

When Death Draws Near

I face terminal illness every day. Yet I've learned that this is a special time to confront my fears, challenge my doubts and trust my heavenly Father.

For many years I have enjoyed singing C.A. Tindley's old gospel song "We'll Understand It Better By and By." In fact, I have gotten quite emotional anticipating the impending revelation of understanding that is to come. But the cancer I am afflicted with is not in my "by and by"; it is in my nasty here and now. And I don't understand it one bit!

You probably have situations in your life like that, too. So I want to share with you a spiritual principle that will help you in those times when you cannot understand what is happening to you. This is it: There will be times when you cannot find an answer for the tyrannical question "Why?"

In those times, don't become distressed. Simply submit your situation—and your unanswered questions—to worship. That is what I've had to do with the questions that have confronted me throughout my season of illness.

Why hasn't God healed me? "Why?" is one of the first questions we ask when negative circumstances slam into our daily lives. As a Christian leader, I believe beyond any shadow of a doubt that God heals. Yet I am trapped in a terminal illness from which I have found no healing.

And though I do not claim to be perfect, I believe that with the help of the Holy Spirit, I have lived an exemplary life both in public and in private. If we believe that Christian

behavior merits God's healing favor, I should be well. Why hasn't God healed me?

There is something about suffering that most of us Christians don't understand. We see the dealings of God as being temporal and believe it is His will to heal everyone.

Yet the Bible speaks of fulfilling the sufferings of Christ. I am not sure we understand that very well. We feel there should be no suffering, yet all through the Scriptures we see chosen ones of God enduring suffering and pain.

I have to leave this in the hands of God—and you will need to do the same when you cannot find answers to this question. Submit your questions to God, and follow the advice Paul gave to young Timothy when he exhorted him to “fight the good fight of faith” (1 Tim. 6:12, NKJV).

Unfortunately faith has an enemy. Whether that enemy surfaces from within our lives or opposes us from without, its name is doubt.

Doubt is not unbelief; it is more a poor handling of belief. Doubt is uncertainty about God's promises; doubt lacks confidence in the God of those promises and considers their fulfillment very unlikely. Doubt puts our experience over against God's Word and trusts our reasoning more than the reality of God's Word.

The way to overcome the word of doubt is with the “word of faith” which “‘is near you, in your mouth and in your heart'” (Rom. 10:8). Since faith flows when God speaks, we will do well to remain in His presence to hear His voice during the

dark seasons when doubt demands an audience.

If faith and doubt are mortal enemies, we need to have a constant increasing and strengthening of our faith, lest the doubts induced by our natural life overcome our faith in God. The more time we spend in God's presence, the stronger our confidence and trust in Him will become.

Why was my brother healed and not me? Another question believers have in illness is this: "Why was so-and-so healed, but not me?" For example, the same month that I discovered my PSA was high, I urged my brother Robert to have his PSA level checked. His level proved to be higher than mine, but his urologist recommended a different treatment than was given to me, and he was cured.

Why him and not me? I don't see him as more godly than myself. I have no reason to believe that he is more faithful in tithing and giving than I am, or that his level of personal holiness is better than mine. Still, it seems that God has seen fit to spare him and leave me afflicted.

This is another question we don't have an answer for. God is sovereign, and He does as He wills to do. That isn't very satisfactory to 21st century Christians.

If healing is something His children deserve, then God doesn't have the right to heal one person and not another. But if healing is a grace He gives to whom He chooses, then that is another issue. We Christians would do well to let God be God and stop trying to play His role.

We should seek Him earnestly for His best and then dare to

trust Him to know what is the best. If, through sickness, God can form in me a Christian grace that He could not do with my good health, then God has a right to use any tools at His disposal to effect the grace He is wanting to perfect in me.

There comes a time in our prayer lives when we cease dealing with our wills, wants, and wishes, and we face the will of God. When He impresses that will upon our hearts, we remain in His presence, allowing Him to communicate with us by His indwelling Spirit. We soften. Our wills crumble, and we, like Jesus, find ourselves saying, "Not my will, but Thine be done."

How do I get rid of my anger and bitterness about being sick? During this painful season of trying to find reasons for my diagnosis of incurable cancer, I struggled with inner anger and bitter thoughts. Others were being healed. People for whom I prayed over the phone got healed, while I remained ill.

If you are trying to overcome anger and bitterness about your sickness, find out why you are angry. Do you feel that you deserve something better? The truth is, none of us get what we truly deserve. If we did, we would all be bound in hell.

If you will focus on God's blessings in your life instead of on your sickness, there will be rejoicing that you are still alive instead of anger and bitterness. It's sad to spend our lives focusing on the negatives. God has done so much for us that we should be grateful and filled with thanksgiving for what He has done, rather than being resentful and bitter about what He has not done.

