



Elisabeth Elliot



On Asking God Why

Reflections on Trusting God

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Why

*And Other Reflections on Trusting God
in a Twisted World*

ELISABETH ELLIOT



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Do you find it difficult to approach God with the questions that are tugging at your heart?

When speaking of God, Elisabeth Elliot writes, “He is not only the Almighty. He is also our Father, and what a father does is not by any means always understood by the child.”

On Asking God Why reminds us that as children of God we can bring our questions to him with all the trust of a child in his earthly parent. We are encouraged to search the Scriptures for God’s answers. Among the issues Elliot contemplates are singleness, risk taking, and being judgmental of others. When we overcome our fears and decide to ask God why, he will surely give us all the answers we need.

To my husband
Lars Gren
who builds the
fences around me
and stands on all sides

Contents

Foreword 11

1. On Asking God Why 15
2. On Brazen Heavens 21
3. Singleness Is a Gift 28
4. A Look in the Mirror 33
5. Happy Birthday—You’re Heading Home! 37
6. I Won’t Bother with a Face-Lift 42
7. Why Funerals Matter 44
8. Hope for a Hopeless Failure 50
9. O Little Town of Nazareth 54
10. A No-Risk Life 58
11. Shortcut to Peace 63
12. To Judge or Not to Judge 68
13. Have It Your Way—or God’s 74
14. Person or Thing? 80
15. To a Man Who Chose Divorce 85
16. The “Innocent” Party 89
17. Is Divorce the Only Way? 97
18. Images of Hell 105
19. When I Was Being Made in Secret 109
20. London Diary 113

21. How to Sell Yourself 120
22. Meeting God Alone 125
23. The Song of the Animals 131
24. We've Come a Long Way—or Have We? 133
25. The Christian's Safety 137
26. Tenderness 144
27. Parable in a Car Wash 146
28. Two Marriageable People 150
29. Pick Up the Broom! 157
30. A Jungle Grave 160

Foreword

God does many things that we do not understand. Of course he does—he is God, perfect in wisdom, love, and power. We are only children, very far from perfect in anything. A true faith must rest solidly on his character and his Word, not on our particular conceptions of what he ought to do. The word *ought* presupposes an idea of justice. When God's actions do not seem to conform to our idea of justice, we are tempted at least to ask *why*, if not actually to charge him with injustice.

Thousands of years ago one of God's faithful servants, having lost practically everything, sat on an ash heap surrounded by weeping friends who were tearing up their clothes and tossing dust into the air for grief. For seven days and seven nights they were speechless in the face of Job's suffering. It was Job who broke the silence—with a long and eloquent curse. He asked the question men have asked ever since: *Why?*

Why was I not still-born?

Why did I not die when I came out of the womb?

Why was I ever laid on my mother's knees?

Why should the sufferer be born to see the light?

Why is life given to men who find it so bitter?

Why should a man be born to wander blindly, hedged in by
God on every side?

See Job 3:11, 12, 20, 23 NEB

Written centuries later, the Psalms express similar agonized cries:

I will say to God my Rock, “Why hast thou forgotten me?”
Why hast thou cast us off, O God? Is it for ever?

Psalm 74:1 NEB

There would be no sense in asking *why* if one did not believe in anything. The word itself presupposes *purpose*. Purpose presupposes a purposeful intelligence. *Somebody* has to have been responsible. It is because we believe in God that we address questions to him. We believe that he is just and that he is love, but that belief is put to severe strain as we wrestle with our pains and perplexities, with our very position in his ordered universe.

“Whence knowest thou that this thing is unjust, unless thou know what is just?” wrote St. Augustine. “Hast thou that which is just from thyself, and canst thou give justice to thyself? Therefore when thou art unjust, thou canst not be just except by turning thee to a certain abiding justice, wherefrom if thou withdrawest, thou art unjust, and if thou drawest near to it, thou art just. . . . Look back therefore, rise to the heights, go to that place where once God hath spoken, and there thou wilt find the fountain of justice where is the fountain of life. ‘For with thee is the fountain of life’ [Psalm 36:9].”

