



THE  
MENTORING  
PROJECT

HOPE IN GOD:  
FACING ILLNESS  
WITH A FAILING  
BODY



ANDY FENTON

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# INTRODUCTION

Whether short- or long-term, terminal or treatable, receiving a diagnosis and coping with chronic illness is exhausting and often lonely. Some days feel as though the oxygen has been turned off; daily existence can feel unbearably heavy. Hopes and dreams are flushed away. Where once the future was painted with bright hues, darkness descends and slowly covers every inch of life's canvas.

Sarah was 28 years old. I was studying at seminary. Our first son had just been born. Then, in late 2002, came the diagnosis: Sarah had Multiple Sclerosis (MS). Twenty-one years later, on December 22, 2023, Sarah breathed her painful last and went home.

In the early years, we were thankful. Doctors had made sense of varying symptoms; answers felt better than speculation. That was our rational thinking. Yet emotionally, our minds were dominated by darker, more irrational, and often self-absorbed questions: why does God allow sickness? How quickly will the MS progress? Will we be able to travel? Can we have more children? How will this affect intimacy?

If you are reading this while facing illness yourself, or standing alongside a sick friend or family member, or simply wanting to be better equipped to serve someone in the future—thank you. You are rare. Just look at the divorce rates and the crippling loneliness among the chronically ill. Faithful presence is precious and uncommon.

## ***Facing Illness***

The first and greatest challenge is simply to face the illness. To face it is to acknowledge it and refuse denial. It is to step into painful reality rather than hiding behind blind optimism or shallow Christian truisms. Yes, we trust that God is good and sovereign—that is gloriously true. But do not let those

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truths anaesthetise you to what is right in front of you. Face your illness honestly and recognise you do so... trusting God during illness.

### ***In a Failing Body***

There was a time when looking in the mirror was not a nightmare-inducing horror show. Yet the reality is that every day our bodies are gradually failing. Pertness goes south; chiselled features soften under life's weathering storms. If we are married, the same is true of our spouse.

On our wedding day, we spoke covenant vows: "in sickness and in health," "for better, for worse." On that joyful day, those words trip easily off the tongue without deep reflection—and that is fine. Couples should enjoy the mist of romance without descending into despair. But eventually, every one of us reaches the "in sickness" and "for worse" chapters of life. Married or not, we try to deny it. We buff the veneer. Yet as physical beings, we are all locked into bodies that are failing.

### ***Fight***

Illness simply increases the tempo of our bodily decline—but it is a fight none of us can avoid, requiring strength in physical weakness. So, face illness, and fight.

Illness and suffering in a failing body is gut-wrenchingly awful. Sadness can overwhelm. There is loss, frustration, and the ache of missed opportunities. It feels unfair, especially in a culture that prizes physical strength and beauty. So, fight.

Fight to appreciate what you have: family, friends, work, safety. Discipline yourself to thank God for blessings, however small. I often thank God for clotted cream and good strawberry preserve on freshly baked scones. Yes, I am British, and this is a genuine jewel in my prayer life.

Fight to uphold the dignity and beauty of being created as physical human beings. Being made in God's image is easily forgotten when the body fails. It is tempting to give up—do not. We are not to idolise our bodies, but as those made in God's image (Genesis 1:27–28), we are called to steward them with care. That is difficult when aches are relentless and aesthetics discouraging, but lovingly do what you can.

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One Christmas, a wealthy friend gave my wife some Christian Dior hand moisturiser. It was beautifully scented and extravagantly indulgent. As I applied it to her hands, she felt cared for. The rest of her body was failing, but in that small act we upheld her dignity as an image-bearer of God Almighty. And perhaps she arrived in heaven with the softest, rose-scented hands imaginable.

Above all, fight to keep trusting Christ, even when your strength feels spent and your questions remain unanswered. When Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” it was the only time He did not address His Father as “Father.” In that moment, He experienced God as the just Judge. He endured abandonment, bearing the full weight of divine justice for sin. It was suffering beyond anything we can comprehend. As this great hymn recalls:

*Bearing shame and scoffing rude,  
in my place condemned he stood;  
sealed my pardon with his blood:  
Hallelujah, what a Saviour! (P. P. Bliss, Man of Sorrows)*

Whatever life brings, we will never endure what Christ endured. That truth does not trivialise our suffering, but it does relativise it. It also gives us someone to turn to:

*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15).*

Jesus understands when no one else does. So fight the pull toward constant introspection and turn to Him. He knows what you are going through—even better than you do.

What follows are six short biblical reflections that I pray will help you face illness and find hope in your failing body.

