

Suffering is not generic. It is particularized to individual people and to their personal stories. Esther Smith has written a wonderful devotional about the trial of chronic illness. It is richly flavored by her story but also resonates beyond her experience because it winsomely draws from the fathomless fountain of biblical truth and gospel celebration. The best thing I can say about this book is that it speaks eloquently to chronic illness but also gives hope and wisdom for all sufferers and for those who seek to care for them as well.

—**Andy Farmer**, Pastor of Counseling and Care, Covenant Fellowship Church, Glen Mills, Pennsylvania; Author, *Real Peace: What We Long For and Where to Find It*

Esther Smith's devotional on chronic illness is simply outstanding. As one who struggles with pain every minute of every day, I need to be reminded of the hope I have in Jesus. This devotional delivers an avalanche of hope as well as practical help about how to care for our bodies. Read this devotional, and then reread it again and again. It will bless your body and soul.

—**Dave Furman**, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Church of Dubai; Author, *Being There: How to Love Those Who Are Hurting* and *Kiss the Wave: Embracing God in Your Trials*

Finally, a devotional that gives a validating voice to the suffering of chronic illness while also bringing essential hope and purpose through the life-giving promises of Scripture. Esther's empathetic words capture the pains, sorrows, joys, and victories that come when we understand that God uses illness for his glory. You will no longer suffer alone as you take up the journey of walking with God in the pages of this book.

—**Eliza Huie**, Director of Counseling, McLean Bible Church, DC Metropolitan Area; Dean of Biblical Counseling, Metro Baltimore Seminary

Chronic Illness: Walking by Faith is an exceptional devotional written by one who understands chronic illness, who has experienced its life-changing impact, and who leans deeply into Jesus. Esther offers no quick answers; instead, she invites us to engage with Scripture, to read her honest thoughts about a life that she didn't expect but longs to steward well, and to consider thoughtful reflection questions and action steps. A feast to savor and treasure!

—**Cindee Snider Re**, Cofounder, Chronic Joy (chronic illness ministry); Author, Chronic Joy Thrive Series and Abide Series

Esther Smith is a caring and compassionate friend who understands the tiresome challenges of living with chronic illness. Reading this devotional, and following its wise and gracious counsel, will clear your mind, strengthen your heart, and grow your faith.

—**Paul Tautges**, Senior Pastor, Cornerstone Community Church, Mayfield Heights, Ohio; Founder, *Counseling One Another* (blog)

C H R O N I C
I L L N E S S

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

A Series

DEEPAK REJU

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C H R O N I C
I L L N E S S

WALKING
BY FAITH

ESTHER SMITH


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Tips for Reading This Devotional

EARLY IN OUR MARRIAGE, my wife and I lived on the top floor of a town house, in a small one-bedroom apartment. Whenever it rained, leaks in the roof would drip through the ceiling and onto our floors. I remember placing buckets in different parts of the apartment and watching the water slowly drip, one drop at a time. I put large buckets out and thought, *It'll take a while to fill them.* The water built up over time, and often I was surprised at how quickly those buckets filled up, overflowing if I didn't pay close enough attention.

Like rain filling up a bucket, this devotional will surprise you. It may not seem like much; just a few verses every day. Drip. Drip. Drip. Yet a few drops of Scripture daily can satiate your parched soul. The transformative power of these readings will build over time and overflow into your life.

Why does a book like this make such a difference?

We start with Scripture. God's Word is powerful. Used by the Holy Spirit, it turns the hearts of kings, brings comfort to the lowly, and gives spiritual sight to the blind. It transforms lives and turns them upside down. We know that the Bible is God's very own words, so we read and study it to know God himself.

Our study of Scripture is practical. Theology should change how we live. It's crucial to connect the Word with your struggles. Often, as you read this devotional, you'll see the word *you* because Esther speaks directly to you, the reader. The readings contain a mixture of reflection questions and practical suggestions. You'll get much more from this experience if you answer the questions and do the practical exercises. Don't skip them. Do them for the sake of your own soul.

Our study of Scripture is worshipful. When you are experiencing a chronic illness, many days are hard. The pain, fatigue, lack of energy, guilt and shame, reduced engagement with your friends or church—all of it can overrun your life. Yet it doesn't have to. In the middle of your pain, where do you turn? Away from God or to him? Is it easy for us to turn to God when we're overrun by pain and heartache? No—it's incredibly hard. Some days, it feels impossible. But this is our goal—to run to Christ and to live by faith through our suffering. So we spend our time in God's Word to help ourselves to worship the King of our hearts—Christ. Our bodies may waste away, our minds may struggle to concentrate, our lack of energy may leave us stuck at home or missing yet another church service, but we cling to the refuge of our souls—our Savior, Jesus.

