

THE GREAT “WHY”
Psalm 22
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Lawrence Webb

INTRODUCTION

Children ask questions — often that one-word question: “Why?”
If we get exasperated by that question, “Why?” we may say, “Because I said so.”

Today, I want to look at that pesky, one-word question, “Why?”
“Why did our son seem lost in outer space when he came home from Afghanistan?”

We’ve used different terms to describe the personal fallout from taking part in battle. At one time, they called it war nerves. After World War Two, one of Mother’s cousins married a navy veteran. As a boy in grade school, I remember when the couple visited us. When someone got this man started talking about war experience, he got extremely excited and yelled and screamed as he told about some of his combat experiences. In those days in the 1940s, they called this “shell shock.”

Following Viet Nam, approximately 30 percent of men and 27 percent of women had these emotional disturbances at some point. The study is incomplete regarding Afghanistan, but up to 31 percent have been diagnosed as suffering Post-Traumatic Syndrome Disorder or PTSD. Even more significant — medical personnel have noted the persistence of symptoms a year after the veterans return.

So we ask, “Why?”

Beyond the question about soldiers and sailors with War Nerves, think of this question: Why do blacks and browns — African-Americans and Latinos — represent more than half the executions in this country when they are a smaller segment of the population? For example, in Houston, twelve of the last thirteen executed were black. Among the prison population in Alabama, African-Americans are 27 percent of the population, yet they comprise 63 percent of the prisoners.

Again we ask, “Why?”

On a personal basis, those of us who lost a child in death never quite get over asking “Why?” Age doesn’t matter. I think of dear friends of mine whose little girl ran full-term but lived only an hour or two. They had a full funeral and burial, the same as if she had lived months or years. Pansy and I had twin sons in our first pregnancy, born two months prematurely. Our Randall lived only thirteen days. His twin brother Russell is in good health as he nears his 50th birthday. Pansy and I have a friend who is an Episcopal priest. He and his wife lost a son who lived about twenty years. Age doesn’t matter.

Many people don’t know what to say in the face of deep sorrow. When our twin son died, several well-meaning friends didn’t reach their goal of comfort:

- When I went back to the office after the memorial service, my secretary said, “We still have Romans 8:28.” That wasn’t what I needed in that moment. I believe the testimony of that verse — that all things work together for good for God’s people I believe those words reflect Paul’s personal testimony that he came to amid all the struggles he endured. They are not a spiritual prescription pill offered for what ails you.

- Someone told my friends whose daughter lived only a few hours that God took her because He needed a new angel. My friends didn’t buy that for two reasons. They didn’t believe God took their baby. She died of complications that developed in her little body. Also, the Bible says nothing about our becoming angels when we die.

- My Episcopal priest friend out in Texas told of similar platitudes when their young adult son died in a car accident.

- Our baby didn’t get enough oxygen to his brain, so if he had lived, he likely would have been retarded. One thoughtless person said: “You’re better off than if he had lived.” Longterm, that might or might not be true, but that was something we had to work through.

- Someone else said, “Well, you still have the other one.” Yes, we “still have the other one” nearly 50 years later. But that didn’t allay our loss of his brother.

Why did this happen to my child?

Why do we still send young women and men to Afghanistan after more than 17 years?

Why did guards at the border lock babies of illegal entrants in cages like animals?

Why can’t government leaders find a sensible solution to the Wall issue?

One other “Why?” Arlis Hinson, 87 years old, was a special friend to many of us in our church. For years, he and I got together every week for lunch. He had heart complications for several years and recently had a new heart valve installed. We thought he was coming along well when he went home with his wife Georgia. Then, just a couple of days after getting home, he died suddenly.

In recent months, Arlis and I had been dining in elegance — at Wendy’s! We had waited several weeks for the one near the hospital to relocate just across the intersection. We had been meeting on Thursdays. Then Wendy’s opened their new store on Tuesday just before Arlis went into the hospital — on Thursday, our regular meeting day. So we never got to eat together at their new location.

Perhaps it shouldn’t be so shocking when those of us in our eighties die without warning. No one has the promise that we will see a new day. But we are shocked and can’t help asking, “Why?”

That question has no easy answers. That’s why we keep asking them. But there’s nothing wrong with asking questions about life, questions about God.

PSALM 22

The 22nd Psalm asks hard questions.

It begins with an anguished cry:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

Why art thou so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

Many of us have asked this. This may be the cry of your heart this morning.

This psalm is a song, a religious song. The Psalms are the song book for Jewish worship. Many of the psalms express discouragement. Why would the compilers of the Psalms put such unhappy songs in the book to sing when they gather to worship?

We have a few songs of that sort in Christian song books. Consider this one by John Newton, the man who also wrote “Amazing Grace”:

How tedious and tasteless the hours
When Jesus I no longer see;
Sweet prospects, sweet birds and sweet flowers,
Have all lost their sweetness to me;
The midsummer sun shines but dim,
The fields strive in vain to look gay.
But when I am happy in Him,
December's as pleasant as May. . . .

