

## CHAPTER 9

# GOD-ORDAINED DECONSTRUCTION

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

**T**he book of 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 some clueless guy getting caught in the middle of a cruel cosmic wager. Here is the summary. Satan thinks he can rock Job so violently that he will deny God. 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. People who try to sugarcoat the book and make Job look like some calm, unquestioning stoic have not read past the second chapter. His angry rant is introduced with these words: "**After this Job opened up his mouth and cursed the day he was born ...**" (Job 3:1-3).

But Job never does deny God. 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 beliefs about God have undergone a radical shift. We could say that he had a theological makeover. Yes, Job loved and served God earnestly before all the trials hit. God Himself even said that Job was a great guy. "**Have you taken note of My servant Job? There is nobody like him on earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and shuns evil**" (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. No Bible scholar or theologian worth his salt would take issue with this statement.<sup>1</sup>

The story follows that same well-trodden path we find 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 have attempted to update the story a little.

## 9.2 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.<sup>2</sup>

Turner lives on a sprawling ranch in Wyoming, and goes to the local Baptist church. He has a degree from a 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 his 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 dozens of good friends across the country from Maine to California. 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. Turner has to liquidate, and eventually even sell the sprawling ranch he hoped to one day retire on. But believe it or not, 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 by a semi driver who fell asleep at the wheel. But unbelievably, there's even 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 mental collapse. She crashes into debilitating depression, and in her despair and rage she counsels Turner to "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. In the face of his children's deaths, the mental collapse 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 being unfair, unjust, cruel. He gets on his computer and 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 of a sudden. Why am I being crushed, while all the wicked people I know run around Scot-free? There doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to it. 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 stalking me 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 friends hear about the unbelievable series of tragedies, they drive and fly in from all over the country—California, Texas, New York, Florida. One of them, Steve, was Turner's best man in his wedding. Another, Rick, was 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 looks up, jabs his finger in the air and yells,

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

His friends are stunned, and they try in vain to stop the flood of words. Turner looks like he is going to crack. Steve pleads,

Bro, seriously, you are completely out of control. That look in your eye scares me, like you're going to hurt someone. I know these are tough times, but you can't just say that sort of outrageous stuff and hurl accusations at God like that. (See Job 15:12-13)

Turner is undaunted. He continues to rant and rave, accusing God of making a joke out of the universe by attacking good people and turning a blind eye to the wicked. His words grow more and more outrageous. Turner tells God, "Go ahead and kill me, but when I see You on the other side, You are going to have to own up to all this." He then stumbles out the front door, shakes his fist at the sky again and shouts, "God, You can't treat Your faithful children this way!" He walks quickly to his pickup, slams it into drive, and tears down the long gravel driveway.

Deep into cattle country he turns off the engine, gets out of the truck and slams the door. He again looks up. He has just one more thing to say. 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)

### 9.3 GOD IN THE WHIRLWIND

Everything around Turner suddenly becomes ominously quiet. Not a bird or insect makes a sound. The breeze doesn't even rustle in the grass. A chill runs down Turner's spine. Somehow he knows that this is the proverbial calm before the storm. He notices dark clouds beginning to gather on the far horizon. Then with surprising rapidity the sky above him grows black with angry churning clouds. Trees in the distance start to sway and bend. A couple miles away Turner

sees an old barn dismantled by gale force winds. Then without any warning at all, a massive tornado about a mile wide dips out of the angry sky and begins racing ... straight towards him. Turner stares in terror as it crushes and devours everything in its path. Closer ... closer ... closer. Then just as suddenly, the churning black wall stops in place, roaring and spinning about fifty yards in front of him, whipping debris, boards, and uprooted trees.

Frozen in terror , Turner then beholds something impossible. His mind strains to make sense of what he is seeing. An imposing figure in blinding white garments steps out of the massive black funnel, as if through a door from another dimension. An audible voice that sounds like a fleet of 747s then roars,

Who is this I hear talking such nonsense about Me? Buckle up, cowboy.<sup>3</sup> I have a few questions for you. Did you help Me build this world? Are you an architect? Did you help Me figure out all the calculations? Let's talk about astronomy. Do you make the sun rise every morning? Do you keep the stars in their place, or control their movements? Do you know how to separate light from darkness? Let's talk meteorology. Do you control the weather patterns? Do you know how snow, rain, hail, thunder, and lightning all work? Do you know how I keep the natural elements from tearing apart everything and everyone? What about biology? 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)

Turner tries to process this first barrage of questions. All he can say is, "No ... no ... no ... no ...." As the questioning continues, he has a *Eureka!* moment. He gets God's point, and quite literally puts his hand over his mouth. If he doesn't understand astronomy, meteorology, or the aerodynamics of a hawk ... 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 on<sup>4</sup> 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, another 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 a stunning epiphany—*I have been firing complaints and*



*accusations against someone—God—who I know next to nothing about.* So Turner "turns" (i.e., repents) and says,

Forgive me. 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 know now that I was just regurgitating a bunch of ideas I heard from other people. But now I am starting to see You clearly. I take back everything I said. I renounce it all, and I put my face in the dirt where it belongs. (See Job 42:1-6)

#### 9.4 BACK TO JOB

The purpose of our human existence is to know God deeply, intimately (John 17:3; Jeremiah 9:23-24). Although Job was a really great guy, his theology needed a lot of work. Study it out. It's pretty one dimensional—*Do good and good comes, do bad and bad comes*. God loves Job too much to let him live with this paper-thin theological perspective. How is God going to lead Job into new revelation? 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 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 the fire 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. If we understand this, we can find the living water our souls are yearning for.

