

## The Learning Curve of Life

The Hush of Heaven Part XIII

Job 32-37

### Introduction

A common expression in our generation is the allusion to a “learning curve”. It is a reference to certain times in life that are hard because we have new things thrust upon us.

A new job has a steep learning curve. There is an awful lot to learn in a short period of time until eventually, things settle down.

Showing up as a freshman in college or as a first year student in seminary will present quite a learning curve.

The concept of the learning curve was introduced by an engineer in 1938, as a way to estimate the cost and efforts of airplane assembly. His theory of a learning curve was simply this – the more a person repeats a series of operations, the less time and effort will be expended in order to achieve the result.

In other words, the first time we do something, the harder it is; the fifth time we do it, the easier it gets.

This is true.

Do you remember the first time you swung a golf club? You probably wish that day had never happened – you have been cursed ever since!

My roommate in college was talking about taking up golf and how hard it was to hit a golf ball. I said, “Nah, it can’t be that hard.”

He replied, “Oh yeah?”

I said, “Oh yeah.”

He took me out to the front yard of our dormitory and brought along his driver. He said, “Now here’s how you hold the club and here’s how you stand . . .”

I felt like I was playing a game of Twister.

He then put an orange down on the ground and said, “Okay, hit it.”

I swung as hard as I could – and missed.

He said, “Keep your head down.”

Like that would help. I swung again . . . and again . . . That orange was completely safe – it was making faces at me; mocking me. I missed again and again. I finally hit it – only because I put the club up over my head and swung down out of exasperation. That orange never left the ground.

There is a learning curve involved with playing golf that makes us feel like we have to remember a thousand things at the same time – until we repeat the golf swing a thousand times and it becomes second nature – for some people.

Do you remember the learning curve of driving?

I learned on a Volkswagen bug. It was baby blue with four on the floor. What fun. My parents let me practice in front of the house. There were several things to remember at once – give it some gas, let off the clutch slowly until it engaged, then let off the gas, then clutch, change gears by putting the clutch back in, let off the gas, shift gears, etc., etc., etc. I learned fairly well. No one got hurt. The neighbors stayed indoors.

When I arrived for my first driver’s lesson, I could not believe it – we could choose between a small Buick and a Volkswagen bug. What luck! I

mean – what good fortune through the providence of a gracious God.

I hopped in the driver's seat with the instructor beside me, slammed it in first gear, and thought to myself, "This instructor is going to be impressed." We took off without a hitch. I shifted into second gear and suddenly, our car screeched to a halt – my instructor had brakes on his side of the vehicle. He looked at me and said, "Son, you're here to learn, not race."

He took all the fun out of it.

What about the learning curve of marriage? But you had premarital counseling – four sessions and a notebook, with charts and everything. What more was there to learn?

The learning curve of marriage becomes very apparent as soon as the wedding is over. You have a lot to learn.

One author said marriage is like getting on a plane heading for the Bahamas. You have all your shorts and Hawaiian shirts packed, along with plenty of sunscreen and even a snorkel and fins. Then the plane lands and you get off to discover you are at the North Pole. Instead of a breeze, it is a blizzard. You need a fur coat, not a swim suit. You need skis instead of fins and a snorkel.

Talk about a learning curve. You thought you were ready – well, ready or not, there you go.

Perhaps you are buried in diapers – now there is a learning curve like none other. As you arrive home from the hospital with a newborn baby, life is a whirl of activity. The only thing missing in the whirlwind is sleep. There is so much to learn. And you stay out of the way while your wife learns it, right?!

Talk about a learning curve. There is nothing quite like the feeling you get when the baby is bathed and lotioned, had that bedtime bottle of milk laced with NyQuil – just kidding – is snuggled into the Winnie the Pooh pajamas with little footies, and is, for the moment, in their right mind and finally asleep. "Nobody breathe – the baby's asleep. Praise God. Now please, Lord, let this be a deep sleep – like hibernation – let it last three months long."

Maybe your learning curve is a major move. Perhaps it is a forced retirement or a new job.

There is at least one learning curve that occurs to all of us – whether old or young; married or single; children or no children; rich or poor; employed or unemployed. We never know when we are going to be put on this curve and we are never fully prepared.

David wrote,

***It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes. (Psalm 119:71)***

In other words, the challenges of life put us on a learning curve that develops godly living, according to God's wisdom.

