

# **Illness Through the Eyes of Faith**

## ***Selected Passages***

Pastors and church members spend a lot of time praying for the sick, visiting the sick, and sometimes burying the sick. Every Christian suffers occasional illness, and we all have loved ones who experience illness. Therefore, it would be helpful for congregations to spend some time thinking theologically about illness and faith. This new sermon series, “Illness Through the Eyes of Faith,” can help in that process. It revolves around three primary questions. First, does God heal people, and if so, how? Second, what happens when healing does not occur? And finally, what can we learn from illness?

- ***Part One: God’s Healing Grace: The Ability to Recover***
- ***Part Two: God’s Sustaining Grace: The Strength to Cope***
- ***Part Three: God’s Refining Grace: The Opportunity to Grow***

## **Illness Through the Eyes of Faith**

### **Part One - God's Healing Grace: The Ability to Recover**

Over the past few months, numerous members of our congregation have struggled with serious medical challenges, some life threatening. We've also had several funerals for our members, including people who have died from cancer and heart disease. As always, I struggle with a chronic vocal cord disorder that has stalked me for over three decades now. Speaking is an exhausting and painful experience for me virtually all the time, which, as you might guess, is not helpful in my line of work. Finally, in recent months, my 35-year-old niece was diagnosed with stage three brain cancer. She had major surgery, followed by highly toxic chemo, which is making her extremely sick. Although she loves her work, it looks like she will have to go on disability. The worst part of her illness is that most people who have her kind of cancer die within five years.

Given all of these factors, I've been doing a lot of thinking lately about illness and faith. We spend a lot of time at this church praying for the sick, visiting the sick, and sometimes burying the sick. Every Christian suffers occasional illness, and has loved ones that experience illness. So, I decided it would be a good idea for us to think theologically about illness.

The end result is a three-week series, starting today, called ***"Illness through the Eyes of Faith."*** The series will revolve around three primary questions. First, does God heal people, and if so, how? Second, what happens when healing does not occur? And finally, what can we learn from illness? The bedrock foundation of these three sermons is that God is a God of grace. And God's grace does not disappear when we face illness and disease. For the believer who has the eyes to see, God offers at least three different kinds of grace in the face of illness. Sometimes God offers healing grace, which is what we are going to talk about today. When healing grace is not possible, God offers sustaining grace, which we will look at next Sunday. Finally, in our illnesses, God offers refining grace, which we will look at the following Sunday.

Please look at your listening guide printed in the bulletin. ***(Listening guide can be found at the end of this sermon)*** Today we are going to look at God's healing grace—the ability to recover. When we get ill, God often responds with healing grace. We see that in the four

scripture passages printed in your listening guide. In Luke 5 we see that Jesus often healed people. In Matthew 10 we see that Jesus commissioned the apostles to engage in healing. In Philippians 2, we find an example of healing. We see here that Paul's dear friend Epaphroditus was very sick and almost died, but God healed him. James 5 points out that healing was part of the early church. When people get sick, God often offers healing grace for our illness. The question, then, is how? How does God heal people? He does so in at least four ways, which are listed in your bulletin.

First, God sometimes heals through natural healing. Let me give you a very simple example. Years ago, I was riding my bike when a car drove me off the road into a mail box, then sped away in a hit and run accident. It ended with a trip to the emergency room, an x-ray showing a broken right arm, and finally a cast on my arm. Over the next couple of months, my arm healed. But it wasn't the doctor who healed my arm. All the doctor did was take pictures of the healing process. Every two weeks, I'd go in, he'd take another x-ray and say, "It's healing very well." Finally, he took an x-ray and said, "It's all well now; we can remove the cast."

