

Great Moments in Marriage, and Then--

by Lehman Strauss

The sermon explores the intersection of marriage, faith, and the trials of sickness, emphasizing God's presence and the importance of spiritual nourishment during difficult times.

Scripture: Exodus 33:14, Psalm 27:14, Isaiah 40:31, Matthew 4:4, 1 Corinthians 10:13, Philippians 4:13, Hebrews 13:5, 1 Peter 4:12

Topics: "Trials And Tribulation", "Gods Sovereignty"

Description

Lehman Strauss shares a personal account of the distress and humility experienced during his wife's stroke, reflecting on the depths of helplessness and the intricate connection between the brain and body. Despite the trials, he finds comfort and strength in God's Word, emphasizing the importance of waiting on the Lord and finding rest in His promises. Through this unexpected trial, he learns the value of lying down in the green pastures of Scripture, experiencing the presence and peace of the Good Shepherd even in the darkest moments.

Transcript

Sickness can be one of life's most distressing and humbling circumstances, both for the person who is afflicted and for the loved ones who stand on the sidelines. This is particularly true of strokes, when both brain and body are affected. These two are intricately related, for the brain is the power station that controls the members of the body.

Having spent seventy-six consecutive days in the hospital watching the anguish and frustration of stroke victims, I have learned something of the depths of humiliation and helplessness to which we poor mortals can fall. This personal account is intended to give you understanding and help in responding to any troubling situation the Lord may allow to come into your life.

The year 1981 was a magnificent milestone for my wife Elsie and me. It was a year to which we looked forward and one we will never forget. That year marked our golden wedding anniversary. Fifty beautiful years!

Ours has not been a perfect marriage, of course. There cannot be a perfect marriage where two imperfect people are involved. But having listened to the complaints of hundreds of wives and husbands who have come to me for counsel, I do not hesitate to tell you that our marriage has been far above average. Sure, we have had problems, but we have learned how to resolve them.

Our marriage has been packed with great moments. We were married June 17, 1931. In preparation for that big event, I had spent just about every dollar I had saved. After the wedding, Elsie had sixty dollars; in fact, between the two of us we had sixty dollars! We enjoyed our honeymoon in Atlantic City--one week at the Blackstone Hotel. (In those days you got a lot for your money.) What a week!

I wish I had the time and space to tell you about some of the wonderful moments we shared during our half century together. But our 50th anniversary in 1981 was the best of all. Our families and friends had arranged celebrations, seven of them, from one end of our country to the other: in Escondido, California; Colorado Springs, Colorado; Detroit, Michigan; Middletown, North East, Maryland; Bristol, Pennsylvania; Schroon Lake, New York; and Charleston, West Virginia.

A full schedule of meetings had been planned through that summer and fall. It was without doubt the greatest year of our lives. After it was all over, we both relived with pleasure the joy of those glorious twelve months.

Meanwhile, we looked ahead to a full schedule of meetings in 1982. During January and February, I spoke forty one times in Florida. Then we drove to our home in Escondido, California, for three weeks of rest and study. Our plans were for Elsie to remain home during the latter part of March and April while I journeyed east to resume my ministry.

Then it happened. On March 27, I arrived in Peoria, Illinois, to begin a one-week conference on prophecy under the direction of the Moody Bible Institute. I was sitting in the motel room beside the telephone on Sunday afternoon, waiting with joyful anticipation. It was prearranged that Elsie would call me at four o'clock, Illinois time. The telephone had been a vital link between us whenever I was away. A man many miles from the one he loves becomes lonely.

With the first ring of the telephone, I picked it up and answered. The voice I heard on the other end of the line, however, was not the one I expected. Our son Richard was calling.

"Dad, the news is not good. Mother had a stroke." He gave me what information he had. I told him I would make flight plans and call him back.

I put down the telephone and just sat there stunned. After fifty years of a happy and trial-free relationship, why should the roof cave in like this? That Sunday in March was the darkest day in all my seventy-one years. Now, as I write these lines, it is nine months to the day since Elsie was stricken. The severity of the trial has not diminished. At times it has been even more severe.

I have been teaching the Bible and preaching sermons and writing books for forty-five years. I have set forth fervently, and sometimes dogmatically, the great doctrines of our historical Christian faith. I sought to comfort, console, and cheer sorrowing and suffering Christians. But trial and tribulation are now my constant companions. Truths that I once knew intellectually and academically, I am now learning experientially. There is a great difference.

In this book I am writing the testimony of that which is taking place in my own life during these months of watching my dear Elsie suffer. Her stroke was serious, and her recovery limited. Since her discharge from the hospital in mid-June, I have been caring for her twenty four hours every day. When you watch the one person suffer whom you love more than you love your own life, you reach a turning point. I am at that point now.

