

How to Handle Calamity

A study in fear-of-the-Lord faith from the book of Job

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by

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Preface

This booklet grew out of a series of sermons that I preached at Grace Fellowship early in 2002. In the previous months, our small church had faced death, brain tumours, cancer, child molestation, assault, family break-ups, financial collapse, and a host of lesser calamities.

In the course of a few weeks I counselled a woman who had seen her husband shot to death before her eyes, another who had contracted AIDS, a rape victim, and a friend who was in the midst of an ugly church split. At the same time, my wife was in the grip of an illness that left her often unable to get out of bed, and left the doctors groping for explanations. I didn't feel like Job, but I did feel like Job's pastor.

In the face of all that, our church asked the same questions you ask when you face calamity: Who is in control? Why did this happen? How should we respond? As sailors seeking shelter in a hurricane, we turned to the word of God and dropped anchor in the book of Job. For many Christians, Job is lengthy and complicated, a book to be avoided. But in our calamities, we found its lessons were the difference between faith and doubt, hope and despair.

In Job, we met God—a God so great, so wise, and so loving that we didn't have to understand why so many bad things were happening. With such a God leading us, we were content to walk by faith, not sight. I hope you profit from the lessons of the book of Job as much as we did. Christ used it to shepherd us; we believe He'll use it in your life, as well.

Joel James

Job and Old Testament Wisdom

Three of the most fascinating books in the Old Testament are Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. What you may not realise is that God intended those three books to work together as a unit. As members of a well-coached sports team work together as a unit, so each of these books makes a unique contribution to understanding how life works in God's universe.

It starts with Proverbs. Proverbs is smug, knowledgeable, and self-confident. "Marry me," trumpets Lady Wisdom in the opening chapters of Proverbs, "and you will have peace, security, prosperity, long life, and good health." In the world of Proverbs, the good are blessed and the wicked get whacked. Those who follow wisdom's insights are rewarded; liars, sluggards, and scoffers find only despair.

As far as axiomatic principles go, Proverbs is right. Walk in wisdom and you will find life to be God-blessed, stable, and rewarding. Job, however, looks up from his ash heap and asks, "Is that *always* true? Is it *always* true that the God-fearers have peace and stability, and the wicked calamity?" As a kangaroo needs a tail so it won't fall over when it makes a five-metre bound, so the smug matter-of-factness of Proverbs needs Job to balance it.¹

Life isn't always Proverbs-cut-and-dried. Job shows us that there are incomprehensible exceptions—a fact even the super-confident Proverbs has to admit: "Man's steps are ordained by the Lord, how then can man understand his way?" (Prov 20:24).

Ecclesiastes penetrates even further into the pain of life in a sin-cursed world. Not only do apparently good people sometimes get massacred by calamity, it leaves us gasping for air when they do. "If this is the way the world is, then I wish I were dead," complains Solomon in Ecclesiastes 4. Proverbs presents life as it should be, Job, how it sometimes is instead, and Ecclesiastes, the frustration we feel when we are in the middle of the "instead."

However, in spite of their evident differences, all three wisdom books actually promote the same message. Proverbs boldly placards it in its introduction, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (1:7; 9:10). Ecclesiastes pokes its nose down some dark alleys, but relentlessly presses toward this conclusion: "When all has been heard...fear God and keep His commandments" (Eccl 12:13).

In Job 28:28, Job declared what he knew to be true—even though he was having trouble applying it—"Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom." The phrase, "fear of the Lord," is not used in the closing chapters of Job, but what is Job's silent, hand-over-the-mouth repentance in chapters 40 and 42 but the awe-struck response of one who has seen God and trembled?

¹ For more on this, see Derek Kidner's, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1985).

Like a shepherd drives his flock, all three wisdom books drive the reader to one answer: the key to handling the good, the bad, and the ugly of life is an awe-struck, humbled relationship with a God who is so great you'll trust Him whether you understand what He is doing or not. Job's contribution to that threesome is unique. It records the personal experience of a man who lost so much that his very name is synonymous with suffering. Job has walked the road. He has met God. His grief was real, but he really learned to trust God in the midst of it. In the next chapter, we'll meet him.

Who Is In Control?

Tornadoes are one of God's most powerful natural phenomena. In a tornado's funnel, winds can easily exceed 300 km per hour. In fact, I've seen a picture of a piece of straw blown through a wooden fence post by a tornado. If a tornado strikes your house, there won't even be pieces to pick up afterwards.

I once read an interview with a woman whose home had been flattened by just such a tornado. Looking at the carnage, she told the reporter, "God wasn't in this. God didn't want this to happen."

Is that true? Is God swept along in the flow of a catastrophe such as a tornado, unable to intervene? Are the tragic events of our lives—natural disasters, disease, violent crime, and wars—out of His control? Those are important questions to answer biblically. Theologians call it *theodicy*: an attempt to explain God's role in suffering and pain. When disaster strikes, we call it life-and-death: "Who, if anyone, is in control of *this*?"

Many Christians blame Satan for every bad thing that happens. In this view of calamity, Satan is almost equal to God in power—certainly he excels God in trickery. You always have to look over your shoulder, never sure when God will have His back turned and Satan will jump you with a divinely unanticipated emergency.

Others teach that neither God nor Satan are in control of calamity: *you* are. For example, the prosperity preachers teach that you get sick when you make yourself sick by speaking or thinking negative confessions. If you think positively enough and have faith enough, nothing bad will happen to you.

So, who *is* in control: Satan? Man? God? The first two chapters of Job provide the answer, a definitive, reassuring, biblical answer. When a tornado flattens your home, a disease your health, or a divorce your family—when the world seems out of control—*God* is in control.

Meet Job

The opening two chapters of Job divide into three earthly scenes and two heavenly ones. In the *first earthly scene* (1:1-5), we are introduced to a man named Job.

There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job; and that man was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil.

(Job 1:1)²

Job was a real man who lived, loved, and suffered just as the book bearing his name says. Both the Old and New Testament mention him by name,³ confirming that Job was not merely a legendary figure. According to Job 1:1, Job lived in Uz in northern Arabia, an area southeast of the Dead Sea.

Job was a man of noble character. He was, in fact, the epitome of what an Old Testament man was to be. He was “blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil.” Job’s character was as spotless as a chrome bumper at a car show.

The word “blameless” meant to be complete. Job was complete morally—there were no hidden sins, no spots or tears in the garment of his holiness. Job was upright—straight as an arrow in all his ways. Job was also a fearer of God—he approached life with a faith-filled, awed devotion for His Creator. And Job habitually turned from evil. Trying to get Job to do evil was like trying to press together the like poles of two magnets—he always swerved away to the right or to the left. In short, Job was the brightest trophy on God’s mantelpiece of grace.

Besides his impeccable character, Job had also been blessed by God in every way a man could desire.

Seven sons and three daughters were born to him. His possessions also were 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 female donkeys, and very many servants; and that man was the greatest of all the men of the east.

(Job 1:2-3)

With ten children (including plenty of boys to carry on the family name), and a livestock portfolio second to none, it is no wonder Job was called the greatest man in all the east. Job also had something that most highly successful men don’t: family unity. His children often had braais together (rather than braaiing each other, which—if the tabloids are to be believed—is more typical of the rich and famous).

² The author of Job and its date of writing are uncertain; the text simply doesn’t say. Job himself probably lived in the patriarchal era—after the tower of Babel, but before Moses. Both Job’s pattern of sacrificing for his family (instead of a Levitical priest) and Job’s life span (about 200 years) suggest this.

³ Ezekiel 14:14, 20 and James 5:11.

His sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When the days of feasting had completed their cycle, Job would send and consecrate them, rising up early in the morning and offering burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, "Perhaps my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually. (Job 1:4-5)

To top everything off, Job regularly sacrificed to assure that his children were in a position to receive God's blessings. In an Old Testament world where the God-blessed man was an envied man (Psalm 1:1), Job was exhibit A.

Satan, the accuser

Job's peaceful, God-blessed life was envied by his friends and neighbours, and resented by the arch-enemy of peace and blessing, Satan. We meet him, "the Accuser," in the *first heavenly scene*.