Dear Lord, if indeed I am Thine,
If Thou art my sun and my song,
Say, why do I languish and pine?
And why are my winters so long?
O drive these dark clouds from the sky,
Thy soul cheering presence restore;
Or take me unto Thee on high,
Where winter and clouds are no more.

The psalmist has prayed day and night but gets no answer (v. 2).

He is from a godly family, a godly ancestry. Listen again to verses 4-5:

In thee our fathers trusted; they trusted, and thou didst deliver them.

To thee they cried, and were saved; in thee they trusted, and were not disappointed.

The blessings God gave this man’s ancestors haven’t continued with him. Maybe the statue of limitation expired.

He feels like a worm, not a man (v. 6).

People mock him (vv. 7-8).

This doesn’t seem right to the singer because he has believed God for as long as he can remember. Here are verses 9-10:

Yet thou art he who took me from the womb; thou didst keep me safe upon my mother's breasts. Upon thee was I cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me thou hast been my God.

What's going on here, God?

He feels completely cut off from any help (v. 11).

He feels he is being attacked by bulls, as fierce as lions (vv. 12-13). He refers to strong bulls of Bashan. Bashan was an area known for rich pasture land, herds of cattle, and fierce bulls (Durham 214):

Be not far from me, for trouble is near and there is none to help.

Many bulls encompass me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me;

they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion.

In verses 14-17, the Psalmist gives a series of word pictures to show his misery:

He's as out of control as water that's being poured out.

His bones feel as if they are disconnected one from another.

His heart is melting in his chest like wax.

He feels his strength is dried up like a broken piece of pottery.

His tongue feels like it's stuck to his jaw.

He feels God has laid him in the dust to die, and dogs are gathering about his carcass.

It's as if he can count his bones, as if they're protruding through his skin.

All these descriptions give a horrible picture of the condition he is in.

Gospel writers pick up on part of this passage in describing the crucifixion:

In Matthew 27:8, people around the cross echo this psalm:

"He committed his cause to the LORD; let him deliver him, let him rescue him, for he delights in him!"

Matthew reports that Jesus cries out the first verse of this Psalm:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

Jesus's human side shows through as He suffers the pain and agony of death. He expresses feeling isolated from the Heavenly Father. These words help us understand that Jesus shared our human suffering. Perhaps Matthew records these words as a way of saying, "Even Jesus raised questions in His final hours, as life faded from His body."

In e-mail, a friend mentioned being angry with a loved one because she had died. My friend was apologetic for admitting this feeling. I tried to reassure him that this is a natural feeling. It's not logical, but it's quite common. Unless the death is a suicide, the person didn't choose to die. But we feel cheated because we don't have that person with us any more. And that can lead us to feel the deceased is cheating us by leaving us. So I hope you don't feel embarrassed or guilty because you are angry at the dear one who died.

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, reminds us that the Psalms -- including the Psalms of Lament -- were and are an integral part of Jewish worship. This means it is acceptable in Jewish worship to lay grievances before the Lord God. Dr. Brueggemann calls these laments “Psalms of darkness” (Brueggemann 27).

But the Christian church largely ignores Complaint Psalms, as if it is an act of “unfaith” to acknowledge negativity. On the contrary, it can be a bold step to bring our grievances before God (27).

We should not try to hide or disguise our negative feelings. We can be honest like “Good Ole Charlie Brown” in the *Peanuts* strip. When Charlie is at a low point, Linus tries to encourage him:

“Don’t be discouraged, Charlie Brown . . . In this life we live, there are always some bitter pills to be swallowed.”

To which Charlie Brown replies, “If it’s all the same with you, I’d rather not renew my prescription” (Schulz).

The Linuses of the world offer cold comfort leaving us with our questions and laments.

Remember, the Complaint Psalms are not the voice of some agnostic who weeps and wails about the things God is letting happen to him. These songs have the blessing of the religious leaders. These songs are used in corporate worship. Life is not all “Blessed Assurance” and “Standing on the Promises.” “Psalms of Darkness” used in Jewish worship acknowledge that life often is rough and that it is acceptable to voice our lament to God about the rough times.

MY “WHY” FOLDER

I keep a file folder labeled “Coping.” I could call it “How Do I Deal with Difficulty?” or “When the Going Gets Tough” or “Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?” Or maybe the file could be called simply “Why?”

Whatever you name it, the folder is for one of those “Questions We Keep Asking.”

In the folder, I keep newspaper clippings and Internet stories about different ways people try to deal with those questions which keep coming back.

Here is a lament from the obituary page of the Anderson paper several years ago (Anderson Independent-Mail, May 31, 2002):

I have a friend That is sweet as a baby.
He has a family that loves him, and a happy life.
We all love him to death, but something is not right.
Everything was fine until that day You came and took him away.

I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what to do.

Words can't express what I'm going through.
He changed so much over the summer.
Every day something changed about him.
His eating habits, his appearance, but mostly his attitude.

