



*If God is
my strength,
why am I
still tired?*

DEVOTIONS for
CHRISTIAN CAREGIVERS

Maggie Hilmer



I have often faced challenges in my life and wondered if anyone else was going through the same thing. How did they feel? How did they manage? So I will share my experiences as a caregiver in the hope these short meditations will bring comfort, joy and hope to you at those moments when you need to feel God's love the most.

Many of us giving care to a friend or family member experience similar times. God is with all of us all of the time—when we feel frightened, sad, alone, angry, in need of hope, or just plain tired and worn out.

My husband is a retired Lutheran minister who spent the last 20 years of his ministry in institutional ministry—nursing homes and hospitals. He says he was “institutionalized” for the last 20 years of his ministry! We met in a nursing home where he was chaplain and I was the director of physical therapy. Both of us had been recently widowed. In sharing the challenges of our suddenly changed lives, we discovered a new life together, made strong by our faith in our Lord. Together we ministered to the nursing home residents and staff.

Shortly after we were married, my husband was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, and I had a heart attack. These may seem like bombshells, and they were, but not as much as you might expect. We knew before we married that he had some type of neurological problem, although it was undiagnosed. I had known since I was 18 that I had congenital heart problems. We decided we would simply enjoy each day together as God gave them to us.

We truly have enjoyed our life together. Sometimes, however, as his Parkinson's disease has progressed and as my general physical health has been challenged, we have had some tough times. With the faith that God does bless us in everything, we are living our lives with a new motto: We know we can't be what we used to be, but we want to be the best we can right now!

Caregiving is tough! Our heavenly Father knows, He cares for us 24/7. Often tired and sometimes stressed, I have prayed and searched for answers. I have found that God's Word, the Bible, provides me with the help and answers I long for. I hope that some of these thoughts and meditations will be helpful to you.

—Maggie Hilmer

Too Tired To Be Kind

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.
Psalm 23:6

Sometimes in my Scripture meditations, I compare different translations of the Bible out of curiosity. I discovered that the word “mercy” in Psalm 23 appears only in the King James and RSV translations. Others use “love” or “loving kindness.”

As caregivers, we may show mercy or empathy and understanding for the person for whom we care, but do we forget to express the love and loving kindness? I mean, as we care for our loved one, be it spouse, parent, child or friend, do we have a hard time remembering—amidst the problems and fatigue—the love that brought us to this point? Showing that loving kindness, showing the love Jesus shows for us, is often difficult, because we feel overwhelmed, discouraged and just plain tired. Where is that goodness and mercy that is supposed to follow us all the days of our lives?

Jesus knows our pain and suffering. After all, he is our caregiver who never gets weary. He knows that we are human and that, as hard as we may try, we can never be like him. He is there to hold us up. Remember to show the love and loving kindness that is in your heart, even when it seems deeply buried there. Jesus hears our prayers for the strength we need to continue. He will show us his goodness and mercy.

Prayer: Dear Lord, you know how tired I am and how weak. Just as your disciples fell asleep waiting in the Garden of Gethsemane as you agonized over what was ahead, I often feel I can't stay awake and face what is ahead. Give me strength, courage and loving kindness, Lord. Help me to remember that you alone truly know what is ahead and you will be there with me. Amen.

Hints for the Helper

Healthcare professionals are trained to be empathetic to their patients and sometimes sympathetic. Part of the definition of empathy includes: “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to...” Pity, however, is not included.

Pity is not helpful or healing. Empathy, with a little sympathy (“I can’t imagine how difficult this is for you”) sends the message that you do truly care and want to help. Sometimes such words might seem harsh and need additional words of explanation.

When my granddaughter was around three years old, I took her with me to meet a few patients. Her mother wanted her to learn about persons with disabilities and how to accept them.

I introduced her to a man in the facility who had lost a leg when he was struck by lightning. He was a very tall man, and I am sure that to a three-year-old he looked like a giant. He showed her his prosthesis and let her touch it. He then proceeded to remove it and let her look at it. This did not frighten her. Instead, she looked at him very matter-of-factly and said, “Okay, now let me see you walk!”

As her grandma, the physical therapist, I was proud! I thought to myself, “She has what it takes; maybe she will grow up to be a physical therapist, too.”

Trust

(Jesus changes water to wine:.) This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him. John 2:11

What does this miracle, Jesus’ first miracle, mean to me? How does changing water to wine relate to my daily struggles? I want to do what Jesus would do, but I can’t perform miracles. I can’t cure my loved one. I can’t make the pain go away—theirs or mine. Jesus, what would you have me do?

Full

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. Colossians 2:6-7

What kind of things do you feel “full” of right now? Hope, pain, thanks, regrets, or stress? That is a lot to think about and may be more than you have energy for at this moment.

You know as well as I do that we can be “full” of positive feelings or negative feelings. And somehow the bad feelings seem to crowd out the good, so that it takes extra work even to see what might make us thankful, hopeful, grateful.

Thankfully, we have God’s grace for today and promises for tomorrow to keep us grateful, joyful and hopeful.

Sure, we feel empty, drained and worn out sometimes. Especially at those times we can take two steps. First, we need to remind ourselves that we are not alone, but that God is bringing fulfillment into our life. He will fill us up.

Second, and just as important, we need to remember to take care of ourselves, so that we can care for our loved one and be God’s hands here on earth. He wants us to take care of his temple, our body, so that it can be healthy and filled with the Holy Spirit.

