



when
you ask
WHY
It's OK to ask.

daniel e. johnson



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To
David

We thought you left too soon.



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FOREWORD

When You Ask Why is a classic. First written more than 20 years ago, now in its eighth printing, it speaks to all of us. It is worth reading, not because it answers the tough questions, but because it refuses to dismiss them — or to offer easy answers. Rereading the book evoked vivid memories of the many times I have sought for answers to life's dilemmas.

Daniel Johnson reminds us that our plans may sometimes be interrupted by a variety of circumstances. And we are not alone, he suggests. Joseph comes to mind. What grandiose dreams marked his youth! But the very dreams seemed to mock him when his brothers betrayed him and sold him into slavery. The long years in an

Egyptian prison were not what he had in mind when his youthful imagination had run wild. But the all-knowing God was never absent from Joseph's life, and in His own time, what was intended for evil became a blessing to his family and to the whole nation.

And why do we love the Psalms? Is it not, in part, because the shepherd boy who became a king and wrote so many of the Psalms, describes in poetic detail what it was like hiding from King Saul, fleeing from his own son, or pouring out his anguished heart to a God who seemed far away?

The Apostle Paul was certain that the hardships he faced were the stuff of which life is made, and that those things work for us "a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Corinthians 4:17). Paul had discovered a profound truth: *The secret of growing in grace is to be in a place where you need grace.* The secret of leaning hard on God is to be found in those circumstances in which you have no other choice.

The author of this volume writes that the experiences from which we shrink often prove

to be the portals through which we advance to the richest and sweetest experiences of our lives. Given that trials may become a benediction in disguise, valleys may be more important than the mountains. Someone has observed that few of us can drink out of a full cup. There is far greater danger in conquest and victory than in loss and defeat. The Lord won't let us forget that. Our God is the God of the mountains, but He is God of the valleys as well, and He is faithful. This is the message of *When You Ask Why*, written out of a heart of compassion by Daniel Johnson. You will understand yourself better and love the Lord more deeply in reading this masterpiece.

Richard W. Dortch

Author, conference speaker, TV host

INTRODUCTION

This book was written two decades ago. It has been reissued a number of times, undergone two or three revisions and cover makeovers, and now carefully edited again with minor additions made. Because it touches on events occurring over a period of time and in different locations, an explanation is in order.

The careful reader will question the sequence of events and wonder about the time-line. No effort has been made to clarify times and places, to put them in proper order. We're living in Milwaukee on one page, in Charlotte on another, then moving across the country to Seattle on yet another. From disappointment in career to the collapse of the Twin Towers,

the narrative stretches unevenly across the years.

You will say this doesn't make sense, this is no way to write a book. You may be right. But that's not the point. This is not a historical document or theological discussion. It is not an exercise in logic or argument. It is not likely to win a Pulitzer nor gain approval of the English teacher. The heart knows its own bitterness and there are feelings deeper than words. This is an invitation to track with a fellow struggler, to journey with a friend toward the Celestial City. By God's grace, and your generous help in looking after one another, we shall all travel safely to the river's edge.

I visited an old friend who was dying of lung cancer. I noticed two books — just two — on his nightstand: the Bible and a thin volume titled *Heaven* by E.M. Bounds. You travel light on the long journey my friend would take three or four days later. Speaking of eternal life, don't miss *On Resurrection* by my brother, Clayton Lee Johnson. Of the five boys and one girl in our family, it was agreed that he has the best brain.

I found a word the other day: *extrude*. Kind of an interesting word. It means “to thrust out; force or press out; expel: *to extrude molten rock*.” You get the picture of something good being forced out as a result of pressure, or pain, even. My brother’s life has not been easy. Some of the words that have poured from his pen — extruded, if you will, have come at some cost, and will not soon be forgotten by those who have read them. Don’t miss *On Resurrection*.

I am grateful to my daughter Cindy for carefully proofreading this manuscript. To my wife Martha, without whose editorial help and loving support these pages would be blank, saying thanks seems inadequate. Now, it’s time to get started. What do you do, where do you go, when life tumbles in? Let’s make the journey together.

