

Bible readings for
special times



Ill Health

Wendy Bray

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Introduction

In 2004 I sat down to write a short booklet of Bible readings and reflections which might encourage and support those struggling with a period of ill health. I had recently completed a long round of treatment for cancer, and, unbeknown to me, was about to face the diagnosis of a second. What I couldn't have anticipated, and wouldn't have wanted to, was that eight years later I would be third time unlucky. At the very least, three encounters with cancer have given me some experience of that lonely, bewildering, life-changing place that is serious illness.

Each time I have found myself in that place, yet again, I have found it helpful to try to look beyond the illness, the symptoms, the hospital procedures and waiting times, and look instead to God. But that is often easier said than done, and being a smiling martyr in the face of suffering is nothing but damaging to us and unhelpful to those who love and care for us. What is needed is honesty—before God, one another and in the dialogue we so often have with ourselves.

God understands the gut-wrenching turmoil that often fills the 'waiting' times of those who are ill.

He is big enough to take our anger, confusion and doubt. He doesn't only take those things but helps us to embrace them, so that our relationships, our prayer and our attitudes might remain authentic, expressing 'where we are at' in a healthy way while maintaining resilience and retaining hope.

These readings are designed to help us find that authenticity—spiritual, emotional and relational—during a period of illness. They are intended to help us frame questions, even those of the almost impossible kind, and to hear God in response to those questions even when that response seems framed by the perplexing mystery of silence. They do not avoid asking us to face our emotions, our prognosis, or the practical issues we may have to tackle. Rather, they approach those anxieties from what might be a divine perspective, as far as that can be understood, as well as a human one. The hope they carry is that we will meet God in our fragile humanity in the

midst of the most trivial and the most traumatic moments of illness and know his reassurance, even his blessing.

Our attention span is often short when we are ill, and reading may be tiring, so each reflection is designed to be easily 'paused' midway. Weekend readings are of a more contemplative, restful style and each concludes with a short prayer or reflection which can be returned to during the day or in the middle of the night. Some key topics, weakness for example, appear in several places with varying approaches so that connections can be made and remade between the word of God and the nitty-gritty of our experience.

Many of the verses and thoughts I have shared are drawn from my own reading, reflection and prayer and from diaries I kept over several years of illness. No two experiences of illness are ever identical, but I am grateful for the benefit I've received from reading the thoughts and understanding of those who have 'been there, had that' before me. Somehow sharing experiences, however traumatic, helps us feel less alone.

It is my prayer that this short book will make a real difference during difficult times by turning our hearts and minds to God, who cares for us in every detail of our experience of illness... and at this very moment... more than we can possibly know.

Hidden futures

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Is it any wonder that our bodies don't always do their job properly, and generally wear out? They are just a temporary arrangement, not designed to last for ever.

Paul appreciates that we find our mortality depressing. He knows what it is to battle with illness, but reminds us that it is the unseen, in us and in eternity, that ultimately matters—not what we see and experience now.

Maybe Paul had his tongue fixed firmly in his cheek when he referred to 'light and momentary troubles'! Perhaps his perspective was such because he was able to contrast those 'light' troubles with a heavenly glory so great that it far outweighs them all.

Losing heart is easy to do when we're confined to home or hospital. Days are long and it often seems as if the rest of the world is going forward without us. We feel helpless and dark moods or tearfulness can catch us unawares.

Paul encourages us not to lose heart. 'Don't look at your circumstances,' he is effectively saying. 'Look heavenward... and keep on looking heavenward!'

If we can learn to look above illness and uncertainty, we might find, like Paul, that our situation is illuminated by the glorious reality we have yet to experience.

G.K. Chesterton said that 'heaven is peace dancing'. What a wonderful picture!

Tuesday

PSALM 121:5–8

Someone to watch over me

The Lord watches over you—the Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and for evermore.

The psalmist shows that God is the source of his ultimate protection—ultimate, because there are instances when our foot may slip. So does the psalmist have false hopes? No, he has faith. A slipping foot does not result in a loss of faith but a moment of doubt, and God's love and grace still surround that moment. We do not lose his protection, even if it may take an act of will to remember that.

Think of a mother watching her playing children from a distance. She must not stand over them or they will never learn to turn to her for help. They can run to her for assurance, or do without her comfort. Whatever their choice, though, she is always watching over them. This psalm reminds us of God's watchfulness, day and night. Nothing can happen outside his view. He watches us now and 'for evermore' (v. 8), into eternity.

If you are in hospital, you may know the feeling of lying awake at night in what seems to be a ward empty of nurses but full of other patients able to sleep when you can't. No one else may be watching us, but God our guardian is. He doesn't take turns to sleep like the nurses. He is ever watchful, ever wakeful.