Take time to be hopeful, joyful, cheerful, and peaceful—a minute at a time, and watch the minutes grow!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, just as you fill us with the Holy Spirit and with your grace, refresh us and fill us with strength and hope for whatever it is you would have us do. Amen.

Hints for the Helper

The most important “-ful” word is hopeful. When we say “Keep the faith,” we are also saying “Keep hope!” We all need some things to look forward to, even if they are small. Try to keep those kinds of things coming; they will lift everyone’s spirit.

When I was working in the nursing home, I always smiled to see people lined up in their wheelchairs an hour before the next meal. The anticipated mealtime was hopefully a pleasant break in the routine.

The unexpected can also be a pleasant surprise—and often funny. Don't be afraid to do silly things. Be a kid and have a smile, laugh, and just have fun whenever you can, even in the tough times. Hope and humor are healing!

“Smile, You’re On Candid Camera”

O Lord, you have searched me and know me. You know when I sit and when I rise: you perceive my thoughts from afar. Psalm 139:1-2

Did you ever feel kind of glum and not very smiley when the phone suddenly rang or someone came to the door and you were greeted by an old friend? You immediately put on your happy face, cheery voice, and your good disposition. After you finished your visit, did you notice how energized and uplifted you felt?

Why is it that many of us don't seem to wear that smile and have that pleasant, cheerful disposition in our daily routine? Care-giving, whether it is routine or filled with problems, can become a much lighter load if we can just share our smile. Everyone deserves a smile. God smiles on us all of the time.

In our family we rarely end a telephone conversation without saying “I love you.” We have all experienced sudden loss, and so we don't want our conversations to end without an expression of our love.

As caregivers, however, it's so easy to forget to think about our “attitude” during the minutes or hours which come *before* we remember to say, “I love you.”

Two truths my husband and I share with our children often are these: it takes more muscles to frown than to smile; and, more importantly, if Jesus is in your heart, let it show on your face.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, you are in my heart. Help me show your joy and grace to others. Give me energy so that I am never too tired to smile. Amen.

Hints for the Helper

What about issuing a disclaimer? You see and hear them in so many areas of our lives now. Disclaimers can protect a person, company, or product legally.

I would like to suggest that perhaps you and the person you care for explore possible ways to make a disclaimer when you are in a group setting with new faces. Having a health problem that “shows” is not something of which you should be ashamed. No, be proud that, in spite of whatever difficulty or complicating factors you are facing, here you are out in public with others. If people stare or look at you a little too long, that is because they don’t understand. Let’s educate them!

I think you will find that people’s response will not be one of pity; instead, they will be impressed by your strength and courage. It is also possible that there is someone else out there with similar problems who has been afraid to share them. This person might be encouraged by you, too.

My husband now starts out his public speaking with something like this: “I have Parkinson’s disease. You will notice that I move around a lot. If that bothers you, just close your eyes; then I won’t know if you are sleeping or not during my talk. Otherwise, come dance with me!”

I think that is a great disclaimer, and it makes me extra proud to claim him!

If God Is My Strength, Why Am I Still Tired?

DEVOTIONS FOR CHRISTIAN CAREGIVERS BY MAGGIE HILMER

More than 50 million people in the United States are caregivers for a chronically ill, disabled, or aged family member. Many are members of your parish. Serving as a caregiver requires special gifts, including the ability to care for themselves while caring for others.

If God Is My Strength, Why Am I Still Tired? is a book of devotions and down-to-earth advice by a Christian caregiver, drawn from experience in her own life. Maggie Hilmer is a physical therapist in home health practice who is married to a pastor who has Parkinson's disease.



Ron and Maggie Hilmer

This is a thoughtful resource that any Christian pastor or friend can give to someone in need of spiritual care as much as the loved one for whom they are caring.

"A wonderful resource and guide! Maggie Hilmer has first-hand experience of caregiving and working with caregivers! Easy to read and put to daily use."

*Sister Suzanne Wesley, CSJ, Chief Executive Officer
Cardinal Ritter Senior Services, St. Louis, MO*

"Maggie Hilmer opens doors and windows with workable solutions and reassurances. Her message 'rings true' through her own insightful experiences."

*Rev. Walter M. Schoedel, Director of Church Relations
Lutheran Senior Services, St. Louis, MO*

"I've spent over thirty years as a medical physician and in recent months caring for a dying parent at home. Perhaps, like you, I'm still tired. Maggie Hilmer asks and answers not just 'what does this mean?' but, more importantly, 'just how do I do that?' Thanks, Maggie, for the light and lightening of the burden."

*John Eckrich, M.D., Executive Director
Grace Place Lutheran Retreats, St. Louis, MO*

"Genuine, real, human, spirit-based. If you are a caregiver, a care receiver, someone who needs care, or someone who will need care, this is for you!"

*Dr. Rich Bimler, Ambassador of Health, Hope, and Aging
Lutheran Life Communities, Arlington Heights, IL*

"Maggie Hilmer has poured out her heart and soul into this work and created an uplifting, thought-provoking guide. A 'must read' for all caregivers."

*Steve Young, President, Board of Directors
Cardinal Ritter Senior Services, St. Louis, MO*

"I am confident that there will be others who find this a useful resource."

*Marcia A. Schnorr, R.N., Ed.D., Coordinator
Parish Nurse Ministry—LCMS, Rochelle, IL*