



Memoirs of a Smoker

[Clarence Johnson's Note: The following was penned in 1986 by a friend who preferred to withhold his name.]

For 25 years I preached for small congregations while working in industry to supply the needs at home. Much of that time I was smoking at work. Oh, I had been told about the poisons and carcinogens in tobacco, but like most folks, I did not believe it would ever affect me! After all, it hadn't hurt me so far. I had pneumonia several times. My lungs were weak. I had more colds than most people. Post-nasal drip caused me to cough my lungs out every morning, but smoking hadn't hurt me at all!

The Doctors Wouldn't Tell Me

About 1975, the plant doctor told me I had chronic bronchitis. I asked my family doctor what that is. He prescribed medication for it, but never told me what it is. I called the plant doctor to ask what chronic bronchitis is. He told me to ask my family physician. I asked a friend who is chief radiologist in a hospital. He took X-rays and told me what a wonderful heart I had. (I wish I had such a good heart now!) Nobody ever told me what chronic bronchitis is, I had to read medical books to find out.

The human breathing system is very delicate. From the oral-nasal cavity, air passes down through the trachea to the bronchial tubes. It divides and subdivides into fine bronchioles which supply air to the millions of tiny sacs in the lungs. In the trachea and bronchial tubes there are two kinds of cells, the cilia and the mucus producing cells. Cilia are fine and hair-like, like a field of grain. Their job is to move the mucus upward to the oral cavity where it can be expelled after it has filtered out some pollutants as it moves. I am told that the smoke from just one cigarette will slow the action of the cilia. With continual smoking, the cilia eventually stop waving and may finally be destroyed completely. When that happens, the mucus is not transported to the mouth to be expectorated, but drops to the bronchi where inflammation develops. Then there are violent, heaving coughs to expel the thickened mucus. That cough is appropriately named "cigarette cough." If a person stops smoking at this stage, there is still some chance of natural repair or arrest. Because my doctors didn't level with me, I was not aware that lung damage was already taking place and that smoking was the primary cause. Bronchitis is an inflammation of the bronchial tubes at the lower part of the windpipe. Chronic means constantly. Chronic bronchitis is almost always caused by smoking.

A Brush With Death

When I entered the examining room the doctor (a new one) touched my chest with his stethoscope and picked up the phone. "I'd like a room for an emergency admission, please. The one near the nurses' station. He'll need close supervision."

The first week I couldn't lie back in bed. I slept with my feet hanging over the side rail and my head in my hands with my elbows on the bed-side table. X-rays and EKGs were taken in the sitting position. The EKG technician said she would like for her husband to see me. Maybe he would stop smoking.

More than a month later, after several episodes I was discharged. I have never really felt well since. I had lived a relatively normal life up to the time of that admission. Now my doctors said I had emphysema and that I would never be well. I went to the American Lung Association where the patient counselor guided me from depression to renewed hope by teaching me how to breathe when doing oxygen demanding work like going up a few steps -- or talking or eating.

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

I learned that God has given us a truly wonderful body, Psalm 139:14. In industry I used many pumps. Those pumps or their valves had to be replaced. My heart has been pumping continuously for 71 years. God gave me a wonderful pair of lungs, too. The capacity of healthy lungs is twice the volume needed to sustain life. The body is not a complainer! If it tells you something, listen! The lungs seldom complain until an appreciable amount of damage has reduced the double capacity to bare survival. We tend to ignore the every-morning heaving cough. The gradual loss of cilia cannot be seen. We think we are getting by with our constant irritation and abuse of our lungs—until the doctor makes that call for an emergency admission. Don't let him make that call for you! My lungs now perform at about 55% capacity. I am able to expel about 90% of the air I inhale. I have destroyed almost all the extra lung volume God provided through my own abuse and misuse. I've only myself to blame.

I have learned that the major area of our body that is exposed to air is not the outer skin. Those millions of tiny sacs connected to the bronchiole are formed of micro-thin lining. The lining of the millions of tiny sacs in healthy lungs would spread out to cover a tennis court. Throughout

this lining are many ultra-fine capillaries through which blood is taken from the veins. As the blood passes through the capillaries, carbon dioxide and other wastes are removed and oxygen is returned to the heart in the blood to be pumped through the arteries to supply the brain, muscles and other tissues with life-sustaining oxygen. Emphysema destroys that micro-thin lining and the capillaries within it. The lungs lose much area available for transfer of pollutants out of the body.

Assimilation of fresh oxygen to the blood is restricted in direct proportion to that loss. As the lungs are progressively damaged by loss of the lining, larger pockets develop which are not as elastic as the original tiny sacs. Because of emphysema, my lungs have lost enough of their elasticity that I cannot exhale about 10% of the air that I inhale. Ten percent of the polluted air stays in my lungs with its carbon dioxide and other pollutants, to dilute the next breath of fresh air.

As the micro-thin lining is lost and the sacs are reduced to less elastic pockets, many of the ultrafine capillaries are lost. The heart must pump the same volume of blood through fewer passageways. That increases the pressure within those capillaries and causes fluid to separate and settle in the legs and chest. This condition is known as congestive heart failure (CHF). (If you are as old as I am, you probably know this as dropsy). When I left the hospital for the first time, I was discharged with a diagnosis of CHF, as well as emphysema and chronic bronchitis.

As I smoked, I was abusing my heart and lungs without mercy. I inhaled carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide (both deadly poisons), nicotine (a poisonous alkaloid and habit-forming drug), plus carcinogens, acids, tars, and other harmful substances. I kidded myself into believing I wasn't damaging my lungs.

