

IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

A fine example of good health in old age is found in Caleb, one of the twelve men sent to explore the land of Canaan from Kadesh, two years after the Israelites left Egypt. The story is found in Numbers 13 and 14. The men were gone for forty days and then returned with a glowing report. In the account, however, was one aspect that caused some concern: *“But the people who live there are powerful and the cities are fortified and very large” (13:28).*

Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, *“We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.”* Joshua agreed with him. The other ten were so pessimistic that the entire community became discouraged and talked of returning to Egypt. Moses and Aaron fell face down before the entire Israelite assembly while Joshua and Caleb tore their clothes and gave a wonderful pep talk, including this: *“Do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them” (14:9).*

It didn't work. Finally the Lord stepped in and told the people the consequences of their rebellion. They were going to wander around in the wilderness for a total of forty years, one year for each of the forty days the men had been in Canaan. During that time all the people who had been twenty and older when they left Egypt would die – all except Caleb and Joshua. So these two men were the only ones over sixty to enter the Promised Land. (Moses and Aaron died for other reasons before entering the land.)

Joshua became the successor to Moses and under his direction the Promised Land was conquered, divided among the tribes of Israel and settled. Caleb came before Joshua to ask for his portion:

“Just as the Lord promised, he has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time [we explored Canaan]. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! I am still as strong today as I was the day Moses sent me out; I'm just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. Now give me this hill country that the Lord promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as he said” (Joshua 14:10-12).

Wouldn't we all like to be like Caleb if we had a choice – vigorous in body, soul and spirit at the age of eighty-five? Or like Moses, who on the day of his death at one hundred twenty was still able to go mountain climbing? However, we must guard against making these stories normative, for they are not. They are just records of two men who remained healthy into old age. Many Bible stories end differently.

Here are some of the people from the Bible stories who suffered physical infirmities, especially in old age:

– **Isaac.** Genesis 27:1 says *“Isaac was old and his eyes were so weak that he could no longer see.”* I never knew how prevalent loss of eyesight was among the elderly until we moved to Drum Hill. Macular degeneration leaves many seeing only shadowy images, while others (some of whom have sight only in one eye) fearfully face surgical procedures to repair what vision they have left in their “good” eye.

– **Jacob (Israel).** He was sick enough to be confined to his bed, although he sat up when visitors came and to bless his children. Genesis 48:10 tells us that his eyes, too, were failing because of old age and he could hardly see.

– **David.** *“When King David was old and well advanced in years, he could not keep warm even when they put covers over him. So his servants said to him, ‘Let us look for a young virgin to attend the king and take care of him. She can lie beside him so that our lord the king may keep warm’”* (1 Kings 1:1,2). What they were suggesting was that David needed a personal aide, a home health care worker, just as many do today. Unlike some who strongly resist getting help, David gave his consent. Abishag was hired for the job. *“[She] was very beautiful; she took care of the king and waited on him, but the king had no intimate relations with her”* (1:4).

– **Elisha.** *“Now Elisha was suffering from the illness from which he died. Jehoash king of Israel went down to see him and wept over him”* (2 Kings 13:14). Terminal illness must be handled both by the one suffering from the condition and by those who hear about it. We who are ill need to be sensitive to those who need to visit and to cry. Significant psychological and spiritual work can be transacted on both sides during such visits: forgiveness; the giving and receiving of thanks, praise and love; encouragement; the passing on and receiving of a legacy; comfort. Time and eternity seem to blend in such moments; savor them.

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The above Bible stories as well as stories of more recent people of faith have prepared me well for my own physical problems. Here are two women I have long admired and wish to emulate:

– **Amy Carmichael.** She was a British woman who went to India as a missionary about 1900 and stayed there until her death fifty years later. As I read her biography I was so impressed by her assimilation into Indian culture and her steadfast belief that she was doing God’s will where God wanted her to be.

I also liked the way she lead others in her compound to think of death. The cemetery was called God’s Garden. Bells would ring calling all to come celebrate the Home-going of another of God’s dear ones. And when it was one of the leaders of the mission who died, the news would circulate that God was entrusting them with a great trust: going on without that person.

Twenty years before her own death Amy was seriously injured in a fall from which she never fully recovered. Although basically confined to her bedroom suite or to her bed, from there she continued to minister to all who came to see her. Amy also did a lot of writing during those years, books I have read and cherished. She served the Lord whether healthy or infirm, and her example powerfully impacted me.

– **Annie Johnson Flint** (1862-1932). I first met Annie through a book of her poetry that I bought for my husband Leo in 1957 for our first Christmas together. We both enjoyed that book so much and used the poems various ways in our service for the Lord. The biographical material included in the book told me something I never would have guessed from her poetry: Annie spent the last forty-five years of her life seriously crippled by arthritis. I agree with the writer’s assessment of her work:

“There is nothing of self-pity or despondency here, no moaning over the fate that has been hers, no railing against the Will of God or questioning of Him Whom she was convinced does all things well. A great number of Miss Flint’s poems were written around God’s great out-of-doors from which she was shut off almost entirely all her life. But her radiant faith lent wings to her imagination, and she sang her song of praise for all things bright and beautiful that had come from the hand of the Lord she loved.” My heart clutched this fine example of God’s grace and made it mine.

Here is the first poem in the book, one whose sentiment I fully endorse. (Note: Annie used the word “hath” in her poem; I changed it to “has.”)

WHAT GOD HAS PROMISED

God has not promised
Skies ever blue,
Flower-strewn pathways
All our lives through;
God has not promised
Sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow,
Peace without pain.

But God has promised
Strength for the day,
Rest for the labor,
Light for the way,
Grace for the trials,
Help from above,
Unfailing sympathy,
Undying love.

