

Why Ask Why?

Faith and Lament in Times of Crisis

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Intro: The Biggest Problem or The Most Audacious Hope?

Part One: Why ask Why? (when it is a question that cannot be answered)

A. Where the Why Question comes from: Our beliefs about God and our trust in God's promises and providential care.

1. Our belief that God is loving, powerful, and good leads us to ask: so why so much pain?
2. Our trust that God will keep God's promises (Jer. 29:11; Rom. 8:28; Eph. 6:3, Rev. 21:4) leads us to as cry out, accuse, demand, seek, and plead (consider Job!)
3. Our conviction that God is providentially involved in all things leads us to look for God's presence and action in everything (Ps. 139).
4. Our conviction that God created everything "good" deepens the "why."

B. The (Potential) Hazards of asking Why

1. It can't be answered and so can become a waste of time.
2. To ask this of God distracts us from our responsibility; what *can* be done.
3. Insisting that there is an answer can lead us to diminish the reality of creaturely suffering/Answering it definitely and creating a "formula" can keep us from being-with.
 - (a). Examples of distancing explanations.
 - (1) This is not as bad as it looks (e.g. Leibniz)
 - (2) We will learn something.
 - (3) This is punishment from God that we deserve.

(Works a little better with moral evil than natural.)

(b). Examples of distancing comments.

- (1) *Have you found the blessing in that, yet?*
- (2) *God never gives us more than we can bear.*
- (3) *You have to remember that God gave us free will.*
- (4) *We just have to trust that it's all part of God's "secret plan"¹*

C. Q: Can we ask why (trusting that God is sovereign, loving, and providentially involved in our lives) without diminishing creaturely suffering?

1. A: not really.

- a. Better to focus on what we *can* do than worry about any direct relationship between God and suffering creatures. *Functional deism.*
- b. Better to re-think God's attributes, in particular the divine omnipotence, to account for the problem and spur on human agents (e.g. process theologies).

2. A: We could try.

a. But why would we do that?

(1) To keep moving in the world (Calvin's take)

Without certainty about God's providence life would be unbearable . . . Innumerable are the evils that beset human life . . . our body is the receptacle of a thousand diseases . . . wherever you turn, all things around you . . . almost openly menace . . . Embark upon a ship, you are one step away from death. Mount a horse, if one foot slips, your life is imperiled. If there is a weapon in your hand or a friend's, harm awaits . . . Your house, continually in danger of fire, threatens . . . to collapse upon you . . . Your field threatens you with barrenness" (Institutes I.17.10).

(2) To affirm that God cares for and loves us (Wesley's take)

God hath made us, not we ourselves, and cannot despise the work of his own hands. We are his children: And can a mother forget the children of her womb? Yea, she may forget; yet will not God forget us! On the contrary, he hath expressly declared, that as his "eyes are over all the

¹ For more on this see, *Everything Happens For A Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*, by Kate Bowler.

earth,” so he “is loving to every man, and his mercy is over all his works.” Consequently, he is concerned every moment for what befalls every creature upon earth; and more especially for everything that befalls any of the children of men (from John Wesley, sermon #68, “On the Divine Providence.”)

(3) To keep God on the hook (Greenway, Job’s wife, Job)

(4) Best reason: because we have experienced God walking with us and want to deepen in our understanding of this (Jn. 15:4; sanctification.

Part Two: The Shape of Faith in a Time of Ambiguity.

A. A better directing of the question: Jürgen Moltmann (Jn. 9:3.)

B. Telling it like it is: Lament

1. Job
2. Psalmist (eg 22,42,44)
3. Martha in John 11: foot-stomping, vulnerable, confessional, active.
4. Jesus’ cry of dereliction

C. Not sticking to one template. Bumble, don’t march.²

D. Don’t rule out that God might be working providentially through the hard — even suffering experiences— of you or someone’s life. *But realize that as soon as you ask a person “have you found the blessing in that?” or “you must trust that God has a secret plan” you have punted on being with them and diminished their suffering. Not ruling out the possibility that God is somehow, in ways we can’t possibly understand, using some suffering redemptively is very different from piously deciding that all suffering is somehow redemptive and you are going to help everyone figure that out. That’s the trick of the oppressor that is used to keep suffering people in their place. But I think we can also diminish the sufferer if we tell them there is NOTHING redemptive about their experience when they say there is. (e.g. James Cone’s example of Emmet Til’s mother).*

² See my article, “Speak of the Devils: Creative Faith in a Time of Pandemic” and interview “Bumbling Forward in Faith” in the latest issue of *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary* (fall 2020). It is linked here, is fully downloadable and printable, and includes discussion questions and a podcast for educational use: <https://www.austinseminary.edu/resources/publications>.

E. Look for God in the abyss as well as on the mountaintop (Apostles' Creed; Christian Wiman): A story

References/Bibliography/Annotations/Comment

Link to Martha image: <https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarasque> (the black and white image on the right).

Link to Far Side cartoon mocking a (distorted) understanding of God's sovereignty: <https://thebarkingfox.com/tag/smite-button/>

Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*.

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Kindle version).³

³ *I have been pondering James Cone's controversial discussion of "redemptive suffering" in recent days, as I think comes through in this talk (it also influenced a sermon I did in the APTS chapel last fall: (<https://www.austinseminarydigital.org/items/show/1460>).*

In The Cross and the Lynching Tree, James Cone says he was "slow to embrace King's view of redemptive suffering," but couldn't ignore the experience of Black Christians who "felt something redemptive about Jesus' cross (Kindle edition, Loc. #2559, #2250). "When I took up the cross," Cone explains, I recognized its meaning. . . . It is not something that you wear. The cross is something that you bear and ultimately that you die on" (#2441). "Redemption . . . through Jesus Christ . . . was an amazing experience of salvation, an eschatological promise of freedom that gave transcendent meaning to black lives that no lynching tree could take from them" (#2275).

Could it be the case that God redeems us not only by "overruling" the world, but also by actively and deliberately drawing us into its sufferings and struggles? How such a dangerous idea could be considered without undoing all the careful work done by feminist theologians who have successfully argued that suffering itself is NEVER redemptive, I believe Cone would say, takes "imagination." "People without imagination," Cone quotes Reinhold Niebuhr as saying, "really have no right to write about ultimate things. Certainly it takes a special kind of imagination to understand the

William Greenway, *The Challenge of Evil: Grace and the Problem of Suffering*.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*.

Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*.

Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel: *Women Around Jesus*.

Cynthia L. Rigby, "Communicate Life": Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel Imagines Biblical Models for Women. *Theology Today* (June 1, 2012);

Cynthia L. Rigby "Providence and Play" (critique of Calvin's evocation of "God's secret plan." In *Insights* (126:2; spring 2011), 10-18. Linked at: <https://www.austinseminarydigital.org/items/show/1524>.

Deanna Thompson/deannathompson.com; *Glimpsing Resurrection: Cancer, Trauma, and Ministry*.

Elie Wiesel, *Night*.

Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditations of a Modern Believer*.

truth of the cross. Only poets can do justice to the Christmas and Easter stories and there are not many poets in the pulpit" (#2275).