If you find this devotional helpful (and I trust that you will!), reread it in different seasons of your life. Work through it this coming month, and then come back to it a year from now, to remind yourself how to persevere through chronic illness. You'll also find additional resources at the end of the book to help you as you continue your journey.

That's enough for now. Let's begin.

Deepak Reju

Introduction

I WALKED INTO the Johns Hopkins rheumatology department feeling defensive. Over the past ten years, I had seen a string of rheumatologists, and every single time, the appointment had ended in discouragement. This time, my shields were up. I was not letting another indifferent doctor hurt me again.

Things did not go as I anticipated. From the beginning, this appointment was different. The doctor took great care as he reviewed my history. He asked about my current symptoms and completed an extensive physical exam. Then he sat down on his stool, looked at me, and said, “So, tell me what brings you here today. What are you concerned about?”

My mind raced. I was concerned about a lot of things that were happening to my body; but in that moment, I was most concerned about what he was going to say. If I heard one more doctor tell me I was fine, I might scream. My answer was curt—fueled by years of dismissal and unexplained symptoms. “I didn’t even want to come today! I’m sure I’m fine. I’m only here because my other doctor told me to come.”

I looked down at my lap, waiting for him to say there was nothing he could do for me. Instead, he got straight to the point. “You have lupus. Your physical exam also indicates that you have hypermobility syndrome.”

“What? No . . . seriously?”

This was unexpected. I had known that lupus was a possibility for some time but had never thought I would be diagnosed. After over a decade of searching for answers, I finally knew the cause of all my symptoms.

In the weeks following that pivotal doctor’s appointment, so much of my life began to make more sense. Since childhood, I

had experienced flare-ups of symptoms that would come and go and then come back again months or years later. I had suffered through unexplained fatigue, and although it was hard to put into words, my body never felt quite right. My most challenging symptom was chronic pain that was related to a chiropractic injury six years earlier. The hypermobility syndrome provided a partial explanation for why this injury had happened in the first place and why I struggled to recover.

These physical symptoms had been just the tip of the iceberg for me. Following my chiropractic injury, my physical abilities had deteriorated until I was forced to spend most of each day lying down. My life became very small, which took a heavy toll on my emotions and sense of self. I struggled to go to work and keep up with daily tasks of living. I struggled to make and keep friends and to be in community. I felt anxious and sad, angry and defeated. I cried a lot. Life felt meaningless, and I didn't think things would ever get better.

For a long time, I felt alone in this experience. Now I know that there are millions of other people with chronic illness. Over the years, I have met many of them. Although we all struggle in different ways, our experiences share one similar quality: Our illnesses are persistent. They last months into years into lifetimes. More than anything else, this is what makes chronic illness hard. From arthritis to chronic migraines, from diabetes to Crohn's disease, chronic illness comes and it doesn't go away.

Maybe chronic illness has been part of your story since birth. Or perhaps it interrupted your life at what seemed like the worst possible time. Your symptoms could be a minor inconvenience, or they may have devastated all your dreams and plans. No matter your particular circumstances, you have likely grieved and doubted, wondered and questioned. Emotions have overwhelmed you. Fears have enveloped you. The future looms as a frightening unknown. Will you ever get better? What good could possibly come from your pain?

I know you may have struggled to get out of bed this morning. Or maybe you long for just one meal that won't make your body revolt. You might be exhausted beyond words—wary and ready for bed by midafternoon. But after years or decades, just when it seems things will never change, many people find that they do. Sometimes we find solutions that take our symptoms away. Other times, change happens inside us. *We* change. We grow. We learn better ways to approach being sick.

Learning to live with chronic illness happens through trial and error. We learn as we talk to people who have more years of illness behind them than we do. Most importantly, we learn as we read Scripture and consider what God has to say about physical suffering. And that is what this book is about.

This devotional is divided into four sections that highlight four lessons Scripture has taught me about how to faithfully live with chronic illness. As you continue to read, I hope you are surprised by how much Scripture has to say about chronic illness. I hope you see that Scripture can change what you believe about chronic illness and that this can truly make a difference.

