

The why question: The deepest mystery of all

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 3, 2003](#) issue

I didn't know Lewis Smedes very well, but I miss him. The Fuller Seminary professor and author who died late last year was the kind of generous and open evangelical who gives me hope for the unity of the church at a time when that hope is hard to come by. We met just once, under peculiar circumstances. We were both scheduled to tape a program for the *30 Good Minutes* television show in Chicago, and were in the make-up room at the same time, sitting beneath white drapes while a young woman applied powder to our foreheads. We each knew who the other was, and soon were lamenting and laughing about how conservatives in both our faith families were unhappy with us.

Smedes was smart and also consummately pastoral, the kind of person who invites confidence and trust, a person with a special gift of grace. And because of that his books were helpful to this preacher looking for an idea, a story, an anecdote.

The excerpt from his memoir that appears in this issue tells us something about Smedes's own theological journey. If there is a common experience that binds the pastors of the land together, it is that of being present with people when tragedy strikes, as it did to Smedes and his wife—of being the one who is asked, “Why has this happened? How could God do this to me? What is God up to?”

Theodicy is the technical name for making sense of evil in God's world. I have found three resources helpful: Burton Cooper's *Why God?*, Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Lament for a Son* and Martin Marty's *A Cry of Absence*, each written in the midst of exquisite grief at the death of a loved one. And now add Lew Smedes, whose Calvinist notion of a God in control was challenged and changed by the death of his baby.

I'm writing this in Holy Week, as the church focuses on that most inexplicable event—the death of God's son on a cross. Once again I try to take to heart the mystery of suffering love, the mystery that although God does not cause our suffering, suffering forms us, deepens us and makes us more sensitive to the

suffering of others and is therefore a blessing to those who suffer. And that deepest mystery of all: that nothing—no suffering, no death—will separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ.