

Reflections from the Refiner's Fire

Death is the last enemy, to be eliminated only at the final victory of Christ. "Christ must rule until God defeats all enemies and puts them under his (Christ's) feet. The last enemy to be defeated is death" (I Corinthians 15: 25, 26). Physical death with whatever precedes and accompanies it awaits all of us in this temporal realm.

I am writing these reflections shortly after the day when Miriam, my wife and beloved companion of 52 years, was released from her long struggle with a malignant bone marrow disease. She is now in her eternal home and beginning her service in the presence of God himself. We have been on this long and difficult journey together. When we were married in September of 1958 God bonded us together as one flesh, one person. Her suffering has been my suffering. Her release has released me from the pain of seeing her suffering. It has not released me from the agony of the separation I must now endure.

Throughout this long journey I have wrestled with many questions. I have consulted, even confronted the Almighty God almost every evening with questions and even accusations of unfulfilled promises. Through it all God has been speaking quietly to my mind and spirit helping me to understand better the truths I have always known but which have never passed through the intense fires of deep suffering. He has likewise made it clear there is much he has not revealed to us either in his Word or by his Spirit simply because our human capacities are insufficient to understand many eternal things.

The ground rules of Eden

In the beginning God created the man and the woman (our ancestors) in his image. He placed them in a marvelous environment, the Garden of Eden. The ground rules he established for them were based on order, open communication with him, working together with him as co-creators to complete his creative work on earth, and obeying his commands and instructions about everything. Joy, peace, and harmony filled their spirits.

The ground rules of the world

However, to make them moral beings possessed with freedom, God gave them a choice. They could continue to follow his original ground rules, or they could reject them and fend for themselves. In their pride and under the powerful influence of the spirit of deception, they chose the latter. The ground rules immediately changed, not only for them but for all of creation. Disorder replaced order. Fear supplanted security. Shame and guilt took away their joy and harmony.

They found themselves completely exposed before God and before the vicissitudes of a now disturbed physical, social, and spiritual world. They continued to bear the image of God and have passed this down to us throughout human history, but that image is badly marred. They remained spiritual as well as physical beings, but the life of God was no longer in their spirits, nor in our spirits unless we actively choose to invite God back into our spirits. The disorder affected their spirit, their minds, their physical bodies, and the natural world around them.

The burdens common to man

Disorder corrupted the natural world. The food chain began. The soil lost much fertility and productivity and obtaining adequate food became difficult. Diseases and degeneration entered into human experience, and physical death became the end stage of life for everyone. Psalm 73 speaks of these things as ‘human ills and the burdens common to man.’ All of us must live under these altered ground rules. None of us are immune from these ills or burdens common to men, whether we are believers or non-believers, or believers in any other faith.

Our DNA is susceptible to disorder; from this come disorders like Downs syndrome, cystic fibrosis, sickle cell anemia, congenital malformations, or other hereditary disorders. Degeneration, aging, malignancies, organ failures, and eventual death come to us all indiscriminately. Miriam’s malignancy is a manifestation of this process. Until this day, in spite of massive efforts of research, we still do not understand the origin of the malignant transformation of cells and what to do to prevent it.

Modern medicine has developed effective approaches against some of these diseases, especially those related to infections. Against many others, however, including some infections, we remain quite impotent. We can mobilize spiritual resources such as prayer, fasting, anointing, and the confession of sins. But God rarely changes the ground rules for us. I argued extensively with him, but he reminded me of many people I knew well for whom no remedy came.

One was Ralph Willoughby, a prince of a man and a marvelous spiritual leader with InterVarsity in the ‘40s. Ralph led a Christian boy’s camp in Canada in the summer of 1953 where I was a counselor. He developed a sinus infection and after 2 days came into the camp infirmary where the camp nurse began penicillin and she and I cared for him. I sat with him all night praying and listening to his labored breathing. Three days later, in spite of massive antibiotics and a 24 hour prayer vigil he went on into eternity due to massive blood stream infection. Why did God not hear us? Why did he allow a man with such spiritual potential to be snatched out of a growing ministry that would have benefited thousands? None of us received an answer. Could I ask God to do something for my Miriam that he did not do for Ralph those many years ago?

In these ‘human ills and burdens common to man,’ what is the role of the church? It is to explain, to comfort, and to support in every way possible. The prayer of many people, fasting by some, and anointing by the elders of the church and even myself have been of great benefit to us. Meals appeared at our door; plants or bouquets of flowers, and people dropping by to give a brief word of encouragement. Jesus said, “I was sick and you took care of me.” Many have and by this were caring for Jesus.