A week later I got a large bill from the doctor's office. I sort of resented the fact that my body did all the work, but the doctor got all the money! That's an example of natural healing. This is healing that comes from the natural healing process that God created and placed in the human body. The fact is God has created our bodies with a marvelous, even miraculous, built-in healing system. When we get a wound, for example, our body rushes an emergency blood supply filled with white cells and agents of repair to heal the wound. A fever is the body's effort to fight bacteria. Our body continually fights disease and illness. Indeed, the majority of illnesses are naturally healed because of God's built in defensive system in our bodies. So, God often heals us through our natural, God-created internal healing systems.

Second, God sometimes heals through medical healing. Let me give you another personal example. Years ago, I had a serious problem with my eyes. I went to see Dr. Wang, the guy who does the TV commercials. Back then he was working at the Vanderbilt Eye Clinic. Dr. Wang told me that I had a case of "recurrent cornea erosion." That didn't sound good! It basically meant that the outer layer of my eye was tearing, causing severe pain. The eye clinic tried several things including medicine and a procedure where they actually poked my eye with a needle over and over again—that was fun! Finally, after everything else failed, Dr. Wang said, "I need to remove the outer layer of your cornea." I said, "You what?" He explained that

if he removed the outer layer of the cornea it would grow back stronger and not tear anymore. And that's what he did. The first few days after the surgery were difficult. But since that time, I have not had another major episode. I've had a few minor issues, but nothing significant. So, I have been healed of cornea erosion for almost twenty years now. I believe that healing came from God, but it was carried out through a doctor. God often mediates healing grace through nurses, doctors, medicine, and various medical treatments such as physical therapy, surgery and other medical procedures. In short, medical healing is healing that comes from human instruments—from the doctor who writes the prescription, to the surgeon who does the surgery, to the research scientist who develops medical breakthroughs in the laboratory.

Medical healing—healing through human instruments—is consistent with God's pattern of working in creation. God has delegated responsibility to human beings from the very beginning. God asked Adam and Eve to tend the garden and name the animals, Noah and his family to build an Ark, Abraham and Sarah to begin a nation, the prophets to proclaim the word of the Lord, and the disciples to carry on the work of Christ's church. He asks us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, welcome the stranger, and share the good news of the Gospel with others. When God wants something done he almost always asks people to help. It should not surprise us then, that when God wants healing to occur, he usually uses human instruments. Therefore, when we get sick, we would do well to pray, and also go to the doctor.

Most of you have heard the old and silly story about the man in the flood. The water was pouring in his front door. A boat came by to pick him up. He said, "Oh, no, I am a Christian. I'm trusting God to take care of me." Later the water was even higher. He was on the roof of his house. Another boat came by to take him to safety. Again, he refused, saying God would save him. Finally, the guy was hanging onto his chimney and the water was about to overtake him. A helicopter came overhead, dropped down a rope and told him to take hold. "No," he shouted, "I'm trusting God to save me." The helicopter left, the water rose, and the man drowned. When he got to heaven, he complained to God. "I trusted you Lord but you let me down. Why didn't you save me?" God responded, "What do you mean I let you down, I sent you two boats and a helicopter!"

Healing often comes through human instruments, especially medical personnel. Most healing comes from natural healing, or medical healing, or a combination of the two. However, not all

healing can be explained in natural or medical terms. Some healing occurs which is beyond human understanding.

Which brings us to number three in your guide—what we are calling mysterious healing. For example, I once heard about a woman named Marie. Years ago, doctors discovered malignant tumors throughout her body. She reacted negatively to treatment and they had to stop. She lost 82 pounds. There was no hope. Doctors said she only had a few weeks to live, to get her affairs in order. That Sunday she went to her church, an Episcopal church, and she asked her priest to anoint her with oil and pray for her healing, and he did so. The next day Marie began to feel better. She continued to make progress. She went back to her doctor a few months later and no cancer could be found anywhere in her body.

This kind of healing grace remains a mystery. We don't see it very often. It is extremely rare. But it does happen sometimes. However, a very important note needs to be made here. This kind of mysterious healing is not just a matter of having enough faith. Many people with tremendous faith in God do not experience healing, in spite of their faith. Even the Apostle Paul, with all his faith, was not healed of his illness, and we'll look at that next Sunday. Unexplained healing remains a mystery, we simply cannot understand it. Therefore, rather than trying to explain it, perhaps the best response is to simply be grateful to God that healing has occurred.