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, "From where do you come?" Then Satan answered the Lord and said, "From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it."

(Job 1:6-7)

Among the angelic beings reporting to God in verse six was one called *hasatan*, literally "the adversary" or "the accuser." It was a word from the Hebrew law courts—the word for the one who brings the accusation. Later texts (Revelation 12:9, for example) assign this name to the leader of the fallen angels, the devil, the same one who deceived Adam and Eve in the Garden. In this heavenly scene, that lying, murderous Accuser had come for his regularly scheduled report to God.

The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil." Then Satan answered the Lord, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face."

(Job 1:8-11)

As God lionised Job's unique character, the Accuser immediately went on the attack. "Sure, I know about Job. Why shouldn't he serve you? You give him everything he wants. But let me tell you a secret about Job that you don't know, God. Job is only in it for the blessings. Job doesn't love you; he loves what you give him. Take away his toys, and you'll see the real Job. Job likes your sugar and bubbles, God, but when you stop giving him what he wants, he'll toss you aside like an empty Coke can."

Satan was frustrated that God had “made a hedge about Job” (v. 10). It was a hedge too high for Satan to climb over. In fact, in verse eleven, Satan acknowledged that only one hand can cause calamity in the lives of God’s people.

But put forth *Your* hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face.”

(Job 1:11, emphasis added)

Who is in control of calamity? By his own admission, Satan isn’t. He had to plead for God to strike Job. Without God’s permission, Satan couldn’t even make Job stub his toe. In verse twelve, God gave permission to Satan to attack Job, but also set strict limitations on the assault.

Then the Lord said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him.”

(Job 1:12)

Some Christians say that God is taken by surprise or is helpless to intervene when calamity strikes. They didn’t get that view from the Bible. Job 1 presents God as completely in charge of Job’s calamity. In fact, Satan had to seek permission from God before he could lay a finger on Job’s possessions. And God strictly forbade Satan to attack Job’s physical health. God was using Satan as a tool to accomplish His purpose—no more, no less—in the life of Job.

Further evidence

In fact, not just Job 1-2, but all the Scripture broadcasts the fact that neither Satan (nor men, for that matter), are in charge of calamity. For example, Satan is not the source of physical handicaps, birth defects, or disease as many Christians believe. God pointed that out when Moses argued at the burning bush about the “heaviness” of his tongue and, therefore, his inability to be God’s messenger.

Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently, nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” The Lord said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?

(Exodus 4:10-11)

God claimed direct control over birth defects, a fact confirmed in the New Testament when Jesus addressed the question of why the man in John 9 had been born blind.

As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.

(John 9:1-3)

Satan is not in control of calamity; neither are men. Joseph said of his brothers' act of selling him into slavery, "You meant it for evil, God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20). Who controls kidnapping and slavery? God.

Police corruption and violent crime are two calamities that many in South Africa fear. When Jesus was unjustly arrested in the middle of the night and violently murdered the next day, who was in control?

This man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put him to death.

(Acts 2:23)

Reflecting on the out-of-control events of Jesus' arrest and the crucifixion, Peter knew who had been in control all along. The indifferent, corrupt Roman authorities? The murderous Jews? No. God and His predetermined plan.

Human words—positive or negative confession—do not magically control good or bad either. Jeremiah wrote the following rhetorical questions after Jerusalem had been wiped off the ancient Near Eastern map by the legions of Babylon:

Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth?

(Lamentations 3:37-38)

Many other texts of Scripture also confirm that God is sovereign over calamity.

I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God...I am the Lord, and there is no other, the One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the Lord who does all these.

(Isaiah 45:5-7)

In Amos 3, the prophet lined up a series of things he believed to be self-evident.

Do two men walk together unless they have made an appointment? Does a lion roar in the forest when he has no prey?...If a calamity occurs in the city has not the Lord done it?

(Amos 3:3-4, 6b)

Solomon said it this way in Ecclesiastes 7:14, "In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider—God has made the one as well as the other." Neither Satan, nor men, nor our confessions control calamity. God does. That is exactly the picture presented in Job. Until God gave His permission, Satan could not touch Job or his possessions.

A day of destruction

As we take up the narrative of Job 1 again, we find a *second earthly scene*. In a day of frenzied destruction, Satan orchestrated four separate disasters to ruin Job (1:13-19). All of Job's oxen and donkeys were stolen and his servants slaughtered. All his sheep were destroyed by lightning and the shepherds incinerated. All his camels were kidnapped and their guardians massacred. However, by far the most devastating event on that day of calamity was the death of Job's ten children, crushed by a cascade of bricks as a tornado levelled the oldest son's house.

As each panting servant finished his tale of woe, another fell at Job's feet gasping out news of a fresh holocaust. Job's response to his total ruin was a fear-of-the-Lord response.

Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped.

(Job 1:20)

Tearing the robe, shaving the head, and falling to the ground were common expressions of grief in Job's culture. Worshipping was not. But Job was an uncommon man.

"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Through all this, Job did not sin nor did he blame God.

(Job 1:21-22)

Job acknowledged that all he had received in life had been God's gift—none of it was deserved. What God gave, God had the right to take away. The end of verse 22 literally reads, "Job did not ascribe folly to God." In other words, Job did not accuse God of making a mistake when He took the life of his children, his employees, and left Job in financial ruin.

If at first you don't succeed...

Chapter two continues the narrative with a *second heavenly scene*. Job had not folded under pressure as Satan had predicted. The Accuser, however, was quick to find an explanation: God had not touched that which was most valuable to Job—his own precious hide. "Strike his health," squealed Satan, "and Job will turn on you faster than a striking cobra."

The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered My servant Job?...he still holds fast his integrity, although you incited Me against him to ruin him without cause." Satan answered the Lord and said, "Skin for skin! Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life. However, put forth Your hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh; he will curse You to Your face."

(Job 2:3-5)

Did you notice again Satan's acknowledgement of who is in control? He begged God, "Put forth *Your* hand..." Satan may orchestrate the actual deed, but he knows full well who is in charge.

So the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your power, only spare his life."

(Job 2:6)

Permission sought and obtained (but again with a critical limitation), Satan launched his second attack. It is described in the *third earthly scene* of Job 1-2.

Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.

(Job 2:7)

Exactly what disease this was is difficult to say. Whatever it was, it was agony. The original called it "evil" boils. Burning, oozing, swollen sores covered Job from head to foot. As bad as the sickness was, the treatment was worse: "And he took a potsherd to scrape himself while he was sitting among the ashes" (v. 8). "The ashes" referred to the place where ashes from the fireplace were dumped, the place where the household refuse was burned. Job's hospital bed was the garbage heap.

His wife encouraged him to give up the battle and die, but Job refused to adopt an attitude of bitter resentment: "'Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?' In all this Job did not sin with his lips" (v. 10).

Who is in control of calamity?

The opening chapters of Job answer the question, "Who is in control of calamity?" with unmistakable clarity. Job, Satan, and God all confirmed that *God* is in control. Job said, "Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?" (2:10). Satan complained about the hedge God had built around Job, and pleaded with God, "Put forth *Your* hand..." (1:11; 2:5). God Himself initiated the discussion with Satan that led to Job's testing. God gave permission to Satan to assail Job, but placed strict limitations on Satan's destructive desires. In other words, God controlled the timing, nature, and extent of Job's calamity.

When calamity strikes, it is a relief to know that God is in control. We have reason to be terrified if God doesn't know what is going on, is powerless to stop it, or has been tricked by Satan. But that is not what the Bible teaches.

Life sometimes feels out of control—like an airplane in a flat spin. When that happens, it is comforting to know that God's hand is on the stick, and His feet are on the rudder pedals. The God who got you into this can also get you through it (He might not choose to get you *out* of it, but He can get you *through* it). To handle your calamity in a trusting, God-honouring way, you must be convinced of the biblical truth that God is in control.

