seems to follow from what he has just been talking about. They are facing a fiery trial, so they will need oversight. Faithful elders will be especially important at this time.

Elders here are probably referring to people with a more formal role, but it should not be detached from its more informal sense. When we talk about elders we can often think about a formal office or function in some degree of detachment from its more generational sense. Yet the fact that elders are older is not unimportant.

Certain things can only be known through experience, and as we live through the patterns of life we experience those times of sowing and reaping the harvest of our past actions and commitments, and we experience the various seasons of life. Those who are older have gone through these seasons of life, and can put their wisdom at the disposal of those who are younger. Peter speaks of himself as a fellow elder.

He doesn't appeal to his apostolic authority, but presents himself alongside them as one who has the same sort of commitment of oversight. He is also a witness of the sufferings of Christ from a unique vantage point. As Peter looked back upon the sufferings of Christ, no doubt he also recalled his denial, those memories being inseparably bound up together.

He is also a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed. He has a foretaste of Christ's glory in the Transfiguration, and he also has this experience that all Christians have of the Spirit that gives us a down payment and guarantee of what we will receive on the last day. Elders are called to shepherd the flock of God among them.

The notion of the people of God as a flock, and their leaders as shepherds, is one that we

find throughout the scriptures. The patriarchs were keepers of sheep, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph introduces his brothers in Egypt as shepherds. Moses, who once shepherded sheep in the wilderness, shepherds Israel out of Egypt, leading them with a shepherd's rod.

The young David is called from the flock to shepherd God's people Israel. Later, in places like Micah chapter 5, the Messiah is described as a shepherd. Christ, in John chapter 10, speaks of himself as the good shepherd, the one who lays down his life for the sheep.

When we think about shepherds we can often have this image of bucolic mountainsides, perhaps the countryside of the English Lake District, and this very peaceful and serene scene. Yet shepherding, as it is described in scripture, is a far tougher profession. Shepherds had to lead their flock through the wilderness.

They had to protect them from bandits and thieves. They had to protect them from wild beasts. David killed the bear and the lion.

Jesus talks about laying down his life for the sheep. The shepherd in Israel had to tend for sheep in hostile and unforgiving terrain, to locate good pasture in an often dry land. The faithful minister is an under-shepherd of the chief shepherd, responsible to him for his flock.

In John chapter 21 verses 15-17, Jesus had given this charge to Peter himself. When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? He said to him, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. He said to him, Feed my lambs.

He said to him a second time, Simon, son of John, do you love me? He said to him, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. He said to him, Tend my sheep. He said to him the third time, Simon, son of John, do you love me? Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, Do you love me? And he said to him, Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you.

Jesus said to him, Feed my sheep. Under-shepherds are dependent upon and responsible to the chief shepherd. The flock is the flock of God, not their personal flock.

And in places like Ezekiel chapter 34, we have an extensive indictment against the false shepherds who treat the flock of God as if it were their own, and then a description of how God, as the true chief shepherd, will seek out and tend for his flock. In verses 1-6 and 11-16 of that chapter. The Lord said to Peter, You have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and they had become food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered, they wandered all over the mountains and

on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

For thus says the Lord God, Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out, as a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep. And I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land.

And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel.

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

The description of the true shepherd in 1 Peter chapter 5 should be looked at more closely. When we think about elders and pastors, we tend to think about leaders. But the description of the work of the shepherd here does not focus upon the theme of leading.

The sorts of things that are foregrounded are tending, overseeing, presenting an example. Domineering, leading for mercenary purposes, or being an elder only under compulsion, are all opposed. True oversight must be a willing and eager activity, a loving activity exercised from the heart, not for mere financial gain.

It should not be a matter of taking advantage and privilege over others, but of giving yourself as an example. The overseer has authority, but his authority is used in the way of service. What he looks for is not earthly treasure or human power, but the reward of glory that comes from the chief shepherd.

When Christ, the good shepherd, appears, the good elder must be able to give a faithful account of his charge. Those who are younger must be subject to their elders. They must respect their service, they must learn from their example, and they must allow themselves to be tended to by others, to be overseen and guided by humble leaders for their own good.

There are virtues of good leaders, but there are virtues of good followers too. The more general deference towards the older generation that Peter encourages here is a bit counter-cultural in our own time. Our society idealises youth.