There is a sharp incline of alertness and even desperation to learn from God when in the valley of affliction.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that even Jesus Christ – though fully God, yet fully man – as a man, . . . ***learned obedience from the things which He suffered. (Hebrews 5:8)***

If affliction introduces the believer to a learning curve, then Job has been riding one of the fastest curves we will ever see. He has been on this learning curve for many months; perhaps as long as a year or two.

By now, we are ready for the hush of heaven to be broken by the voice of God. And we are just studying this – Job has been living it!

Job has said his final words. He has appealed directly to heaven. He is waiting on God to speak.

However, instead of hearing God's voice, there is a brand new voice heard at the ash heap.

## **Elihu's New Concepts for Job**

Beginning in Job chapter 32, a young man by the name of Elihu steps forward to deliver a speech that will take up the next six chapters of this record. Elihu will actually introduce some brand new concepts that are much closer to the truth than the counsel of Eliphaz, or Bildad, or Zophar.

- Elihu will introduce the idea that God might have sent Job this suffering, not because he sinned, but to keep him from sinning.

This idea certainly had not been bantered around the town dump. In other words, "Job, perhaps God is protecting you from greater sin by sending you affliction."

By the way, this was exactly the testimony of the apostle Paul, who wrote,

***Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me – to keep me from exalting myself! (II Corinthians 12:7)***

In other words, suffering kept Paul spiritually minded.

Elihu suggests this possibility to Job, which would have been tremendously encouraging.

- Elihu will also suggest another new concept that suffering not only keeps a person from sin, it causes them to learn the ways of God.

There is a learning curve that affliction encourages and promotes.

Elihu begins to speak in Job chapter 32. In fact, all he does in this chapter is introduce the fact that he is going to speak and the reason why. *He admits that he is angry.*

At first, we might think, “Oh no! What good can come from unrighteous temper?”

However, we soon discover that Elihu is wrong for the right reason. Look at Job 32:2b.

*. . . against Job his anger burned because he justified himself before God.*

In other words, Job was leaning toward self-righteousness.

Elihu was also angry with Job’s three friends. Notice Job 32:3.

*And his anger burned against his three friends because they had found no answer, and yet had condemned Job.*

Elihu is angry because he had watched and listened as these three men, without any objective evidence, determined that Job’s sufferings were the result of great sin.

Aristotle wrote that righteous anger is, “to be angry with the right person to the right extent at the right time with the right motive and for the right reason.”<sup>i</sup>

This is not easy, and it is not everyone who can do it.

Elihu was, for the most part, a wonderful counselor who not only challenged Job’s wrong attitudes, but encouraged Job with new insights. In fact, Elihu did what every great counselor will do – he prepared Job to hear from God.

His is certainly a long speech – six chapters long.

While he was president, Ronald Reagan loved to tell the story of the young country boy who had just finished Bible college but had never before preached a sermon. When he arrived at the rural church where he had been scheduled to preach, to his disappointment, there was only one rancher present. The church was empty except for this one man. The young preacher walked to the back and shook the

man’s hand and asked, “Well, what do you think I ought to do?”

The old rancher replied, “Well, I don’t rightly know, son, I’m just a cowpoke. But if I went out in my field and found only one steer, I’d feed it.”

That was all the young preacher needed. He delivered a sermon that went on and on and on . . . and on. Over an hour later, he finally ended the marathon message. He walked back to the rancher and asked, “What’d you think?”

The old cowhand replied, “I don’t rightly know, son, but I’ll tell you this – if I went out in my field and found only one steer, I wouldn’t feed him the whole load.”<sup>ii</sup>

This is the way you are going to feel when we are finished today, so buckle up.

## **Elihu’s Counsel for Job**

Elihu begins his counsel in Job chapter 33. In order for us to hang our cowboy hats on some obvious pegs of truth, let us go through this text and bring out the four major points of Elihu’s counsel.

### **1. First, even when life is confusing, God is still communicating.**

“Job, God is speaking! Not like you wanted; not through channels you expected, but He’s speaking.”

- First, Elihu says that God is speaking through dreams, in Job 33:15-18.

In Job’s era, before the Bible was completed, or perhaps even begun – if indeed Job was the first book ever compiled and edited by Moses, as many Bible scholars believe – God spoke through dreams.

For us today, God does not deliver revelation through dreams but has already revealed His word through the prophets and apostles who composed the book we are holding – the Bible.

The trouble with our evangelical world is that it is so bored with the spoken word of God that it now attempts to organize and sell ways for us to interpret our dreams. Manuals on how to interpret dreams can be picked up at the local Christian bookstore. All sorts of confusion and chaos will be the result.

Finding some hidden spiritual truth in a dream opens the door to subjective departure from the truth of God’s word. This is the reason that even the prophet Isaiah challenged his people to stick with,

*. . . the law and . . . the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them. (Isaiah 8:20 KJV)*

Today, dreams are not new revelation from God. They are nothing more than our subconscious minds at work, and these thoughts can certainly impress us, even when we are asleep.

If dreams distract us from the truth of God's revealed word, they are to be discarded. If they support the truth of God's word, then we are really not following a dream but are following the word of God.

I can remember as a rebellious seventeen year old, running from God, living the life of a hypocrite, even though I was in a Christian school and in church every Sunday morning and Sunday night. I was wrestling over the demands of following Christ. I knew what they meant and I refused to surrender.

One night, as a seventeen year old, I dreamed I was in hell. It was vivid. I woke up, covered in sweat, trembling from the affects of that nightmare. It was the truth of God's word already implanted in my heart that came to my mind, and the fear that I was already living under invaded my sleep. I ended up getting out of bed and kneeling there, surrendering my life to Christ.

The truth is – my dream did not add to the word of God or contradict what God's word had already said or take anything away.

The troubling thing to me is that people are going outside the word of God, delving into their dreams to find answers to decisions or direction for their lives, and are getting involved in all sorts of strange diversions from the truth.

We have been told that the inspired word of God is sufficient to equip us for every aspect of life; every good work. (II Timothy 3:16-17)

With Job, however, God could, and perhaps did, speak through dreams.

- Secondly, Elihu reminded Job that God was speaking through suffering.

In Job 33:19a, Job is told,

***Man is also chastened [disciplined; instructed] with pain on his bed . . .***

Suffering is often the doorway to great learning.

C. S. Lewis wrote, "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. Pain is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."<sup>iii</sup>

"God has been speaking to you, Job, through dreams and pain and finally, through others. Messengers from God," Elihu says in Job 33:23 –

which could be translated "angel," but is more broadly believed to be "messenger" – "come to,"

***. . . remind a man what is right for him,***

*Job, even when your life has been most confusing, God has indeed been communicating.*

## **2. Secondly, even when life seems unfair, God is never unjust.**

Elihu quotes Job's own words, in Job 34:9, when Job had said earlier,

***. . . It profits [me] nothing when [I am] pleased with God.***

In other words, "Life is unfair . . . God is rewarding the wrong man."

Elihu will simply repeat the truth that God always does what is right, even when we do not see it.

Notice Job 34:10-12.

***Therefore, listen to me, you men of understanding. Far be it from God to do wickedness, and from the Almighty to do wrong.***

***For He pays a man according to his work, and makes him find it according to his way.***

***Surely, God will not act wickedly, and the Almighty will not pervert justice.***

Throughout this chapter, Elihu will defend the character and nature of God.

When we are discouraged and life seems unfair, the best thing a counselor can do is remind us that God always does what is right – even though He chooses not to explain Himself.

Elihu describes the facts about God:

- He is the just Rewarder (verse 11);
- He is the sovereign Authority (verse 13);
- He is the independent Sustainer of life (verses 14-15);
- He is the impartial Ruler (verses 17-20).<sup>iv</sup>

Notice Job 34:19.

***[God] shows no partiality to princes nor regards the rich above the poor, for they all are the work of His hands***

- We play favorites – God does not.
- We show partiality – God never has.
- We skewer the scales of justice with highly paid lawyers – God judges one and all with

the same scales of perfect justice and perfect holiness and perfect judgment.

*Job, even if life seems unfair, God is never unjust.*

“Oh yeah? Well, it’s possible for someone to be just and still be unkind.”

It is as if Elihu anticipated this kind of response from Job’s heart, so he moved to his third major point.

### **3. Thirdly, even when life seems hard, God is not heartless.**

God is not distant when we suffer. In fact, a precious text arises from the ash heap of Job’s suffering – this time from the lips of Elihu, as he describes God as the One who gives us songs in the night (Job 35:9-10). God gives to those who look to Him,

*... songs in the night*

Elihu says, “God,”

*... teaches us more than the beasts of the earth and makes us wiser than the birds of the heavens (Job 35:11)*

“And above all, God is able to give us songs in the night.”

There is quite a difference between whistling in the dark and a song in the night, right?

I come to our church building sometimes at night to pick up a book. No one is around and the place is dark and big – and sometimes I whistle.

This is not bravery, it is fear.

However, to be in a dark place and all alone while suffering whatever suffering brings, and yet, begin to sing praise to God – that is the courage of faith.

This is Paul and Silas singing in the jail cell in Acts 16.

This is the singing of our Lord, who sang with His disciples in the upper room, knowing He was about to enter the Garden of Gethsemane and go on to the cross. Matthew records in chapter 26, verse 30,

*After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

It is one thing to sing in the sunshine – it is another to have a song in the night.

Perhaps when you sing in our church service, it means to you nothing less than a declaration of your faith in the heart of God.

Joni Erickson Tada and John MacArthur collaborated on a book of hymn histories and

included some of the theology behind these great hymn texts of the church.

For those of you who do not know, Joni broke her neck in a diving accident and has, for several decades, served Christ through a variety of ministries, although paralyzed from the neck down. Her pastor, John MacArthur, worked on a series of books that I have enjoyed reading from time to time.

In one particular chapter, the story was not about Joni’s suffering, but the home going of the mother of James Dobson. Let me read a paragraph or two.

In a few minutes we were sitting on the edge of Myrtle Dobson’s bed. Suffering from Parkinson’s disease, which rendered her confused, she was unable to speak more than a word or two at a time. Dr. Dobson spoke kindly to his mother, reminding her who we all were, even though we had known her very well. She just nodded and smiled. After a few minutes of small talk, Bobbie (one of the guests) spoke up, “Why don’t we sing. Myrtle loves to sing.” So we did.

O worship the King, all glorious above,

O gratefully sing His power and His love;

Our Shield and Defender, the Ancient of Days,

Pavilioned in splendor, and girded with praise.

For the first few lines of the hymn, she silently smiled back at us. Could she understand? Was she listening? We really couldn’t tell. But as we sang the final verse, her mouth began to form the words; then she joined in with each unforgettable word. What was even more amazing than Myrtle’s remembering the lyrics was the fact that she sang a perfect alto. The music may not have landed a record contract, but it was good enough to fill our hearts with enough gratitude and praise to last a lifetime.

Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail,

In Thee do we trust, nor find Thee to fail;

Your mercies how tender, how firm to the end,

Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend.

Dr. Dobson wept almost uncontrollably at the familiar sound of his mother singing this great melody of faith.

This hymn includes (one of the most) powerful four-word summaries of the character of the sovereign God ever recorded: “Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend.” Think of it. Maker: He created us. Defender: the forces of evil melt at the sound of His name. Redeemer: the death of His own Son was not too high a ransom to pay. Friend: A

woman too weak to sit without help had Someone reassuring her of His everlasting presence.<sup>v</sup>

This was their song in the night.

Part of what silences our songs in the night is that we refuse to travel up the learning curve. It is too fast. It is too much. It is too hard . . .

However, this learning curve of suffering:

- deepens the depth of our faith (James refers to trials testing our faith in chapter 1 verse 3 of his letter);
- teaches us about the character of God;
- develops in us a longing for the things of God;
- teaches us to desire the glorification of our bodies;
- causes us to yearn for the coming kingdom of Christ;
- makes us long for heaven.

It elevates our thinking from the trivialities of this temporary world to the glory of our,

*Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend.*

What seems heartless on God's part is actually helping us onward and upward.

It is no wonder that Martin Luther, the reformer, would say, "I have found affliction to be one of my best schoolmasters."<sup>vi</sup>

"Listen, Job," Elihu counsels,

- *Even when life is confusing, God is still communicating.*
- *Even when life seems unfair, God is never unjust.*
- *Even when life seems hard, God is not heartless.*

Elihu will then give his final major point.

#### **4. Fourthly, even when life becomes unsettled, God has not been unseated.**

In this last section of Elihu's speech, he will declare two things.

- First, Elihu declares the power of God over sinners.

In Job chapter 36, Elihu declares the terrible end of sinners – those who refuse to follow after God.

In Job 36:12, he says, "They do not listen to God,"

*. . . and die without knowledge.*

In Job 36:17, Elihu reminds Job,

*. . . judgment and justice [will] take hold of you*

" . . . if you scoff at the wrath of God, like those who let riches keep them from considering their end." (Job 36:18-19)

"Over all who challenge His authority,"

*. . . God is exalted in His power . . . (Job 36:22-23)*

This is the power of God over sinners.

- Secondly, Elihu reminds Job of God's power over seasons.