But that leads us to a second question: if God is in control, then why did He allow Satan to pillage Job's possessions, pulverise his family, and punch his health in the nose? If God is in control—and He is—then why does He allow bad things to happen? To answer that question, we must turn to the next section of Job.

Why Did this Happen?

Knowing that God is in control assures Christians that our catastrophe is God's carefully crafted plan. However, that truth assures us only momentarily. "Oh, God is in control of this. What a relief...[pause]... But *why* did God cause this to happen?" Inevitably, that's the next question.

When disaster strikes like lightening out of a cloudless sky, there is for us a sense of arbitrariness. "Why was my house broken into and my husband shot?" "Why did my wife get cancer?" God is not arbitrary. With a sovereign God, there are no such things as random chance, luck, or fate.

But why does God allow suffering? *Your* suffering? Besides glorifying Himself (always His highest goal), there are at least five specific reasons God brings calamity into the lives of His children.

- 1) To discipline specific sin
- 2) Because of human sinfulness generally
- 3) To mature us in Christ
- 4) To prove our faith to ourselves and others
- 5) To bring unanticipated good

Is this God's judgement?

The *first reason* God causes calamity is *discipline for specific sin*. But be careful! It was their misunderstanding and misapplication of this principle that caused God to be furious with Job's friends at the end of Job (42:7). Many—ignoring the book of Job—make the same mistake today, torturing their suffering friends or congregation members in the process. Let's carefully consider this principle.

At first, Job didn't demand answers when God brought disaster (Job 1:22; 2:10). But over time, Job's trusting faith was devoured by a demanding, "I-deserve-an-explanation" attitude.

Why did I not die at birth? Come forth from the womb and expire?

(Job 3:11)

Why is light given to him who suffers?

(Job 3:20a)

Why then have You brought me out of the womb? ... [Why will] He not let my few days alone? Withdraw from me that I may have a little cheer.

(Job 10:18, 20)

Have I sinned? What have I done to You, O watcher of men? Why have you set me as Your target?

(Job 7:20)

Job asked, "Why has this happened?" His friends were happy to supply him with what they were convinced was the answer: "God is disciplining you for a specific sin."

Yes it's true

Does God discipline people with calamity for specific sins they have done? The answer is, yes...sometimes. Consider three examples. King David destroyed his life in exchange for a few minutes of secret pleasure with Bathsheba. But his life wasn't the only one he destroyed.

Then the Lord struck the child that Uriah's widow bore to David, so that he was very sick... Then it happened on the seventh day that the child died.

(2 Samuel 12:15,18)

God brought calamity—the death of their infant son—on David and Bathsheba. Why? To discipline their sin. King Uzziah was struck with leprosy when he violated God's law by trying to offer a sacrifice in the Temple (2 Chron 26:16-19). But it wasn't just royalty that incurred this kind of judgement. Gehazi was just a servant—Elisha's errand boy. He was also struck with leprosy when he lied to Elisha about taking money from Naaman (1 Kings 5:25-17).

Sometimes God does cause calamity in order to discipline people for a specific sin. Tragically, Job's friends misapplied that principle to Job, with devastating effect. They aren't alone.

The visit

When word of Job's catastrophes spread, there was great concern among Job's acquaintances. Three of them, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—wisdom experts like Job himself—determined that they would visit Job in an attempt to comfort him.

When they lifted up their eyes at a distance and did not recognise him, they raised their voices and wept. And each of them tore his robe and they threw dust over their heads toward the sky. Then they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great.

(Job 2:11-13)

As my Hebrew professor at seminary once said, "This was by far their best effort." Their silence was golden, supportive. Their simplistic explanations and barely veiled accusations were pain heaped upon pain.

The pain Job was already suffering should have been enough. His children and employees were massacred, his wealth gone. Physically, he hurt so badly he wished he were dead. His statement in 7:3, "So am I allotted months of vanity," suggests he had been in this state for some time. He would have given anything for a restful night's sleep.

When I lie down I say, "When shall I arise?" But night continues, and I am continually tossing until dawn. My flesh is clothed with worms and a crust of dirt, my skin hardens and runs ... my days come to an end without hope.

(Job 7:4-6)

Enthroned in ashes, Job was unrecognisable to his friends. Covered with maggots, filth, scabs, and oozing sores, his red-rimmed eyes held no hope. In verse fourteen, Job spoke of hallucinations—a common effect of significant sleep loss. Observing all this, Job's friends broke their silence. Unanimously accepting that God was in control, they took it upon themselves to explain why God had ruined Job.

At this point, you must grasp something difficult, a paradox: Job's friends were both right and wrong at the same time. They were correct in saying that God does use calamity to discipline specific sin (you skipped church on Sunday morning to play golf, and came home with raging sunburn—God does use calamity to judge sin). Job's friends' mistake was thinking that this was the only reason or even a primary reason for Job's calamities. It wasn't.

Eliphaz was the first to speak. His opening salvo is a one-line summary of everything he and his companions would say in the next twenty chapters.

Remember now, who ever perished being innocent? Or where were the upright destroyed?

(Job 4:7)

Eliphaz had a simple theology of calamity. If you live rightly, God blesses you. If you live badly, God drops a bomb on you. Job had obviously taken a direct hit from the biggest bomb in God's arsenal; therefore, he must have been living badly.

According to what I have seen, those who plow iniquity and those who sow trouble harvest it. By the breath of God they perish and by the blast of His anger they came to an end.

(Job 4:8-9)

In Eliphaz's Proverbs-run world, everything worked according to a clear-cut law: the righteous were cuddled by God; the wicked got whacked. Though he didn't say it directly, Eliphaz was obviously applying that theology to Job.

Eliphaz's theology hasn't gone away. In the sectors of the church influenced by the Word-faith movement, this theology is still thriving. The prosperity preacher's message is simple: God wants you healthy and wealthy. If you aren't, you must be living badly—too little faith, hidden sin, etc.

You know the scenario. A Christian is in the hospital with a devastating illness such as cancer. Some acquaintances show up with all the best intentions in the world (just like Job's comforters), and say, "If you had enough faith, you would be healed. You must have a secret sin. That's why this is happening to you." People in my congregation have had exactly those words spoken to them. Eliphaz's theology is alive and well.

Convinced they were right, Eliphaz and friends tightened their philosophical fingers around Job's throat with clear references to his agonising physical condition.

Eliphaz: "For affliction does not come from the dust... The wicked man writhes in pain all his days." (Job 5:6; 15:17).

Bildad: "Indeed, the light of the wicked man goes out ... His skin is devoured by disease." (Job 18:5, 13).

Zophar: "If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away ... then, indeed, you could lift up your face without defect..." (Job 11:14-15)

Job's friends had one string on their violin, and they sawed away on it relentlessly: "Job, what has happened to you, happens only to the wicked. Repent of your hidden sin, and God will give you relief." Job, however, had no dramatic sin from which to repent. Throughout the book Job admitted he was not sinless (7:21; 9:2, 15; 10:6; 13:26, and 14:16-17). However, he could not admit to having done a sin so great, so dastardly that God should do this to him. In fact, Job even appealed to God, "According to Your knowledge I am indeed not guilty" (10:7).

The relentless accusations of Job's friends had the same effect on Job that accusations of "a lack of faith" or "hidden sin" have on sick or hurting people today. First, it frustrated him.

You smear with lies; you are all worthless physicians. O that you would be completely silent,
and that it would become your wisdom!

(Job 13:4-5)

Then it took the wind out of his sails; it destroyed his spirit.

My spirit is broken, my days are extinguished, the grave is ready for me. Surely mockers are
with me, and my eye gazes on their provocation.

(Job 17:1-2)

Job's loss of family, possessions, and health were devastating enough without his friends heaping insult on agony. Instead of untrue accusations, Job longed for comfort: "For the despairing man

there should be kindness from his friend; so that he does not forsake the fear of the Almighty" (6:14).

Job's resistance to their reasoning infuriated his friends. Chapter by chapter, they continued to beat him with verbal kidney shots, rabbit punches, and low blows. In chapter 22, Eliphaz stripped off the gloves and let Job have it right on the chin in the plainest of terms.