ON RESURRECTION

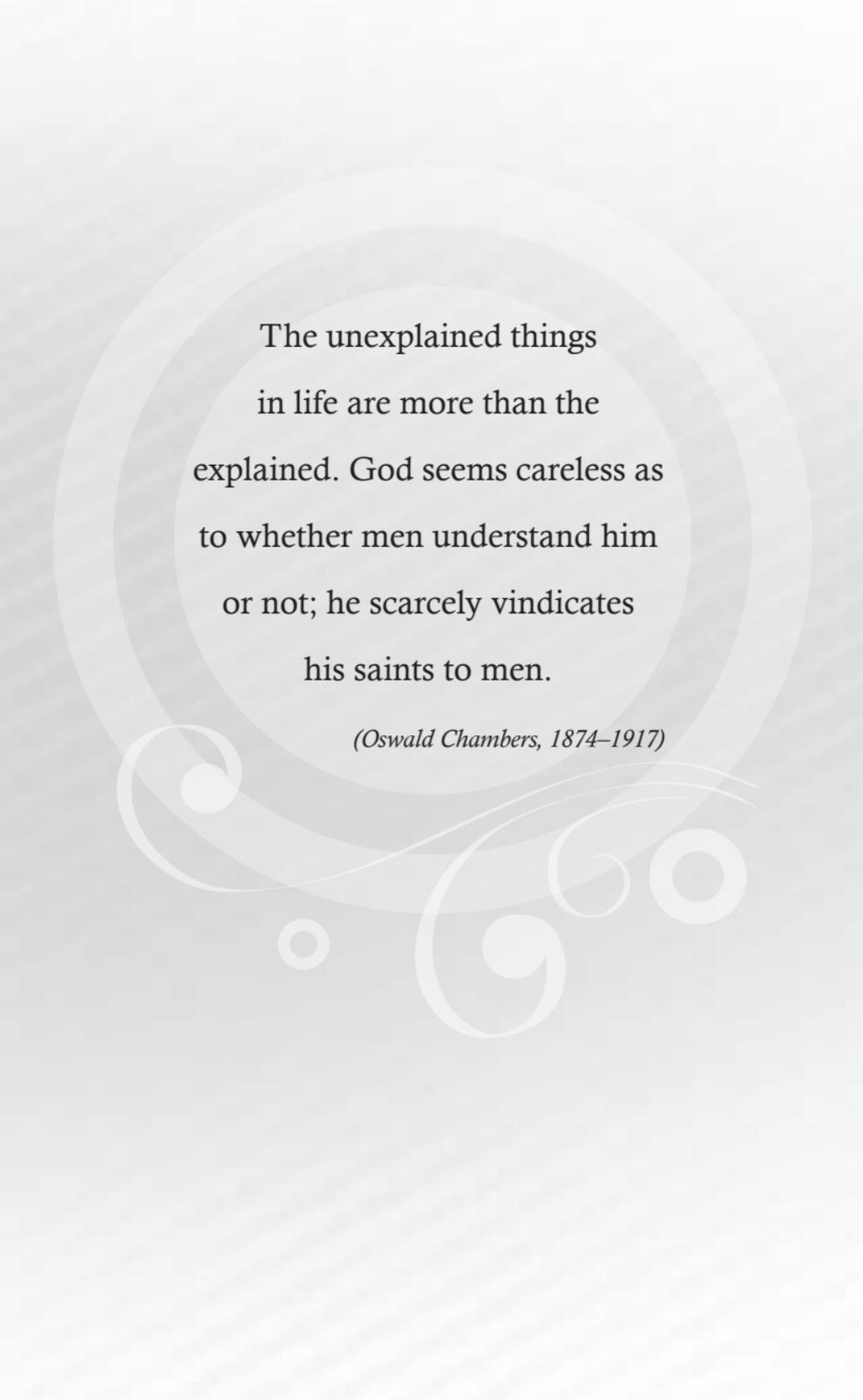
In my unwilling immolation
Spectral figures loom.
Unwelcome immigration
To my soul's burning room.
Again my heart remembers —
Where once was heady adulation
Is now a tomb.

