



How to Show Christ's Compassion to Those Who Face Chronic Conditions

Bible Study
Leader's Guide

[Please provide: a copy of this study for each participant, Bibles, hymnals]

Opening Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for making us all unique and with special talents to serve you. Bless us as we explore how to serve those with chronic or debilitating conditions. Open our hearts to serve You through compassionate service to others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Laying Some Groundwork For This Study

Think back to the last time you had a cold, a stomach ache, a sore throat, sprained ankle, or some other short-lived ailment. What are some things that your spouse, family member, or friend, did for you to help you feel better? Encourage participants to share.

What have you done to help someone else in a similar condition? Encourage participants to share.

While these kinds of short-term illnesses and conditions can be painful and uncomfortable, usually in a few days we are healed through Jesus' power and means and we are once again able to get back to our normal routines. Even if we have to visit a physician for such issues, we are usually able to get an answer concerning how long our symptoms will last as well as help to end them.

This is not the case for individuals with chronic medical conditions. A chronic medical condition can be defined as one that lasts for three months or longer and which has no specific cure. Such conditions can cause constant discomfort or have symptoms that begin, end for a time, then begin again. Some examples of chronic medical conditions include Alzheimer's disease and dementia, arthritis, asthma, Crohn's disease, epilepsy, cystic fibrosis, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, and Parkinson's disease. The National Health Council estimates that 133 million Americans (about 40% of the population) suffer from a chronic medical condition (www.nationalhealthcouncil.org).

Think again for a moment about the last cold, stomach ache, sore throat, or other short-lived ailment you experienced. What if the physical, mental, and emotional symptoms you felt during this illness persisted for months instead of a few days or a week? How might such a condition change your life? Lead participants to consider the new challenges and difficulties that would come from facing a chronic condition.

A Biblical Example Of A Chronic Condition

Read 2 Corinthians 12:1–10. In verses 1–4, Paul vaguely refers to a miraculous event that God caused in his life. Paul goes on to say that what *he heard cannot be told* (v. 4). Paul does not boast about this experience, but instead, speaks about his *weaknesses* (v. 5).

According to verse 7, how does Paul describe his weakness? Paul describes his weakness as a thorn ... in the flesh.

The Bible does not reveal what Paul's illness was. In verse 8, what did Paul do concerning his illness? Paul says that three times he pleaded with the Lord to remove his condition.

What was God's reply? (See verse 9.) God told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. God did not remove or cure Paul's chronic condition, but instead used it as a way to strengthen Paul's faith and to lead him to more fully rely on Jesus' power.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, in faith, what was Paul's response (vv.9b–10)? Paul said that for Jesus' sake, he was content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. In his physical and emotional weaknesses, Paul found strength in Christ.

Read Philippians 4:11–13. Through all of his difficulties, including his chronic health condition, what did Paul learn? Paul learned to be content (v.11). He learned that the secret of facing any difficult situation was to rely on Jesus' strength (v.13).

Read Hebrews 4:14–16. On what can we rely in any difficulties, including living with a chronic condition? In anything, we can rely on Jesus, our great high priest (v. 14). Jesus understands everything we face.

Hebrews 4:16 says that in all our times of need we can come to God's throne of grace in *confidence*. Why can we do so? We can come to God's throne in confidence because we know God will be merciful towards us and will help us for Jesus' sake. Jesus paid the price we owed God for our sins when He suffered and died for us on the cross. Jesus' sacrificial actions brought us back to God. All who trust in Jesus as their Lord and Savior have forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Acute and chronic illnesses are a part of the world because of sin. However, what important clarification did Jesus make in John 9:1–3 concerning illness and an individual's specific sins? Jesus told His disciples that the man was born blind not because of a specific sin that either the man or his parents committed. Through the healing of this man, Jesus was able to show the works of God (v. 3); that is, physical healing as well as healing from the spiritual blindness our sins cause us.

How might the Bible truths from 1 Corinthians 12, Philippians 4, Hebrews 4, and John 9 provide comfort to an individual suffering from a chronic condition? Encourage participants to focus on the strength and comfort Jesus gives us no matter what difficulties we face.

Compassionate Care

The word *compassion* means "sympathetic consciousness of other's distress together with a desire to alleviate it" (www.merriam-webster.com). Note that to show compassion involves not just recognition of another's difficulty but also action. It can be said that compassion is two hearts pulling at one load.

The Compassion Of Our God

Psalm 103:13 says, *As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.*

Read Micah 7:18–19. How do we daily see God’s compassion toward us? God’s love for us is constant. He shows us His compassion as He daily forgives our sins for Jesus’ sake.

We daily witness the power of God’s compassion in our lives through His forgiveness. When Jesus walked the earth, He personally showed compassion to those with various physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. Read each of the following Bible passages. How does Jesus demonstrate compassion in each one?

