

## *Facing Serious Illness • 2 Kings 20:1-3*

No one wants to suffer. And no one wants to die. Jesus didn't. The night before his death he knew what was coming and he pleaded with God the Father for relief. He referred to his own suffering and death as his "cup" and he prayed in Matthew 26:39, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me." Even though we don't want suffering or sickness or death we all get them. While the circumstances may vary and there are infinite degrees of intensity we all suffer and we all die.

You've heard all the explanations. There have been millions of books, sermons and conversations to tell us why bad things happen to good people, why there is pain and suffering and what happens when we die. These are very important lessons to learn but today our focus is not on who or why we suffer but on how. What is a Christian to do when diagnosed with cancer, struggling with depression, dealing with chronic pain or otherwise suffering from maladies we never would choose and cannot make go away? How do we act like Christians when facing serious illness? Honestly, there are no easy answers to these questions, but let's attempt to build a list of Christian behaviors for us to exhibit in the midst of sickness and suffering.

As Christians we start with God. The minute we hurt; the day the diagnosis comes; when we are scared and filled with uncertainty—we go to God. That's what Christians do. We go to God and we pour out our hearts to him.

Hezekiah, king of Israel, became desperately ill when he was 39 years old. He was too young to be so sick and certainly too young to die so soon. Isaiah went to the king and spoke the prognosis that no doctor wants to give and no patient wants to hear in 2 Kings 20:1:

*In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet*

*Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, "This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover."*

What Hezekiah did next is what all godly people should do when they are told they are going to die. He poured out his heart to God. We read about it in 2 Kings 20:2-3:

*Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, "Remember, Oh Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.*

Hezekiah wanted to be alone. He couldn't look Isaiah in the eye. This was between God and him. Scared and heart-broken he sobbed and tried to bargain with God. He reminded God that he had been a good man and that he had always done well. He was pleading for his life.

I think I would do what Hezekiah did. I would want to be alone. I think I would chase everybody out of the room and talk to God and pour out my heart to him. I would cry, too. And I would probably be far more filled with

emotion than rational thinking. It would be all about my heart and relatively little about my head.

Do I believe God can heal even after a prognosis of death? Yes. I believe that he can and that he does. Do I believe that God owes me? I do not. I know that Christians get sick and that Christians die just like everyone else. But, I still would ask.

As Christians we go to God first. As Christians we trust God the most. As Christians we tell God what is on our heart. It is how a Christian acts when facing serious illness.

Amazingly, God immediately granted Hezekiah a fifteen year extension to life. The story continues in 2 Kings 20:4-6:

*Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the Lord came to him: "Go back*

***When days are good we should live them for God and when days are painful we should live them for God. As Christians we consider every day as God's gift to be lived for God's glory, to enhance his reputation.***

*and tell Hezekiah, the leader of my people, 'This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: 'I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. On the third day from now you will go up to the temple of the Lord. I will add fifteen years to your life.' "*

God gave Hezekiah some very good news but it does not always happen this way and it is seldom this quick. Also, he was to remain seriously ill for three more days before he got better. So, even after he had received this promise from God there seemed to be little indication that God was going to come through and extend his life by fifteen years. He was 39 years old and that meant he had a guaranteed promise that life would extend to somewhere around his 54<sup>th</sup> birthday. Since he thought he was dying that must have seemed like a terribly long time.

How old are you? Add fifteen years to that. Would you consider that to be long enough?

For Hezekiah it wasn't a direct healing. In fact, God specifically instructed Hezekiah to get the best medical treatment available. The story continues in 2 Kings 20:7: *"Then Isaiah said, 'Prepare a poultice of figs.' They did so and applied it to the boil, and he recovered."*

We in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may be wondering what possible good it would do to put a paste made up of figs on his skin. This was folk medicine at its very best. But wait a minute. That is not really the point. The point is that God told him to go to the doctor. God had already decided to supernaturally intervene but he often utilizes the best human resources as well.

As Christians, when facing serious illness, we turn to God and we take our medicine. It's not either or. It is prayer and the poultice, prayer and penicillin. It's God first and the doctor, too. We pour out our hearts to God and we get the medical help that God provides.

Unlike Hezekiah, when we face serious illness and suffering we usually don't know how long we have to live. Hezekiah was the rarest of exceptions. I've often thought it's a very good thing that I don't know the day I'm going to die. I think it would cast a shadow over the rest of life that would be far more negative than it would be positive. But what we do know is that each day we live is a

gift from God and we should live each of those days for God.

Truthfully, we prefer our lives to be pain and problem free. For most of us we have more good days than 99% of the rest of the human race throughout human history. We have a lot of good days. When days are good we should live them for God and when days are painful we should live them for God. As Christians we consider every day as God's gift to be lived for God's glory, to enhance his reputation. St. Paul wrote in Philippians 1:27, *"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."* In other words, our purpose in life is to make God look good no matter what happens. And, some of what happens is likely to be hard. Philippians 1:29 says, *"For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him."* This is the core of Christianity—that we are to live for Jesus. We are to conduct our lives in ways that honor Jesus. We are to live out our Christian faith in the very best of days and the worst of days, in pleasure and in pain, in safety and danger, in grief and in joy.