I found Warren Wiersbe's outline intriguing as he highlighted the weather conditions of the four seasons as further proof of God's sovereign and creative control over all His creation.

In Job 36:27-37:5, the weather conditions of autumn are described.

In Job 37:6-10, there are the conditions of winter with snow and sudden icy storms from the north.

Job 37:11-13 reveals the weather of spring with rain showers.

In Job 37:14-18, God's control over the summer season is revealed, with the heat of the sun, in verse 17, that heats up your clothing and the sky seems like a brass mirror.<sup>vii</sup>

If we simply list Elihu's declarations of God's control in chapters 36 and 37 over the weather conditions of our planet, we find him referring to God's control over:

- evaporation,
- rain,
- clouds,
- thunder,
- lightning,
- flooding,
- etc.

All these elements of nature are not haphazard – they are secondary effects that bring about God's primary purposes.

This is the ultimate and only true comfort to Job, whose children died in a tornado – that God has a purpose and His purposes are never trumped, even by the devil himself.

We have a family in our church that just a few months ago, had their beautiful home in Cary struck by lightning while they were away. The lightning

bolt had fried the alarm system, so no fire alarm had sounded and no signal got sent out. Their home and everything in it burned to the ground.

I went and stood in their front yard the next day. A couple of firemen were sitting in the side yard – the only thing they could do was guard the property. Even though it was a day later, there were still small flames here and there, finishing off whatever was left of the structure. It was an eerie sight to see the columns of the porch still standing and fireplaces at both ends still standing, but the house in the middle gone – just one huge mountain of ash.

Not only did this family's house burn, but the lightning struck their home while they were in the hospital with their teenage daughter who was in critical condition with an infection. She had just come out of the intensive care unit when they got the news that their home was on fire and nothing could be done.

A few days later, I told them that of all things, our book on the first section of Job was being delivered the same week, and I had entitled it, *When Lightning Strikes*. The picture on the cover is a bolt of lightning streaking from the sky to earth. I said to them that if it had not already been printed, I would have dedicated it to them.

I was writing about it – they were living it – a lot like Job.

They told me, interestingly enough, they were not Job – they still had their daughter and their health, and they expressed to me that they were trusting God and His purpose for their lives, in spite of what was happening all around them.

*When life is unsettled, God has not been unseated.*

## Conclusion

“So, Job,” Elihu intimates, “stay the course.”

We should do this, as well. Let us practice applying the truth of these four declarations to our own lives.

### 1. Is God silent?

Where is He communicating in your life right now that you might be ignoring or overlooking or missing?

### 2. Is life unfair?

Will you remind yourself that God is never unjust and He will make everything right? He will not always settle the score on planet earth, but ultimately everything will be made just in His righteous judgment preceding the new heaven and new earth. (Revelation 20:11-15)

### 3. Is life hard?

God is not heartless – in fact, there is a song for you in the night. The question is not, “Lord, do you have a song for me?” The question is, “Lord, I am willing to sing – which song will praise you best?”

### 4. Is life unsettled?

God is still enthroned. In the words of the widow whom I used to greet every Sunday morning with, “How are you doing?” who would always respond, “He is still on the throne.” He is still on the throne.

Life may be unsettled, but God has not been unseated. His is the kingdom forever, and even now He is seated upon the pinnacle of His universe where He reigns supreme. And we are:

*Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail,*

*In Thee do we trust, nor find Thee to fail;*

*Your mercies how tender, how firm to the end,*

*Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend.<sup>viii</sup>*

Another great song to sing when in the night time of affliction:

*Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow:*

*Praise Him, all creatures here below;*

*Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;*

*Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/30/2007 by Stephen Davey.

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<sup>i</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *Be Patient: Job* (Victor Books, 1991), p. 123.

<sup>ii</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Job: Man of Heroic Endurance* (W Publishing, 2004), p. 248.

<sup>iii</sup> Steven Lawson, *When All Hell Breaks Loose: Job* (Navpress, 1993), p. 206.

<sup>iv</sup> Roy Zuck, *Job* (Moody Press, 1978), p. 150.

<sup>v</sup> John MacArthur, Joni Eareckson Tada, Robert & Bobbie Wolgemuth, *O Worship the King* (Crossway, 2000), p. 33.

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<sup>vi</sup> Derek Thomas, The Storm Breaks (Evangelical Press, 1995), p. 279.

<sup>vii</sup> Wiersbe, p. 139.

<sup>viii</sup> Robert Grant, "O Worship the King".