

CHAPTER 13

"...HIS STRENGTH IS MADE PERFECT IN WEAKNESS."

As I contemplated the rest of my life I felt that the Lord had more in store for me in the area of preaching the gospel in a formal way. I felt that I was in accord with His word and living the type of example that I should. Not that I did not have my days of doubt and resentment, but I was fighting to keep a positive attitude, recognizing the effect that this had on the people around me. At this point in my life I had lost all of the use of my legs and all but some movement in my hands. However, while my voice was not strong, I could still engage in public speaking with the appropriate audio amplifier.

The sermons that I had delivered to this point were all short invitation-type lessons. I had set a goal to deliver a full-length sermon. Recall that I had developed one, but at that time I was not scheduled to do a full-length lesson, so I had to hold it until the opportunity presented itself. I pulled it out and continued to develop it, but I was not satisfied that it was good enough to present. I needed a new idea. Dad had done a lot of sermons, and he had several sermon outline books from which I could get ideas. The outline itself could be read in only about five minutes, so I would have to elaborate on it quite a bit.

One lesson that really intrigued me had to do with *the ways of Cain*. While Jesus is our model, we can learn much by counterexample. In other words, we can learn what not to do by studying some of the worst examples in the bible, and certainly Cain qualifies as one of the worst. There were about six or seven points in the lesson I chose, so in order to get ready for it I decided to spend one week on each of the points. However, once I got into it I found that it was not nearly as difficult as I thought. In fact, by the end of the week it was drafted out. I ran it by Dad for a critique. He looked it over and gave me a few hints on it, but basically he thought that it was good and scriptural sound.

The next problem was: when to give it. This was a major milestone in my life, and I wanted my grandmother to be there to hear me present it. This was a difficult timing problem, since it was hard to coordinate a time when the preacher was out of town and she could come over from Louisiana. A month or two passed by and I began to get impatient as I continued to hone the lesson. Then one week Brother Richard Creel, our preacher, let me know that he was going to be away in a couple of weeks and asked if I was ready. Mom checked for me, and fortunately, Grandma would be available. So I gave Richard the commitment to fill in for him on a Sunday morning.

When the day finally came around I learned what stage fright was all about. Those who do not engage in public speaking on a regular basis usually have a real adrenaline rush, sometimes starting hours or days before the event. However, I was most excited for my parents and grandmother. Who would have believed in the Spring of 1971 when their son/grandson had been diagnosed with MD that 23 years later he would not only still be alive but would be presenting the sermon for the day?

When the time came to start the service I recalled the feelings that I have had on all previous occasions. Basically it is: "What am I doing here? Why did I volunteer for this? What makes me

think that I can preach? Why should anyone listen to me?" My heart was beating at a fever pitch, and my head was flushed and hot. But worst of all: I could recall *nothing* that I had written or prepared. I still only barely remember the song service. I wanted it to go fast and get this thing going and at the same time each note got me closer and closer to what was terrorizing me. Soon the song service and the Lord's Supper were over, and it was my part of the service. Dad systematically wheeled me to the front of the building from our usual spot on the left side toward the front (a place by the side door that they set aside for my wheelchair). He adjusted the microphone, and I began.

I started slow at first, took deep breaths and got my nerves under control. After a couple minutes my mind was totally off of me and totally on the subject. As I got rolling I began delivering my thoughts with more feeling:

*... Jude talked about the way of Cain in describing the false teachers who crept in secretly (Jude 11): "Woe unto them! For they went in the way of Cain, and ran riotously in the error of Balaam for hire, and perished in the gainsaying of Korah. But what is this "way of Cain?" We need to identify it and **flee from it.** ...*

*... It is the way of human opinion, as the apostle Paul warned us against in Roman 12:2: "And be not fashioned according to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, and ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect **will of God.**" Human opinion is of this world. It is always changing, mostly for the worse. One thing is certain ... it is never as good as the will of God. Isaiah stated (Isa. 55:8): "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith Jehovah." ...*

*... It is the way of willful ignorance. Cain knew right from wrong and was given a second chance, but he chose to ignore God's law just as Jonah chose to run from God. James stated (James 1:23-24): "For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a mirror: for he beholdeth himself, and goeth away, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was." But he went on to say (James 4:17): "To him therefore that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, **to him it is sin.**" ...*

*... It is the way of utter rejection, as God rejected Cain, marked him, and drove him out from his fellow men, so following Cain's way will cause us to be rejected by God eternally. Saul was rejected by God when he got impatient with God's approved method of sacrifice and decided to do it himself (1 Samuel 13:9), and he compounded his problems when he failed to do exactly as God had told him with regard to the Amalekites. Samuel rebuked him (1 Sam 15:22): "Hath Jehovah as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of Jehovah? Behold, **to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.**" ...*

*...It is the way of unyielding pride that keeps us from admitting when we do wrong. "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the vain glory of life, is **not of the Father, but is of the world**" (1 John 2:16). "Pride (goeth) before destruction, And a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:16). "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." (1 Cor 10:12).*

... It is the way of deep-rooted hatred. If Cain had done what God had said, he would have enjoyed the communion of God and his brother, and this would have increased his natural love for his brother. Instead he chose hatred, as I John 3:11-12 states: "For this is the message which ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another: not as Cain was of the evil one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because **his works were evil**, and his brother's righteous." Similarly, Saul hated David even though David loved him. The way of Cain is completely self-destructive to ourselves and all that are around us ...

... It is the way of divine condemnation, as God said (Gen 4:11-12): "And now **cursed art thou** from the ground, which hath opened its mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand; when thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee its strength; a fugitive and a wanderer shalt thou be in the earth." Jude included Cain when he stated (Jude 1:14-15): "Behold, the Lord came with ten thousands of his holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their works of ungodliness which they have ungodly wrought, and of all the hard things which ungodly sinners have spoken against him." ...