*“Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord!” (Psalm 31:24).*

# 1

## ILLNESS ISN'T WHO YOU ARE

### *Facing Illness*

It is easy to forget our identity in Christ in illness. In the busyness of life, every Christian wrestles to remember who they are. We carry many important roles and responsibilities—being a parent, a spouse, pursuing a career. These matter, yet they can slowly become the measure of our worth as competing pressures vie for primacy in our lives. Add to this the daily grind, the pull of social media exposing our insecurities, and the constant comparison surrounding career progress, and our sense of self can feel fragile even in good health.

Then illness comes. The scheduling of medication, hospital appointments, test results, and physical limitations can dominate our thoughts. Our bodies, once reliable, begin to fail. The vicissitudes of life press heavily upon us. In such moments, it is easy to define ourselves by diagnosis, pain levels, or prognosis. We may begin to think, “I am sick,” before we remember, “I am Christ’s.” We must remind ourselves of what does the Bible say about illness and who we are in the midst of it. Even finding Christ in the hospital or the doctor’s office is possible when we anchor our identity in Him rather than our symptoms.

Yet God’s Word anchors us and reminds us, as Paul writes, that we are blessed “in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3). Through faith, we are united to Him. This is not a fragile or shifting identity; it is secure and eternal. Jesus Himself says, “I am the true vine... you are the branches” (John 15:5). Our life flows from Him, because our union with Him is our ultimate identity.

That is true for everyone—healthy or ill. Busyness can cloud it; suffering can obscure it. But illness cannot not sever our union with Christ. Our

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identity “in Christ” must remain the first priority, even when our bodies fail. In Him, there is hope in a failing body—a hope that sickness cannot erase and weakness cannot diminish.

### ***More Than a Conqueror***

Illness has a way of rewriting how we see ourselves. A diagnosis can feel like a new name, a new category, a new defining label.

Sarah received her diagnosis of MS while I was studying at seminary. At the time, I was immersed in Romans 8. In the middle of medical uncertainty, I was studying these words:

*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us (Romans 8:37).*

The Greek word Paul uses is *hyper-nikōmen* — often translated, ‘more than a conqueror’, ‘overwhelmingly conquering’ or ‘completely victorious’.

That Greek word lodged itself in my heart and was the identity check-point on a daily basis for our family for over twenty years. Each year on our wedding anniversary, I sent Sarah a card with one word written inside “*hyper-nikōmen*.” Why? Because we needed the reminder. Not a reminder that life was easy. Not a denial of pain. But a reminder of the gospel—of our identity in Christ.

Paul does not say we will be conquerors one day. He says, “we are more than conquerors.” Present tense. Now. And always. In Christ.

If you have put your faith in Jesus, this is true of you. Whatever your pain, whatever your trial, whatever your diagnosis—you are more than a conqueror through Him who loved you.

That does not take away the pain. Romans 8 does not ignore suffering—just look at the few verses before. In fact, Paul lists it plainly: “trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword” (Romans 8:35). Yet in the very midst of those realities, Paul declares victory—not because of human strength, but because of union with Christ.

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Your body may be weak, your future may feel uncertain, but your identity is not determined by MRI results, blood tests, or medical charts. Your identity is determined by the cross and the empty tomb.

*“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).*

*“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:16).*

That is who you are.

And only in this truth will you begin to find any beauty in your trial. Not because suffering is good, but because Christ is present with you in it. Because nothing—“neither death nor life... nor anything else in all creation”—“will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39).

Practically, what does this look like?

For a season, Sarah could not read as her eyesight was limited. So we listened to the Bible, to sermons and faithful teaching. We prayed together. We anchored ourselves in truth when feelings were unreliable, seeking spiritual encouragement for the sick through the Word.

Biblical hope for a failing body begins when we remind ourselves that illness is not who we are. It does not define us. We are “in Christ.” And in Him, we are *hyper-nikōmen*—overwhelmingly conquering. That is not positive thinking; that is the Biblical hope found in gospel reality.

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. What tends to define you most in seasons of illness or weakness?
2. How does Romans 8 reshape the way you view suffering?
3. What practical steps can you take to help you remember your identity in Christ?

## 2

# ILLNESS FOR GOD'S GLORY

### ***When Illness Strikes***

When illness strikes, life is never the same. Control slips through our fingers. This is not a choice we have made. The future we imagined bends in unfamiliar directions and in those moments, questions rush in: “Why this? Why now? Why me?”—questions about how to find hope.

But God is not silent. We are not left in the dark, forced to invent meaning for our suffering. In John 9:5, Jesus declares, “While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” The Light has come and He doesn’t leave us to despair or be confused, instead he speaks into it and moves toward it, demonstrating the power of God’s love.

John 9 has been such a helpful passage over the years. Verse 1 begins simply: “As he [Jesus] went along, he saw a man blind from birth.” Jesus saw him and that detail matters. The man is not an interruption, not an inconvenience, not a theological puzzle to be solved. He is simply seen and if you have spent any time in a wheelchair or laying on a hospital bed, you will know how easily unseen you can be, yet there is always hope in God.

