When Your World Crashes Down
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These articles (Rod’s and Mark’s) were birthed from a conversation they had in Rod’s study as they shared their journey of suffering. When Rod was diagnosed with aggressive cancer, Mark stopped by his study and mentioned that Rod certainly had it worse than he. But Rod quickly turned it and compassionately shared that he would be delivered far earlier from his suffering than Mark. From this transparent conversation between two colleagues and friends, they share their intimate journeys of suffering so others in the body of Christ might find solace and peace as they share the same or similar paths.

I Am Not Afraid to Die; I Am Afraid to Live
Mark McGinniss

A strange sentiment for a Christian. Christians can face death confidently knowing the reality of enjoying God’s presence once they pass from this life. This theological truth produces great peace. For some, death is a gracious deliverance from terrible suffering. But where is comfort for sufferers of chronic pain if death is not imminent? How does one hang on through suffering, when letting go is not an option? What does one do when they wake each morning not afraid to die; but afraid to live?

In the fall of 2010 I was diagnosed with Trigeminal neuralgia. Trigeminal neuralgia or TN is a nerve disorder, which is characterized by episodes of intense pain. It is a chronic pain condition that causes extreme burning or in my case searing electrical shocks predominantly to the left side of my face. However, I am part of the rare class who also experience TN on the right. The excruciating jolts seldom last for more than a few seconds but a person with TN may suffer scores of intense episodes within minutes! In the past three years I have not experienced a day, not even an hour without pain—even with medication!

Currently few medical options treat TN. Only one offers a complete cure, the MVD. The MVD is an invasive brain procedure. In this operation the neurosurgeon enters the skull and separates the offending blood vessels from the trigeminal nerve. It is believed a compression of a blood vessel against the nerve causes the condition. While the technique boasts a 90%+ success rate, I awoke from surgery on the wrong side of the medical statistics, not once but three times! So I still struggle with a nerve disease triggered by the slightest touch, a breeze, or even a kiss from my wife.

While there is no prize for having the greatest pain, the contractions of childbirth and kidney stones hurt less than the excruciating jolts of TN. Many have dubbed TN “the suicide disease.” The reason for such a moniker is that while the disease can be debilitating, it is not fatal. There is the rub: TN will not kill you; but there are times that you wish... however it does not. Like Rod, I am not afraid to die: my eternal destiny is secure but there are times I am afraid to live. At the present moment it is not a consuming fear. However there are times fear is a close companion.

I fear the pain. Other then cluster headaches, TN is the worst pain known to medical science. My experience has proven the researchers correct. People with the affliction find it difficult to describe the pain. There are no metaphors or similes that can be created to communicate it accurately. It hurts so badly that all one can say, through tears, is, “It hurts!” I smile when asked by
a medical staff at a hospital or MD’s office, “On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your pain level?” I want to say, “Are you serious? Do you understand this disease?” But I refrain, and reply, “Your chart does not go that high!”

Not only does one fear the intensity of the jolts, but the seemingly randomness of them hitting. This unpredictability does not allow one to prepare the body for the next onslaught. Once the jolt is passed the fear is when will the next one occur? You know the next one will come (there is always another), and you fear the subsequent one will be as bad and maybe worse. Then there is the emotional pain: the over–whelming sense of profound sadness that this is your new normal and the realization that agonizing pain is your life.

I fear unfilled expectations. My life is not the same. Before, lofty dreams and expectations of an unlimited future stretched before my wife, Joy, and me. We are close to being complete “empty-nesters.” Our youngest is a BBC junior. We looked expectantly to a new chapter in our lives. Three years ago we entered a new chapter we did not expect. Now in every decision we must factor in TN. Some activities worsen the pain: a concert, a movie, even music of a Sunday morning church service. All trigger TN—even watching TV can increase the jolts. The expectation of a quiet night in front of the fireplace with music playing brings the concern of causing more anguish. A kiss, a certain touch can kill the promise of an intimate evening. My wife hoped that we could travel as our freedom increased. But we are tentative. “What if the TN is so terrible and we are so far away?” “What happens if the TN worsens and we cannot get home right away?” I have been offered a few opportunities to teach overseas and in the past we expected to be open to those ministries. Now our dreams and expectations get filtered through the lens of TN. We realize sadly not every dream will be fulfilled.

I fear being a burden to others. I have new students who wonder why their prof cringes for a few seconds during class. Or I have to stop the lesson and explain why I cry out in class. I fear they will remember the painful episode they witnessed rather than Hebrew nouns! Others, who witness my pain simply do not know what to say or do to bring comfort. They are uncomfortable in their impotency. I dislike immensely causing such feelings. Along with this, I fear disappointing people. Sometimes I make plans and have to cancel at the last minute because TN is simply too agonizing. I hate disappointing people, but TN gives me no choice. This too becomes a burden.

As a husband and a father you never want to be a burden to your wife and family. Although my family has continually reassured me that this is not the case, I know my condition weighs heavily on their hearts. I reason that they have enough burdens in this world; they certainly do not need another—as a father I should come along side and uplift them, not add more weight to their lives.

I fear the future. There are times I fear the prospect of a future with more pain. “When will the next jolt hit?” “How severe will it be?” “Is this my future?” Although I find it difficult to grasp, there is always the chance the pain will increase. While not offering much, if any pain relief at the moment, the medication that I am on may become less effective or the pain may simply “blow” through it. The fear of the future multiplies all the rest. I fear losing any possible normalcy for the future with the present pain level. I fear losing more of myself to share with my family and friends due to the struggle. This daily fight to endure exhausts one physically and emotionally. I fear losing the freedom I have enjoyed in the past. I fear losing the ministry of teaching that I love.

