

The 'Why' question

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Many of the most difficult questions begin with 'Why'. Such questions occur often in Scripture, and are posed by us in particular regarding the atonement. The ultimate answer to such questions is that God willed it so.

THE CONTINUAL questions of a child can be a little exhausting to a parent, so parents tell me. It's the 'Why? Why? Why?' type of question I am thinking of, questions like, 'Why is the sky blue?', 'Why is the grass green?', or even, 'Why do I have to put my coat on?'. The child believes that the parent has the answers to all the conceivable questions out there. It is said to reach a peak by the age of five, when hundreds of questions are asked.

To some questions there is an easy answer, of course. To the question, 'Why do I have to put my coat on?', the answer is, 'Because it is cold outside'. It is a good answer, which should put an end to the discussion. Another answer that parents use sometimes is, 'Because I say so', in the hope that it quickly puts an end to the 'why'-type questioning. Questions like, 'Why is the grass green?', or, 'Why does the sea go up and down?', are more difficult to find an answer to. Such questions are a little more problematic to a parent.

Jesus' questions

Jesus asked questions as a child. At the age of twelve we find him left behind at Jerusalem, his parents having departed after the Passover to travel home. They came to realise that their child was not with them, and they returned to the city. Jesus was found "in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers" (Lk. 2:46,47). They recognised that this was no ordinary child. For Jesus, the learning process had begun, he was about his Father's business.

Both hearing and asking questions is part of the growing process, learning about the world in which we live and about God our maker. The questioning mind should be encouraged; that is how we develop into well-informed adults, or so we can hope.

The disciples' questions

The disciples of Jesus asked many questions, the why-type question; for example:

"Why speakest thou unto them in parables?"

"Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come?"

"Why could not we cast him out?"

They are genuine questions; the disciples wanted to understand the teaching of Jesus, which left them puzzled at times. You could say they were almost childlike in their desire to learn, and this could be the same attitude required by Jesus when he said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God . . . Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein" (Mk. 10:14,15). The disciples, even though they sometimes misunderstood Jesus, on the whole had the correct attitude to Jesus and his teaching. They were willing to hear and ask questions, to learn in that way.

The rulers' questions

The scribes and the Pharisees also asked why-type questions, negative, fault-finding questions; for example:

"Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?"

"Why do ye that which is not lawful to do on the sabbath days?"

and so on.

They were following their own agenda to trap Jesus in his answers. Their aim was not to find answers to their questions; they were not seeking truth, but probed away at Jesus to find fault. So there are questions, and there are questions. The advice to Timothy was to avoid "questions and strifes of words" (1 Tim. 6:4). It is this negative type of questioning that should be avoided.

Rhetorical questions

Jesus asked questions as a boy, but he grew in wisdom, we are told, and by the age of thirty he was the master teacher whose questions in turn were to make his disciples think about themselves. Jesus knew what the answers should be; he asked more rhetorical why-type questions, such as:

"Why take ye thought for raiment?"

"Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye?"

"Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?"

They were asked in order to make the disciples ask questions about themselves, to search their hearts so that they could grow spiritually.

The final answer

So, back to the 'difficult' question asked earlier:

Why does the sea go up and down?

Because of waves.

Why do we have waves?

Because the wind whips them up.

Why do we have wind?

It is the movement of air.

Why the movement of air?

It is due to high and low pressure, hot and cold air.

Why high and low pressure?

The sun heats up the atmosphere.

Why the sun?

God made it so, see Genesis 1:16: "And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day . . .".

My point here is that the final answer to most fundamental questions is 'God'; God has made it so. We cannot go beyond that. That is it. And I feel that a child simply accepts that as an answer. No further questions are required. 'Why is the grass green?' *God made it green.*

Many questions in this world lead back to God the Creator. God makes the rules. God is the final answer. To some questions there is no other reasonable answer, other than, 'God made it so'. It is a bit like the answer the parent might give the child, 'Because I say so'. God has declared it.

Job's questions

Job had a troubled time, and during his long speeches he asked a number of why-type questions, and not very cheerful ones:

"Why died I not from the womb?"

"Why hast Thou set me as a mark against Thee, so that I am a burden to myself?"

"Why dost Thou not pardon my transgression, and take away my mine iniquity?"

"Why then labour I in vain?"

Job felt forsaken, left alone in his suffering, and dwelt on these very inward-looking questions. Job's so-called friends were willing to give him answers but they failed to comfort him, in fact "they had found no answer, and yet had condemned Job".

God finally gave him an answer out of the whirlwind, and to that Job's response was, "Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer Thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth. Once have I spoken; but I will not answer: yea, twice; but I will proceed no further" (Job 40:4,5). No more questions from Job. God's greatness was the final answer. And we are in a far weaker position than Job; we are not in any position to question God as he did.

Lessons from Romans

Job is quoted in Romans 11. The theme of this chapter is that of God's dealings with the Jews. The question is asked in verse 1, "Hath God cast away His people?", and the remainder of the chapter gives an answer to that question. But the chapter ends with this (if we still have questions left):

"O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been His counsellor?" (vv. 33,34).