Let me briefly note one final form of healing, number four on your guide. Eventually, our body will die. Therefore, the only ultimate form of healing is resurrection healing. We read about this in 1 Cor. 15:42-44. "So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body." In the end, when our body fails and we die, healing will come—ultimate healing—resurrection healing.

So, does God heal people? The Christian faith says yes. How? Sometimes God heals through natural healing—the God-created ability of our body to heal itself. Sometimes God heals through medical healing—God's use of human instruments to heal. Sometimes, on rare occasion that we do not understand, God heals through mysterious ways. And ultimately, when we die, God heals us through resurrection healing.

When we speak of healing, however, we must also be honest and admit that sometimes, in spite of our faith and prayers, and the best work of doctors, healing does not come. For example, I've been praying for decades that God would heal my vocal disorder. But no healing has come, and after thirty years it seems unlikely it will. That is the experience of many faithful Christians, including many of you. When that is the case, when healing grace does not come, does God have anything else to offer? The answer is yes, and we will deal with that topic next Sunday.

## LISTENING GUIDE

### ***Sermon: Illness Through the Eyes of Faith (Part 1)***

- Part One: God's Healing Grace: The Ability to Recover
- Part Two: God's Sustaining Grace: The Strength to Cope
- Part Three: God's Refining Grace: The Opportunity to Grow

Luke 5:14: "Word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be healed of their diseases."

Matthew 10:1: "Jesus summoned his disciples and gave them authority to cure disease and sickness."

Philippians 2:27: He (Epaphroditus) was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him."

James 5: 14-16: "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save them ... Pray for one another, that you may be healed."

1. Natural Healing
2. Medical Healing
3. Mysterious Healing
4. Resurrection Healing

## **Illness Through the Eyes of Faith**

### **Part 2 - God's Sustaining Grace: The Strength to Cope**

We are currently in the middle of a three-week series called ***“Illness Through the Eyes of Faith.”*** Last Sunday we affirmed that when we get sick, God always responds with grace. Sometimes, God responds with healing grace, and we looked at four different ways that occurs, which are printed in your listening guide. However, there are times when healing grace does not occur. In spite of our hopes and prayers and the best work of the doctors, many people do not receive healing grace for their illness.

That has been my experience. As mentioned last week, I struggle with a serious vocal cord disorder. Speaking, in any context, is both exhausting and painful for me. I've had this problem for three decades. It constantly threatens my vocation as a pastor. At one point, I had to leave the pastorate for several years because of this problem. As you might imagine, I have prayed for healing grace many times, and lots of other people have done the same on my behalf. I've also sought out the best medical treatment available. I've been a very good customer at the Vanderbilt Voice Clinic. The receptionist sees me coming and thinks, “All right—another month's salary is walking in the door!” But in spite of all the prayers, and high quality medical treatment, I have not received healing grace. And my experience is certainly not unique. Many faithful Christians seek healing, but do not receive it, including many of you in this church today.

That was certainly the case for the Apostle Paul. Paul had some kind of physical illness, which he called a “thorn in the flesh.” We don't know what kind of illness he had. Some scholars think Paul had epilepsy. But whatever it was, it greatly bothered him. Paul pleaded with God over and over again to heal him, but God did not. We read about that in today's text, which is printed in your listening guide. Hear again the words of Paul. “Therefore, to keep me from becoming conceited.... there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.... for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

Paul, a man of great faith, prayed for healing, but healing did not come. Faith, contrary to some popular theology, does not heal all illness. Physical laws of nature and limits of

the human body do not always allow for healing. But regardless of the reasons, the fact is—healing grace does not always come to those who seek it. Which raises an important question. When healing grace is not available, does God offer any other kind of grace? The answer is yes. When healing grace does not come, God offers a second kind of grace: sustaining grace—God’s strength to cope.

