



QUESTIONS

for your real life journey

Episode 28: Bethany Sollereder

How do we face change?

1. NOT PUSHING FOR A PARTICULAR GOAL (13:08)

Bethany describes when she asked one of her professors to write her a letter of recommendation when applying for a PhD scholarship and her professor asked her to write one of her own for herself. She spent all night agonising about what she should write.

'I realised just how much of my life was like this game of shadow puppets, where I was trying to contort myself so that people would see a projected image. That night was like holding a mirror up to my soul realising how twisted I'd become in order to create a certain image.

'Since then, I've been able to have the intention of saying I'm not chasing success as the world defines it. When success does come I've simply said, "Okay, this opportunity has opened up and I will pursue it as faithfully as I know how, because I think this is worthwhile doing. And when the end comes, if there's nothing beyond it, I'll go find some other opportunity."

'So, constantly just saying, "my life is an offering to God and to the church" has been what's really important in what I do...I think that is what allows the change to be something you can embrace, because I'm not pushing for a particular goal. I'm saying "my life is in the hands of God."

A lot of contemporary advice says we should follow our dreams and pursue our goals, that we should actively make happen the changes we want to see – but Bethany's way of approaching life seems at odds with this. What do you make of her philosophy to say, simply, 'my life is in the hands of God'?

2. INCENTIVISING THE EMBRACE OF CHANGE (25:03)

Bethany is currently working on the question, 'What do we do if we cannot stop climate change?'

'We have a limited pool of resources. New York recently said "we're spending four billion more dollars adding better sea structures to protect the city", and I thought 'For goodness sake, start moving the city! If we don't, we'll spend billions of dollars building sea walls, and they won't work, and the city will be flooded, and everybody has to move. And we have a mass migration crisis, and emergency, and emergency, right? So you're still going to have to move the city: there's not going to be a city left.

'So the question is, do we have to wait till there's another disaster that destroys the city? Or do we start saying, we're going to put incentives to get people out of here?'



QUESTIONS for your real life journey

Why do you think humanity persists in a stubborn optimism that everything will all be okay, when evidence suggests that might be wildly unrealistic? What would incentivise you to move home?

How do we move through suffering?

3. DEATH IS NOT THAT BAD (18:55)

The changes to our climate, says Bethany, 'will mean dramatic and painful changes for humans, because our infrastructure is so finely tuned to the climate we've expected... But it's certainly not the end of life. It's not the end of the planet.'

'I'm in no way saying there won't be horrific suffering associated with what's coming, but at the same time, from a Christian point of view death is not the worst thing. Suffering is not the worst thing.'

'And that's where someone like Julian of Norwich is so helpful, because she comes along and she says "all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." The idea she introduces – that when we suffer it's an opportunity to participate with the suffering of Jesus on the cross – is something we're very averse to. But when suffering happens, it can become a spiritual opportunity, a place where we can grow.'

'Death *with sin* is a problem: Death *can* be for evil reasons, as we're seeing in the Ukraine right now.'

'But I think death in general is part of God's good creation. And I think that in the lives of saints and martyrs, we begin to see God's purpose for death, where it's this joyful transition into God's presence and in into the gates of the New Kingdom.'

'So I want to both acknowledge the suffering and the tragedy, but also say that this is when Christian faith really gets going – when times are tough.'

What do you think of the idea that suffering and death are not 'the worst thing'? Have you found suffering to be a place where you can grow? How might death in general be part of God's good plan for creation?

4. CLIMATE CHANGE AND EUCATASTROPHE (30:28)

Bethany explains that this isn't the first time the planet has faced climate change: 2.4 billion years ago, cyanobacteria released a toxic gas into the air through their metabolism, which nearly killed themselves and caused widespread climate change.



QUESTIONS for your real life journey

'But do you know what that gas was? Oxygen! They nearly destroyed themselves by releasing too much oxygen so that its proportion in the atmosphere went from zero to 19%. And that was a tragedy, it was a horrible thing that happened to them. But it became the foundation for all aerobic metabolism that we now rely on.

'It's one of those sudden, unexpected turns for the good, that Tolkien called *eucatastrophe*.

So we need to think: okay, we have a tragedy. But let's look out for the eucatastrophe in it, the next turning that life will have, and let's work towards that.

Can you think of an example of a tragedy (from your own life, or history) where some unexpected turn for the good came out of it? While climate change will cause huge changes and we want to do everything in our power to prevent it, what good do you think might come out of it if it does take place?

5. WHAT BUILDS YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD? (34:26)

Bethany shares about a time she was in an extremely toxic, damaging church situation and was asking God 'How can you let this happen?'

'What was interesting was the advice I got from other people. Some people said "God's preparing you for future ministry." Somebody else would say 'God has a plan for this, God will redeem this.'

None of this advice helped Bethany. 'But I knew that those people had gone through significant suffering and that their advice had been what had got them through.

'I ended up going down kind of open theist posture, saying "God doesn't ever intend suffering. But he can work to redeem it." And that helped me.

'I just sort of I had this sense that, actually, I think that different models of suffering may get different people through and that's okay. Because ultimately, we don't know the answer, and there's no way to get to the answer.

'And so the question is, "what builds my relationship with God? Which of these paths helps me to draw closer to God and see God as loving, kind and merciful, and loving me in the midst of this?"

