

**Patient: DG**

Chaplain: Robert Baral

Pt: X Y, mid 40 year old married man with children

Time of Visit: 14:30

Length of Visit: 25 minutes

Type of Visit: follow up

Location of Ministry: Adult Intensive Care Unit

Title:

“GOD’s Will Be Done, Not Man’s. Giving Pastoral Comfort at End of Life”

**Diagnosis & Prognosis:**

Life threatening brain injury from fall. Very poor prognosis.

**Peer group focus:**

What do you say and how do you pray in such a case?

**Introduction:**

Reportedly fell from scaffold. Life threatening brain swelling, portion of skull removed to relieve intracranial pressure from brain swelling. Has intracranial catheter in place. Unresponsive on ventilator. Has “raccoon eyes” bruising about the eyes. Eyelids are swollen shut. Slight twitching right leg noted by wife and son during my visit with them, which family sees as promise and answer by GOD to their prayers, that patient will experience miraculous healing. The patient passed on the next day.

**The Players and the Text:**

W – Wife; S – Son; D – Daughter; SL – Son-in-Law; C - Chaplain

C1 – [I confirm pt’s name with ICU Unit Clerk. The Nurse is talking with family at bedside. As he exits, I introduce myself and talk with him briefly. He identifies the patient and family members for me.] Hello. May I come in?

S1 – Yes.

C2 – You are the family of Mr. Y? Did I say the last name right?

S2 – Yes.

C3 - My name is Chaplain Robert Baral. I am the hospital Chaplain on this unit today. I am following up from Chaplain X’s visit and would like to spend a few minutes with you. Would that be okay?

S3 – [I shake hands, make eye contact and greet each family member. Son talks quickly. Wife is slightly tearful.] Please. We need all the prayers we can get. We have thousands of people praying for him now. We're praying for a miracle. GOD is going to give us a miracle in 24 hours.

C4 – (I feel they believe against all reasonable hope. I think, GOD, either they don't understand the pt's condition, or they are not capable of seeing it because of their Faith. It is reported to me they are Assemblies of GOD.) Thank you.

C5 – Would it be okay if I said hello to X?

W1 – Sure. [Daughter steps away momentarily so I can do so.]

C6 - Hello, Mr. Y. My name is Chaplain Bob. I am going to spend a few minutes with you and your family. [I place my hand gently and carefully on pt's shoulder. I then step back and claim a corner so that I am facing all of family.]

C7 – I understand that your husband, your father, your father-in-law had a serious fall and has had some brain surgery. And that you are praying for a miracle for him. [Brief silence. I look around the room to each family member. I intentionally remain silent as I do.]

S4 – Do you know The 700 Club and Pat Robertson? We have them praying for him. We have a prayer service at our Church tonight for him. We're praying for a miracle for him before we meet the Doctor tomorrow.

C8 – Yes. The 700 Club. It sounds like you have a lot of people praying for X.

D1 - [Daughter and son-in-law have not said anything so far. The daughter stands up and leans over her Dad.] I can see you looking up at me. He's looking at me. [She leans forward and kisses him on the forehead. [Daughter and son-in-law get up to talk briefly with Mrs. Y. I step to the side.]

W2 – [Addressing her children and son-in-law, waving arms up.] I don't care what they say, that he won't get better. He will! [Turning to me.] We're meeting with the Doctor tomorrow. [Family moves to just outside the room. Brief conversation between them. I follow.]

SL1 – We have to leave now. Thank you for coming to see him. Could you pray for him? (The son-in-law strikes me as the strong and silent one for his family now. I wonder if he is buying into the hopes the rest of his family have for the pt's miraculous recovery.)

C9 – (His face is somber. I think, GOD, the son-in-law knows how bad things are. But he's protecting his family. He can't say what he's thinking to anyone. A lonely place to be.) I would be happy to pray for your father-in-law, your father. [I shake hands with the daughter and son-in-law. They are off to their Church. Wife and son return to the bedside and invite me back in with them. I allow several minutes to pass in silence. I give in with a question.] I understand your Pastor has been in to visit?

S5 – We've had all 4 Pastors in to see my Dad. We're praying for a miracle in 24 hours before we meet with the Doctor tomorrow.

C10 – (The son is repeating himself. I wonder, if he feels he speaks it often enough, it will force the Divine healing to come that they all so desperately hope for. Red light of caution for me. I make that note to myself as I nod my head slightly. Be careful in what you say and pray with these poor people!) It sounds like you have a lot of Church support.

S6 – Look! He's moving his leg! GOD is healing him!

C11 – [There is an almost unnoticeable mild twitching of the pt's right leg.] I see.

W3 – [Wife is slightly tearful, but not crying. She says more of GOD answering prayers... I am not hearing her right now.]

C12 – (I feel like running away from a thick cloud of desperate darkness hanging over this poor family. I think that I should begin to end my visit and give them to be alone together with the pt. Many areas to explore, but it doesn't need to all be done today. I think, GOD, that will come soon enough when things hit the wall for these people.) Thank you so much for sharing these things with me. I am wondering if you would like me to say a short prayer now for Mr. G and all of your family? [Wife and son accept my offer.]

C13 – [I place my right hand on the pt’s shoulder. I offer my left hand to the son, who takes my hand. He places his other hand, with his mother, on the right pt’s arm.] Lord JESUS, we come before You to lift up your son X Y and all of his loved ones, especially Mrs. Y, their son and daughter and son-in-law. We pray for Your hand of Peace and Comfort to surround and uplift Your people in this difficult time. Trusting in Your Loving Presence upon Your servants, we confess in prayer together The Words that You teach us to pray. Our Father, Who art in Heaven... [I say The Words slowly and clearly. Wife and son join me, first quietly, then more clearly, in saying The Our Father.]

