

Distinctives: physician, heal yourself

Léonie Fourel explores dealing with disability and ill health at medical school



I started medical school six years ago, nervous but excited at the prospect of starting a lengthy degree in a different country. I made new friends and slowly settled into my new environment. I looked forward to putting my love of learning and science to beneficial use for the healing of others, but never dreamt that I'd need that healing myself.

I struggled with my health from the first year, but things worsened and eventually got so bad that I failed my Year Four exams. I was devastated at the prospect of retaking the year, especially as I was due to intercalate in a really interesting subject. But that summer was the start of an incredible journey of hope in which God has been showing me that truly, his power is made perfect in weakness.

Two years later, I have (finally!) graduated, now with several diagnoses in tow. As I look back on my time at university, here are some of the lessons

I learnt along the way. I hope you find them useful, whether you're dealing with ill health yourself or supporting a friend.

God meets us in our suffering

We can find great comfort in knowing that we have a God who understands suffering. Jesus chose to submit himself to one of the most excruciating forms of death that we humans have managed to invent to purchase our salvation. He is our example for how to suffer well, taking our sorrows to God in prayer and finding comfort in his Word.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all recount Jesus' prayers in the garden before his arrest.¹ His response – that the Father's will would be done – is incredible. Such an attitude in the face of distress and suffering can only come from one place. Jesus knew his Father intimately, and knew he could trust him.

We get to know our God by spending regular time



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in his Word. This is so important. Acute suffering is generally not the time to be determining your academic stance on disability theology. But if you have come to know God's heart for you prior to your trials, then, like Jesus, you will be able to stand firm on his character revealed to us through scripture.

As I understand God's sovereignty and goodness better, I find myself asking 'why?' less often. Instead, I now come to God in prayer with my feelings and my fears, and I allow myself to be reminded of his truth and comforted by his love.

So, let me ask you this: when you encounter suffering, will you run towards your Father with your pain or will you run away from him? Do you believe he is who he says he is? Will you work with him in giving glory to his name? Do you seek God for who he is rather than what he can do for you? Would you still follow him if he took away your health? Your degree? Your loved ones?

May we be people who can join Job in declaring, 'Yahweh gave, and Yahweh has taken away. Blessed be the name of Yahweh.' (Job 1:20-21 LSB)

suggested sources of support

Ill health can be lonely and stressful at times, so I want to share some resources I found particularly useful throughout my time at university.

Find yourself some **solid Christian friends** and get plugged in to your **local church body**. This is so important. Disabled or not, we cannot get through this life alone. These are the people who will walk through life with you, if you let them. They are also a primary means by which God speaks into your life. Please do not let fear or pride prevent you from reaching out to God's people for emotional, spiritual, or practical support.

Your **University's disability and support services** are there to help make your studies easier and more sustainable. Don't burn yourself out because you think you need to do things the 'right'

way. The right way is the one that enables you to do your best work and still have energy for the rest of life. And if you don't qualify for the Disabled Student Allowance because you're an international student or don't have Student Finance, find out how else the university can support you and whether they are able to pay for any reasonable adjustments and accommodations themselves.

You should have access to an **occupational health service** for placements – they can be helpful for recommending ways that your university and placement providers can support you on the wards.

Does your course have a disability champion or student network? I found it helpful to talk to other students in the same position. It helped normalise many of my struggles and allowed us to work together to find solutions, such as working with the medical school to change exam formats for disabled students.

parting words

Medical school is your chance to practise being a medic. Your university will focus on preparing you to be a GMC-approved doctor fit for work in the NHS. Make sure you also use this time to practise being a Christian medic; a disabled medic; perhaps an international medic. Add whatever other adjective needs to be included in that sentence to fit your circumstances.

Finally, let me leave you with these words of Jesus: 'in this world you will have trouble, but take heart, for I have overcome the world.'² Suffering is not optional, and it comes in many forms. Being a Christian does not shield you from the sorrows of this life. But we serve a God who delights in us, and who comforts and sustains us in our time of need. So whatever God allows to come your way, take heart, friend, take heart. ■

REFERENCES

1. Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46
2. John 16:33