

In Faithfulness

I want to start off my story with a passage that has meant so much to me throughout my journey. My title is also taken from this passage. It was what I had to remind myself of constantly—these afflictions were given to me, my family, and the church in God’s faithfulness to us. “I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me. Let, I pray thee, thy merciful kindness be for my comfort, according to thy word unto thy servant,” Psalm 119: 75-76.

I was diagnosed around 5 years of age with asthma. Asthma is a chronic lung disease that causes inflammation and narrowing of the airways. Asthma attacks are often caused by spasms in the bronchi of the lungs. An asthma attack is often triggered by allergens (i.e., dust, molds, and animal dander) or other illnesses. An asthma attack often causes shortness of breath or wheezing due to the restricted movement of air through the inflamed airway. My asthma was greatly influenced by allergens that entered my body.

My family moved to from Michigan to Iowa in July 2006. Due to the different allergens in different parts of the country, my asthma was triggered greatly by the allergens in Iowa, especially with fall approaching right after we moved. Starting already in August, I was in and out of the hospital constantly during the fall. If I recall correctly, I was in and out of the hospital six times in three months, often times for weeks at a time.

In January 2007 I was in the hospital for a full month with asthma, pneumonia, and CMV. With this hospitalization, I was in the ICU for some time. I was not getting better but declining, so they had to look into my lungs with a bronchoscope. This is a minor outpatient procedure. However, for me it was a major life-threatening procedure because of my condition. My family was called to my bedside. We are called to be ready for the Lord to take us to live with Him. Our sinful human nature causes us not to want to leave this earth; it is hard to be prepared to die. I didn’t realize how unprepared I was to die until this time came. I had to say my good-byes to my husband, my kids, and our families. It was so hard to leave my loved ones in the Lord’s hands. Meanwhile, that was my only comfort in going into surgery the next morning. The Lord gave me the peace that passes all understanding, which is spoken of in Philippians 4:7, “And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

Through that incident the Lord worked greatly in my heart. At that time I did not know I would be battling many more hospitalizations and other moments of having to say good-bye.

This peace worked in my heart strength so that I could endure whatever was to come to pass. I knew and was convinced that the Lord would take care of my family. This gave me strength to go forward that moment, as well as for many more moments that were yet to come. I have had many hospitalizations since—too many to count.

The tightening of my chest, the feeling of a rubber band tightening and squeezing the air out of me, and the pain associated with both was terrible. My chest would hurt so badly. My ribs hurt for weeks on end. Once the doctors intubated me without any sedation. All I heard was, “You have to let us do this or you will die.” In the meantime I had to try to relax; otherwise everything would be worse. Another time I heard the nurses say “We’re losing her.”

It is amazing how when one is dying, it is possible to hear until the very end. I know from experience. When doctors and nurses would ask me to respond, I could hear them, but I could not move or talk. As much as my brain was telling me to respond, it just wouldn’t happen.

Those are scary moments to us since we have a sinful human nature. However, during these times, the Lord made it so that I could not do anything except pray. I would lie there while the doctors were trying desperately to keep me breathing, praying for my family. I just prayed for the Lord to be with them and to take care of them.

The allergens that entered my system caused severe asthma attacks. The doctors had to put me on prednisone (corticosteroid) to help reduce inflammation and therefore to help me breathe better. The prednisone helped with inflammation, which helped to increase the airflow and decrease the wheezing. The prednisone saved my life; however, in many ways it took my life.

There are so many side effects associated with prednisone, especially with being on high doses of it for a prolonged period of time. I went from taking a couple of inhalers and pills a day to daily nebulizers and anywhere from 20-30 pills a day. Prednisone causes increased appetite that is hard to control. It is a must-have appetite. Prednisone also causes fluid retention, which also is associated with the increase in weight that most experience.

I gained 200 pounds on prednisone over the years, although most of it was put on quite suddenly. I would gain 10 pounds a week at times. It was very hard to see my body increase that much. The scale kept going up, and I did not know if and when it would stop. I crept up to over 400 pounds. Not many can imagine that.

With the weight gain came immobility. I came close to not being able to get out of bed. It took so much effort even to roll onto my side in bed. I couldn’t clip my toe nails, clean myself, or put my socks on.

Prednisone also caused hypertension, low potassium levels, blood clots (deep vein thrombosis x 3), pulmonary embolism, sleeplessness, restlessness, gastric reflux disease (GERD), and steroid-induced diabetes. Prednisone can have an effect on your bones and cause osteoporosis, so I had to take Fosamax to prevent that.

