

Did God Create Williams Syndrome?

by Stacia McKeever

How do we reconcile the goodness of God with what is happening in our lives?

Whether the first or the fifth, the birth of a baby is (in most cases) a joyous event. As the parents, friends, and family celebrate the new life, they marvel at the baby's beauty and fill their minds with hopes and dreams for the child's future.

We were no exception. My husband and I were thrilled when our first son was born in late 2008. Even before he entered the world, we had already begun dreaming of his future. In addition to our desire to raise a son who would bring glory to the Lord, my husband was sure he would one day be the top running back in the NFL, while I had hopes of a future valedictorian.

And then the doctor visits began. When he was 2 months old, a heart murmur sent us to a cardiologist where he was diagnosed with supravulvular aortic stenosis (SVAS). And then came a trip to the GI nurse when he was diagnosed as "failure to thrive." This was followed by trips to other specialists for various problems.

The Diagnosis

The culmination of our doctor visits was a trip to the geneticist when he was 9 months old. The geneticist diagnosed our son with a rare genetic disorder called Williams syndrome. Williams syndrome (WS) is caused by a spontaneous deletion of about 25 genes on the seventh chromosome and can lead to physical and cognitive disabilities.

With this diagnosis, our lives took a sudden detour from the path we thought we were traveling. In the few seconds it took for the geneticist to say, "Yes, he has Williams syndrome," we went from being parents of a potential NFL running back to being parents of a child with special needs—a child with potentially life-threatening physical problems, developmental delays, and learning disabilities.

The diagnosis left us reeling, but not doubting. We know who God is and why life doesn't always turn out the way we expect it to.

As you can imagine, we began researching all things pertaining to WS. And thanks to the blessings of social networking, we've been able to make "friends" with other WS parents and learn from those who have walked where we are currently walking. In trying to understand how things like genetic disorders fit into a Christian worldview, one of those parents, a Christian herself, posed this question, "Did God create Williams syndrome?"

It's a valid question. As Christians who embrace a life-affirming worldview, we often discuss how beautifully designed the human body is—a masterpiece of God's creation. We know that we are "fearfully and wonderfully" made. So how does a child with a genetic disorder (or any

"problem") fit into this worldview? How do we reconcile the goodness of God with what is happening in our lives?

This is how I answered—both for my friend and for us.

God's Original Design

This question reflects the age-old question: Is God the author of pain and suffering?

He gave the first man (and a short while later, the first woman) a "very good" combination of DNA.

From a careful study of Genesis, we know that God's original creation was "very good"—a reflection of his good nature—full of life and joy (Genesis 1:31). I believe he designed the universe so that everything would work together for his glory (see, for example, Psalm 19:1).

As he created Adam in his image from the dust of the ground, he gave the first man (and a short while later, the first woman) a "very good" combination of DNA. He encouraged them to be fruitful and multiply. And had things stayed the way they were in the beginning, that "very good" genetic combination would have continued combining in "very good" ways as Adam and Eve brought forth children.

Of course, we know that things did not stay the way they were in the beginning. After Adam disobeyed God's command concerning that one particular fruit, God placed a curse on his beloved creation—the just punishment for the commitment of high treason against the Creator of the universe. Particular aspects of the Curse are spelled out in Genesis 3. The culmination of the Curse is separation from God forever through death. As accompaniments to death, we have pain, suffering, disease, and genetic disorders. (Of course, we're not without hope!)

Williams syndrome (along with all the various other genetic disorders) isn't God's fault. Genetic mutations (including spontaneous deletions on part of the seventh chromosome) are a now-natural result of no longer living in a "very good" world. So, did God create Williams syndrome in this sense? No—we, sinners in the hands of a holy God, are the responsible parties.

However, there's something else that needs to be addressed, as well.

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

The Bible clearly teaches that God is the author of life—He forms each one of us and knits us together in utero (Psalm 139:13–16). The Bible also clearly teaches he is sovereign over his creation—He is the one who is in control—not a laissez-faire deity that wound up his creation and now lets it go as it pleases. (See, for example, Deuteronomy 3:24; 1 Chronicles 29:11–12; Jeremiah 1:5; Daniel 4:34–35; Nehemiah 9:6.)

Just as God is in control of the intricate workings of the universe, he is also in control of the intricate workings of conception. As such, I can't escape the thought that we are who we are—genetic mutations and all—as the result of God's handiwork. In this more individualized sense, God gave our son (and each one of us) a specific genetic combination, which in our son's case, included a deletion of part of one of his chromosomes.¹

Moses learned this lesson when he pointed out to the Creator that he was “slow of speech and slow of tongue.” The Lord said to him, “Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord?” (Exodus 4:11, NIV).

Does this make God an ogre or less than completely good? Not at all. Because his very nature is good (Psalm 25:8, 34:8, 145:9; Matthew 19:17). Whatever he does is good.

And I believe that he creates everyone for a reason: to bring glory to himself (Isaiah 43:7; Romans 11:36). In answering his disciples' question about the reason a certain man was born blind, Jesus said: “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, NIV). And Paul tells us that God “works all things after the counsel of his will” (Ephesians 1:11, NIV).

To relate this specifically to our son and his genetic disorder diagnosis, I believe that he (and each of us) is part of God's plan to bring himself glory in some way—genetic mutations and all.²

The Naturalistic Alternative

There are those who scoff at the Creator and his goodness on the basis of genetic disorders. To these people, I kindly suggest that they first examine their own atheistic molecules-to-man-evolution worldview and its implications.

For within their worldview, genetic disorders are the “trial and error” of evolutionary processes, leading either to the formation of a new species or resulting in a dead end. People with chromosomal abnormalities are simply a “bump” in the evolutionary road to bettering the species. Why, then, would these scoffers be concerned about those with genetic disorders if they're simply displays of “trial and error”? Why, in their atheistic worldview, bother to give those with such problems a good quality of life or rail

against a Creator (whose existence they deny) for making them thus? To put it simply, they have no logical basis on which to argue that genetic disorders are “bad.”

Furthermore, they have no logical basis on which to make moral judgments about a Creator (whose existence they deny). Because, according to their worldview, we are simply the result of natural processes over billions of years, who is to say that the way one set of chemicals combined is any better (or worse) than the way another set of chemicals combined? They have no ultimate standard by which to say that one combination is “good” while another genetic combination is “bad,” and therefore, they are unable to consistently hold the Creator accountable for doing something that they deem to be “wrong.”

I find their “concern” for people such as my son inconsistent with their worldview.³

While we may not have the running back and valedictorian we had originally planned on (although we're giving him every advantage), we have the child God fearfully and wonderfully made and entrusted to our care for his glory—the one whom we wouldn't trade for anything.

And we know that “the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations” (Psalm 100:3–5, NIV).

Footnotes

1. Let me add this caveat. I understand that our actions have consequences and, in some cases, the actions of parents before the conception/birth of their child can have dire consequences on the baby. However, even in these cases, God is still the ultimate author of that life.
2. In fact, who of us can say we have a perfect combination of DNA? We're all suffering from an accumulated 6,000 years of the Curse, yet we were each knit together by the loving hand of the Lord.
3. It has been demonstrated elsewhere that the Bible provides the only logical basis for morality and rationality. See, for example, “Morality and the Irrationality of an Evolutionary Worldview.”