

CHAPTER 9

LET GOD WRECK YOUR THEOLOGY

We are tearing down speculations and every lofty opinion that has been raised up against the knowledge of God. (2 Corinthians 10:5)

Job is, without question, one of the most troubling books in the Bible. For many people, it's downright offensive. On the surface of things it looks like an arbitrary bet between God and Satan, with poor hapless Job caught in the middle of a cruel cosmic wager. Here is the summary. Satan thinks he can break this good man down and make him deny God ("deconstruct"). God basically counters, "I'll bet you can't." Then all hell breaks loose on poor unsuspecting Job. Satan pillages and plunders everything Job holds dear, even killing his children.

Amazingly, this first attack doesn't shake Job's devotion to God, so Satan says, "Double or nothing" (or something along those lines). Incredibly, God lets Satan take another crack

at him, with one caveat—"Just don't kill him." The second onslaught ensues. Job's health crashes, and then for about 30 chapters he teeters on the brink of a spiritual, emotional meltdown. The angry rant begins with, "**After this Job opened up his mouth and cursed the day he was born ...**" (Job 3:1-3).

Does Job ever deny God? Does he deconstruct? No. Surprisingly by the end of the book we find him in a place of perfect peace and rest. How is this possible? Here is the answer—Job's thinking about God (his theology) has undergone a radical change. Yes, Job loved and served God earnestly before all the trials hit. God Himself even says that Job is a great guy (Job 1:8). But let's be perfectly clear about one thing. Prior to his trials, Job's ideas about God were pretty shallow, bordering on the absurd.

This story actually follows the same pattern we see throughout Scripture and Christian history. God uses trials to correct a person's off-center vision of who He is. But since Job's historical-cultural context is so foreign to us, I attempted to update the story a little.

8.2 There was once a man named Turner

Let's put that well-known story of Job into our contemporary world, and let's change the hero's name to Turner.¹ Turner lives on a sprawling ranch in Wyoming, and goes to the Local Baptist church. He has a degree from Bible College, regularly listens to Christian podcasts, and loves to read all the hot-off-the-press books by his favorite Christian authors. He even teaches a weekly Sunday school class for the

more serious members of the church called *Basic Christian Doctrine*.

By all accounts, Turner is a good man, and he's living the good life. He has a loving wife, a quiver full of children, and a lot of friends. He also has a great reputation in the community, and several successful business ventures. He sincerely believes that this is all proof positive that he and God are on better-than-good terms. Turner is blessed. ... Then one day, *KABOOM*, chaos hits.

First, his business ventures all tank one by one. Then, a former friend and business partner turns on him and unjustly sues him for all he is worth. He has to liquidate, and eventually even sell the sprawling ranch he hoped to one day retire on. But, things get worse, much worse. While he is trying to sort out his financial woes, Grandpa and Nana take his 7 kids on a camping trip to Yellowstone. Tragically, they are all killed in a head-on collision with a drunk driver. But unbelievably, there's more. Turner starts feeling fatigued, and begins experiencing weird aches and pains. He goes to the doctor, and hears that cursed word, "Cancer ... stage four." The only possible hope is aggressive, life-draining chemotherapy. The one member of his immediate family left alive, his wife, then has a complete mental collapse. She crashes into a debilitating depression, and in her despair and rage she counsels Turner to just, "Curse God and die."

As these disasters pound Turner like ocean waves, he finds it increasingly difficult to hold on to ideas about God that used to make so much sense before his world imploded. But in the face of his children's death, the mental breakdown of his wife, and life-threatening cancer his mind becomes

a war zone. Nothing seems to make sense anymore. He is harangued by the thought that God is unfair, unjust, cruel. He begins to blog his honest feelings and thoughts:

September 24—I haven't done anything wrong, but God seems to be playing some kind of cruel game with me. Why won't He help me? Everything has turned upside down and backwards all the sudden. Why am I being crushed, while the wicked people I know run around Scot free? There doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to it all. If God is not the one who is responsible for all this, who is? (See Job 9:24)

Over time, the entries become darker:

... God, why are You hunting me down and devouring me like a Grizzly bear? It's like I can see You baring Your teeth, snarling at me, glaring at me. Why have I become Your enemy. (See Job 16:9)

When his closest friends hear about the unbelievable series of tragedies, they drive and fly in from California, Texas, Oklahoma, New York, and Florida. One of them, Steve, was Turner's best man in his wedding, another, Rick, his roommate in Bible College. They try to encourage him with Scriptures. Rick, says, "Remember Romans 8:28 brother,

"All things work together for good." Steve quotes those famous lines from the poet Cowper, "Hey man, remember that 'The Lord works in a mysterious way ... Behind a frowning providence, God hides His smiling face.'" They are shocked at Turner's response. He cuts loose in a tirade against God, and doesn't seem to care who hears him. He yells at the sky,

... Are You enjoying using me for target practice, God—shooting arrows at me like it's open season? You are like some sort of ruthless monster, tearing my guts out like this. (See Job 16:13)

His friends try in vain to stop the flood of words, as if they fear lightning will take them all out if it continues. Steve pleads,

Bro, seriously, you are completely out of control. Your eyes are filled with rage. How can you allow that kind of outrageous stuff to spew out of your mouth, and hurl accusations at God like that? (See Job 15:12-13)

Turner is undaunted. He continues to rant and rave, accusing God of perverting justice on the earth. He goes so far as to say that if God kills him, When Turner sees Him on the other side God will have to admit that He is being unfair. Turner then shouts, "He can't treat His faithful children this way!" Turner then storms out of house and races the old pickup

deep into cattle country. Far away from any other human being, he gets out of his truck and continues yelling at the sky. He challenges the Almighty to a showdown.

I dare You to come on down here, God! Because if You do, You will have to admit that I am right and You are wrong. (See Job 31:35)

He stand there waiting. The silence is ominous, the proverbial calm before the storm. Then he notices dark clouds gathering on the horizon. The sky above him grows black with churning angry clouds. Winds begin picking up force. A couple miles away, Turner sees an old barn dismantled by hurricane force gales. Trees in the distance begin to bend, limbs snap. Then suddenly a massive tornado about a mile wide dips out of the black clouds, and begins racing straight towards Turner. He stares in terror as is crushed and devours everything in its path. Closer ... closer ... closer. Then suddenly, the churning black wall stops in its place, roaring about 50 yards in front of Turner.

A figure in blinding white garments then steps out of the massive black funnel. An audible voice roaring like a fleet of 747s then asks,

Who is this I hear talking such nonsense about Me? ... Buckle up cowboy.² I have a few questions I want to ask you. Did you help Me create the world? Did you help Me figure out all the calculations? Do you know how I keep the nat-

ural elements from wreaking havoc on everything and everyone? Let's talk about the sun. Do you make it rise every morning? Do you know how to separate light from darkness? Do you control the weather patterns? Do you know how snow, rain, hail, thunder and lightning work? Do you keep the stars in their place, or control their movements? Do you know how I designed all the wild animals? Can you take care of them all? Do you make sure all of them have enough food? Do you know their gestation cycles? (See Job chapters 38-39)

As Turner tries to process this first barrage of questions, he has a eureka moment. He quite literally puts his hand over his mouth. If he doesn't understand astronomy, gravity, meteorology, the aerodynamics of a hawk, or the gestation cycle of a mountain goat ... maybe, just maybe he doesn't have God in his back pocket either. Perhaps the tight little system of theology he picked up at Bible College was not the end-all be-all. God then ramps things up, as if all the previous questions were the easy ones.

So put your big man britches on³ and tell Me what you know, cowboy! Teach Me. Are you absolutely sure that you are innocent and I am guilty? Are you and I equals? Do you keep the whole world full of people from exploding into chaos? What about the spiritual forces of evil—do you keep them under control too? (See Job 40:7-41:34)

As the questions roll, a new thought hits Turner like a punch in the gut. It isn't just that he doesn't have the right theological answers. He realizes he isn't even smart enough to ask the right theological questions. He has his eureka moment, a stunning epiphany—*I been firing complaints and accusations against someone—God—who I actually know next-to-nothing about.* So Turner "turns" (i.e., repents) and says,