Unlike the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10, who passed by on the Jericho Road, Jesus does not cross to the other side. He is not merely like the Good Samaritan—He is THE true and better Good Samaritan who moves toward our suffering.

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### ***Jesus Sees Us***

When illness enters our lives, it can feel as though we have become invisible—reduced to symptoms, scans, and statistics. But in John 9: Jesus sees. And when He sees, He moves toward. John 9 continues:

“As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

The disciples ask what feels like a natural question, but it is the wrong question. It is the reflex of the human heart. We want explanations. We want to know “why?”, by tracing the suffering backward. We hear the same instincts in the friends of Job (e.g. Eliphaz the Temanite in Job 4:6&7). We ask similar questions today in quieter forms: Is this punishment? Did I bring this on myself? Why am I suffering when others are not?

The disciples want an explanation, and they get one—but not the one they expect. They want the cause of the blindness, but Jesus gives them the purpose of the blindness, providing a Biblical perspective on healing. Look how Jesus replies:

*“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” (v.3)*

We know from Genesis 3 and Romans 8 that suffering entered the world because of sin. Jesus is not denying that reality. But here He shifts the lens. The ultimate explanation for this man’s blindness is not found in past sinful causes, but in the future sovereign purposes of God. The explanation is not ultimately behind him—it is ahead of him!

God is not reacting to suffering and then scrambling to use it for good. He is sovereign over it. However chaotic illness feels—and illness can make everything feel out of control! But we see here that there is no suffering outside of God’s purposes. Nothing slips past Him. This does not make suffering easy, but it makes it meaningful.

### ***In Healing or Sustaining***

In John 9, Jesus heals the man. The works of God are displayed dramatically and immediately. But here is something crucial: the glory of God is not dependent on healing alone. Ultimately it does not matter

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whether the man is healed or not. God can and will display His power in and through every person, even as we are finding rest in God. The purpose of my wife's disability was not the mere possibility of cure—it was that the works of God might be displayed.

Sometimes that display is through healing. Sometimes it is through sustaining grace. Paul learned this deeply, as we read in 2 Corinthians 12:9, when the Lord says to him:

*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*

Power perfected in weakness. Glory revealed in frailty. Strength displayed in dependence. Whether by removing the thorn or by sustaining us through it, God's works are shown.

### ***Lifting Our Eyes***

The sovereignty of God lifts our eyes from chaotic, retrospective causality—“*How did I get here? Why me? What chain of events caused this?*”

And it pushes us toward a future-oriented horizon—“*How will God display His works in this? How might He be glorified through this trial?*”

Instead of being trapped in backward-looking despair, we are invited into forward-looking trust—which transforms illness. It is no longer random. It is not meaningless. It is not outside the purposes of God. Jesus, the Light of the World, steps into the darkness and reframes the entire conversation.

So, when illness strikes and life is never the same, when control is gone and the future feels uncertain, John 9 is the ballast we need. Because when the cause mystifies our tiny human minds, we can trust the purpose because ‘the Light has come’. He sees. He moves toward. And in ways we may not yet grasp, the works of God will be displayed—whether through healing or through sustaining grace.

That is not denial. It is hope anchored in sovereignty. Illness, then, is not outside God's glory. In Christ, even here, the works of God can shine.

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### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. Where do you instinctively look for explanations when suffering comes?
2. What would it mean for the works of God to be displayed in your weakness?
3. How does believing in God's sovereignty lift your eyes?

# 3

## ILLNESS IS LIGHT AND MOMENTARY

We considered our identity—that illness does not get to name you, it is loud, but not ultimate. We then lifted our eyes to God, seeing that illness is never outside his sovereign good purposes. Now we move from identity and sovereignty to comparison and perspective as we turn to 2 Corinthians 4:16–18 and hear the apostle Paul say:

*“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*

### ***The Paradox of Christian Suffering***

These words were not written from comfort. They were written by a man acquainted with beatings, shipwreck, betrayal, imprisonment, and weakness. And yet he says, astonishingly: We do not lose heart.

*Though our outer self is wasting away...*

Illness makes this visible as bodies weaken, strength drains and independence fades. But there is no denial here and never does the Bible pretend that deterioration is not real. Paul acknowledges it plainly. The outward person is wasting away. But that is not the whole story.

*our inner self is being renewed day by day.*

Here is the paradox of Christian suffering: decline on the outside, renewal on the inside. Many of us have watched a body diminish while a soul grew

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stronger. As muscles failed, faith deepened. As independence shrank, dependence on Christ flourished. But being renewed is not automatic.

It happens as we open the Scriptures, as we pray in weakness, as we cling to Christ when nothing else holds. God doesn't waste suffering and illness. Instead he uses it as a furnace to refine (Psalm 66:10; 1 Peter 1:6-7). Therefore, when the world only sees loss and decline; heaven sees growth and renewal.

