

**Helping People with Chronic Illness**  
**2 Corinthians 4:7-18**  
*Pastor Tim Nixon*

A few years ago, while we were living in Waynesville, Jayne came home to find the back patio door kicked in. The house had been ransacked. The sugar and flour containers overturned in the kitchen. Our brand-new television ripped out of the wall and gone. The burglar was discriminating. He only took the best tools and the most current electronics and left all the rest for us to simply cleanup.

It was the first time in our lives when we actually thought about a home security system.

The diagnosis of chronic illness is much like having your home broken into. When the doctor says cancer; when the doctor says Alzheimer's; when the doctor says COPD or Crohn's disease; when the doctor says cystic fibrosis; we feel violated. Sometimes we feel betrayed, even like an enemy has gotten inside our bodies.

Deborah Howard writes, "It doesn't matter what has transpired before we or our loved ones hear these words, or what happens after. In that first frozen moment, we tend to go completely numb. The impact is so great it paralyzes us emotionally, perhaps for months. Our first response to disaster is disbelief: *No that just can't be. Surely the tests are wrong. Maybe we need to see another doctor! This can't be happening to us...* Sometimes it's harder to walk this road with someone you love than it is to walk it yourself."<sup>1</sup>

How can we walk side-by-side one another through chronic illness? So many times, we don't know what to do. Most of the time we don't know what to say. So how can we help? Hopefully, as we look at the Scriptures this evening, it will give you hope and help in this area.

As we work through this subject this evening, this may sound like more of a list of bulleted items than a sermon. That's because there is so much information, and so much for us to understand, that I believe it will be easier for us to walk through it in this way. Because of this list like information, please reference this message on the Chapel website. There will not be any slides this evening.

When the diagnosis for a chronic illness is revealed, our minds certainly spin with all kinds of questions and uncertainties. But in the midst of this turmoil there is a place to turn. There is someone to whom we can go for help.

*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea... (Psalm 46:1-2)*

David Powlison writes, "These are not just words in a book. When you take them to heart, you find them true. Those who actually ask, do receive. Those who seek, do find. Those who knock find the door wide open. As you learn how Christ takes the fear away, you are receiving a wonderful gift that you will treasure for the rest of your life. Christians who learn to suffer well

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Howard, *Someone I love Has Cancer*, Lifeline Mini Book. Page 12.

often say something along these lines: *I would never choose to go through what I had to go through, but I would not give up what I learned in the process. God met me. My faith then became real.*<sup>2</sup>

As you come alongside your brother or sister in Christ, praying with them and bringing Scripture to bear in their life, your goal is not to become a medical expert. With the Internet so easily at hand, it is easy for us to become a “medical professional” as we help one another. But this is not your skill or place. Your skill is how to use God’s Word to encourage, confront, and support the one suffering chronic illness.

So, what is the biblical view of illness? Does the Bible actually talk about reasons for sickness?

Let’s look at a short list together.

- Curse of sin on all mankind – Ezek 18:4, Rom 6:23 (this affects both the believer and the unbeliever)
- God may use illness as a judgement/punishment for sin – Ex 15:26; 2 Sam 12:14, 15; 1 Cor 11:28-30
- God may us illness to produce repentance – Num 21:5-7; 1Cor 5:5
- Go may use illness to prevent sin – 2 Cor 12:7
- God may use illness as a result of sin – James 5:15, 16
  - Natural consequences of sin
  - Psychosomatic
- What are psychosomatic problems?

A simple definition of these problems is that stress alters the body’s susceptibility to diseases because the mind and body are intricately linked. Examples might be when we are struggling with problems in marriage, relationships, or work - the body gradually loses its ability to fight disease.

What goes on in our hearts can have physical consequences.

The biblical view is distinctive in a couple ways:

1. What we call stress is not always an expression of the heart. We live in a fallen world and living under the curse is simply difficult. This can lead to what we call stress – but it does not necessarily come from the heart.
2. If stress-related physical problems are from the inner person, the biblical view indicates that this stress is from sinful choices or unwise living.

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<sup>2</sup> David Powlison, *When Cancer Interrupts*, New Growth Press. Page 4.

Sin, guilt, and unwise living can lead to sickness; righteousness and the peace and joy of biblical living can lead to health.

So – in the area of psychosomatic problems, how can you know whether or not the problem is caused by sin? You can't.

The psychosomatic or spiritual-somatic connection is not an unbending rule.

Our sins do not always lead to illness and our righteousness does not always lead to health.

- God uses chronic illness to glorify himself
  - In Job 2:3-10 God used illness to demonstrate character
  - In John 9:1-4 illness was used to bring glory to God

**Our responses to life may produce sickness** This is true of 30% - 50% of patients seen in the average primary care physician's office.

**Our responses may aggravate diseases already present.** You see, the problem is not our problems, it is our response to those problems.

**What should be our response to illness?** We should evaluate from the above reasons.

How can this illness be used to glorify God?

1. We need to recognize and understand John 9:3, "Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."
2. We need to set aside our personal goals (comfort, free of pain, free of disease, free of suffering) and understand what Jesus did, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work."
3. You must be responsible no matter how you feel.

