

## **Elihu: A Young Man Who Burned with Anger**

### **Grappling with God: The Gospel According to Job, Part 10**

**Job 32-37**

**David Sunday**

**September 7, 2014**

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Please open your Bible to the book of Job. We're jumping ahead to chapter 32 today. We have about six sermons left in this series in the book of Job, and so far we've met all but one of the major characters.

- We've met Job himself in the first chapter and heard that he was a blameless, upright man who feared God and turned away from evil.
- We've met the Lord, Who affirms that about Job twice in those first two chapters and holds him up as an exhibit of such a righteous man. "Have you seen or considered My servant, Job? There is none like him on the earth."
- We've met Satan, the adversary, who accuses Job and God, saying that no one fears God just because He's God; everyone who serves Him married Him for the money; they only do good things for God because God does good things for them. Satan taunted God and said, "Stretch out Your hand against Job and touch everything he has and he will curse You to Your face." With God's permission, Satan took all Job's property, possessions, wealth, family—ten sons and daughters were killed—and even his health. In all of this, Job did not sin but worshiped God.
- Then we met Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, who surrounded Job with comfort and compassion in the first seven days. As he grieved, they were silent. However, when they heard his lament pour forth in chapter three and heard Job saying he wished he had never been born, they could hold their silence no longer. For many, many chapters, there has been a cycle of speeches from Job's three friends and Job's response. There are three cycles in the book and all of them basically say the same thing, which is that the world operates on the principle of immediate retribution. In other words, you get what you deserve. If you are good, God will bless you. If you are bad, God will punish you. And if you are suffering, it means you must have done something to deserve it. So it is as if they said, "Job, quit saying you're innocent. Just confess your sin, repent and God will restore you."

Job listened to his three friends and held fast to his integrity. He kept longing for a mediator who would allow him to stand in God's presence and make his case. Job had high points of faith, as we read in Job 19, where he said, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the

last he will stand upon the earth. He will defend me; He will vindicate me; and I will see Him face to face. I will see God.”

Job demonstrated great trust and great faith in the face of great opposition from his friends. However, through the suffering, we also hear him wrestling; we hear him struggling; we hear him demanding an audience with the Almighty; we hear him challenging God to prove that he is guilty as charged; we hear him calling God his adversary. As we come to the end of chapter 31, look at what he said in verse 35: *“Oh, that I had one to hear me! (Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!)”* It’s like he wrote up a case to present in the courtroom of heaven. He continued, *“Oh, that I had the indictment written by my adversary!”*

Job saw God as his enemy. That’s where we find him at the end of chapter 31. All the talk of his friends petered out. They were exhausted and out of breath. Job won the argument with Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. They failed to prove that he was guilty of any sin to deserve what came upon him. Based on the prologue, we know that Job was right. He did not suffer due to some gross sin in his life. Job proved that his friends’ simplistic doctrine of retributive justice is insufficient. However, Job did not answer the question either. He did not know why he suffered. In his grief and the prolonged misery of it all, Job began to sound as if he believed God is arbitrary or capricious. Job grew increasingly restless, even brash and insolent, in the things he said about God.

If the book ended here we would be in a hard place, but a new character appears on the scene. It’s almost a surprise to meet him. We find him in chapter 32. There is a brief prose introduction to this character. His name is Elihu. He was a young man. I thought I might try to preach this sermon in the first person as Elihu. If I had done that, I would have come in jeans, a t-shirt, and maybe a fake tattoo on my arm. I mentioned this to the OK Club yesterday, but they strongly discouraged that approach to preaching. So I’ll just be myself.

### **What Are We to Do with Elihu?**

Elihu was a young man who was very zealous and burning with anger. How would you like to meet a young man burning with anger? They can be really in-your-face and difficult to deal with. Let’s listen to how the narrator of Job introduces Elihu in 32:1-5:

*<sup>1</sup> So these three men ceased to answer Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes. <sup>2</sup> Then Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, burned with anger [that’s the first time you’re going to hear those words]. He burned with anger [secondly] at Job because he justified himself rather than God. <sup>3</sup> He burned with anger [for the third time] also at Job’s three friends because they had found no answer, although they had declared Job to be in the wrong. <sup>4</sup> Now Elihu had waited to speak to Job because they were older than he. <sup>5</sup> And when Elihu saw that there was no*

*answer in the mouth of these three men, he burned with anger [yet a fourth time].*

So we have here a young man who burned with anger. It presents a dilemma. What are we to do with Elihu? This is one of the great interpretive difficulties of the book of Job. In fact, commentators and scholars whom I respect are on radically different ends of the spectrum when it comes to how to interpret Elihu. There is a great divergence, even among Bible-believing scholars who love the Word and from whom I've benefited in this series.

On the con side—against Elihu—there are those who say his role in the book was just to provide some comic relief. In other words, the best thing you can do is just laugh at this guy. They say that Elihu was “the ultimate young fool” and that he really presented nothing different from Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. He just said the same things in a different way. One commentator, Francis Anderson, whom I have loved in this series, uses these adjectives to describe Elihu: cruel, cold, detached, crass, trite, perfectionist and vain.

Admittedly, there are times when Elihu comes across very harsh. Look at 34:7-9. I don't hear a whole lot of empathy for Job when Elihu said, *“What man is like Job, who drinks up scoffing like water, who travels in company with evildoers and walks with wicked men? For he has said, ‘It profits a man nothing that he should take delight in God.’”*

It doesn't sound very compassionate to Job's ordeal. However, remember that Job himself said to his wife in 2:10, *“You speak as one of the foolish women would speak.”* It could be that Elihu said the same thing here. “Job, you are talking as if you are in company with evildoers when you say some of the things you are saying.”

At other times, Elihu sounds arrogant and conceited. Look at 36:4. As he begged with Job and the three friends to bear with him a little longer, he said, *“For truly my words are not false; one who is perfect in knowledge is with you.”* Now, in English, when we hear stuff like that, we just think, “Oh, brother! Who does this guy think he is?” But it could be that Elihu just said, “What I am saying to you is true. These are true words of knowledge. I am not lying. My words are reliable.”

It is easy to write off overzealous, young men. But if you are older, beware of smug complacency. It's often those who are not in the inner circle of church or community leadership who are best able to see what's wrong with that community. Just because we believe something for a long time doesn't mean it's true. Just because we're old doesn't necessarily mean that we have wisdom. Wisdom comes from the Holy Spirit, not from age.

Elihu was a young man who was overzealous at times, but I'm going to argue that we should listen to him.

On the pro side are people like Christopher Ash, John Calvin, John Piper and others. They believe Elihu truly spoke forth the words of God and should, therefore, be heard.

The following are some of the reasons Piper gives for why we should listen to Elihu:

1. If Elihu was simply repeating the blunders of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, why did he get six whole chapters to do it uninterrupted? We have heard enough blunders. We have six more chapters. Now, this is a turning point in the book, and the fact that there are six chapter uninterrupted suggests there is something new here that we should be hearing and listening to.
2. In 32:2-3, Elihu himself claimed to have something new to add to the discussion. He was not happy with Job's friends, nor was he happy with Job. He thought they both had gone awry in some way and he tried to bring a corrective word. That's a reason to listen. He claimed to have something new.
3. When Elihu finished speaking, Job was silent. Elihu paused at times and gave Job the opportunity to answer, but Job did not dispute Elihu's claims. In fact, I think what we are going to see in the final chapters is that when Job finally repented, he repented of some of the very things Elihu said he should repent of.
4. God spoke after Elihu and built from where Elihu left off. God expressed His anger at Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, but God did not express anger with Elihu.

I'm going to argue that Elihu has something to say to us. You will have to be the judge of that as we work our way through this. You will have to decide if there is something new here or if there is some way God used Elihu to advance the discussion. I believe Elihu served as a bridge, as someone who prepares the way for the appearance of the Lord out of the whirlwind. Elihu was a true friend who wounds in order to heal. As D.A. Carson says, Elihu was "a great, wise man in the making."

