

failing exams

Chidimma Onwere considers a Christian response

It was a beautiful summer's day in June 2002, the sort of day most of us would crave for - perfect conditions for water fights, Ultimate Frisbee, reading a novel in the park, sunbathing or alfresco dining.

It was also the day I was to get my exam results for medical school finals. Needless to say, basking in the midday sun was last on my list of priorities. I was extremely anxious and felt sick with worry. This was it; the culmination of six long hard years at medical school would be defined by what was written on that slip of paper.

A pass would signal the successful end of my student career and triumphant beginning of a medical career as a pre-registration house officer [now known as F1 doctor] at Ealing Hospital NHS Trust. I had already landed an amazing first year job there to start in August 2002, including a paediatric rotation, which was what I felt God was calling me to do - surely he wouldn't have given me that job if I wasn't going to pass?

I arrived at the university campus and bravely made

my way through the crowds of elated final year medical students who had got their results already and had, quite obviously, passed. Shouts, cheers, laughter and lots of 'good luck Chid' were ringing in my ears as I headed towards the medical school reception to get my brown envelope.

The jovial mood really did lift my spirits and renew my hope. My tentative steps became more firm, gaining confidence as I approached the office that I too would share in the success of my peers and be able to join them celebrating in the sunshine. Jubilation is so contagious; I could feel the success, as though just being there was enough.

it wasn't enough

What I had spent all night fasting and praying against was staring me in the face - the slip of paper told me that I had failed finals. My hopes were dashed.

Questions, questions and more questions filled my head: Why did God let this happen? How could this happen to me, I'm a committed Christian? What on earth do I do now? What shall I tell my parents?

how could it happen?

*shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?*¹

In some Christian circles, there is an assumption that God owes us success in life - as if it was part of the deal when we became followers of Christ that success would always follow no matter what.

The Bible tells countless stories of our brothers and sisters of faith who endured many trials and tribulations, in spite and sometimes because of their commitment to God. Our Lord Jesus was not spared the cruelty of this fallen world, so why do we think we should be?

why did it happen?

*'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord.*²

God does know best and we are called to trust his sovereign wisdom as we live for him. During my preparation for the resits I was astounded as I realised how ill-prepared I had been for the exams in the summer. I had to eat big slices of humble pie during that difficult, but educational time. I don't have all the answers -

but I do know that when I did qualify in November 2002, I was a much better house officer than I would have been the summer before. I was not only six months older and wiser, but I knew that I had matured spiritually. I had been through the 'refiner's fire' and realise now that the purpose of this, as with raw gold, was to start to reflect the image of the refiner himself, Jesus Christ.

what happened next

*Praise the Lord, O my soul*³

Well, I didn't die! I wasn't black-listed and unemployable, in fact, I discovered that many highly

respected consultants had failed finals and it hadn't affected their career progress at all.

Of course I was upset, but once I accepted that sulking at God was not going to change anything, he graciously provided friends and family to 'pick me up' and steer me in the right direction towards success.

Since that time I haven't looked back - God has opened many doors for me, doors I wouldn't have dreamed of approaching - let alone knocking on!

I still don't pass everything first time around (my driving instructor can testify to that!) but my approach and priorities have changed.

keeping things in (Christian) perspective

Who is this for anyway?

In the secular world, how we perform in life defines who we are and our worth amongst our peers and society as a whole. We want to look good and get ahead.

Rev Richard Bewes, former Rector of All Souls Church, used to warn against this over-competitive work ethic by saying: 'In life's great rat race, even if you win, you're still a rat!'⁴

We were chosen to glorify God,⁵ to do good works that he prepared in advance for us to do.⁶ Just as Nimrod was a mighty hunter before the Lord,⁷ so too are we to excel in whatever we do before the Lord.

We also need to remember that we are always Christ's ambassadors to our non-believing friends and family who are there for the rises and falls in our lives.⁸ Failing does not reflect badly on God - it's how we handle it that matters.

Most importantly, because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we are 'more than conquerors' as Christians.⁹ We have already 'passed' the biggest exam of all, without even taking the test. Christ has done it all! God the Father examines our hearts and finds Christ's righteousness there, reconciling us to God now and for all eternity; true success is his.

Ultimately, we are victorious from the time we receive Jesus as Lord - the past is dealt with, our future is totally secure, so there really is nothing to worry about.

practical tips

start early and make a plan

The old adage 'fail to plan; plan to fail' is true. It's vital that you make (and stick to) a realistic timetable that enables you to get through revision thoroughly with plenty of time to practise past papers and iron out areas that need special attention. Avoid last minute cramming!

talk to people who have gone before and succeeded

*Make plans by seeking advice; if you wage war, obtain guidance.*¹⁰

Good advice is invaluable. Those that have already passed may offer advice about books to read, courses to go on, pitfalls to avoid and tips about how to study; you may consider having a study partner, which is great for encouragement and accountability. Use advice to tailor-make your revision.

understand the basic principles well

People who score highly in medical exams are not necessarily the ones who have read all the recent journals; rather, they have understood the basic principles of medicine extremely well. Don't be afraid to get help from your lecturers and tutors or fellow students to clarify parts of the syllabus you find difficult. By doing so, you will have an excellent grasp of the fundamental principles, which is vitally important for your clinical practice as well as the exams.

don't neglect yourself

Exam revision is physically and spiritually demanding, so look after yourself; eat well, get enough sleep and exercise

regularly. Resist the temptation to overlook your Christian life in favour of spending more time revising. Integrate the two by asking your church or small group to pray for you - especially for wisdom, endurance, guidance, and protection against unhelpful distractions. Take every opportunity to demonstrate the peace-giving joy of the Gospel because you are 'too blessed to be stressed'!

you labour in vain without God

Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain.

*Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late toiling for food to eat - For He grants sleep to those he loves.*¹¹

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