This is not the testimony of a hero who has been living victoriously on the mountaintop. Some days and nights I have been in the valley. Back in the 1940s the young people at the Pinebrook Summer Bible Conference in Pennsylvania used to sing the following chorus:

Down in the dumps I'll never go,

That's where the devil keeps me low,

So I'll sing with all my might

And I'll keep my armor bright,

But, down in the dumps I'll never go.

(Author Unknown)

I sang that chorus many times those days, with good intentions. But I won't sing it now. From experience I know better. In recent months I have been in those "dumps" a few times. Thank God, I am not there now!

The Word of God has been my stronghold in these difficult days. One of the most significant statements of our Lord was spoken during His confrontation with Satan. He said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). When Jesus spoke those words He was not minimizing the importance of food for the body. He was saying that man has needs other than physical and material, needs that call for complete dependence upon God. Paul wrote about the outward man and the inward man (2 Corinthians 4:16; see also Romans 7:22 and Ephesians 3:16). Both need to be fed, and each has its own prescribed diet.

In times of trial it is easy to give in to the weight of the problem. Sorrow, suffering, or loss has a way of draining us of the strength we need to bear up under the trial. That empty feeling within us cries for a means of finding peace. Some people turn to drink, expecting that the alcohol will meet their need. I have a friend who becomes a compulsive eater whenever he faces a serious problem. But what we put into the body, which is the outward man, can never feed the inner man, which Peter calls "the hidden man of the heart" (1 Peter 3:4). Our Lord said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." When Satan tempted Him, He went immediately to the Holy Scriptures. Because He had not eaten food for forty days and nights, He was hungry and in need of physical nourishment. The devil, the author of false confidence, tempted our Lord to feed the body. Instead, Christ drew confidently from the Scriptures during His testing.

As I sat contemplating what my son had told me on the telephone about Elsie, my thoughts went immediately to this passage:

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

I was reminded that nothing unique had happened to Elsie and me. Our trial was a common one. I have learned since then that in the United States more than 500,000 people each year have a stroke.

I received a similar reminder from these words of the apostle Peter: "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you" (1 Peter

4:12). Because we are God's children, and because He permitted the trial, I knew He would also provide for our every need. His fidelity and faithfulness were my guarantee. This is not the mere figment of my imagination but the glorious fact that God has been with me to keep me from being overwhelmed by the trial. God is faithful.

A phone call to the airline ticket office informed me that there were no flights leaving Peoria that Sunday evening that would give me connections to Escondido. I arranged a reservation on the earliest flight Monday morning, phoned Richard, and began to wait. I found myself in God's waiting room.

Hospitals have waiting rooms--small enclosures where people go to wait and hope for a favorable change in the condition of a loved one. Many of the people I have seen in hospital waiting rooms were anxious, worried, and frustrated.

I have been in God's waiting room since my wife had her stroke. God in His faithfulness has enabled me to bear the trial. Elsie remains paralyzed, and she needs my love and care twenty-four hours every day. I too am waiting and hoping for a favorable change; as I wait I am drawing upon the infinite resources of God's grace. This unexpected trial has changed my well-laid plans, but I know that God's plans are far better than mine.

Even so, this business of waiting is one tough assignment. I had never learned experientially that waiting is a necessary part of Christian training. This is my first experience in God's waiting room. If "Waiting 101" were an elective course in God's school, you may be certain I would not choose it. But God didn't give me a choice--it was a required course. He made the choice for me, knowing I needed it. So I continue to wait.

The Scriptures contain many exhortations for Christians to wait for the Lord to fulfill His plans in His time. David prayed. "Thou art the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day" (Psalm 25:5). (I could add, all the night.) David learned to wait, and he found it to be a profitable experience. He wrote, "Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and He shall strengthen thine heart: Wait, I say, on the Lord" (Psalm 27:14).

At times I have found it hard to wait. I get in a hurry, and God seems so slow. But I am learning that "they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31). This verse, as well as others like it, is proving to be blessedly true as I remain in God's waiting room.

I have always had the ambition and desire to do God's work. Since leaving the pastorate in 1963, I have averaged about 60,000 miles of travel annually, spoken 400 messages each year before audiences, and taught the Bible twenty-five minutes each weekday on the national radio program "Bible Study Time." It has been difficult to say no when invitations come to teach and preach God's Word. For the present, I do not have a choice. On April 1, 1982, I canceled all scheduled meetings for the twelve months following. I am thankful for more time to wait before the Lord in prayer. I am also grateful for the privilege of ministering to my dear Elsie.

