

Deep Waters

It can happen to you. And when it does,
remember that life and health are gifts of grace.
The same wisdom, love and goodness that gives them
may also withhold and recall them.

As I write, our son Edward, aged 15, lies in the Intensive Care unit of the UMC hospital here in Holland. Tuesday two weeks ago he underwent heart surgery. The surgeon explained his task: (1) make two tunnels through the heart so that the blood coming in on the left atrium reaches the right atrium and vice-versa, (2) insert a donor valve for the blood that goes from the heart to the lungs, (3) connect the blood that comes from the head and arms direct to the lungs, allowing about half his blood to flow passively to the lungs, and (4) close down his current shunt. Three surgeons we busy with him for over 10 hours, his heart was bypassed for half that time, and to work in the heart, it was stopped for 2 hours. We met him as soon as he was delivered to the Intensive Care unit. The surgeons were satisfied and optimistic.



When your world begins to shake

During the next day he did not attain the expected post-surgery stability. On Thursday the doctors concluded that something was not right. They suspected that one of the new tunnels in his heart had partially collapsed. That afternoon they opened his heart up again and made the necessary adjustments. Friday was a crisis day. Would his heart adjust to the changes? He looked pale, he felt cold, he would shake with every heart beat. During the afternoon they connected him to a dialysis machine to reduce the swelling. It was upsetting seeing him struggle while connected to all those tubes, cables and monitors. "Lord," I cried inside, "Does it really have to be this way?" There is an acute pain in one's soul when one senses that one is losing a child. Together with Anneke, my wife, we walked in silence in a nearby lonely park. I could not even pray. I could find no words to express that oppressive hurt in my soul. An incoherent flood of rapid moving thoughts added to the confusion. Tears begun to flow as I struggled with the "what if" and the "why," trying to reconcile the notion of a loving heavenly Father with the pain we were seeing and experiencing. I'm not a crying type of person, but once tears start to flow, they are difficult to stop.

Could it be avoided?

Three or four weeks before Edward's operation, we met a lovely Christian couple at a parents evening at the school of our youngest daughter. We interchanged stories about our children, as is common in such settings. They were surprised to hear our son had a heart problem. "Are you Christians?" we were asked. "Have you not prayed for your son?" Then he stated his conviction: "It cannot be the Lord's will that children of Christian parents should be unhealthy." In a caring way he offered to visit our home and pray for our son Edward. "I encourage you," he added, "to phone the hospital and cancel the appointment for that surgery." We exchanged email addresses and later went home. We were thoughtful. This was a loving and genuine Christian couple. Did we lack faith? Should we "present our requests to God" (Phil. 4:6-7) in a different way? Ought we plead with God and claim or demand healing? Should our prayers be more aggressive?

I am attracted to the premise that God wants all Children of believers to be healthy. More, I'd love to see all children healthy, in fact everyone! But the facts of life and Scripture itself does not support this premise. The Lord blessed Edward with a calm and peaceful spirit up until the operation. We did not invite this Christian couple to our home. We suspected that to pray in Edward's presence in line with that defective premise would be upsetting for him. Instead we invited them to join the many other friends and family who were also concerned and



praying for Edward. Distance need not be a hindrance (Matt. 8:5-10). Our God wisely invented and faithfully sustains nature. But He sometimes acts against the laws of nature and intervenes in miraculous ways. He has and still does. That is what usually drives us to our knees. But for some reason, pain, suffering and crippling limitations remain part of this fallen world, even among devoted Christians, even after we pray.

God's love expressed

During this last month we have received many emails from caring and concerned Christians, most known to us and some unknown, from near and far. To date we have counted 16 different countries. We have felt loved by our heavenly Father through the expressions of His people. Most cards and emails contain notes of encouragement. For example, from Yemen: "We are in prayer for your son... we hope he will fully recover... May the Lord encourage and strengthen you in this difficult time." From Colombia, where Edward was born, and where we served as missionaries for 15 years, "We are with you. The Almighty is in control. We love you," "May the Lord strengthen and comfort you," "We pray that God may be glorified in this situation." From China: "... the Lord is using your experience to help my life." From Germany the quotation of a hymn: "Twas grace has brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home." From Peru: "All the brothers and sisters in my assembly are praying for your son Edward." An SMS from England with, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). From our home Christian assembly here in Holland, "We thank God that we can share with Him the

longings of our heart. Your desire and ours is that Edward be restored.” And so on. It is an odd fact that I have seen many times before: pain and suffering draw God’s people together. It seems to provide the occasion to say something, to do something, to express that divine love that ties us Christians together.