During the day, wards and corridors are full of 'comings and goings'. Patients wait for doctors to arrive. Visitors and trolleys come and go. But the psalmist says that the Lord will even watch over our coming and going. He doesn't miss a thing.

In all 'comings and goings', remind me, Lord, that you watch over me.

A question of healing

Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

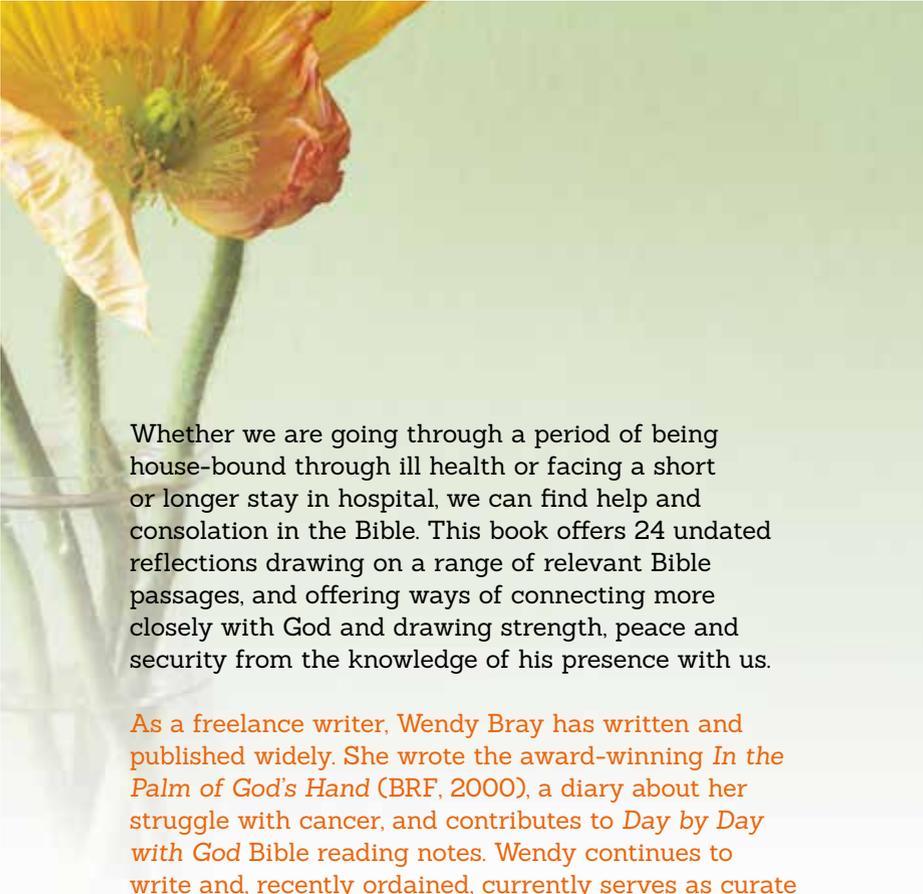
God's healing includes both the medical and the miraculous. Whenever we hope for healing, it is important that God, not the illness, is the focus. We should always come to him in honesty and confession first, and pray for healing second.

If I'm not healed, does it mean I haven't enough faith? No! Jesus said that we only need a mustard seed of faith (Matthew 17:20). Healing does not depend on faith alone. We know only that God can heal—not that he will.

Paul, referring to some faithful biblical personalities, writes, 'These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better' (Hebrews 11:39–40a). Trust God's perspective on illness and healing. He may have planned 'something better'.

When I was first diagnosed, I didn't go straight to my church leaders for anointing and prayer. I wanted to listen to God first. When I did ask them to pray for me, it was with a much clearer perspective on what God might be doing in my life. That view helped others to understand that it was God, not instant healing, that mattered. If I had been healed immediately, God would not have been able to touch literally thousands of lives through my diary (published 18 months into treatment).

God deals with each of us differently. That's why hearing (God) rather than healing (me) should be the priority.



Whether we are going through a period of being house-bound through ill health or facing a short or longer stay in hospital, we can find help and consolation in the Bible. This book offers 24 undated reflections drawing on a range of relevant Bible passages, and offering ways of connecting more closely with God and drawing strength, peace and security from the knowledge of his presence with us.

As a freelance writer, Wendy Bray has written and published widely. She wrote the award-winning *In the Palm of God's Hand* (BRF, 2000), a diary about her struggle with cancer, and contributes to *Day by Day with God* Bible reading notes. Wendy continues to write and, recently ordained, currently serves as curate at St Pancras Church, Plymouth.



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