

Regarding Thursday: Comfort for Christians Facing Illness and Uncertainty About the Future

By Daryl Wingerd

"Regarding Thursday," I wrote to a friend, "please do not be worried." She was a few days away from exploratory surgery which might reveal anything from a clean bill of health to cancer. In her email to me she had admitted her trepidation and asked for comfort. Having never faced a similar prospect myself, I spent some time thinking about how I would feel if I were in her shoes. I came to realize, first of all, that I too would be intensely concerned. When I wrote back, it was not to say "don't worry" as though *I* never would.



I then began to meditate on some of the factors that make Christians fearful when faced with the possibility (or reality) of a long-term or terminal illness, along with biblical responses to each. The following is an expanded version of the email I sent to my friend. I hope these meditations will help you, or someone you know who is facing a similar problem.

Perhaps you fear death itself. If you are a true Christian, however, "to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). As Paul went on to say concerning his own prospect of either dying or living, his first choice was "to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better" (v. 23).

Perhaps you fear pain and suffering. The prospect of pain is unpleasant any way you think about it, particularly when it is long-term or severe. But think of the benefits! First, debilitating pain and physical weakness drives you to rely more fully upon the strength of Christ. What Jesus said to Paul also applies to you: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Second, every spasm of pain can be a blessing if it makes you think of what lies ahead, for "The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). Finally, for the Christian, suffering is part of the purifying work of God. He is displaying His love for you by using trials to make you more like Christ. Remember Hebrews 12:11—"All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness."

Perhaps you fear becoming a burden to other Christians. No one wants to spend a lot of time in the "special needs chair." We tend to feel self-conscious about all the attention, even guilty for requiring so much self-sacrificing goodness from others. But serving you in a long-term illness would be a special opportunity for your Christian brothers and sisters. They are, after all, the workmanship of God, "created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph. 2:10). By serving you they are only fulfilling

their purpose as Christians. Jesus gave Himself for them "to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:14). It is an opportunity, then, and not a burden, for Christians to "do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10).

Perhaps you fear the loss your family will experience if you die. If you were to die after suffering from a serious illness, your friends and family would certainly mourn the loss, but your death would also be cause for great rejoicing. Do they want you to be happy and free from pain? Will they not be glad, then, to know that you are *indescribably* happy and pain-free *forever*? Will they not rejoice to know that, being "absent from the body," you are "at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8)? Teach others to think rightly about your death by thinking and speaking biblically about it yourself.

Perhaps you fear the loss of your usefulness in ministry. This may come as a surprise, but God does not need you for the proper functioning or advance of His kingdom. While you are alive He is certainly using you and the gifts He has given you, but you have made no "personal contribution" to His work. Ask yourself what Paul asked the Corinthians: "What do you have that you did not receive?" (1 Cor. 4:7). As Jesus said to His disciples, "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). However much God has gifted you for service, He has plenty more where that came from, "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things." (Rom. 11:36). Even John the Baptist said of himself and his ministry in comparison with Christ, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

Perhaps you fear not seeing the outcome of important concerns. Maybe you are praying for an unconverted child, for example, and do not want to die before seeing him or her converted. Remember that while God "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11), He does not always reveal how things will work out in relation to *your* will. You may be tempted to think that it would be better for you to stick around in order to "help" your child find Christ, but God needs no help in drawing sinners to Himself. Don't be surprised, in fact, if He uses your suffering, even your death, as the very means of converting your child. The point is, God will *still* work "all things after the counsel of His will," even after you are gone.

"Regardless of what is discovered on Thursday," I wrote to my friend, "God has not lost His grip on your life. The bottom line is, 'God causes all things to work together for good, for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.' Thursday cannot turn out for the worse in any ultimate sense—not for one of God's children."