

Chapter Five

Suffering, Illness and Wholeness

Why Suffering?

We all have difficult times in our lives, times of loss, failure, disappointment or rejection, times when we feel wounded and suffer. There is no way of avoiding such times; they are part of the stuff of life. Some people experience more suffering than others, but no one avoids it entirely.

When people suffer they often instinctively want to ask: ‘Why?’ ‘What have I done to deserve this?’ ‘Why me?’ Behind these questions is often the idea that God has decided that we should suffer. Then they feel indignant, because it seems unreasonable or unfair. Let us first examine that question. Actually, it may not really be a question at all; people probably don’t really want an answer to it. Asking the question is probably more a way of making a protest than asking a real question. But the question arises from some tangled and mistaken assumptions that are worth examining.

Some people imagine that because they are Christians they will be exempt from suffering, or that if they suffer it means their faith isn’t strong enough. This is a complete misunderstanding. God does not promise freedom from suffering, so we should never judge ourselves, or others, because we suffer. Suffering can’t be taken as a sign of weak faith or of God’s displeasure.

There is also sometimes another misunderstanding that God has decided that we should suffer. Christians believe that all Creation owes its existence to God, and that God loves it, guides it and nurtures it. However, they also believe that God has granted freedom to Creation, and that God is not controlling it or micro-managing it. So, if we suffer, it is not because God has decided that we should.

What God does promise is to stay with us through suffering and help to see us through. Christians find an example of this in Jesus. He certainly suffers, especially in his trial and crucifixion, but he triumphs over his suffering in a way that has been an inspiration to countless people ever since. He is a model of how we can grow through suffering, of how it can bring benefits.

It is instructive to watch how Jesus approaches suffering. He anticipates the appalling suffering of crucifixion more clearly than most people are able to do, but he approaches it in a calm, purposeful matter-of-fact way. There are two extremes that he avoids. One is shrinking from the suffering that is facing him, or running away from it. The other is going to his suffering cheerfully, in a way that denies the appalling reality of suffering. There is already an achievement in how Jesus approaches the suffering involved in his crucifixion.

If people approach suffering in the right way, they can be enriched by it. It may seem strange to suggest that people can benefit from suffering or trauma, but quite often they do. Not always, of course; sometimes people can be so crushed by suffering that they never quite recover. But for many people, suffering brings change and growth.

As we have already seen, psychologists have gathered evidence for what they call 'post-traumatic growth'. There is now much evidence of people growing through war, natural disaster and personal setbacks. It is not an automatic response to suffering or trauma, but depends on how people square up to the challenge of rebuilding their lives after a time of suffering.

People can emerge from a traumatic period with new priorities, greater confidence, better relationships and a sense of new possibilities. Often there is spiritual change too. Whether or not people turn to conventional religion, they often emerge from trauma or suffering with a stronger focus on ultimate or transcendent values and priorities.

Question:

Can any good come from human suffering?

Can you think of any examples?

Health and Illness

Suffering sometimes takes the form of illness. We have already looked at stress, anxiety, depression and loss. We will now look at physical illness.

Once again, illness should not be seen as a punishment from God. In a story in the Gospels, Jesus refuses to blame either a blind man or his parents for being blind (John 6). It is not in God's nature to decide that particular people should get ill. He doesn't have that kind of relationship with Creation. God has given Creation its freedom. Religious people can get ill, just like anyone else.

Nevertheless, there is a trend for religious people to have better health than others, and to come through it better if they do get ill. It is only one factor, but the evidence for it is now quite strong. Why should religion be good for physical health? There are various possible explanations.

One is that religious people tend to have healthier lifestyles, for example to be less likely to eat and drink excessively, less likely to smoke, less likely to be overweight etc. Religion tends to be associated with a healthy lifestyle, and that makes them less likely to get ill. Religion may well also be associated with being responsive to health advice and complying with treatment regimes.

Religious people are also likely to be part of good, supportive networks of people who care about each other and look after each other. Of course, many non-religious people have good networks too, and not all religious communities are as supportive as they might be. Still, there is a trend for religious people to have better social support, and that can also contribute to better physical health.