Is it because of your reverence that He reproves you, that He enters into judgement against you? Is not your wickedness great?

(Job 22:4-5a)

"Job, do you think God has done all this to you because you are such a great guy? Because you are so godly? That's ridiculous, Job!" Actually, it wasn't ridiculous at all. How had God described Job in chapters 1 and 2? "There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man fearing God and turning away from evil." Derek Kidner has rightly said of Job, "It was his very innocence that exposed him to the ordeal."⁴

To face calamity, we must understand this lesson: a catastrophe in health, finances, or family does not necessarily mean that God is angry at you. Occasionally God does use calamity to discipline a specific sin. However, Job's terrible losses and ravaged body had nothing to do with a lack of faith or hidden iniquity. In fact, God was furious at Job's friends for insisting that such was the case.

It came about after the Lord had spoken these words to Job, that the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends, because you have not spoken of Me what is right..." (Job 42:7)

Our Lord Jesus Christ was no friend of the criminally simplistic, "You must have been bad" view of calamity either.

As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?"

(John 9:1-2)

The disciples had exactly the same theology of sickness as Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar! Jesus was quick to correct it. "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him" (v.3).⁵

⁴ Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 57.

⁵ A subtle, "healthier than thou," self-righteous attitude often accompanies this theology. When the friends show up at the hospital and say, "If you had faith, you would be healthy," what they really mean is, "If you had faith, you would be as healthy as *we* are. You're sick; we're well. You must be less godly than we." That self-righteousness was the attitude the Pharisees exhibited when they said to the healed blind man, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you teaching *us*?" (v. 34, emphasis added).

Many today fall into the trap of Job's three friends. They assume calamity comes for only one reason, and they unjustly accuse the suffering. They steal the hurting person's one hope: "In the midst of all of this, God still loves me." To steal that hope is a theft more cruel than any other. God's fury with Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar in Job 42:7 serves as a warning. God hates "You must have been bad" theology, and is angry at those who teach it.

Did this happen because I was bad?

Sometimes there is an obvious cause and effect relationship between a specific sin and a calamity: sexual immorality and unwanted pregnancy, drunkenness and a tragic car accident. If greedy speculation or dedicated laziness has led you to financial ruin, you don't have to wonder why God did what He did. Sin's law of consequences—"You reap what you sow" (Galatians 6:7)—tells you that God was disciplining a specific sin.

But if there is no obvious cause and effect relationship between your calamity and a specific sin, you don't have to kill yourself trying to find one. If you have a sin you need to repent of, by all means, do so. But don't fall into the trap of Job's friends, accusing others (or yourself) of being out of God's favour because you've experienced a tragedy. Cancer, crime, or car accidents aren't proof that God hates you. Job is the classic example proving that God sometimes brings calamity on those He loves dearly.

"But," you ask, "If God wasn't disciplining a specific sin, then why did He do this to me?" Let's step aside from the book of Job for a moment to answer that question from the rest of Scripture.

Other reasons God brings calamity: Human sinfulness

After the disciplining of a specific sin, a *second* biblically revealed reason God brings calamity is *because of human sinfulness*. In Genesis 3, Adam's sin pulled the keystone out of the arch of creation. Ever since, bricks have been falling, the ceiling collapsing. To put it simply, bad things happen because we have messed up God's universe with sin.

We're surprised when things go wrong. Ecclesiastes tells us that in a Genesis 3 world, we should be surprised when things go *right*. It's only God's grace that things aren't worse than they are. When hail destroys my crops or a virus corrupts my data, I shouldn't be stunned. We labour under a Curse—the divinely appointed consequences of human sinfulness. Romans 8 points this out for us.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption ...

(Romans 8: 20-21)

When Adam sinned, the whole universe was plunged into futility, enslaved to corruption. In our bodies that means pain and infections. In our work that means weeds, forms in triplicate, and software that self-destructs during important presentations. In relationships it means parental disinterest, teenage disruption, and messy divorces. In the end, we're getting what we deserve.

Why should any living mortal or any man offer complaint in view of his sins?

(Lamentations 3:39)

Jeremiah, surveying the wreckage of Babylonian-captured Jerusalem, said, "Guys, we really can't complain. The fact is, we are sinners, and we're just getting the wages we've so thoroughly earned." Today, we can praise God that Jesus Christ has accomplished the removal of the Curse through His death on the cross. Full application of Christ's triumph will be enjoyed in heaven, "There will no longer be any curse" (Rev 22:3).

Under construction!

There is a *third* biblically revealed reason God brings calamity: *to mature us in Christ*. Whatever happens to you, you can be sure of one thing: God caused it to bring His Christ-reflecting work in you one step closer to completion.

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

(James 1:2-4)

You can't produce steel at room temperature. You need fire. In the same way, comfort, peace, and ease don't produce spiritually strong, flexible people. You need the heat of trials to manufacture resilient Christian character—a blade strong enough to be useful in the hands of God.

God used my wife's illness (mentioned in the introduction) just that way in my own family. No one likes to be bed-ridden, but my wife became more accepting of the good and the bad from God. With mom out of action, the kids learned to be better helpers around the home, doing so with a joyful spirit: "Mom's not well, we'll pitch in and help." Dad learned the same lesson. I can actually wash dishes now, not just without complaining, but even with rejoicing!

A runner won't become faster unless he makes his legs and lungs burn during his workouts. A weight lifter won't become stronger unless he exhausts his muscles moving metal. In sports it's a given—progress comes by gradually increasing the intensity of the exercise. It is no different with spiritual progress. But since we're usually too lazy to push ourselves spiritually, God has a way of increasing the intensity for us: calamity. The result is strong faith, greater compassion, enduring patience—harder spiritual muscles in every way.

Faith on parade

A *fourth* reason God brings calamity into our lives is *to prove our faith to ourselves and others*. God proved that Satan's accusations against Job were slanderous. How? He tested Job, and Job's endurance proved Satan to be wrong.

Peter told his readers that they had been distressed by various trials because the "proof of their faith" was more precious than gold. When their faith came through the fire, Peter said that it would "result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:6-7).⁶

One of the women in our church has had cancer five times. It's been hard in every way: physically, emotionally, and spiritually. But as we watch her resilient cheerfulness, we are encouraged. The proof of her faith spurs us to say, "When my turn comes, I want to handle my trials like she does." More than one doctor, nursing sister, or friend of the family has been saved by the humble trusting strength of a Christian cancer patient and his or her family. God uses trials to prove our faith—to ourselves and others—bringing Himself glory in the process (1 Peter 1:7; John 9:3).

Unanticipated good

A *fifth* reason God creates calamity in the lives of His creatures is *to bring about unanticipated good*. The Bible is full of such surprises. Classic example? Joseph. His brothers kidnapped him and sold him in the same way they would have auctioned a cow or a goat. No doubt as the slavers' camel caravan humped its way toward Egypt—and at various awkward points thereafter—Joseph asked, "Why has God done this?" Answer: unexpected good.

God used Joseph's kidnapping, slavery, and unjust prison time to put him in a position to feed his starving family. Decades later, Joseph said to his brothers, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (Genesis 50:20). No one could have guessed it at the time, but good had been God's plan for Joseph's calamity all along.

Ruth is a second example. Tragedy doesn't come much worse than having your father-in-law, brother-in-law, and husband die in rapid succession, leaving you and your mother-in-law impoverished and hopeless. How did God use that heart-rending situation? Ruth went to a place she would never have gone (Bethlehem), met a man she would never have met (Boaz), and became the great-grandmother of King David from whom Messiah would spring. Unexpected good.

In Acts 8, Stephen's life was crushed by a hail of stones. As the bewildered Christians fled into exile, away from the wonder and joy of all that God had done in the Jerusalem church, do you

⁶ God doesn't put you under trials so you will fail. He tests you so you will *pass*, so that His name will be glorified by those who see your endurance.

think they thought that scattering was *good*? They probably wondered if it would be the end of Christianity. Unexpectedly, God used that dispersal to start the Antioch church (Acts 11:19ff.)—the church which became the gun that fired a missionary bullet named Paul into the heart of the Roman Empire. It's all over Scripture: apparently unsalvageable disasters are often the critical first step in God's plan for bringing good.