Above all I fear being unfaithful. I fear that one day God may eliminate this terrible ordeal and mercifully grant healing (this side of heaven). I fear I may look back and realize that I had been unfaithful with the trial. I would be sorrowful that if I had endured just one more minute, one more hour, one more day by his grace, I would have glorified God for the power he granted (1 Cor 12). Instead he may have found me accusing him of wrongdoing, injustice, and demanding he give an
account of his violent treatment towards me (Job 31:35). This is my greatest fear.

To deal with this torment I have taken the words of Asaph and Paul to heart. I rehearse with Asaph that no matter the suffering, “My flesh and my heart may fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps 73:26). Like Paul I count on God’s power (2 Cor 12:9). I attempt to commit each jolt to him and trust he will give grace to endure. While other TN sufferers trust different remedies, this is truly the only one for believers who suffer fear. God’s ministry to my heart does not take away the pain. But it chases away the fears. This does not mean there are no more tears—there are plenty of these. Our tear-soaked pillows and my wife’s damp shoulder attest to that fact. But through the sadness we experience grace, the power to endure one more day, or one more hour, or even one more minute.

You will notice my article is longer than Rod’s. That is appropriate. Even the length of our articles quietly whispers our individual messages. Barring a miracle for Rod, he will, by his own admission, experience deliverance from his suffering much sooner than me. He will be cancer free. (Although we pray that God will continue to be merciful to him and to those who love him and grant him a long and productive life and ministry). Barring a miracle for me (and not being hit by the proverbial truck), I will suffer on with pain and occasionally fear. For those who tread a similar path whether emotionally or physically, we make Asaph’s and Paul’s words our own: “My flesh and my heart may fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps 73) and “my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness” (2 Cor 12).

I’m Not Afraid to Die
Rod Decker

It is no surprise that we will all one day die. We all will for Scripture promises that we are “destined to die once” (Heb 9:27). We often live as if that is not the case. We think we are invincible, especially when we are younger. True, most younger folks who die do so as a result of traumatic injury, but disease strikes more often than we like, even then. It tends to get one’s attention, however, when the doctor says, “6 months if we do nothing; 6 months when we run out of treatment options. This disease will one day take your life.”

Although I did not hear words that blunt until the fall of 2013, I had suspected that was the case when first diagnosed with a very aggressive recurrence of treatment-resistant cancer the year before. I had been told last winter my cancer was stage 4 and incurable. I am now on a fourth type of treatment, three in less than a year. Beginning with radiation when the cancer first occurred 3 years ago, and then continuing with new forms of treatment last winter, I have typically gotten positive responses for 3 or 4 months. Each shift in medical strategy is hopeful of being more effective, but there are no guarantees. So I now live with a 6 month outlook on life. What does life look like when there is a 6 month timer set and ready to tick?

In the big picture I can say with all confidence that I am not afraid to die. My Savior has conquered death: “Death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor 15:54, fulfilling the promise of Isa 25:7–8). Although death came into our world through Adam, the sure promise of resurrection comes through Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:20–22). Death is not the end. Although my body will be buried in the earth one day, I will be very much alive. “We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human
While we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (2 Cor 5:1, 4–5). That wording is certainly poetic and metaphorical, but the reality they describe is very real—just as real as our life now. Those promises are not, of course, given to everyone. They belong only to those who have relinquished their own efforts to earn God’s favor and trusted in his free gift of grace alone based on Jesus’ finished work on the cross (Eph 2:8–9), but that I have done.

Does that mean I am rapturous at the thought of dying? Not at all; I am not a fool. Death is an enemy, even though a defeated one. Though I fear neither the event of death itself nor what lies beyond, I am concerned that I may not “die well”—that I will not honor my Savior as I ought in the pain that (especially with my form of cancer) often precedes stepping into eternity. So I pray I will have “sufficient courage so that Christ will be exalted in my body by death” (Phil 1:20).

That which most often brings tears unbidden to my eyes is thinking of my dear wife who will be left alone when I go home. We have lived, loved, and ministered together for nearly 40 years, she caring for me and I for her. Though I have done what I can to prepare and provide for her “down the road,” there is a personal sense of helplessness that sometimes overwhelms. But at that point I must trust my Savior who will never leave her nor forsake her (Heb 13:5) and who has special concern for widows and orphans (Exod 22:22; Deut 10:18; Ps 68:5). Our three grown children will, of course, pitch in along with 10 young grand children (1 Tim 5:4). He has also provided us with a healthy, caring church family where pure religion, looking after orphans and widows (Jas 1:27), is not just theory. Yes, there will be sorrow when we part, but thankfully it is not the hopeless sorrow of the world (1 Thess 4:13).

I once hoped I would have another 10 or 15 years of active ministry in the classroom, in the church, and in writing. In that time I once dreamed of another four books in print, books that would minister to students as well as the church, books that would in some way repay some of my debt to this school where I first trained for ministry 40 years ago. At this point, however, it appears that God is telling me that my work is largely done. No one is indispensable, least of all me. That God took a farm boy and placed him in the ministry, eventually on into graduate studies, and then into the classroom to train young pastors is grace from the beginning. Unless God should surprise me (and, I suspect, my oncologist) with a renewed lease on health and strength beyond what seems medically probable, I am not many years from glory.

Living with the reality of death, there is nothing to be done differently. I have no plans to distract myself from the realities of life and death. I will not buy a new sports car, take an exotic vacation, or make dramatic changes in life style. I am not attempting to escape or ignore what inevitably lies ahead. I continue to teach and minister as God enables, both in the classroom and in my local church, though now with considerably less vigor and energy than I once brought to those challenging ministries I have enjoyed for many years. My goal is to be faithful to what God has given me to do as long as I have the strength to do it, whether that be for six months or six years.

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