

When a Loved One Has a Chronic Illness

In my book *Living in the Shadow of Death: Learning to Thrive through Tragedy and Uncertainty*, I share my journey of accepting and living with my husband's chronic health conditions. In one of the chapters, I ask the question, "What do we do when we pray and ask for God to work, but it doesn't seem like He is hearing or answering our prayers? What if our circumstances are such that it feels like God is absent or unconcerned?"

Let me share with you my answer as written in the book.

I can read my Bible and pray and lean on friends, building up my spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional health. But is that all? Should I be doing more?

Maybe the thought of doing more is disheartening because the truth is you're flat exhausted. Dealing with everything that's going on around you right now is more than you can handle, and just the thought that God is asking one more thing of you is too much. What then, if you're worried that God wants one more thing but you don't have the mental or emotional ability to think about it, much less the physical stamina to add it to your To Do list?

In the eleventh chapter of his Gospel, the apostle John walks us through a very intense scene. Jesus gets word that a dear friend, Lazarus, is ill. He knows Lazarus will die, yet on His Father's instructions, Jesus waits for that death to occur before He makes His way to Lazarus's sisters.

Then John records the heart-breaking cry of everyone touched by intense pain. First Martha approaches Jesus. "*Lord,*" *Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died"* (verse 21). A few minutes later, Mary echoes her sister. *When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died"* (verse 32).

Can you relate? Have you had moments when you've cried out, "Why didn't You stop this from happening?" Maybe when a tragic news story crosses your desk you wonder, "Where was God?" Or how about when that problem hits the news that's too big and complex for any easy solutions?





Perhaps you think, “Why aren’t You intervening, God?”

Right after Mary’s heart-wrenching question, John simply writes, *When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled* (John 11:33). Our English translation cannot adequately convey the depth of emotion in this scene. Sheila Walsh writes in *God Loves Broken People*,

The Greek term translated “moved” is *embrimaomai*. It’s a strong word denoting anger, strength, or the bellowing and snorting of a horse. In other words, as Christ looked at the grief of His friends, He felt a rage, a fury at what sin has done to this world. “Moved”? No . . . that doesn’t even come close. I feel “moved” when my son tells me he loves me, or my dog rests her head on my lap. But what Jesus experienced went far beyond some sentimental, warm feeling; far from it! This was the Son of God raging at the pain that Mary and Martha . . . faced (Walsh, 47).

Several years ago, I served as a support staff member of our church. One of my jobs was to help organize funerals for families who wanted to have a service at the church. Those I met with were in varying stages of shock and acceptance, and I strived to be patient, extend tremendous grace, and take the time to listen to those who wanted to talk. One widow sticks out in my mind when I think about Jesus standing with Mary and Martha. She kept herself fairly well pulled together, up until the moment when it was time to roll the casket away to the hearse and take it to the cemetery. When the funeral workers stepped forward, she collapsed, sobs wracking her entire being. I was standing in the foyer, more than twenty yards and on the other side of a weight-bearing wall from the bereaved woman, but her cries echoed throughout the building. Her pain rippled through me as the depth of her grieving poured out for several moments.

Whatever you are going through right now, whatever you and I will face in the days ahead, Christ feels it too. He rages at our pain with an intensity that we often overlook. He understands the unfairness of this fallen world, and He longs to restore it to what it was meant to be. That brings me comfort, even now as I seek to love the man in my life who didn’t sleep well last night or the night before.

Why doesn’t God end all of our suffering right now? I know you don’t want the pat, Christian answer any more than I do. Outside of God’s desire to extend grace, *not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance* (2 Peter 3:9), I can offer three statements that I have learned to embrace through my years of wrestling with God over the pain in my husband’s life.



1. *I Don't Know*

Are you familiar with Job? Many avoid this book of the Old Testament altogether, which I understand. It's uncomfortable and doesn't provide any easy answers. Job, a rich man who loved God and sought to follow Him and His laws, faced tremendous loss. This is one of those cases where God didn't bring tragedy, but He clearly allowed it. Satan asked God for the opportunity to prove that Job only praised God because God blessed him and his family. So God allowed Satan to go to work.

First, a servant reported to Job that enemies attacked, taking all of his oxen and donkeys, killing the rest of the servants nearby. Before he finished talking, a second servant came forward, reporting fire falling from the sky, burning up his sheep and all of the servants working with them. Before he finished giving his report, a third servant came forward with reports of more enemies raiding his fields, this time taking all of his camels and killing all of those servants.