### **How Elihu Contributes Something New to the Argument**

Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar believed that Job suffered because he sinned. They kept saying that over and over again. "You must have done something wrong to be suffering like this." Elihu rejected that even though he did not say that. Instead, he believed Job sinned in his suffering. That is something different.

When Pastor Leeper preached on August 17, he asked the question, "Where has Job sinned in all this?" It's hard to discern as you're reading through the book of Job. Where did he cross the line? We have to be careful not to be too harsh and judgmental on Job, because none of us have been in his shoes. Job did not suffer because he sinned, but Job did sin in his suffering. We know that's true because in the end he repented. Furthermore, God said Job needed to repent.

So where did Job sin? I think Elihu helps us answer that question. Elihu shows us some of the ways Job crossed the line from honest struggling with suffering into sin. In showing us where Job crossed the line, Elihu helps us in to suffer faithfully and worshipfully without sinning ourselves. He's showing us where the line is and where we must not cross. We are going to see three ways we can cross the line.

Think of a believer like a container filled with clear water. Down at the bottom of the container is mud and residue. Job was a righteous man, but there was still residue of sin in his life. As long as you do not shake that container up, everything is calm and it looks pretty clear. However, if you shake it up and stir it up, the mud comes to the surface and it starts to look dirty. Suffering shakes us up. Suffering reveals what is inside us.

As believers, when we are suffering and shaken, we often start to see the residue of pride, self-pity, unbelief or impatience. Suffering has a way of bringing these things to the surface. In the same way he showed Job, I think Elihu is showing us where the shaking of suffering has brought forth sin in Job's life. The only one Who was shaken utterly and completely and Who has suffered and been tempted and tested in every way as we are, yet never sinned, is our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the only perfectly righteous sufferer.

So where and how do we cross from honest struggles in our suffering into sin? **There are three ways we can cross the line.**

**The first way is by accusing God of being unfair or unjust.** When we care more about our honor and integrity than we do about God's honor and God's integrity, and when we say He is being unjust, unfair and malicious, delighting in causing pain or becoming our enemy, we are crossing a line. We are going down a road that we will find to be a dead end, and we do not want to go down that road.

Look at Job 33:8-11 for an example of this. Elihu says to Job, *"Surely you have spoken in my ears, and I have heard the sound of your words. You say, 'I am pure, without transgression; I am clean, and there is no iniquity in me. Behold, he finds occasions against me, he counts me as his enemy, he puts my feet in the stocks and watches all my paths.'"*

Because Job was convinced that he was innocent (and he was in this particular case), Job was prepared to entertain the idea that God was guilty, being unjust and unfair, expressing maliciousness toward him in this situation. The honor of Job started becoming more important to him than the honor of God. In doing this, Job crossed a line.

Joni Eareckson Tada had a diving accident when she was 18 or 19 years old and became a quadriplegic. It must have been extremely difficult for her father to watch his young, beautiful, athletic daughter now paralyzed from the neck down. But he said something to her at some

point early in her sufferings that she held onto the rest of her life and about which she has written. Joni Eareckson Tada's dad said this: "We Christians believe that we all deserve hell. That's true. And, yet, when we get less than hell, we moan and say, 'God is unfair.'" In other words, we have been delivered from hell itself, but when we go through difficult times and when we suffer, it is our tendency at times to moan and groan and say, "God, You're not treating me right." When we moan and groan like that, we forget from what we have been delivered.

Now, many times we do not understand why we suffer and what God brings into our lives. I think there will be unanswered questions until the day we die, and I don't know if we're even going to care about some of the questions we have now when we're with the Lord in heaven. What we do know is that God is ultimately not silent in our sufferings. It might feel like He is, but Elihu impressed upon Job, "You are pleading for God to answer you, Job. You want God to talk to you, but you don't realize that He is present. He does speak in many ways."

In 33:12-18, Elihu said, "*Behold, in this you are not right. I will answer you, for God is greater than man.*" He did not say, "God's greatness is an excuse for God to do whatever He wants. God can do wrong because He's great." No, he's saying God's greatness is a reason to believe God has plans, purposes and perspectives in mind of which we are completely in the dark.

God is His own interpreter,  
And He will make it plain.