This was the gift God gave to the Apostle Paul. Although Paul did not receive healing grace, he did receive sustaining grace. God gave Paul the strength to cope with his illness. God’s word to Paul was, “my grace is sufficient for you.” With the time I have left, I want to lay out four different ways that God mediates sustaining grace for those who struggle with illness. They are printed in your listening guide.

The first can be called spiritual empowerment. This is the gift of God’s courage, God’s presence, and God’s strength to face difficult days. We see this in Philippians 4:13, which is printed in your listening guide. It says, “I can do all things through Him who gives me strength.” When healing does not come for us, God gives us spiritual empowerment to cope with chronic or even terminal illness. Let me give you two quick examples. I have a friend named Carol who has Lupus. Although Carol constantly struggles with this chronic, long-term illness, God has given Carol the ability to face her disease with a positive and courageous spirit. Carol has not received healing grace, but God has given her sustaining grace to face her Lupus year after year and still have a good life. In fact, Carol lives her life with more joy and fullness than most healthy people I know.

Let me give you another example, not of chronic illness, but of terminal illness. I used to have a friend named Leon. I visited Leon many times during his long battle with lung cancer. Many of Leon’s friends, myself included, prayed for his healing. We asked God for healing grace, but it did not come. But God did not forget Leon. The last time I ever talked to him, just a few days before he died, Leon said to me, “Martin, I do not know why this has happened to me (Leon never smoked in his life), but I do know that I am not alone. God has not abandoned me.” Leon discovered God’s sustaining grace. He knew the help, strength, love and hope of God to help him walk even through “the valley of the shadow of death.” Both Leon and Carol serve as examples of God’s spiritual empowerment to cope with chronic and even terminal illness.



A second way God provides sustaining grace is through encouraging individuals. For the Apostle Paul, Timothy was one of those persons, as we see in this text from Philippians. Paul says, “I hope.... to send Timothy to you soon.... I have no one else like him” (Phil. 4:19-20). These encouraging individuals are often family members. They can also be friends, a caring doctor or nurse, or perhaps a pastor. God regularly uses the people in our life to help carry us through the hard times. That’s certainly been true in my own life. For example, many of you know that I served First United Methodist Church in Lebanon for ten years. When I first moved to Lebanon, I was having a horrible episode with my throat. I could barely speak when I first arrived, and wasn’t sure I was going to be able to continue working. Thankfully, God gave me some encouraging individuals to support me, including my family and some close friends. God also sustained me through members of the congregation. One member in particular was especially helpful. He, like me, struggles with a serious throat disorder. During the first months of my pastorate at Lebanon, he came to visit me several times. He told me about his own devastating voice problem, which almost disabled him a few years earlier. He shared with me how he agonized when he had to answer the phone, or greet a customer, or speak in a meeting, or attend a social event. As he told his story, I began to cry. This man understood exactly what I was going through. And his understanding and support and prayers, along with the support of others, helped get me through those very hard days.

I see this lived out here at FUMC all the time. For example, our good friend Rebecca, who died a couple of months ago, experienced profound sustaining grace from her friends in this congregation. When we struggle with illness, God often sustains us through encouraging individuals. Some of you here today would greatly benefit from having an encouraging friend walk with you through an illness or another challenge. If so, we can make that happen right away. You simply need to contact Noel, or me, or Rob, and ask about receiving a Stephen Minister. Stephen Ministers are well-trained, compassionate lay ministers who walk with people through illness or grief or other challenges. Please let us know if you would like more information about Stephen Ministry, through which God provides sustaining grace to many people.

