

How Covid Changed My Life

The Covid pandemic has come and gone, but for some of us who still suffer from lingering effects, it doesn't necessarily feel "gone." The aftermath for me has been life-changing on many levels. I lost my two closest male friends, had to quit my job, lost my income, and developed health issues after years of great health. Big, impactful losses. But I want to focus on the impact to my spiritual life, which has been just as far-reaching.

I was working at a local health food store at the time Covid hit. Customers were desperately seeking help, answers, guidance, as well as a place to vent and share their struggles and anxieties. Certain supplements were in such high demand that we had to put a limit on purchases per customer. That frustrated some and flat out made others angry. Customers were divided on masking, many demanding it, and many protesting it. There was simply no way to make everyone happy and comfortable. The "new normal" felt so abnormal. Stress abounded.

I was on the front lines everyday, working with sick customers who were depending on me. I lasted 18 months until I also became sick and ended up homebound for six weeks. During those long weeks, there were a few nights when I was sure I wouldn't make it. For me, it felt nothing like the regular flu. I felt like I'd been poisoned. My breathing wasn't so much hindered by congestion as it was by a strange inability to take in oxygen. I remember lying on my stomach with a large pillow under my midsection and my head hanging off the side of the bed, just so that I could breathe.

One of the hardest things for me was going through all of this alone. I've lived alone for years, and it suits me. But being so sick and so alone all at the same time ... that was hard. During the worst nights, I turned to a Youtube channel which plays continuous praise and worship music for 10 hours straight. The power of praise has long been an important part of my personal faith journey, but never quite as it was during Covid. I literally clung to those songs, allowing the Holy Spirit to comfort me, support me, hold me ... in fact, almost literally cradle me.

The other thing which got me through those long nights was God's Word. I was too weak to hold a Bible and read verses, so the fact that I had a few key verses memorized was a great help. I think I quoted Psalm 46:1 hundreds of times during those days and nights. *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.* Was I in trouble? Yes. Did I need help and strength? Yes. Did I need a place of refuge? Yes! I held tightly to this one verse during my entire illness.

The Word of God is always alive, but I experienced its aliveness as never before in my Christian life. Prior to Covid, if you'd asked me "Do you read the Word everyday?" I'd have said, "No, not really. I know I should and I mean to, but I get busy and just don't." In other words, I wasn't truly depending on the Lord for my life, my stability, my every breath. Covid changed all of that, practically overnight. The Word became my refuge, and I came to know God's presence *in* my trouble. At the time, I couldn't have told you squat about Psalm 46—that it was attributed to the Sons of Korah, that it was addressing specific historical crises of the time, that it was focused on God's steadfast presence—nor did those facts matter to me then. It was enough to say the words over and over, and to believe and receive them into my body, soul, and spirit. Now, a few years later, I understand that faith is the *substance* of things hoped for (Hebrews 11:1). I believe it was the substance of faith which I was receiving from Psalm 46, and that it was holding me together during those long difficult nights.

During one particularly bad night when I was so sure I was going to die, I came face to face with Jesus. The ensuing interaction wasn't what I would have expected at such a time. But it was exactly what I needed. He showed me a dark blot on my heart. It was a point of immense unforgiveness. The Lord wasn't rebuking or chastising me—that isn't His way with His children. He was quietly, gently, but clearly showing me that this blot was there, and asking if I was OK with it.

Why? Why bring that up then, at such a dire time when I was fighting for my life?

I believe the answer is all about His priorities versus mine; that I'm looking outwardly, while He looks inwardly; that I'm seeing bits and pieces, while He sees the whole picture. Consider this verse in I Thess. 5:23 - *Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.* And this key

verse in III John 1:2 - *Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers.* Now I see, Lord. You were tending to all of me, not just part of me.

So in answer to the Lord that night ... was I OK with that blot on my heart ... I quickly realized, "No, Lord, I don't want to die with this ugliness in my heart. But do You mean I must truly forgive those people? Release them from my anger? Not hold it against them anymore? You know how hurt I was, physically and emotionally. You know the PTSD I've suffered. How does that just go away?"

The answer wasn't long in coming. Of course I needed to forgive them, whether I lived or died. I had been "working" on forgiving them for several years, but "working" on forgiveness isn't the same as forgiving someone. Maybe I'd been laying the groundwork to forgive them over those years, and the Lord was patient with me. But now He was telling me it was time to lay it down, release it, and more importantly release them, and actually speak the words "I forgive you, say *their name.*" And no, it didn't mean it would all just go away, as if it never happened. But the impact of it would lessen, and eventually the event would dissolve within the all-consuming love of Christ. It would no longer control me. I would nail it to the cross and let it die.

I hope we can hear what the Lord is saying. Forgiveness doesn't excuse the wrong that was done, nor does it necessarily forget what happened. But it takes it out of the realm of feelings and into the realm of God's mercy. It cancels the debt of the sin committed against you or me, and cancels the penalty of the unforgiveness that we've held in our heart. I see now that it takes a lot of work to hold others hostage through unforgiveness. It requires energy that could be spent in life-giving ways versus soul-killing ways.

I wish I could say I felt the weight of the world lift from me as I voiced their name and said "I forgive you," but honestly I felt nothing of the sort. What I did feel was a cleansing, perhaps from being obedient, from doing what I knew was right in God's sight.

II Chronicles 16:7-9 tells about Asa, King of Judah, who had previously obeyed the Lord, but then later he turned to the arm of flesh and depended on man. Hanani the prophet spoke to him about this, declaring that when he had trusted

the Lord, it went well for him. The prophet said, *For the eyes of the LORD roam throughout the earth, so that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His.* But then when Asa turned his trust to man, the prophet said this: *You have acted foolishly in this. Indeed, from now on you will have wars.*”

Just like Asa, I’ve lived in both realms. I’ve lived in disobedience, turning to people for answers, solutions, and comfort, and indulging my flesh along the way. And in so doing, I’ve allowed my soul to become a battleground for all kinds of wars, wars that included unforgiveness, resentments, and self-justification of all kinds.

But over time, with God’s great mercy and patience, I’ve also learned to walk in obedience. It’s something I’m happy to learn, since I know from scripture that Jesus *learned obedience from the things which he suffered* (Hebrews 5:8), and I will too. I still falter, as I know we all do. But more and more, since my Covid crisis, I want to be close to the Lord all the time, to hear His voice, to see His face, to heed His words and wisdom, and to live in peace with myself and others ... not just when I feel like it, and not just when it’s convenient or suits my agenda, but all the time and in all circumstances. I’m blown away by God’s long suffering in my life, that He would persevere with me through years of struggle and bring me into a new place where I walk with Him daily.

The confusion of Covid, and the new “normal” which was so abnormal ... who would imagine God could use even that to continue His great work of sanctification and renewal in the lives of his sheep? I speak as one of his grateful sheep, thankful that He was with me in the *valley of the shadow of death*, and brought me back to the good pasture of His Word, where I graze now everyday.

Beloved reader, don’t settle. Go on to know the Lord and the power of His Word. *Seek Him while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near* (Isaiah 55:6).

Pray with me: “Lord, draw me, keep me, hold me, teach me, correct me, and use me for Your glory. Keep me as the apple of your eye, and under the shadow of your wings. My Lord and my God, I give you my life again today.”