Many of our churches have ceased to be intergenerational, and even when they are,

they can continue to idealise youth. The older people can be aspiring to be young. A posture of humility should characterise Christians more generally.

In our relations to one another, whether we are in positions of authority or under other people's authority, we must be characterised by humility and honouring each other. Part of the radical message of the New Testament is that humility and honouring other people is not exclusive to those in lower positions in society. God himself is humble in his condescension to us.

Peter drives the point home by quoting Proverbs 3.34. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. No one should boast in God's presence. He then moves into a series of short instructions.

We must humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. We should recognise and submit ourselves to God's providences. They are about to enter into this fiery trial, and they must recognise that God is the one who is in control of all things, even the trial that they are undergoing.

Like Job had to submit to the hand of the Lord, so they have to submit. God will raise them up at the right time. Quoting Psalm 55 verse 22, he calls for them to cast their anxiety upon God.

He cares for us. Just as our Lord charged Peter to watch and pray lest he enter into temptation, Peter presents his hearers with a similar challenge. Once again he tells them to be sober-minded and to be watchful.

They must be alert, recognising that they are acting in hostile territory. The devil himself is seeking to destroy and to consume. He is like a savage beast, a roaring lion.

And what is needed to resist him is a strong, a firm and a steadfast faith. In the struggle that they face, it will help them to recognise that these struggles come from God ultimately, and God will preserve them through them. Furthermore, the sufferings that they are experiencing are not exclusive to them.

Other Christians elsewhere in the world are going through the same thing. And when the time comes, God will raise them up and bless them. He has called them to eternal glory in Christ, and they will reach that destination.

He will restore, confirm, strengthen and establish them. He ends with a benediction. Following the benediction there are a number of short greetings.

Silvanus is mentioned first of all. He is a faithful brother by whom Peter has written to them. This might be a reference to Silvanus being the one who bore the letter that was carried to different places.

Or maybe Silvanus is the one who was the amanuensis. I believe it is more likely to be the latter. As Peter's amanuensis, it is possible that Silvanus exercised a lot of latitude in what he wrote.

He might have been writing just according to the general theology of Peter, in his own words, with Peter approving and signing off on it at the end. There is plenty of room for debate, but the possibility of such involvement by Silvanus might explain the quality of the Greek that we see throughout the epistle. A quality of Greek that probably exceeds what we might expect from someone with the education of a Galilean fisherman.

Peter communicates greetings from she who is at Babylon. She who is at Babylon is almost certainly not Peter's wife. Rather it is a reference to the church.

We find a similar female personification of the church in 2 John. Where is the Babylon in question? It is almost certainly not the literal Babylon, which had been wiped out by that point. The traditional alternative to this is that Babylon is a reference to Rome, where the early tradition argues Peter lived for some time.

Another possibility, depending upon your reading of Revelation 17-18, is that Babylon is a reference to Jerusalem. We know that both Peter and Mark lived in Jerusalem, so it would not be surprising for them to send a letter from that city. Within the New Testament we find several inversions of the Old Testament themes that associate Jerusalem with captivity.

Jerusalem is in captivity with all of her children, Paul argues in Galatians 4. In the Olivet Discourse Jesus reworks material that was originally associated with oracles against Babylon in the book of Isaiah and relates them to the destruction of Jerusalem. And then of course, in Revelation 17-18, Jerusalem, I believe, is the Babylon the Great, the harlot that is destroyed. Peter also communicates greetings from Mark.

In Acts 12, after he was released from prison by the angel, Peter went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. The Mark here is almost certainly the Mark who wrote the second gospel. Recognising the association between Mark and Peter, we can also see something more of the unity between various parts of the New Testament.

Matthew's gospel has affinities with James, the gospel of Mark is associated with the material of Peter, and Peter is associated also with Jude's material. Luke was a missionary companion for some time with the apostle Paul, and John's material includes both his gospel, his epistles, and the book of Revelation. This suggests that there are essentially four families of material within the New Testament.

And when we consider the overlap and the interaction between these families of material, we will have a fuller sense of the variegated unity of the New Testament as a corpus. The letter ends with a charge to greet each other with a kiss of love. As in Paul,

this token of affection was a sign of the unity of the church as the family of God.

A question to consider, how does the vision of the oversight of elders and pastors that Peter presents in this passage serve as a challenge to prevailing notions of leadership in our day and age?