

Biblical companions on my cancer journey

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My family does cancer in a big way. In my immediate family of five members, there have been ten different occasions when a doctor has told one of us that we have cancer or that, despite the treatments, the cancer has returned. My wife, Esther, has had two rounds of breast cancer. Our son Tim, who was born with significant physical and mental disabilities, was diagnosed with a brain tumor when he was three. Despite surgery and aggressive radiation treatments and chemotherapy, the cancer returned and took his life when he was eight. In the last five years, I have been diagnosed with both thyroid and prostate cancer. Despite major surgery to remove my thyroid gland and radioactive iodine to kill remnants of the cancer, it did return, and I have needed two additional surgeries to remove cancerous lymph nodes from my neck. Despite surgery to remove my prostate gland, the cancer returned; then, despite radiation treatments and a year of hormone therapy, it returned again. Doctors now tell me that I will have prostate and thyroid cancer for the rest of my life, although various treatments should keep me alive for many years yet.

Even though my family does cancer in such a big way, I experience my life as incredibly rich, joyful, meaningful, and blessed. Numerous factors nurture my joy and gratitude, such as a loving life partner, supportive friends, family, and church community, meaningful work alongside wonderful colleagues, financial security, and—not least of all—Christian faith. In this article, I reflect on how I have been comforted and supported by a number of biblical passages that I count as precious friends on my cancer journey.

Life as a “prize of war”

The prophet Jeremiah once received a message from God for his friend and secretary Baruch: “And you, do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for I am going to bring disaster upon all flesh, says the LORD; but I will give you your life as a prize of war in every place to which you may go” (45:5). Leaving aside the difficult issue of whether God inflicts disasters on humans, the gist of the message for Baruch is that he

must give up any great expectations for his life because defeat and disaster are about to befall his nation, but God will grant him his life as a prize of war. His life, diminished as it may be, is still a gift worth being grateful for. More than once a diagnosis of cancer has rocked my world, and I have had to learn the benefits of accepting my life as a prize of war, of being

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grateful for life itself, even though my quality of life was not what I wished for.

Some of the literature written to help people cope with a cancer diagnosis will encourage activities that have typically brought people pleasure: enjoy tasty food, listen to beautiful music, appreciate the beauty of the natural world, and cherish the important people in your life. In other words, accept your life

as a prize of war despite the challenges that the cancer brings, and be attentive to small daily blessings and potential sources of pleasure and joy.

Gratitude makes us more joyful people and increases overall fulfillment and satisfaction with life, even and perhaps especially when facing cancer. Gratitude can be nurtured through practices given to us by our Christian tradition: table grace thanking God for the gifts of sun, soil, rain, farmers, and workers who have brought the food to our table; a simple morning prayer thanking God for a good night's rest, for the gift of a new day, and for the opportunities that the day will bring; bedtime prayer thanking God for the experiences and encounters of the day, for tasks accomplished, and for pleasures enjoyed. Gratitude, even for small blessings, has helped me receive my life as a prize of war.

Settling into reality

The prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to a group of exiles who had been dragged off to Babylon some ten years before the Babylonian destruction of Judah, advising them to build homes, plant gardens, raise families, and seek the welfare of the city to which they had been deported (29:5-7). These exiles did not want to unpack their suitcases because they were convinced that God was about to intervene by defeating the hated Babylonians and allowing them to return home. Jeremiah tells these exiles that their God-given calling is to accept the painful reality of their situation and make the best of it, even though they do not like it.

The various cancers in my life have taken me into exile where I do not want to be. I have found it helpful to heed the advice of Jeremiah and accept the reality of my situation and that of my loved ones. As much as I have railed against heaven and earth, I have ultimately found it healing and life-giving to believe that God calls me to accept the painful reality that my family does cancer and that, in the midst of this cancer journey, God calls me to carry on with the mundane tasks of home-building, earning a living, tending relationships, and seeking the welfare of my community. Jeremiah's advice lends dignity to the ordinary activities of my life—and even makes them sacred—by reminding me that the Christian faith is not about accomplishing the spectacular but involves heeding the call from God to be faithful in the daily activities by which we sustain ourselves and our communities, even when we find ourselves in cancer exile.

Embracing hope

Accepting painful exile and cancer realities may be important, but Christians are also people of hope whose lives are not only defined by the painful realities of the present. Hope is often confused with optimism, the conviction that things will work out well. What does Christian hope look like when the pediatric neurosurgeon informs us that Tim's CAT scan



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shows that the medulla blastoma has returned and taken over his brain and that he has only weeks to live? Christian hope is a far cry from naive optimism that every cancer story will have a happy ending.

First Peter 1:3 states, “By [God’s] great mercy [God] has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” When we are thrust into the midst of cancer or some other painful

reality, then the suffering can easily take over our lives. While it is important to give the cancer or pain the space that it deserves in our lives, letting it consume and define us is another matter. Christian hope involves the ability to look the crushing realities of our lives straight in the face and acknowledge how painful they are but then, in an act of defiance, to declare that they will not define us and take over our lives because we have given our lives over to a different reality, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from

the dead. Jesus died a horrible death on the cross, but God transforms that death into resurrection and new life that are now offered to each of us. The resurrection reminds us that there is always another power at work in the world besides the painful realities of the present. Christian hope is the defiant act of clinging to and being shaped by the new life and healing that the resurrection of Jesus Christ makes possible already on this side of the grave, and it means facing cancer and the prospect of our own death knowing that Jesus's entry into resurrection life is God's promise that some day we will be privileged to follow.

Lament

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

*Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my
groaning? (Psalm 22:1)*

When Tim had mostly recovered from the devastating side effects of the radiation and chemotherapy treatments, he suffered a stroke that robbed him of many of his physical and mental abilities, including his vision. For months I sank into an abyss of rage and bitterness that corroded my body and soul and my ability to be a good father and husband. The most helpful thing I ever learned about grief is that, when we experience a major loss, our entire being is injected with a massive dose of pain. That pain is like a poison in our body and soul, and it can destroy us if we do not release it. The process of getting the pain out is what we call healthy grieving. Once I realized that I was a warehouse stuffed to the ceiling with unaddressed pain, I knew that I needed to grieve. Almost every day for weeks on end, I would listen to certain music and look at pictures that I knew would tap into my grief, and I would weep, often uncontrollably. I would also lament like the psalmists do, crying out my pain and rage to God and pleading for deliverance. This lamenting was an incredibly healing process as the anger and bitterness gradually dissipated, allowing greater space in my life for love, compassion, and even fragments of joy.

Praise

Bless the LORD, O my soul,

and all that is within me, bless [God's] holy name.

(Psalm 103:1)

Praise can be a radical act of hope that nurtures faith by declaring that the steadfast love of God is greater than all the powers of death arrayed

against us. Defiant praise is an act of basic trust and hope through which we give our lives over to the steadfast love of God, which is strong enough to carry us through life's difficult experiences, strong enough to empower us for faithful discipleship even in the face of hardship, strong enough to carry us from this life into the next.¹ Defiant praise reminds us that evil and suffering will not have the last word, but someday God's reign will come in all its fullness and renew all of creation.

Years ago I was preparing to teach Psalm 103 when I stumbled on a statement by Claus Westermann: "The secret of praise is its ability to make contact with God; through praise one remains with God."² Praise may help us experience some of the love, grace, and power of God that we celebrate as we sing and speak our praises. Westermann's statement about the ability of praise to make contact with God helped me understand an

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experience I had when Tim was dying. During the last month of his life, Tim was unconscious, and so Esther and I took turns keeping watch by his bed. To comfort myself and pass the time, I sang my way through our church hymnal, singing all the hymns that were familiar. I began to notice that the hymns of praise affected me most powerfully. One

time the tears were streaming down my cheeks as I sang an old favorite, "Now Thank We All Our God." I remember feeling guilty and wondering how I could sing hymns of praise while I was watching Tim die.

Praise puts us in touch with God, and this connection is precisely what I needed during that difficult time. I needed to experience God's grace, comfort, and strength surrounding and sustaining me. Those hymns of praise were doing their work on me even though I was not consciously aware at the time of how they were affecting me. When life is painful or seems like it is spiraling out of control, praise can be a way to remain rooted in the steadfast love of God.

1 For the insight that praise can be an act of defiance, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 51.

2 Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content and Message* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980), 6.

Remembering faithfully

Israel's laws enjoining compassion toward vulnerable members of the community—refugees, orphans, widows, landless people—often include a motivation clause: “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 24:18, 22). We have choices to make about how we will remember the individual and collective suffering that life dishes out to us. Pain and suffering can turn us into angry, bitter, frustrated people who lash out at others or nurse resentment while waiting to exact revenge. A classic example is the American government's response to the tragedy of 9/11, which it remembered by unleashing military fury on Afghanistan and Iraq, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths and political chaos that still rages. God encourages the Israelites to remember their collective trauma of Egyptian slavery differently. They are to become more empathetic, caring, and committed to preventing vulnerable persons in their own community from experiencing similar exploitation and hardship.

My mother modeled faithful ways to remember periods of suffering. In a period of three years, she lost her husband, a daughter, and a grandson. One way that my mother faithfully remembered her personal losses was through supporting other persons in their time of loss. For years, she led the committee that provided lunch at the twenty or so funerals in her church each year. My mother faithfully remembered the loss of a grandson with physical and mental disabilities by volunteering at a Christian agency that ran group homes for adults with physical and mental disabilities, hosting many a meal for residents and supporting many a fundraising event. For years, my mother was responsible for sorting the clothes that were donated to the local Mennonite Central Committee thrift store, helping to raise money to alleviate poverty and suffering around the world. I have tried to follow my mother's example of remembering faithfully so that my cancer pain makes me more sensitive to the needs and suffering in my community and the broader world.

God is our refuge and strength

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.*

*Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea.
(Psalm 46:1–2)*

One of the reasons I appreciate Psalm 46 so much is that it assures us of God's presence precisely in the midst of earth-shattering events. One evening I met Charlie in the hospital intensive care unit where I was spending the night with Tim because we did not know if he was going to make it through the latest crisis. Charlie was with his three-year-old daughter who was hooked up to life-support systems because it looked like she was not going to make it after she was found floating facedown in an irrigation pond. In our grief and communion, Charlie and I shared Psalm 46, drawing comfort and strength from its assurances.

Conclusion

As the text for Tim's funeral, Esther and I chose Paul's well-known response to the question, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ?" (Romans 8:35-39). The preacher paraphrased part of the passage something like this: "Neither cancer, nor radiation treatments, nor chemotherapy, nor endless needles, nor physical pain, nor long hospital stays, nor even death itself will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The prospect of my own death still strikes terror into my heart. Yet I know that when death draws near, I will die surrounded by the love of family, friends, and faith community, all of whom are channels of God's gracious presence to me. I also know that I will die in Christ, that he will walk with me through the valley of the shadow of death, and that he has already gone ahead so that I too can look forward to resurrection in God's new world to come.

For all its problematic features that I become increasingly aware of as I study it, the Bible still comes to me as a precious gift, full of potential friends and companions eager to walk with me and support me as my family does cancer in a big way.

About the author

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