'And I think that that is different for different people. But I'm not a relativist so much as having a sense that our theologies are too small. They're always partial, they are always only going to be glimpses of the Divine.'

Have you ever been given advice that seemed really unhelpful when you were going through a tough time? What builds your relationship with God and helps you see God as loving, kind and merciful? In what ways might your model of God and life be too small?



QUESTIONS for your real life journey

How do we receive joy?

6. PAY ATTENTION TO DISCOVER WHAT YOU'RE GRATEFUL FOR (00:00)

'Psychological studies on gratitude have said that it's kind of the healthiest emotion, the thing that correlates most with satisfaction.

'But the problem is, we've forgotten how to pay attention.

'One of my extended family members was here for a visit, and he's Buddhist. We were eating together and talking about what it meant to pay attention, which is something important to both Christian and Buddhist traditions.

'And he says: *"I'm trying to remember when I eat to just notice that I'm chewing."* And I thought, "yeah, I don't ever pay attention to that, let alone swallowing or anything else.

'And so how can we be grateful if we're so often on autopilot? If we're not aware of the things we're experiencing?'

What things do you do every day that you pay no attention to? What impact might paying attention to those simple actions have on your life? How might developing your ability to be aware and pay attention make you more grateful? How might being more grateful make you feel more satisfied?



QUESTIONS for your real life journey

How do we mature in service?

7. TAKE YOUR WORK, NOT YOURSELF, SERIOUSLY (00:00)

In the last episode of the podcast, Andrew Grinnell said: 'I think we mature when we don't take ourselves so seriously.' In this episode, Bethany shares a similar piece of advice: 'Take your work seriously but not ourselves seriously.'

'I remember Eugene Peterson talking about attending a big celebration of him pastoring a church for 30 years. And at the end of his goodbye party, he walked around the church as he normally did before he locked up at the end of the night, went into one of the washrooms and found that some kids had just made a mess of it. So the last service that he did to his church was cleaning up the bathroom and mopping it: that was the end of his pastoral work.'

'And I just thought "that's somebody that I want to be like!" You know, someone who after a party in their honour says, "Oh, the washroom needs to be mopped and cleaned" and doesn't think twice about doing that.'

What strikes you about this story about Eugene Peterson? Does it inspire you? Why or why not?

8. CURIOSITY VS STUDY (1:03:57)

Bethany explains that there is a tradition in Christian thought that makes a distinction between curiosity and study.

'Curiosity is actually a vice in the Christian tradition: there's a great book called *The Vice of Curiosity*. And the idea is that curiosity is that sense of needing to have mastery over knowledge: "I'm going to learn so that I have the power that knowledge grants me."

'Whereas study is the pursuit of loving: knowing more what we *already* love. It's like when you get into a relationship with somebody, you're not trying to get to know them better so that you can manipulate them to meet your needs, you're getting to know them within the context of love, not to use them.'

Does your experience of having curiosity resonate with the description that Bethany gives? How might we study God in a way that makes us know and love him better?



QUESTIONS for your real life journey

Act: DRAWING YOUR MAP (53:42)

Bethany's book, *Why is there suffering?*, takes the form of a 'Choose your own adventure' book. It allows readers to discover their theology about suffering by forcing them to think for themselves. The book contains a map that portrays the different views about God and suffering as physical locations.

1. Prepare: Take a fresh piece of paper and different coloured pens or pencils to draw with
2. Remember: Jot down as many key moment in your life's journey so far that you can think of – times that you have been confronted with change, gone through suffering, experienced joy and had opportunities to grow.
3. Draw: Create a map of your life's journey so far by drawing these moments in your life as physical locations (mountains, rivers, forests, roads, castles, harbours...)
4. Name: Label each location with a name that sums them up. Be creative! (eg The Mountains of Loneliness, The Moving House, The Sticky Mess, The Pit of Despair, The Laughter Lake, the Road of Responsibility).
5. Moving on: Next draw arrows that indicate how you have moved from one place to the next.
6. Helpful guides: Think about the times you have managed to move on from a tricky situation: who or what was it that helped you do that? (A friend? A book? A sermon? A random occurrence? A message from God?) Draw extra elements on your map to represent these helpful guides on your journey.
7. Adversaries and obstacles: Consider those bad places you were stuck in for a long time, or that you somehow found yourself going back to. Why do you think this was (or is)? What have been the biggest obstacles preventing you from moving on, or the people that triggered you to go back to places that were unhelpful? Draw something to represent each of these adversaries or obstacles on your journey.
8. The future: Now add to your map other places that you haven't been to yet – changes that you *know* are coming (going to university, a new job, a change in house), suffering that you *fear* may happen, joys that you would *love* to experience, challenges that you would *welcome* as opportunities to grow you. Draw these as physical locations and again give them a name (eg The Career Crossroads, The Waterfall of Refreshment, The Jungle of Sickness, The Trampoline of Opportunity...) Indicate those you wish to avoid by placing crosses over them, and indicate places you wish to visit by adding dotted arrows towards them.
9. Share: Talk each other through your maps. Allocate everyone at least 5 minutes to do this. Essentially this is a creative way of sharing your testimony, so ensure you are sensitive when listening to each person's story.
10. Pray: Ask the Holy Spirit to comfort, empower, encourage, equip, inspire and guide you as you continue to live out your life's journey, aware of your memories of your history, opportunities in the present and dreams for the future.