(God Moves in a Mysterious Way by William Cowper, 1774)

He knows what He's doing. He's saying God does speak; He speaks in many ways (verse 14). There are ways we do not even perceive:

- God speaks in dreams (verse 14).
- He opens men's ears and terrifies them with warnings (verse 16).
- He speaks to the conscience. He speaks in ways that are designed to turn us away from paths of sin and to remove pride from our lives (verse 17).
- He speaks in ways that are designed to keep back our soul from the pit and our life from perishing by the sword.
- One of the primary ways God speaks today in the world of His people is through pain and suffering. God is speaking in our pain. That's what Elihu spoke about beginning in verse 19. He said:

<sup>19</sup> *Man is also rebuked with pain on his bed and with continual strife in his bones,* <sup>20</sup> *so that his life loathes bread, and his appetite the choicest food.*

<sup>21</sup> *His flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen, and his bones that were not seen stick out.* <sup>22</sup> *His soul draws near the pit, and his life to those who bring death.*

But then he described how God has angels in heaven and mediators who stand in the defense of men. They work in such a way that heaven responds to the misery of man and causes man to cry out to God in the midst of suffering. It may reveal sin in the man's heart and cause confession of sin. God redeems souls from going down into the pit and causes the lives of His people to again look upon the light (verse 28).

As he said these things, he did not speak in the same way that Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar spoke. Instead, he referred to God's fatherly chastisement—how God sometimes uses pain and suffering to rescue us from paths of sin or remove pride from our lives. It raises the questions:

- What if pain is not a sign of God's enmity but of God's love?
- What if God knew there were paths that you would travel to your own destruction were it not for painful discipline to chasten, rescue and protect you?
- What if God had redemptive purposes for our pain, suffering and misery?
- Would you then say that God is unfair or unjust when He brings suffering into your life?

C.S. Lewis famously stated this in his book, The Problem of Pain, and he preached this as well:

"We can rest contentedly in our sins. We can sin and sin and sin and never feel the danger of it. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Elihu did not know why Job suffered. Job did not know why he suffered. But Elihu said, "Job, before you cross that line and start talking about how God is your enemy, how God is unjust and how God is unfair, have you ever considered that God may be using pain for redemptive purposes in your life?" That's something to think about.

Let's turn over to 36:15-16. There is a very beautiful statement to that effect here. I think 36:15 is like the clincher of Elihu's argument. He said, "*He delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity.*" He delivers the afflicted by their affliction. That's a profound statement. In other words, "There is salvation and deliverance that God is going to bring into your life. He's going to deliver you through affliction. He's going to use your affliction to produce something gloriously redemptive out of it. He's going to open your ear to hear Him through adversity."

Verse 16 continues, "*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.*" I hear that and cannot help but think about Psalm 23. What if suffering is part of God's shepherding and care of your

life? What if God, in His shepherding care, is keeping you as His beloved child within the boundaries of His grace through affliction and suffering? What if He is going to lead you through that affliction and suffering out of distress into a broad place where there is no cramping? What if you're going to have a table set before you that's full of fatness and will be filled with joy in His presence forevermore where, at His right hand, are eternal pleasures? What if that's where this path is leading? Would it cause you to think twice before saying, "God is my enemy. God is unfair. God is unjust?"

The New Living Translation translates 36:15 this way: *"But by means of their suffering, he rescues those who suffer. For he gets their attention through adversity."* Just apply this into your situation right now. God is leading you away from danger, Job. God is leading you away from danger, David, to a place free from distress. Isn't this the story of where God's grace is taking us? He's leading us away from danger to a place free from distress. He is setting our table with the best food. That's how He's leading. If we believe this, we would be loath to accuse Him of being unjust or unfair.

That brings us to the second place we can cross the line. **We are crossing the line whenever we say that God does not care.** When we accuse Him of being uncaring, that's a line we don't want to cross. Look at chapter 35, where Elihu said, *"Do you think this to be just? Do you say, 'It is my right before God,' that you ask, 'What advantage have I? How am I better off than if I had sinned?"*

Let me read that from the New Living Translation (hereafter, NLT). It says, *"Do you think it is right for you to claim, 'I am righteous before God?' For you also ask, 'What's in it for me? What's the use of living a righteous life?"* In other words, "I have been a blameless man. Now, look at what's happening to me. What good does it do to live a righteous life if this is how God is going to treat the righteous?" Job got very close and may have crossed the line to say things like that. Elihu listened and said to Job, "Oh, don't go there! That is the wrong question to be asking."

