

Faith on Trial

Strength under Tension

By Dana Olson



Bummer. After all, it was the Fourth of July—and instead of sitting at a picnic table eating a burger, I was sitting on an exam table in the heart hospital’s ER, waiting.

For weeks I had noticed odd symptoms. Previous tests had shown nothing (or so I thought). But now, after my heartbeat went from “marching band snare drum” to “funky jazz drum solo,” I landed on this bench, awaiting results from high-tech picture-taking. The young ER doctor looked perplexed as he entered. “Tell me about this mass on your spleen.”

“I don’t know anything about my spleen,” I replied, stunned. Apparently previous testing had shown an obvious abnormality, but I had not been notified due to office error.

Uncertainty followed. My “busy pastor” schedule was cleared, more tests conducted, consultations held. Multiple diagnoses were considered as I alternated between my own bed at home and a woefully inadequate hospital bed. Finally, a fuzzy picture became clear: non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma cancer and an extensive blood clot. My life changed dramatically.

Prayer Lessons

In the three years since, many have asked what I learned from hearing the C word, going through surgery, and experiencing rapid hair loss. It's taken a while to figure that out.

I preached two out of every three Sundays during chemo. My hair loss presented no great challenge. I spent lots of time in a big chair and special bed—both purchased by caring friends. Mostly, I tried to keep going, day by day, but with extra rest. I took my meds—and still do.

One hymn I'd sung from my youth meant the world to me. I sang it to myself again and again:

Jesus, I am resting, resting
In the joy of what Thou art;
I am finding out the greatness
Of Thy loving heart.¹

The time to build up your “faith bank account” is today. Don't wait until trials come. While facing a threatening diagnosis, relational breakdown, profound disappointment, disillusioning failure, or devastating loss, the withdrawals come fast and furious. You will need to have banked faith to draw upon.

Here are truths to help you prepare:

1. God is in control. You can trust Him. That doesn't mean circumstances always turn out well. Life isn't like the smiling, late-night TV preacher who offers health and wealth. Cancer can kill. Life presents an extensive variety of hurts and heartaches. To deny that is to deny sin's profound impact on humanity. Jesus says, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Our God is Lord of heaven and earth. He holds the future. He makes all grace abound to you, whatever the circumstance—in life and death, in joy and sorrow, in pain and pleasure.

2. God sees. In Genesis 22, the gospel comes alive on a mountain at Moriah. Abraham obeys the Lord and takes his beloved son Isaac and prepares to offer him to the Lord. But the Lord intervenes. God provides a ram as a substitute for Isaac, and Abraham names that place “The Lord will provide” (v. 14)—in Hebrew, Jehovah Jireh, which means, literally, “God sees.” The passage is a neon sign pointing ahead to Jesus, the divine Substitute who died on the cross in our place. God sees you in your heartache. He sees your suffering. And when God sees, He provides.

His provision comes in expected and unexpected ways. The God who sees you in your distress might send a wave of Holy Spirit comfort, or an old friend to sit with you, or a passage of Scripture to point you to hope, or someone from your church who shows up with your favorite meal. He might send a job offer, a check from an old friend, or a bag of groceries. God might send a counselor, a favorite uncle, a neighbor, or a stranger. Watch how He faithfully provides.

3. God cares. I’m no fisherman, but I know that effectiveness requires learning to cast the line into the water. Similarly, in our suffering, God tells us, “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7). This marvelous verse’s context reminds us that such humbling of ourselves (v. 6) requires vigilant watchfulness (v. 8). We dare not give in to the devil’s scheme, tempting us to despair and turn our backs on our heavenly Father. Instead, we press in to Him. We call upon Him. We pray earnestly. We cast and keep casting!

Why? Because God cares. He showed His merciful care for us by sending His Son to be our Savior, Redeemer, and Friend. He continues showing believers that loving care every day, for His Spirit dwells in us and is our Comforter. The cynic says, “God doesn’t care about you.” The cross screams otherwise.

4. God prepares. Suffering is a kind of preparatory school. God is preparing us for Himself. And He is preparing a place

for us to spend eternity with Him. This is our hope in suffering: “If I go [and He has gone] and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:3, brackets added).

For us to be with God requires holiness. Our holiness requires the divine washing by Christ’s precious blood, followed by the divine surgery transforming us from the inside out to be God’s holy people. The whole process is the great grace-work of justification (in a moment) and sanctification (over a lifetime). Suffering is part of God’s sculpting work in our sanctification. But the destination—the very presence of God Himself—is worth every bit of the suffering.

