

The fire that refines: James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

by [Christine R. Bartholomew](#) in the [September 22, 2009](#) issue

One day a few years ago, when I realized that my hair was falling out from chemotherapy treatment, I leaned against a wall and sobbed, “This is too much.” In the silence I heard, “Where does my strength come from?” and I heard myself answer, “From the Lord . . . but this is too much!”

The Lord did not make my hair grow back or remove the lupus from my DNA, but the Lord heard my prayer and rescued me. How does the Lord rescue someone from sickness when the sickness may still remain? I mean that the Lord changed my faith during my sickness, and gave me a new faith for my time of need. The Lord sent me friends and family who did all they could. The Lord sent laughter, that uncontrollable spasm of air and noise that heals and cures so many intangible things.

I found that the best way to face chemo treatments was to come armed with my faith, friends and delightful distractions. I always felt love and hope when my friends were gathered around me, and I forgot about the poison that was being pumped into me. I’ve forgotten the jokes my friends told me, but I’ll never forget the feeling of peace after laughter.

One day during a treatment we were laughing a little too hard, and a nurse came storming over to us. “Shhh! There are sick people here!”

With my head bald and an IV sticking into my arm I retorted, “Then what am I?”

She had no response, but I knew who I was. I am a beloved child of God. The Holy Spirit moved through me and was in each of the hospital rooms I occupied. The Spirit was there when we laughed, and turned our laughter into prayers. I am convinced that sickness will not have the last word, for faithful people have prayed over me. Sickness will not prevail because I can still laugh. I’m saved, even from my fear of death, through the death of Christ.

One year after a successful series of chemo treatments, I still carry a dormant disease within my body. I’ve developed my own theology of sickness, and believe that we must reconcile what happens to our bodies with God. Sickness becomes part

of us, and it informs our understanding of God. My God loves me and does not want me to be in pain, but uses all things to his glory, including my weaknesses.

Sickness can make your relationship with God stronger in the strangest of ways. Sickness can give us permission to be mad at God. We can scream, yell and kick our legs until we're blue in the face. The great thing about getting mad at God is that he is big enough to take our anger. He does not run from our angry words or turn away in pain. God is big enough to take our sorrows and empathize with our pain. He takes anger and finds ways to show us love. It may take us a while to give ourselves permission to yell at God for what has happened to us, but God will love us through our anger, even when we scream. Then God can hug us and wrap loving arms around us. This is the power of God shown in sickness.

I find myself staying away from healing services. It's not that I am averse to people praying over me. Many have laid hands of healing on me, and I've had anointing oil put on my head. But I avoid charismatic services that call for people to get out of their wheelchairs and walk. I stay away from places where people would be tempted to ask the Lord to take the lupus out of my body because I fear that they cannot see that I am already saved. I do not want them to be disappointed and to doubt God if lupus attacks my body again. I know that I am saved even if the lupus stays in my body, and that God is still to be glorified if I am sick. God is still the great Creator. God is still good. But some people cannot see that God works in spite of and through this broken vessel.

Sometimes he uses our weaknesses as a way of refining us and making us able to walk a little closer with him. "For everyone will be salted with fire." Through the fire of pain and suffering we gain our depth, our flavor, our salt. Through my suffering, I received the gift of God's undeniable presence. His Spirit walked into rooms, sat beside my bedside and held my hand.

My favorite wildflower is Queen Anne's lace. Its beautiful big white blossom has a small red dot in the center of it. The rare thing about this flower is that it cannot blossom unless it is first infested with bugs. It cannot become all that the Lord created it to be unless the bugs come and coerce the blossom to open. We are like Queen Anne's lace. We cannot become all that God has planned for us to be if we do not allow the "bugs" in our life to help us blossom.

God is constantly refining us with fire, whether that fire be conflict, persecution or sacrifice. These events can change us and draw us closer to God. This is a work of

sanctification, not salvation. We may walk into heaven suffering, limp and lame, but we will walk tall.