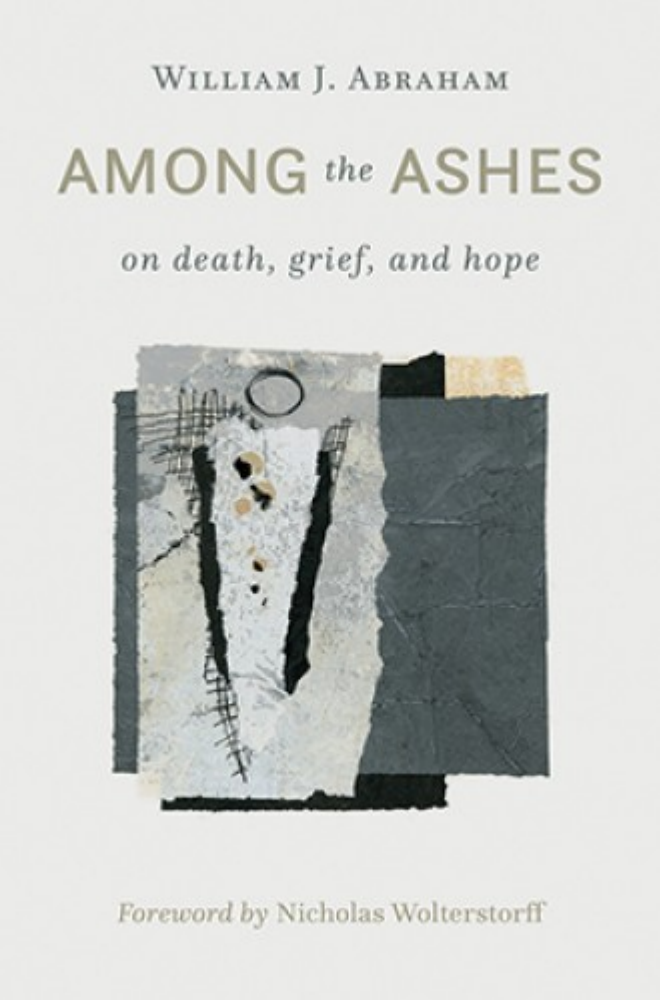
Theodicy in real life

William Abraham's theological affirmations of faith are shadowed by a persistent question: Why don't they work?

by Richard Lischer in the June 20, 2018 issue

In Review



Among the Ashes

On Death, Grief, and Hope

By William J. Abraham
Eerdmans

Imagine a Christian has experienced a devastating loss, perhaps the death of someone dearly loved. Not everyone knows the traditional word *theodicy*, but most Christians have been acquainted with its propositions in rudimentary form since youth. They are a part of us: God is benevolent. God is not the author of evil or undeserved suffering. God will not give us greater burdens than we can bear. God hears our prayers and answers them. Earthly losses are made good in life after death. Pain is “God’s megaphone,” as C. S. Lewis put it, for getting our attention and making us receptive to divine blessings. Or as Augustine once said, “God wants to give us something but cannot, because our hands are full—there’s nowhere for Him to put it.”

Now imagine it is you—not a neighbor down the street or someone in the next pew, but you—who receives the tragic telephone call or the surgeon’s unexpected report. But instead of finding support and comfort from the familiar script, none of the assurances seem to work for you. They are, in the words of William Abraham, “hollow,” “utterly empty,” and they remain so for some time. Moreover, when well-intentioned friends or pastors repeat them to you, they tend to minimize the depth of your suffering and make things worse. What has happened?

This is the point at which Abraham, a philosopher and theologian, begins his inquiry. Not from an abstract idea but from a specific occurrence, the 2013 death of his adult son Timothy.

This is a brave little book. Given his intellectual commitments, Abraham risks a great deal by pointing out the gap between theology and human experience. He makes a distinction between third-person accounts of God’s providence, by which he means the broad tradition of reasoned explanation, and first-person accounts, which represent the individual’s response to unfathomed losses. The first is articulate and sheds light; the second is choked and filled with darkness. For a handy example of both versions from a single author, one might compare the rationality of Lewis’s *The Problem of Pain* with the numbed anguish of *A Grief Observed*. They appear to be the work of different persons, one a Christian apologist in his Oxford study and the other a grieving widower in an empty house filled with memories.