God's use of calamity isn't arbitrary after all. He uses it for specific purposes: to make us dissatisfied enough with this Genesis 3 world to seek something (or Someone) better, to harden us in the furnace of troubles as a blacksmith tempers a sword, to prove our faith, and to bring good that no one could have predicted.

So, now we know that God is in control. We know the biblical reasons why He causes calamity. But how do we respond when He does? That question leads us to the next section.

Why Job Stumbled

A good start

Job started so well. His faith was as invulnerable to Satan's onslaught as a turtle to the pawings of a jackal. Job just tucked his head and feet into the shell of his faith and said, "The Lord gives, the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." What went wrong?

There are at least four reasons Job's trust in God took a tumble. *First*, he listened to bad counsel. *Second*, he let the termite of time gnaw at his trust. *Third*, he had built up expectations, believing God owed him certain things. *Fourth*, he lost his grip on the shield of faith.

Avoid bad counsel

The scene was sports day; I was in grade three. One of my friends had just made this revelation, coupled with some counsel: "Do you know why policemen can run so fast? They breathe through their noses when they run. We should try it." Having just been enlightened as to the secret of cheetah-like foot speed, the choice was before me: would I run breathing only through my nose or not?

Fortunately, I didn't take my friend's counsel. I was slow enough already, and unless you possess nasal passages resembling a subway tunnel, breathing only through your nose in a 300 metre race is a sure way to asphyxiate.

Good counsel is invaluable when facing calamity. Bad counsel can suffocate you. In fact, listening to bad counsel is one of the reasons Job went off the rails. If you are going to handle your calamity, you'll have to learn a lesson Job didn't: *ignore well-intentioned but unbiblical counsel.*

If Job's counselors had been from the 21st century AD, they probably would have said, "Job, look at these terrible things that are happening to you. We have to break the generational curses that have power over your life. We have to cast out the demons of skin disease. You should go to the *sangoma*. You should have prayed the Prayer of Jabez. You need to send R1 000 to the Spirit-anointed faith-healer at Better-for-a-Buck Ministries."

One of the most challenging aspects of calamity is rightly handling the well-intentioned advice you get from friends and family. Biblical advice is a treasure. Unbiblical, "You don't have enough faith" kind of advice isn't. Often it's more like a fist to the solar plexus.

Don't let comments that portray God as inept or ignorant of your situation tap your heels and send you sprawling spiritually. Don't let "Christian witchdoctors" distract you with speculations

about demons and their supposed contributions to your disease or disaster.⁷ Job learned that to deal with calamity he had to fix his eyes on God. So must you.

To handle calamity, you must reject all unbiblical, “breathe only through your nose” advice with a smile and a thank you. People give counsel because they care—receive it that way, even if the counsel is rotten. But don’t let their unbiblical advice throw you into a tailspin like Job did. You know what’s true about God and how He works. Cling to that.

Time keeps on tickin’

Here’s a second reason Job went off the rails starting in chapter 3. He let the termite of time gnaw at his faith. According to Job 7:3, Job’s grief over his children and the burning torment of his physical sickness had extended for months by the time his friends arrived. His suffering felt eternal. The sheer duration of it was wearing him down.

Much as an eager marathon runner, Job bolted off the starting line of faith like a rabbit. But as the race of responding to calamity stretched out kilometre-after-kilometre, day-after-day, Job’s faith began to fade, stagger, and eventually it fell.

Time is a killer in trials. Like Job, we start with faith, but as we tick off endless days on the calendar, turn over the page to a new month, buy a new calendar for next year, and then the next, and the next, we despair.

The hard part about most trials is that they are open-ended. You simply don’t know when they are going to stop. When I ran athletics, although I was a distance runner, our coach occasionally had us do sprint workouts. He subjected us to two different kinds. The first consisted of a certain number of sprints for a specific distance—two hundred metres repeated eight times, for example. They weren’t fun, but they were manageable. We knew just how far we had to run.

However, our purest hatred was reserved for the other workout. The coach would say, “You guys start sprinting as hard as you can around the track, and don’t stop until I blow the whistle.” Brutal! We never knew how long he was going to make us run. There was no fixed goal, no finish line to cross. We just had to keep running, not knowing when the whistle would blow to bring relief.

That’s how trials are. You don’t know when you are going to get better, when the Lord will take your cancer-weakened father or mother home, when you’ll get a job—when God will blow the whistle so you can catch your breath.

⁷ Although we know Satan had a personal hand in Job’s calamities, Job was never encouraged to handle his situation by binding Satan, casting off curses, or any other occult-like techniques. The book ends with Job back on track. What was the secret? He focused on God; Satan and demons are not even mentioned.

To handle calamity, you must learn from Job: beware of the danger of duration. Time can have a weakening effect on faith. It is like a termite. Termites eat a wooden structure gradually, weakening it from the inside with constant nibbling. On the outside, everything looks fine. But the tiny, hungry mandibles of the termites invisibly weaken the structure until it collapses. That's how it was with Job—time gradually ate away his faith. Have you found the same thing in your trial? How can you cope?

The next right thing

The biblical answer for handling extended trials is found in Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount.

Do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

(Matthew 6:34)

Jesus knew that spreading today's grace across tomorrow's worries will cause you to stumble every time. It's like using one dab of butter for a whole loaf of bread. What is adequate for one slice won't cover a loaf. In the same way, God's grace for today is sufficient for today: "Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears our burdens" (Psalm 69:18). Don't try to spread today's grace over tomorrow, next month, or next year. Planning ahead is fine; worrying ahead isn't.

Jesus told the disciples to give their attention to getting through that day, depending on God's grace. Tomorrow will have new troubles, and new grace. Sufficient is the trouble for the day—maybe even the minute.

Christian author Elisabeth Elliot was once asked how she managed to keep going after the death of her second husband. Her response was profound: "I did the next right thing." Unable to face the trouble (i.e., grief) of the day, she applied God's grace to the next minute. When that minute was past, she faced the next. One minute at a time, one task at a time, she made it through the day.

She didn't feel like getting out of bed, but that was the next right thing to do. She didn't feel like brushing her teeth and making herself presentable, but that was the next right thing to do. And so she went through the day, facing her grief by doing the next right thing. That's Jesus' principle, honed to a needle's point, to deal with overwhelming trouble: do the next right thing.

The expectations trap

Besides the snare of time, Job also stepped squarely into *the trap of expectations*. In Job 29, Job listed some of his many accomplishments. He had been successful in business: "My steps were bathed in butter, and the rock poured out for me streams of oil" (29:6). His success intimidated the younger men; it commanded respect from the city elders: "When I went out to the gate of the

city, when I took my seat in the square, the young men saw me and hid themselves, and the old men arose and stood" (v. 7-8).

Job was loved and respected not just because of his business success, but also because of his concern for the needy:

When the ear heard, it called me blessed...because I delivered the poor who cried for help, and the orphan who had no helper. The blessing of the one ready to perish came upon me, and I made the widow's heart sing for joy. I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame...I broke the jaws of the wicked and snatched the prey from his teeth.

(Job 29:11-17)

Job was everything a man of wisdom and righteousness had to be. However, by his own admission, he had become overly impressed with himself. He had built up a series of expectations—things he believed God owed him because he had been good. In 29:18-20 he listed some of them: an easy death, a long and comfortable life, lots of life vitality, glory in the eyes of men, and perpetual strength.⁸

In chapter 30, Job—the wisdom expert—had a flash of insight into his own heart.

When I expected good, then evil came; when I waited for light, then darkness came. I am seething within and cannot relax; days of affliction confront me.

(Job 30:26-27)

That's the expectations trap. Job expected good from God because he had been good, and when God didn't deliver, Job was left seething. It's an easy trap to fall into when calamity strikes. "All I wanted was a happy family, and now my daughter is divorced...my son is rebelling...my husband has left me. What did I do to deserve this?" The expectation? If I'm a good wife and mother, God owes me a happy family—as I define it.