*For this light momentary affliction...*

We recoil at that phrase. Light? Momentary? There is nothing light about chronic pain. Nothing momentary about years of illness and treatment. Nothing trivial about watching someone you love fade. But Paul is not minimizing suffering. He is comparing it.

He places suffering on a scale. On one side: decades of illness, grief and sorrow. On the other: eternal glory. When you put time against eternity, even a lifetime is momentary. When you put affliction against glory, even the heaviest burden is light. The great hymn writer William Cowper understood this. Cowper was afflicted and ill for much of his life. He once wrote:

*His purposes will ripen fast,  
Unfolding every hour;  
The bud may have a bitter taste,  
But sweet will be the flower.  
("God Moves in a Mysterious Ways" by William Cowper)*

Illness is the bitter bud and glory is the flower. That doesn't minimise illness—the tears are real. But they are not final. Paul goes further saying these troubles are:

*preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison*

That is, suffering works. It does not save—Christ alone saves. But suffering shapes as it chisels pride and exposes our idols. It drives us to how to pray for the sick, encouraging desperate prayer and detaching us from a world that was never meant to satisfy—within the economy of God, nothing is wasted.

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Illness refines the sufferer, but it also refines the observer. Families are changed. Friends are awakened. Churches are humbled. Some cling more closely to Christ because they have seen another cling to Him, finding Christian hope in their example.

There is mystery here—and sometimes anger. We may never understand all the reasons for illness this side of glory. But Scripture insists suffering is not pointless. It is achieving something weighty and eternal, showing God's power in weakness. And therefore, what feels like subtraction (illness) is often preparation for something that is better by far. Notice the language:

*an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.*

Glory has weight. Illness and suffering feel very heavy—but glory is heavier. It outweighs grief. It outweighs regret. It outweighs the grave. That is, eternity will not merely compensate for suffering; it will overwhelm it.

The dance that illness prevented will not be postponed forever. The capacities that faded will be restored beyond imagination. What was hindered here will be unhindered there. And when eternity stretches out before us—endless, radiant, unbroken—we will see how brief this chapter truly was.

### ***Looking to What Is Unseen***

But today, especially when facing illness—today can feel terribly weighty. What do we do?

*we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.*

This is the discipline of faith. Hospital rooms are visible. Test results are visible. Weakness is visible. Financial strain is visible. Grief is visible. What is unseen requires trust.

- The unseen Christ, enthroned.
- The unseen inheritance, secured.
- The unseen glory, coming.

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Looking to, or fixing our eyes on, the unseen is not escapism. It is realism; because the visible world is temporary and the unseen world is eternal. Material comfort is deceptive and privilege can distract our gaze. Even good gifts can quietly pull our devotion away from God. Illness is a strange mercy in this regard—it strips away illusions and exposes the fragility of what we once leaned on, leading us toward spiritual healing as it forces us to ask what truly lasts.

Therefore, fix your eyes... not on human strength; not on institutions; not on reputation; not even on the best of people. Look to the things that are unseen.

And don't loiter! Suffering tempts us to loiter. Self-pity is a soft and warm resting place and grief can easily become an identity and pain an excuse. But we are not victims in Christ. We are, as Paul says, 'more than conquerors'. Not because suffering is small, but because Christ is greater, giving us faith in the face of death.

The missionary David Brainerd, dying young in severe pain, once prayed, "Lord, may I not loiter on my heavenly journey." That is the prayer of those who refuse to let suffering stall obedience. Yes, we must rest, grieve, and process grief and loss in Christ, as well as receive help. But do not loiter. Use the gifts that God has mercifully given. Love your people. Pursue holiness. Seek joy. Serve Christ. Waiting on the Lord in these moments, we find our strength renewed. Illness may limit your capacity, but remember..."We Do Not Lose Heart."

This does not deny the aches of illness. It merely reframes them by finding hope in hard times.

Because of Christ: Illness is not who you are. Illness is not outside God's glory. And illness is light and momentary compared to what is coming. When we look to Bible verses for healing and Bible verses for chronic illness, we see that our current trials are preparing us for an eternal weight of glory.

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### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. What practical habits help ensure that suffering becomes a place of refinement rather than resentment?
2. If illness and suffering is only a “light momentary affliction” compared to eternal glory. How might regularly meditating on eternity reshape the way you interpret present hardship?
3. What “seen” things most easily distract or discourage you (comfort, reputation, security, injustice, grief)? And what would it look like, practically this week, to look more intentionally on the unseen Christ and His coming glory?

