

The limits of explanation

By [William H. Willimon](#)

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Last year Professor Bart Ehrman of the University of North Carolina cranked out yet another book, *God's Problem*. Dr. Ehrman breathlessly announces that he has discovered that God has a big problem – *suffering*.

Ehrman dismisses various futile attempts on the part of God to explain why there is suffering, pain, and disaster in the world – the Book of Job, Ecclesiastes, and Jesus. Unsurprisingly, Dr. Ehrman reaches the conclusion that God comes up short in regard to a plausible explanation for suffering. Dr. Ehrman says that, even though he personally does not believe in God, he can't figure out why so many otherwise intelligent people persist in the notion that God is good – look at all the suffering that God can't explain.

Now,

I'm all for explanations, have attempted some of them myself. I have spent much of my life trying to figure out answers to some of life's toughest questions, write books on what I've discovered, and convey explanations to my students and my parishioners.

In the past two weeks I've learned again that terrible, destructive, undeserved tragedies are, on the whole, inexplicable.

Pine

Grove UMC (pastor, Don Burgess) was built over a hundred years ago, with stone that was pulled up the hill by mule teams. Now, those huge stones have been cast all over the hillside and Pine Grove Church has been leveled to its foundations. That same day I stood among the volunteers working at Pleasant Grove Church (pastor, John Gates) and saw nearly equal destruction of one of our beloved churches.

No

one around me at those locations of terrible destruction asked, "Why me? Why God?" Most of them were too busy, drenched in sweat, and dust from the rubble to pause to engage in philosophical speculation. Their most persistent question was, "How can we do more to support and work for the victims?"

And

that seems very Christian to me. Jesus was not a great philosopher who came with a set of noble precepts and brilliant ideals. Jesus never said, "Think about me." Rather it was always, "Follow me!"

Jesus

was among us as a victim of horrible injustice. He offered us few explications of suffering and injustice; he offered himself as fellow sufferer. As Hebrews says, Jesus not only came to us but suffered with us. He offered us not reasoned explanations but rather empathetic, life-giving presence with us. He gave us not a great way to think about tragedy but a way of *acting* in and through tragedy.

Professor

Ehrman, believe it or not, that's as close as Christians come to a true explanation for suffering. God in Jesus Christ does have a real problem – this God cannot desert us, cannot not keep coming back to us or refuse to stand with us.

We

Wesleyan Christians have never been known for our great speculative theologians. We have been known for our warm hearts and active hands. John Wesley considered that any theology that can't be put into practice wasn't worth thinking. Thank goodness our churches didn't wait to ponder the eternal implications of the horrible storms that swept through our state and destroyed so many of our churches, homes, and families. We went right to work. We were first on the scene and we reassured our devastated communities like Fultondale, Forrest Lake, Tuscaloosa, Phil Campbell, and Cullman (and others listed on our website) that we will remain with them throughout the long, arduous process of rebuilding.

And that, my fellow Wesleyans, is better even than learned explanations.

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