

Dealing with the Why of Suffering

By Amy Baker and adapted by Matthew Black

Have you ever struggled to experience God's presence when you were suffering? How is a believer able to connect with God in the deepest trials of life?

Asking Why, God?

1. In times of grief and suffering, the question of "Why?" often plagues us. What are some of the "why" questions you've asked God? Don't be afraid to be vulnerable and honest.
2. The deeper the suffering, the less likely knowing "why" will satisfy. Only as we ask "Who" and trust in God will we find satisfaction and comfort. Asking why, without asking who, can easily lead to despair. Have your despairing thoughts ever helped you? How have despairing thoughts made your life worse?

Asking Who is God?

3. Jesus tells us what his heart is like in the New Testament. Read the following passage and answer the question, what is Jesus' heart toward me?

Matthew 11:28-30, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

4. God tells us what his heart is like in the Old Testament. Read the following passage and answer the question, what is God's heart toward me?

Exodus 34:6-7, ... "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished..."

5. Look at the following passages and answer the questions.

Lamentations 3:32-33, “Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. ³³ For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.”

Jeremiah 32:37-41, “I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety. ³⁸ They will be my people, and I will be their God. ³⁹ I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me and that all will then go well for them and for their children after them. ⁴⁰ I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me. ⁴¹ I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul.”

What does God do reluctantly? What does he long to do and what does he do eagerly? **Think about it.**

Left to our own natural intuitions about God, we will conclude that God is reluctant to show mercy and eager to show judgment. But, in fact, he is reluctant to bring judgment and is eager to show mercy. With that in mind, answer the following question.

6. What rises naturally within God? What’s in his heart, his inner person?

Exodus 34:6-7, The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...”

Answers God has given in answer to “why?”

7. How do the people listed below respond to “why” when they ponder “who”?

a. Moses, “that I may know you...”

Exodus 33:13, Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.

b. Habakkuk, “though the fig tree should not blossom... I will rejoice”

Habakkuk 3:16-19, I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly

wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us. ¹⁷ Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, ¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. ¹⁹ God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.

c. Job, “I repent”

Job 42:5-6, I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees You; ⁶ Therefore I retract, and I repent, sitting on dust and ashes.

d. David, “You hear!”

Psalms 10:17-18, O Lord, you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear ¹⁸ to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more.

Read through the Lamentations 3 passages and answer the following questions.

8. How does your experience in suffering relate with Jeremiah's in Lamentations? Are there times you feel like you are eating gravel in life? Are there times you feel you are cowering? Do you sometimes forget what happiness is or that you have no endurance or hope in the Lord?

Lamentations 3:15-18, He has filled me with bitterness; he has sated me with wormwood. ¹⁶ He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes; ¹⁷ my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; ¹⁸ so I say, “My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the Lord.”

9. What is it that never ceases toward you? What does he want to give you every morning (and every moment of every day)?

Lamentations 3:19-26, Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! ²⁰ My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. ²¹ But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: ²² The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; ²³ they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ²⁴ “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” ²⁵ The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. ²⁶ It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

10. If God in his heart doesn't want to afflict his children, then why does he allow affliction in our lives? List the answers to "why" you find in the passages below.

Lamentations 3:33b, He does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men.

Passage	The answer to "Why?"
Psalm 119:71, It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.	
James 1:3, Because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.	
James 1:4, Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.	
1 Peter 1:7, These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. (NLT)	
Romans 8:29, For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.	
James 1:12, Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.	
2 Corinthians 12:7, Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.	
Galatians 6:7-8, Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. ⁸ Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.	
2 Timothy 2:8-10, Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, ⁹ for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. ¹⁰ Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.	

Passage	The answer to “Why?”
2 Timothy 2:12, If we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us.	
2 Corinthians 1:9, Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.	
John 9:3, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.	
Job 1:8, Then the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.”	
1 Peter 4:13, But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.	
2 Corinthians 1:3-6, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. ⁶ If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.	
<i>(When Job heard he had lost his children and his property)</i> Job 1:20-21, Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. ²¹ And he said, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”	
2 Peter 1:5-9, For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.	
2 Corinthians 1:8–9, We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly	

Passage	The answer to "Why?"
burdened beyond our strength that we despaired even of life itself. Indeed, 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.	