Perhaps the most important lesson I have learned is that chronic illness can take away many things, but it can never take away God's presence. This doesn't mean we will always *feel* God's presence. It does mean that even when you feel forgotten and alone, God is with you. When you are overwhelmed with sorrow, God invites you to tell him how much it hurts. When life doesn't offer any answers, God offers you himself. The first lesson is this: *Draw near to God, because he is your only certainty.*

I have also learned that God invites people who live with chronic illness to make self-care a priority. When you have a chronic illness, taking care of yourself can become all-consuming. You may spend most of each day taking care of your body, managing the emotional and mental toll of your illness, navigating relationships, and maintaining faith during hard times. Spending so much time on self-care can feel selfish or meaningless to some

people, but this work is well worth your time. *Take care of yourself, because God is glorified when you faithfully care for the body and soul he has given you.*

Another lesson I have learned is that God often uses the unique circumstances of people who have chronic illness to further his kingdom. I used to think that my illness was a spiritual liability because it kept me from doing so many things. I now know that physical limitation can become a spiritual asset that leads to dependence on God. *Live each day with purpose, using your gifts to serve others, and you will bring encouragement to your soul.*

Finally, I have learned the importance of perseverance. I still pray for recovery and hope for better days, but neither of these things are guaranteed. In the meantime, I have learned to keep going, and I hope this book encourages you to keep going, too. Life with chronic illness is hard. The days are long and overwhelming. I know how exhausting and discouraging it is to fall down and pick yourself up over and over again—but you don't have to do this alone. So keep going. *Don't give up.* We are all in this together.

DRAW NEAR TO GOD

DAY 1

Seen and Known by God

I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have known the distress of my soul. (Ps. 31:7)

PEOPLE WHO HAVE chronic illness know what it feels like to go through life unseen. Many chronic illnesses are invisible. You experience difficult symptoms, but no one can see when you are struggling. Even if you experience outward signs of illness or use mobility devices, you may struggle to explain to doctors, family members, and friends the extent to which symptoms impact your life.

You likely hold a desire for people to understand what you are going through. If the suffering won't go away, you at least want people to see your pain and acknowledge how much life hurts. Often people show up in the first weeks and months of poor health, but when illness persists for years or decades, support begins to fade. It's hard for people to comprehend suffering that doesn't go away.

People move on. They stop asking, which means they stop knowing. They stop showing up, which means they stop seeing. You may feel forgotten and abandoned, isolated and alone. Even if you are surrounded by supportive people who do everything they can to help and understand, at the end of the day no one can know what it is like to live inside your body but you.

It can be depressing to grapple with the reality that no one fully gets your situation—but in the end this realization leads to an important, freeing truth. The only one who can fulfill our desire to be truly seen and fully known is God. In times of suffering, Psalm 31 reminds you of an important truth: God sees your affliction. He knows the distress of your soul. God sees beyond

what is visible on the outside. He sees all the ways illness impacts you that no one else can fully understand. He sees beyond your circumstances and into your soul. He sees your hurt and pain, your questions and grief, your sin and doubt. He sees the times you don't know how you will keep going but somehow manage to continue on.

I often have to remind myself that no one can see my pain. I can't expect people to know when my symptoms are increasing or when I am having a hard time. I can't keep people updated on my pain levels every single time they rise and fall—nor would I want to. I don't know how to put into words why I can push through certain symptoms but not others. I can't explain these things—but God doesn't need my explanations.

God knows everything; nothing is hidden from his sight (see Heb. 4:13). Maybe you can't feel God's presence or see what he is doing, but that doesn't mean he isn't there. He sees you—even when you can't see him. He knows when no one else knows. His love is steadfast and faithful, and he will never tire of sticking with you, no matter how long your illness lasts.

Reflect: What does God know about you that no one else knows? What does God see that no one else sees? What emotion do you experience when you think about the fact that God sees your affliction and knows your soul?

Reflect: In Psalm 31, the psalmist's response to God's steadfast love is one of rejoicing and gladness. How can you rejoice in the fact that God sees your affliction and knows your soul?

Act: Don't go on this journey alone. Consider asking a wise and empathetic Christian to read this devotional with you.

DAY 2

Faith in What You Cannot See

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Heb. 11:1)

MANY PATIENTS WHO have chronic illness wait for years to be diagnosed. This can be an immensely trying time. In addition to experiencing troublesome symptoms of unknown origin, patients are often disbelieved. Doctors are quick to doubt patient reports when blood work or imaging doesn't show anything wrong. Often, it isn't until years later that visible evidence of underlying disease processes begins to appear.