... and finally, it is the way of hopeless despair, as the rich man pleaded with Abraham for just a single drop of water to place on his tongue (Luke 16:19f), but this was **impossible**. So those who follow the way of Cain today will not enter into the rest of God.

... But each of us follows the way of Cain when we sin. "Now these things happened unto them by way of example; and they were written for **our** admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages are come" (1 Cor 10:11). If we only see other sinners in the way of Cain and fail to see ourselves, then we are **self righteous**, and we are as guilty as Cain; indeed we are following the way of Cain ourselves. It is only if we identify with Cain and see the futility of our own sins that we can learn the bitter lessons of these examples and overcome the "way of Cain" that exists within each one of us.

... **Where do you stand?** Are you following the Lord? or are you still clinging to your sin after the example of Cain? If you need to turn from your old life and be born anew in baptism (John 3:5; Romans 6:3), or whatever your need might be, we invite you to come forward and let us be of assistance to you ...

And with that it was over. The Lord had spoken through this feeble vessel. The power was not in me, it was in His word. They listened not to me, but to the truth originally penned by the Holy Spirit through the divine apostles. My physical limitations were of no deterrent to doing God's will. Indeed, they served as an asset to those who were looking beyond the physical.

I was surprised with the reaction. My brothers and sisters in Christ had always encouraged me, but it seemed that they were surprised that I could preach in my condition. Perhaps they were holding their breath for me, as I know my mother was. She was just overjoyed that it was over, but I know she and Dad were both proud. Grandma was another issue -- she could say very little as tears filled her eyes, and she just gave me a big hug. I expressed my appreciation to all who complimented me, but I dare not feel proud of my presentation. It is God in me "both to will and to work, for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

My first full-length sermon gave me the confidence to see that I was respected for what was in my mind, not for the condition of my body. Although, I hastily add that I take no credit for the sermon that I delivered. If it was from the bible it was totally what God had delivered to the first century apostles and prophets through the Holy Spirit (John 16:13). And if it was not from the bible then I should not have been preaching it. So, all is to the glory of God.

I knew that I would have other opportunities to preach, and I felt capable of the task. However, there was another challenge that I had yet to accept. I could not at this time do anything physically other than talking and writing. Perhaps the first idea of writing came to me in 1994 when my father introduced me to a man that he knew from the University. He developed an affinity toward me since we were both confined to wheelchairs. He had had a tumor removed from his spine that left him paralyzed from the waist down. I told him of my love of books, and he offered to provide copies of tapes he had made from a program on the Public Broadcasting System that featured interviews with well-known authors. As I viewed these tapes I began thinking: What a sense of accomplishment it must be to complete an entire book. I began thinking that I would like to experience that sense of accomplishment – it would give me a reason to get out of bed in the morning. I began to try to resolve a subject: this is the most difficult part of the project. Just the time that you think you have a topic down something comes up and the whole project goes down the tubes. For example, if someone else comes out with a book on the same subject a week before yours is done, all is lost.

My first stab at it was to pick something that I felt I knew as much about as anyone. I had watched every episode of *The Waltons* and figured that this would be a fun project. I had been fascinated with TV for some time, not just watching but considering what it took to put a program on the air. I have a collection of books on similar subjects – from *I love Lucy* to *the Fugitive* – so I had plenty of resource materials and models to follow. I had Missy do a computer search at the UA library to check out if there were any books on this subject. Apparently no one had tried to write a book on this particular show, so I decided to give it a try. The first thing I did was to go through the videos of the show that I had and determine who the writers were as well as the main actors and actresses and the show's creator so that I could do some research on them. Missy, who was attending the University of Alabama at the time, helped me get some books to get further information on the background of the series.

At one point it seemed that this project would be costly. Whenever I would find a section of a book or article that looked like it would be of interest I would get a copy made of it. On one occasion Mom was copying an article from a library book and left the book on the machine in the drug store where she was making the copy. When she realized what she had done she went back but the book was gone. She checked the lost and found but to no avail. Dad checked with the library and they charged \$50 for all lost books to cover the replacement and effort involved. However, we had three weeks until it was due, so we held off for a while. When the three weeks rolled by Dad took a check for \$50 over to the library, but they told him that someone had returned the book on the exact day that it was due. Guess they got conscience at the last minute; but I was not complaining.

Once I had exhausted the books I went on to research the many articles that had been written on the series. Some of the articles were not in our library but we were able to get them via inter-library loan.

This entire process was quite enlightening and fun. I learned a lot, not only about the show itself, but also about television and how these types of series were made. It kept me busy for the most part of 1994 and 1995. However, in the middle of the project I got to feel that if this book were going to make it, I would need to take some English courses at the University. However, taking these courses in person was out of the question. Mom was still recovering from her back problems and Dad was tied up quite heavily with his job at the University. So we would have to find a correspondence course. I could not find the exact English course in the 1995 winter semester, so I decided to take one of the history courses that I had missed at Shelton State. Due to the difficulty that I had at typing at this time, this course took me about seven months to complete. A lot of different things would come up and in the early part it was hard to get into it. It was hard to set a specific time to do the work. Also, the amount of writing required coupled with my inability to type very fast caused a real time delay. It seemed that for every one step forward I was taking two steps back. It was good that I was getting more college courses, but my book project had gotten put on hold.

Not to make excuses, but there were a lot of other things competing for my time at this point. I was still working on the book, but I also got interested in genealogy and the tracing of my ancestors back as far as I could. All of this was great in that it diverted my attention from feeling sorry for myself, but in retrospect I see that I was doing a lot of procrastinating. I was wandering around between these projects and others and failing to focus.

Another major diversion came along during the summer of 1995: Missy and our cat Sylvester moved back in with us. Missy had been suffering from asthma for some time, and it appeared that the problems that she had with her breathing were getting worse. She had gone into the hospital several times over this past year for breathing problems, with most of these cases ending up with pneumonia. What happened over and over was that she would contract the problem and then go into the hospital for a week or so, and then go to her apartment for a week or so to recuperate. Of course, Dad and Mom would be quite concerned about her during this recuperation period, and they would go over and check up to see how she was doing, usually taking food and medicine over to her. They worried about her since she was taking two or three different types of medicines, and this also required quite a bit of effort to assure that she had the medicine and was taking it properly. Not that she was incapable of doing these things for herself; it was just that they were concerned for her and could not just leave her on her own during these times.

