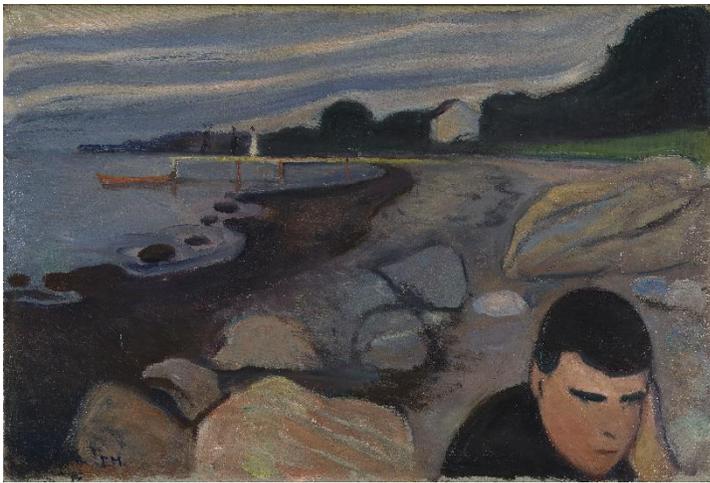


**I HAVE A FRIEND**  
**A Devotional Meditation from**  
**Job 31:1-40; Ezekiel 4:16; Matthew 9:20-22; John 5:2-9, 9:1-3, 17:15**  
**Albert J. McCarn**  
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I have a friend with a mental condition. You wouldn't know it because she is always smiling and pleasant and eager to serve. That is, you wouldn't know it unless you know her. There are times she wrestles with the demons of trauma and abuse that have plagued her since childhood. Sometimes the wrestling incapacitates her with depression to the point of despair. That's when we miss her, and when we realize someone should check on her. The saddest thing is that if we ask what she needs, she might say, "I don't really know. It's been so long since anyone has asked that. Maybe a hug?"



"Melancholy," Edvard Munch, 1892. ([National Museum of Norway, Oslo.](https://www.nm.no/en/vis-utstilling/melancholy))

I have a friend with severe allergies. You wouldn't know it because he is so talented and he worships the Lord with all his heart. That is, you wouldn't know it unless you know him. That's when you might see what happens when he accidentally takes a bite of something with peanuts in it. It's amazing how lucid he is even as his throat closes and his body forgets to breathe. Once he drove himself to the hospital, although he needed help communicating to the staff. Times like that remind us how short and fragile life is, and how we all

wish our friend didn't have to eat with anxiety and drink with alarm.

I have a friend with chronic illnesses – things like autoimmune diseases that make her body attack itself. You wouldn't know it because she's so kind and gentle. We like being around her because she brings peace into the room with her. That is, you wouldn't know she's sick unless you know her. Then you realize how often she's missing because a migraine triggered by something mysterious has left her huddled in misery in a darkened room. Then there are those constant, nagging little pains. Sometimes they multiply so much that she can't push her body beyond them. She has found remedies that work sometimes, at least to take the edge off. Mostly it just takes time for the affliction to ease enough for her to go about the day like normal people do. Normal, that is, because most people only have to go through once what she endures every day.

I have a friend who carries a heavy load of sorrow. You wouldn't know it because he's the funniest guy around and the most productive person in his company. That is, you wouldn't know it unless you know him well enough to realize there's a lot going on beneath the surface. If you ask how he's doing, he'll say, "I'm fine today," and hope you don't ask any more questions. If you do, and if those questions start to penetrate his mask, he'll tell

you a joke or amaze you with some fascinating bit of trivia. But deep inside, he's scarred from decades of living and observing life. He hasn't suffered much himself, but he knows so many people who have, and he's seen so much hurt all around the world. He's given up trying to fix problems that are too big even for governments to tackle, but he hasn't given up crying over them when no one is looking. It's a kind of chronic, lifelong PTSD, brought on by too much exposure to the human condition. You can't help him much, but he appreciates it if you sit beside him and let him be quiet. Eventually you'll gain his confidence and hear something of what's going through his mind. That's how you can share a little of his burden. It surprises him when people do that, but he likes it much more than you'll ever know.

What do we do with people like my friends? If they were poor and starving, we would give them food. If they were homeless, we would find them shelter. If they were unemployed and unable to buy shoes, we would clothe them and help them find work. If they were sick with anything recognizable, we would pray for them and nurse them back to health.

That's just the thing that seems impossible with what my friends are suffering. They've lost count of the times someone laid hands on them and prayed for healing, and they've lost hope in miracle cures or diets that well-meaning people recommend. Fending off kind-hearted attempts to help can be tedious and annoying, but there are other approaches that simply add to the pain – like when someone asks whether there's unacknowledged sin in their lives, or a generational curse that's afflicting them the same way their great-grandmothers were afflicted. There may be value in those lines of inquiry, but honestly my friends are too polite to tell you how offended they are at the suggestion. These are the godly kind of people who examine themselves constantly to see whether they are right with God, and they've already considered a dozen times what they may have inherited physically or spiritually. They understand something of what Job felt when his friends accused him unjustly, and when they uttered the same pious platitudes to get him to repent for wrongdoing that had never crossed his mind.

I have made a covenant with my eyes;  
How then could I gaze at a virgin?  
And what is the portion of God from above  
Or the heritage of the Almighty from on high?  
Is it not calamity to the unjust  
And disaster to those who work iniquity?  
Does He not see my ways  
And number all my steps?  
If I have walked with falsehood,  
And my foot has hastened after deceit,  
Let Him weigh me with accurate scales,  
And let God know my integrity.  
If my step has turned from the way,  
Or my heart followed my eyes,  
Or if any spot has stuck to my hands,  
Let me sow and another eat,  
And let my crops be uprooted.

## Job 31:1-8 NASB1995

This is how my friends feel sometimes. They are living proof that bad things happen to good people, and that's why they make the rest of us so uncomfortable. We want the quick fixes and the pat answers. We want to see their suffering wiped away instantly and never come back. If we're honest, it's not only because we want to see them healed and fully functional, but because we don't want to wrestle with our own chronic conditions.

The painful truth is, every one of us are walking trauma grenades. None of us want to continue walking through a valley of tears, even if it's someone else's tears. That's why we pray and hope for the instantaneous miracle cures, and why we silently hide our discouragement when those cures don't come. Maybe that's also why we want Jesus to come back today. We want Him to fix everything for us rather than face the grim possibility that what we face in life is not fixable unless we ourselves address it day by day. After all, He didn't ask His Father to take His disciples out of this world, but to keep them from the evil one (John 17:15). Which means we get to endure whatever the evil one throws at us, at least for a time.

Is our God a sadist who delights in making people suffer?

No, not at all. Sometimes His people suffer for a greater good. That's what Yeshua said about a man born blind:

And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" Jesus answered, "*It was neither that* this man sinned, nor his parents; but *it was* so that the works of God might be displayed in him. (John 9:2-3 NASB1995)

The dreadful realization is that this man had to endure many years of blindness before the works of God were displayed in him. And the lame man at the pool of Bethesda had to endure 38 years of suffering before God's power was displayed in him for all to see. And the sick woman had to bleed for 12 years before her faith made her whole.

And the whole time, each of those precious human beings learned how to rely on God for everything – even for a compassionate glance and a merciful touch.

Maybe the true miracle isn't instantaneous relief from suffering, but the softening of our hearts so we can provide just what is needed at the moment when the suffering gets overwhelming.

The poor are with us always, and it seems the traumatized, the chronically ill, the manically depressed, and the walking wounded are with us always as well. We can't give them instantaneous and lasting relief, but we can stand beside them one day at a time.