I was just spewing a bunch of theological nonsense. I spoke about things I didn't understand, things too awesome for my puny little human mind. Now I am going to say something I know for sure is right. How about I shut up and let You talk. Tell me who You are and how You do things. I realize now that I was just regurgitating a bunch of ideas I heard from other people. But, now I am beginning to see You with clarity, so I take back everything I said. I renounce it all, and I put my face in the dirt before You. (See Job 42:1-6)

8.3 Back to Job

The purpose of our human existence is to know God deeply, intimately (John 17:3; Jeremiah 9:23-24). Although Job is a really great guy, his theology needed a lot of work. Study it out. It's pretty one dimensional—*do good and good comes, and do bad and bad comes.* God loves Job too much to let him live with this paper-thin vision of Him. How is God going

to lead Job into truth?³ The same way God does it in virtually everyone's life. He allows Job's theology and his experience to collide like two freight trains. This is called an existential crisis. Job's case is exaggerated, but we face the exact same thing when a relationship fails, we lose a child, or a dream dies.

It's in our suffering and trials that God shows us that our theology doesn't work, that it is shallow, flawed, and inadequate. It's in our our suffering that He can pry our white knuckles off of what we think we know, and open us up to what is really true about Him. When we do finally understand all this, we can find the living water our souls have been yearning for. This may all seem like a pretty brutal way for God to get things done, but I have come to the conclusion that it may be the only way. It has to do with how He made us, and how He made this universe. (I am convinced that if there were an easier way, God would do that.) We are stubborn and proud little creatures, and it's extremely difficult for us to relinquish opinions once we latch on to them.

8.4 You Don't Know Diddly!

Am I being too hard on poor Job and his theology? I don't think so. Listen to God's evaluation after enduring hours of Job's "brilliant" sermonizing, theologizing, and philosophizing. God can't take it any more and breaks in with, "**Who is muddling up divine counsel by all these nonsensical words?**" (Job 38:2).⁴ God then gives Job a 77 question quiz in an attempt to convince him just how small and ignorant he really is. This is the point at which God asks him questions about creation like, "Do you know the gestation cycle of a

mountain goat," and "Do you know the aerodynamics of a hawk" (chapters 38-41). 77 times Job's understood answer is, "Uh, no."

The light eventually goes on and Job gets God's point. If he doesn't know diddly about biology, meteorology, astronomy, or oceanography, then maybe, just maybe, his theology might have some holes in it too. Job then does the first intelligent thing he has done in a long time—he puts his hand over his mouth (40:4). This is the universal human gesture that means, "I am going to shut up now!" Now he is ready to "see" and "know" God.

Let's just be honest. Most of us religious folks are what we are (religiously speaking) for no other reason than this is what mom and dad believed. Or, if we came to faith later in life, we are what we are because that's what our group believed (Baptist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Lutheran). In Job's words, **"I have heard about You by the hearing of the ear."** We may truly be in the door (saved, born-again) but the fact is we still have a lot to learn.

The main point of the book of Job is that even the most committed religious folks need a radical theological makeover. This is not just true for Job, it's true for all of us. We were all created to know God deeply, and so many of us are assuming we already do ... but we don't. So God lets life shake us from our confidence. The process can be difficult, even violent, but according to Scripture it is necessary. This is why the Bible tells us to rejoice when trials hit, because this is where we become **"mature and complete, not lacking in anything"** (James 1:2-3). Before his trials, Job had religion. After his trials, he knew God.

I was yammering about a bunch of things I knew nothing about, things beyond my comprehension, things I didn't understand. ... The fact is that I had only heard about You second hand, but now my eye sees You. So, I now take back everything I said before, and I repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:3-5)

8.5 God in My Back Pocket (?)

So why do so many of us miss Job's point—that virtually everyone, even the most religious people (the Pastor, the Priest, the PhD) probably need a theological overhaul? Because ironically, we are all so much like Job. We are utterly, totally, absolutely sure that we have the subject of God all nailed down.