So they explored the possibility of her moving back in with us to cut down on the amount of running around that they would have to do. This presented two problems. After she had moved out in the first place, Mom had turned her room into a craft room, and it had gotten piled quite high after four years. So moving into her old room seemed out of the question. Then there was the fact that Missy still wanted some sense of independence. They debated getting a bigger house for about a month but they could not find any that met all of their needs. So, finally they decided to add an apartment to the back of our house so that she could have a custom made apartment that would still be adjacent to our house.

As soon as the decision was made to add on to the house, Mom began to draw blueprints. She drew everything to the minutest detail, spelling out the living, kitchen areas right down to where the electrical outlets were going to be. I took a week out myself and took a shot at drawing the outside. Not thinking that they would be of any use, I set them aside. The process then progressed to the selection of contractors as they came out to the house and gave us estimates. When the first contractor came by he had a problem of visualizing the outside appearance, and Mom asked where the pictures were that I had drawn. I was surprised that they would play such a significant role, and this is probably what brings this event so vividly to my remembrance. It was doodling when I should have been working on my projects, but at least it had some value.

The actual construction began in July, and this is when it began to affect my schoolwork so much. As much as I tried to concentrate on finishing up that first lesson for the correspondence course, my eyes could not help but wander out to watch what they were doing in the back yard. It was like I had my own "This Old House" TV program in my own back yard. So I temporarily gave up on my schoolwork and parked myself in front of the window so I could see everything that was going on. For me this was far more of an education than the correspondence course.

After about a month and a half they finished the apartment and Missy and Sylvester moved in. This was Labor Day weekend. Some of my friends joked and asked if I minded Missy moving back in. I returned their joking by telling them that I felt like the Prodigal son's older brother. If you recall the story, after the Prodigal son spent his inheritance on wine, women and song, he came to his senses and returned to his father's house. Of course, he was welcomed with open arms by his father, who was glad to see him return and gave him a big party. However, the older brother was not so pleased, since although he had always been loyal to his father, he had never been treated like this. Of course, I was only joking, since Missy had not run off and carried on. However, it was a fun joke for my church friends, since they knew the story of the Prodigal son quite well. In reality, I was overjoyed to have Missy back after four years and I still look forward to her being here for many years to come. I enjoyed Sylvester too. While Missy was in an upstairs apartment I was unable to visit her or the cat. She visited us, of course, but rarely brought the cat.

Sylvester started spending as much time in the regular part of the house as he did in Missy's apartment. However, if he knew what the cost of his moving into the new quarters was, he would probably have turned himself into the humane society. Recall that Mom was not too fond of animals, and she said that the only way that she would let the cat in the house would be if he were de-clawed, OUCH!!!

Along with the addition of the apartment, the construction plan added a deck around a good part of the house. Our house was built on a hill, and any time that I tried to go out, I could only go a few feet without the possibility of toppling over down the hill, which could be quite catastrophic in my condition. Now I could go out and move all around viewing the trees, flowers, squirrels and all the things that most people just take for granted. Over the years Dad had purchased several lots around us so that we were surrounded by nature even though we lived in a fairly close residential area.

Meanwhile I had completed the first lesson of the correspondence course. I sent it in and expected them to take a few weeks to grade it and get it back to me. I figured I would have a few weeks off. However, they got it back in one week. I got an A+ on the paper. This built my confidence and prepared me for the second lesson. I was resolved that it would not take me nearly as long to get the next lesson in. I set out a schedule where I answered at least one question a day. Systematically I managed to get it done by December of that year. However, I decided to wait until after Christmas to turn it in.

As the 1996 year began I could never bring myself to begin work on the essay that was required as part of the correspondence course. Every time I got ready to begin I kept thinking that I had 15 more lessons to go, and that prospect was not real good to me. I felt that if I could go to class it would be much easier to get through this than doing it all on my own. Plus the fact that the time that it took to complete that second lesson while giving it "my all" was far too long. I began to realize that if I had been going to class in person I could have completed the entire course in this time period, and not just one lesson. It was frustrating.

However, with my Mother in such bad health with her back, and Dad taken up with his work, it was impossible for me to attend the regular class sessions. I was also working on my book on the TV series, but had run into several snags on that as well. Most of the people who knew the answers were in California, and it was going to be impossible for me to contact them. My problem at this point is that I had bitten off so many large chores at the same time that it was giving me a sense of frustration not bringing closure to any of them. Not that keeping busy did not have a very positive effect on keeping from regressing back to depression. However, I felt that something was missing.

So I began to ask myself the age-old question: what was I going to do with the rest of my life. Was there some meaning there, or was I just putting in time like someone in prison? Here I was at 29, which in MD years is a ripe old age. I had outlived Kevin by five and a half years, but spent the best part of the last two years in recovering from a broken leg. Surely there had to be a reason for all of this. But what was it? Surely, God in his infinite wisdom had something in store with me. But what was it? I was running out of patience. Needless to say, this was somewhat of a low point for me.

Not that I was completely devoid of a sense of worth at this point. For example, I realized that one thing that I could do much better than most is to provide encouragement to those who have health problems. For one thing, I was at a point where very few people could say that they were worst off than I was in a physical type of way. So, if I could keep a positive attitude, there is no reason that anyone could not. That example alone was enough to bring a sense of worth not only to myself, but also to those around me who were locked into the same fight with depression that I had fought. (I will not say *won*, since you can never win in the sense that the monster is still at the door waiting to come in whenever you let your guard down.) This was something that I had to live with and accept.