How soon spring became September!
For one day my maturation
Vaulted to the stars.
Then spider-like came denigration,
Weaving webs like prison bars.

But with fire in every member
I hear a syncopation
Cascade from above:
*No one lives in isolation,
There's a branch for every dove!*

Now, reduced to one small ember,
My heart hears an indication
As by thunder from above:
*Death is but initiation!
Afterword, comes breathless love!*
So perish every accusation,
Every lying taunt that hell's of;
I shall rise to higher station
For securely in my heart is: Love!

Clayton Lee Johnson

The background features a large, light gray circle in the upper half, with several smaller, overlapping white circles and swirls scattered throughout, particularly in the lower half. The text is centered within the large circle.

The unexplained things
in life are more than the
explained. God seems careless as
to whether men understand him
or not; he scarcely vindicates
his saints to men.

(Oswald Chambers, 1874–1917)

CHAPTER ONE
WHEN LIFE
TUMBLES IN

The scenes are etched so deep in memory the soul seems scarred forever — planes plunging into towers, 110 floors collapsing on top of one another, thousands fleeing burning buildings and falling debris, and mountains of smoke and ash rising where Manhattan’s magnificent towers once stood.

“Images of dazed New Yorkers swimming in ash will haunt our cultural memory,” Jerry Adler wrote in *Newsweek*.¹

It was a picture perfect day on the East Coast. September 11, 2001. We were well into the first year of the new century, and things looked promising all across the country. The economy was a little weak, but it would improve. It was a good time to review the past, count our blessings, and get a grip on the tasks that lay ahead.

That's what they were doing at Hillsdale College in Michigan, where two days earlier they had begun a conference on the Second World War. On Sunday night, the noted historian Stephen Ambrose argued that the 21st century would be the greatest and most peaceful in history because of the victory won by the "greatest generation." If other speakers were not quite as optimistic, the mood was still upbeat. Iwo Jima, Guadalcanal, Omaha Beach, still vivid to those who flew those skies and stormed those beaches, will forever remind us of the price that was paid for our freedom. Evil had been routed out in those days. This would be a good century. Then came Tuesday.

After years of planning and enormous expense, blind hate executed an assault on the World Trade Center in New York. It took exactly one hour and 44 minutes after the first attack for the collapse of the Twin Towers.

"I don't know what the gates of hell look like," said John Maloney, a security director for an Internet firm, "but it's got to look like this."²

Rudy Guiliani — inspiring, emotional and as tough as ever — rushed to the scene at 8:45. The intrepid mayor of New York described the horror: “When I was looking up, I could see a man just dive out of a window like he was diving into a pool. He came down the full hundred stories and then his fall was broken by the plaza. I think that was the first time I realized that this was beyond anything we had ever faced before.”³

Marketing executive Kevin Burns said, “I have a photographic image in my brain of the people falling from the sky. I pray.”

Fred Golba, a relief worker whose expertise is finding corpses, called the burning Twin Towers “Hell One” and “Hell Two.” The picture he paints is not pretty: “. . . jagged glass, girders, the holes go down for stories and you look in and here’s all these pieces of people.”⁴

Minutes after the towers were struck, United Flight 73 slammed into the Pentagon. “What was that?” Donald Rumsfeld asked. The defense secretary, working in his office somewhere in that building, posed the

question we're all asking, what was that? Never in history had a hijacker deliberately flown a plane into a building killing everyone aboard including himself.

What was that? What's going on here? Can anyone by searching find rhyme or reason in this? Has a clash of civilizations threatened the end of history? Why do things like this happen to ordinary folks on their way to college or work, taking their children to school, going about their business?