# 4

## ILLNESS HAS A SONG

*Read the psalms over and over until you have the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax necessary to lay your heart before God in lamentation. If you do this, you will have the resources to cope with your own periods of suffering, despair and heartbreak, and to keep worshipping and trusting through even the blackest of times - (Carl Truman, "Why Do Miserable Christians Sing")*

Illness has a song; not always a triumphant anthem and often it begins as a groan...a lament. Let's walk through Psalm 13 together, because we need Psalms of lament—especially when facing illness.

Psalm 13 is one of the shortest psalms, yet it carries the full weight of a suffering believer's heart. It begins not with confidence, but with repetition:

*How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?*

*How long will you hide your face from me?*

*How long must I take counsel in my soul*

*and have sorrow in my heart all the day?*

*How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (Psalm 13:1-2 ESV)*

Four times the psalmist cries, "How long?" It is the cry of weary faith. Like a child in the back seat of a car on a long journey—"Are we there yet?"—David's question is not information-seeking. It is ache-speaking. The problem is not simply suffering; it is timing, because the suffering feels prolonged beyond what God's mercy should allow.

If you are living with illness and progressive weakness, you know this cry. Not merely "Why?" but "How long?" And here is the first comfort: the Bible understands.

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*The great promise in psalms of lament is that God's distance is always temporary. (Suffering Wisely and Well: The Grief of Job and the Grace of God, Eric Ortlund)*

Psalm 13 does not silence the anguish, rather it provides the lyrics. Even in our darkest moments, Scripture hands us a song to sing. Listen how John Flavel in the mid 1600's encouraged his readers to lament:

*It is much more becoming a Christian ingenuously to open his troubles than sullenly to smother them. There is no sin in complaining to God, but much wickedness and complaining of him. (p.20, John Flavel, 'Facing Grief - Counsel for Mourners')*

### **David's Complaint**

David's complaint comes on three fronts.

- “Will you forget me forever?” (v1). His deepest anguish is not physical threat but divine absence. He feels forgotten.
- “Sorrow in my heart all the day” (v2). His inner world is in turmoil. His thoughts are exhausting.
- “How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” (v3) There are external pressures—opposition, humiliation, vulnerability.

Suffering is never monochrome. Illness rarely stays in one category. It affected David's theology (“Has God abandoned me?”), his psychology (anxiety, exhaustion, despair), and his social life (dependency, misunderstanding, isolation).

But notice something crucial. David cries, “How long, O LORD?” He uses the covenant name—Yahweh (LORD). Even when God feels distant, David addresses Him personally as the faithful, steadfastly loving LORD.

When illness strips away strength, independence, and even clarity of mind—who do you instinctively cry out to? Friends are gifts. Family is precious. Doctors are necessary. But none of them can carry the full weight of you. David's instinct is to cry to the LORD and that instinct is revealing and also comforting. Weak faith still reaching for the right God is real faith.

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But notice the tension. Many summaries of Psalm 13 call it “From Distress to Delight.” That is true structurally, but lived experience is rarely so neat as often distress remains constant. The psalm does not merely show movement, it reveals tension—delight in the midst of distress. David does not wait until circumstances change before turning to trust. In fact, there is no evidence that his circumstances change at all. After lamenting his distress, he pleads:

*Consider and answer me, O LORD my God.” (v3)*

Logically, that makes little sense. If God is distant and unresponsive, why appeal to Him again? The theologian, Dale Ralph Davis, once commented on this line saying:

*This is lousy logic, but excellent faith. (Dale Ralph Davies)  
Instinct Reveals Allegiance*

Like a father tossing a ball to his son—after enough repetitions, the son instinctively reaches out to catch it. Here David instinctively reaches for God and instinct reveals allegiance. What do you reach for when illness tightens its grip? Distraction? Bitterness? Self-reliance? Resignation? Living faith, even trembling faith, turns back toward God—“*Consider and answer me, O LORD my God*”

Illness exposes whether we treat God like a genie or like our covenant LORD. And still, through tears, David says: “LORD my God”—that possessive pronoun matters.

David then asks, “*Light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.*” (v3b)

The phrase “light up my eyes” speaks of renewed vitality. In 1 Samuel 14, Jonathan tastes honey and says, “See how my eyes brightened.” It was a surge of strength. David is asking for that—fresh strength to endure.

Then he reasons with God. Three times he says “lest”—lest I sleep in death; lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him”; lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken. This is not vague pleading, it is thoughtful prayer. Emotion and reasoning held together. He cares about God’s reputation. He cares about what his own fall would signal. His prayer is not “Make life easier.” It is, “please LORD act for your name’s sake.”

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Then comes the hinge in v5: *“But I have trusted in your steadfast love.”*

The Hebrew word is *hesed*, which means ‘steadfast love’ or ‘covenant lovingkindness’.

When God revealed Himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6, He proclaimed Himself “abounding in steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness.” This was after Israel’s rebellion with the golden calf. They did not deserve *hesed*—yet God’s love persisted because it flows from His character, not their worthiness. And that is the miracle.

### **God’s Steadfast Love**

God’s steadfast love toward you does not rise and fall with your health, mood, or performance. It is anchored in who He is. David’s circumstances appear unchanged. His enemies are still real. In sorrow he may still lament, his body may still ache. But he pivots on *hesed*. And therefore, he can say:

*v5b “My heart shall rejoice in your salvation.”*

Notice the determination. He does not wait for a feeling to jolt him upward. He speaks to himself. “Shall rejoice.” “I will sing.” Faith is not passive. It chooses its anchor.

He moves from lament to confidence not because the pain has dissipated or the storm has ceased; but because he has remembered who God is.

*v6 “I will sing to the LORD, for he has dealt bountifully with me.”*

“Dealt bountifully” speaks of completeness. Of fullness and sufficiency. How can David say that in distress? Because completeness is not defined by his circumstances. It is defined by his LORD—the God of steadfast love and in that he can sing secure.

For Christians, Psalm 13 resonates even deeper when we look to Jesus.

Hebrews 5:7 tells us that during His earthly life, Jesus offered up prayers with loud cries and tears. He knows fervent lament. On the cross, He experienced the ultimate “How long?”—as his Father’s face turned away. He was abandoned so that we would never be ultimately forsaken. He entered the garden of agony so that we might enter an eternal garden of

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rejoicing. He faced death so that “the sleep of death” would not have the final word over us. Because of Jesus...Death has been swallowed up in victory (1 Cor.15:55). Our enemies are defeated (Col.2:15). Our eternal future is secured (Rom.8:37-39). In Him, God has dealt bountifully with us.

Illness may remain, pain may intensify and bodies may fail. But if you are united to Christ, you are complete in His steadfast love. That is why the psalm ends in praise. That is not naïve denial, nor forced positivity. It is defiant trust. Do you see the flow of the Psalm? Trust. Rejoice. Sing.

Sometimes you will sing through tears. Sometimes you will not have strength to sing at all. That is why God places us in a family of believers, so others can sing truth into our ears when we cannot lift our own voices. But remember: Illness has a song.

It often begins with “How long?” But it does not have to end there, because even if your circumstances do not change, you can. As you lean into and lean on the steadfast love of the LORD, that never ceases...cherishing the truth that it is ‘new every morning’ (Lamentations 3:22-23).

So today—however frail you feel—say with David while trusting great David’s greater Son (Jesus):

*“But I have trusted in your steadfast love;  
My heart shall rejoice in your salvation.  
I will sing to the LORD,  
for he has been good to me.” (Psalm 13:6 ESV)*

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. When illness or suffering lingers, what is your instinctive response? Who or what do you turn to first—and what does that reveal about where your anchor truly lies?
2. Psalm 13 holds emotion and reasoning together in prayer. How might you begin to pray more honestly—bringing both your anguish and your thoughtful trust before God?
3. What would it look like, in your current circumstances, to say intentionally, “My heart shall rejoice”? How can the steadfast love of God in Christ reshape the way you interpret your suffering?

# 5

## ILLNESS ISN'T JOYLESS

Many of us measure the goodness of God by the smoothness of our circumstances. When work is stable, family life is happy, health is strong, and plans are succeeding, we unwittingly can think, “God is good.” But what happens when illness comes? When there is loss, grief, mental anguish, or physical decline? Is God still good?

### ***Joy Independent of Illness***

For many, suffering raises doubts about God’s character. Joy seems tied to comfort such that when comfort disappears, joy evaporates with it, and we subtly assume that hardship cancels happiness.

Illness can feel especially joyless, but Scripture confronts that assumption, as William Cowper captures so beautifully in his hymn “Sometimes a Light Surprises”:

*Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings;  
it is the Lord who rises with healing in his wings:  
when comforts are declining, he grants the soul again  
a season of clear shining, to cheer it after rain. (William Cowper, 1779)*

Later in this hymn, Cowper references Habakkuk 3, which shows us that suffering—and illness—is not joyless for the believer. Habakkuk writes as a man facing catastrophe. The Babylonians/Chaldeans are coming. Violence, destruction, and economic collapse are certain (see chapters 1 and 2). Yet at the end he can sing:

*“yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.” (Habakkuk 3:18, ESV)*

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Habakkuk 3 is both a song and a prayer. He begins by remembering:

*“O Lord, I have heard the report of you,  
and your work, O Lord, do I fear.  
In the midst of the years revive it;  
in the midst of the years make it known;  
in wrath remember mercy.” (3:2)*

Habakkuk is afraid. He does not pretend otherwise. Later he says:

*“I hear, and my body trembles;  
my lips quiver at the sound;  
rottenness enters into my bones;  
my legs tremble beneath me.” (3:16)*

That is how suffering feels—illness makes bodies tremble. The Bible does not dismiss such fear. But most of the chapter is not about Habakkuk’s circumstances; it is about God. Habakkuk remembers who God is. He recalls the Lord’s mighty acts—His power in the Exodus, His authority over creation, His justice against evil, and His commitment to save His people. He declares, remembering that God is Savior:

*“You went out for the salvation of your people,  
for the salvation of your anointed.” (3:13)*

### **Remembering God**

This is the first key to joy in suffering: remembering. When illness narrows our vision to test results and treatments, we must widen it to see the Lord’s character. He is holy. He is sovereign. He is merciful. He saves.

