

A Silent Adventure

Parts of his body paralysed and choking on his own saliva, Willem Nel knew that he had to fight to stay alive. He couldn't talk, eat or breathe by himself, but He knew the One who had already overcome. By Fiona Matier

What does the word 'adventure' mean to you? The more subdued may enjoy a relaxing hobby but the adrenaline junkie will agree that adventure involves risk – bungee jumping, kite surfing or mountain climbing. Adventure should be enjoyed; something you can usually prepare for.

Willem Nel, however, has a different kind of adventure story to share. His was certainly not planned or wished for, but God used Willem's experiences to take him on an adventure of grace – one discovering the riches of His goodness in a unique way. This was also an adventure of silence as Willem discovered what it means to live in the Spirit and not in the flesh, communicating God's love without using words.

"For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, to the things of the Spirit,"
(Romans 8:5).

Just another day?

Sunday, 22 March; Preparing to preach to his Potchefstroom congregation, Willem discovered that something was seriously wrong. He was seeing double, his speech was slurred and he started to lose feeling in his face. Later that day he was admitted to hospital and by the following day was transferred to ICU. By Tuesday he was unable to breathe on his own.

During an MRI scan Willem was asked to lie flat on his back as he went through the scan tunnel, but as he did so began to suffocate in his own saliva. Staff were unaware that he could not breathe, and so, in that dark space Willem knew he was going to die. He had to get their attention, but the staff could not understand him as he was unable to speak.

He remembers trying to tell them he was drowning, while thinking: "This is such a stupid way to die!" He says: "Knowing that you are dying and that you can do nothing about it, makes you feel powerless. When I got back to ICU my face was dark blue, my heart had stopped and I hadn't taken a breath in 20 minutes. The staff and doctors managed to revive me and the nurses later told me it was a complete miracle that there was no brain damage as a result of a lack of oxygen. This gave me a second life and I know that the old Willem Nel died that day."

Some people believe this sickness was God's way of getting Willem to slow down and rest but he disagrees. "God is a God of life, not death, healing not sickness. God did not make me sick, but He is definitely using these

circumstances to reveal more of His character to me – His undeniable goodness.”

Deciding to live

Willem was diagnosed with Guillain Barre syndrome, a virus that attacks the nervous system. Usually it begins in the feet and works its way up until the entire body is affected but in Willem’s case, his tongue and facial muscles were the first impacted. This paralysed his upper body and he was unable to talk, eat or breathe without life support machinery. He was only able to communicate with family and friends when his arm muscles were strong enough to write a few words.

Throughout his 26 days in ICU, Willem and his family made a decision not to be negative about his condition (easier said than done!) but to focus on God and His Word. His wife Celesté and their four children continued to speak words of life, rather than allow the negative words and reports from the doctors to determine what they would believe.

Celeste says, “We praised God and thanked Him for His faithfulness and His promises, that Willem would live and recovery completely. We experienced so much joy while Willem was in hospital.” She laughs as she recalls how the hospital staff thought they were a bit crazy at times, singing and praising God instead of being negative.

As a result of their decision to be joyful and to trust God, the family was able to minister to others in hospital. For instance God gave Willem a word of knowledge for one of the ICU nurses which he wrote down. “This was part of the silent adventure – praying for people without being able to talk!” he says. She later phoned Celesté in tears explaining the impact of this word on her and her family. “Moments like these made me realise the power of God is not restricted by our weakness, but is made stronger,” Willem says.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Despite the family’s admirable attitude throughout this experience, it hasn’t always been easy. It has been especially tough for their youngest son, D’lanrew, aged 2. He was afraid of Willem because the paralysis in his face caused his muscles to hang and his face looked expressionless. He refused to be in the same room as Willem without Celesté or his older brothers being with him. It was only after three months that he started recognising his dad again and would willingly go to him.

Willem's encouragement to all is that God is good. "It doesn't matter how hopeless a situation looks to our physical eyes, God is God of the impossible and His gracious work on the cross has paid the price for us in full."

Today Willem is on the road to recovery . Parts of his mouth are still paralysed and his speech is not completely clear. He is also working with physiotherapists to regain strength in his muscles. "The adventure is hard at times," he admits, "but as a family we are experiencing so much grace and taking each day at a time."

Willem is the visionary leader of His People Church in Potchefstroom. He is currently writing a book called A Silent Adventure which will be released soon. Please visit his website www.faithstory.co.za for more info.