

COPING WITH CHRONIC ILLNESS

By: Arnettie Wright

In Joshua Chapter 3, Joshua talked to the Israelites before crossing the Jordan River. In essence he told them to stay close to God since they had never walked that way before. *"If you have never walked in strange places, been in difficult situations or faced unforeseen trials, probably before this life is over you will. So stay close to the Lord."*

My husband, Wilbur, a Research Chemist from Monsanto, retired in January 1994. In a few months he began to feel bad, losing weight and his energy became less and less. A biopsy in June 1995 determined that he had cirrhosis of the liver as a result of working with toxic chemicals.

During the next three years we made many trips to Kirklín Clinic so he could be checked and treated. We were told that the cirrhosis might progress rapidly, slowly, or not at all. At first there were no changes and then it progressed slowly.

We did not realize the seriousness of the problem until he had gall bladder surgery in December of 1997. Then a picture of the liver taken showed the damage and it was carried to the Clinic on our next visit.

Late in May 1998 when Wilbur was lying on the couch where he spent most days, the doctor called to say that he had been reviewing Wilbur's record. He decided that his liver was damaged enough that he should be evaluated for a liver transplant. We had to face three possibilities: 1). He might be approved; 2). He might not be approved; or, 3). Be approved but not get the transplant in time and die.

All of this was bad enough but more problems developed - kidney stones! You probably know of the pain involved. Wilbur passed thirty-four stones from May through August. This made bad matters worse but in November 1998 an overactive parathyroid was removed which was causing the stones.

In June 1998 the team of transplant doctors, one of who was a fellow Auburn graduate, evaluated Wilbur. I will always believe that the Lord placed him there to help us. He was the one who presented Wilbur's history to the transplant team. I believe that he helped to persuade the group to accept Wilbur. We knew the doctors thought it was too early for him to be added to the transplant list. Wilbur was considered only borderline but he made the transplant list. You know who was responsible? God!

People from all over the United States come to UBA for organ transplants and we just *praise God* that this was so near and available to us. Many leave families, stay in the hospital for weeks, and lose jobs and medical insurance before ever receiving a transplant.

We began to ask people to pray because *there is power in prayer*. We did not want Wilbur to get sick enough for a transplant and certainly did not want someone to die for him to receive one. That is when I learned the meaning of the *"Lord's will be done."*

Wilbur had no energy, could hardly take a shower and his medication would not allow him to be in the sun. He never wanted to go anywhere nor did he feel like it. For the last six-months before the transplant, he was very inactive. For me, I was still trying to adjust to his retirement. Since he traveled often for Monsanto, I had been able to set my own schedule. Those days were over! Now especially with his being sick, he wanted me home all the time. I really did not have much choice with my having to do so much as he did not even have the energy to carry out the garbage, walk to the mailbox or help answer the phone.

We could not blame anyone for his illness, as it was no one's fault. It just happened. Being Christians does not exempt us from problems in life. David tells us in Psalms 34:9 that God is there to help us in difficult times. But to get out of difficulty, you generally have to go through it. With God's help, I did. In Psalms 34:4 we learn that God is always with us. I could not have survived without Him and so many of you whom He used to answer my prayers.

In Acts 17:11 we learn that the Bereans searched the scriptures daily. I knew the promises of God for providing the necessities of life, but now I need to know more. When you "grow up" in the church, you develop faith, but you don't know if it is real until it is tested. Your faith will carry you or you will not survive. I began to search God's word and pray fervently.

I learned there were many promises and one was in Psalms 37: 23&24. The Lord establishes the steps of a man, and he delights in his way. When he falls, he shall not be hurled head long because the Lord is the one who holds his hand. Notice four things: 1) we will fall. 2) We will not fall on our face. 3) The Lord is with us. 4) He is holding our hand.

We learn in Proverbs 16:19 that God will direct our steps. When we don't know how or where to go, He leads us. Isn't it amazing what the Lord will do, if we will just turn everything over to Him? His promises are there for us but we have to believe and take advantage of them. A life preserver thrown to us in rushing water is no value unless we grab it and hold on. Right...?

Have you ever thought what you would do if your world falls apart? Strength from God's word is available but we must have stored it in our hearts and minds before trouble comes. God's word in our heart is like a bank account, you must make deposits before you make withdrawals.

During Wilbur's illness and recovery, I saw God's promises fulfilled many times. Also I learned things that can't be changed must be endured. We are told in Isaiah 40:31 those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, fly like eagles, not be weary, walk and faint. *Wait on the Lord!*

WAITING AND NOT KNOWING! We all have probably had that experience. We all are in God's waiting room for one reason or another. While waiting we often become anxious and fearful because God may not come when we call, but he is always on time.

Waiting does not mean that we are not in God's will and this time of waiting can be used as a time of spiritual growth and certainly is needed. We must learn to *trust God's promises* and *wait in confidence*.

What do you do when you face impossibility? You go to God and you leave it with Him. *Remember He's the Specialist!*

In 1998 the average waiting time for a liver transplant was from one and a half to three years. In December only six months after Wilbur's name was added to the list. We were told to be prepared for a transplant in January or February. I was not ready but I was just the caregiver. Sometimes I wonder if it is more difficult for the caregiver than the patient.