A friend who has a child with Downs Syndrome once shared with me that expectations are one of the greatest struggles parents of handicapped children face. "I wanted to watch my boy play sports, see him go to varsity, get married, and have a successful career. Now I have a son who will never pass grade two."

Job's summary is both pathetic and perfect: "When I expected good, then evil came" (30:26). Pride makes us believe we deserve certain things from God for being good. "I don't cheat on my VAT, therefore, God is responsible to make my business succeed." Isn't that how we are tempted to

⁸ These expectations were typical of wisdom literature. For example, in Psalm 73:4 the psalmist complained because the wicked men he observed experienced "no pains in their death," and they had a life without "trouble" (v. 5). Of the 120 year-old Moses it was said, "His eye was not dim, nor his vigor abated" (Deut 34:7). Job expected similar blessings.

think? "How could God do this to me? I've been good!" Part of Job's anguished wrestling in chapters 3-30 came from that very issue. He had stepped into the trap of expectations.

In calamity, I-deserve-good-for-being-good expectations lead to anger at God and feelings of betrayal. God, however, never promised endless good if we are a devoted mother, patient father, faithful tax-payer, or don't run with the wrong crowd at school. To handle calamity rightly, Christians must avoid Job's mistake of building up expectations that "God owes me because I've tried to be good."

The shield of faith

Besides bad counsel, time, and expectations, there was one other thing that made Job stumble: *he lost his grip on the shield of faith*. In chapters 1-2, Job seemed solidly entrenched behind an impenetrable barrier of faith in God's wisdom. "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord... Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?" (1:21; 2:10). What a perfect example of Paul's teaching about the shield of faith in Ephesians 6.

Take up the full armor of God...in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

(Ephesians 6:13, 16)

The soldiers of the ancient world often carried large shields. When enemy archers fired a volley of arrows at them, they ducked behind those shields and let the arrows harmlessly bounce off. In Job 1-2, Job had done just that. Satan had fired a barrage of fiery darts at Job, but the shield of faith deflected them all. That's how faith works: no arrow of Satan—no matter how hot or deadly—can penetrate simple, child-like faith. "I'll trust God whether I understand what He is doing or not."

In chapter 3, Job allowed the handle of the shield of faith to slip from his sweaty fingers. Rather than preoccupy himself with believing trust, Job allowed his mind to be enticed, and then captured, by angry expectations, by thoughts of "How long?" and by the disheartening, untrue accusations of his friends.

In the Gospels, the man cried to Jesus, "I believe, help me in my unbelief." In calamity, we must cry the same. "I believe, rescue me from my doubt. Help me hide behind the shield of faith. Help me reject thoughts of fear, anger, doubt, and despair." How do we go about hiding behind the shield of faith in calamity? Let's return to the story of Job to find the answer.

Fear-of-the-Lord Faith

Job's life was a ruin withered by the inferno of Satan's hate. It looked like the city of Hiroshima after the atomic bomb—a rubble-strewn wasteland. Job's initial response was shock, but also quiet trust in the God He knew to be in control of calamity.

However, bad counsel, the passing of time, and the frustration of his life expectations, plans, and dreams gradually led Job to drop his guard. And as the shield of Job's faith slipped lower and lower, he did the most devastating thing someone can do when facing calamity. Job asked, "Why?"

Asking "Why?" isn't such a bad thing if we accept God's biblical answers. God brings calamity to mature us, to prove our faith, to bring unexpected good, and so on. However, very often (as in the case of Job) we are dissatisfied with God's biblical answers. We want, and believe we *deserve*, more detail.

We alternate between pleading and open hostility: "Why did I have to get cancer and not someone else? Why was *our* house broken into? I hate God for what He has done." We become negotiators, offering God alternative (and in our minds, far better) plans: "Why wasn't it someone who doesn't like sports that was paralysed? Why did the break-in have to happen *now*, just before my son's matric exams? Why couldn't you have waited, God? Now my son is so distracted he'll probably fail."

What do those questions imply? "God, You've made a mistake, and I want an opportunity to argue with You about it. You did this to the wrong person, at the wrong time. Before You take this thing a step further, I want to see your plan so I can make sure I approve of it."

Is an explanation as to why God has done something the key to handling your calamity? Is an explanation regarding how your disaster fits in His overall plan the secret to a trusting response? You might think so, but Job reveals how wrong you are. From chapter 3 on, Job begged, pleaded, and railed at God. He threw himself at the door of heaven, kicking and screaming, demanding answers. He pounded until his fists were bruised and bloody.

In the end, Job's fury was silenced. His questions vanished. He stood with his hand over his mouth—as graphic a way of expressing "I have nothing to say," as you can find. Did God give Job a lengthy explanation of why He did what He did? Did God divulge the information that Job wanted? No.

As you read to the end of the book of Job, you realise a startling thing. Job—as far as we know—was never told about the heavenly dialog between God and Satan in chapters 1-2. God didn't give Job a glimpse of how his calamity would be used for good in the future.

The secret to Job's change of heart in chapters 40-42 was not information. It was not an explanation. It was a Person. At the end of the book, Job met a Person so great and so wise that all of Job's accusations, arguments, and questions melted away like an ice cube in the Karoo sun. In the end, Job found consolation, comfort, and satisfaction, not in explanations, but in a Person: God. Or to say it another way, Job found consolation, comfort, and satisfaction in the fear of the Lord.

But let's not just summarise the story of Job. Let's trace Job's frustration, anger, and accusations, and then his restoration to the fear of the Lord.

Time and suffering pushed the shield of Job's faith lower and lower. The first evidence of that came in chapter 3 in a series of demanding, God-made-a-mistake, "Why?" questions. Put simply, Job believed God had mismanaged his life.

Why did I not die at birth? Come forth from the womb and expire?

(Job 3:11)

Why is light given to him who suffers?

(Job 3:20a)

Job's friends only made matters worse with their relentless accusations against his integrity. Job vehemently (and accurately) denied that he had done anything worthy of the avalanche of "judgement" he had received from God. "If only the wicked get the back of God's hand," said Job, "then God got it wrong in my case."

Have I sinned? What have I done to You, O watcher of men? Why have you set me as Your target?

(Job 7:20)

In fact, Job was so convinced that God had wrongly assailed him, he wanted a chance to prove it. The idea of a disputation or court case with God to prove his innocence first occurred to Job in chapter 9. At first, the idea seemed to Job monstrous, unthinkable.

If one wished to dispute with Him [God], he could not answer Him once in a thousand times.

(Job 9:3)

"If I had a thousand chances to debate with God," said Job, "I doubt if I could beat Him even once." Job was certain the Almighty had blundered, but he couldn't contemplate arguing with *God*.

Job was at a fork in the road. If he had consciously filled his mind with thoughts of trust (Phil 4:8), he would have stayed on the high road of chapters 1-2. Instead, he chose to brood over his

doubts about God's wisdom.⁹ The result? What had been unthinkable in chapter 9, became his goal in chapter 13.

I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue with God.

(Job 13:3)

In Job's heart, a lifetime of trusting God butted heads with his proud desire to debate with God. You can see that collision in 13:15, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him. Nevertheless I will argue my ways before Him." So strong was Job's desire to extract an explanation from God and to prove that God had made a mistake, in chapter 23, Job begged for a hearing in God's courtroom.

Oh that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come to His seat! I would present my case before Him and fill my mouth with arguments.

(Job 23:3-4)

Given a chance to argue it out, Job believed he could prove God should not have brought calamity on him. Job was sure he could sift through God's plans, and show God where He had overlooked a viable—in fact, far superior—alternative to his calamities. Faced with Job's arguments, God would only be able to acknowledge He had been wrong, and restore Job's fortunes.

I would learn the words which He would answer, and perceive what He would say to me. Would He contend with me by the greatness of His power? No, surely He would pay attention to me. There the upright would reason with Him; and I would be delivered forever from my Judge.