Learning James 4:13-16

When my lungs were healthy, I never dreamed that someday I'd hurt with every breath. I used to jump out of bed, through the shower, and off to work in minutes. I used to! Now, it's a regime of getting up slowly, showering, resting, shaving and resting, putting on a few clothes and resting, then finish dressing. Then a good rest before I try to tackle the half-stairs down for breakfast. Even during breakfast I must pause to rest, as the eggs get cold and the cereal gets soggy. Imagine having to leave the shower because you can't tolerate the hot humidity in the close confines of the shower.

I used to adhere to a rather tight schedule but not anymore. I've truly learned the meaning of James 4:13-16, "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell and make a profit'; whereas you do not know what will happen

tomorrow...Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.' But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil."

We were putting on our coats to go to worship one Sunday when I felt a sharp pain in my chest. The Advanced Life Support Unit bundled me off to the hospital. The doctor said it was a case of increased intensity of the lung disease and that I could expect such to happen from time to time.

Another time, I called the doctor to tell him I felt that I was filling with fluid in the chest. In the emergency room they began removing fluid due to an increased episode of CHF. In three hours they removed over two quarts of fluid.

My physical condition now is such that my doctor must constantly be on guard. The nerve endings to the lungs and heart share common roots. It is very difficult to treat one without affecting the other. The side effects of the medications I take to help me breathe can cause irregular heartbeats and other problems to the heart, eyes and lungs. It all began when I damaged my lungs by smoking cigarettes. And most of the damage was done before I was aware of it.

The Financial Cost

When I was in school, starting to smoke, cigarettes were 12 cents to 15 cents a pack. When I stopped smoking in 1980, they were 80 cents a pack. During the fifty years I smoked I spent about \$12,300 for cigarettes. But that hardly reflects what smoking has cost me. My medical bills last year alone were more than double the cost of 50 years of cigarettes. I was in the hospital six times in that one year. My pharmacy bill is between \$220 and \$280 a month—not to repair the damage cigarette smoking caused. It's too late for that. My medication is simply for survival, as I try to live with the damage I did to myself.

Who Will Mow Your Grass?

We were having a luncheon in preparation for a seminar at a hospital in which I was to participate. The director of out-patient education said she could not understand why lung patients were so sensitive about not being able to accomplish things. Her name indicated that her husband was of old-world background. I said, "I suspect your husband is a macho Italian." She nodded affirmatively.

I continued, "How do you think he would like to sit by the window and watch you mow the grass?" She quickly came to his defense. "He wouldn't do that!" Then she wilted, realizing that others do not like to have to do such things either. I've never met a man who planned for his wife to mow the grass but some men have to watch their wives do what they themselves can no longer do—and clean the tears off the spectacles before the wife comes back into the house. If you keep smoking, who's going to mow your grass?

Miscellaneous Observations

It's easy to quit smoking. I must have quit at least 50 times. But it's difficult to stay quit. No one who has quit and stayed quit will tell you it's easy. The habit will be with you for a long time. I don't know how long I walked up to my desk at work and reached in my pocket to put the cigarettes out for the day. You may never cease salivating when you smell the aroma of a cigarette. You must have the resolve to not succumb to the pleasures of old. The "Smoke Enders" sessions of the American Lung Association may be helpful. Try them. The realization that smoking had damaged my body, and that my body belongs to God, helped me have that resolve.

"OXYGEN IN USE. NO SMOKING." After these barrier words have been on your hospital room for four weeks, it would seem that the time for the nicotine fit is over. It would seem that way. I did not really experience withdrawal because I was too sick to separate it out. But the desire for a smoke did not automatically go away.

The pregnant woman who continues to smoke showers her baby with the damaging impurities of the smoke she has accepted as a part of her lifestyle. Doctors warn women of much harm that can come to their babies unless smoking is given up, at least during pregnancy. Studies show that women who smoke during pregnancy have more stillbirths, spontaneous abortions and premature deliveries than women who don't smoke. The babies of smoking mothers are more likely to be under-sized, and have a greater risk of dying soon after birth.

All parents who smoke are setting an example before their children that is likely to cause a great deal of grief later in life. You might be fortunate enough to smoke and beat the odds, only to see your son or daughter not be so fortunate. Are you willing to run that risk?

The Greatest Cost

As I mentioned at the outset, I smoked during the 25 years I preached. I smoked only at work or while traveling. I assumed I was fully within my "rights" -- that I was not hurting anyone. When I was forced to look at my life in true perspective, the picture lost its glamour. Jesus said, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple." (Luke 14:26). Our devotion to Christ must overshadow all else in life.

Whatever may restrict my influence, power, well-being, and ability -- and detract from my service to Christ, must be put aside.

I became convinced that by allowing cigarette smoking to hinder my influence and damage the body Christ bought at great price, 1 Cor. 6:19-20, I needed to repent, ask God's forgiveness, and seek His help to overcome the habit that had done so much harm in my own life and in the lives of millions of others.

Perhaps the greatest cost to me has been my inability to continue to preach the gospel and be as active in the work of the Lord as I would like to be. The fields are white unto harvest. Churches are in need of men to lead and serve. I would give anything in the world if I could be more active. I wish I had the wind and vocal volume to lead in prayer. I wish I could sing the praise of Jesus loud enough to teach and admonish others in song, but I waited too long to quit smoking. The cost has truly been great. It would have been even greater if I had not repented. It would have cost me eternally.

Dear friend, whatever we give up in this world that will help us be better servants of God will be repaid a hundredfold—and more, Mark 10:30. Please give prayerful consideration to these thoughts. Thank you for hearing me out.

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