The diseases of the Egyptians

God established an important ground rule in Exodus 15: 26 when he told the people of Israel, “If you obey me completely by doing what I consider right and by

keeping my commands, I will not punish you with any of the diseases that I brought on the Egyptians, for I am Jehovah Rapha (the Lord who heals you).”

My understanding of this verse, coming right after the purification of the water in the spring of Marah (a parable of inner healing), is that this describes a second major category of illnesses. The diseases of the Egyptians are the diseases related to life style and personal behavior or to the unrighteous behavior of someone else. These are what we called the stress-related diseases, many of the auto-immune disorders, and those related to various abuses and to immoral behavior. The significance of this distinction is great, because in these illnesses we can do something about them. Inner healing, behavioral changes, and finding peace of mind can often reverse many of these diseases. Proverbs 14:30 says, “Peace of mind makes the body strong. Envy makes the body sick” (my paraphrase). Here we often see ‘miracles’ of healing, the reversal of serious illnesses like chronic inflammatory diseases, asthma, lupus, certain malignancies, and others that have strong connections with the immune system. To paraphrase further Proverbs 14:30, we can say “Peace of mind makes the immune system strong.” It does, and a multitude of scientific studies demonstrates this. To continue, “Envy (fear, anger, anger, guilt, bitterness, etc.) weaken the immune system, opening the body to all manner of illnesses.” This also is a well-substantiated fact. Here is where the church can have a remarkable ministry in making available to hurting people the powerful healing resources of Jehovah Rapha and his Word.

Miriam and I went over this carefully. We looked into the possibility of deeply buried destructive feelings even back in early childhood and we dealt with what we found. We were convinced that whatever spiritual healing needed to be done was indeed done. Her spirit was free. But she was not suffering from a ‘disease of the Egyptians.’ Rather it was one of the burdens common to man where the ground rules of disorder apply.

The principalities and powers of evil (Ephesians 6:12)

Here is a third category of illnesses, and these are quite common. We dealt with many manifestations of them in Africa. They are also quite common in the US and far more difficult to deal with because western culture and bio-medicine are not able to recognize them or approach them effectively. Many people open themselves to spirits of anger, lust, immorality, bitterness, or fear through encounters with occult games and practices, internet games or pornography, willful involvement in disordered behavior or life styles, or by holding onto the negative feelings and emotions. They then discover they are incapable of abandoning such involvement or practices even if they wish to. This is another area where a well-informed church with trained leaders can be of great help by enabling people to be delivered from such influences by the power of Jesus.

I wrestled with God on this one. Miriam has never been involved in occult activity, but she grew up in Africa and we served for 35 years in Africa in the midst of an occult-based tribal culture. Long experience has shown how occult powers can invade the human personality even without the knowledge or consent of the person ‘infected.’ I spent hours in prayer attempting to deal with any possible evil spiritual influences in her

life. Jesus said, “The thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy.” Was not Myelodysplasia a thief, straight from the Evil One? I shouted at it and commanded it to leave in the name of Jesus. I did this until the Spirit of God gave me peace that all of this had been dealt with by Jesus on the cross and Miriam has been living under the cross all of her life.

Why is disorder so rampant in the world?

The apostle Paul deals with this in Romans 8: 18-23. “I consider that what we suffer at this present time cannot be compared at all with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. All of creation waits with eager longing for God to reveal his children. For creation was condemned to lose its purpose, not of its own will, but because *God willed it to be so*. Yet there was the hope that creation itself would one day be set free from its bondage to decay and would share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. For we know that up to the present time all of creation groans, like the pain of childbirth. Yet it is not just creation alone that groans. We, who have the Spirit as the first of God’s gift, also groan within us as we *wait for the day when God will set our whole being free*” (GNT. Italics mine).

Creation was condemned to lose its purpose – the purpose of being perfect and marvelously reflecting the glory and majesty of God. Disease, degeneration, and congenital malformations do not reflect the order and majesty of God. Yet it was *God himself* who condemned creation to lose its purpose and order. Why? Why? What in the world was God thinking? Is he a horrible God?

The DNA controlling the formation of Miriam’s blood platelets was condemned to lose its order and purpose and so the bone marrow stem cells became malignant – and killed her. The genes responsible for platelet formation became fragmented and distorted. Medical science does not know why this happens. Did God do that? If so, what did he have in mind?

