

Well, I had my first bout with COVID in December. The first few days I felt like I had a really nasty flu. After a week had passed, I was in pretty bad shape. Thanks to the kindness of my sister-in-law, Stacey, I had an oxygen monitor, so I was able to know when my O2 levels started to drop. As most of you know, I ended up in the hospital.

The experience in the ER was actually pretty terrible. I was taken from the admissions area around 10:30pm and put in a holding cell (that is what it felt like), maybe a 10 x 10 room with a giant sliding glass door that sealed us in. I shared the cell with as many as three other COVID sufferers, depending on the time, all sounding as bad or worse than I did. There was very little communication about next steps or if I would even be admitted. I wasn't offered any oxygen, but ironically I was told that I needed to wear a mask. At 2am, in that weakened state, I was feeling pretty sorry for myself. I just wanted to lie down and try to get some rest. I could barely think straight.

Someone from Sunday School class should be asking the question right about now, "Did you consider it all joy Brad? Our class recently started a new series in the book of James. Guess who taught the opening passage? Yep, me.

**James 1:2-4 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4 And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. NASB**

So there I was, trial in full swing and feeling pretty sorry for myself. Thankfully, God gave me a simple way to move forward and refocus. He pointed me to prayer. One of the people in the room with me had a nasty cough and was in obvious misery, so I prayed for him. I didn't have much capacity for deep spiritual thought, but I could pray a basic prayer. Because I also had COVID, I could understand some of his suffering, so I prayed for mercy, that he might be able to breathe better, that his coughing would clear some of the gunk from his lungs, etc.

This may sound very simple or even mundane, but it was God's grace at work. My eyes were slowly shifting off of myself (which I needed...I never have felt joy at a pity party!) and my heart lightened a bit in the midst of all the yuck of COVID. And that began a five day journey involving a lot of prayer. It was something God gave me to do when I didn't feel like I had much to give.

So when the unrelenting headache worsened, the Spirit reminded me to pray for Rick McIntosh. When heavy muscle aches set in, I would pray for Suzie Hemphill. If I sensed the COVID blues approaching, I would pray for the many other COVID sufferers from church, or pray for the roommate on the other side of the curtain. Praying in this fashion has been a boon for me in the midst of trial. Essentially, when I am suffering or in a trial, I try to think of someone I know in similar circumstances and then pray for them. It is amazingly helpful and I am confident that the time I spent in prayer for others during that week bore more fruit than bemoaning my circumstances. And those times in prayer were joy-filled and meaningful.

A further blessing was knowing that so many of you were praying for me (thank you for your faithful prayers!!) Inevitably, as I would finish praying for someone, I would receive a message from a brother or sister stating that they were praying for me. Though I never had a visitor physically present, the prayers

of God's people were constantly stopping by to encourage and uphold me. I felt loved and cared for...and I certainly was not alone. It was a balm to my soul.

Now, I would love to tell you that every moment was filled with joy, but it wasn't. God, the great physician and healer, knew that I also needed some precise cutting away of sin that clings so closely.

He gave me plenty of time to reflect on my own shortcomings in the midst of this trial. A simple example was when I got a bit miffed, at least internally, with a nurse's aide. At the time she walked in, I was moving between portable oxygen and the bedside setup. With both forms of oxygen removed, I was trying to clear my throat and nasal passages. She overreacted a bit and exclaimed, "You need to get back on the oxygen quick!" and then promptly doubled my oxygen intake. At the time I was thinking, "Relax, I have done this about six times now and things are fine. My oxygen will stabilize like every other time."

Naturally, two and a half days into my stay, I was a seasoned professional at these exchanges. Clearly I knew better because I was credentialed by my multi-day wisdom. How silly! Even if this lady was overreacting (which I will never truly know), she was doing so with my good in mind! I should have been thankful that she wasn't indifferently going about her tasks. She actually cared enough to get pretty worked up about the scene.

Part of the maturing process (through failure) that week was recognizing that I allowed arrogance to cast a shadow over a scene of kindness. I wished I would have noticed sooner. But by God's grace, he helped me see it later on and respond a bit more thoughtfully thereafter (praying for your nurses and aids can bring perspective).

I am grateful that when failures like these surface, there is one that ran the race before me, **"who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."** Jesus faced every trial perfectly, and because he never failed, he sits enthroned as **"the founder and perfecter of our faith."** (Heb 12:2)

My prayer for you and me, is that we will continue throwing off sin and running toward the prize. There can be joy all along the way when we look to Jesus. And at the finish line, we will find Him in all his glory, joy everlasting.

Pastor Brad