Later on I learned that on two separate occasions when I was too ill or tired to make services, the men giving short talks had based their lessons on me and the example that I was setting. I was glad that I was not present at these times in that this would have been extremely

embarrassing for me. In fact, I know that I have my problems just like everyone else, and while I rarely talk to others about my problems and complain, there is no question that I harbor my share of resentment about it. I realize that this is not right, and I continue to work and pray about it.

Being able to help other people through their problems and help give them a positive attitude toward life through my example is a useful endeavor. But, I was looking for something else. I wanted something of substance, something that I could realize. Then, in the spring of 1996, Dave Brown, an engineer on the faculty at the University of Alabama, approached me with the idea of us working together on the book that you are reading right now. I had known Dave for about four years through our common church association, and while I had confidence in him, I must admit that the idea sounded weird at first. What was there about me that warranted a book? Dave suggested that I might well hold the world's record for survival for my type of MD. The fact was that I had survived where others had succumbed long ago. Was this just a matter of luck, or was there something about my attitude and approach to life that spelled the difference. I certainly could not tell – this is a medical mystery. But perhaps I had an obligation to document my story if at all possible so that others – handicapped or not – could benefit from it. Whether I held the world's record or not was quite irrelevant; if I did not in 1996, I planned to some day. In any event, I had something to say, and if Dave would help me say it, I was game.

I began thinking that maybe this was it; maybe this was the thing that I had been looking for. But more importantly, I had a reason to get out of bed in the morning. I had something to work and worry about. Something to fret about, and something to keep my mind on. As we began working on the book, Dave explained to me that he had written three books before and each one had taken several years to put together. I began to wonder whether I would live long enough to complete this task. He could only work part time on it, and he warned me that it would have to be over a very prolonged period of time. I was convinced that I was ready for the task.

But fate had other ideas. It began on Sunday, June 2, 1996. I was supposed to go to church as I usually do, but the storm clouds moved in. It was pouring at the time for us to go, and it seemed to be a hopeless cause for the morning, with the lift getting wet and everything, so I decided to go ahead and try to be sure that I made it that night. I settled back and tried to get a couple more hours of sleep. The phone rang waking me up at about 11 AM. I noticed that I was feeling a pulling in the left side of my chest. I felt that I had probably slept on it crooked or something, so I got Mom to raise up the bed a little for me. This did not seem to help. When Dad came home from church he got me out of bed, and brought me the hamburger that he had purchased on his way home. But none of this relieved the pulling in my chest.

I began thinking that it might be indigestion, so I started taking some medicine for that. It was a minor discomfort, and I went on with my usual daily routine. However, when 5 o'clock rolled around I decided that it would be better not to attempt to make it to church under the circumstances. As I got back into bed, I found it strange that the pulling now shifted to the right side. I watched a little TV and read until about 10:30 or so, after which I went on to sleep.

Dad usually came in about 5:30 AM or so after I had been sleeping on my back all night to turn me over. After he left I realized that something was definitely wrong. Every time I would breathe in the pain in my chest would get worse and worse. I was able to sleep off and on for the

next hour or so. Dad came back in around 7:30 AM or so to get me ready for the man to get me up for the morning. But things were getting to such a point that I began to feel the need to go to the emergency room or the doctor. The doctor's office would not open for another half hour, so we decided to go right to the hospital. Dad called the ambulance.

It was not that I was in a big rush or that I felt in any danger. Mom thought that it was pneumonia, since every time that I took a deep breath the pain would get more severe. When Dad called 911 he did not say that I was having breathing problems – just pain in my chest. This sent up a red flag for them that it was a heart attack. I was sitting up and relaxing at this point when I heard sirens go by on the highway behind our house. I remember thinking that I was glad that that was not me and that I had a while before having to go to the hospital. Less than a minute after that, though, here come the paramedics down the hallway and into my room. "Your having heart problems, huh?"

"No! breathing problems," I responded.

The leader made his way over to my bed with a stethoscope and told his partner that he did not hear anything blocking the passageway. I thought that this was good, and that I would not have to stay in the hospital very long. As soon as they found out that I was not about to die on them, they sent the fire engine back to the station. Why they brought it in the first place I do not know.

A minute or so later the ambulance arrived and they took me to the hospital. The first thing they do when they get you in the emergency room is to stick you in a corner and begin stealing your blood. In a few minutes the nurse came back and said that the doctors were not satisfied with the results – the enzymes were not right indicating something was wrong with my heart. I did not pay a whole lot of attention to it, since I still figured it was pneumonia. The hardest part of going to the emergency room is that if you are not on the verge of going into shock or dying the doctors do not get in any great hurry to treat you. So I waited and waited. This would not bother me, but the pain was steadily getting worse. It had settled on the left side, but it was also dependent on the position that I was in. I could ease the pain by getting Dad to lift my arm above my head. This relieved the pain in the chest somewhat, but caused a pain in the shoulder. The other approach was if someone would put pressure on my chest. This got tiresome to Dad after while.

Finally the emergency room doctor arrived and repeated what the nurse had said. He kept asking me questions like "did my back hurt," and such as that. Of course I said yes, since my back always hurt. He went on to say that whenever he had an MD patient he checked the heart first – it could be the heart or a blood clot. So, lucky me. I did not have pneumonia, but I could have a heart attack or a stroke. That was comforting.

I suddenly began to realize why he was asking about my back. This was a symptom of heart problems. It was then that I got a feeling that the end was near. With the paramedic not finding anything blocking my breathing, the problem might be more severe than that. Before I thought the absence of blockage was a good sign; now I realized it could indicate something more severe. At this point I was convinced that it was my heart, and it was serious.

I was not really worried about myself at this point. But I knew how by family and friends would feel and I could put myself in their places. The other thing that bothered me was the prospect of going out painfully. I did not mind going out, but the prospect of there being pain involved was not something that I relished. I later explained to a friend of mine that it was not death that I was concerned about; but I would rather that death be a surprise.

