

A PASTOR ON THE SICK BED

Some of you might think that a Christian, and especially myself as a pastor, should not have been in hospital in the first place. To many it spells spiritual defeat, a lack of faith. I was there to undergo a major operation. But I would like to show you that in many ways it was a blessing, and in God's wise purposes it was designed to be a blessing! We actually need to be exercising our faith in using these times for spiritual advantage.

1. It was a blessing to me personally.

- It showed my personal weakness. Knowing there would be at least 5 days in hospital after the operation I went armed with my Bible and much reading material. I have to confess that I managed to read my Bible only a little, and meaningful prayer was so difficult. Perhaps it was the effects of the anaesthesia. There was certainly little peace and quiet in the ward so if there was an opportunity to read and pray one always felt like sleeping. It was hard to focus the mind. I have never experienced this before, and neither can I remember having heard anyone say these things. I longed for brethren to come and read the Scriptures and pray with me. What a valuable lesson, as our weakness, spiritually and physically, is the true state of affairs. Is it not a blessing to be confronted with one's own weakness (see 2 Corinthians 12:9-10)? Why are we ashamed to confess our weakness? It is only when we know our weakness that we can be spiritually strong. Thank God for anything that shows we are weak, and that brings us to depend on Christ!
- It has given me more sympathy for others in like situations. In a way I could wish this had happened to me 20 years ago! I only had one time of pain and discomfort a couple of days after the operation but, of course, I did not know what it was and where it would lead. It took so long for a nurse to come, and then one just came and stood by my side and 'held my hand' as it were. What a comfort it was! Many of you have known this but I have never felt such helplessness and dependency physically. Few of us stay in hospital repeatedly, so it is a new experience for most. Such new experiences are often difficult to handle. We do not know what to expect. So we must comfort others with the comfort with which we have been comforted (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

2. It was a blessing to ministered to in hospital, and there were lessons to be learned.

- The importance of hospital visitation. It was the first lengthy time for me to be on 'the other side' – a patient. Up to now my life has been visiting patients in hospital and home. I longed for visits from my wife and brethren, and had many wonderful surprises. It has made me see all the more the importance of making an effort to visit even with the problem of horrendous traffic jams in Nairobi. One thing to be aware of when visiting; if there are signs of weariness in the patient prepare to leave.
- Read the Scriptures. How much I needed to be refreshed with familiar Scriptures read and simply explained, such as Psalm 23. Don't think: 'You are my pastor and *you* have always been doing it!' One pastor came and directed me to Scripture as we talked, and this was of such help. Then lead in a simple and earnest prayer based on the Scripture that has been read.

- Give true spiritual encouragement. Brethren were so concerned for me, hardly ever having seen me laid aside in 40 years. They constantly said, 'You will be well', and I always added, 'Lord willing'. How could anyone know for sure that I would recover? I really appreciated those who said, 'I am praying you will recover quickly so that you can continue to minister to us as our pastor'. There must be a definite and godly reason for remaining in this world. We need to give a comfort that extends beyond this life, that God's grace will be sufficient whatever the future holds, and that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:37-39). Just before being anaesthetized I had to ask myself if I am ready to die. Thank God for the Lord Jesus Christ! Then, if God does bring recovery, we need to be told that God has a purpose in this (Romans 8:28), certainly to be a witness to those around, staff and patients, while we remain in hospital.

3. It was a blessing to observe God's kind providences.

Before going into hospital I asked my brethren to pray that the Lord would help me to be a witness. There were some very encouraging opportunities.

- One nurse was particularly helpful and late one evening she opened up that she had been bitter with God for 17 years having been widowed with 2 young children. I had given a booklet on 'Bitterness' to the one in the bed next to me and she had picked it up. If you have to go to hospital, you may not be able to talk much, so consider carrying appropriate literature to distribute.
- I was able to speak the gospel to a male nurse as he attended me and he opened up saying how hard they find it when they do everything for a patient but still they die under their care. What a difficult work they have to do.
- Sunday night there was the terrible incident of the double bus bombing. Ambulances raced in with sirens blaring. One of the victims occupied the bed next to me, and I found later that his wife had also been admitted in the same accident and 5 months pregnant. He had leg and hip injuries and could not move. It was past midnight but many of his university friends crowded round him. This continued through the next days, unconverted students not knowing what to say to him, even making jokes. Pastors prayed for healing, not considering God has many other purposes in such events in our lives. Some prayed against the devil as if all these things are only from that evil spirit; the Bible teaches that God is behind all that the devil is able to do (remember Job, 2 Samuel 24:1 compared with 1 Chronicles 21:1, 2 Corinthians 12:7). I had my opportunities later in the evenings, when they had all gone, to read the Bible and pray with him. I had given him the booklet on 'Bitterness' not realizing at the time how relevant it was to him (and others), and also one of our Grace & Truth magazines.
- There was an Ethiopian soldier opposite me, injured in the foot as he served in Somalia with the ANISOM forces. There were 3 more soldiers in the ward, one from Uganda, one from Sierra Leone, and one from Djibouti. Language was a problem for 2 of them, as one needed Amharic, and another Afar (Djibouti).
- Diagonally opposite me was a strapping, 'macho' man from Kinshasa DRC, self-admitted for an operation on his neck. He did not need anyone to help him, he thought, and drew the curtains around his bed and started phoning home. But after surgery, with intense pain, he needed help and reassurance constantly. I was able to have some words with him and leave some literature.

- Finally there was one of my 2 surgeons who went out of his way to help me. He even went on our church website to find out more. I was able to tell him before the operation that I am not afraid to die because of the Lord.

CONCLUSION

Instead of praying against situations that we do not like, let us rather accept them, and ask the Lord to use them in our personal growth as Christians. "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline," says the Lord (Revelation 3:19). "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:11). Then we need to pray that in the situation of weakness we would be given opportunities to be a witness to Christ. Often it is just such a circumstance that brings an open door. If Paul and Silas had not been unjustly treated and thrown into prison in Philippi they would not have been able to witness to the jailer. If Paul's trials had been examples of justice then he would not have appealed to Caesar and he would have had no opportunity to bring the gospel to Caesar's household. God's ways are not our ways.