A third way God provides sustaining grace is through medical resources. As Phil. 4:19 says, “God will meet all your needs.” One way God meets our needs is through a variety of medical resources. Although some diseases cannot be cured, they can be maintained. Think of the person with diabetes who receives insulin. Or the person who has epilepsy, but is maintained

with anti-convulsion drugs. Or the person who struggles with depression, but with the help of anti-depressant medication, manages to deal with their depression. I once had a church member who had schizophrenia, which can be absolutely debilitating. But, through medication, this man was able to maintain a fairly normal and rewarding life.

These are all examples of God's sustaining grace through medical resources. When healing grace does not come, for whatever reasons, God often gives us sustaining grace through various medical resources. God can also use medical resources to sustain persons who have a terminal illness. For example, pain-killing medication such as morphine can be a form of God's sustaining grace for a dying person. So how does God provide sustaining grace when we are sick? First, through spiritual empowerment—the gift of God's presence and strength to help us carry on. Second, through encouraging individuals who support us in our illness. And third, through medical resources that help us cope.

Finally, God provides sustaining grace through resurrection hope. When our body is broken, or when we face death, God gives us hope for a new body and a better life to come, and that hope helps sustain us. An example of resurrection hope is found in Phil 3 which says, "In heaven.... the Lord Jesus Christ.... will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Phil. 3:20-21). Resurrection hope reminds us that one day, in the Kingdom of God, we will receive a new body, and we will live in a place where illness and death are contraband, and that hope helps sustain us.

I once read a sermon by a young pastor, only 31 years old, who was dying of cancer. He preached this sermon just a few months before he died. I'd like to read you the final paragraph of his sermon. He said: "I'm dying. Maybe I'll preach for several months, and maybe for a bit more. But I am dying. I know it, and I hate it, and I'm still frightened by it. But there is hope, unwavering hope. I have hope not in something I've done, some purity I've maintained, or some sermon I've written. I hope in God—the God who died on the cross, yet rose again from the dead. That's the gospel, and I can stake my life on it. I must. And so must you." When our body fails us, and illness becomes terminal, and we face the reality of death, God helps sustain us through resurrection hope.

It's time to end. But let me ask again—when we face illness, what does God have to offer? Often times, God gives us healing grace. Sometimes, for reasons beyond our comprehension,

healing is not possible. When healing grace cannot come, God gives us the gift of sustaining grace, God gives us the strength to cope. And when that is the case, we will discover, as did the Apostle Paul, that God's grace is sufficient indeed.

## **LISTENING GUIDE**

### ***Sermon: Illness Through the Eyes of Faith (Part Two)***

#### ***Part One: God's Healing Grace: The Ability to Recover***

1. Natural Healing
2. Medical Healing
3. Mysterious Healing
4. Resurrection Healing

#### ***Part Two: God's Sustaining Grace: The Strength to Cope***

"Therefore, to keep me from becoming conceited.... there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.... for when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Cor. 12:7-10)

1. Spiritual Empowerment  
"I can do all things through Him who gives me strength." (Phil. 4:13)
2. Encouraging Individuals  
"I hope.... to send Timothy to you soon.... I have no one else like him." (Phil. 4:19-20)
3. Medical Resources  
"God will meet all your needs...." (Phil. 4:19)
4. Resurrection Hope  
"In heaven.... the Lord Jesus Christ.... will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." (Phil. 3:20-21)

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## **Illness Through the Eyes of Faith**

### **Part 3 - God's Refining Grace: The Opportunity to Grow**

Today concludes a three-week series called ***“Illness Through the Eyes of Faith.”***

Throughout this series we have affirmed that when we get sick, God always responds with grace. Sometimes God responds with healing grace—the ability to recover. Healing grace is mediated in at least 4 ways, which are listed in your listening guide. However, healing grace is not always possible. When that is the case, God offers a second kind of grace, what we called sustaining grace—the strength to cope. Like healing grace, sustaining grace is mediated in at least 4 ways, which are listed in your listening guide. When we get sick, God either provides either healing grace—the ability to recover, or sustaining grace—the strength to cope. That's the heart of what I wanted to share in this series.

