

Why, God? The biggest and most profound questions of all: The biggest and most profound questions of all

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 25, 2005](#) issue

Perhaps it was John Wesley who observed that a preacher has only a few things to say, only a few sermons to preach, and that the task of preaching is a matter of addressing in newly creative and energetic ways the few essential themes. After four decades of preaching, I'm ready to agree. The few sermons we all have are related to the basic questions people ask—about guilt and grace, forgiveness and restoration, life and death, the reality of evil and suffering and the goodness of God.

The lectionary Psalm for the second Sunday in January was Psalm 29: "The voice of the Lord is over the water." Those words powerfully intersected with the news of the horrific deaths and suffering caused by the tsunami in South Asia. They present us clearly with the questions that are on the minds of so many: Why did God do this or allow this to happen? Where was God? What is God? Such questions lurk also in calmer times, beneath the surface of comfortable lives.

Among the most worn and underlined books in my library are the ones that offer some help in understanding, framing and responding to these questions. They include:

A Cry of Absence: Reflections for the Winter of the Heart, by Martin E. Marty (Harper & Row, 1983). This is a beautiful book, written after the death of the author's first wife, which employs the Psalter to explore the silence and absence of God in the heart broken by loss. Marty's daughter-in-law Susan contributed spare, elegant sketches for each chapter.

Lament for a Son, by Nicholas Wolterstorff (Eerdmans, 1987). A Yale philosopher writes poetically and authentically about the death of his 25-year-old son. His brief

diary entries speak to my mind and heart: “To the most agonized question I have ever asked I do not know the answer. I do not know why God would watch him fall.”

Why, God? by Burton Z. Cooper (John Knox, 1988). The author, a teacher of theology at Louisville Seminary, writes following the death of a daughter. He brings to the conversation C. S. Lewis, Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World, by Douglas John Hall (Fortress, 2003). Hall has been my mentor from afar ever since I read *Lighten Our Darkness* in 1979. His three-volume *Theology in a North American Context* has kept me busy for years. And the question of God’s love and the reality of human suffering has been at the center of Hall’s quest. In his most recent book Hall returns to his concern that Western Christendom eagerly adopted the Theology of Glory and ignored the Theology of the Cross. He is most helpful in his careful explication of God’s self-limited power for the sake of God’s love—which is the only treatment of God and suffering that is sensible and healing for me.

I am grateful for all those who have struggled so honestly and faithfully with the biggest and most profound questions of all.