To remember is to reconnect—to re-member ourselves to God. When we remember who He is, suffering does not disappear, but it is reframed. Illness is real, but it is not ultimate—God is. Habakkuk then paints the bleakest possible picture:

*Though the fig tree should not blossom,  
nor fruit be on the vines,  
the produce of the olive fail  
and the fields yield no food,*

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*the flock be cut off from the fold  
and there be no herd in the stalls. (3:17)*

This is total collapse—agricultural, economic, and social. Nothing is working, and in those circumstances, there is no visible reason for joy. Yet look what he says:

*yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will take joy in the God of my salvation. (3:18)*

Notice the repetition: “I will rejoice.” “I will take joy.” Hebrew poetry often repeats truth for emphasis, driving it deeper into the heart. Habakkuk knows that rejoicing in suffering is not instinctive. It must be chosen and declared. The verbs matter: “I will.” Joy here is not a passive emotion but active resolve. Habakkuk is not saying, “I feel joyful.” He is saying, “I choose to rejoice.”

Illness can strip away many abilities. It can limit mobility, energy, appetite, and even speech. But it cannot remove the will to rejoice in God. Even the weakest believer can say in their heart and mind, “I will take joy in the God of my salvation.”

That repetition is vital because illness and suffering cloud the mind. We forget what we know. I can walk upstairs in my house and, in the ten seconds it takes to get there, easily forget why I went upstairs in the first place! We need truth repeated—through Scripture, through preaching, through songs, and through friends. The gospel must be spoken again and again. Joy grows where gospel truth is repeated.

It sounds almost too simple: to rejoice, we must rejoice. But Scripture commands it because rejoicing is an act of faith. To rejoice in the Lord is to treasure Him. It is to savor Him as Savior. Habakkuk does not rejoice in flocks, or financial security. He rejoices “in the Lord” and takes joy “in the God of my salvation.”

That phrase is crucial: “the God of my salvation.” His joy is rooted in redemption.

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For us, salvation is clearer still. We look to the greater deliverance—the cross. Jesus Christ, the true and better Lamb, shed His blood to deliver us from sin and death. If that salvation is secure, then that deepest good can never be taken from us.

Illness can take strength. It can take independence. It can take years. But it cannot take Christ. It cannot erase our names from the Book of Life. It cannot undo justification. It cannot separate us from the love of God.

That is why illness and suffering is not joyless.

Tim Keller once told the story of Alan Gardener; the British Royal Navy officer and missionary to Patagonia in South America who found himself and his crew isolated just off Picton Island, on the most southern part of Chile near the Cape. It was early 1851, supplies intended for his crew were trapped by the bad weather hundreds of miles away on the Falkland Islands, so slowly one by one, the men died of starvation. Gardener was the last to die and they found in the last entry of his journal, that he had written, Psalm 34:10:

*The young lions suffer want and hunger;  
but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.*

What was Gardener doing? He was remembering his Lord and thus he was able to rejoice in his suffering. The last words written in his journal were:

*'I am overwhelmed with the sense of the goodness of God'.*

Paul captures the same paradox when he describes himself as “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” in 2 Corinthians 6:10. Sorrow and rejoicing are not sequential, as the world often preaches. Paul says, sorrow and rejoicing are simultaneous. We often want suffering to end and joy to come, but that is often a pipe dream and removed from reality. Instead, Scripture maintains the beautiful tension of joy in suffering —“sorrowful, yet always rejoicing”. We see that as Habakkuk concludes:

*God, the Lord, is my strength;  
he makes my feet like the deer's;  
he makes me tread on my high places.” (3:19)*

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The image is striking: a deer navigating rocky heights—sure-footed, agile, lifted above danger. Suffering can push us down into bitterness and self-pity. Or, by grace, it can push us upward onto the high places of deeper trust.

### ***What Stops Our Rejoicing?***

Rejoicing in illness does not mean pretending it is pleasant. It means trusting that God is our strength in it. The climb is steep, but the vantage point is clearer, because on the heights, we see that God is still good. So what stops us rejoicing?