What sin of mine brought on the curse of sickness? Shortly

after I was sent home to die, I received a brief card from a friend with whom I had ministered in a large convention just a month earlier. He challenged me to search my heart to find out why God had sent this affliction on me. He reminded me that Scripture teaches, "Like a flitting sparrow, like a flying swallow, so a curse without cause shall not alight" (Prov. 26:2).

I immediately began to soul-search with vigor for the cause of the curse. Where had I sinned so seriously that God had to afflict me with prostate cancer to bring me to repentance?

I dug deep into my memory circuits to uncover sins of action, attitude or desire. One day in my prayer time, I probed way back into my past and uncovered a confessed sin of considerable magnitude. It was a sin that involved a person in a church I had pastored many years ago.

In my desperate soul searching for the cause of my affliction, I rehearsed this sin episode in my memory circuits. What a mistake this was. The Holy Spirit rebuked me: "Judson, if you continue to uncover what the blood has covered, the righteous demands of the Law will yet reach out and condemn you. Never seek to uncover what Christ's blood has covered."

God reminded me that He does not want to hear me talk about what He has put under the blood of Jesus. He has not only forgiven us, but according to the Scriptures, He has also forgotten our sins: "'I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins'" (Is. 43:25).

The Word of God declares, "As far as the east is from the

west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103:12). That's too far to be retrieved! When we "reconfess" sin from which Christ has already cleansed us, we put the sin on the table of God's remembrance to be dealt with again. Instead, we need to meditate on the words of Psalm 103:12 and praise God for His forgiveness.

How do I avoid depression? As weeks stretched into months, the number of cards from friends diminished. I received fewer and fewer phone calls of encouragement, and even the e-mail contacts dwindled to but a few per day.

This change was to be expected, but it induced a loneliness in me. I didn't realize how much I had come to lean on encouragement from others.

When the expressions of love dwindled, I found myself in "withdrawal." Kind words of encouragement from others had strengthened me for months. Now I had a choice before me: to slip into depression or learn to encourage myself.

There was only one answer—I had to "relearn" to encourage myself. Now I could not settle for merely reading the Psalms; I needed to live them. I had to rediscover the power of praise. And I well knew that thanksgiving births praise, as David wrote:

"You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, to the end that my glory may sing praise to You and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to You forever" (Ps. 30:11-12).

It was time for me to remember God's great goodness to me the

last few months. I was alive—in spite of the doctor's predictions. I was strong enough to be out of bed for several hours at a time. The cards, letters, flowers and phone calls from individuals who said they were praying for me blessed me.

During this time, I found many reasons for praising God. Like David I could cry, "The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad" (Ps. 126:3).

"Be glad, not sad" was God's challenge to me. I understood the Scriptures were instructing me to rule my emotions and not let them rule me. I realized I had not yet faced a circumstance in life so severe that I could not be glad in the Lord.

This was not the time for self-pity; it was the time to praise God. So I did. I praised with my mind and my mouth. I praised with body language, with the English language and with the language of the Spirit. I praised in the silence of the night and in the noise of daily activities. And the more I praised, the more encouraged I became.

To be perfectly honest, this praise did not always come easily. Much of it was expressed through clenched teeth and an inner feeling of hypocrisy, but it was expressed nonetheless. God deserved the praise, and I desperately needed to express praise. I knew it was my lifeline for living above depression at this juncture of my dying experience.

In spite of the toll the disease had taken, I still had a lot of life left in me, and that life needed to be released Godward, not inward. This painful season was not for complaining about what I was losing; it was a time for singing praises with all the strength of the life remaining in me.

If we must make a choice between the presence and comfort of people or the presence and comfort of God, the choice is not difficult. Always choose the Eternal One. I did, and I have found it to be a wise choice. His inner presence brings glorious deliverance from depression.

During this lonely season I have discovered that I could encourage myself in God to such an extent that I received strength to endure extreme suffering and pain that filled my life. If I fill my mind with the Word of God, I can't be depressed, for all that God is, has done and has become lifts me out of a depressed state and into a praise state. I have widely taught on praise in my last years of ministry, and now, during this time, I have a good opportunity to put it into practice. You cannot praise and remain depressed.

There will not always be an answer to the kinds of questions I've posed. But there is a way to deal with the questions when they surface: Submit them to worship. I have learned to do that in my illness, and I'm praying you will learn to do it as well. If you will focus your attention on worshiping Christ, the cares and problems of this temporary life on Earth will be placed where they belong—under the covering of praise.

Judson Cornwall is an internationally known Bible teacher and author of more than 50 books including Let Us Draw Near. Based in Phoenix, he recently began recording his books on tape for the blind.

This article was adapted from Judson Cornwall's newest book, Dying With Grace (Charisma House). For more information log on to

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