I believe what I just told you. But I have to tell you that my words scare me. I'm afraid that what I am saying will echo through my mind when I'm paralyzed by a car crash. I'm afraid someone will repeat what is written here when I'm diagnosed with cancer. I'm afraid I'll reread my own notes when I'm in the pits of depression. I'm afraid I can't do what I'm teaching. I'm afraid that in the midst of paralysis or cancer or depression or some other hated and unanticipated trauma of life that I won't be able to live for Jesus Christ.

But that also comes back to the core of Christianity and that is that we live by faith. We are convinced that our God is a God of grace. He will be there with us and for us. He will give us strength, courage, help and hope when the suffering comes. He will not abandon us. He has no intention of letting us go through any of this alone. God may not give any of us the same answer he gave to Hezekiah but he will be there for us just as he was there for Hezekiah.

There is one more point for when Christians suffer with serious illness. It is so strange that we don't tend to talk much about it with unbelievers because only a disciple of Jesus Christ can really

comprehend and understand it. It is that when we suffer we have the opportunity to grow as Christians and especially to grow close to Jesus. That is because Jesus suffered and died for us. When we suffer we make a spiritual (and even supernatural) connection to Jesus Christ that cannot be made in health and ease. Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:3-7:

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead . . . . In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

All of that is to say that when we suffer as Christians we know that, as horrible as it is, it is only temporary; we have eternity ahead. When we suffer our faith is tested and confirmed. When we suffer we are closer to Jesus than we ever would be if life had been problem free. When we suffer we grow as Christians. For some the growth is in trusting God to provide daily grace for suffering as God provided daily manna like bread in Exodus 16 when the people of Israel were stranded in the wilderness.

Jeffrey Boyd is a medical doctor from Waterbury, Connecticut, whose wife did not receive healing the way Hezekiah did. He writes:

My first wife, Pat, had diabetes, two heart attacks, bypass surgery, two strokes, went on dialysis, went blind,

and had both legs amputated above the knee. She and I went every week to a healing service at our church. The clergy would lay hands on us and pray, while Pat and I cried uncontrollably. She was never healed. There was no evidence that healing prayer had any positive effect in terms of miraculous cures. But every week this intimate prayer gave us enough spiritual strength to endure another week. Thus my own experience was that healing prayer was like manna for Pat and me. Every Sunday we were given enough to get us through. We were not given more nor less manna than we needed to survive. It was exactly like Exodus 16, and like the Lord's Prayer, "Give us today our daily bread."

In other words, Pat and I experienced healing prayer to have a curative power not in terms of a change of medical outcome, but in terms of keeping us in touch with our Lord, who spiritually sustained us.

If none of this sounds easy it's because it is not easy. Serious illness and suffering are never easy. Yet, in suffering we have the opportunity to act like Christians. We can tell God what is on

our hearts. We can get the medical help that God provides. We can live the life that God grants to us. And we can grow through suffering.

Before we leave this topic of suffering and serious illness let's make one more list. It is not a list for those who are sick. It's a list for those who are healthy. It's some advice on how a Christian acts toward those who are seriously ill and suffering.

Number one is to see the person and not the sickness. Don't define anyone by a disease or disability. Whether someone is suffering from a mental illness or a physical injury, always treat that sufferer with respect as a person and not as a malady.

Number two is to realize that looking okay on the outside doesn't mean a person is okay on the inside. Be sensitive to the soul as well as the face

***God is a God of grace. He will be there with us and for us. He will give us strength, courage, help and hope when the suffering comes. He will not abandon us.***

because sometimes the way we look on the outside is not the way we feel on the inside.

Number three, we need to remember that chronic pain varies. Just because someone is having a good day doesn't mean that their pain is not severe.

Number four is to understand that depression is a frequent side effect. Our bodies, minds and souls are wired together and the best of people become depressed.

Number five is to beware of playing doctor. Resist the temptation to diagnose, to talk about a better doctor or to offer some alternative medicine.

Number six is to beware of playing God. Give a verse from the Bible but don't speak for God as if you know some secret or supernatural perspective.

Number seven is to offer emotional support. Just be there. Recognize that as the friend or the family of those who are suffering we don't have to cure them. That's not our job. It is not our responsibility to fix them. We just need to be there. We just need to be a friend.

Number eight and last on the list is to say that you will pray and then do it. Often when we are seriously ill we are not very good at praying for ourselves and we need someone else who will pray for us. We need others to pray for us through the pain and the discouragement. We need someone who will pray for the care givers and we need others who will pray with zeal and persistence. Don't just say you will pray; do it!

On November 5, 1994, former President Ronald Reagan wrote a letter to the American people. Here are some lines from that letter:

"I've recently been told that I am one of the millions of Americans who will be afflicted with Alzheimer's disease, so now we feel it is important to share it with you. At the moment I feel just fine. I intend to live the remainder of the years God gives me on earth doing the things I've always done.

Unfortunately, as Alzheimer's disease progresses, the family often bears a heavy burden. I now begin the journey that will lead me into the sunset of my life.

May God always bless you.

Sincerely,

Ronald Reagan

When facing serious illness, when suffering great pain, when beginning our own journey into the sunset of life, may we trust God and may we, with the help of God's Holy Spirit, act distinctively like Christians in the midst of the difficulty.

And, may God bless us all!

*Faith Matters*® is the Broadcast Ministry of  
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
952-944-6300  
[www.faithmatters.fm](http://www.faithmatters.fm)