Certain religious practices can also be good for health. Prayer and meditation tend to be good for people in various ways. For one thing they provide a daily period of quiet and calm that is likely to be good for health. Prayer also provides an opportunity to reflect on events in one's life and make sense of them. We all experience things that are puzzling and difficult, and raw events that we can make no sense

of are bad for our health and can cause suffering. At the heart of the religious life is the regular effort to make sense of what is happening to us in relation to the purposes of God. That process of finding meaning in things is likely to be good for our health.

A wide range of virtues are associated with good health too, including forgiveness, gratitude, altruism, hope and so on. Such virtues are partly a matter of inner emotional state, and partly a style of social interaction. Both could contribute to health in different ways.

Religion can also help with pain. The experience of pain depends on two rather different factors. It partly depends, of course, on the amount of tissue damage in the area concerned. However, it also depends on psychological processes that are connected with the central nervous system.

We saw that depression is made worse by getting upset about being depressed. In a similar way, pain is made worse by being upset about pain. An attitude of acceptance is likely not only to help us to bear pain, it also actually reduces the level of pain we experience. Being good at making sense of things will also probably help with pain, and religion helps with that.

Religion helps in different ways with different health problems. There are some specific effects on top of the general factors we have been looking at so far. We can illustrate this with two of the most common illnesses in modern society – cancer and heart problems.

The most important risk factors for cardiac problems are to do with aspects of lifestyle: eating, drinking, smoking, exercise etc. In as far as religion reduces the risk of cardiac problems, it is likely to be largely through such factors. Another risk factor is high blood pressure and a rather driven (type A) personality. Emotional factors are likely to be more relevant with that. If religious practices like meditation induce a certain calmness, they are likely to reduce cardiac risk by another route.

Emotional factors seem to be important with cancer too, but the pathway by which that works is not so obvious. The connections are quite complex and we are only just beginning to see how it works, but it looks as though the basic story is something like this. Cancer is a matter of cells in the body over-reproducing themselves. There are internal processes that normally stop that happening, but which sometimes break down. Those regulative processes are mediated

through our immune system. That in turn seems to be associated with our emotional state, and problems in regulating anger are linked to how the immune system functions.

So, if religion affects our emotional state, that in turn affects our immune system, which can affect how cancerous cells reproduce. Needless to say, there is much more research to be done to check out that possible route by which religion could affect cancer.

Question:

How can religion be good for your health?

How could it help with your own health problems?

Healing

When people get ill, there can be special prayers for healing. Sometimes laying on of hands, or anointing, are used along with prayer. Such spiritual healing can now be found both in many religious circles and it can also be found with healers in the 'new age' movement who use similar techniques, but outside a framework of conventional belief.

The effects of such spiritual healing are difficult to assess scientifically, but it does often seem to have helpful effects. It is not as simple and predictable as taking medication, although too many people have experienced some kind of spiritual healing for it to be easily dismissed. There really do seem to be benefits.

However, what is going on in spiritual healing, and why people benefit from it, is more complex. Some people will say that it obviously proves the power of God. Others may say that benefits are entirely psychological and that there is nothing specifically religious about it at all. My own view is that there is a complex mixture of things going on that are not easy to sort out.

Let us start with some of the more obvious and uncontroversial things. People who engage in spiritual healing usually believe in what they are doing. The fact that they believe in it helps it to work. If you have faith that you will be healed, it is more likely that you will be healed. The effects of all attempts to heal people seem to be enhanced if people believe in them. That applies to spiritual healing, too. In that obvious sense, it is 'faith' healing.

The focus of that faith may vary. It can be primarily in God, or in the healer, or in the process of healing and what the healer does.

People probably don't normally make too sharp a distinction between them; there is an element of faith in God, in the healer and in the healing process.

Sometimes people seem to 'go through the motions' of praying for healing, without much passion or urgency, and without much expectation that it will make any difference. I doubt whether that kind of spiritual healing does much good. Jesus is quite clear that people who pray should pray with passion and urgency, and tells stories to make that point, like the story of the person who needs bread in the middle of the night and bangs on his neighbour's door so long and hard that the poor man gets up and gives him what he needs (Luke 11:5–10). If we want healing prayer to work, we should take it seriously and put time and effort into it.