The pieces in this book make up a somewhat mongrel collection. Essays? Sketches? “Cautionary tales”? Those, perhaps, and some less classifiable. They touch lightly on matters of considerable weight—the mystery of suffering (losses, cancer, despair, death), the mystery of evil (abortion, divorce, euthanasia, the cult of rock “music”), and the mystery of our ordinary human condition (loneliness, hopelessness, tenderness, confusion, aging, the need for forgiveness). All but one are the expression of a single writer who owes a special debt to the author of the second chapter, “On Brazen Heavens.” He is my brother, eight years my junior, to whom for the first decade or

so of his life I taught everything I knew. He has been teaching me ever since. He wrote the above mentioned chapter while my husband Addison Leitch was dying. I think we share the same vision, seeking always to see things in the light of “a certain abiding justice.” It is my hope that this collection will help some to “rise to the heights, go to that place where once God hath spoken,” and find that Fountain of Life.



On Asking God Why

One of the things I am no longer as good at as I used to be is sleeping through the night. I'm rather glad about that, for there is something pleasant about waking in the small hours and realizing that one is, in fact, in bed and need not get up. One can luxuriate.

Between two and three o'clock yesterday morning I luxuriated. I lay listening to the night sounds in a small house on the "stern and rockbound" coast of Massachusetts. The wind whistled and roared, wrapping itself around the house and shaking it. On the quarter hour the clock in the living room softly gave out Whittington's chime. I could hear the tiny click as the electric blanket cut off and on, the cracking of the cold in the walls, the expensive rumble of the oil burner beneath me, and the reassuring rumble of a snoring husband beside me. Underneath it all was the deep, drumming rhythm of the surf, synchronized with the distant bellow of "Mother Ann's Cow," the name given the sounding buoy that guards the entrance to Gloucester Harbor.

I was thinking, as I suppose I am always thinking, in one way or another, about mystery. An English magazine which contained an interview with me had just come in the mail, and of course I read it, not to find out what I'd said to the man last spring in Swanwick, but to find out what he said I'd said. He had asked me about some of the events in my life, and I had told him that because of them I had had to "come to terms with mystery." That was an accurate quotation, I'm sure, but as I lay in bed I knew that one never comes to any final terms with mystery—not in this life, anyway. We keep asking the same unanswerable questions and wondering why the explanations are not forthcoming. We doubt God. We are anxious about everything when we have been told quite clearly to be anxious about nothing. Instead of stewing we are supposed to pray and give thanks.

Well, I thought, *I'll have a go at it*. I prayed about several things for which I could not give thanks. But I gave thanks in the middle of each of those prayers because I was still sure (the noise of the wind and ocean were reminding me) that underneath are the everlasting arms.

My prayers embraced four things:

1. Somebody I love is gravely ill.
2. Something I wanted has been denied.
3. Something I worked very hard for failed.
4. Something I prized is lost.

I can be specific about three of the things. A letter from a friend of many years describes her cancer surgery and its aftermath—an incision that had to be scraped and cleaned daily for weeks.

It was so painful that Diana, Jim, Monica, and I prayed while she cleaned it, three times and some days four times. Monica would wipe my tears. Yes, Jesus stands right there as the pain takes my breath away and my toes curl to keep from crying

out loud. But I haven't asked, Why me, Lord? It is only now that I can pray for cancer patients and know how the flesh hurts and how relief, even for a moment, is blessed.

The second thing is a manuscript on which I have spent years. It is not, I believe, publishable now, and I can see no way to redeem it. It feels as though those years of work have gone down the drain. Have they? What ought I to do about this failure?

The other thing is my J. B. Phillips translation of the New Testament, given to me when I lived in the jungle in 1960 and containing nineteen years' worth of notes. I left this book on an airplane between Dallas and Atlanta several weeks ago. The stewardess brought my breakfast as I was reading it, so I laid it in my lap and spread my napkin on top of it. I suppose it slipped down beside the seat. (Stupid of me, of course, but on the same trip my husband did just as stupid a thing. He left his briefcase on the sidewalk outside the terminal. We prayed, and the prayers were almost instantly answered. Someone had picked up the briefcase and turned it in to the airline, and we had it back in a couple of hours.) I am lost without my Phillips. I feel crippled. It is as though a large segment of the history of my spiritual pilgrimage has been obliterated. It was the one New Testament in which I knew my way around. I knew where things were on the page and used it constantly in public speaking because I could refer quickly to passages I needed. What shall I do?

