God Does Not Give Me More Than I Can Handle

Georgia Gojmerac-Leiner

There is a certain look of beseeching, a look of longing and helplessness in the eyes of those who are ill and in the eyes of their loved ones. Usually illness is experienced as suffering, and the statement I hear most often from patients is, “God doesn’t give me more than I can handle.” What causes them to believe this? The way the word “God” is intoned makes it sound as if they have a special access to the Divine, as though they are on familiar terms. I hear a sense of exclusiveness to their suffering. They’ve been singled out for suffering because of their special strength.

The idea of strength of endurance implies that everyone in the hospital is being tested for endurance. Those who are strong enough will pull through, and those who are not will die. Implicit in their words, is the corollary, “What a shame it is to be weak and succumb to death.”

But surely God is not a will breaker. Surely, God does not go around hanging tent caterpillars on oak trees nor worms inside the ears of corn. Nature, which Saint Teresa of Avila, a doctor of the church, describes as the second Scripture, can teach us a lot.

Sometimes, if patients are well enough and seem open, or as Jack Shea might put it, “if they are in a developmental moment,” I offer to tell them the Scriptural source of this saying and then invite them to reflect on it. Such reflection often leads to a new understanding and to a new attitude towards illness.

Some respond with, “I never thought about it this way,” others are skeptical about my interpretation. Though they don’t “buy” outright my suggestion that God may not actually be giving them the suffering, they may later accept this as a possibility.

“Are you sure God gave you this illness?” I ask. “Nothing happens without His knowing,” is the standard answer, “and I am sure He has something to do with this. There has to be a reason for what I am going through.”

They are saying three things, but it is the last one that reveals vulnerability. While I am amazed at the tightness of the logic, I am aware that I must remain sensitive to their need to make meaning out of life and especially out of their illnesses. It is possible for us to discover something new through our suffering, to gain a new perspective on life, but that does not explain the source of illness.

It seems that those who speak in these terms are convinced that there is a definite meaning to their illnesses that it

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has to be gained through suffering, and through the testing of their ability to survive. At the same time, they appear to believe that to accept illness is the equivalent of succumbing to weakness and see that as cowardly.

To some patients, accepting illness seems to be the equivalent of accepting that death is imminent and equal to admitting defeat in the fight against death. Poets, such as Dylan Thomas, defy death through their verse. John Donne, in his “167 Holy Sonnet,” writes angrily, “Death, thou shalt die.” But for Christians, Christ has already defeated death.

However, it is when we ponder the fact of death that we gain a new perspective on life. We learn that we are a part of bigger things, that we are a part of the eternity, where God holds us lovingly, like a child in her mother’s arms.

As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:13,

No test has been sent you that does not come to all men [and women]. Besides, God keeps his promise. He will not let you be tested beyond your strength. Along with all the tests he will give you a way out of it so that you may be able to endure it (New American Bible, 1970).

Paul offers sentence four in particular as encouragement to his brethren as he prepares them for their faith in God to be tested. Might we say that illness is given to test our faith? If so, then it is not our bodies we need to save, cure, or otherwise preserve or prolong but our sense of wholeness and connectedness to God.

These lines have a tone of hope and courage. They are packed with faith. The promise is that we will discover something about the strength of our faith through whatever form our individual tests take—illness, loss, despair, loneliness—and that we will grow spiritually as a result.

The first sentence states that there is no exclusivity to suffering. We all have a share. If we can be in solidarity with others, we won’t feel singled out. As long as we are not isolated by our suffering, it will be easier to bear and will have no stigma. That is one “way out” God gives to us.

A second is that suffering is an equalizer. It is not a special strength. There is no guarantee in this passage that the test will not end in physical death, but we are assured that through our faith we will be able to endure, whatever the result. Looking at it logically, since God does not give us more than we can handle, then if we can’t handle our problem, it is not from God since God gives us only what we can handle.

It rests upon those of us who are chaplains to help those to whom we minister to find the way to endure. Since illness has the power to transform consciousness, our work should not be difficult if our faith is secure. Trusting in God during suffering is necessary for healing. In that sense, suffering ceases to be an affliction we must bear passively and becomes a conduit for spiritual enlightenment.

We may die to this life, but in Christ we live forever. The testing is temporal, and what God gives is the means to pass through—to get out of—the test.

How do we endure suffering? Is it by saying, “God gave me this, and he’ll take care of it,” or by singing Psalm 90:

Seventy is the sum of our years, or eighty, if we are well....
Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain the wisdom of heart (NAB).

Ultimately, the only thing being tested is our faith in God: faith that God loves us and does not wish us to suffer, much less gives us the suffering. If we should suffer, it is the faith that God is with us in the suffering and that we have God’s strength of endurance, having been made in God’s very image that gets us through. Suffering may not have more than an existential meaning. It is a mixture of physical pain and spiritual pain, a struggle with biology and essence, an interplay between the perishable self and the spiritual self. What it offers is a confrontation with mortality, and we accept it according to our abilities. May we do so with grace.