**How can we come alongside and help?**

Start by praying for them. And then sit down and ask questions. The more you know about the person and the circumstances within and around their chronic illness, the more you will be able to help. Consider asking questions that reveal:

- The effect of the condition on your friend's thinking.
- The effect of the condition on your friend's lifestyle.
- The response of relatives and friends of your friend
- The effect of any medication your friend is taking.
- Potential complications from the use of the medication
- Your friend's attitude about the condition?

**How can your response to their illness help?**

- Accept the diagnosis and symptoms as a given
- Do not try to prove or disprove the diagnosis
- Do not recommend alternate possible diagnoses or methods of diagnosis. **YOU ARE NOT A DOCTOR!**
- Encourage your friend to follow basic principles of good health

- If there is no cure or relief do not attempt to find or recommend an alternative
- Your goal is to turn the attention from the pain and discomfort of the illness to what God is doing through it

### **How can you help your friend think biblically about their condition?**

We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5)

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Philippians 4:8)

- God will not exceed your ability to handle the difficulties of the illness - 1 Cor. 10:13; Phil. 4:13
- The illness is under the control of a sovereign God - Pr. 21: 1; Job 1:21; 1 Chr. 29:12
- God's grace is available and sufficient - 2 Cor. 12:9, 10; 9:8
- God intends for you to have victory in the midst of the agony of the illness - 1 Cor. 15:57; Rom. 8:35-37
- Job did and so can you - Job 1:1 to 2:10
- God's has a purpose for the illness
  - To bring glory and honor to His name - Phil. 1:20; Jn. 11:4; Mt. 5:16; 1 Cor. 6:20
  - To make you more like Christ - Rom. 8:28, 29
  - To increase your ministry - Job 2:10; Luke 23:39-43; Jn. 19:25-27, 30; Phil. 1:12-18
  - God's purpose is very valuable - Mt. 13:44

Ask yourself, “what am I living for?” Are you living for what will last forever? Yes, it’s true, that a chronic illness can take from you many things that you are accustomed to in life.

- It can take from you the opportunity to hike the mountains.
- It can take from you the opportunity to eat your favorite foods.
- It can take from you the ability to sleep well at night.
- It can take from you the ability to even sit in a chair and relax without pain.
- It can take your energy.
- The expenses of it might require you to sell possessions.
- You may not be able to work at your job any longer.

These are all the realities of chronic illness.

But these are God's good gifts to you. If you are living for the gifts, not the giver of gifts, you will find that when illness takes these a way that what you have lived for will perish because of the illness.

I believe it was John Newton who said that all the perishable things of life into which we put our hope are "schemes of earthly joy." At some point, all of us will experience the loss of these earthly joys.

Again, David Powlison writes, "It is God's mercy to let us see, before we die, that all of our earthly joys are perishable. Remembering this will help you face the shadows of death fruitfully. As you practice dying to your "schemes of earthly joy," you are actually practicing the art of living. Learning the art of suffering disease well in a fallen world means you are also learning the art of living well. When you experience hardship and grapple with the death of your dreams, hopes, and desires, you will find out that only love for God and others is imperishable."<sup>3</sup>

- If the illness is terminal anticipate the glories of heaven - Rev. 21:3, 4; 22:1-5
  - Even with a terminal illness He is not stopping your ministry but is simply changing the direction
  - In Phil. 1:23-25 Paul struggled with his desire to go to home to heaven or to stay here and minister
  - One of the very important ministries to dying people is to keep them informed of what will happen as they die
  - Other than sudden death or the rapture every person will die as a result of some illness
  - Keep in mind the ultimate end of this illness is to be the vehicle that God will use to bring you to Himself in heaven

## Conclusion

Chronic illness is tough. We and our friends should not live in denial. We don't have to live as though we can beat this by willpower or even medical intervention.

God is up to something far more significant. Peter says to people who face serious threats that they are "grieved by various trials" (1 Peter 1:6). Peter recognized the tough road they had to walk.

Peter never sugarcoated it. We never hear from Peter, "you can do it" or "just keep a stiff upper lip". Peter's advice is never to just keep busy so you don't have to think about it.

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<sup>3</sup> David Powlison, *Facing Death with Hope*, New Growth Press, page 16.

In chapter 4 of first Peter he describes these trials as “fiery.” And so, we know that it hurts, it burns, it makes us nauseous, it exhausts us, it brings pain physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It tests us. And that is where Jesus meets you.

I will conclude tonight with this quote:

Remember that God himself is with you. You may go to the one who loves you. You may bring your struggles and tell him all about them. Remember who he is. He cares. He is involved. He is a sure and certain presence. He will walk with you through pain. He will strengthen you and give you courage. He will deliver you from your fears. He is your refuge, a safe place amid danger. He will clarify your thinking. He will anchor your hopes and what can never be lost. He is merciful to you, and he will make you merciful. He will settle you in your true identity. He will advise you about things far more important than your chronic illness. Cry out your troubles to the God who hears and he promises to never leave you or forsake you.

Chronic illness is always a test of faith. And chronic illness always creates an opportunity for faith to grow. Faith is nourished on who God says he is. He is what he says. Faith feeds on who God promises to be. He says what he does, and does what he says. Remember. Take him at his word.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> David Powlison, *When Cancer Interrupts*, New Growth Press. Page 10.