

Why?

One of the most frequently asked questions of me as a pastoral carer is, 'Why?' Why is John suffering such **debilitating pain** in hospital? Why has **Mary died so young** when she has left behind two children and an unemployed husband? Why is Brother David, now at the age of 93, suffering from advanced dementia **when he was such an active and vibrant member of our ecclesia**? Why has Sister Amanda had **another miscarriage**? Why does little Billy, **at the age of 4, have cancer**?



My usual, immediate answer is "I don't know". I have no idea why these 'events' take place in an individual's life. I have some Scriptural reasons why, in general, these events take place but, at a time when such a question as "Why?" is often asked, it is not usually appropriate to launch into a theological explanation. Very rarely does the person asking the question expect a definitive and immediate answer. I usually further respond that "I am so sorry that this is happening. Can I help you in some way - perhaps by praying with you

that you and your loved one might be comforted by the loving hand of our Lord?", or, "Is there something practical I can do – like, take the children to school?" This will often provide an opportunity for the cared-for person to express their feelings which can, in itself, help them in their anguish, as well as being of practical assistance.

A general, Scriptural explanation

What are some of the Scriptural explanations for what is happening in illness, suffering and death? We'll start with some broad considerations and get a little more specific as we progress.

The basic principle. Suffering started when Adam and Eve, whilst in the Garden of Eden, were disobedient to God's command and suffered the consequences. In Genesis 3:16-19 it is recorded:

To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life."

These verses show the introduction of suffering into human life because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve. They describe pain in childbearing, difficulties in daily work, and eventual death.

And the Apostle Paul also states

"... sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned..." (Romans (5:12)

This verse shows the consequences of Adam's sin to the broad human experience of suffering and death. Sin came into the world through Adam which led to suffering and mortality for all of us.

These passages point to the fundamental cause of pain, suffering and death. Reading verses around them show that while God punishes disobedience and sin, **He also makes a way for redemption** for those who come to Him.

But while these verses offer a basic explanation for the beginning of sin and suffering, they can be of little comfort to one of our friends who is in severe, acute pain and who is suffering immensely. We need to go deeper into the Scriptures to see a more detailed explanation.

A little more specific

There is the often-quoted passage in Ecclesiastes:

I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all. (Ecclesiastes 9:11)

This is stating that what actually takes place happens to all people in life. The context for this verse is the inevitability of death. Death comes to all. The time of one's death cannot be predicted. The word translated 'chance' has no implication of 'luck' in the Hebrew as it usually does in English. The Lexicons also use the word 'occurrent'. So, over a period of time, during life, there are various occurrences that affect us all. For the believer in God, we recognise, that, if we place our trust in Him, He will guide our occurrences to help us in the best way possible including events where we experience suffering. This may include accidents, floods, bush fires (wild fires), illnesses, mental suffering, death – and everything else that occurs because that is life.

This view is reinforced in the letter to the Romans:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

The "all things" in this verse are the troubles and trials of our life. God will work beside us to bear all these "things", to tread the dark valleys, for our ultimate good - eternal life.

Another verse to consider is in Matthew:

He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:45)

We are told that if we trust in Him, He will help us through the difficult times, even though we may not understand the reason at the time, we rest assured He is with us.

So, where is God?

Above all, God wants us in His kingdom more than we can comprehend. He is not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3: 9). If we understand that our spiritual well-being is more valuable to God than our natural well-being (even though obviously this is also important because He loves us), then perhaps the lens through which we view suffering and pain would not cause us to blame God or be angry with Him. He sent Jesus to bind up the broken hearted, to comfort those who mourn, to give us gladness instead of mourning and praise instead of despair (Isaiah 61). Jesus was even pierced for our transgressions, and we are healed by his wounds (Isaiah 53). How blessed are we that the LORD our Redeemer says, "with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you"? (Isaiah 54)

Does God help?