If that wasn't enough sorrow for one day, a fourth servant arrived. This one said, *Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!* (Job 1:18–19).

Can you imagine? Your animals that feed you and earn you money, many of your servants, and every one of your children gone. In one day.

Somehow, Job fights through the pain and continues to praise God, so Satan takes another swipe at the man. This time, he attacks Job's health, giving him *painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head* (2:7). In the face of Job's intense suffering, he lobs many questions at God, questions we also tend to ask when life hits us hard. *Why did I not perish at birth?* (Job 3:11), and *Why is light given to those in misery, and life to the bitter of soul, to those who long for death that does not come?* (3:20). Can you relate?

Instead of answering him directly, God throws a few curveballs. He asks:

- *Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?* (38:4)
- *Have you given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place?* (38:12)
- *Do you send the lightning bolts on their way? Do they report to you, "Here we are?"* (38:35)

I can't even tell you why bananas are yellow or if every single snowflake really is different! I don't know why God is allowing that pain and suffering in your life. While I can see some good coming out of our experience, I can't tell you why He crippled my husband with chronic pain and weakening muscles.



I don't like that answer, and I'm sure you don't either. But it's the most honest one I've got.

2. *I Still Love God*

Even though I don't have many answers, I still love and trust God. Although I don't understand Him and can't predict His plan. Despite the fact that I don't know why the good perish along with the evil, or why it seems that the evil prosper while the righteous suffer.

Let me tell you this, though. Lodging that truth deep into my heart didn't come easy. While I'd grown up in the church and tended to see the world through rose-colored glasses, my husband's health concerns challenged my beliefs about a good God. Disproportionate facts stared me in the face as I looked around our world. Could I look at the Bible and still see a God who cared? Would I look at the stories I knew and still see God as good and just, who offered mercy and extended grace?

Ruth is my daughter's favorite book in the Bible. In the first paragraph of the first chapter, we are introduced to Naomi, a married Jewess with two sons living in Bethlehem. A famine hits the land, so they make the choice to flee to Moab, the people descended from Lot (Ruth 1:1–2, Genesis 19:36–37). In both the lack of food and in saying good-bye to friends and loved ones, the first sorrows we know of hit Naomi's life.

Shortly after arriving in Moab, her husband dies (Ruth 1:3). A second sorrow piles on to the first. Her sons marry Moabite women, and life seems to settle down for a bit. We really aren't given many details, including how old her sons were when they left Bethlehem, how long they lived in Moab before her husband died, or even at what point her sons married. All we know for sure is that ten years pass between moving to Moab and verse 5, which reports the deaths of both her sons. Two more sorrows to pile on.

Was she close with the families her sons married into? That could have brought some comfort to her over the years she was away from Bethlehem, but we don't know. Maybe they never fully accepted her because she wasn't one of them. What about grandchildren? The text doesn't suggest in any way that either Ruth or Orpah carried babies. Were they not married long enough for this to have happened? Or was this perhaps more sorrow that Naomi endured as she watched her children go childless?

When word reached Naomi that the Lord had provided food again in Judah, she and her daughters-in-law packed up and prepared to return. But on the road, Naomi encouraged her two girls to go back to their mothers' homes where they could perhaps find another husband. The tender relationship between the three of them is beautiful. Verse 10 says, *She kissed them good-*



bye and they wept aloud. More sorrow piling on.

At first, both girls fought her on her request, but she laid out the painful reality to them. She had no other sons and little chance to gain another husband. She was returning to her people in poverty, relying on the care and concern of others for the rest of her days. Orpah conceded and returned home to her family.

But Ruth? In one of the most loved passages in the Bible, Ruth plainly states, *Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me* (verses 16-17).

This loyalty touches me, but Naomi was lost in her grief. When she returned to Bethlehem, all those that had known her before commented on the change in her. She seems to ignore Ruth at her side when she says to them, *the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty* (verses 20-21). Oh, how easy it is to be blind to the blessings surrounding us!

Thankfully, Naomi doesn't remain so buried in grief that she can't see the opportunity placed before Ruth. When the girl stumbles into Boaz's field to glean food for them to eat, Naomi encourages her to follow Boaz's instructions and glean only in his fields behind his workers. When the winnowing of the barley began, she guided Ruth, teaching her how to seek Boaz out and ask him to be her guardian-redeemer, the man to marry her. And everyone soon recognized the blessings to Naomi. Boaz became father to Obed, who became father to Jesse, who became father to King David.