Before concluding, I want to mention one final form of grace that God gives us when we face illness. It's listed in your listening guide under part three. The final form of grace I want to mention is God's refining grace—the opportunity to grow.

Illness, like any struggle, offers us an opportunity to grow as human beings and as Christians. I thought about refining grace last December when I read an article about the one-hundredth birthday of Kirk Douglas. The article gave an overview of his life and career. For our younger members who are not familiar with Kirk Douglas, he was a well-known actor back in the golden age of Hollywood. Perhaps his most famous role was the gladiator Spartacus in an epic film from 1960. His son, Michael Douglas, is also a famous and successful actor. The article included the story of Kirk Douglas's debilitating stroke about twenty years ago. It seriously impaired his ability to speak. Although he is better, he never fully recovered. When he first suffered his stroke, and lost his voice, he was devastated. An actor who can't speak isn't worth much. But after his stroke something interesting happened to Kirk Douglas. His illness changed his life, and changed it for the good.

He wrote a book about his experience called, *“My Stroke of Luck.”* In the book, Kirk Douglas admits that he used to be a selfish, self-absorbed man. Having a stroke, however, taught Kirk Douglas that life, to have any meaning, must be more than just about self. Though his struggle with illness, Douglas gained a heart for others, he became compassionate. For years now

he has counseled stroke victims and their families. He speaks to doctors about what it's like to have a debilitating stroke. After his stroke, he got heavily involved in community service. For example, he rebuilt over 100 school playgrounds in his city and he and his wife funded an Alzheimer's wing at a hospital. His stroke also resulted in a better relationship with his son Michael. A few years after his stroke, Michael said, "My father is a different man. He's compassionate now and generous of heart." Douglas's stroke also brought him closer to God. Kirk Douglas's illness proved difficult. But it made him a far better person.

Struggles in life, including illness, have the potential of making us better people. Painful experiences, including illness, can teach us much. The Bible is chock full of examples. I've listed five of them in your listening guide. We won't read all of them, but let's look again at the first example from James 1.... The other four passages are similar. They all point out that suffering, including illness, can be a time of refining grace in our life, a time of substantial growth. With the time I have left, I want to mention four lessons we can learn from illness.

First, illness can teach us humility and empathy. Serious illness, perhaps more than anything else, teaches us that we are not in control and we are not self-sufficient. In short, it destroys our pride and teaches us humility. It can also teach us empathy towards others. When we struggle, we can better understand the struggles of others.

Second, illness can teach us to number our days. Illness, like few other experiences, reminds us that the clock is ticking, and that can be a great gift. I remember a conversation I once had with a woman in her late 40s. She had just had a mild heart attack. No serious damage was done to her heart. But it sure got her attention. When I visited her at the hospital she said to me, "For the first time in my life, I realize that I am not going to live forever. This experience makes me realize just how precious time is." Illness, more than anything else, reminds us that, "from dust we come and to dust we shall return." Illness is a poignant reminder that life is brief, so we had better number our days and make the best of the limited time we have.

Third, illness can teach us what really matters. Having a serious illness can help us clarify our priorities. Years ago, a man in my church named Ron was totally consumed with his business. He worked seven days a week, 10 hours or more a day. His wife and son came to church every Sunday, but not Ron. He was too busy working. His son and my son were in Cub Scouts together, but when I went to scouting events, Ron was never there. He was always

working. Ron's son and my son played little league baseball together, but Ron never came to the games. He had more important things to do like run a successful business and make a lot of money. Then, out of the blue, Ron was diagnosed with cancer, even though he was only 40 years old. Thankfully, he fully recovered. But that experience changed his life. Lying in that hospital bed and wondering if he was going to die, gave Ron a vivid opportunity to evaluate his priorities. He came to realize that growing a business and making a lot of money is not what matters most.