In addition to God helping us in all circumstances, He will extend life or not extend it, as was demonstrated in the life of Hezekiah. In this case, God had stated through the prophet Isaiah that Hezekiah would die. It is not recorded that Hezekiah asked for an extension to his life. He simply

asked God, in tears, to remember the good things he had done. God, in His goodness, decided to extend Hezekiah's life anyway. (2 Kings 20)

Positive aspects of suffering

While at times it can be difficult for us to see anything positive in personal suffering, in hindsight, we can see that it can lead to our spiritual growth. It can lead us to persevere and grow in other aspects of our life. People who have experienced hardship often have deeper levels of humility, compassion, and depth as individuals – not that any of us look for the pain of the growth process. Listed below are some Scriptural verses that suggest this, and you will notice that the first two passages are positive in relation to our current life while the final one suggests the benefit of eternal life that can come to us. (The first passage actually suggests both.)

The present...

And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. (1 Peter 5:10)

A benefit for suffering can be a strengthening of our character in our current life.

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. (Romans 5:3-4)

Again, a verse that draws attention to an eternal 'benefit' from suffering.

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. (2 Corinthians 4:17)

These verses help us to understand some of the positive aspects of suffering and the hope we can have for the future. The hope of the Resurrection is one of the greatest comforts we can have during bereavement. At the same time, this hope does not mean that we do not miss the current presence of a loved one who has died.

Yes, but what about John, Mary, David, Amanda and little Billy (above)?

They are in most difficult circumstances. How do these broad principles help them? And why does a believer undergo such suffering? Doesn't God look after His people? Of course He does! But He never promised that He would be holding people in a life of 100% good health.

Scriptural examples

There are a number of Scriptural examples of this. Take Job (in the book of Job). He had a family and many possessions. He was very wealthy, and life was very comfortable for him. He was a God-fearing man. In the narrative, God took away everything he had. Job refused to blame God but could not understand why he was suffering this great loss of everything. Job's friends suggested that he must have wronged God therefore he should admit it and be done with it. God's answer to all this was that He wanted to demonstrate the principle that God was God and did things **because He was God** (Job 40 and 41). While this was extremely stressful and painful for Job, God used him to illustrate a greater point which is helpful for us. We should know that God is the supreme being. God knew that Job would be able to cope with the stress even though it was massively difficult for him. He suffered for a reason. Ultimately, God blessed him with double the amount of everything he had earlier.

King David was another. He was described as a man after God's own heart, yet he suffered immensely, sometimes because of his own weaknesses – for example, his sin with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11) but other times simply because he was David (Psalms 51, 60, 71). Key to this was his pursuit by King Saul. David was exceptionally kind to Saul, yet Saul was jealous and did his best to find and kill David (1 Samuel 19). The man after God's own heart still suffered during his life. The Bible describes so much of his life that are examples, both good and not good, for us.

The Apostle Paul was another who was an exceptionally righteous man who suffered a lot during his life - for a purpose. He stated:

“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. **But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us.** On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many. (2 Corinthians 1:8-11)

Can we notice here, though, that **Paul admits to suffering more than he could bear at times**. He doesn't specify the occasions. But he also made another very important point – he said that they had the hardships so that **they would not rely on themselves but on God**.

Paul also tells of all the sufferings he went through (2 Corinthians 11 from verse 23) – a comprehensive catalogue of problems involving beatings, shipwrecks and other persecutions, and he also had a “thorn” in his flesh (we can only speculate on what this was) but, ultimately his answer, which is suitable for us, was

But he (God) said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:9-10)

The Apostle Paul was magnificent in his ability (that God recognised) to withstand massive trauma in his life of service to his Father. He was chosen by God, yet he still suffered.

So, we know why there is suffering and death and that this happens to all people. We know that God allows this to happen but sometimes, He will intervene and stop difficulties happening to some people. We don't know why God allows things to happen to some of His people, but we do know that He will help them through these most difficult circumstances.

Isn't God a God of love?