This may 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 also 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.

## 9.5 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).<sup>5</sup> It's at this point that God gives Job a seventy-seven question quiz to convince him just how small and ignorant he really is. God begins by asking questions about creation, like, "Do you know the gestation cycle of a mountain goat?" and "Do you know the aerodynamics of a hawk?" (Job 38-41). Seventy-seven times, Job's implied answer is, "Uh, no."

The light eventually goes on for Job. If he doesn't know diddly about biology, meteorology, astronomy, or oceanog-

raphy, then maybe, just maybe, his theology might have some gaping holes in it, too. This is the point at which Job does the first intelligent thing he has done in a long time—he puts his hand over his mouth (40:4). This is, of course, a universal human gesture that means, "I am going to shut up now." Now Job is ready to receive new revelation.

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 of where we sit on Sunday morning. It's what our group believes (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.

I was yammering about a bunch of things I  
knew nothing about, things beyond my com-  
prehension, things I didn't understand. ...  
The fact is that I have heard about You by the  
hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You.  
So now I take back everything I said before,  
and I repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:3-5)

## 9.6 GOD IN MY BACK POCKET (?)

The main point of the book of Job is that even the most committed religious people usually need a radical theological makeover. This is not just true for Job, it's true for all of

us. We were created to know God deeply, and most of us assume we already do. But the fact is that we don't. The pain and suffering of this life can shake us free from our delusion. The process can be difficult, even violent, but so often it is absolutely necessary. This is why the Bible tells us to rejoice when trials hit, because it is in the furnace of affliction that we become **"mature and complete, not lacking in anything"** (James 1:4). Before his trials, Job had religion. After his trials, he knew God.

So why do so many people read Job and miss the point—that virtually everyone, even the most religious people (the pastor, the priest, the PhD), 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, like Job, may be 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 Turner, it will be hard not to cry out, "God, You can't treat Your faithful children this way!" 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 that 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."

## 9.7 ONCE AGAIN, ENTER *THE DERAKIM*

The great yearning of our souls, in biblical terms, is to know God's "ways" (*derakim*). We are all hungering and thirsting for something deeper and more satisfying. We hear this in Moses's cry over three millennia ago. **"Let me know Your ways, that I may know You"** (Exodus 33:13). 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 lovingkindness of God.

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

**You have heard of Job's endurance and understand the Lord's intended goal—that the Lord is full of compassion and is 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.<sup>6</sup> The implication clearly seems to be that Job saw the exact same thing that Moses saw in the midst of his great existential crisis. Job came to understand those great truths about God that every human being on earth so desperately longs 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 86:15; 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 in Egypt and entering into a covenant with God, they turned their backs on Him. They plunged helter skelter into idolatry and debauchery. Israel was teetering on the brink of total annihilation. It was in this crucible that Moses cried out, "Let me know Your ways, so that I may know You" (Exodus 33:13). Just as God hoped, the trial forced this good man into a deeper revelation. This is where Moses first heard *The Derakim* (Exodus 34:6). James indicates that the same revelation was given to Job in his furnace of affliction.

*The Derakim* is the secret that all God's closest friends know. The psalmists sing about it (Psalm 86:15; 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, God may have to turn much of their old theology into rubble. For so many people (including me), this is key to really hearing the message. A little bit like Job, it all began when my circumstances and my theology had a head-on collision. Once my old ways of thinking about God were taken down, my heart was opened up to know His ways (*derakim*). In over thirty-five years of following Jesus, this has been the most life-transforming truth I have ever discovered.

This chapter is titled, "God-Ordained Deconstruction." Hopefully the message is clear. If we have built our the-

ological edifice poorly, it needs to be deconstructed. How would we know if our theological house is poorly built and needs a God-ordained demolition? Simple. Our faith isn't working out for us in the real world. It isn't delivering "the goods"—peace, joy, wisdom, purpose, etc. We aren't living life with that "**light and easy yoke**" Jesus talked about (Matthew 11:30). We aren't experiencing the "**abundant life**" He promised (John 10:10). The long and the short of it all is that there is no problem with "deconstruction" as long as we are open to a glorious "reconstruction." Allow me to suggest an ancient prayer to initiate that process.

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

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1. "The intellectual background of the book is obviously one in which cut-and-dried theologies of guilt and punishment have prevailed; for all the friends of Job, in their different ways, insist that if Job is suffering he must in some way be deserving of his suffering." David Clines, *Job* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1989), xxviii.
  2. "He who Turns" is one of the possible, if a bit obscure, meanings of Job's name—if it is a word related to the Arabic language. See discussion in Clines, *Job*, 11. This name would make good sense in light of the book's message. Job experiences the most important "turn" a person can have—His understanding of God.

3. Literally, "**Gird yourself up like a man**" (Job 38:3).
4. Another Wild West attempt at the repeated phrase, "**Gird yourself up like a man.**" (Job 40:7)
5. 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?**"
6. This is a bit technical, but James's "*πολύσπλαγγχνός ἐστιν ὁ κύριος καὶ οἰκτίρων*" not only draws on Exodus 34:6 as it reads in the Septuagint ("*κύριος ὁ θεὸς οἰκτίρων καὶ ἐλεήμων μακρόθυμος καὶ πολυέλεος καὶ ἀληθινός*"), James also shows the growing preference for *σπλαγγχ*-derivatives as indicative of divine compassion.