

Ouch! Everything hurts

A friend wrote that his life was falling apart. He had lost his job, was losing his house and developed a life-threatening illness. He asked why God was doing these things. Below is my reply. Happily, he has since recovered from these circumstances.

<><><>

Dear Justin,

Whenever someone expresses a cry of pain such as in your letter, it generates a certain frustration because I would like to say something more substantial than a spiritualized *buck-up*. Quoting verses is always a good idea but even so, one can be left frustrated by what seems an endless wait for answers.

I have concluded the solution to helping someone through their pain, is to remove it. If I can't, then as a minister what am I supposed to do?

Crying *ouch* is natural. Asking *Why, God?* is another way of saying it. I'm not exactly sure when it is okay to ask that question. Theologians disagree on this point, especially when they are not the ones in pain.

Pain does not help the reasoning faculty of the brain. It brings confusion. When hot grease hits my hand, I immediately stop being analytical and begin looking for an immediate solution, even if it's not a good one.

Unfortunately, you expressed the hurt in the form of questions addressed to me. That puts the ball in my court as a minister to answer.

Very well . . . It will not take away the pain any more than the comments of your well-meaning friends. It may even add to it. I trust not! It is, however, the only answer you are ever likely to get.

The answer as to why this series of events is happening is the same reason why anything else happens or ever will occur, good, bad or indifferent. It happens for the glory of God.

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him is glory forever! Romans 11:36

The immediate question is, *how does Justin's distress glorify God?* I don't have a clue. But that is exactly what the Word says it accomplishes.

If that is not true, then nothing in the gospel is true.

The above fact is both comforting and ominous.

- Comforting, in the sense that at least we know the pain .
- Ominous, in telling us something outside of ourselves is more important than our pain, for which the pain is a perfectly valid price to pay.

To put the icing on the cake, we are reminded that God is not being cruel, insensitive or egocentric. To put the cherry on the icing, we learn it will be proven ultimately that experiencing the pain is infinitely better than not experiencing it.

You asked if this was punishment for some sin. Possibly, but not likely. If it were, you would know what it is by now. Throughout scripture, such as in the chastisements of Israel, God alerted them to the specific cause. As someone rightly put it, *God is not a child abuser.*

I know that in the midst of your pain it is probably inappropriate for me to try to correct your theology. It might even seem callous, like someone rebuking me for shouting when hot grease hits my hand. I'm tempted to deliver a knuckle sandwich, transferring at least some of the pain to the rebuker.

Jesus came across a blind man. The disciples asked, *was it because of this man's sin or his parents' sin that he was born blind?* Jesus answered, *neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.* John 9:3

It's not that the man or his parents were sinless. Jesus was clarifying that not every event in one's life is necessarily connected to their moral condition. It might well be, but then again, maybe not. If we were to live in a perfect reward-and-punishment world, *grace* would have no meaning.

Human nature easily assumes that if we are good enough, this will shelter us against bad things. That's not Christianity.

I'm leading up to a point that I hope will not cause you further distress. You said, *I have done what Jesus said to do. I love, I help, I give.*

Oh no you haven't. Jesus said *be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.* Are we? Isn't this something Jesus commanded? He also made it clear that when we have done all that is demanded of us, even if we *were* perfect, we are to conclude *we are unprofitable servants. We have merely done what we were supposed to do.* This means we don't deserve any reward whatsoever. Why be rewarded for a duty?

God's rewards are really a gift of grace. If God chastises us, it's because he

wants to place us in a position to reward us even more.

Know that you are in our prayers.

Love in Christ,

Roger