How will all this end?

But we also received other kinds of messages. From a caring non-Christian friend, “I will keep my fingers crossed for Edward.” Without God, what else can you say? Another kindly wrote: “My family and I have the absolute confidence in God that Edward will recover completely.” As you can well imagine, such message makes one stop and think: Is this a message from the Lord for us? This could be very good news. Paul said something similar to the



frightened crew and passengers: “keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed” (Acts 27:22-25). Paul’s encouraging affirmation was based on a special revelation: “Last night an angel... stood beside me and said...” The Lord could act similarly today. But it is misleading if such a positive affirmation is used without a revelation. In the context of eternity, healing is not always the best option. In Hebrews 11 we read of men and women of faith who suffered and died. History contains countless stories of Christians who suffered and died. We are even told that “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints” (Psalm 116:15). Is it possible that my son shall die now or in the near future? It can happen to any of us. Thankfully the journey of every Christian will end well. We have a wonderful destination. But the path may or may not involve healing of our hurting bodies.

Trusting or understanding

On the first Sunday morning after the operation, I felt a deep need to seek the Lord’s presence. I visited a Christian assembly near this hospital. The service begun with the well know children’s song, “My God is so great, so strong and so mighty, there’s nothing my God cannot do.” As they begun to sing, frustration, perhaps even anger began to fill my heart. Together with Edward there are many other children with pipes coming out of their nose, mouth, neck, chest and head. If He can, why doesn’t He intervene? To blame it all on the sin of Adam and Eve felt then like an academic irrelevance! Explain that to the parents of a baby with brain damage or who is struggling to survive on half a heart! What exactly is this love and kindness we so happily sing about?



During the service I calmed down. I have learnt over the years that when I feel angry, frustrated or disappointed with God, something about my understanding of God or His ways must be corrected. We love simple models to explain 'how God works.' But sometimes such models don't fit reality. They sometimes encourage wrong expectations. We can ignore or deny the evidence. We can invent simple little explanations. Or we can learn to live with tension and mystery. It is true that on the one hand God is wise, loving and good, and that "there is nothing that He cannot do." But on the other hand it is also true that in this world, as we see it and sometimes experience it, there is too much unexplained pain and injustice. Can't both be true? Must we be forced to affirm one and deny the other? Truth remains true regardless of what I see or experience. The essence of faith is trust. When we can't see well, when we can't understand, we can only move forward if we trust. Is God and His Word worthy of our trust? Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me" (John 14:1). To trust is a choice.

Deciding to 'let go' of gifts

Two days before the operation I sat together with Edward in a 'Praise Hour' on Sunday afternoon at our Christian assembly in Eindhoven. It was the last song that caught my attention. It was Matt Redman's "Blessed be Your name." It is fairly easy to obey 1

Thes. 5:16-18 and be joyful, to pray and to thank the Lord "When the sun's shining down on me" and "When the world's 'all as it should be'." But it becomes less easy when our road is "marked with suffering." The song ends with: "You give and take away. My heart will choose to say: Lord, blessed be Your name."