Prednisone suppresses your immune system. Because my immune system was suppressed, I caught every “bug” out there, which in most cases required hospitalization again.

Prednisone also affects your muscles. It caused the muscles of my bladder not to function correctly, so that I was unable to urinate. I needed to have an indwelling catheter. Prednisone affected so much that it is hard even to think of all the side effects I have experienced.

In a way, I think that my burdens were greater burdens for my husband because he had so much to deal with. Kerwen would try to juggle being with me, the boys, and at work. Being the one that was ill, I couldn't think about anything else besides fighting to stay alive. My brain would not allow me to think of anything else: it was consumed with just trying to breathe. When one is so ill, your body shuts down and does only what is absolutely necessary.

The last couple of years, I would be hospitalized for asthma. I would feel very short of breath, at times not being able to breathe, but many times my oxygen would be okay and there was not much wheezing. However, I was not moving much air. When the doctor would listen to my lungs, he would not hear wheezing. He would just not hear much air movement. It came to it that I would enter the hospital fairly stable, but then suddenly could not breathe. The doctors ended up having to put me on the ventilator several times.

About a year and a half ago, I was placed on the ventilator for the first time, and I stayed on it for nine days. Even after getting off the ventilator it took me several days to come around, due to the sedation medication staying in my system. How hard that had to be for those staying by my bedside waiting for my eyes to open!

After being on the ventilator a long time, I was unable to talk. It takes quite awhile to get your voice back. So, I would try to whisper to Kerwen, mom, nurses, and the doctors. We'll just say they were not good at reading lips. I was off the ventilator, but I was unable to move my arms, legs, or anything, so I could not even write anything down for them. I was so frustrated with them because it was so difficult to communicate my needs for a time.

I was helpless. I came off the ventilator, but I ended up with encephalopathy. Encephalopathy is a disorder or disease of the brain. It is not a single disease, but a syndrome of brain dysfunction caused by severe illnesses. My brain had to be retrained on how to comb my hair, eat, sit up, stand up, and walk. I really had to relearn everything. I had to have rehab for

two weeks after being in the hospital for three weeks. I did not know how much I would get back. However, every day I made huge strides. The first try at sitting up, I had five therapists holding me up. The first time I stood up, the therapist was holding me up with a gait belt and I was holding onto the parallel bars. That occurred at the beginning of the week, and by the end of the week I started walking a little bit with help of special walkers.

Since that hospitalization, I had several other hospitalizations during which I ended up on the ventilator as well, usually for just a short time, but nonetheless on the ventilator. In April 2011, I ended up in the hospital. I was being treated for an asthma attack again. I would be in ICU on the ventilator, then transferred out of ICU in stable condition, only to be transferred back to ICU that same day or the next to be placed back on the ventilator. This had happened before as well, but it is quite unusual. My pulmonary specialist, along with a pulmonary specialist at Mayo Clinic started thinking that something else besides asthma was going on.

After another visit to Mayo Clinic in March, they began wondering about my vocal cords. When I was hospitalized again in April, the doctors conferred and decided that it was probably vocal cord dysfunction and not asthma causing all the problems. In April they took extreme measures and did a tracheotomy, so that even if there is paralysis of my vocal cords, I can still breathe through my trach.

Little did we know that this would be the answer to our prayers. The trach has done wonders for my health. For the first time in five years, I was able to get off prednisone. I have been able to breathe without the help of prednisone. I have been able to lose weight (100 pounds in 5 months). I have been able to get off a few other medications. I no longer have to have insulin for diabetes. I am becoming more active. I have been able to stay home and out of the hospital. Our family has been able to stay together. I have been able to attend church again lately, even though it is only once a Sunday because I do not have full strength yet. Nevertheless, it has been such a blessing to be able to go up to the house of the Lord again on the Sabbath day and to have communion of saints.

There were a couple of things that I really struggled with. First, I did not understand why the Lord kept me away from his house so long. This was so difficult for me. I desired so much to be able to go to the Lord's house on Sunday, but time and again this was taken away from me. There were times when it was many months before I could go to church. Then the Lord would bring me up into his house once and then take it away again for many more months. I still struggle with this and often wonder why. However, I do know the Lord has worked in me such a desire to be in his house that I pray will never go away. I am thankful for the means of DVDs, internet, and radio so that even if I am at home or in the hospital, I am able to here God's word preached by Protestant Reformed ministers and missionaries.

