

I Was A Patient In A Hospital: Some Thoughts On Dealing With Physical Infirmities

By David E. Moss

Many of you reading this have had similar experiences to mine. Some were much more severe, some less. My story is not unique, but I hope in telling it that all our stories will be told; and in the telling, I hope that words of comfort and encouragement may be conveyed to those who presently suffer infirmity and to those who face it in the future.

Infirmity

I had been hospitalized three times in my life, all for kidney stones. So, when pain flared up on the left side of my back, I knew exactly what was happening. It was Friday February 23 and I was supposed to speak at a Sweetheart banquet that evening. Tylenol helped a little, but the pain was distracting even after several doses. Somehow, I managed to get through the banquet and return to my bed where I agonized all night.

On Saturday, the pain diminished somewhat and on Sunday God graciously relieved me from all pain. I began to think that it was just going to pass away, but Monday proved otherwise. The pain returned in earnest and would not subside for days. Our Doctor approved some strong pain medication I could take at home, where I hoped I could pass the torturing stone.

By Thursday, nothing had changed and I was running low on medication; so we called the Doctor to see what he would recommend. After a visit to his office, he suggested I go to the hospital where they could do something more direct about my condition. At 4:00 that afternoon I was admitted into the York hospital, hooked up to an IV and relieved of some of the pain by hypodermic needles.

Friday, tests were conducted to determine the location of the stone. It was not until mid afternoon that these were complete. They showed a blockage but it was unclear if this was the location of the stone. I spent the weekend hoping that it would pass on its own, but it did not. Monday, more x-rays were taken and I was put on the schedule for the operating room the next day.

On Tuesday afternoon, my doctor performed a procedure to retrieve the stone. When he reached the place of the blockage, there was no stone. It was apparently still lodged in the kidney. He continued probing all the way into the kidney itself, working inside of me for an hour and forty minutes, but could not reach the stone. When I awoke in the recovery room I was adorned with a catheter and was in excruciating pain.

For three and a half days I bled and suffered several kinds of pain in addition to the kidney pain which continued off and on. By Saturday all of this began to clear up and the catheter was removed. It turned out to be a good day and I hoped to go home on Sunday.

When I awoke early Sunday Morning, I still felt very good. But between 8:00 and 9:00, a fever came over me and I became delirious. The hospital staff began to scamper about, restarting my IV, taking tests and rushing me down for an ultrasound. I had developed a urinary tract infection and was very, very sick. Instead of going home, I lost the whole day, sleeping in the hospital, basically unaware of anything.

Monday I was better, but still battled a low grade fever. The Doctor told me I had to be fever free for several days before I could go home. On Thursday morning at 10:00 a.m., I was released and arrived home, fourteen days from the time I entered and twenty days since the pain had begun, with a stone still embedded inside my kidney.

For twelve days I enjoyed the comforts of home, except that on the tenth day I began to experience fever and chills. Over the next two days this condition worsened, indicating that infection had returned to my urinary tract. The stone had finally moved out of the kidney but now had created a blockage.

Tuesday March 26 I was back in the hospital. A tube was inserted through my back into my kidney in order to bypass the urinary tract and relieve the infection. It worked.

Three days later, I was in the operating room again. This time the doctor located the stone but it was too large to pull out. So, he used an electronic device and blasted the stone into a thousand tiny fragments. Finally, I could begin the upward journey of healing and recovery.

I went home from the hospital 38 days after I had felt the first pain. There were still follow-up visits, tubes to be removed, strength to be recovered and healing to occur. But finally it was over and I could reflect upon the value of the experience.

Comfort

Literally thousands of times, I have stood beside hospital beds as a Pastor and offered words I hoped would soothe the discomfort of the sick. Now I lay for endless hours, suffering diverse kinds of pain, sometimes numbed with medication, but always with time to think.

There are two favorite thoughts that have thrilled my heart during many days of good health. I believed them with fervor, even though I had not had opportunity to apply them in really serious situations. Now, they became the very things which sustained me in times of suffering.

1. God knows what is best for me.

Would a human being ever choose to suffer? Not one in his right mind. The Bible says, "No man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it... (Ephesians 5:29). It is normal for a person to encourage the health of his own body and to seek a prosperous physical experience.

Why, then, would God allow suffering to occur, especially to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose? Some believe God repudiates physical infirmity and wants every one to be healed of all his diseases and deformities. Yet life demonstrates otherwise. He allows suffering, sometimes to great extremes and sometimes to those who live in closest fellowship with Him.

Faith involves believing that God is always right. Applying this to our times of suffering is crucial. God is indeed capable of preventing or stopping every infirmity we experience. If he does not, it is because He has chosen not to stop it. And, if God chooses not to stop our suffering, He has good reasons which we should accept rather than question.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the most high God, had an exemplary attitude considering matters like this. They said, "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. ***But if not***, be it known unto thee O King, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou has set up" (Daniel 3:17-18). In other words, God is able to stop whatever infirmity that strikes a human being. I believe that with all my heart and hope in His deliverance. But if God chooses not to deliver me, it will have no effect upon my faith. If God wants me to suffer, He knows better than I do what is best for me.

