

How to Live With Unanswered Questions and Unresolved Problems – 1 Corinthians 13:12

When I sit down to work on a project, I like to have a clean desk. I dislike messy piles, unanswered mail or unreturned telephone calls. When I work on a project, I like to finish it. That's one of the reasons I find it so frustrating to work on income taxes. If I'm missing a tax form, I want it right now. I'll drive to the library, call the IRS fax service or drive to Barnes & Noble for an income tax book.

Some would call this style a great strength. Others would say I'm sick and could really use some professional help. But, either way, I find it sometimes carries over into other areas of life as well. I just don't like loose ends. I don't like unanswered questions. I don't like unresolved problems. The trouble is that life is full of them!

Why do people suffer so much? Why do innocent children become so desperately ill or disabled or even die? Why do some people believe in Jesus Christ when others do not? What does God want me to do with my life? What is God's will? How can I change my husband or my wife or my son or daughter or my mom or dad? Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? How do you go on with life when you've just lost the person you love more than anybody else in the world? What am I supposed to do when mental illness takes control of my life and there is no remedy from psychologist or psychiatrist or pharmacist? How can I keep on praying when God never answers? How do I keep on praying when nothing happens?

Every one of us has something to add to this list. Sooner or later we all have unanswered questions and unresolved problems. We may search for years without satisfaction. We may make the unanswered and the unresolved the center of our lives. Some of us may become

bitter and angry people. But, no matter what we say or do, it doesn't seem to make any difference.

I have long been fascinated by the Old Testament story of Job. He was the richest and most respected man in the land of Uz. He was godly, intelligent, powerful, healthy and happy. But, in a single day, he lost his entire wealth and every one of his children tragically died. His good health turned into chronic painful disease. His friends lost respect for him. His wife recommended suicide.

The Bible says that behind Job's great calamity was a dialogue between God and Satan. Satan said that the only reason Job really loved God and was loyal to him was because he was so prosperous and so healthy. He had every good reason to be loyal to God. God said that Job's good circumstances had nothing to do with his faith or love for God. So, Satan proposed a test - - - replace everything good in Job's life with something bad and see how he responds. And God agreed. So, Satan caused disaster to rain on Job and, amazingly, Job stayed faithful to God.

The story has a happy ending. Job recovered from his illness, regained his wealth and fathered another ten children. But Job never got an explanation. He was never told that he was part of a cosmic test. He lived to be 140 years old but he never had his questions answered.

How did he do that? How did he go on? How do we do it? How do we live with perpetually unanswered questions and continually unresolved problems?

A key step in the resolution of any problem is to define what that problem is. Negotiators in labor management disputes insist that each side clearly and specifically state what they want.

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Mediators in lawsuits ask for a simple statement of the conflict. Marriage counselors try to get down to the core and the central issue.

Sometimes the issue really is not what it first appears to be. In John 4 Jesus started a conversation with a Samaritan woman. She asked him how he planned to get water from a well without a bucket. But that wasn't her real issue. Jesus moved her to the two central issues of her life. One had to do with a human relationship — the man with whom she lived after five failed marriages. The other had to do with the divine relationship — how she could truly know and worship God.

A friend recently gave to me a little 30-page book called Asking to Win by Bob Beal. It contains 100 questions to ask yourself about key areas of life like career, parenting and problem solving. Here are some samples: "At its essence, in one sentence, what decision am I facing? What is the 'bottom, bottom' line? Who, what, when, where, why, how, how much?" "What is my single most important problem?"

If you have some unanswered questions or unresolved problems, what are they? Take the time and the discipline to write them down. Get a friend to help you. What is it that really bothers you? The clarification of the issue may come out something like these:

- I am single and I want to be married and there's no prospect for marriage in my life.
- I have a disease for which there is no cure and I'm angry with God for letting me get sick.
- I don't believe in God and I wish I did.
- There are six parts of the Bible that really upset me and it's hard for me to believe the rest.

Clarify your issue. Avoid the pitfall of being dissatisfied and upset but never identifying what is the cause. You see, clarification of the issue can be a major positive step in coming to terms with whatever is wrong.

Next, affirm your beliefs in God and about God. As Christians, we have strong clear teach-

ings from the Bible about the person and character of God. God is love. God knows everything. God is wise. God is powerful. Do you believe all of this about God? This is extremely important because when dealing with unanswered questions and unresolved problems we are eventually going to have to decide if we really believe God is God even when he does not do what we want him to do.

Pilots with instrument ratings may fly through violent storms when they feel they are upside down and going the wrong direction. It is a life and death decision on whether to believe in instruments or instincts.

Patients go to physicians who give them medicines and treatments that make them feel worse. You have to decide whether or not you believe that the doctor has your best interests in mind and will treat you in a competent and effective way.

I John 4:16 says that Christians "know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him."

Job believed God loved him when his children died, when his business failed and when his good health disappeared.

Do you believe God loves you? Do you believe that God knows absolutely everything and that no detail is outside his knowledge? Do you believe God is completely wise in everything he does? Do you believe that God is all-powerful and uses his powers exactly right?

