



How do I help someone maintain faith during illness?"

Illness and death are aspects of life that can affect us all. We become ill ourselves and know of others who are extremely ill. We can face death ourselves and know of others who face death. How do we approach these aspects of our existence? A simple answer is that we have faith that God will heal us in our illness, help us to overcome facing death and also have faith that our friend or family facing death will be healed and not have to confront death. Unfortunately, this is not entirely satisfactory. There are verses in Scripture that suggest that if we pray in faith we will be healed. But we know that sometimes we (or another person) are not healed, or dies when we have asked for life to be extended. Does this mean that we haven't had enough faith either for ourselves or for the person we have prayed for?

And then there is the other issue that death is inevitable for all people (unless our Lord Jesus returns before we die, which, of course, we pray

for). Can we pray for an extension of our life to complete tasks we have started? (It is often suggested that King Hezekiah prayed for an extension to his life. But this is not Scriptural. (2 Kings 20:1-8ff) There is no record that Hezekiah prayed for an extension to his life. What he asked for was to God to remember what he had done during his life. God listened and extended his life for 15 years with a specific task. We cannot assume, on the basis of Scripture, that God intervened for any other reason.)

So where does this leave us? If we do not recover our health, or we or our friends die, has God not listened to our prayer?

The ultimate answer is in the example of Jesus. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is recorded as saying: "Mat 26:39 "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. *Yet not as I will, but as you will.*" Jesus asked God to take away the cup - not let the crucifixion, the pouring out of his blood, take place. But he qualified this by saying that what was important was that Gods' will is done. Personally, this is the ultimate answer for me about having faith about the wellness or saving from death of myself or friends. *What happens ultimately, is that we have the faith that God's will is done.* This happened in Jesus' case. He did not want to suffer death; he was human. How could he want to go through the agony of crucifixion? Yet, he knew that it was God's will, and he was obedient. Whenever I ask for God's intervention, or ask for removal of illness, or an extension of life, I must have faith that God's will be done. Not necessarily my will.

Consequences for us?

Benefits. Many people will attest to the benefits of some incidents in our life that God has allowed to happen that have ultimately been very beneficial for us personally or have benefitted from others by the magnificent example they have set by maintaining their faith in God during their most extreme circumstances. If we think carefully about their circumstances, we can often be so impressed by the way they have coped in faith. This does not mean that they need to be put on a pedestal by us. This can often lead to embarrassment for the person. This is not what they wanted. At the same time, they, by the way they have approached the situation, show us how it can be done. Not always will such a person want us to see them on a pedestal. They will know for themselves that their faith has not always been as strong as you imagine. Ultimately, it is the way we react individually, allowing God to guide us, that is important in how we manage and progress.

A benefit we may not see at the time of a personal illness is the way God guides us in our life beyond our illness.

I was diagnosed with cancer many years ago. It was a shock. I had no idea where I was going. It was not generally known as a major life-threatening illness, but it was bad enough. The treatment was very difficult. The mental ups and downs were ever present. I prayed continually. After 6 months the cancer had been removed. Did I ever question faith? In a mild way, yes. After 5 months of treatment, I had a major setback. I asked “Why”? God’s answer was, “Because you still have something to learn”. God was not being merciless or unkind. He was being with me continually and He knew I would benefit from the experience.

God wants us in the Kingdom more than anything – He is not willing that ANY should perish – so He does everything in His power to guide and help us there. We all learn in different ways, so God teaches us differently. It’s the same situation with children – what works for one child does not always work for another.

How do I help someone in these circumstances?

So often, I find myself powerless to help someone. I can only pray for them. **Only pray?** This would have to be the most important way I can help, although, if possible, prayer should be followed by practical action. If I am conversing with them through emails, WhatsApp, Phone, FB Messenger or whatever, I pray, in faith, that God will be with them to do His will for what is best for them. If we genuinely can’t do anything to help the situation, we can still tell the person that we have been praying and what we have asked God to do for them. It is amazingly helpful and supportive to know that others are praying for us, and that we are not in this alone – our spiritual family is standing by us in our trial.