W4 – Thank you for coming to be with us.

S7 – Thank you.

C14 – I appreciate being able to be here with you today. Would it be okay if I say good bye to your husband, your father, your father-in-law? [Wife and son say yes. I place my hand again on pt’s shoulder.] Thank you, Mr. Y, for letting me be with you and your family today. Rest quietly in GOD’s hands. [I give family a Chaplain Dep’t card and encourage them to have us paged at any time if needed. I shake their hands and exit. I report briefly to the Nurse.]

### **Self-Awareness:**

I am conscious of knowing the near zero likelihood that this poor man will ever recover to any meaningful level of consciousness and function, let alone recover fully in a miraculous way. In fact, the prognosis is grim. I felt deep pain in knowing this, and yet seeing this family grasping for a hope that will not likely come. As I stood there in the midst of this tragedy, I pictured for a few moments the movie Apocalypse Now and the scene of the assassin soldier emerging from the water, his face painted in camouflage and a knife in his teeth. In the background, I could hear in my mind the words of the movie of this scene, “The horror. The horror.”

Between the lines, I hear this potentially hurtful theology of this family, that if they simply pray enough, and enough join them in their prayers, that this guarantees GOD will bring healing in the way in which they desire. And the backside of this, that if the healing they pray for does not come, this means that they didn't have enough Faith, or were laden with hidden unconfessed sins, or that GOD was turning His face from them because they are unworthy.

My heart rebels against this. I longed to help this family consider alternate forms of healing in answer to their prayers, such as becoming closer to one another, to GOD, to their Church community, to finding new and deeper meanings and vocations in life. But I did not sense they were in any way ready to consider such things. I believe in miracles deeply. I was left wondering how GOD would work in the lives of these dear people, not knowing how, but knowing that He would.

### **Theological Reflection:**

JESUS says to His Apostles in MATTHEW 21:22, "Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive."<sup>1</sup> Here is a Scripture Text taken out of context by so many in the "name it and claim it" GOD as a slot machine in bondage to man. It is a theology so hurtful to so many people because of the implications in requires as conclusions if prayers are not answered, or answered in a way very different from what was asked for.

Matthew Henry calls this a "proverbial expression," teaching us that The Lord has power to bless and curse, that we are to believe what GOD declares and promises in His Word. It means "...that we are to believe that nothing is impossible with GOD, and therefore that what he has promised shall certainly be performed, though to us it seem impossible."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1, NAB, MATTHEW 21:22.

<sup>2</sup> 2, Matthew Henry Notes, MATTHEW 21, Verses 18-22, II., 1., (2).

It is The Promises of GOD's Providence in His Word that are guaranteed here. Not the dictating of men in prayer, no matter how earnest, that dictate human will to be done by GOD. We Christians are forever praying in The Our Father Prayer that GOD's will be done on earth as it is in Heaven, in our everyday lives as we trust Him for our daily bread of Grace and Providence.<sup>3</sup>

He answers all prayers in His time and according to His will. His ears are always open to our cries.<sup>4</sup> And often we do not have the answers to our prayers, to what is answered and why, and what is not answered and why not, and in what forms as we desire and in what forms so distant from what we cry for. The Almighty knows best and why. We do not.

### **Lessons in Ministry:**

This case points out the delicate bed of eggshells the pastoral caregiver is often be invited to dance upon by joining such prayers of desperate loved ones who offer up hopeless prayers of complete and full healing in such circumstances. My course here was clear to me:

1. Show respect, give informed consent, ask for permission to visit, use touch with permission and acknowledge the presence and life of the patient by addressing him directly, even when the patient is apparently not conscious.
2. Speak little and listen a lot.
3. Affirm what the family is going through by using simple reflecting back and summary.
4. They were not ready to accept reframing for possible alternate ways of receiving GOD's healing for their loved ones and themselves, though this may be of great help if and when they begin to emerge from their denial – if and when they receive the devastating Divine answer, “No!”

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<sup>3</sup> 1, NAB, LUKE 11:2-4, “And He said unto them, When ye pray, say, Our Father Which art in Heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in Heaven, so in earth. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.” See also MATTHEW 6:9-13.

<sup>4</sup> NAB, PSALM 34:16, “The LORD has eyes for the just and ears for their cry.”

5. Use of open ended questions and silence invites them to share their Story and feelings.

6. It is not for me to dictate to this family how they should direct their prayers and what they should hope for. I lifted up their hopes in prayer.

7. It is not in my power to see with absolute certainty the future of this case. That is in GOD's hands.

8. Therefore my prayer with this family avoided the "name it and claim it" petitions they have learned within their Faith tradition and community. I prayed instead freeform to lift up the hearts of GOD's people, asking for his Peace and comfort, ending with The well known and reassuring Christian Prayer, which I spoke slowly and clearly.

9. This helped to slow this distraught family down, come before GOD at a familiar place, and perhaps open the door a little more to being aware of simply being in His Presence.

10. Thank people for allowing you the privilege of being with them, especially in difficult times, and tell them how to obtain further pastoral support.

11. Trust GOD fully, knowing He will work out all things for the best for all those who call upon His Name.

**References**

1. "New American Bible." Bible Works 7. Bible Works, LLC. Norfolk, Virginia. 2006.
2. "Matthew Henry Notes." Bible Works 7. Bible Works, LLC. Norfolk, Virginia. 2006.