We are supposed to read Job, and follow his example—admit that perhaps we too are about as theologically astute as a doorstep. Those who don't understand the point of the book will find it to be an extremely frustrating read. Like Job, it will be hard not to cry out, "God, You are not supposed to be behaving like this!" This is all an irony of cosmic proportions, and evidence of the Bible's genius. This strange book traps the unknowing reader, and proves its main point. The only reason anyone gets frustrated with God is because they are assuming they have God in their back pocket. The message of the book is, "Please, put your hand over your mouth and stop talking."

The great yearning of our souls, in biblical terms, is to know God's "ways" (Hebrew: *derakim*). We are all hungering and thirsting for something deeper and more satisfying. We hear this in Moses's cry over three millenia ago, "Let me know Your ways, that I may know You" (Exodus 33:13). Only knowing God in this way will allow us to experience the abundant life Jesus spoke of (John 10:10). If a good thrashing by the devil is necessary to wake us up and get us moving in the right direction, then (as strange as this sounds) this is ultimately the kindness of God.

8.6 Enter *The Derakim*

So, what did Job eventually see? The New Testament author James gives us his take of the story.

You have heard of Job's endurance and understand the Lord's intended goal—that the Lord is full of compassion and merciful.
(James 5:11)

There is very good evidence that James's words "full of compassion and merciful" are his own creative allusion to Exodus 34:6.⁵ If this is so, what it means is that Job saw the exact same thing that Moses saw in the midst of his great existential crisis. Job came to see those great truths about God that every human being on earth desperately needs to know—the ways (*derakim*) of God. God is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and great in lovingkindness"

(Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:17-18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:103:8; 145:8; Jonah 4:2; Joel 2:13).

In Moses's case, the crisis that pushed him to discover *The Derakim* is found in Exodus 32. His people had just sinned in the most outrageous way, and rightly deserved the full measure of God's wrath. Right after being delivered from slavery and Egypt, and entering into a covenant with God, they turned their backs on Him, plunging into idolatry and debauchery. Israel teeters on the brink of total annihilation, and this excruciating situation causes Moses to cry out to God, "Let me know Your ways, so that I may know You" (Exodus 33:13). Just as God hoped, these trials force this good man into a deeper revelation of Himself. This is when Moses first hears *The Derakim* (Exodus 34:6). James indicates that the exact same revelation was given to Job (which would only make sense if we are talking about the same God).

The Derakim is the secret all God's closest friends know. The Psalmists sing about it (Psalm 86:13; 103:8; 145:8), and the prophets proclaim it (Numbers 14:17-18; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). This description of God carries Israel through her entire history (Nehemiah 9:17), and in the New Testament it's what makes God in the flesh so easily recognizable (John 1:14-18). Before anyone can see this glorious revelation, however, much of their old theology will probably have to be shaken to the ground. For so many people (including me), this is key to really hearing it. A little bit like Job, it all began when my circumstances and my theology had a head-on collision too. Once my old ways of thinking about God were shaken down, my heart was open up to know His ways (*derakim*). In over thirty years of following Jesus,

this has been the most life-transforming truth I have ever discovered.

Let me know Your ways, so that I may know
You (Exodus 33:13)

1. "He who Turns" is one of the possible, if a bit obscure, possibilities of the etymology of Job's name; this is possible if it is a word related to Arabic. See discussion in David Clines, *Job* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1989) 11. This name would make perfect sense in light of the book's message. Turner experiences the most important "turn" a person can have—His understanding of God.
2. Literally, "*Gird yourself up like a man*" (*Job 38:3*)
3. Another wild west's attempt at the repeated phrase, "Gird yourself up like a man" (*Job 40:7*)
4. A few other translation options for this verse: The King James Version reads, "**Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?**" The New International Version reads, "**Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge?**" The Good News Translation reads, "**Who are you to question my wisdom with your ignorant, empty words?**"

5. James's "πολύσπλαγγνός ἐστὶν ὁ κύριος καὶ οἰκτίρμων" not only draws on Exodus 34:6 as it reads in the LXX, "οἰκτίρμων καὶ ἐλεήμων μακρόθυμος καὶ πολυέλεος καὶ ἀληθινός." James also show the growing preference for σπλαγγ-derivatives as indicative of divine compassion.