

# When Counselors Ask ‘Why’?

By Wendy Wood



A human's desire to understand the cause or reason for something begins early. Every parent can attest to the "why?" phase that toddlers and preschoolers go through as they seek to understand the world and people around them. When asked to perform a task like "clean up your room", your child will want an explanation of the reasoning behind the request. "Why should I clean my room?" When they are looking up at the trees a child will ask "Why are the leaves changing colors?" As we grow and learn, we continue to seek understanding of our circumstances and especially our suffering. We will inevitably have counselees who ask "why did God allow this to happen?" "Why did my relationship of over a year end suddenly and without explanation?" "Why did my mom die in a car accident when I was a child?" "Why is my teenager rebelling when I have parented so faithfully?" "Why have I had so many trials these last few years?" Almost everyone who comes to you for counseling will be seeking to understand "why"?

Asking "why?" can be a good question, but it can also reveal a sinful desire for control. I usually find counselees who think they are asking the question innocently and believe they are desiring to understand God and His ways better, but often it is a deceitful heart

that is trying to figure out how to avoid painful circumstances in the future. When asked from a good desire, the “why” of some situation can be rooted in wanting to see the sin exposed by the suffering. For example, when a romantic relationship ends that a counselee believed would lead to marriage, the “why did this happen?” question could be a desire to search one’s heart for idolatrous desires or to examine how he/she contributed to the relationship in positive and negative ways and seek to grow in some relational areas. If “why” is used to examine the heart and repent and be sanctified, the “why” questions can be beneficial.

However, asking “why?” can also reveal sinful motives. Asking “why” might reveal a desire to control future outcomes by trying to figure out how to “outsmart” the situation. This is really rooted in idolatrous control. If I can figure out what happened, I can control the next situation. Rather than submitting to God and being dependent on Him, “why” can become the solution to the problem and God can be eliminated from the situation. In the example of the broken relationship, if you can answer “why did this relationship end?” with five steps to hold onto a relationship, you can convince yourself you have it figured out and don’t need to surrender your plans and relationships to the Lord.

Asking “why did \_\_\_\_ happen?” may also be a way of putting God on trial. By asking “why” in this way, a counselee may be demanding that God explain Himself and that He needs to prove that He is justified in allowing this suffering into his/her life. Asking God to justify His actions is extremely prideful! By asking “why” in this fashion a counselee is claiming that God is on trial because he/she knows better than God does and would have made a wiser decision than He did. We rarely recognize and admit how prideful we are in this area. But this type of questioning often leads to bitterness and resentment to God and others. If we cannot make sense of our circumstances, surely they are wrong, and the sovereign God who purposed them is therefore wrong, too.

The book of Job records many times when Job and his friends are seeking understanding of the extreme trials Job has endured. In Job 1 and 2 we read that Job lost all his sheep, camels, and livestock, all his servants, and all his children. Job continues to worship God and trust in Him. But then, Job is struck with boils and sores all over his body. Job tears his robes, puts ashes on his head, and continues to accept that God gives good and evil. As he sits alone, his friends join him and wisely stay quiet at first. Then Job asks “Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire?... or why was I not as a hidden stillborn child, as infants who never see the light?” (Job 3:11, 16) Essentially, Job wishes he had died or birth or never even been born. The suffering is so intense he is seeking to understand why he ever lived if God

was going to bring the loss of everything. He is wanting God to explain the reasoning behind his suffering.

Job's friends then respond with some unhelpful advice. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar answer Job's question of "why" with "you've sinned and you are getting what you deserve." They all tell Job that he needs to repent. For example, in Job 8:20, Bildad says, "Behold, God will not reject a blameless man, nor take the hand of evildoers." The friends argue that Job is suffering because God is just in punishing sin. He has not been completely righteous and his sin has led to God's judgment, is their assessment. They argue God is just and, therefore, Job is getting what he deserves. If Job repents and turns to God, his suffering will end. Eliphaz tells Job in Job 15:4-6 "But you are doing away with the fear of God and hindering mediation before God. For your iniquity teaches your mouth, and you choose the tongue of the crafty. Your own mouth condemns you, and not I; your own lips testify against you". Eliphaz agrees that Job's question of "why am I suffering?" is answered with "you have sinned".

Job begins to question God more aggressively seeking God's response and justification for what Job has lost and the suffering he is enduring. Job 19:7-11 records Job crying out. "Behold, I cry out, "Violence!" but I am not answered; I call for help, but there is no justice. He has walled up my way, so that I cannot pass, and he has set darkness upon my paths. He has stripped from me my glory and taken the crown from my head. He breaks me down on every side, and I am gone, and my hope has he pulled up like a tree. He has kindled his wrath against me and counts me as his adversary." Job feels like God is against him. In Job 29, Job cries out, "Oh, that I were as in the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me, when his lamp shone on my head, and by his light I walked through darkness, as I was in my prime, when the friendship of God was upon my tent, when the Almighty was yet with me" (2-5a). Job longs for the days when God was with him and blessing him. Job answers his own question of "why?" with "because God has abandoned me".

As Job and his four friends (Elihu remained silent longer) seek for answers, God remains silent for 37 chapters. God has listened to all these men ask "why has Job suffered so much?" God has listened to them as they have tried to answer that question and God has listened as they have mixed truth about his character with lies about his judgment. None of these five men saw the conversations that took place between God and Satan. None of them hear God declare Job righteous and faithful. None of them see or hear that Satan is trying to persuade Job to distrust God and God is holding Job faithful. This is part of a cosmic battle that humans on earth don't see. God is demonstrating his power and glory over Satan by being the anchor of Job's soul that keeps him faithful to God regardless of his suffering.

In chapter 38 God speaks. While God remained silent for most of this book and through most of the unfolding of events, the book of Job is all about God. God speaks out of the whirlwind. “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. (Job 38:2-3). God is about to answer Job and his friends. And, God, being all wise and knowing, responds perfectly. God doesn’t justify his actions. God doesn’t even address the suffering. God does not owe Job or his friends any explanation. God responds with 38 questions of His own that reveal who He is. The best response is to say, ‘Look at God.’ ‘Look at how awesome, mighty, powerful, perfect, good, and wise God is. God challenges Job to answer questions like, ‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the world?’ Or, “Do you know when every single mountain goat gives birth?” “Do you keep the storehouses of hail?” On and on, God reveals Himself as the Sovereign King of the universe. And this is ALWAYS the answer to our “why?” questions. We don’t have to understand why God does what He does. God does not owe us any explanation of His purposes and ways of accomplishing His will. Deuteronomy 29:29 reminds us “the secret things of God belong to God” but he has chosen to reveal enough of Himself to us. We are to trust His very nature. We are to put our hope in His character. In humility, we are called to trust God’s essence. Corrie ten Boom says, “Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.” Our counselees need to know God. They do not need to know why God does what he does.

When your counselee asks “why is this happening?”, lead them to God and His character. Remind them of God’s attributes. Remind them of the cross as God’s evidence of His love and grace and that God is for His children. Remind them of God’s promises that He is with them in the storms and trials and that this life is a momentary affliction producing a weight of glory for eternity.