We are often asked, “But surely, if God was a God of love, He would not allow this to happen, that He will help us – safe travel, help us through illness. If the person is not helped, does this mean we are not faithful enough?” This does not stop us from asking for these things ourselves, and encouraging our friends and family to pray earnestly for what they believe is important. We should encourage them to pray in faith that God's purpose will be achieved. If we do not receive what we pray for, this does not mean we have lacked faith. What it means is that God knows a reason for not granting our wish. **Ultimately, God's action will be much better for us than our initial plan.** And we would do well to gently help our sick and hurting friends to understand this.

What about when we ask God in faith

Another question is, if God controls our life is He causing this suffering to happen? Is it God's will? It is never God's will that people should perish. (2 Peter 3:9) He does not cause individuals to have illness and suffering. He allows it to happen. He does not allow us trials beyond what we can bare. In 1 Corinthians 1:13, Paul states – "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear." The Scriptural word 'temptation' here is also translated 'trial'. A trial can be illness or suffering.

A supreme example

Sometimes a loved one who goes through immense trauma and suffering leaves behind a wonderful example of faith and love. Even if this happens at a young age, we can understand that God's purpose was fulfilled for that person. The supreme example of this was our Lord Jesus Christ. He lived to the age of 33 years. Incredible! What he achieved in his short life was absolutely amazing. He suffered terribly. He was nailed in agony. He was despised and rejected in every way. He went through an ignominious existence, yet he did not sin. He preached the Gospel. He healed the sick. Yet God knew that by living a sinless life and then offering him, His only son, as a sacrifice for us, Jesus accomplished everything that was needed to achieve his and his Father's purpose. He could not have achieved any more eternally had he lived longer. There was nothing else for him to do.

Is suffering a punishment for a specific sin we might commit?

In a local and general sense – no. However, there are exceptions to this in our own life. For example, if I drive over the speed limit, I may have an accident that results in severe injury, and I, and others, suffer because of this. This suffering is of my own making because of my own 'sinful' behaviour. However, popular theology that suggests that every bit of suffering results from a specific sin is just not Scripturally correct.

We are all in the position sometimes of wondering why some dreadful things happen to some people and not to others. As quoted earlier, it rains on the just and the unjust for example. Ultimately, people suffer because they live in a world that has natural occurrences. **They are not necessarily created by God, but they exist in the world God created.**

For me, the principal reason for occurrences lies in an observation that God allows events to happen but does not necessarily cause them. Despite much prayer, people for whom we pray may not live. We should always pray that God's will be done. The suffering some people go through is an immense example of faith and courage that is a wonderful example for those of us who remain.

Opportunity for us to comfort each other

We sometimes struggle coping with illness and suffering, and death in others. But, through prayer and faith, we can rely on God to help us, and He will comfort us:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction... (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

We can help those who need comfort:

...so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you

experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. (2 Corinthians 1:4-6)

Paul also recognises that the community of brothers and sisters can help through comfort. Let's look at Corinthians again:

You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many. (2 Corinthians 1:11)

Prayer and faith are vital elements of our service to one another during times of stress, suffering and bereavement.

Perhaps the final word comes again from Paul. In these verses he is saying that for the person loving God and believing in His Son, nothing, including illness and suffering, can separate them from the love of God.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. **For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.** (Romans 8:31-39).

Our prayers and practice

There are many reasons why suffering and death occur, and we don't have all the answers. One vital way in which we can help comfort one another in all circumstances is to pray that our Lord Jesus Christ, and our wonderful Heavenly Father embrace our suffering friends and family with their love and compassion. Pray together with your friend – this is very powerful for the person being prayed for – as well as pray for them in your private prayers that their faith remains strong, and they stay connected to the love and compassion of our Father. Be fully present with them in their suffering – just the warmth of your presence and love without words can be as powerful a support to them as long conversations could be. (Job's friends sat with him silently for a week before anyone said anything). Listen deeply to their pain without judgement. This is truly a gift. As we all practise caring for others as Jesus cares for us, we strive to do our best in prayer and in practice, to comfort our friends who are suffering. May our Father bless you as you grow in grace in His service to others.

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(I am very grateful to Peter Collins, Cathy Strachan and John Quill
for reading through the paper and making helpful suggestions.)