Now the struggle was to keep from getting upset. I knew that if got upset that it would really confound all of the diagnosis and probably get everyone else upset as well. So I did my best to control my emotions. After a little while my family arrived and started talking with the emergency room doctors and they took charge. When my regular doctor, Dr. Lydia Stefanescu, finally arrived at the hospital, she set them straight that the high enzymes were normal for me, and that was just due to my MD. She was not so concerned with heart problems. Being able to control the pain by putting pressure on my chest was a strange characteristic. However, she decided to admit me to a regular room and get some x-rays on my chest later on. This certainly made me feel much better, since, although she had not ruled out some of the more severe things, she did not seemed to be very worried about them either. Either there was not much wrong, or else she was an excellent actress.

I got into a private room and things seemed to be settling down a little. I was not sure that I was out of the woods yet. The pain was still in my chest. A nurse came into the room and began talking to my mother like I was not even there.

"Does he have a living will?"

"Yes," Mom responded.

"Can you bring a copy up to the hospital so that we can make a copy of it?"

I sure did not like that sound of that. I was trying to get off of that track. No use in just lying there and fretting; might as well watch a little TV. As I clicked on the remote, on came a middle-aged white-haired lady ...

"I did not want to be a burden to my family, so I got a tailor-made, economical, first-rate, professional funeral plan." *Just what I needed.* I changed channels, realizing that this just was not going to be one of my better days.

They took me down to get x-rays, but they were not x-rays in the conventional sense. This was more like a TV sonogram. You would lie on the table and they would put the big machines over you, but there was an image instead of a single still picture. They also were taking some stills and going off and developing them and coming back. One of these times while waiting for them to come back I looked up at the screen to see what I looked like. At first I did not like what I saw. One of my lungs was smaller than the other one, and it looked like it was on the side where the pain was. As I looked at it I realized that I could not tell if it was just the angle or whether there was really some abnormality. Finally I gave up since without my glasses I could not tell much about it one way or the other.

Finally they returned me to my room. The blood tests indicated that I had some kind of infection in my chest as well as other possible problems. So they started pumping antibiotics into me and by late night most of the pain was gone. I was feeling great at that point, feeling like I had dodged a bullet, and convinced that the doctor had performed some kind of a miracle on me. I rested comfortably that night, and the next morning I was still elated feeling like I had a new lease on life. It was a complete reversal from the previous day, when I had been convinced that I would be a goner before the day was out. Now, without a care in the world I was eating breakfast sitting up in bed with the sun shining in thorough the window. There was no way that I was going to take this day for granted!

The doctor finally came in and gave me the diagnosis. I had what they called *walking pneumonia*, which means that I had the early stages of it, but not the full-blown case. Probably what had happened was that because I was not breathing deep enough, the problem arose when my sinuses drained into my lungs. To prevent that from happening again, the doctor gave me an instrument that forced me to take deep breaths when I used it – three times a day for at least 15 breaths. I had one of these at home but felt that I only needed to use it when I was sick. They never told me that I should use it to keep from getting sick. So, needless to say, I now use it on a regular basis.

This bout with pneumonia was also a major turning point as far as I was concerned. I really had confidence in this doctor. The other doctors had misdiagnosed everything and had me checking out to the cooler early. She was the only one that entertained that it could be a respiratory problem.

By Wednesday morning (June 5th) I was ready to go home, but they kept me for a couple more days. They ran a few more tests, including an EKG to check my heart, but by the end of the day on Friday all they could give me was a clean bill of health.

A week after getting out of the hospital and with the pneumonia under control, I decided in earnest that it was time to put everything that I had into the project of writing this book. Dave and I had had a meeting a couple weeks before I entered the hospital, where we had determined what the goals and objectives of the book should be. We wanted it to be helpful first of all to the handicapped themselves ... to give them hope and understand that others have been through this just as they have and perhaps to enable them to cope with the problems that have beset me all of my life. Next to that we targeted the parents and other relatives and close friends of the handicapped. What can they do better than serve and be served by those who love and are loved by the handicapped? But we did not leave out common ordinary normal folks. Perhaps by giving them insight into the inner workings of my mind they could improve their relationships with the handicapped by better understanding their drives and motivations.

We had not gotten much done by the time I entered the hospital. The first thing we decided to do was to use a tape recorder instead of trying to write everything down. My manual dexterity at this point had deteriorated, and while I could still write, I could not do it nearly as quickly as I could dictate. We began the process ... I would dictate a tape and he would take it that week and put it in the computer, smoothing out the rough edges as we went along. In the meanwhile, I would be on to the next subject. This might seem easy, but it took a major transition in the way that I had always expressed myself. When you are writing things by hand there is a certain delay in which you are

writing and you have a chance to think about the next word and the next sentence. Suddenly this entire process is accelerated, and I was sitting there with the tape recorder running not knowing what to say next. It took some practice to make this transition. I got frustrated a few times and tried to write some things out, but finally realized that Dave was right and I would be much better off if I could skip the wordsmithing and just somehow dump my thoughts into the recorder.

There were some other things that slowed me down as well. At first I was quite reluctant to dictate while family members were around. This put a real cramp in my style in that I was rarely left totally alone. At first I decided to do my dictation at night after I went to bed, which for me was about 7:30 each night. Being in the room by myself I could loosen up and not worry about anyone overhearing my dictation. The problem with this was that I could not hold the tape recorder up to my mouth as well as I could when I was sitting up. Again, my disability had gotten to my arms to such an extent that it was not possible for me to hold the tape recorder. What I could do while sitting up was to lean over to it on my desk. So dictating at night did not produce a very clear voice, and I was afraid that Dave would not be able to hear what I was saying. A second problem of dictating at this time was that I needed to be winding down at this time. Usually I would watch TV or get some reading done. So, in far too many cases I would just turn the TV on for a little background noise to keep me entertained. The problem was that I would get distracted and the next thing you know I would be asleep without having dictated anything very useful at all.