There are probably also some biological aspects to spiritual healing. If healing affects the body, there are bound to be physiological processes that mediate its effects. Some aspects of the healing process may specifically contribute to the biological processes through which the effects of healing are mediated. There is often physical contact in spiritual healing which may contribute to its effects. Our primate ancestors spend much time in mutual grooming which probably had a variety of helpful effects, some of which may contribute to spiritual healing. Religious dancing or other rituals may induce an unusual state of consciousness, in which people are less controlled than usual, and more open to experience. That may also contribute to healing.

There is now good reason to think that spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation are good for health, and so may contribute to the benefits of spiritual healing. They have effects on both mind and body that can be beneficial.

I mention all these different ways in which spiritual healing could be beneficial to make the point that it is not at all surprising that spiritual healing is often helpful. You don't have to believe in God to recognise that there are many ways in which spiritual healing can be helpful. There is nothing incredible about it, even for those who don't believe in God.

However, I don't want to imply that there is nothing more to spiritual healing than the factors I have mentioned. It seems likely that there is some energy for healing that flows from God. When two or more people pray together for healing with passion and urgency they connect with that energy, and it flows with new power and impact.

Personally, I have two different ways of approaching spiritual healing. I can stand back and look with cool detachment at how it might work, as I have in this section. However, when someone asks me to pray for healing for them, I instinctively set that aside and focus solely on invoking the healing power of Christ with all the passion and conviction I can muster. When I do that, the results are often impressive.

Question:

Can prayer restore people to health?

Do you sometimes seek prayer when you are ill?

Wholeness

Our instinctive response to suffering is to want to get rid of it. That is natural, and there is certainly nothing good about suffering in itself. But there is another deeper response to suffering than just wanting to get rid of it, which is, 'How can this suffering become a source of blessing to me?'

Entering a time of suffering is like going through a door, or into a tunnel. It may at first be dark and forbidding, but it can sometimes lead us into a brighter place. On the far side of the tunnel of suffering, there can be a bright and beautiful garden. It is like going from a prison into freedom. So, if we find ourselves suffering, let us ask how we can turn it to our advantage and grow through it. If we do that, we will be following in the path of Jesus, who turned the suffering of the cross to the new life of Resurrection.

There is more to healing than just getting rid of suffering. Healing literally means making us 'whole', and there is more to becoming whole people than just getting rid of suffering. It may involve learning to bear our suffering in a way that is fruitful for ourselves and others. If we learn to bear one suffering fruitfully, it will help us to bear other sufferings if need be; in that sense it is a 'transferable skill'.

Our relationship with God can help us learn how suffering can become a source of blessing. For that, we need to work in collaboration with God, not imagining that we can do it all ourselves, nor leaving it entirely to him, but working in partnership with God. Sometimes our suffering arises from things we were doing ourselves that were self-destructive and caused us suffering. Then, the wisest course of action may simply be to take ourselves in hand and correct what is causing us to suffer.

But sometimes there are dark sides of our personality that can be healed, redirected and put to good use, rather than simply eliminated. There have always been two rather different strands of religious teaching jostling together on this. One wants to identify the parts of us that are leading us astray and to get rid of them, so that what remains is pure and righteous. The other wants to heal and redeem even most the problematic parts of us. There is probably a time for both, but my sympathies are more with the latter approach. Let me explain why.

Partly it is just a practical judgement. I am doubtful whether we can actually get rid of the problematic parts of ourselves. Even if we control one manifestation of them, we can find that they have gone underground, changed their spots, and are now causing trouble in other ways. So, as a psychologist, I am doubtful about this strategy.

I also have doubts from a religious point of view about whether it is an appropriate thing even to attempt. Looked at in that way, I don't think there is anything in Creation that can't be healed and redeemed, so that it can contribute to the purposes of God. As the old marriage service said, we can hope that our 'natural instincts and affections, implanted by God, should be hallowed and directed aright'. Even what may seem to be our darkest side can be put to good use within the broader framework of God's purposes.

Making sense of things that are causing us suffering, through putting them in the bigger picture of God's purposes, can be very important in bringing healing and wholeness. For suffering to lead to wholeness we need to come to understand how it can find a place in the bigger picture of our lives.