I start to cry just thinking about the whole situation.
He won't be there to see his sister's graduation.
He won't be there to see his brothers grow up
to be successful young men and marry great ladies.
Or see that his little sister does her best.
You came out of nowhere while we were unaware
And took him away just like that.
I just can't believe what You have done.
You've brought pain to everyone. Why did You do this to him?
I just keep thinking to myself, "How can this be?"
But what I really keep thinking is,
"Why God, why did You take him from us?"
In Loving Memory of Pat (Fat-Back), Friend, Pammy

A husband and wife in Texas asked The Great "Why" when their 19-year-old daughter was raped and murdered. Here are some thoughts they expressed several years after their daughter's death:

The most difficult thing was dealing with anger, and the whole issue of forgiveness and bitterness. We have to come to grips with the fact that this is something we cannot change, and "Why" is something we will not have an answer to that would ever satisfy us. It is a meaningless question. Several places in the Bible we are told, "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," but I always thought that meant that God was going to get even for me. What it came to mean was that God was going to carry the problem that I couldn't handle. I had to let God carry the load of anger and bitterness and vengeance, because it was too big for me (Martin).

This grieving couple cited St. Paul's testimony in Second Corinthians concerning what he endured. Notice the Apostle was under such stress that he despaired of life itself:

For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead; he delivered us from so deadly a peril, and he will deliver us; on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again (2 Corinthians 1:8-10).

This couple's closing comment tells what they found in God in times of grave difficulty: "What is true is that He will carry us when our pain and grief are too great even to think about."

POSITIVE SIDE OF PSALM 22

The Psalms were written for singing in the synagogue — even Psalm 22, wondering why God has forsaken the singer. This gives legitimacy to telling God our worst feelings toward Him. Singing it in group worship reminds us that we are surrounded by people with similar issues, similar feelings.

But Psalm 22 doesn't end on the sour note. After howling, "God, why have You forsaken me?" the psalm ends by declaring the Lord is with the singer --is with US -- after all.

I will tell of thy name to my brethren; in the midst of the congregation I will praise thee: You who fear the LORD, praise him! all you sons of Jacob, glorify him, and stand in awe of him, all you sons of Israel! For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; and he has not hid his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him. From thee comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

So, perhaps Jesus's cry from the cross can be read differently. He began in agony as He quoted those agonized first words. Then, He continued with Psalm 22, ending with this testimony of faith:

THOMAS KEN'S SONG:

Thomas Ken, who lived in the 17th and 18th centuries, wrote about both sides of this equation:

When overwhelmed with doubts and fears
Great God, do Thou my spirit cheer;
Let not my eyes with tears be fed,
But to the Rock of Ages led.
When storms of sin and sorrow beat
Lead me to this divine retreat --
Thy perfect righteousness and blood,
My Rock, my Fortress, and my God.

When guilt lies heavy on my soul
And waves of fierce temptation roll,

I'll to the Rock for shelter flee,
And take my refuge, Lord, in Thee.
When called the vale of death to tread,
Then to this Rock may I be led;
Nor fear to cross the gloomy sea
Since Thou hast tasted death for me (Ken).

SHARON RANDALL

Sharon Randall writes a syndicated column. Over the years, she wrote about losing her husband to cancer at a relatively young age — then guiding three children through adolescence till they flew from the nest. Then she moved on to a new stage in life: Gone to a new state with a new husband.

One year in springtime, Sharon wrote about her grandfather's explanation of March winds:

It's simple, he told me: God sends the wind in springtime to clear the Earth of all that's dead -- crumbling leaves, broken branches and other casualties of winter -- to make room for new growth and shout out the promise of everlasting life.

Then Ms Randall said,

I don't know much about wind. But I know something about the winds of change. They come howling through our lives when we least expect them, ripping up plans, forcing us off course, stripping away what was -- no matter how dearly we loved it, or how fiercely we try to hold on to it -- to make room for what will be.

I hate it when that happens. I turn up my collar; hunker down and try my best to resist — until the wind stops and I start to ask how did my neck get so stiff? Someday before I leave this world I hope to learn to weather change with all the grace and style and abandon of a hawk. Until then I'll just try to hang on to what's left of my hair (Randall).

Sharon Randall often writes about her faith in God, but she writes as someone who has sung both parts of Psalm 22, the Song of Desolation: “My God, why have You forsaken me?” And the Song of Praise: *The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD!*

CONCLUSION

I haven’t offered much by way of concrete answer to The Great “Why.” I’ve tried to say: It’s all right to raise the questions. Passages such as Psalm 22 give us permission to tell God about the dark, disturbing areas of life as we pray and hold on for dear life. The Psalm also offers the promise of a new start, a new day. If you’re still singing the sad, lonely, questioning part of the song, God bless you. Try to remember He is holding you, even though you feel you are having to go it alone.

BENEDICTION

To that end, I challenge you to accept these promises:
God’s love that will never let you go,
God’s grace that is greater than all your sin,
God’s peace that passes all understanding.
These are yours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE GREAT “WHY”---SOURCES

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