Here is what I am suggesting. Clarify the issue. Write out the difficult questions. Define the unresolved problem. But set them aside for a minute and affirm your beliefs in God. If we do not believe in God, we will never find a fixed point to deal with the unanswered questions and the unresolved problems. If we believe in God, we will have the only solid and eternal platform for the greatest challenges of our lives.

For some of us this will be hard to do. It will come down to the ultimate question of whether our lives will be run by faith or by circumstances. That is the greatest dividing line

between a Christian and an unbeliever.

Third on the list of how to live with unanswered questions and unresolved problems is to be responsible to God. You may recall a line in James 2:17 that says, "... faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." Action is taking responsibility. There is a huge difference between being responsible *for* something and being responsible *to* someone.

Maybe I can best explain the difference in one of your own personal struggles. As a pastor I care deeply about the lives and destinies of the people who comprise Wooddale Church. I want every person to have a genuine faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. I want every person to grow spiritually in closeness with God. I want every marriage to be Christian and happy. I want every interpersonal conflict to be resolved according to the Bible. I want every Wooddaler to have Christian friends, love and be loved. The list is long.

But, if I take responsibility for everybody, for every marriage, for every employment situation, for every problem, it will be a disaster. I am not capable of making everyone happy, much less godly. I would do a disservice to a lot of people if I took responsibility where each should be responsible. I would be worn out long before I could possibly do much good.

I must choose, instead of being responsible *for* people and circumstances, to be responsible *to* God. That is, I must live life primarily in terms of God. I must be faithful to God. I must seek to do what God wants in the way that God wants it done.

Take that principle into all of our lives. We are not responsible for making our family members into what they should be. We are not responsible for every question or to resolve every problem. But we are responsible to God . . . to be who he asks us to be and to do what he asks

us to do. Then the ultimate responsibility belongs to God.

According to Philippians 2:13, "... it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." For us to take all the responsibility on ourselves is to play God. We are not able to do what God can do. God must be God and we must be responsible to him.

Actually, this is very good news! I find opportunity for great individuality and creativity in my responsibility to God. I find great relief that God is ultimately in charge.

All of this so far is preliminary coming up to the critical point. So, first we clarify the issue, then we affirm our beliefs and then we must be responsible. But that brings us to the real key to living with unanswered questions and unresolved problems. It is to trust God. And trust always extends beyond personal control.

The summer of 1985 our family rented a cabin in north-central Minnesota. One of our children broke a pane of window glass and I decided that I would fix it myself. Unfortunately, in the process, I cut the back of my hand and severed the tendon. In the emergency room of

the Brainerd Hospital I was introduced to a man who said he was an orthopedic surgeon. He said that he wanted to keep me overnight in the hospital and that he would operate on my hand.

When he walked away I asked the nurse if she knew him and if he was board certified. She said yes, so I let him operate on me. There was no way I could have operated on myself. It was totally beyond my control. I trusted him.

Banks have trust departments. Many banks have "trust" as part of their name. You leave your life savings with someone you may never have met and trust that person to properly handle and distribute your money after you die. That's

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really trust! It is extending far beyond your personal control.

Jesus said in John 14:1, “Trust in God; trust also in me.” So, trust in God is counting on him to properly handle what we cannot know and cannot do. Trust is believing God has the answers even if we will never know. Trust believes that he can and will handle our problems even if we cannot. Trust is the conviction that God is loving, right and good even if what happens doesn’t make full sense to us at the time.

Why is trust so hard? There may be several different answers.

Trust is often hard because of how much we really care. When you love your little girl with all your heart you want to protect her with all your might it’s hard to entrust her to anyone else’s care, even if the other person is God.

Trust is hard because we like to keep control. We like to be in charge. We like to have the answers. We like to hold the power. Frankly, we are reluctant to let anyone else have power and control over us . . . even if it is God.

That’s the whole point of one of the first stories in the Bible. Remember that Adam and Eve were given the extensive luxuries of the Garden of Eden. They were given enormous power over the animals and the rest of God’s creation. There was one exception. It was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That was for God alone. Only God would have that information. Adam and Eve were stuck with an unanswered question: “What is evil?” They were bothered by the unresolved problem of one area that was outside their power and control.

God wanted them to trust him . . . to just let God know, to just let God have that power. But they couldn’t do it. They insisted that they take control of every last detail of their lives and environment rather than trust God. It was a tragic mistake.

Well, we have been loaded here with principles and advice and you have probably been thinking about the specifics. On your mind are the same problems you have had for awhile. You think about your job, your health, your marriage,

your friends, your parents or children. The principles for all of us come down to the specifics, to the lingering questions, to the real problems.

So, I will ask you again. Can you clarify the issue? In one or two sentences what is it that most concerns you? Do you believe in God? Do you believe in God’s love and knowledge, wisdom and power? Will you be responsible to God? Will you agree to do what God wants you to do? You don’t have to be responsible for everything. Just be responsible to God.

Will you trust God? If he doesn’t answer your question or solve your problem, will you trust him to handle it for you? Will you let him be in charge? Will you give your burden to him?

Saint Paul was a man with lots of questions and his share of unresolved problems. He struggled. And finally he trusted. His trust enabled him to live with the uncertainty of the present and with a conviction for the future. In I Corinthians 13:12 he wrote: “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” He was able to bring his unanswered questions and his unresolved problems and present them to a God that he was convinced he could fully trust!

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