Prayer Strategy

So why and how can we pray with confidence in the midst of painful suffering

- Because God is in control, let your prayer be filled with praise and adoration to the One who alone is God: “Hallowed be your name.” Let your prayer reflect your sweet submission to your Father in heaven. “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (see Matt. 6:9–13)
- Because God sees, and when He sees He provides, ask God for the daily bread of His sustaining grace, whatever that might be. Jesus asked Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” (see Mark 10:46–52). We have a wonderful privilege to answer Jesus’ question, praying, “Father, here’s what I long for You to do for me.” Keep in mind, the answer will not always come quickly. Often God wants to work in us through the waiting! But if we trust Him for His timing—and if we stay patient—we will see His hand and His heart in due time.
- Because God cares, keep casting! From the midst of pain, don’t be afraid to honestly tell the Lord what is on

your heart. Any burden can be transferred from our broken hearts to His broad, strong shoulders. As you cast your cares upon Him, remember that the committed believer's greatest desire is always this: that Jesus Christ be magnified. Paul reminds us, "Do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). What seems like silence to us may in fact be God's strategic timing, using our suffering for His glory in some remarkable way we don't see now. In my case, I believe my cancer and complications were tools in God's hand, working powerfully in me and in our church. We are taking steps of faith today that I believe are answers to heart cries during my illness. We too easily focus only on ourselves. God's agenda is far larger and more complex. Nevertheless, from your suffering, don't stop casting! One more cast may yield the big fish of God's awesome answer to your prayer.

- Because God is preparing you and preparing a place for you, pray with hope. Hope is faith applied to the future. When you trust God today to do mighty things that will last forever, that is hope! When you pray big, expansive prayers that will be finally answered in the new heavens and new earth, that is hope-filled praying. When you pray, knowing that the final outcome will arrive with the return of Christ, that is hope on its knees.

Our cry for God to make us whole inherently applies to our holiness.

Prayer Strength

Engineers work with the concept of tensile strength: the maximum stress that can be applied to an object under tension before it breaks. Cancer is only one of many possible tension producers in life. You can fill in the blanks for yourself.

What has brought significant tension to your life? What has threatened to break you, in the past or present? What fiery darts have come your direction from the world, the flesh, or the devil? Whatever is putting stress on you, keep on praying.

Your prayer life can greatly strengthen your spiritual tensile strength. Trials will test you—and they are inevitable. But by prayer you can be prepared, can pray through, and pray beyond the trial. Build up your tensile strength now. Prepare yourself to pray through the difficulty. Here are practical ways to endure the tension of suffering:

1. Keep on praying. Don't stop. When you can't even put your prayers into words, sigh. Groan. The Holy Spirit Himself will intercede for you. Take Romans 8:26 to heart. Rest in the presence of God and in the joy of Jesus, your Savior and Friend.

2. Stay in the Word of God. Make the Bible your companion in suffering. Let the Psalms give expression to your own journey through pain, and God will meet you there. Both the psalms of lament and the psalms of adoration and praise can build your tensile strength. Where to start? Try Psalm 42:5:

Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

3. Ask others to pray for you! Yes, the Spirit of God will intercede for you, but so will brothers and sisters in Christ. Don't be shy. Ask for their intercession. Phone, email, or text: "I really need you to pray for me right now. It's hard." Let the body of Christ lift you up in your pain to the Father's throne of grace.

4. Sing! If you can't sing, hum. So many Christian songs are prayers that can express our heart's yearnings during suffering. I recommend my favorite, "Jesus, I am Resting, Resting," but you undoubtedly have other songs, hymns, and

spiritual songs that lift your heart and mind up to God. If you can't sing or hum, listen to the music of fellow believers who for centuries have made music out of their own journey with pain, songs such as "Day by Day":

Help me then in every tribulation
So to trust Thy promises, O Lord,
That I lose not faith's sweet consolation
Offered me within Thy holy word.
Help me, Lord, when toil and trouble
meeting; E'er to take, as from a father's hand,
One by one, the days, the moments fleeting,
Till I reach the promised land.²

How is your spiritual tensile strength? What is the maximum you can endure by faith? Are you ready for life's next great trial? Holy-spirit enabled prayer, aligned with the promises of God's Word, can prepare you for whatever the Father allows to come your way—from daily stresses to the ER on the 4th of July.

¹ Jean S. Pigott, "Jesus, I Am Resting, Resting," 1876, public domain.
² Karolina Sandell Berg, tr. A.L. Skoog, "Day by Day," 1865, public domain.

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Surviving Isolation

By Jackie Harmon

Eight years ago, I traveled to Ethiopia to meet the little boy God called our family to adopt. I received Miles with open arms. Three years later, those arms were covered in scars, scratches, and bite marks. Every interaction with this child, who has the challenge of autism, was physically painful. And I landed in the darkest place my heart and mind had ever been.

I spent a lot of time at home with Miles, isolated from people. God used my isolation as an invitation to stand in the gap, praying for my husband, my pastor, and my friends in ministry. God sealed on my heart the words, Not on my watch. I made it my mission to pray for hundreds of marriages, families, and ministries every month. God used that time to fill my heart with love for “my people,” so I felt connected to their lives and ministries—even though I was still isolated.

Besides calling me to pray for marriages and ministries, God also invited me to change the way I was praying for Miles. In Matthew 11, Jesus sends word to John the Baptist, saying, “Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me” (v. 6, NIV 1984).

When I first read those words, it was like Jesus was saying, “Jackie, I know what adding Miles to your family has done. I know that caring for him is hard. But I’m not coming for you. I’m not rescuing you. Do not lose faith because of Me.”

I no longer pray that Miles progresses emotionally out of the terrible twos or that he will one day be potty-trained. My prayer is that, no matter what, I will not lose faith because of Jesus.

Nothing has challenged me to keep my eyes and heart fixed on Jesus more than the gift of Miles, who has the gift of autism. Caring for Miles is the hardest thing I’ve ever done—and it is

the greatest privilege of my life!

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