Question:

What would the signs of 'wholeness' be for you?

Social Wholeness

So far we have been looking at this question of suffering and wholeness from the point of view of the individual, but we will now broaden out to look at the road from suffering to wholeness in families, communities and whole societies. We will look more fully at issues of relationship and society in the next section but, for now, let us see how the theme of wholeness applies to society as well as the individual.

Much suffering comes from a breakdown in human relationships, and it is very important to find a way from suffering to a restoration of wholeness in communities too, at all levels.

There are various ways in which relations break down. We can become insensitive to the consequences of our actions for other people, and become so locked in our egocentricity, our own point of view and our own desires, that we cause damage to other people.

Disagreements can become so polarised that we no longer look for consensus but exaggerate our disagreements. A disagreement over one thing can become over-generalised, so we start to imagine that we disagree over everything. We start to divide people up into those that are like us and those that are unlike us. Then we scapegoat those who are not like us, attributing everything bad to them, and make them out to be the source of all our problems.

Wholeness of society is very hard to achieve. There seems to be a natural instinct, when we are anxious and feeling under threat, to bunker down, look for security and solidarity with people like ourselves, and to see people unlike ourselves as the source of all our problems. What happened in Nazi Germany is a warning of how that process can get out of hand; and there are similar forces at work now that are quite dangerous.

The solution to this lies partly in recognising and rejoicing in diversity, rather than allowing it to become a source of disagreement and division. When we are not feeling beleaguered, we can celebrate diversity in a way that overcomes division and the suffering it brings, and restores wholeness to relationships and communities.

Jesus tells a story about a fold of sheep from which one has gone missing. The shepherd makes it a priority to find the lost sheep and bring it back into the fold, so that the fold will be full and complete. It is basically a story about wholeness, about going to great lengths to gather everything together into a unity. It encourages us to go and look for the lost parts of our personalities and bring them back into the fold, and to look for the lost members of our community or the ones that we have been scapegoating and to bring them back too.

After telling the story, Jesus says that he has other sheep that are not of this fold, and he wants to gather them in too. Some of those sheep may seem so 'other' to us that they are hardly acceptable in the fold. But yet Jesus wants to gather them all in, in his search for wholeness. In the end, such wholeness, both of personality and society, is in the best interest of all of us. Jesus' work is to gather everything in.

Question:

How can we go about building wholeness in society?

Bible Study

One of the most vivid accounts of suffering in the Bible is St Paul's description of his own sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11:23–31. Jesus also talked to his disciples, in Mark 10:32–34, about all that he was going to suffer. How would you have felt if you had suffered such things? How did Jesus and St Paul feel, and can you learn from them about how to bear your own sufferings?

There are also some moving visions of wholeness in the Bible, such as the vision of peace and harmony in Isaiah 65:17–25, or the vision of paradise in Revelation 22:1–7. It was Jesus' explicit purpose to establish this comprehensive wholeness (Luke 7:22). The healing of the flesh of individuals is a sign of the more general wholeness that God desires and promises. The healing of Naaman in the Jordan is one of the most vivid healing stories in the Bible (2 Kings 5:1–15).

Background and Sources

There are many books exploring the problems of evil and suffering. They mostly cover similar ground, but one that is particularly clear-headed is Brian Hebblethwaite (2000) *Evil, Suffering and Religion*. SPCK. See also Philip Yancey (2001) *Where is God When it Hurts?* Zondervan. For a more psychological approach see John A. Sanford (1982) *Evil: The Shadow Side of Reality*. Independent Publishers Group.

I have reviewed research on religion and health in chapter eleven of Fraser Watts (2017) *Psychology, Religion and Spirituality*. Cambridge University Press. I have also brought together various perspectives on healing in Fraser Watts (ed.) (2011) *Spiritual Healing: Scientific and Religious Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press. I will have more to say about healing of the body in a book on Embodied Spirituality, to be published shortly by SCM Press.

A classic that integrates the various different spiritual streams that converge in healing is John A. Sanford (1977) *Healing and Wholeness*. Paulist Press. On wholeness see Anna F. Lemkow (1990) *The Wholeness Principle: Dynamics of Unity Within Science, Religion and Society*. Quest Books.