- Sin can. David prayed, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation” (Psalm 51:12, ESV). Unconfessed sin dulls delight in God.
- Comfort can. A life devoted to ease will not produce durable joy. If we rejoice only in circumstances, we will be crushed when they change.

But if we rejoice in the Lord—if we serve and savor our Savior—joy can coexist with illness, tears, and trembling. Habakkuk shows us that faith does not deny fear; it sings through it. He trembles in verse 16 and rejoices in verse 18. The Chaldeans are still coming, and the fields are still barren—yet he takes joy.

Illness is real, grief is real, but for the believer neither is joyless. When health fails, God remains and when strength fades salvation stands firm.

*Yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.*

Look at how Cowper finished his hymn. As a man, he struggled with his mental health throughout his life. Yet as someone who trusted in Jesus, he could pen these words:

*Though vine nor fig tree neither their wanted fruit should bear,  
though all the fields should wither, nor flocks nor herds be there;  
yet God the same abiding, his praise shall tune my voice;  
for, while in him confiding, I cannot but rejoice.*

Even in illness—even there—we can take joy.

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### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. Where Is Your Joy Rooted? When life is going well, what do you most naturally attach your joy to—health, stability, success, relationships?
2. Habakkuk trembles in verse 16, yet rejoices in verse 18. What specific truths about God’s character (His sovereignty, mercy, salvation, faithfulness) most help you when fear rises? What practical habits could help you “remember” those truths when illness or suffering narrows your vision?
3. Habakkuk repeats, “I will rejoice... I will take joy.” Who around you could help repeat gospel truth to you when suffering clouds your thinking—and how can you do the same for them?



## CONCLUSION

*It pleased the Lord to take to Himself my dear and faithful wife, with whom I have lived nearly 42 years. Whose tenderness to me and faithfulness to God were such as cannot by me be expressed, as she continually sympathized with me in all my afflictions. I can truly say that I never heard her utter the least discontent under all the various providences that attended either me or her. She eyed the hand of God in all our sorrows, so as constantly encouraged me in the ways of God. Her death was the greatest sorrow to me that I ever met with in the world.*

Those were the words of the English baptist minister William Kiffin, speaking about his wife Hanna, who died on the October 6 1682. I read them as we gathered to celebrate the life of my late wife Sarah, in January 2024. I simply said after quoting Kiffin; “I echo his words today”.

We have already seen that, facing illness is one of life’s most disorienting journeys. It strips away illusion, exposes fragility, and forces us to confront what we would rather avoid: our bodies are failing, and *the greatest sorrow* that we will ever know in this world comes into sharper focus. Yet the Christian does not begin with denial, nor with shallow optimism. We begin with honesty—and with Christ.

We have seen that illness is not who you are. United to Jesus our identity is anchored deeper than symptoms. You are “in Christ”—secure, loved and uncondemned. Your body may weaken, but your union with Him does not.

We have seen that illness is not outside God’s purposes. The questions of “Why?” often remain unanswered, but Scripture lifts our eyes from causes to purposes. Whether through healing or sustaining grace, the works of

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God are displayed — sometimes in dramatic deliverance, often in quiet endurance.

We have seen that illness is light and momentary compared to eternal glory. That does not trivialise pain; it relativises it. When placed beside the weight of forever, even decades of suffering are a brief chapter.

We have seen that illness has a song. It begins with “How long?” but need not end there. Lamenting illness is not faithlessness; it is faith reaching through tears to the steadfast love of the Lord that remains, even when feelings falter.

And we have seen that illness is not joyless. Joy rooted in comfort will collapse. Joy rooted in salvation will endure. Therefore, “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” is not contradiction but Christian reality.

Wonderfully, *the greatest sorrow* of the grave does not win. Illness and decay does not define. That is, your suffering and illness does not have the final word—Christ does. And he declares that illness has an end and, in his kindness, he revealed it to John in Revelation 21:1–4.

There Jesus lifts our eyes to the sure end of illness and sorrow. John sees “a new heaven and a new earth,” where “the dwelling place of God is with man.” In that restored creation, God Himself “will dwell with them, and they will be his people.” This promise reaches into every hospital room and graveside: “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more” (v4a). Therefore, “neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (v4b). Illness belongs to the former things. In Christ, it has an end.

So face illness. Fight for faith. Fix your eyes on the unseen and in your failing body, cling to unfailing hope we have in Christ.

*God hath made many fair flowers, but the fairest of them all is heaven, and the flower of all flowers is Christ. When we shall come home and enter to the possession of our Brother's fair kingdom, and when our heads shall find the weight of the eternal crown of glory, and when we shall look back to pains and sufferings; then shall we see life and sorrow to be less than one step or stride from a prison to glory; and*

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*that our little inch of time-suffering is not worthy of our first night's welcome home to heaven. (Samuel Rutherford, 'The Loveliness of Christ')*



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