In all of Naomi's sufferings, she never left God's heart. He watched over her and provided for her even when the worst things she could conceive happened to her. Even though His methods were not what she would have chosen, I'm certain that in her final days, Naomi would never have chosen a life without Obed.

Sheila Walsh asks some pointed questions in *God Loves Broken People*, questions well highlighted in Naomi's story.

Suffering and pain peel back the layers of our faith and present us a life-changing choice: Will we become bitter, blaming God and others for our pain, venting our hurt and anger and frustration on those we consider responsible? Will we wallow in self-pity? Will we run and hide? Will we resist? Or . . . Will we choose to see God's hand in the midst of our pain and suffering? Will we embrace His will for us? Will we declare our trust in Him and



fall at His feet in worship? Will we bring the broken pieces of our lives to Him and allow Him to use them to create something beautiful, something that brings Him glory? (Walsh, 111).

Max Lucado asks, “We can’t always see what God is doing, but can’t we assume he is up to something good?” (*You’ll Get Through This*, 146). Powerful questions. Perspective-changing questions. Will I embrace God’s will for me, even if it includes continued pain and suffering? Will I declare trust in Him as I worship Him even in this hard place? Can I assume even when, or maybe especially when, I don’t understand how He is up to something good?

My answer didn’t come easily or quickly, and I still don’t say it lightly. But I confidently believe that whatever life looks like right now or in the next moment, God will bring good from it.

3. I Was Cheated? Absolutely Not!

Maybe it’s only in military circles, but a common phrase when someone dies young is, “The world is cheated by the loss of men like your husband.” I understand, even appreciate, the sentiment behind it, but I respectfully disagree.

No matter what has happened to me before or what will happen in the future, I don’t want to believe I was cheated out of anything. Sure, maybe my childhood wasn’t protected like others, or my marriage has rougher moments than some. But to believe I was cheated by the pain and suffering is to believe that God wasn’t powerful enough to stop what never should have been. Or maybe that His plan isn’t good enough, and I’m missing out because God was impotent or asleep or unconcerned. Is that really what the Bible shows us?

The story of Joseph dominates the last quarter of the book of Genesis. Seventeen when his adventures begin in chapter 37, he was the oldest son of his father’s favorite wife. Add in a bit of youthful arrogance, God-given dreams, and ten older brothers, and you have the makings of a tumultuous upbringing. Over the next thirteen years, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, sold into Egypt by the slave traders, sexually tempted by his master’s wife, falsely accused of attempted rape, thrown in jail, and completely forgotten by a servant of Pharaoh he helped. Yet, Joseph never lost his faith in God.

“In God’s hands intended evil becomes eventual good,” Max Lucado writes in *You’ll Get Through This*. “Joseph tied himself to the pillar of this promise and held on for dear life. Nothing in his story glosses over the presence of evil. Quite the contrary. Bloodstains, tearstains are everywhere. Joseph’s heart was rubbed raw against the rocks of disloyalty and miscarried justice. Yet time and



time again God redeemed the pain” (Lucado, 7).

The Bible shows me that God’s plan is good—even when they include moments I don’t particularly like. His plan is good even when life is so hard I want to stay in bed and hide underneath the covers. If God is sovereign with supreme power and authority, then every event in my life is under His control. No circumstance is random, and no tragedy is unexpected. Which means I wasn’t cheated.

No, God’s just lining things up for something amazing.

Will You Still Love Him?

In *You’ll Get Through This: Hope and Help for Your Turbulent Times*, Max Lucado asks a pointed question: “Is God good only when the outcome is?”

Most of us don’t like to consider that question because we’d rather our life just be good so we can boldly declare God’s goodness to others. But, that’s not the way God works. It’s not the path to holiness nor to dependence on God, appreciation of God for who He actually is.

First Timothy 6:15 calls God *the blessed and only Ruler*. God tells us in Isaiah 55:9 that His ways are higher than our ways, and Romans 11:33 says, *How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!* We will never fully understand God or His ways as long as we live on this earth. His infinite being is beyond our finite mind.

Which leads to another great question that we must all wrestle with, one asked by Sheila Walsh in *God Loves Broken People*. “Will you still love a God you don’t understand?” (Walsh, 83).

When life is overwhelming and you can barely get yourself out of bed in the morning, God asks, “Will you still love me?” When you’re exhausted from just keeping up with the most basic things that need done and the light at the end of your tunnel seems to have faded with the sunset, God asks, “Will you still love me?”

Will you still love Him, even in this pain that you don’t want and can’t see any good in? Will you still love Him as you journey through your valley of the shadow of death?