There is a little game I have played for many years. I look for faces in places like wall paper patterns or grains in wood surfaces. It is amazing what a little imagination can do in amusing oneself. The door to my hospital room was a wooden door and when swung open was directly in front of me. So I played my game and found two faces. One was sinister looking, like a villain who lurked in the shadows of evil. The other was a face of strength, with lines of firmness, portraying the courage of a protector standing guard. Just below this second face was a plaque which read in part, "In memory of I. B. Abel". This was not a vision. God was not speaking to me outside of His word. But sometimes God does use simple things in life to remind us of truth we have previously learned from Scripture. The two faces and the plaque reminded me of God's ability and readiness to take care of me in the midst of suffering. Regardless of what sinister thing may threaten my life, He has posted His angels on guard as ministering spirits to the saints (Hebrews 1:14). Beyond that, He Himself is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us (Ephesians 3:20). It was His way of saying, Remember, I am able. The reminder brought tears to my eyes.

So I thanked God that He knew best, and waited upon Him for whatever He would do, or for whatever He would choose not to do.

2. God is consciously thinking about my trouble.

One day, a verse of Scripture jumped off the page and struck me in my heart. It was Psalm 31:7, "I will be glad and rejoice in thy mercy: for thou has considered my trouble; thou hast known my soul in adversities."

James tells us to consider it a joyful experience when we are confronted with diverse temptations. But, we may wonder how this is possible, because trouble and joy just do not seem compatible. Psalm 31:7 explains it. It is possible to rejoice in the midst of trouble when we realize that God is actually thinking about our specific trouble and that He is personally interacting with our soul while we are suffering.

What more could one ask for, than to have the God who sits upon the throne of Sovereignty personally considering the specific circumstances of our little lives. Just knowing that He is thinking about us is a tremendous encouragement to our heart (for who are we to deserve the attention of the Almighty?). But there is more. Not only does He think about our trouble, God also personally interacts with our inner man, sustaining hope, while our outer man suffers adversity. Of all the things He has to do, He takes the time to breathe into our soul reminders of the wonderful truths we have learned from His Word. And with those whispers of His Spirit, the physical pain is reduced by the peace that swells in our heart.

Knowing that God was personally involved in the whole affair, I was able to lie in the hospital bed with full assurance that I was in the palm of God's hand.

Care

There was another dimension of this hospital experience that made a profound impression upon my life. It was something that I missed in my previous experiences with hospitals. It involved the nurses.

The nurses in the York Hospital, floor six main, could not possibly have given me and my roommates better care. I saw in those nurses what compassion and sacrifice and ministry are really all about. There were some very messy things they had to clean up, some frustrating circumstances they had to deal with, some crises they had to react to, and they did it all with patience, with cheerfulness and without complaint. They were remarkable in the way they cared for each of their patients.

This spoke to me of the way Christians ought to care for one another within the body of Christ. Every time a need arose, those nurses were right there tending to it. Sometimes they had to be firm, sometimes gentle. Sometimes they had to act quickly, and sometimes show great patience. Sometimes they had to clean up really dirty stuff, and sometimes they had to work really long hours. But they did it all with smiles on their faces and with genuine concern in their hearts. It was obvious they were employed as nurses because they really cared about people and were willing to do whatever was necessary to provide all of the care each one needed.

It made me think of the passage in I Corinthians 12 where the feeble members of the body are given honour and where all the members of the body should have the same "care" for every other member of the body. In fact, for the feeble ones, more honour and more care is in order, because they need the assistance of the strong ones.

Wouldn't it be marvelous if a group of people who belong to a local church could serve each other as these nurses did their patients in the hospital? Imagine believers who are ready at any moment to meet a need as soon as they become aware of it; who are ready to get their hands dirty cleaning up every mess they find; who are quick in a crisis, calm in the midst of frustration, gentle with the suffering, firm with the irresponsible. But always there, always serving, always giving that extra effort, meeting the need, warning the unruly, comforting the feeble-minded, supporting the weak (I Thessalonians 5:14).

There was, in addition, the care of the saints, who I knew were standing with me in this time of need. The sense of many prayers being offered on my behalf was very real. Card upon card brought thoughts of encouragement, and visits from close associates and family sustained my hope.

I know I am blessed as a Pastor, to have so many care about what happens to me. But it makes me aware that less visible people need the same care when they experience similar infirmities.

Conclusion

Suffering is not fun but it does not have to be a disaster. Divine comfort and human care make it possible to endure.

If you are presently experiencing physical infirmity, I understand. I know what it is like to have pain, to writhe in agony, to crave sleep for a temporary respite, to wish it would just all go away when it refuses to do so. But I also understand what it means to be soothed by those who truly care. There is great relief when God ministers to the inner man and human beings care for the body. There is great relief when you know so many are praying for you and so many are hoping with you for deliverance from your infirmity. There is great relief in looking beyond the immediate circumstances and realizing there is something much greater at stake than your own comfort.

Physical infirmity is an opportunity to demonstrate the reality of one's faith. Do I really believe God knows best? Am I willing to wait for Him to bring resolution? Can I show observers what God is like by how I react to prolonged suffering? Will I leap through the open doors to testify of God's mercy through Christ?

Say yes. Welcome physical infirmity into your life when it comes. Rejoice in the day of trouble. Glory in your infirmities. Be grateful for the opportunities they provide to give life to your faith by the works of faithfulness. I know it can be done. I've been there.

The One who made us knows how to mend us.

He is the Great Physician - the only One who can heal body, soul, and spirit.
His appointment calendar is never too full...
His schedule is never too busy...
His diagnosis is accurate...
His treatment is gentle...
His results are wonderful!
You couldn't be in better hands!
(author unknown)