

# Adventuring with God

with Jeanne Hedrick

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## The Feeling of Our Infirmities

In his article "God's Purpose in Our Suffering" (*Decision* magazine, March 2009), Steve Saint makes an interesting observation: "Sufferers want to be ministered to by people who have *suffered*. They are suspicious of people who appear to live lives of ease."

That's true, isn't it? We're more likely to discount the opinions of people who haven't actually gone through what we're experiencing. Even if what they are sharing with us is thoroughly biblical, we tend to mentally dismiss their attempts to comfort or counsel us about our situation. The main reason for this is because it registers as clinical information, not something that comes from deep within the heart of the messenger.

I remember how devastated my mom was when my dad died very suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 59. Her painful grief was apparent to everyone who saw her during those first few days. The day of the funeral the young pastor of their church did everything he could to comfort her. I watched him sit beside her, holding her hand tenderly, quoting passages of Scripture that seemed to be perfectly applicable to her situation. But none of it appeared to give her any comfort. Later she told me that, while she appreciated his desire to help her, all she could think as she looked into his eyes was, "What could you know about how I'm feeling?"

There's something about shared experiences that deepen our emotional connection to one another. That's why God came to us as He did. He didn't come to just impart knowledge to us and deliver His commands. He came to join us in our human journey and empathize with us in a way that some austere ruler watching from afar could never do.

In Hebrews 4:15 (KJV) it says that Jesus Christ was unlike all the other human high priests that Israel had known: "**For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities.**" He was tempted in every way we are, and because of

that, He is able to identify with and sympathize with everything we go through. His priesthood on our behalf is so much more effective and helpful as a result—"Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Hebrews 2:18).

We can never say to Him, "But you don't know what this is like!" or "You haven't experienced the depth of my sorrow and grief ... you can't possibly understand." Even though He was the Son of God, He didn't live a life of ease. In Isaiah 53:3, in fact, He is called a man of sorrow, acquainted with grief. He experienced all the emotions of life *for our sake* and gladly identified with us so that He might be "**able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them**" (Hebrews 7:25). What a Savior!

There was a very insightful movie done in 1991 called "The Doctor." The doctor featured in the story was highly respected by everyone, considered the top physician in his field of study. One of his jobs was to teach groups of medical students training in the hospital.

His arrogance was apparent as he counseled them to keep an emotional distance from their patients, to see each case as a medical puzzle to be solved with the best research information available in the field. He made fun of getting emotionally involved with patients and their families and characterized a successful doctor as one who could do his or her job with precision and expertise, with a minimum of interpersonal involvement.

That was his avowed opinion ... until he contracted a serious illness. When he became a patient, suddenly his perspective shifted dramatically. He didn't look for a highly skilled and unemotional technician to handle his case. He sought out the most caring and compassionate doctor on staff—the one he had often scorned for being too "unprofessional." Once he was forced to face his own mortality, fears, and pain, he could see the value

of an empathetic healer who might not have all the answers but cared about him personally.

Throughout most of my life, I must admit, I've tried my best to remain detached and unemotional in the face of other people's suffering. It wasn't because I had no capacity for feeling their pain; it was because I knew that if I allowed my sympathy to be aroused, it would create emotional pain within me and I didn't want to experience that. It was a different story with those really close to me, of course. I willingly embraced their trials and carried their pain with them because I loved them. But for those outside of that circle, I was in most cases unwilling to share "the feeling of their infirmities."

But recently I've been challenged with just how different my attitude is from the character of God. As His representative, He wants me to show to others the same kind of loving identification that He showed to me when I was outside of His "circle" of family relationships.

None are so blind as those who *will not* see. But God has His ways of opening our eyes and enabling us to see the hurting and needy all around us. They don't need spiritual clinicians who have all the answers for their problems. They need doctors who have been patients, people who can identify with what they are going through.

I don't like the current health situation I am facing, and I certainly wouldn't have sought it out by choice. But I know my heavenly Father has led me here for His good purposes. I can't see yet what all of them are, but I know one thing for sure: I can identify with those who are facing a serious illness a whole lot better now than I could have just weeks ago. I finally understand at a deep and emotional level what this kind of challenge involves and how God can make the difference in going through it with peace of heart.

Paul understood the connection between personal suffering and effective spiritual ministry to others. He wrote, "*The God of all comfort ... comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows*" (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

We certainly don't seek out suffering and difficulty, but when they come, we should look for the benefits that may be hidden within them, both for ourselves and for others. I have much to learn in this area, and some days I'm not a very willing participant. But I trust that my Father will be patient with me as I seek to develop a more compassionate heart, a heart that better reflects the One who was so compassionate with me.

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## Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood as to understand;  
to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen