

When Cancer Interrupts

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Some surprises in life are wonderful—a long-hoped-for pregnancy, a windfall inheritance, an unexpected promotion. But a cancer diagnosis is *never* a good surprise. When the doctor says “It’s cancer,” those words break into your life in a most unpleasant, threatening way. You feel violated. The enemy is operating on the inside—is part of you. It is a bit like coming home after an evening out to discover your home broken into, every drawer ransacked, and your most treasured possession stolen. You feel betrayed. The enemy got inside.

My life has been interrupted on four occasions by a cancer diagnosis. And, of course, the diagnosis is just the beginning. It is rapidly followed by tests, surgeries, pain, the healing process, chemo, and the ongoing follow-up. My particular cancer and recovery was different each time. But every time triggered an honest inner struggle. What if . . . ? What about the people I love? What is my life? What will my future hold? Do I in fact trust the God in whom I say I believe? Those are the big, life-defining questions. And there are little struggles too, because cancer drastically alters the usual pattern of life. What things must I do tomorrow that I never planned to do? Threatening surprises change your life instantly and obviously. That threat can leave you disoriented, overwhelmed, and anxious.

When cancer blindsides you, your mind usually spins with questions and uncertainties. But in the

midst of the turmoil, there is a place to turn. You can go to someone for immediate help.

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though the earth
gives way. (Psalm 46:1–2)

Those are not just words in a book. When you take them to heart, you find them true. Those who actually ask receive. Those who seek do find. Those who knock find the door wide open.

O Lord, you are my refuge. Protect me. You are my strength. Strengthen me. You promise to be a very present help in my trouble. This is trouble. Help.

And he does. No one wants to hear the words “You have cancer.” But as you learn how Christ takes the fear away, you are receiving a wonderful gift that you will treasure for the rest of your life. Christians who learn to suffer well often say something along these lines: “I would never choose to go through what I had to go through. But I would not give up what I learned in the process. God met me. My faith became real.”

We will look at four steps in how we come to grips with a cancer diagnosis. Take your time. Listen. Learn to walk through the experience in the right way.

What You Are Experiencing Matters

First, you can be honest about how hard it is. You don't have to live in denial. You don't have to live as if you can beat this by willpower and medical intervention. God is up to something far more significant. Reflect on what the apostle Peter says to people who face serious threats. He points out that they are being "grieved by various trials" (1 Peter 1:6). He recognizes the difficult road they had to walk. He doesn't sugarcoat it. He doesn't say "You can do it." He doesn't say "Just keep busy or take something so you don't have to think about it. Instead, he invites you to get personal. Why does he say "various trials"? He is giving you a blank check that you can fill in with your particular details. The Bible puts things in a way that draws you in. God invites you to name exactly what you are facing.

A bit later in his letter Peter describes these trials as "fiery" (4:12). In other words, this is dangerous; it burns, it hurts, you might die. That is a good description of cancer. It brings pain physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It tests you—and that is exactly where Christ meets you.

God always invites his people to *name* their particular troubles. You can be like the writers of the Psalms and tell him all about what you are facing, feeling, and thinking. Below is a list of the kinds of things that people experience when cancer

interrupts. Check the ones that apply to you. At the end of the list is space for you to describe any particular troubles that I haven't mentioned.

1. *Uncertainty.* One of the hardest parts of any trial is that you do not know how things will turn out. The outcome of cancer is uncertain. An experienced doctor will talk with you about percentages. He may predict a likely trajectory and can offer both realism and a degree of comfort by what he has seen in similar cases. Online research will usually supplement your knowledge about what you are facing. Still, cancer is a wild card. Because it threatens your life from the inside, percentages and statistics only take you so far. Good odds for survival are not the only thing we'd like to know. We'd also like to know what the process will be like. We'd like to be one hundred percent sure of our survival. And we can't be that certain.

2. *Pain.* You don't know what will happen, but you do know it will hurt. Depending on your diagnosis, you could be facing a whole host of painful experiences—invasive tests, surgery, a hospital stay, chemotherapy, and so forth. For all the wonderful skills and advances in modern medicine, you can't avoid experiencing some "discomfort," to use the word the doctors use. I call it pain! And physical pain is often

accompanied by the pain of being in a dehumanizing environment. The beeping noises, the equipment, that stylish hospital gown, the institutional décor, the nurse fixated on writing notes rather than looking at you. It is a “fiery” trial at many levels.

3. *Fears.* The natural human responses to pain and uncertainty are fear and anxiety. You are in uncharted territory. Much of what is happening or might happen triggers the inward stress of responding to threat. Our natural wiring can easily run out of control into worry, fretting, brooding, and even an anxiety attack.

4. *Questions.* A life-changing diagnosis raises so many questions. What will happen? Will I make it? What will I be able to do? How will my family handle it? Does my insurance cover it? What if I can't _____ (go to work, function as a parent, have sex, go to the bathroom normally, get out of bed)? Is God punishing me? Why did this happen? Do people care?

5. *Loss.* Those questions inevitably have to do with loss. The natural human response to loss is sorrow. What will you lose? How will you handle those losses? Of course you are concerned with your health, but then there are all those things you are able to do when healthy that you might not be able to do as you go through cancer treatments. And of course the

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