Elihu did not just put his arm around Job's shoulder and say, "Oh, my friend, please don't say that." Elihu got right up in his face and shouted, rebuking him sharply. Continuing in verses four through eight in the NLT, Elihu said:

*<sup>4</sup> I will answer you and all your friends, too. <sup>5</sup> Look up into the sky, and see the clouds high above you. <sup>6</sup> If you sin, how does that affect God? Even if you sin again and again, what effect will it have on him? <sup>7</sup> If you are good, is this some great gift to him? What could you possibly give him? <sup>8</sup> No, your sins affect only people like yourself, and your good deeds also affect only humans.*

Elihu did not say that God doesn't care if you sin and God doesn't care if you're righteous. Actually, he said the very opposite. However, he did say, "Listen, Job. God is in the heavens. He rules in His sovereignty over all. Every day on this planet, people are sinning, and it doesn't change God's righteous rule. People are killing one another; people are doing horrible things; and God still sits on His throne in the heavens and rules over all. He is guiding this earth to His good and glorious ends no matter what we do, because He's transcendent in His majesty. So don't think, Job, that you can put God in your debt by your good behavior. Don't think that, because you've been so righteous, you have the right to gain God's attention and God's favor. It isn't that way."

"What's in it for me?" is the wrong question for a believer to ask. But then Elihu made a beautiful and important point in verse nine. He said, "*People cry out when they are oppressed. They groan beneath the power of the mighty. Yet they don't ask, 'Where is God my Creator, the one who gives songs in the night?'*" (NLT).

He said that so much of our crying out for help is not really prayer. It's not really seeking to know the God Who created us, the God Who is with us through the night and the God Who stretches out the morning stars so that they sing for joy together before Him. So much of our crying out is just moaning and complaining. It's not true prayer. It's not done in faith. It's not the expression of a seeking heart longing to know God.

People get upset and say, "God doesn't listen to me. God doesn't care. I've been crying out in my distress and the heavens are brass. Where is He when I hurt?" Elihu said so much of that is not even real prayer. It is just humans shaking their fist at the heavens. These are empty cries. They don't ask, "Where is God, my Creator, the One Who gives songs in the night?" They don't seek after God. "*Where is the one who makes us smarter than the animals and wiser than the birds of the sky?'*" (NLT)

Verse 12 continues, "*And when they cry out, God does not answer because of their pride. But it is wrong to say God doesn't listen, to say the Almighty isn't concerned'*" (NLT). That's wrong. That's a path you don't want to go down. That's a line you don't want to cross. You can't put God in your debt. You can't command His attention. But if you will seek Him because He is God; if you will search for your Creator, Who gives songs in the night; if you will reach out for Him, to know Him, not demanding that He answer you in a certain way, but if you will cry out, seeking Him, then you will discover His Word is true. "*Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you'*" (1 Peter 5:7). He does care. It is wrong to say, "God doesn't listen." It is wrong to say, "The Almighty isn't concerned." That's a line we don't want to cross.

**Third, we are crossing the line when we conclude that God is powerless to do anything.** Isn't this a temptation after you have suffered and suffered and suffered; after it goes on and on and on? You've been hoping that God will answer in a certain way and the answer isn't coming that way. Isn't it a temptation to begin thinking, "He must not be able to do anything about it; He must be powerless"?

That is where Rabbi Harold Kushner ended up after his son died at an early age. He was grieving, and he wrestled with why God took his son. He came to the conclusion that God could not do anything about it. He wrote in his bestselling book, Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?, "I can worship a God Who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God Who chooses to make children suffer and die." In other words, "Give me a benign, loving God Who is powerless—over a God Who, in His power, lets children suffer and die."