In my case, I experienced concerning symptoms for over a decade before receiving a diagnosis. During this time, many doctors believed that my symptoms were real, but others did not. Most people in my life were supportive, but some thought I was just stressed. After all, I *looked* completely healthy. Nobody could see my symptoms or feel my pain but me.

In those years before I received a diagnosis, I often left doctors' appointments feeling defeated. How do you get doctors to take you seriously when the physical evidence is contrary to your experience? In frustrated moments, we wonder, "Why can't they take me at my word? Why can't they trust me?"

It's hard to believe in what you can't see. At the same time, visible evidence is not always an accurate indication of what is happening. Yes, this is true of our experiences with doctors, family members, friends, and strangers. But then it hit me—it is also true of the way we so often relate to God.

When chronic illness disrupts our lives, we sometimes think that because we can't see evidence of God, he isn't there. We think that because we can't feel God's presence, he's not at work. We

struggle when we read promises in Scripture that don't seem true in our lives. God says he is good, but life is filled with suffering. God says he answers prayers, but it sure doesn't seem that way. God says he loves us, but is life with chronic illness what love looks like?

Hebrews 11:1 says that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Faith gives us two things: assurance and conviction. It gives us assurance that the hopeful things we read in Scripture are true. It gives us conviction that unseen things are real. The New King James Version uses the word *evidence*: faith is "the evidence of things not seen." Faith is the evidence that enables us to take the leap between what our eyes can see and what God tells us in Scripture.

Faith is essential, because God is invisible. We can't see God, so we have to take him at his word. Perhaps there will be times when God asks us the same questions that we ask our doctors: Will you trust me? Will you take me at my word? Just because you can't see the things I tell you doesn't mean they aren't real.

Reflect: Can you believe God's promises when visible evidence in your life seems to contradict what they say? This is exactly what we want people to do for us. And isn't God so much more trustworthy than we are?

Reflect: Faith helps you to believe in what you cannot see.

Act: Ask God to help you to trust him when things don't make sense. Pray for renewed faith, that you would believe the evidence he provides in Scripture.

DAY 3

Walk with God

Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him. (Gen. 5:24)

THE SHORT STORY of one man's life can be found in Genesis 5. In the middle of a genealogy that lists the men who lived between Adam and Noah, we find a man named Enoch. If you read through the whole genealogy (see vv. 3–32), you see that Enoch's name stands out from all the rest. All the other men simply lived their lives, but Enoch was different. "Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him."

Are you walking with God? Sometimes illness leads people to deeper faith in God, but other times it leads people to walk away from him. When you lose everything to your illness and God doesn't answer your prayers for healing, it's easy to feel discouraged and lost. It's easy to want to give up on your faith.

Feelings like these are understandable. Suffering is hard. Many people who have chronic illness have told me that talking to God is the last thing they want to do. How can you trust someone who has allowed so much suffering to enter your life? I understand the feeling. Sometimes I get angry at God and want to push him away. Choosing to trust is not easy. But at the end of the day, a relationship with God is what helps us to experience freedom and rest when chronic illness erodes our bodies and physical capacities.

Let me explain what I mean. We discover what Enoch's walk with God looked like in the book of Hebrews. The relationship that Enoch had with God was built on faith. Because of his faith, Enoch was commended as having pleased God (see Heb. 11:5–6). God rewarded Enoch by taking him to heaven before he died—not for any great works that he accomplished but simply because Enoch sought him (see v. 6).

God doesn't want the things that you could be *doing* if you were healthy. All he wants is you. He wants your faith, not your works. He wants your company, not grand feats. He wants to get to know you, and this is something you can do no matter what your daily life with illness looks like.

As I began to write this book, I asked myself a question. What is the number one message that people with chronic illness need to hear? What is the most important lesson that my own experience has taught me? In the end, I realized it was this: Your relationship with God is vital for your survival. People will let you down. Symptoms will come and go. Life will be painful and filled with grief. God is your only certainty.

Seek God, and you will find him (see Deut. 4:29). Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you (see James 4:8). The story of Enoch teaches an important lesson. If all that you ever do, all the days of your earthly life, is to walk with God, then that is a life worth living. That is a life worthy of being recorded and remembered for generations to come.

Reflect: How has chronic illness impacted your relationship with God? Are you walking with God or away from him? What questions or doubts, if any, make it difficult for you to be in a relationship with him?

Reflect: What steps could you take this week to walk with God? How can you make your relationship with God the most important thing?

Act: Talk to a strong believer who has suffered. Ask about his or her walk with God.