At noon Friday, February 4, 1999 the phone rang and we were on our way to UAB. We were told to arrive as quickly as possible so they could begin preparing Wilbur for the surgery. We were expecting state troopers to be on the road and lead us to the hospital; Between Decatur and Birmingham not one was seen. Wilbur said they could never have caught up with me if they had seen us. With God's protection we did arrive safely and then we were asked, "Where is the patient?" They looked at Wilbur and told us that he was not sick enough for a transplant. See how God was blessing us as most people are near death by then. We continue to be amazed at all the ways God was blessing us. In fact during the past week, one local doctor had two patients to die with liver problems. One went for the transplant and died before getting it. The other one died three days after the transplant.

Hardly had we arrived at the hospital until our family and our Austinville family came. They stayed through the night with the surgery only taking four and a half hours when it could have taken up to fourteen. The liver began to function even before the doctors had the stitches sewn. You know why? I have reminded Wilbur from time to time...He got a woman's liver!

Three days later Wilbur's body showed signs of rejection of the new organ and here came our families again. Later we learned that was normal, as adjustments in the body were being made to a foreign organ. There will always be the possibility of the liver being rejected and that's the reason an anti rejection drug will have to be taken for life.

That week I was so sick with a sinus infection that I was in bed most of the time at the hotel. An apartment, funded by the Liver Foundation, became available. I was too sick to move and got lost driving around the block down there.

A young friend who had lived in Birmingham came down from Austinville to check on us. I know God sent her that day to help me but had she not come; I know that He would have sent someone else.

After living in the Townhouse apartment for a month, we were allowed a pass to come home for the weekend. We were exhausted physically and emotionally when we arrive home for that weekend. But again, we were blessed by another friend who had food cooked for us.

We returned to Birmingham and after a couple of weeks we were dismissed to come home. In three days we were on our way to UAB again. Wilbur had developed a fever. It left just as mysteriously as it came. We could see God working in our lives.

At home again Wilbur was back on the couch, not feeling well and not walking, as he should. About a month later he began to have pain in his legs and was on his way from Decatur General, by ambulance to UAB with blood clots. As I was driving down, I prayed, "Lord don't let me have to stay in that hospital one more night." From Wilbur's hospital room that night I heard a familiar voice in the hall, and I knew immediately I had a place to stay. The transplant husband of a new friend was back in the hospital so she invited me to stay with her. The very same day her husband was dismissed, the Social Worker called to say that my name was at the top of the Baptist list for an apartment. They rent apartments to out of town people for a minimum fee. I did not know to remove my name from their list when we came home. This was not accident or good luck but God's way in caring for us.

Do you see how I coped? Through God's providential care all our needs were met, even to the parking space needed each day for trips to the Clinic for lab work. We just continue to thank the Lord!

When you are SO OVERWHELMED in times of crisis, it is difficult to realize God's presence and help. In looking back I can see His providence through it all, every.... step.... of.... the.... way.

After five years there have really been no problems with the transplant itself. Wilbur was recently told by one of his doctors that he had done better than any of his patients. He was able to stop taking the steroids before he gained so much weight and now is on the lowest level of the anti-rejection drug possible. He only sees the doctors once a year for a checkup. They told him that he would die one day but not from liver disease.

God's love and the love, concern, prayers and encouragement of so many helped me. This was shown in so many ways, (maybe insignificant to you, but certainly not to me) - the fruit baskets, cards, calls, visits, Valentine candy, and food sent to our apartment at the Townhouse. Even money was sent which was not needed and passed on to others. A friend sent a copy of the song, "Till the storm passes over"-----and it did. However, I do not believe that God will do anything for me that I can do for myself. I must do all I can and then God will take over. In times of trials you must:

1. Take your eyes off yourself
2. look around to see whose prayers you can answer because you can always see someone whose problems are worse than yours
3. Cling to God's promises
4. Think positively
5. Keep a merry hear
6. Learn to accept things that cannot be changed

7. be optimistic and
8. Keep your mind busy even if it is just calling on the phone or writing a not to some one who is lonely and discouraged

It will bless both of you. NEVER, NEVER under estimate the power of a touch, a hug, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear or a word of encouragement. Even the smallest act of caring in difficult times has the potential to turn a life completely around.

REMEMBER TO THE WORLD YOU MAY BE JUST ONE PERSON BUT TO ONE PERSON YOU MAY BE THEIR WORLD.

Rosemary McKnight wrote that storms are a joy to the eagle, for they enable it to rise to new heights of glory. It soars effortlessly letting the wind carry it where a lesser bird cannot fly. The eagle does not escape the storm; it simply uses the storm to lift it higher.

When trials happen to us, we can use them to help us mature spiritually. Their purpose is not to get us down but to lift us up. Truly God can bring blessings out of adversity and to Him be the glory!

LISTEN TO ME LADIES!

Paul writes in Romans 2:11 that God is no respecter of persons. He is not partial to any of His children. He will do for you what he has done for me. I am no more special to Him than you! You are always number one with God. ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT!

I thank you.

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