We love our four children, but sometimes my wife and I book a hotel to go away just the two of us for one or two nights. It's a time to walk, to explore, to talk, to rest and to just enjoy being together. A month ago our night away was in Gent, Belgium. During our morning devotional we considered the possibility of 'losing' our son Edward. His congenital heart disorder meant that we nearly lost him soon after he was born. Children are entrusted to parents for a limited time. We've had him now for 15 years. Could it be that this time is coming to an end? Are we now ready to let him go? Job was a righteous man who took God seriously. After losing all his children "he fell to the ground in worship, and said: '...The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised'" (Job 1:20-21). That morning we chose to hand our son back to the Lord. We prayed something like, "Lord, it is our hearts desire to have and enjoy him for many more years. You gave him to us. We return him to you. If it is in your good will to entrust him to us again, we will be delighted! Please strengthen us and give us Your peace." During these last two weeks we have lived some difficult moments. That prayer does not diminish the pain. But it does calm our urge to claim our rights or to tell God what He must do. Today I have spent five hours by his side in the Intensive Care unit. His movements are minimal and he still depends on that respirator. On leaving I gave him a gentle hug, and committed him to the Lord, his true owner.



Do you need 'heart surgery'?

About 30 years ago, when my younger brother John was about Edward's age, he laid paralyzed in a hospital in Cali, Colombia. For 3 months he relied on a breathing machine to keep him alive. Then followed the slow and long rehabilitation process. For a number of years now, his wife Carolyn, in her 40's, suffers from deteriorating MS. They have experience with 'deep waters.' Last week John wrote us a short email: "We can only imagine how difficult and heart-wrenching it is for you at this time. In many ways it seems to me that you are all undergoing 'heart surgery' of different kinds... and that perhaps the kind you are going



through may be more painful than the one Eddie is having." Could this be true? It seems that some changes will never happen progressively. We need some sort of 'crisis.'

The letter continued: "You are all being 'changed' inside in ways you can't describe, and while the process is happening, you may be either numb or hyper-sensitive. Things might seem sharply in focus, or else very fuzzy. Past certainties may seem unreliable, and present doubts may appear insurmountable. You may oscillate between feeling that everything else is petty and pointless to the other extreme of valuing the smallest things, sights or moments that you would not normally even have

noticed." Moses underwent 'heart surgery' in the desert. Hannah, while childless and longing for child. Paul, while blind in Damascus. No one ever freely chooses for 'heart surgery.' But sometimes we simply need it. And our loving Father knows that.

Adjusting to fallen trees

Next to this hospital there is a nice park. It has a footpath which leads through the woods, along a lake and over a swamp. A large fallen tree caught our attention. The builders of the swamp footpath decided to add some steps to help pedestrians walk over the fallen tree. Sometimes undesirable things happen and, in time, they can be reversed, corrected or removed. But sometimes God causes or allows things to happen that are irreversible. It can be an accident, some traumatic experience in our past, the consequence of our own sin or the sin of someone else, a frustrating health limitation, or the loss of something or someone we dearly loved. Sometimes an earthquake or storms, gales or lightening can cause a huge tree to fall. And as King Solomon observed, "Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie." (Eccl 11:3). We can spend our life trying to remove that unmovable tree. We can stop growing, we can stop moving forward, we can stop being a blessing to others - and live in the unreal world of wishes, dreams and memories. Or we can choose to face and accept the consequences of



living in this fallen world: repent – if we are conscious of sin, forgive – if another has sinned against us, thank the Lord for the gifts we had and for those we still hold, adjust to and accept the new chapter in the story of our life. We must learn to enjoy life as it is – even with its many limitations it still remains a gift of grace.

Conclusion

Today we may still be required to cross through ‘deep waters.’ Like King David we may find ourselves praying, “Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer... I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I” (Psalm 61:1-2). The Lord remains nearby. He is that rock. Let’s hold on to Him! “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me” (Psalm 69:1-2). The Lord’s promises are sure and steadfast - they should be our foothold. And soon this journey will be over. In our Father’s home there shall be no more injustice, no more pain, no more tears and no more goodbyes. We are not there yet!



Postscript: We have decided to write and circulate these thoughts while Edward is still in Intensive Care unit. They will not change regardless of what happens to our son. Over the years, my wife and I will read them again. They will remind us of our own ‘heart surgery’ and will prepare us for any future ‘deep waters.’ We are forgetful creatures. If Edward ever reads this, may it remind him that his life is a very special gift from God, and that the Lord is using his pain and distress to work in the lives of many of us. And you my dear reader, may you be challenged, better prepared and encouraged.

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