Mark 5:21–24a; 35–42: In compassion, Jesus recognized the faith of Jairus and the sincerity of his plea for help for his daughter. Jesus went with him (v. 24a) and brought Jairus’ daughter back to life (v. 42).

Mark 5:24b–34: In compassion, Jesus recognized the faith of the woman with the chronic bleeding condition and healed her.

Mark 6:34–44: In compassion, Jesus realized that the crowd that had gathered needed someone to teach them the truth about God. So he taught them many things (v.34). Jesus also had compassion concerning their physical need for food and so miraculously fed them with only two fish and five loaves of bread (vv.38–44).

Luke 19:1–10: Jesus felt compassion for Zacchaeus, the sinful tax collector. Jesus led Zacchaeus to see his sinful ways and to repent of them. Jesus forgave Zacchaeus his sins and welcomed him into His family of believers.

John 11:28–35: At Lazarus’ tomb, Jesus felt the sorrow of Lazarus’ loved ones. When Jesus saw Lazarus’ sister, Mary, crying, Jesus was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled (v.33) Jesus was genuinely empathetic concerning their loss. Jesus showed His compassion for Lazarus’ loved ones when He Himself wept (v. 35).

John 13:1–12: Jesus showed compassion and love for His disciples as He served them when He washed their feet. This action “demonstrated the self-sacrifice and love that He would show the next day on the cross (The Lutheran Study Bible, CPH ©2009, study note on John 13:12, p. 1808).

Jesus is the ultimate model of compassion. Jesus “knows my need and well provides me” (“I Am Jesus’ Little Lamb” LSB 740, v. 1, Public Domain). The Bible documents Jesus’ compassionate care for others as He listened and understood, taught, fed, helped, and even healed many.

Jesus’ compassion for all people was shown in the greatest way when He suffered and died on the cross to save us from the worst chronic and debilitating condition that affects us all—sin. When Jesus rose from the dead, He showed the power He has over all things. His resurrection proves that we can trust in His compassionate care for us in every condition in which we find ourselves.

While here on earth, a person with a chronic condition may not find relief from suffering through complete or even partial healing. How can the truth that Jesus died and rose for all provide comfort? Through faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection, we have the sure and certain hope of forgiveness and of eternal life. God promises us a home in heaven where we will have no more pain and suffering. Because through faith in Jesus, we have a promised home in heaven, it is a comfort to know that our time of suffering on earth is only temporary. Jesus’ death and resurrection also assures us of God’s great and constant love for us.

Showing Christ's Compassion

Jesus said, *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you"* (John 15:12). We see such love shown to Paul by Christians in Galatia and Philippi as they cared for his chronic condition.

Read Galatians 4:12–14. How did the Galatians show Paul compassion? Despite Paul's condition, the Galatian Christians did not scorn or despise him (v.14). Instead they received him as an angel of God, in other words, God's messenger.

Read Philippians 4:10a and 14. How did the people of Philippi show Paul compassion? The Christians in Philippi showed concern for Paul (v. 10a). They share[d] his trouble (v. 14).

In both these instances, Christians were led by the Holy Spirit to show compassion to Paul. Today, the Holy Spirit works in us and through us to show compassion to those who are hurting.

To help someone with a chronic illness or condition it is important to understand the condition with which he or she has been diagnosed. One way to accomplish this can be by contacting the national association for the particular chronic illness. Reliable information explaining many chronic conditions can be found through these websites:

<http://www.healthfinder.gov/organizations/OrgListing.asp> and

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus>. I have Multiple Sclerosis, one of many chronic illnesses that are difficult to identify simply by looking at an individual. The National Association of Multiple Sclerosis provides several learning videos and literature that will define the disease and the signs and symptoms that affect some MS individuals. By gaining this understanding, you will be able to connect with the person with MS. With any chronic condition, you can provide better support when you know how a disease might affect an individual. National nonprofit groups such as the National Association of Multiple Sclerosis, the American Heart Association, and many others can be located through this website: <http://www.health.gov/nhic/#Referrals>.

Another way to show compassion to those with chronic illnesses is to actively listen to them. Active listening is to look at a situation from that individual's perspective, not yours. In active listening, you let an individual know that you've really heard them by saying back to them, in your own words, what she has told you. For example, if a person with a chronic condition expresses her distress concerning the fact that she is unable to continue her work or career, you might say back to her, "You must feel sad that you can't work anymore." It is helpful to any hurting individual to know that someone else understands how they feel. Showing compassion means to really care how someone else is feeling. It does not involve you sharing your personal experiences, opinions, or advice.