At times I was able to discipline myself away from this problem (and often the lack of anything interesting on TV was a great help). However, I would get myself cranked up and really into it around 9:30 or 10 ... just about the time Dad would come in and want to get me ready for sleep for the night. I felt obligated to go with our normal schedule and not keep him up any later than he normally would stay up. This meant that I would not be sitting up in bed any longer, and it was impossible at this time for me to use the tape recorder while I was lying down in my normal sleeping position. So, right in the middle of the roll that I was on I had to interrupt and try to pick it up the next day. It was next to impossible to get any continuity in this way, since I would lose my train of thought from one day to the next.

I attempted to make time in the morning for this and soon found that the distractions were not limited to the night. A major problem was the housekeeper who would be coming in and out at random times. Needless to say, if I felt self-conscious in front of my family, it was ten times as bad before her. So I was stymied trying to fit things in when no one was in the room and constantly getting my thoughts interrupted.

Things did not get better until I set up a rigid routine. Once I had eaten breakfast and done my bible reading I would forego the TV (the ultimate sacrifice: I gave up old reruns of "The Andy Griffith Show") and the sports page of the newspaper and get right into my dictation. Dad would be at work and Missy and Mom were both in their rooms occupied with their own business, so I had a couple of hours to myself where I could concentrate on what I was trying to accomplish. Once I got proficient in dictating I began to realize that no one was really paying any attention to me while I was dictating anyway, and I began to ignore people coming in and out.

I did find that after eating lunch it was extremely hard to get back to it. I think it had to do with my normal body cycles of being tired after lunch coupled with getting to a point where my

mind wanted a break. So I got into a groove where I could spend a couple hours a day in the morning to maximize the process. I would keep this schedule at least Monday through Friday, and often extend it to Saturday as well.

I felt that I needed to be perfect the first time. I could not come back and rearrange the words later. Neither could the paragraphs be rearranged later. There were times when I would sketch things out on paper before getting started on a given day so that I could get it right. But Dave kept telling me not to worry about it ... just get it down on paper on this first cut and we would reword and rearrange things later on. I finally realized that if we did not do it this way, it was just not going to get done. So once I got this into my head, it began to be much smoother sailing. Then there was just the proficiency that comes from practice.

When Dave and I first began the project he would print out the section as I dictated it and I would review it the next week. Since he was a member of our church, we would exchange comments (as well as papers and tapes) every Sunday. We found that this slowed us down a lot and affected me with my dictation. I got to thinking too much on what I needed to do to improve the previous tapes and got bogged down on that and was not able to make progress. Finally, we decided that this was slowing us down too much. We got one chapter (Chapter 2) into a reasonably good shape so that we could get a feel for what the target was. But then we decided that we would crank it into high gear and just dump everything in for the rest of the chapters and get them all roughed out first before any going back for fine-tuning. I never saw the product of this until we had the entire thing finished, and in this way I was not distracted by it.

While all of this took a lot of discipline, it was quite a bit of fun and very satisfying. Now I had a reason to get up in the morning and a new purpose for living. I began thinking that this might be the reason that I have been allowed to live this long despite my condition, which was steadily deteriorating. I could still move my hand a slight amount and my fingers just a little (enough to write). But that was about it.

I did not want to tell too many people about the project at first. I did not want to "jinx it" like I thought telling many of my friends about the "Waltons" project may have. As time went on I was not able to keep it a secret from too many of my acquaintances. I had to ask questions of friends and family members to get my facts straight, and they wanted to know why I was asking. As I touched base with them systematically, without exception they all gave me great encouragement in my efforts, and that was very gratifying as well. They all seemed excited and hoped that this project would work out well.

There were times when all of this self-reflection would get to me. I would have to quit for a couple days or a week when this would happen. I found that playing Nintendo Space Invaders was a good way to get away from it for a while. After blasting the cobwebs a while with this, I would be ready to go again.

As for the two other projects that I had been working on -- the genealogy project and the "Waltons" book -- both of them were put on hold. There was quite a bit of detective work on the genealogy project, and some of it was just impossible for me to do directly. Getting others involved was a very long drawn out affair, since I did not feel that I could push those who were volunteering

to help me. The "Waltons" project did not get in the way either, for once Dave got me going on this book I had come to the sad conclusion that this would probably not materialize, since most of the sources that I needed were in California. So, I pretty much gave up on them, since if I was going to put so much into writing a book, I wanted to have a fairly certain expectation that it would be published. I figured that a book that would enlighten others on the inner workings of the mind of a terminally handicapped person would make a significant contribution worthy of publication. So, the further that I got into my new project the less time that I spent on these other projects until it got to the point that I set them aside altogether.

The hardest part came after we had finished the first four or five chapters. For, it was then that we I had to visualize once again the effect that MD had had on my early life. The hardest part was working through the time when I had to come to grips with never getting out of the wheelchair again. For one, I had to walk a tight rope of the "peachy keen, no problem" and the "woe is me/why me?" attitudes. I had to think long and hard about how to communicate this, since there is no question that I was always between these two extremes, and occasionally I would visit each and stay for a little while. Discussing the depression when that time arrived was also a pathway that I did not wish to go down again. If I had my way I would have skimmed over both of these, but if I was not going to be totally open and honest about these difficult times, why do it at all? So, after putting it off for a couple of weeks I just grabbed the tape recorder and poured out my guts. Other than these glitches, things got to be fairly smooth sailing, improving as the project went along.

So, with this project underway, summer gave way to fall and I was coming up on my 30th birthday, which was going to be a major milestone for me. Ten years ago after reading that the majority of people with my type of MD do not make it past 20, I felt a great sense of accomplishment just turning 20. You can imagine how much of a sense of accomplishment I was anticipating to live another half-life past that. However, I was not really thinking much about it until November. My birthday fell on a Sunday and I went to church as usual. Several people gave me birthday greetings, and our family went out after church to eat. I came home and opened my gifts. I appreciated the books and a watch from Missy. Then we had some cake and the celebration was over. Well, I cannot complain since this *was* the usual way that we celebrated birthdays. But to me this was a major milestone, and it just seemed that something was missing. I got to thinking: Perhaps I should have invited some friends over.