Another tough struggle was that I was unable to perform my duties as a wife and mother. For quite some time God has taken away my husband's wife and my children's mother. I tried to show God's faithfulness and instruct the boys when I was able, but most of that was taken out of my hands. I was too sick to perform the basic duties of tucking children in bed, getting them ready for school, doing homework with them, and playing with them. I was unable to perform the duties of a wife. I wasn't able to tend to the house, dishes, laundry, or groceries. My husband ended up caring for me. I am thankful the Lord has given me a measure of recovery to start doing the duties of a mother and wife once again.

I want to go into what I have learned from all this. First and foremost, God is good. He has a perfect plan in our lives. He will care for us both body and soul. He has picked me up when I have fallen and could go no more. God has carried me and my family through this. God's promises are sure. They always have been and they always will be. God has brought me and my family much closer to him. I have felt closeness to God that I have never felt before. God is omnipresent. He never forsakes or leaves me. Thanks be to God!

Secondly, I learned not to question the "what ifs". We do not always know what is right. However, we do what we think is the way in which the Lord wants to lead us. It is not right to question the "what ifs," because the Lord willed for everything to happen at a certain time in our lives. All things are in God's hands. Even before we were born, he had our life planned. Everything in his perfect plan for our lives must come to pass for our place to be prepared in glory with him.

God also made it known to me that there were many others watching how I dealt with my affliction. I had to deal with it in a manner that others around me could see that I was a child of God. God used me to be a witness to fellow patients, family, nurses, doctors, and therapists. What a humbling thought! I hope and pray that God uses me and my affliction to help others in their afflictions. What a weak means to fulfill His will!

God has also taught me to look at others differently. I am obese, and what people say and even the looks on the street hurt so much. I look at overweight people differently now. Many of them can't help being heavy. There are many underlying causes that we do not know. I ask that you all please not be judgmental. God has given each and every one of us different situations in life. Many of those situations are unknown to others. Instead of looking at a person's appearance, look into the heart. Many whose outward appearance is not perfect or even repulsive may have a heart that is beautiful. Many times it is the ones who are less than perfect from an earthly standpoint who have hearts that shine. It is someone's heart that makes them beautiful. Our actions come from the heart. If our heart is beautiful, then our actions will glorify God.

Another important lesson that God has taught me and my family is to treasure one another. Nothing on this earth matters. It will all be taken away. When I was ill, I wanted to do things as a family. The Lord did allow us to have many special moments together. I wanted to leave my husband and boys with memories of us together. We had several vacations, including trips to Wisconsin Dells, Colorado, and Yellowstone. These were trips full of memories that we will always treasure. I encourage everybody to take time as a family. Show the love of Christ to one another first in your own family.

The Lord has also taught us to number our days. It became very real to me that we do not know what the next moment will bring. Not tomorrow or next week, but today, set your heart on wisdom's ways. Take time to have fellowship with God. Pray and study his word. There is nothing that will bring more happiness to your heart. "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom," Psalm 90:12.

Another significant lesson God taught me was that I learned to rely on him. Our sinful human nature wants to try to fix everything ourselves. I was placed flat on my back. I could only look up. God is my help. It is to God that I have to go to in affliction. It is God who gives me the grace that I need to bear the affliction that he has sent me. God's grace is sufficient. It is not sufficient for the next five years, but it is sufficient for the moment. That is why we have to live life a moment at a time. There were many times that I could not even live life a day at a time. We do not know what God has in store for us. However, we do know that he will give us grace to bear that moment.

Through undergoing severe affliction, the Lord has taught me to encourage and pray for others in affliction. I now know how much it means to get the encouraging words, cards, phone calls, emails, etc. from fellow saints. I cannot express how much these were appreciated. It has opened my eyes to make sure that I encourage others that are in deep affliction. The truth that we are all one body really impressed itself on me. I never felt as if I was bearing this affliction alone. I felt that the whole body of Christ was carrying it with me. Thank you all! This affliction has helped me more fully to understand what others who are in severe affliction are going through. I pray that the Lord will use my affliction as a means that will help others to bear their affliction as well. I rest assured that He will.

God is good. God sends us affliction. We must be thankful to God for these afflictions and his care of us in them. These afflictions are another step in our earthly life. They keep us on the straight and narrow pathway. They bring us one step closer to the place now being prepared for us in heaven. They are shaping and molding us so that we will be fit for our place in heaven. God has created heaven with all of his children in mind. We each have our own specific place. The puzzle can't be complete until each piece, perfectly shaped and molded, has taken its place. May the puzzle be complete soon! I can't wait for that day of no sin, suffering,

and pain, and to be reunited with all of God's children in heaven. What a glorious day that will be! Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!