God's wisdom is the final answer that we have to come to accept in the end. To most complex questions, God is the final answer.

The death of Jesus

We could ask these questions:

'Why did God require a perfect sacrifice?'

'Why must there be the shedding of blood before the forgiveness of sins?'

'Why did Jesus die upon that cross?'

These questions are difficult to address. The atonement of Christ is a complex subject; it is difficult fully to grasp the reasons why it happened as it did. To define the exact meaning behind it is a hard exercise to do, and even if we do try to spell it out then there is the likelihood that we might be misunderstood.

The 'final' answer to the question is that the need for sacrifice is set as an eternal truth. It is a principle that is established in the Old Testament. A sizable part of the Law of Moses is based on it. Life is in the blood of the animal, we are told; the forgiveness of sin is through sacrifice. Sacrifice for sin was required in the Old Testament, and the children of Israel accepted that this was the case. God had set the rules.

In Hebrews 10 we are told that the continual sacrifices of the Old Testament pointed to something better, they were "a shadow of good things" (v. 1). The question 'Why?' is not asked. It is

just a statement of fact; it is stated as an eternal truth.

The daily ministering mentioned in verse 11 pointed to one man mentioned in verse 12: Jesus "offered one sacrifice for sins for ever". Jesus was to take away the sin of the world, not just individual sins that are repeated time and time again. Jesus bore our sin-stricken nature, even though he did no sin himself. Sin itself is defeated in Christ. Jesus is that lamb without blemish, that perfect sacrifice, acceptable to God.

We accept this fact as the means of our salvation. It is part of our faith to accept this, so that we may have "boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus" (v. 19) in "full assurance of faith" (v. 22).

Back in Hebrews 9, the importance of blood is stated: "the blood of goats and calves" (v. 12); "how much more . . . the blood of Christ" (v. 14); "without shedding of blood is no remission" (v. 22). It is a fact that we accept in faith, a simple statement of fact.

Why did God require a perfect sacrifice before sins are forgiven? Why the shedding of blood? The answer is, because God wills it, it was so from the beginning.

The final 'Why?' question

Jesus knew he was to suffer and die upon the cross. He knew what the will of his Father was. We are told that Jesus obeyed God's will. He did no sin. He overcame his sinful nature. Jesus knew that he would be raised from the dead. There was no doubt.

However, it is difficult for us to appreciate the depth of his suffering at the end. His disciples forsook him, they had fled from the garden. He suffered a night of questioning, and then after a terrible time at the hands of the Romans he was crucified.

On the cross he spoke these words: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?", that is, "My God, my God,

why hast Thou forsaken me?" (Mk. 15:34). Why did he say these words? In the depths of his sorrow was it a sign of desperation, of final doubt? Did Jesus know the answer to the question?

The likely answer is that the God-given power that Jesus received at his baptism was returned to God at this time; that is, he experienced the removal of Divine power. On the cross Jesus had an overwhelming feeling of desertion, of his humanity, of being mere man, suffering all alone. He died like all men. Jesus was the second Adam, representing man in all his pain and sorrow.

The psalmist King David penned those words in Psalm 22 from which Jesus was quoting. David felt forsaken and deserted at times. And, of course, we can feel forsaken at times (like Job in his suffering), and end up asking those continual why-type questions as mere children of God, like, "Why then labour I in vain?".

It is in words such as, "yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered" (Heb. 5:8), and "Himself took our infirmities" (Mt. 8:17), that we see the answer, that at this moment, at the very desperate end, when he hung upon that cross, Jesus represented humanity as a whole, and said those words on our behalf.

There is no doubt that Jesus knew the final answer; God had not forsaken him completely. Jesus had done no sin, but he was that perfect sacrifice for sin; the grave could not hold him, and he rose from the dead on the third day, giving life and hope to all men. God does not forsake those that trust Him.

In conclusion

David was not only able to write those words in Psalm 22, he was able also to write: "The LORD also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. And they that know Thy name will put their trust in Thee: for Thou, LORD, hast *not forsaken* them that seek Thee" (Ps. 9:9,10).

But now the time was at hand for the glory of God to depart, so that it might shine even more gloriously "without a cloud between". God could not die; neither could His Spirit enter the grave. He had to sacrifice His only begotten Son in the fullest sense, allowing him to die, and to die alone. There was no other way than that the Divine presence should be withdrawn, and that our Lord should enter the grave alone. It was the realisation of this, and the descent of that "horror of great darkness", felt by his ancestor Abraham, that wrung from the lips of Jesus the agonised cry: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?". In all the pitiful story of the pilgrimage of Jesus, this moment is the most piteous, for in it our Lord sank like Jonah to the depths, as the waves of sin washed over his head and dragged him down into the pit.

John Mitchell, *The Pilgrimage of Jesus*, Vol. 2, p. 309