That week Richard Creel, our preacher, called and invited us to a going-away party the following Saturday at the Northport Civic Center. One of the couples from church was leaving town, and this was normally what they did to wish them well. Quite often I would not be able to attend these get-togethers, but as long as Dad would load me up, I more than welcomed the chance to interact with my friends from church. The three of us got ready to go but Missy was babysitting someone and would have to miss it.

As we entered the room where the party was being held, everyone yelled "Surprise!!!" and I realized that I had been duped. The family party the week before had just been a ploy to throw me off. After everyone congratulated me on my 30th they took their seats and Richard came up beside me and gave a little speech:

“When I starting talking about having a birthday party for Michael, there were a lot of people that were interested in wishing him a happy birthday. We had some very distinguished people who knew Michael and wanted to be a part of this. And ... uh ... I ... I found it really pretty amazing. I mean, I have known Michael for about three years now and I was amazed that famous people would know him so well and be that interested in his opinions. I guess without further ado we need to start off with our most special guest ...”

Suddenly they started playing "Hail to the Chief." Now I did want to be president some day, but could not understand why they were playing this now, when all of a sudden in comes President Clinton playing happy birthday on his saxophone. It was Allen Parrish under a goofy-smiley Clinton mask. No question he could play the sax a whole lot better than the real Commander in Chief. Everyone joined in singing happy birthday and got a charge out of Allen's Clinton impersonation. I would not have been more pleased had it been the real thing.

In the middle of the crowd was Missy who had come early to get a good seat to take pictures. I found out that they had been planning this for weeks. Originally it was supposed to be the Saturday before my birthday, but the rooms at the civic center were all booked up. Of course, deferring it made the surprise that much bigger.

My friend Jeff Armstrong got up next with a speech ...

“I’ve known Michael for quite some time. Uh ... if you have been around Michael you probably know he knows a little about everything, and he thinks he knows a lot about everything. Just kidding of course. One of the things we talked about a lot in the past included a lot of various things ... politics and uh, politics, and uh politics. No really ... religion, football, old movies, but most of all history, which is obviously Michael’s passion. What many of you may not realize is that Michael is a writer and has been writing on several different subjects. One that we starting talking about is the heritage of our families. I told Michael that ... hey ... just get on the internet, type in genealogy, and then Armstrong or Mason, and you can find out all this stuff and more than you can imagine. Well, Michael has been writing this book on his genealogy since then, and it is kind of secret. It is not complete, but I asked Missy if she would just find me an excerpt – you know, maybe just one of the relatives Michael has in the past. Well, she did and I have that with me and I would like to just read this excerpt that Michael has written at this time about some of his descendents. This is Chapter 13, and its about Kludy Odiferious Mason.

“Kludy Odiferious Mason. Now that is a Cajun name if I ever heard one, and here’s what Michael had to say about him in his research ...”

“One of the most famous ancestors of my family was my great uncle, Kludy Odiferious Mason. His mom and dad just called him “Klu” for short.”

Jeff inserted: “Uh ... Michael ... isn’t Clue spelled with a C?”

Michael: “I haven’t a clue.”

When the crowd settled down, Jeff continued:

“He was born in April, 1887 to Jasper and Romena Mason in Possum Creek outside of Gator Trap, Louisiana.”

Jeff: “That would have to be waaaaay back in the sticks, even by 1887 standards.

“They were very poor folk and had to spend most of their daytime hours gathering sugar cane from Skeeter Swamp just to keep the family still going. At night Kludy and his daddy would take a gunny sack of sorghum as bait, long cane sticks, and mama’s bed sheets to catch possums to sell at the local market. Because they were poor they could not afford to send little Kludy to the schoolhouse for a proper education. In fact, most of the townsfolk would make fun of him and his family because they were poor and they did not seem to have much cents.”

Jeff: “Michael ... that is ‘sense’ not c-e-n-t-s.

Michael: “They did not have much of that either.”

“In addition, because he was not too smart, the children would tease him. For one thing, he was not too swift on his feet, and they called him a real klutz. Well, as expected, this made him quite mad and he vowed that someday these people would come to respect and honor him as a great leader. As he grew older he continued the family business of skinning polecats for other people, and though hard work (and a good supply of lye soap) became the most successful polecat skinner in all of South-Eastern Louisiana. Soon Klu’s family business began to grow. He began to diversity the business into other critters and soon was a rich man by anybody’s standards.”

Jeff: “So he made it in the polecat and lye soap markets. Amazing!”

Michael: “But not necessary in that order.”

Jeff: “And he still had the stigma of being a first class klutz, tripping over all of those critter skins that he had piled all over his office.”

“So Klue bought himself a pair of shoes and started off to school. He tore into book learning sort of like a possum grins at a coal oil lantern.”

Jeff: “Wow ... that Michael can sure write ... but would you like to tell us how a possum grins at a coal oil lantern?”

Michael: “It a figure of speech, Jeff ... just keep reading.”

Jeff: “OK, OK, but one of these days you can show us that grin ...”

“Soon he graduated with honors (geaux loudy) from Coon Ridge Prep in Punkinville, Louisiana. It wasn’t long before he found him a sweet wife and they had five sons, five daughters, and over the years he finally acquired dozens and dozens of grandchildren. But despite his

extensive book learning for that time, he was still regarded as clumsy and secretive. In fact, over time, they became known as Klutzy Klu's Clan or just the Klu Klutz Clan."

Jeff: "Now that is amazing, unbelievable, incredible ... where did you get this stuff? I am sorry I referred you to that web site now."

Michael: "Every word of it is totally verifiable. Just finish the story."

Jeff: "There's more? I don't know if I can stand any more of this. OK ... here it is ..."

"Soon there was a new political party in Louisiana, and thousands signed up. And my ancestor, Kludy (Klu) Odiferious Mason became the legend that he was meant to be. Which goes to show you, a Mason by any other name, still smells as bad."

