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# Lessons Learned in a Crisis of Life

*Some lessons are learned the hard way. The stewardship of those lessons seems especially important. The significant learning I have experienced started with an illness that eventually required major surgery. But that was only the start of the process. These are among the lessons I learned in the midst of this crisis. I wanted to write them down while they are fresh. There is far more to say, but this is a start. God has given me a new chance, armed with lessons I otherwise would have missed. What can we call this but a gift?*

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Two days after Christmas, and several days after the onset of illness, I found myself at the emergency room of a local hospital. That, as nearly every family knows, is an ordeal unto itself. People from all walks of life arrive with challenges great and small. The emergency room staff keeps an even keel marked by quiet intensity. Triage — the evaluation of medical urgency — is going on as patients explain their ailments.

Before long I was talking to a surgeon after a CAT scan. Scar tissue from surgery twenty-five years ago had grown to block the digestive tract. I was scheduled for abdominal surgery the next day.

I am not a good patient under the best of circumstances, and I am, as my family and friends would kindly say, very interested in maintaining control of my environment. Well, forget that. Medical care in the United States is a wonder, but there is nothing wonderful about sitting on a hospital bed wearing what the staff calls a “gown.” No way to look dignified in that.

I was told that I would be in the hospital as long as a week. A week! Heart by-pass patients are sent home earlier than that. I have things to do, people to see, sermons to preach, projects to write, a radio show to host . . . and I can’t wait in here a week. I was determined to prove them wrong.

I came out of the surgery feeling like I had been sawn in two. Four laparoscopic attempts had been unsuccessful, so the surgeon had to go in through a large vertical incision. Added to that, I had tubes everywhere, pain, and a general sense that I was drugged. Then, as those who have shared this experience would well know, the nurses come in all too soon to make you sit, walk, cough, and breathe into a torture device known as an “incentive Spirometer.” It’s all about clearing the lungs. Left alone, the patient would crawl into a fetal position and develop pneumonia. They know what they are doing.

After several days, I just was not getting better. I had experienced abdominal surgery before, but that was at age 21. NEWS FLASH: You do not recover at 47 like you did at 21. Something happened along the way.

Still, something was wrong. I started experiencing excruciating pain that seemed to be coming from my lungs, not from the surgical area. To be honest, I was scared. That went on for some time until another CAT scan was eventually ordered. After that, things got very interesting.

I was barely back in the room when the phone rang. My wife was told that I had developed pulmonary emboli in both lungs, caused by blood clots. The PE’s had caused pneumonia, and they did not know if more were lurking. Things moved fast. Medical personnel flooded the room and they began moving me to another unit.

I grew particularly worried when they rushed me into the Intensive Care Unit. That sign was memorable, and the sense was ominous. Within a relatively short time, a pulmonary specialist was in the room, and he was both honest and assuring. That started a 4-day adventure in the ICU I will never forget. After three more days in a medical-surgical unit — two full weeks in the hospital — I was finally discharged and went home to heal . . . slowly. I was (and am) a very thankful man.

What lessons come through this experience?

1. *The assurance of God's sovereignty and providential love.* I knew these things to be true, of course. The Scripture clearly reveals the true and living God to be, not only “Maker of heaven and earth,” but the divine ruler over all. God's providence, rule, and care extend to every atom and molecule that exists — or ever has or will exist. Nothing is outside His control, and His sovereign control is perfectly consistent with His character.

There never was a moment when my life was not, or is not, in His hands. What happened to me was not a freak medical accident, but something God intended as good for me. I was safe, though I was admittedly scared.

2. *The sweetness of Christ and the assurance of His faithfulness.* In Romans 8, Paul reminds us that those who are united with Christ can never be separated from Him — not even by death. These verses came to mind again and again. Christ is faithful even when we are not — even when we are drugged or unconscious. Christ is our great High Priest who sits at the right hand of the Father. The power of His resurrection is the promise of our own. Our salvation is not secured by our consciousness or strength, any more than by works of righteousness. It is all of grace — all.

3. *The frailty of our humanity.* We really are made of dust. We are weak and vulnerable creatures who remain dependent from the moment we are born until the moment we die. We are made of frail stuff — skin and bones and organs and tissues. A decade ago I was seriously threatened by a microscopic entity — the flesh-eating bacterium. *Necrotizing Fasciitis* is a horrible and deadly disease, but God was merciful in allowing me to escape after five days in the hospital. I have never seen *Streptococcus pyogenes* (not even through a microscope), but it came with intent to kill. We can be turned back to dust by microscopic enemies — and yet we feel ourselves to be so strong and self-sufficient. Until, that is, we find we are not.

Just before the crisis hit, I felt great. We had big plans for Christmas and some calm days after the celebration. All that was changed in a matter of hours. I went from strong to hopelessly weak. I went from being in command of my world to being unable to care for myself in a matter of hours. I had no expertise that could help; no medical knowledge that mattered. I was in the immediate hands of the surgeon and the medical staff. I had no control.