Kushner came to the conclusion God is powerless. That's the only kind of God he could live with. But a powerless God is also a God Who can't help you. Elihu said, "You do not want to go there, Job."

Look at 36:22. From this point to the end of chapter 37, Elihu gave a beautiful meditative exposition of God's almighty power. It is as if he sang:

I sing the mighty power of God, that made the mountains rise,  
That spread the flowing seas abroad, and built the lofty skies.  
I sing the wisdom that ordained the sun to rule the day;  
The moon shines full at God's command, and all the stars obey.

(I Sing the Mighty Power of God by Isaac Watts, 1715)

That's what Elihu did. He paved the way for God to come in the whirlwind. As Elihu spoke in chapter 36, talking about thunder and lightning and the majesty of God, it's almost like you could hear God getting closer and closer and closer until He finally appeared in chapter 38 in all His awesome majesty. And the point of it all is in 36:22, which says, "*Behold, God is exalted in his power; who is a teacher like him?*" In other words, "Let God be God! You don't understand all His ways, but realize Who He is. Realize Who you're dealing with."

Verse 24 continues, "*Remember to extol his work, of which men have sung. All mankind has looked on it; man beholds it from afar.*" One of the things I need to do when I'm getting weighed down and bewildered by affliction, difficulty and discouragement is get outside and look at God's creation, standing in awesome wonder of God. I need to behold His majesty.

Elihu talked about the rain, the thunder and the lightning. He talked about how God can take a huge body of water and make it freeze over in the winter and how God can just drop snow

on the land and all the animals just shut down. Look at the snow! All the people have to stop their work before the awesome majesty of God.

Friday afternoon I was in my study and I thought, “Boy, it’s getting dark in here.” I looked outside and saw that the skies were so dark and the wind was so strong. Kate called me from Elgin (a city just ten minutes north) and said, “The power is out.” Tree branches were dropping, and many of us were without power for seven hours. I think it was the longest we’ve ever gone. The Martin family was without power over 24 hours. God’s majesty and power were on display.

I love Job 37:13, as Elihu described the breath of God causing the broad waters to freeze in ice. He described God loading the thick clouds with moisture; the clouds scattering His lightning, which turn around and around by God’s guidance to accomplish all that He commands on the face of the inhabitable world. As he described all this, look at what Elihu said in verse 13: *“Whether for correction or for his land or for love, he causes it to happen.”* God has so many things going on at once, but He never forgets His love for His people.

Verse 14 continues, *“Hear this, O Job; stop and consider the wondrous works of God.”* And then verse 23, *“The Almighty—we cannot find him; he is great in power; justice and abundant righteousness he will not violate. Therefore men fear him; he does not regard any who are wise in their own conceit.”*

The secret things belong to the Lord our God. We don’t know much of why He’s doing what He’s doing in our lives, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children, that we may teach and observe them (Deuteronomy 29:29). God has revealed enough to us in His Word and it is clear that, no matter what we are going through or don’t understand, we do know this: it doesn’t mean God is unjust or unfair; it doesn’t mean God does not care; and it doesn’t mean that God has no power to deal with what concerns me today. I know He is just in all His ways. I know He cares for me. And I know He is able to accomplish all that concerns me.

I know this is true because I know Christ and see all that in Him. “Therefore, having been justified by faith, I have peace with God through my Lord, Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). I rejoice and hope in the glory of God. Moreover, I rejoice in my sufferings because I know that suffering produces character. Character produces endurance. Endurance produces hope. And hope does not put me to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into my heart through the Holy Spirit Who has been given to me (Romans 5:3-5). So we walk by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).

D.A. Carson has written, “It’s better to be a chastened saint than a carefree sinner.” In light of that, I will leave you with this question: Would you rather be a chastened saint, like Job, or a carefree sinner?

Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father, blind unbelief is sure to err and scan Your work in vain. There are so many lines which we are tempted to cross when You are shaking us in suffering. We pray that, through faith, we would not waver in unbelief but would give glory to You, Who have revealed to us in Jesus Christ Your justice, care and kindness, as well as Your almighty power to save every sinner who trusts in Him. We ask this in His name. Amen.

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*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

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