My mother was afflicted with Alzheimer's for 33 years. In the last few months of her life, I spent every Sunday afternoon with her. During the weekly church service at the facility in which she lived, we had fun singing hymns. Later, we talked about all kinds of topics. Most of the time in our conversations, we were in her world. I would just follow her lead. One time in her imagination she was playing cards with three friends. She would talk about her hand of cards and about how one of her friends was cheating. Soon it was time for bed. Mom wouldn't go to sleep because her friends were still there. I assured her they all went home and after 45 minutes convincing her, she finally agreed. Mom slept 10 hours that night and so did I.

How is this an example of active listening? The author let her mother take the lead in the conversation. Rather than trying to dissuade her from her conversation, the author calmly allowed her

mother to talk about what she wanted. The author offered assurance to her mother. Through the author's active listening, her mother felt secure and heard.

Another way to show compassion to a person with a chronic condition is to ask helpful questions. We may say to those with a chronic illness, "Call me if there's anything you need." While such a comment means well, it can be overwhelming to someone who needs many, many things. Instead, make your comments and questions more specific. For example, you might call the individual and say, "I'm getting ready to go to the grocery store. Is there anything that I can pick up for you while I'm there?" Such a request gives the person something specific to think about and respond to.

Sometimes a person with a chronic condition is too exhausted or physically unable to come to the door or answer the phone. In such situations, compassionate friends have placed a small refrigerator or cooler in the person's garage. On the front of the door is a list of items which the person needs. Friends frequently check the list and make sure that needed items are available without having to ask or disturb the person in need or their family members. An answering machine message or text message can then be left to let the individual know that needed items have been dropped off.

To show compassion to a person with a chronic condition is to be present for her. This might mean simply sitting at an individual's bedside as she rests if she is concerned about being alone. It might mean watching a favorite comedy DVD together. It might mean a daily short phone call just to say "hi." When I had a total knee replacement, it took me away from my sewing circle for two weeks. One Friday on the way home from the doctor, we stopped by the sewing shop where my circle meets. Everyone in the room left their projects to come see me. The love I felt that day was just what I needed to motivate me to follow my doctor's orders so that I could eventually return to my sewing circle. When a chronic illness prevents an individual from leaving her home, get the group together and bring her favorite activity to her.

Sharing The Hope Of Jesus

Compassionate care is sharing the hope Jesus gives with the one who is chronically ill. Most chronic conditions are incurable on this side of heaven. Some of these conditions have few methods to provide the affected individual much relief from discomfort and pain. Constant pain can wear down even individuals with a strong faith in Jesus. Compassionate care includes sharing the sure and certain promises concerning strength and hope found in God's Word.

Summarize the hope God gives as described in each of these Scripture references:

Psalms 119:76: God always loves us.

Isaiah 49:13: God has compassion toward us, his afflicted.

Micah 7:7: God saves us and He hears us.

John 10:27-28: Jesus knows us and will not allow anyone or anything to take us from Him. Jesus gives us eternal life.

John 14:27: Jesus gives us peace. He calms our fears.

Romans 8:35, 37–39: God promises that nothing can separate us from Him and from His love for us in Jesus.

Hebrews 13:6: God is our helper. We do not have to be afraid of anything that man or the world can do to us because God is almighty.

Revelation 21:1–4: In heaven, God will live with us. He will wipe away every tear ... death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore (v. 4).

A woman who faced a breast cancer diagnosis and uncertainty concerning the success of her upcoming treatments, once said, “Either I will get to be with Jesus in heaven or I will get to stay here on earth and rock my grandbabies.” How does this comment reflect Paul’s words in Philippians 1:21? For a Christian, it’s good here on earth, and it will be even better when we reach our heavenly home.

For a Christian, it’s a win-win situation: any time left here on earth provides more time to enjoy family and friends. Physical death takes those who trust in Jesus “home” to their Lord in heaven where “*death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away*” (Revelation 21:4). How can we lose?

We are called to proclaim Christ to everyone. Non-Christians do not know the hope and eternal life that is found in Jesus. For a non-Christian with a chronic condition, this situation is made all the more hopeless as their earthly lives are filled with pain and problems. What truths from this Bible study might the Holy Spirit help you share with a person with a chronic condition who does not know Jesus? What a joy and privilege it is to share Jesus with someone who does not know the hope found only in Him! God can use a chronic illness not only to bring us to an individual that needs to hear the Gospel, but God can also use such a condition to make an individual’s heart more receptive to the Gospel message. Help participants to focus on specific passages from this study that they would want to share in such a situation. Discuss together how to present God’s plan of salvation in a compassionate way that focuses on God’s love for the particular individual, and His desire that everyone comes to saving faith in Jesus (1 Timothy 2:3–4).

Closing Prayer: Sing or pray “My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less,” LSB 575/576, TLH 370, LW 368.

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