Recently I read again the Twenty-third Psalm. Verse 2 came alive to me with fresh insight: "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." He maketh me. I had always been active in Christian service, but I now have the feeling that I was busier than God wanted me to be. So I asked myself, "Is it possible that because God loves me, He allowed this painful trial to make me lie down?" Think about it.

I see a close connection between Psalm 23:2 and Mark 6:31, where our Lord said to His disciples: "Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat." This statement of our Lord immediately followed the disciples' return from their first preaching mission. I detect in Mark 6:30 a bit of pride as the disciples reported to Christ all they had accomplished.

Note the point of likeness between Psalm 23:2 and Mark 6:31. The psalmist said, "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." Mark records that the disciples were too busy to eat. We know Mark was speaking of food for the body, but we may profit from a spiritual application as well. We need to get alone with God and allow the Good Shepherd to lead us to fresh pastures of the Scriptures. If we will not do so voluntarily, then He will make us lie down.

One of my regrets is that I didn't take more time to lie down in the green pastures of God's Word during those busy years. I did read and study my Bible daily, but much of that reading and studying was to keep up with the demands of my speaking schedule.

Today I am grateful that God has made me lie down in the fresh green pastures of His Word. During these months of trial He has enabled me to experience the preciousness and power of His truth. My Good Shepherd has fed my soul, and I have not lacked one thing that is necessary and good. The green pastures of the Shepherd's Word are a sharp contrast to the dry desert wastelands of this world.

Nothing is wrong with sincere ambition and the desire to keep busy in God's work, but we need resting places along the way. God said to Elijah, "Hide thyself" (1 Kings 17:3), and then He appeared to Elijah saying, "Go, shew thyself" (1 Kings 18:1). The prophet needed time alone with God before he could face the wicked Ahab. We all must learn sooner or later that we too need time alone with the Good Shepherd.

The flight home from Peoria on March 29 was a new experience for me. I have flown more than a million miles in the past fifty years, but this trip was different. At times it seemed that this flight alone was a million miles. There I was, a lonely man sitting in a plane, yet surrounded by people. I did not know the seriousness of Elsie's illness. I only knew that she had a stroke. I couldn't think of anything or anyone except Elsie. I felt bleak and desolate. Never had I known such loneliness. I breathed a weak prayer, "Dear Lord, help me!" I wanted to say more, but I just couldn't articulate. I can't remember when I felt so drained, so utterly weak--too weak to pray.

But God came to me in a most comforting and consoling way by calling to my mind one of His precious promises. I had memorized it as a young Christian. "My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest" (Exodus 33:14). I am aware of the fact that some scholars punctuate this verse as a question, and they could be correct. But in my mind, there was no question about God's presence being with me on my flight home. The Holy Spirit ministered assurance and peace as He brought other portions of Scripture to my remembrance. "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee" (Isaiah 43:2). "And the LORD, he it is that doth go before thee" (Deuteronomy 31:8). "Fear thou not; for I am with thee" (Isaiah 41:10). I did not need to ask God to be with me, for He has promised to be with me. He kept His promise!

One of the blessings of this trial came to me as I was led from the "He" to the "thou" of Psalm 23--"He maketh me to lie down. . . . thou art with me" (italics added). There is a difference between talking about the Lord and speaking directly to Him. In the latter, the waiting room becomes the presence room. The Good Shepherd's presence continues to comfort and strengthen me. There were days and nights when, looking through these human eyes, I couldn't see any light at the end of the tunnel. But in those darkest

moments Christ's presence provided comfort and care.

I am writing these lines on a dull, drab day. Stroke patients can be up one day and down the next. Today is a down day for Elsie. The burden has not lightened, and I have no idea what the outcome will be. But one thing is certain--my heart has found a resting place.

Our Lord said, "I will never leave thee [not ever, at any time], nor forsake thee" (Hebrews 13:5). That is His promise! The same verse contains a precept, "Be content with such things as ye have." I do not know if the Lord will heal Elsie, but I do know that He will never leave us nor forsake us.

The devil has tried to dissuade me, to turn me from Christ, to stir up a spirit of discontent within me. But he has not succeeded! The presence of Christ has made me satisfied with my state. The Christian standard of contentment is a lofty one. It would be beyond my reach, if it were not for the presence of my Lord. I have what the world cannot give. I have Christ. No one can improve on that!

I cannot say with the apostle Paul that "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content" (Philippians 4:11). But I can testify that I am learning "through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13).

The flight from Peoria to California was a lonely one, but I was not alone. I say to my suffering brothers and sisters in Christ--rest assured that our Lord will never desert you.

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