I have done the obvious things. Prayer is the first thing—asking God to do what I *can't* do. The second thing is to get busy and do what I *can* do. I prayed for my friend, of course, and then I sat down and wrote her a letter. I don't know what else to do for her now. My husband and I prayed together about the lost New Testament (and many of my friends prayed too). We went to the proper authorities at the airline and have been assured that everything will be done to recover it, but it has not turned up. We prayed about the bad manuscript and

asked for editorial advice. It looks quite irremedial. I continue to pray repeatedly, extensively, and earnestly about all of the above. And one more thing: I seek the lessons God wants to teach me, and that means that I ask why.

There are those who insist that it is a very bad thing to question God. To them, “Why?” is a rude question. That depends, I believe, on whether it is an honest search, in faith, for his meaning, or whether it is a challenge of unbelief and rebellion. The psalmist often questioned God, and so did Job. God did not answer the questions, but he answered the man—with the mystery of himself.

He has not left us entirely in the dark. We know a great deal more about his purposes than poor old Job did, yet Job trusted him. He is not only the Almighty—Job’s favorite name for him. He is also our Father, and what a father does is not by any means always understood by the child. If he loves the child, however, the child trusts him. It is the child’s ultimate good that the father has in mind. Terribly elementary. Yet I have to be reminded of this when, for example, my friend suffers, when a book I think I can’t possibly do without is lost, when a manuscript is worthless.

The three things are not all in the same category. The second and third things have to do with my own carelessness and failure. Yet in all three I am reminded that God is my Father still, and he does have a purpose for me, and that nothing, absolutely nothing, is useless in the fulfillment of that purpose if I’ll trust him for it and submit to the lessons.

“God disciplines us for our good *that we may share his holiness.*” That is a strong clue to the explanation we are always seeking. God’s purpose for us is holiness—his own holiness which we are to share—and the sole route to that end is discipline.

Discipline very often involves loss, diminishment, “fallings from us, vanishings.” Why? Because God wills our perfection in holiness, that is, our *joy*. But, we argue, why should diminishments be the prerequisite for joy? The answer to that lies

within the great mystery that underlies creation: the principle of life out of death, exemplified for all time in the incarnation (“that a vile Manger his low Bed should prove, who in a Throne of stars Thunders above,” as Crashaw expressed it) and in the cross and resurrection (“who, for the joy that was set before him, endured a cross”). Christ’s radical diminishments—his birth as a helpless baby and his death as a common criminal—accomplished our salvation.

It follows that if we are to share in his destiny, we must share in his death, which means, for us sinners, the willingness to offer up to him not only ourselves but all that goes with that gift, including the simplest, down-to-earth things. These things may be aggravating and irritating and humiliating as well as mysterious. But it is the very aggravation and irritation and humiliation that we can offer—every diminishment of every kind—so that by the grace of God we may be taught his loving lessons and be brought a little nearer to his loving purpose for us and thus be enlarged.

Somehow it’s easy to understand the principle of control and denial and loss in the matter of *self*-discipline. It is perfectly plain to anyone who wants to do a difficult and worthwhile thing that he has to deny himself a thousand unimportant and probably a few hundred important things in order to do the one thing that matters most. Bishop Stephen Neill said that writing is almost entirely a matter of self-discipline. “You must make yourself write.” I know. Alas. Sit yourself down, shut yourself up, restrict your enthusiasms, control your maunderings. Think. (Sir Joshua Reynolds wrote, “There is no expedient to which a man will not resort to avoid the real labor of thinking.”) Diminishments. Then put things on paper—carefully. Then (and this is the part I resist more strenuously) rewrite. Cut things. Drop things you’ve spent hours on into the wastebasket.

I lay in bed, luxuriating in the physical bliss, cogitating on the spiritual perplexities. I could not explain why God would restore Lars’ lost briefcase and not my New Testament. I could

not fathom my friend's suffering or the "waste" of time. But God could. It's got something to do with that great principle of loss being the route to gain, or diminishment being the only way we can finally be enlarged, that is, conformed to the image of Christ.

"Who watched over the birth of the sea?"

The words from God's dialogue with Job came to mind as I listened to the throbbing of the ocean from my bed.

"Have you descended to the springs of the sea, or walked in the unfathomable deep?"

No, Lord, but you have. Nothing in those dark caverns is mysterious to you. Nor is anything in my life or my friend's life. I trust you with the unfathomables.

But you know I'll be back—with the usual question.