Many times, God’s will **is** better for each individual person than what is wanted by the person. God sees beyond next week and next month and knows the best course for the person concerned. This can be simply learning – learning to continue to place our trust and faith in Him. It might just be that if we do things our own way, we can think (wrongly) that we didn’t need God because it happened without Him. Not so. Even in circumstances where we think God might not be directing us, direct us He certainly does. What does the wise man say in Proverbs? “In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.” (16:9)

Supporting faith

When we are conversing through whatever means, with someone who is struggling with health and facing death, the best thing we can do for them is to help them reinforce their faith that

God's will might be done. This can be very difficult because we are in effect saying that a friend dying might be God's will. But it might be! People can get upset and defensive because this can be hurtful. They have absolutely no control over it. "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised." (Job 1:21) But it is never what WE want or think we need. We have to be careful we don't think we know better than He does.

But there is a more positive way and accurate way of looking at this. What we are recognising is that things occur in our life that are quite natural. If a person is not raised by God from their sick bed, God is recognising that the person's mission has been completed. It may well be that for those family and friends left behind it would be necessary for us to recognise that if God directs our lives, there is something we can learn from this. And this is exceptionally hard. My mother died when I was 14. It was an immediately traumatic time which continued from some years. Over 60 years later, while I have not had the benefit of her love and counsel in the meantime, I am highly motivated to see her in the Kingdom. Her love and faith have been magnificent examples throughout my life. Sometimes, we need to accept God's decisions even though we may find them exceptionally hard. This does not stop us from pursuing for ourselves, and encouraging our friends and family to pray earnestly for what they believe is important. We should encourage them to pray in faith that God's purpose will be achieved. If we do not receive what we pray for, this does not mean we have lacked faith. What it means is that God knows a reason for not granting our wish. Ultimately, God's action for us will be much better for us than our initial plan. And we would do well to help our ill friends understand this.

At a personal level, one person has observed that, "sometimes, my very human, 'childish' self often says in irritation, 'Why bother praying?!' – if His will is going to be done anyway, and mine isn't, then why ask? When I think like a more mature person spiritually – I know He loves me and wants what's best for me and wants me to talk to Him and tell him everything I'm feeling and thinking (even though he knows it already) because He wants to be the one I turn to for help and advice and comfort and strength and support and guidance . . . just everything. To tell Him I feel angry or sad or happy or frustrated or grateful – it's always, always all about Him.

"I believe the praying process is a healing process in and of itself. Talking out our problems and thoughts and fears very honestly can open our eyes to our own selfishness and desires and underlying motives. Why did I do this? Why do I want this? If we genuinely share our honest thoughts with God and pour out our hearts to Him in humility and love, we KNOW deep in ourselves that He will do whatever it takes to bring us to eternal life, even if it's not the path we want to walk."

Suffering can be immensely difficult. We do not like to see our loved ones suffer. Sometimes, it appears that God is not helping. Again, this is where our faith, and the faith of our friend, needs to be reinforced. God will always help, just not necessarily when or how we would like Him to.

Comforting verses

God has made some promises. You can help the sick person (and the family) by making reference to some of the verses provided below. (Just be careful that you avoid sounding as if you are 'preaching' to them.)

Isaiah 41:10 – God can strengthen us and the people for whom we pray. "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Jeremiah 33:6 – God can bring healing. “Nevertheless, I will bring health and healing to it; I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security.”

John 14:27 – God can provide peace. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

Matthew 11:28-30 – God can lighten our burden. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Philippians 4:6 – Pray continually. “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ”

James 5:15 – Pray in faith. “And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.”

Our prayers can be effective. God has demonstrated that He will hear prayer and can answer prayer in the way we would like.

The final word?

What did Jesus say to his Father? “Let your will, not mine be done!”

WHY?

Because He loves us with an everlasting love!

Laurence Lepherd, and the editorial team