My crisis of faith

My faith has endured immense tests in cross-cultural ministries in Africa and elsewhere. Yet many times during these months it has trembled. What kind of a God is he?

1. He calls himself Jehovah Rapha – the God who heals you (Exodus 15:26) He did not heal Miriam. Is he really there?
2. Why does he say I forgive all your iniquities and I heal all your diseases (Psalm 103: 3)? He has forgiven Miriam all her sins. Why did he not heal her illness? Can I really trust him?
3. In Isaiah 43:2 he says, “When you pass through the waters or through the fire, I will be with you.” Sure, he is with me, but what is he doing? Where was he in Miriam and with Miriam?

This is why I shouted at him and even pointed my finger at him and demanded answers.

I was not in control

All my life I strive to be in control. As a result, many good things have happened. We saw remarkable development in the health programs in our part of the Congo. As a

physician, for forty years I stood between suffering people and the ‘angel of death.’ Many times, but not always, we saw victory and death was averted. As a husband and father with God’s help and together with Miriam, I have judiciously exercised control over family plans and implementation.

But with Miriam’s condition I had no control whatsoever. Chemotherapy failed. Inner healing brought peace of mind to her but it did nothing for her immune system or to halt the progress of this destructive disease. I prayed, we prayed, countless hundreds of people prayed, but the disease continued to steal her earthly life. I still wonder what Jesus meant when he said “I will do whatever you ask for in my name so that the Father’s glory may be shown through the Son. If you ask for anything in my name, I will do it” (John 14:14). I asked in his name, pled, cried, even screamed, but physical healing did not come. I claimed and visualized her healing, but in vain. How do I interpret now what Jesus said? I have not answered that yet. Pious platitudes just don’t work. There is too much mystery.

So it was for the three men in Daniel 3. “The God we serve is able to save us and rescue us from you hand, O King. But if not!!!...” That is what I had to pray. “But if not ... I will still trust you.”

I wondered about my motives. Was I desperate for her healing because of me, because I don’t want to live without her? Or was it for her sake, so that she would no longer suffer? Then I remembered the Scripture – “The two shall become one flesh.” I could not separate myself from her and we were fighting against the disease that was destroying her and part of me and was slowly separating us. I knew God knows all about this. After all, he made us, wrote the Scriptures, and sees the whole picture which I cannot. Was he also weeping, as Jesus wept near the tomb of Lazarus? Perhaps.

Is God there?

My trust in God wavered, and I found myself staggered by it. And so I had to face reality. First of all, my reason clicked in. I know about the absolutely amazing precision in the natural world, the marvelous order in the laws of nature, the beauty of the world around me which can never ever be explained by random chance or the survival of the fittest. At Shell Point we have an orchid house filled with gorgeous orchids in bloom. There are actually 30,000 species of orchids. Every time I go to there, I can see God’s handiwork. Did this incredible array of beauty happen by chance? Is a purple orchid more fit than a lavender one? Or is it because God likes both purple and lavender?

I then had to ask the question Peter asked: “Lord, to whom can we go? Only you have the words of eternal life.” If I lose my trust in El Shaddai, what do I have left? Nothing. “Whom have I in heaven but you? There is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73: 25-26). If I let go of God, if I tell him I can’t trust you any more, what do I have left? Nothing but despair, and I can’t accept that. And I don’t need to.

God’s response

His ego is not offended by my angry and frustrated heart cries as long as they are cries of confusion and doubt and not of rebellion. Slowly God, in his loving-kindness has been speaking to my heart to restore my faith.

“Danny, I have revealed many truths in the Scriptures, through my Son Jesus, and by my Spirit. You must strive to understand these things. But there is much more I cannot reveal to you or to anyone else because your reason is limited by logic and finitude. You cannot yet understand what is eternal. Your minds can grasp only what is earthly, temporal, and limited. Those categories do not apply in eternity, and you do not have the frames of reference to understand what is outside time and finitude. So

1. Do your best to understand what you can understand now.
2. Trust me for what you cannot understand.
3. Let me help you discern the difference.”

This is not spelled out quite like this in the Bible. I found it on Shell Point Beach during late evening talks. I am convinced it came from El Shaddai.

The refiner’s fire

He led me to the refiner’s fire. A master silversmith is a skilled craftsman who, after much training and experience, is able to refine silver until it is absolutely pure. The refining process is, of course, the intense heat from a fire.