After his recovery, I noted some big changes in Ron's life. For example, on Sunday morning, Ron came to church with his wife and son. At major Scouting events, Ron's son did not come alone anymore. Ron came with him. Ron even became a Cub Scout leader in order to spend more time with his son. And, Ron quit skipping his son's little league games. Instead, Ron was there, enthusiastically cheering his son's team on. For Ron, cancer was a great teacher. It taught him that relationships, not business success, matters most.

Finally, illness can teach us that we need God. A wise Rabbi once said, "It is important to know of pain.... It makes us aware of how frail and tiny we are and of how much we must depend on the Master of the Universe." A few years ago, I met a man in my community named Larry who was extremely cocky and arrogant. His wife attended my church, but he never did. I invited Larry to our church on numerous occasions. However, he told me, in no uncertain terms, that he didn't need God, he didn't need religion, he didn't need church, and he didn't need prayer. He was a proud, self-made, self-sufficient man, or so he thought.

Then one day, in his early 50s, Larry had a major heart attack. I still remember the call. It was a Sunday night about 6 p.m. I had just sat down in my recliner to watch *60 Minutes*. The phone rang. Larry's wife was on the phone. She informed me of Larry's heart attack and explained that he was in the ICU and terribly frightened. She wondered if I would be willing to go visit him. I said "Of course I will." But I was thinking, "I'm going to miss *60 Minutes* to go see a guy who doesn't need God or church or religion or prayer." Aren't you glad that your pastor is so compassionate! I'm really just kidding. I did hate to miss *60 Minutes*. But this was an important pastoral call and I was more than happy to go. So, I went to see Larry in the intensive care unit. Very few doctors or nurses were around. I figured they were all watching *60 Minutes!* Larry could not talk because he had a tube in his throat. But when he saw me he

immediately put his hands in a position of prayer. I asked him if he wanted me to pray for him. He nodded his head vigorously.

Larry eventually recovered from his heart attack. But that experience taught him that he was not self-sufficient, that he did need God and prayer and church, and it changed his life forever. Through that experience, Larry connected with God and faith. I baptized Larry a few months later. He became one of our most active members at church. His spiritual awakening—birthed by illness—enriched his life greatly.

Illness can be such a great teacher. It can teach us humility and empathy. It can teach us to number our days and make the best of our limited time. It can teach us what really matters. And it can teach us that we need God. If time permitted, many other lessons could be mentioned. Illness, like any struggle, offers us the potential of becoming a better person. That doesn't mean that illness is a good thing. It doesn't mean that God inflicts us with illness so we can become better people. It just means that if we let him, God can use our illnesses, along with all our struggles, to become an opportunity for refining grace, to become an opportunity for growth.

Well, it's time to wrap up this series on ***“Illness Through the Eyes of Faith.”*** One final time, let me ask the question: when we get ill, where is God? The answer is—God is very near to us, offering us grace upon grace. Often times God offers healing grace—the ability to recover. When that is not possible, God offers us sustaining grace—the strength to cope. And, if we will let him, God will offer us refining grace—the opportunity to grow. In illness, God, as always, is a God of grace. Thanks be to God.

## **LISTENING GUIDE**

### ***Part One: God's Healing Grace: The Ability to Recover***

1. Natural Healing
2. Medical Healing
3. Mysterious Healing
4. Resurrection Healing

## ***Part Two: God's Sustaining Grace: The Strength to Cope***

1. Spiritual Empowerment
2. Encouraging Individuals
3. Medical Resources
4. Resurrection Hope

## ***Part Three: God's Refining Grace: The Opportunity to Grow***

- “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:2-4)
  - “We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.” (Romans 5:3-5)
  - “Therefore, to keep me from being too conceited, a thorn was given me in the flesh.” (2 Cor. 12:7)
  - “But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold.” (Job 23:10)
  - “It is good for me that I was afflicted, so that I might learn your statutes.” (Psalm 119:71)
1. Illness can teach us humility and empathy
  2. Illness can teach us to number our days
  3. Illness can teach us what really matters
  4. Illness can teach us that we need God