Abraham also rejects the shift to “pastoral” thinking as a way around the intellectual demands of theodicy. He seems to be saying that the truth of God when delivered through an emergent prayer, liturgy, the Eucharist, or pastoral conversation carries a lesser or more temporary authority than the systematic claims of theodicy.

I find this perspective perplexing. The resurrection of Jesus is dogma, but it takes on a pastoral dimension when a grieving widow, surrounded and supported by fellow Christians, says, “I believe.” The gospel in a pastoral context is no less a vessel of divine revelation than when it is worked out rationally. Its “answers” are no less secure than those of philosophical theology. While Abraham acknowledges the church’s “liturgical and other practices” and movingly relates his own reliance on them, he doesn’t integrate them in the more abstract claims of theodicy.

Despite the acknowledged failures of traditional theodicy to uphold people in extreme situations, Abraham endeavors to defend the enterprise: “I think our work on theodicy should remain intact and should be subject to renewal and development.” He turns to this work in several brief chapters. Yet in each chapter, the most basic affirmations of faith are shadowed by the persistent and ultimately unanswerable question: “Why don’t they work for those who need them most? Why didn’t they work for me when my son died?” It is the questions more than the answers that make this an honest and interesting book.

Affirming both the resurrection of Jesus and the personal survival of the faithful after death, Abraham reports several longish back-from-death testimonies. I suspect some readers will consider these stories distractions, but the author views them as complementary to divine revelation.

Abraham also surveys the book of Job, concluding that Job’s suffering is unintelligible until God appears in the narrative. But even then, it remains unintelligible—for it is neither explained nor justified. Job’s faithfulness (if we may call it that) rests only on the vision of God’s majesty. The majesty of God is the answer. If theology can’t prove God’s majesty, doxology, a form of language peculiar to worship, simply acknowledges it and offers it back to God in song and praise. Even those mired in grief have been known to sing the Te Deum.

In the final chapter, Abraham turns to the relation between our deaths and the death of Jesus. Interpreting 1 Corinthians 15, Abraham rightly unveils death as the final enemy. Its enemy status justifies our fierce anger and lament. He also shows how

the intimate relationship between our dying and the death of Jesus appears in Paul, the saints, and the *Ars moriendi* tradition.

One endorsement claims, “This book is not an ‘easy’ read.” How could it be? Who among us has all this figured out? It doesn’t help that Abraham’s semitechnical language occasionally slips out of sync with the broken speech of grief that he believes everyone experiences. Nor are the author’s generalizations on human behavior completely accurate. Abraham candidly narrates his own resistance to the traditional claims of theodicy, and doubtless he speaks for most of us—but not all. For not everyone in a stricken state greets the assurances of God’s love, divine providence, and heaven as “pious nonsense.” In the chill of loss, some believers actually do pray and give thanks for the one who has died. Some draw instinctive, immediate comfort from the companionship of Jesus or hope in his victory over death.

The besetting mystery in this book—let’s not call it a problem—is the discrepancy between doctrine and experience. Abraham is right and honest to acknowledge it. Most of us want it both ways: we want to preserve the truth of our essential humanity, which is our right to become unstrung by love, and we want to be backstopped by the truth of God. In the crucible of our own humanity, the first thing we know is what destroys us. At the same time—not always later, but *sometimes* at the very same time—we give muted assent not to a greater truth or one that absolves us from pain but to an all-encompassing reality. All our grief and sorrows are gathered under the wings of Christ’s death and resurrection, which is no longer one truth among many but the ground of all our living—and dying.

By the end of the book, Abraham draws the arguments and mysteries together. In our grief, we are coming to terms with our loves, he says. For followers of Jesus, even the most imperfect love echoes the greater love that embraces us in Christ. “Yet these lesser loves,” the author concludes, “have their own inimitable place in our hearts and minds; I, for one, would never want to have it otherwise.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “A theologian’s unsystematic grief.”