Silver is mined from the earth and contains many impurities. Only intense heat can burn away those impurities and leave pure silver. The temperature of the fire must be at precisely the right point. If it is two degrees too low, impurities will remain. If it is two degrees too high, the silver will be marred. Only a skilled silversmith can know the right temperature. He does so by sitting directly over the crucible, constantly stirring and observing. He determines the temperature by sensing the heat on his face. Hour by hour he sits over the crucible keeping the heat at exactly the right temperature. He feels the same heat the silver receives until he can see his own face perfectly reflected in the silver.

In like fashion, El Shaddai is the Master Refiner. He has been sitting over my dear Miriam and feeling the intense heat on his own face, suffering as it were with her. His patience and skill exceed those of the most skilled silversmith, and he continued his refining until Miriam perfectly reflected his own face. Then he released her body, mind, and spirit from the crucible and brought her completely refined and newly created into his eternal place for her.

At the same time, I felt much of this heat and bore some of the pain of what she has endured. Will I need to go through a similar process? Or even you? We do not know, but El Shaddai knows the plan he has for each of us, and by faith we must affirm that it is a good plan. “For it is by hope that we are saved” (Romans 8:24).

In Hebrews 2:10 we find a remarkable principle. It says that it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make Jesus, the author of their salvation, *perfect through suffering* in order to bring many sons to glory. Jesus is

God who came into the world as a man to live with us. As God, was he not perfect? How could God not be complete? Yet Hebrews tells us he was not complete. He came to identify with us in order to show us the Father, and so he had to become one like us humans who suffer. He suffered as we do in order to become entirely like us. He also had to suffer as the sinless human in order to pay the penalty of sin we could not pay. His suffering was for his sake and for our sake.

For Jesus, then, suffering had meaning and purpose. Through his suffering he identified with us and redeemed us. If suffering had purpose for Jesus, it must also have purpose for us and so, in the eternal sense, suffering is good. It makes us complete by preparing us for eternity. And as we are sustained through our suffering by the power, presence, and grace of Jesus, this can help bring others to glory and cause many to give praise to God. Miriam suffered until our loving Father, the refiner, saw his face reflected in her and we could see his face shining through her.

“We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus so that the *life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body*. (The life of Jesus was revealed in her smile and the sparkle of her eyes!). ... Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles *are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all*. We fix our eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen, What is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (II Corinthians 4: 7-10; 16-18). Suffering does have a purpose in God’s hands. We may not see what it is as we go through it, but we must TRUST.

Our commitment to God

Paul told Timothy, “I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him until that day” (II Tim. 1:12). Miriam committed herself to Jesus when she was a small child and she maintained that commitment daily throughout her life. She has been safe in his hands. In what way God has been keeping her safe in her spirit during these long difficult days of semi-consciousness, suffering, confusion, and restlessness, I do not know. I can only trust that he has been guarding her spirit safe in his keeping.

I committed Miriam to him from the day we were married, and especially during these last days of her suffering. So I must be persuaded (I am) that he is able to keep her safe until that day. That day for her came March 4 at 4 PM earthly time.

Heaven

What is heaven really like? What will we be like? We have no details. We can think of life only in earthly physical terms, with all the limitations that go with this. Those thought categories are insufficient to grasp the nature of life in heaven, so the Scriptures and even the Holy Spirit cannot tell us. We can only know that it is wonderful

beyond our imagination and that we will be far more alive and productive than we have ever been here.

What does Miriam look like now? The Scriptures are almost completely silent on this for reasons I noted above. I know she is dressed in white and is surrounded by myriads of fellow saints singing and glorifying God. I know also that she heard those marvelous words, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of the Lord.” Is she now doing nursing? No. Landscaping and flowers, probably yes. So I can rejoice with her even as I wait with hope for the day when I also will be set free from this slavery to decay and share in the glorious liberty of the people of God.

C.S. Lewis is especially helpful with his inspired imagination. In *The Great Divorce* he talks about heaven and hell working backwards. Miriam now realizes that all her years on earth, including the final months of struggle and suffering, have been part of heaven. She knows she has always been in heaven. Those in the other place realize they have always been in hell even during their entire earthly journey.

Last Sunday morning, Miriam’s first Sunday in heaven, as the organ played ‘Holy, Holy, Holy,’ my spirit could see her dressed in white, waving a purple banner, and dancing with holy grace amongst the millions of other singing ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’ in the language of heaven. So I must keep practicing my singing and my serving now, so that I will be prepared to join the eternal chorus and, with her, give praise to the Lord who made us and loves us.

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March 2011