– Annie Johnson Flint

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What about chronic illness? Certainly Annie Johnson Flint's arthritis was a chronic disease. Are there any examples in the Bible? Yes, there are. The two that come immediately to mind are **Paul** and **Timothy**.

We all look at the Scriptures from different points of view, depending on our own situations or preconceived ideas. I see them through the eyes of one who has had chronic illness as long as I can remember. In 1935, when I was two and a half, I had serious pneumonia that left me with chronic bronchitis and chronic sinusitis. People constantly ask me if I have a cold and I say, "No. It's just my regular cough." And I panic if I realize I have no tissues with me. In my teaching ministry I often had to depend on the Lord – literally! – for the voice to speak and sometimes for the energy. Many times I have praised God for letting his strength be seen in my weakness. So to me, chronic illness is normal, even advantageous; I feel a kinship with those who suffer this way.

Timothy is one such person. Paul wrote to him with advice: *"Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses"* (1 Timothy 5:23). In other words, Timothy needed medicine for his ailments. It is interesting to me that Paul did not seem to think that Timothy was ill because of a spiritual problem, nor did he advise him to pray.

Perhaps Paul was so understanding with Timothy because he himself knew what it was to suffer physically. He used his sickness to promote God's kingdom, as this passage from Galatians shows: *"As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me"* (4:13-15). The latter comment, coupled with his use of a co-worker to write his letters except to the Galatians – *"See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand"* (6:11)! – makes me think Paul had a chronic eye problem. Perhaps that is why he traveled and worked with a whole team of people, one of whom was Luke, a physician.

No discussion of Paul's sicknesses would be complete without including his "thorn in the flesh"

experience from 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 in which he reveals his thinking process that has inspired so many, including me:

"To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

What a man! What a wonderful mentor he has been to me! Thank you, Paul.

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Where does the thought that God has promised us good health come from? For one thing, it comes from verses such as these:

"Praise the Lord. O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. He forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases" (Psalm 103:1-3).

"He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

When we see the words "diseases" and "healed" many of us immediately associate them with the body, no matter what the context. In Psalm 103 David is speaking to his soul, to his inmost being, to himself, if you will. He marvels that his sins are forgiven and that his soul diseases are healed. That is something only God can do; those of us who have had this kind of healing would do well to emulate David in praising the Lord. (I'm sure you can think of many soul diseases which, if left unchecked, may begin to affect the body: unforgiveness and greed, for examples.)

Isaiah says that Jesus died for our transgressions, for our iniquities, that we might have peace with God, that we could be healthy in soul and spirit. What a gift! And at what a cost! Jesus was "pierced," "crushed," "punished," "wounded" – to offer us healing in exchange. How great is the love of God for us, far beyond our comprehension! Let's join the angels in Heaven singing: *"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise" (Revelation 5:12)!*

Another thing that people cling to as a promise of healing is the miracles that Jesus (and later, the apostles) performed. It seems so logical: since Jesus cured all sorts of ailments when he was on the earth, couldn't he do the same today? Of course he could! But miracles in the Bible are clustered around certain periods of time, and for a purpose: to make God known. The time of the exodus from Egypt is a great example. The Israelites had spent five hundred years in pagan Egypt, where gods and goddesses existed in abundance. God provided both the Israelites and the Egyptians plenty of evidence that idols are powerless pieces of art, while God is awesome beyond measure!

In the time of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, who worked in the northern kingdom, Israel, there were again mighty miracles performed in a very ungodly land. The official gods of Israel were golden calves, and the vile king Ahab and his evil wife Jezebel were in power. It's a good thing that God is God and I am not! I have often thought (to my shame) that if I had been in charge I would have given up on Israel and sent these two fine prophets to Judah, where people might be more likely to listen. But God knew that Elijah was the one to do battle with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). And he did it well.

The four gospels record many miracles that Jesus performed during the three-and-a-half years of his public ministry. These healings of all sorts were meant to establish who Jesus was: the Christ (Messiah); the Son of God; the one who fulfilled the prophecies (see Matthew 8:16,17 and Matthew 11:2-6, for examples). Toward the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus said to the Jews who still did not believe: *"Why do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'? Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may learn and understand that the Father is in me and I in the Father"* (John 10:36-38).

Never would I say that God cannot or will not supernaturally heal today, but I think God also works through doctors, medicines and the healing powers he has put within our bodies. And then some diseases are not yet curable. Here in Drum Hill I've heard several people say that we're all going to die of *something*. True! One thing is certain: God's supply of grace is still sufficient for all who are willing to tap into it.

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Mark 2:1-12 tells an interesting story of healing. Four friends carried a paralyzed man to Jesus. With difficulty, they achieved their goal of laying their friend, on his mat, at the feet of Jesus. *"When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'*" I doubt if anyone was expecting that kind of healing! Here's the rest of the story:

Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins ..." He said to the paralytic, "I tell you, take up your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of all of them. This amazed everyone and they praised God saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

I wonder: if the paralyzed man had had to choose between remaining paralyzed but having his sins forgiven or being able to walk but remaining in his sins, which would he have chosen? I know what I would choose: I would far rather be paralyzed physically and have my sins forgiven than the other way around. In fact, that is exactly my case. I'm sure the reason I can accept my disease is that my sin sickness was taken care of long ago by the same One who healed the paralyzed man.

By the way, which would you choose?

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Revelation 21:4 gives us a beautiful glimpse of Heaven: *"[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."* Some years ago my daughter Marty said to me, "I figure that if all those things will be done away with in Heaven, then they are normal for here where the old order still stands." That is so simple, yet profound! And doesn't it help us to look forward to Heaven? Just think: there will be no boxes of tissues there, no walkers, Power Chairs, cough drops – nothing like that! No matter how ill God's people are on earth, death brings instant healing. What a blessing!