(Job 23:5-7)

Job issued a summons, a subpoena, calling God to court. However, Job was in a terrible predicament. The only one qualified to hear his case was the very God he was accusing. In fact, at one time or another, Job had God in virtually every seat in the courtroom. Before his obstinate friends, Job called God as a *witness* to his blamelessness. On the other hand, God was also the only one who could *judge* whether Job or his friends were correct. Now Job wanted to make God the *defendant*, facing Job's accusation of injustice and bad management.

Having abandoned submissive faith, Job was spinning like a compass needle in an iron foundry. Job was certain that if only he could speak to God face-to-face, he could convince God that the death of his children, the loss of his wealth, and the collapse of his health was all a gigantic mistake. Job was certain that his plan for his life—even stillbirth (3:11)—was better than God's.

⁹ In the original of Job 1:22, Job refused to "assign folly" to God. Here we see Job in the process of changing his mind.

A new voice

In chapter 32, a new voice entered the debate with Job. After endless wrangling, Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar had come to an impasse (32:1). Job wouldn't admit to any gruesome, secret sin to explain what God had done. They wouldn't accept Job's exclamations of innocence. Enter Elihu.

Although younger than his learned companions (32:6), Elihu made several contributions that prepare the reader for the final section of the book. First, Elihu pointed out that God was not responsible to explain to Job anything about His working in Job's life.

Behold, let me tell you, you are not right in this, for God is greater than man. Why do you complain against Him that He does not give an account of all His doings?
(Job 33:12-13)

Behold, God is exalted in His power; Who is a teacher like Him? Who has appointed Him His way, and who has said, 'You have done wrong'?
(Job 36:22-23)

Second, Elihu challenged Job's assertion that he knew better than God how to arrange his life. Elihu did that by directing Job's attention to the grandeur of the physical creation.

Listen to this, O Job. Stand and consider the wonders of God. Do you know how God establishes them, and makes the lightening of His cloud to shine? Do you know about the layers of the thick clouds?...Can you with Him spread out the skies...?
(Job 37:14-15, 18)

This turn of argument—"How can you contend with the God who made all you see?"—is important. It is exactly the argument God used when He answered Job's summons.¹⁰

God's day in court

In chapter 23, Job called God to court to answer his accusations of injustice and mismanagement. In chapter 38, a most astounding thing happened. God showed up. In the visible manifestation of a storm cloud and tornado, God answered Job's call to court.

Even more astonishing than the fact that God came to speak with Job is what God said when He arrived. Job spent chapter after chapter pleading, begging, and demanding answers from God. How many answers did God give Job when He arrived? None. That's right. Not one.

¹⁰ In fact, as one reads the closing verses of chapter 36 and then chapter 37, one can't help but wonder if Elihu's eloquent description of a thunderstorm wasn't inspired by the approach of an actual armada of lightening-crowned thunderheads. At the end of chapter 37, the storm arrived, and Elihu made this unexpected announcement: "Around God is awesome majesty." The very next event was God speaking to Job from a whirlwind (tornado). The approaching storm described by Elihu may have been—to his and everyone else's surprise—the very storm of God's presence (cf., Ezekiel 1:4ff.; Psalm 18:10-15).

"Why didn't I die at birth? Why don't you leave me alone so I can have some peace? Why are you crushing me? Why? Why? *Why?*" God did not answer one of Job's questions. Instead—this is hard for our pride to accept—God questioned Job's right to ask them.

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?"

(Job 38:1-2)

God's accusation against Job? Ignorance. Job was asking questions about things he couldn't understand. God's monologue in chapters 38-41 can be summed up in this question: "Job, do you really think you know better than I how to arrange your life and the lives of those you love?"

Wisdom vs. wisdom

At first reading, God's response to Job in chapters 38-41 seems strange—as if He were avoiding the real issue with irrelevant questions about snow, deer giving birth, and binding wild oxen. God is never irrelevant. How, then, did those things relate to Job's accusation that God had mismanaged his life?

In Old Testament wisdom circles, God's creating, ordering, and managing of the physical universe was considered the greatest evidence of His wisdom. Consider the words of Proverbs:

The Lord by wisdom founded the earth, by understanding He established the heavens.
(Proverbs 3:19)

"I wisdom, dwell with prudence... The Lord possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old. From everlasting I was established, from the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills I was brought forth; while He had not yet made the earth and the fields, nor the first dust of the world. When He established the heavens, I was there, when He inscribed a circle on the face of the deep, when He made firm the skies above, when the springs of the deep became fixed, when He set for the sea its boundary so that the water would not transgress His command, when He marked out the foundations of the earth; then I was beside Him, as a master workman.

(Proverbs 8:12, 22-30)

(see also Psalm 104:10-30, esp. v. 24)

Job and his fellow Old Testament wisdom experts rightly considered the creating and daily administration of the physical universe to be a profound testimony of God's matchless wisdom and organisational skill. So, although God's tour of the creation in Job 38-41 might seem strange to us, Job understood perfectly what God was doing.

"Job, let's have a contest: My wisdom vs. your wisdom. You believe I have mismanaged your affairs; let's have a contest to see who has the greater wisdom, you or I. We'll keep it simple, Job. The physical universe will be our test case. If you can order it better than I, then we'll talk about who gets to order your life."

And so, beginning in chapter 38, God took Job by the hand and gave him a tour of creation. At every point, God's question was, "Job, can you explain how this works? Do you know how the bird flies? How the fish swims? Where the lightening comes from? Do you know when the animals should give birth? How to make the sun rise and set? Where I keep the food for the lions? Job, could you order the physical universe for even *one day*?" With gently chiding questions, God pointed out how laughable the idea of Job running the universe was.

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding, Who set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it? "On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, When the morning stars sang together And all the sons of God shouted for joy?

(Job 38:4-7)

"Job, could you have designed, created, and assembled the universe from nothing—with no blueprint, no raw materials?"

Or *who* enclosed the sea with doors when, bursting forth, it went out from the womb; when I made a cloud its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, and I placed boundaries on it, and set a bolt and doors, and I said, 'Thus far you shall come, but no farther; and here shall your proud waves stop'?

(Job 38:8-11)

"Job, can you tell the sea where to stop? Would it listen to your voice if you tried?"

Have you ever in your life commanded the morning, and caused the dawn to know its place? ...Have you entered into the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? ...Have you understood the expanse of the earth? Tell Me, if you know all this...

Where is the way to the dwelling of light? And darkness, where is its place? ...Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, or have you seen the storehouses of the hail?

(Job 38:12, 16, 18-19, 22)

God pointed from one thing to the next, from the solar heavens, to the depths of the ocean, giving Job every opportunity to display his wisdom. As He pointed out each new wonder, God asked, "Job, do you know how to run this? Or this, or this, or *this*?"

Job wasn't saying much at this point (in contrast to his earlier demands and accusations), but it is obvious that his answer was, "No, God, I don't know how to make the sun rise and set, where you

keep the rain and snow, or which drawer you keep the light in." Job was like the average husband in the kitchen—he didn't have a clue where things were or how to use them.

Can you lead forth a constellation in its season, and guide the Bear with her satellites? ... Can you hunt the prey for the lion, or satisfy the appetite of the young lions?

(Job 38:32, 39)

"Would the lions starve, Job, if I left you in charge for a week?"

Do you know the time the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer? ... Do you give the horse *his* might? Do you clothe his neck with a mane? ... Is it by your understanding that the hawk soars, stretching his wings toward the south?

(Job 39:1, 19, 26)

"Quick, Job, how does a hawk fly?"

"Well, I...ah, really don't know God."¹¹ Putting Job in charge of the universe for a day, would be like putting a two-year-old in the cockpit of a 747, and saying, "Land it."

Then the Lord said to Job, "Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it." Then Job answered the Lord and said, "Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth."

(Job 40:1-4)

I find it fascinating that God didn't have to spell it out for Job. God never actually said, "Job, if you can't run the easy thing—the physical universe—then how could you ever order peoples' lives?" God didn't have to say it. Job understood the lesson perfectly.