Jeff: "What does his smell have to do with it?"

Michael: "Don't know ... just sounded good at the time."

Jeff returned to his seat and was followed by my friend and the co-author of this book – Dave Brown, who began to speak ...

"Ya'll know that Michael's political leanings are somewhat conservative."

Some giggles in the crowd and jokes about this understatement.

"Yes, that's right ... to say that Michael's a little conservative would be like saying that the Pope is somewhat Catholic. Yes ... the epitome of understatement. In fact, I knew that Rush Limbaugh knew Michael and I e-mailed him. But, you know, a famous person like Rush Limbaugh ... you really are not going to expect to get him personally. So, I kind of worded it like I was talking to a staff member and wanted them to act like they were Rush. Well, anyway, this is what came back:

"Uh ... Dave ... this is Rush. I handle all of my own e-mail. I am the only one that has access to it. Now as for this Michael Mason guy, I am was not going to send anything to him until I found about him. This guy makes Attila the Hun look like a liberal. I refuse to send anything to someone who calls me, Rush Limbaugh a closet liberal. – Rush Limbaugh"

"Well, in order to get something good back, I quickly e-mailed him and told him that this could not be the same Michael Mason from Tuscaloosa that I know because he is a big fan of yours. I realize that this was a scam, Michael, but it was the only way that I could get this letter from Rush."

Upon which he produced a happy birthday wish from the man himself: El Rushbo, who is one of my great heroes.

I also received signed letters from Bill Clinton, the President of US and Howell Heflin, one of Alabama's US Senators. Also waiting for me was birthday wishes from college football coaches from across the country, including Joe Paterno of Penn State, Lou Holtz of Notre Dame and Bobby Bowden of Florida State and his son, Terry Bowden at Auburn. Of course, Gene Stallings of Alabama did not forget me.

What I remember most was the notebook that they passed around as I was opening my gifts. Everyone there was writing some kind of a message as they signed it and passed it around. Since Kevin's passing away I always wondered what my legacy was going to be and how people are going to remember me after I was gone. In the pages of this book I began to get an answer to that question. It is funny thing about most human beings ... when we have a pencil and paper in hand we can communicate the deep feelings of our heart, things that we hide so cleverly at other moments. I will cherish these notes in my heart forever, and recognize that my 30th birthday turned out to be a major highpoint of my life.

The birthday party was held at the same day that Alabama and Auburn were to play in their annual rivalry. Auburn coach Terry Bowden also had a little surprise along with his birthday greetings. He wrote that he hoped that I really enjoyed the party, but that I did not enjoy the game *nearly* as much as I enjoyed the party. He almost got his wish as Auburn led Alabama throughout the third quarter and most of the fourth. However, in the final moments Alabama finally pulled it out and won 24 to 23. Close games like this are the rule, and this game is usually settled in the final seconds regardless of prior rankings and who ultimately wins. This is the case even when the teams are not that evenly matched, as was the case this year, since for the players at this point, this is the only game that matters for the year, and for some of them it is the only one that matters in life.

Football models life, but there is a point at which this analogy breaks down. Those of us who are compelled to complete the game by halftime are forced to a sobriety usually reserved for people twice our age. We must make our marks with a restricted set of physical capabilities. The advantage is that we have a greater sense of our own mortality, and this motivates an enriched affinity toward the spiritual. Life is nothing; eternity becomes everything.

This book has reviewed the major turning points of my life, from before anyone ever knew that I had MD, through the trying years when I was losing my physical capabilities. I have tried to demonstrate the effects of these losses on my physical, mental and spiritual being – on my body, soul and spirit. But the loss of the physical does not have to be the end of a productive life. My favorite passage is one in which the apostle Paul asks for relief from the pain of some physical affliction, and God says: "No." Paul reasons about the purpose for all of this, and comes up with the following (2 Cor 12:7-10):

"And by reason of the exceeding greatness of the revelations, that I should not be exalted overmuch, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, that I should not be exalted overmuch. Concerning this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he hath said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for (my) power is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may

rest upon me. Wherefore I take pleasure in weaknesses, in injuries, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong."

Certainly the apostle presents a principle here that he was trying to convey to his readers, not just speaking for himself. Very few (perhaps none) of us ever reach the mental and physical capabilities that we would like to have. We would all like to be smarter, stronger and more skilled. But is this really to our benefit? According to Paul, he would have been "exalted overmuch" without his thorn in the flesh, which was nothing other than some handicap. The fact that we do not know what his affliction was makes the generalization to all handicaps quite plausible.

But there is far more here than just God's allowing us to be afflicted to prevent us from becoming proud and losing a sense of our mortality. There is also a positive purpose, and that is the glorification of God. Paul makes it clear that the weaker we are (physically), the stronger the statement we can make for God: "My power is made perfect in weakness." It is difficult for those who have strong physical attributes to prevent these characteristics from being that which convinces the world that they are speaking the truth. Thus, those who are strong and handsome are often believed and trusted because of these attributes. This is unfortunate, since there is nothing inherent within these characteristics that produce truth. The indication is that God does not wish people to be convinced by these characteristics. He wants His power to be demonstrated despite the physical weaknesses of those who proclaim His word. Thus, as Paul put it, the weaker I get, the more God's strength can be seen through me.

I have lost most of my physical abilities, but I can still reason and talk. According to Paul, I can be more useful to my Lord like this than if I had all of my capabilities. There are very few people who can complain of their physical ailments in my presence without feeling self-conscious. But this is not my intent. It is my intent to live as the Lord requires regardless of the circumstances of my deteriorating condition. I will thank him every day for giving me life, dying for my sins, and enabling me to be free from the shackles of MD once my life on this earth has run its course.

As I begin my third decade upon this earth I have no idea what the future holds for me. I could live another ten years, or just another few months. But I hope to continue to live each day to its fullest and to be a good example to others long after my body has given up its spirit and I go to meet my Savior in heaven.