The blood clots were a great emergency and a great mystery. Where had they originated? Were more lurking? The human heart, lungs, and brain can be wiped out by a major blood clot in an instant. We are not tough. We are frail and incredibly complicated beings. I am now and will for some time remain on a treatment regimen for blood clots. My blood is artificially thinned. My liver is being tricked so that it stops secreting an enzyme that starts the “clotting cascade” that, in a normal human being, stops bleeding. It is a trade-off. The trade-off of the frail.

Life is so short, and “man knows not his time” (Ecclesiastes 9:12). That knowledge puts things into a new perspective.

4. *The limitations of human consciousness.* If our bodies are frail, so is our mind. After all, the brain is itself an organ. The biological reductionists and physicalists argue that consciousness (or the soul) is simply the chemical reactions of the brain. Christians reject this reductionism, but we cannot get around the fact that to be *self-consciously* human is to depend upon the effective operation of the brain.

All that gets a bit foggy in a medical crisis. Drugs, anxiety, confusion, sleep-deprivation, and a myriad of lights, voices, and noises fog the mental atmosphere. I could not make my mind do what I wanted it to do. In the ICU, I experienced moments when I could not make words work together. I could not link thoughts — I could not even pray as I desperately wanted to pray. The Lord calmed me with the memory of Romans 8:26 and the promise that the Holy Spirit intercedes for believers “with groanings too deep for words.”

The Lord never slumbers nor sleeps (Psalm 121:4), and this alone explains how we can sleep with safety.

5. *How much my wife loves me, and I love her.* No man deserves a wife like this. From the beginning of this crisis, Mary was my human lifeline. She kept me sane, protected me, comforted me, stayed with me, helped me, encouraged me, and . . . loved me.

I always knew she loved me and that I loved her. I would marry her a thousand times over again and I am so thankful for her — but never more than in this crisis. A crisis can be so clarifying. In the confusion and fog of the ICU unit, she was my tie to sanity and security. If Mary was there, all was well. If she left, nothing was right. She turned the world upside down to be with me. She slept on a hard chair all night to be there when the doctors came in early hours. She asked all the right questions and remembered everything I forgot. She is also honest, and tells me the truth. She was — and is — my lifeline and my closest friend. How would I live without her?

With Mary, I was reminded so powerfully of how much we love our children. Katie and Christopher were in the crisis with us, and their presence was the great energizer (though often they could not tell). Who deserves the love of a child? I thank God in all new ways for my family.

6. *What God gives us in the blessing of friends and the reality of the Church.* The Lord has given me such gifts in friends, colleagues, and fellow believers in Christ. Through members of our local church as well as believers I have never met on earth, God ministered to me. Their concern was a great encouragement and their prayers were incredible gifts. A room (and house) filled with flowers and plants spoke the gift of friendship and devoted concern.

The love of Christ is demonstrated in the love of the saints for each other and in the ministry of intercession. My able colleagues at the Seminary held the ropes and performed with excellence — filling the gaps and never missing a beat. Friends bless us even now with encouragement, reminders, and the gift of meals. How does one adequately thank a friend?

7. *The miracle of modern medicine.* The development of modern medicine is a truly recent development. Only in recent decades is the hospital a place that truly promises much healing. The modern applications of antiseptics, antibiotics, and anesthesia were unknown until the last century, and modern surgical techniques, lasers, imaging technologies, and drugs are the stuff of medical miracles. This is another display of the providence of God. Just read a history of medicine and be reminded that the founders of this nation knew nothing of germ theory. Read of the surgical nightmares of recent centuries and the horrors of infectious disease. Be reminded of surgery without anesthesia or antibiotics (or the surgeon knowing how the body really works). Know that millions now alive would have died prematurely just decades ago.

Medical care is costly, yes. But we enjoy an access to medical care and medical technologies that is unprecedented in human history. I will not complain about the cost.

This is one man who is thankful for modern medicine and medical advances. My trust is in God, and I am thankful He has allowed this knowledge to aid humanity.

8. *The need to pray for the sick.* At my worst moments, I was probably the healthiest person in the Intensive Care Unit. A week later, I was home. The crisis, though all too real and critical, was short in duration. I witnessed in the ICU the urgency and desperation of those in deep medical crisis. I was struck by the fact that I drive by hospitals all the time — even enter to visit friends and church members — without praying for those unknown to me who are suffering deep and potentially life-ending crises. Some suffer great pain and mental anguish. I will not make that mistake again. I will pray for them and for their loved ones.

9. *The dedication of medical personnel.* I thank God for the dedicated men and women, ranging from doctors and nurses to a constellation of other aides, assistants, and technicians, who give themselves to the care of the sick. This is a great gift, and a rare dedication. They deal with the unspeakable and unrepresentable. Nurses and their aides were often agents of mercy, some particularly so. I am so thankful for them. That job cannot pay enough. Their care was evident.

The same is true of the physicians who dedicate their lives to making and keeping people well. They could make more money developing software, but they give themselves to the care of the sick. God bless them.

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