Having given Job a tour of creation, God finished the proof of His wisdom and greatness in chapters 40-41 by taking Job to the zoo. There He showed Job the two greatest animals in His creation: Behemoth and Leviathan. They sound an awful lot like what we call dinosaurs.¹²

Behold now, Behemoth, which I made as well as you; He eats grass like an ox. Behold now, his strength in his loins and his power in the muscles of his belly. He bends his tail like a cedar; the sinews of his thighs are knit together. His bones are tubes of bronze; his limbs are like bars of iron. He is the first of the ways of God.

(Job 40:15-19a)

¹¹ We know a bit more about such things than Job did, but we get the point. If God were giving a modern scientific man a tour, He would just make the questions a bit more difficult. He could, you know.

¹² The thought of dinosaurs being alive two or three thousand years before Christ is shocking to the evolutionist, but there is absolutely no reason this could not be true. What is a crocodile except a dinosaur that is not yet extinct? Many animals—fish and crustaceans especially—thought by evolutionists to have been dead for hundreds of millions of years have been discovered alive and well in the past century. There is no reason some of the gigantic reptiles we call dinosaurs could not have survived to Job's day.

North American and European scholars often suggest that this refers to a hippopotamus, but any African knows better. A hippo's tail looks like a lump of play-dough about the size of a man's fist stuck on a hippo's backside. A hippo can't move that tail more than a few centimetres. Not even poetic license would allow one to say a hippo "bends his tail like a cedar." The simple fact is, when God wanted to show Job the most impressive creature on planet Earth, He didn't show Job a hippo.

Bones like tubes of bronze, a tail that swings back and forth like a tree bending in a gale, gigantic stomach, a long neck that allows it to feed on water plants even during the spring floods (40:21-23)—that sounds like a brontosaurus or some such dinosaur. And that would be a creature—about the size of a block of flats—that God would show Job as "first" in His creation.

Leviathan, the second creature, was just as impressive, if not more so (41:1ff.). God described a creature of great size and strength, armour-plated, aggressive, and virtually unkillable: "Nothing on earth is like him, one made without fear" (41:33).

By the end of chapter 41, the challenge was complete. Job demanded from God the right to order his life. But when God showed up, Job realised his folly. "Job answered the Lord and said, 'I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted'" (Job 42:1-2). Humbled, Job quoted God's earlier question, shamefully admitting his guilt.

'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know....I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You; therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes.

(Job 42:3)

Fear-of-the-Lord faith

Job has come full circle, returning to the silent, trusting acceptance of chapters 1-2. Hand over his mouth, Job withdrew all his accusations of mismanagement, all his complaints, all his angry "Why?" questions. Was it because God gave him the answers he demanded? No. Was it because God explained how Job's calamity would eventually lead to good—something good enough to make it all worth it? No. Was it because God removed his calamity? No.

It was this: when Job saw the Creator God as great as He truly is, Job realised explanations weren't necessary. If God knew why things had happened, Job didn't need to. If God had a plan, Job certainly wasn't going to produce a better one. Instead of trying to find peace in explanations and negotiations, Job lost himself in a Person—One so wise that Job could trust Him whether he understood his calamity or not.

Following the imagery used by our Lord in the New Testament era, we call that "child-like faith." In the Old Testament, Job's awed, humble, trusting response to God in chapters 40 and 42 was called something else: the fear of the Lord.

Child-like faith means a three-year-old doesn't demand that dad pull over so he can examine the map when the family is driving to Grandma's house. Even if he doesn't know the way, he trusts that dad will get him there. Isn't that how Job responded after he met God? He went from demanding the map of his life to accepting that he was fine in the hands of the Map-maker.

All the wisdom books of the Old Testament champion the fear of the Lord. Proverbs said, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Ecclesiastes said, "Remember your Creator...fear God and keep His commandments." The message of Job is exactly the same. The key to handling calamity is *theological*. It is realising how great, wise, and loving God truly is, and (joyfully) accepting His plan, even if you don't understand it.

Job's God-directed tour of creation shut his mouth; it also soothed his enflamed soul. He was so humbled, so impressed by the Creator God that he couldn't help but respond with faith, trust, awe, and submission. He couldn't help but respond with the fear of the Lord.

Learning from Job

For thirty chapters, Job threw all his toys out of the cot, demanding that God explain what was going on. Did all that pleading, demanding, and arguing help Job? No. What helped Job was a fear-of-the-Lord faith. What helped Job was a calm, conscious choice to trust God no matter how great the pain. Job with his hand over his mouth in chapter 40 is a much more relaxed, peaceful, God-honouring Job, than the sputtering, fuming Job of chapters 3-30.

As you know, Job's losses were restored many times over in chapter 42, but that wasn't the key to Job's change of heart. It wasn't that God explained to Job how the account of his calamities would be included in the Bible, providing encouragement and instruction for millions yet unborn. It wasn't that God informed Job about His discussions with Satan in chapters 1-2. What was the key? God gave Job *Himself*, and Job found that the person of God was answer enough to all his questions.

God won't visit you in a tornado like He did Job, but He doesn't have to. Reading the book of Job is reminder enough. Job's suffering caused him to forget his Creator and to stop fearing God. Even Job, a wisdom expert who himself had counselled many, forgot God in his trial. Don't make the same mistake.

The book of Job has many lessons for handling calamity. It warns you not to torture yourself by trying to argue, negotiate, or demand answers from God. It warns you of the dangers of listening

to well-intentioned, but unbiblical counsel. It warns against the trap of time, the snare of expectations, and the danger of lowering the shield of faith.

But the primary lessons of Job are about God. God is in control; never doubt it. God has reasons, even if we can't discern them; trust Him. God is Creator. He is so great, so wise, and so loving that—like Job—we can trust Him, even if we don't understand what He is doing. As Job did, in the end, we will find that "the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful" (James 5:11).

The fear of the Lord—an awed, humble, accepting, trusting faith—is what Job needed to handle his calamities. It's what you need too. Suffering is not easy. You will long for answers to your questions. But when you meet the God of Job 38-41, you find that He is answer enough. That fear-of-the-Lord faith is the only way to handle calamity.

Conclusion:

A helpful checklist for handling calamity

How can you have fear-of-the-Lord faith in calamity? It begins with repentance and trusting Jesus Christ and His death on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. In the New Testament era, the fear of the Lord starts with Christ. If you truly know Christ and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, here are some practical, biblical ways to apply what you've learned in this booklet.

- When calamity comes, resist the temptation to barrage God with "Why?" questions (questions He doesn't answer anyway). Instead, ask "How? How can I get through this in a way that will honour God and please Him with my faith?"
- Capture and replace doubts (2 Cor 10:5b) about God's wisdom before they capture you like they did Job in Job 3ff.
- Pray *thankful* prayers (Phil 4:6-7), not accusing or demanding ones. The thankfulness of Philippians 4:6, opens the tap of God's peace in Philippians 4:7.
- Use the Scripture, hymns, and songs (Col 3:16; Eph 5:19) to focus your thoughts on the awesomely wise God of Job 38-41.
- When you are struggling, identify what is making you stumble: Bad counsel? Time? Expectations? You can review "Why Job stumbled" (p. 30) in this booklet for help.
- If you are harbouring a secret sin, repent. Otherwise, rejoice that—as a forgiven child—your calamity doesn't mean God is angry at you.
- Don't withdraw. Accept the love, encouragement, and help of God's family (Heb 10:24-25).
- Remember that faith pleases God. It delights Him. "Without faith it is impossible to please Him" (Heb 11:6). Positively stated that means, "With faith it *is* possible to please Him."

Fear-of-the-Lord faith isn't easy when calamity strikes. But the God who delights in being trusted will give you the grace to do so. And the book of Job will help. Imitate Job in his better moments, not his worse. Avoid the traps and snares into which he fell. But most of all, remember—read it again, and again—Job's meeting with God. In God, all Job's questions were answered. In God, Job found a Person so great, so wise, and so loving, that it didn't matter if he understood what was happening. For Job, that fear of the Lord was the key to handling calamity. It is for you and me, as well.