Brian Sweeney, 38, a passenger on American Airlines Flight 175, had called his wife: "I hope I can call you again, but if not, I want you to have fun. I want you to live your life. I know I'll see you again someday."⁵ Minutes later his plane crashed into the South Tower.

A mother heard this message on her answering machine: "Mom, don't worry. A plane hit the World Trade Center. We are going to evacuate. Now pray for us."⁶

Madeline Amy Sweeney, a flight attendant, was calm almost to the end of a call to her supervisor, until she looked out the

window and cried, “I see water and buildings! Oh, my God! Oh, my God!”⁷

A team of 62 firefighters, police officers, medical experts, and other rescue specialists from Tacoma, Washington, went to New York to look for survivors and victims. Some of them kept diaries which provide a close-up look at what went on when hell was in session.

“There is anxiety in the air today,” therapist Lynn Cheshire writes. “Something has shifted. We discover later it is no longer search and rescue. It is recovery.”⁸

Without warning, the current of life is short-circuited. A phone call in the night changes your world forever. A careening car out of control or a violent and angry storm, and the party is suddenly over. Planes crash, dreams unravel, jobs disappear, friends depart. Some images are so vivid they remain unsoftened by the passage of time. You play them over and over.

Six astronauts and a schoolteacher emerging from their quarters, moving briskly, smiling, waving. A van takes them to the launch pad where they are packed away for their journey to the stars.

Seventy-three seconds after liftoff the \$1.2 billion space shuttle *Challenger* explodes into a searing nightmare. “What are we doing here? We’re reaching for the stars,”⁹ schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe said upon entering the astronaut program; but on January 28, 1986, the world watched in horror as seven Americans disappeared in a ball of flames nine miles above the Atlantic.

Our collective grief was expressed in Buenos Aires where Dobal omitted his usual cartoon in the *Clarín* to write, “I can’t give you a joke because, dear reader, all my space is filled with infinite pain.”

It is a broken world, after all. We walk by faith, not by sight, and have here no continuing city. Our vision is often clouded, and we see through a glass darkly. We have this treasure in earthen vessels and are hard pressed on every side, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, carrying about in the body grim reminders of our mortality.

Who can forget the magnificent voice of Frank Sinatra belting out one of his favorites, “That’s Life”? That’s life — an apt characterization of the sum total of human

experience. The full spectrum of emotions and experiences. The highs and the lows. The warm sensation of success and the cold feeling of failure. Public acclaim and exquisite pleasure; public loss and private pain.

Charles Allen says, “One does not have to live very long in order to find out that life can be hard and cruel — and sometimes almost impossible.”¹⁰

Even as I write, I am deeply moved. How could anyone not be? The experience is something akin to agitation. I run the gamut of feelings until I am tired of running. Sometimes it is anger; white-knuckled, fist-pounding anger, and I echo the sentiment of television personality Danuta Soderman. Early in her life she sought in vain for an answer concerning her career: “I went out to the beach and started walking up and down the shoreline, screaming my rage into the sky. ‘Enough! Do you hear me up there? I say enough! I don’t want any more of your hope! If you can’t come through on your promises, then don’t dangle hope in my face. I can’t take any more of it! Just leave me alone. . . .”

At other times it is frustration, the emotion so strong you almost break out in a sweat.

Beneath it all, like a current that never stops, is an abiding sense of deep sadness and loss. When the angry sky clears and the storm subsides and the shouting is muted to a whisper, the question is but a syllable and repeated with only the effort it takes to exhale, Why?

Endnote

1. *Newsweek* (December 3, 2001).
2. *Newsweek* (September 24, 2001).
3. *Newsweek* (December 3, 2001).
4. *Newsweek* (December 1, 2001).
5. *Newsweek* (December 3, 2001).
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *The News Tribune* (Tacoma, WA, October 11, 2001).
9. "Christa McAuliffe 1948-1986," *Time* magazine (February 10, 1986).
10. <http://www.faithquest.info/questions/10-why-does-god-allow-suffering-and-evil>.