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~ *My own story*

“God, You are making a really big mistake here.”

HAD YOU SEEN me that late June morning in 1990, you would have thought me the picture of perfect health. Dressed in soft yellow, with my waist-length brown hair glistening in the summer sun and my smile radiating the deep happiness I felt, I was sure the colonoscopy test would confirm only a diagnosis of ulcerative colitis.

After all, I was only thirty-six. I didn't smoke or drink. I had exercised faithfully for several years, and I ate like a health nut. I had attributed occasional blood in my stool to an old pregnancy hemorrhoid and the occasional bowel irregularity to something I had eaten.

But when the gastroenterologist came to my bedside in outpatient surgery with the results of the procedure, both my husband Ralph and I knew immediately that something was wrong.

“We found a tumor,” he said, simply.

With those four words, my world turned upside down. There was a pause that seemed to last forever. No one spoke, and no one looked at anyone else.

“Do you think it's cancer?” I finally blurted out.

The doctor nodded affirmatively as his eyes filled with tears.

I can still see Ralph's ashen face as he stood at the end of the hospital gurney. This was his worst nightmare revisited. Some

twenty years earlier, when Ralph was only a newlywed, a doctor had diagnosed his first wife with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig's disease), which is incurable.

"No!" I yelled, over and over, as if somehow the force of my words could make this nightmare not true. I sobbed and sobbed, eventually hyperventilating. The doctor motioned to the nurse to give me more intravenous sedative. I kept thinking how all the nurses would go home and tell their families about the patient who "lost it" today.

But I didn't really care what they thought. After all, I was the one with cancer. And my tears were the only way to express my feelings at that moment—for me, for our three daughters, and for my husband. Though as a journalist, words were my business, no words could fully capture the moment. *Shocked* and *devastated* were too mild. It was as if someone had hit me between the eyes with a brick and I was afraid to get back up for fear they would hit me again.

I had never given cancer a second thought. No one in my immediate family or our very large extended family had battled the "Big C." Some of my friends seemed constantly worried about getting cancer, including one who often called me with her "lump of the month" story.

But not me. I had been confident it wasn't going to happen to me. *People with cancer look sick or at least feel sick, don't they?* And, after all that Ralph had endured already, could such a serious disease strike another spouse? The odds were against it. Weren't they?

"Do you have a surgeon?" the gastroenterologist inquired.

"No," I muttered. *Do people have surgeons in the same way they have hairdressers?* "I've only been in the hospital to give birth."

He said he would arrange a consult.

The half-hour ride home was the longest and quietest of our sixteen years of married life. There was nothing my husband could have said to make me feel any better, unless he could

My own story—“God, You are making a really big mistake here.”

have told me that the entire thing had been a terrible mistake, the diagnosis a lie.

Five days later I had surgery to remove the tumor and resection the colon. I was told that if the cancer had been caught in the early stage, I would be considered cured and need no further treatment. But if it had advanced to the lymph nodes or beyond, I would have at best a 50 percent chance of surviving with the help of chemotherapy and/or radiation.

I begged God for the former. I endlessly explained to Him why that would be so much better.

Three days later, at 7 A.M., the surgeon and his resident delivered the pathology report. I could tell from their body language that the news wasn't good. They stood against the wall at the end of my hospital bed, as far away from me as they could get and still be in the same room.

“Cancer was found in five of twenty lymph nodes,” the surgeon explained matter-of-factly. “You will need chemotherapy and radiation.”

Again I cried, but no one moved toward me to comfort me.

“Have you ever known anyone who underwent chemotherapy?” he asked, seeming to grasp for words in order to continue the conversation.

I nodded, recalling a fourteen-year-old girl who had died from bone cancer and a young mother who had died with a brain tumor. Their images flooded my mind. Again, I hyperventilated.

Still, neither doctor moved toward me, but instead the surgeon called a nurse to help me breathe into a little paper bag. How I wished the doctor had at least held my hand for a moment or just patted my shoulder and told me that this was not an automatic death sentence.

“Do you want me to call your husband?” the doctor asked, still at the foot of my bed. I nodded between sobbing gasps into my little brown bag.

Now I was really frightened. I desperately needed Ralph. But,

for whatever reason, the surgeon did not call him. So for three hours I lay in the room thinking about what it was going to be like to have chemotherapy pour through my veins. I had a little conversation with myself as I tried to control my weeping.

Get a grip on yourself, my head told my heart. What are you so afraid of? Nausea and vomiting? You were sick night and day for six months with all three of your pregnancies. Mouth sores? You've had them before. Needles? You're not afraid of them. Losing your hair? It'll grow back. Don't be so vain, my head stated matter-of-factly. But my heart didn't buy it. I just cried harder as I stroked the hair that I desperately wanted to keep.

Yes, that's what I'm afraid of, I admitted. I don't want to look sick for my children and my husband. I can't imagine watching my hair fall out. I disliked the vanity of my feelings, but it was how I felt.

I finally called Ralph at 10 A.M. I was shaking so badly my voice was barely audible, and he kept asking me to repeat everything.

"It's bad," I told him. "I need you right away."

I couldn't even get my lips to form the word *chemotherapy*. The fear of facing that, for me, was worse than the initial shock of cancer.

Ralph arrived shortly. At about noon the surgeon strolled in and said he had just tried to call my husband but there was no answer. "By the way," he added, "did I mention that you won't lose your hair with the chemo?"

I didn't know whether to hug him or smack him.

Baldness or not, this nightmare was not going away. I became consumed with thinking about dying. Almost any personal question made me cry, especially anything that reminded me of our daughters, then eight, ten, and twelve years old. *Will I see them grow up? How will they make it without me?*

Lying in that bed, I had lots of time to talk with God, whom I thought had made a big mistake in my life. I told Him so in no uncertain terms. I knew the promise in the

My own story—“God, You are making a really big mistake here.”

Bible in Romans 8:28 that says He will cause all things to work together for good, but I also knew that this promise sometimes can take a while to happen, and I wasn't interested in waiting that long. I told God I didn't want Him to make something good come out of the nightmare unfolding before my eyes. Instead, I wanted Him to take it away.

“You are making a really big mistake here,” I fumed. “There's absolutely nothing You can ever do to make up for this because it is too awful. And don't think You are going to pull me through this somehow and I'm going to go and minister to cancer patients, because I won't do it!”

I think He must have smiled at me like a knowing mother does with a rebellious toddler at bedtime.

Three weeks after surgery I started weekly chemotherapy with Dr. Marc Hirsh, an oncologist in Hanover, Pennsylvania. I had met Dr. Hirsh the previous summer when he had visited the church my husband pastors. More recently, we had renewed our acquaintance when I had done a feature story for the local newspaper about a new cancer support group at the hospital. I knew he was a Messianic Jew—a Jew who believed in Jesus (Yeshua) as the promised Messiah.

I wanted Dr. Hirsh and his faith on my healing team. I had no idea that I would one day end up on his healing team—but that's getting ahead in my story.

I had never really minded needles, but the chemo needle was a different story. My veins would move and the nurse would fish around inside my arm. I felt sick before the drugs even started. The drug combination I was getting was not as toxic as most chemo regimens. It usually took weeks for patients to feel any side effects, I was told.

Not so with me.

I felt sick from the onset, but the anti-nausea medicine made me so sleepy I couldn't function, so I chose to be sick instead. (Thankfully, anti-nausea drugs that don't cause drowsiness are now available!)

I developed mouth sores.

I was terribly fatigued.

My taste buds were shot.

I lost twenty pounds.

Even water made me nauseated, and the outside air smelled so bad some days that I had to hold my nose just to walk outside.

On top of all that, I was allergic to the main drug. My nose ran constantly and my eyes watered profusely. (The chemo scarred my tear ducts so severely that my right eye continues to water to this day despite two surgeries to correct the problem.)

The palms of my hands and the soles of my feet turned flame red and felt like they were on fire.

My joints swelled so much that I could hardly bend my fingers, and I had to walk on the sides of my feet some days.

Three times the skin peeled off my feet.

I experienced just about every possible side effect from the chemo. All the while, I knew that hundreds of people in sixteen states were praying for me. So, it seemed logical, at least to my emotional self, to ask God *why* everything was so hard.

“Why aren’t things going easier for me?” I cried out. “Would it be too much to ask to feel normal again for just a couple of hours?” But I heard only silence from heaven.

At that time, the treatment for colon cancer was weekly for a year (with a break every few weeks). About five months into my treatments, I was driving to my oncologist’s office and talking to God.

“I don’t think I can take this anymore,” I told Him. (I figured that since He knew even my thoughts, I might as well say them out loud and get them off my chest.)

“I’ve been praying to You and lots of people have been praying to make this easier on me, but it’s getting worse. I’m not a quitter, so I’ll keep going. But I don’t know if I can take another seven months of this,” I said as the salty tears rolled down my cheeks.

My own story—“God, You are making a really big mistake here.”

When I got into the doctor’s office that day, he examined my hands and feet and said, “I don’t think you can take much more of this. Let’s get you through another month. I think if the chemo is going to work, it’s had enough time to do so. Besides, I think the studies will eventually show that six months is enough for this treatment.” (He was right—standard treatment for colon cancer is now only six months.) So I hung on, finishing my chemo in February 1991.

When I returned for my first checkup in May, I was the only person in the chemo room who wasn’t there for a treatment that day. I knew I should feel happy that I had finished treatment, but I didn’t. As I looked around that room of people in recliners hooked up to poles with saline-solution bags, I was overcome with sadness. Some of them looked so thin and ill, and others looked so tired and afraid. I began to weep.

I wanted to take away their pain, but I couldn’t.

I wanted to give them peace, but I couldn’t.

Then God spoke to my heart: “But you know the One who can, and you can tell them about Me.”

“But I just want to put all this behind me and go on with my life,” I argued. “Besides, I don’t want to hang around people with cancer. It will be depressing and they’ll die and I can’t handle it. I won’t do it.”

A few weeks later, however, I came up with an idea that I figured would suit both God *and* me: I would start a cancer support group, and God would *have* to let me live because everyone in that group would need me!

But as I spent time each day praying to God, He reminded me that He doesn’t play “Let’s Make a Deal.” He wanted me to get involved—no guarantees.

If you’ve ever sensed God wanted you to do something, but you were reluctant, you probably also know you didn’t have any peace until you said yes.

Finally, like a pouting child, I gave in: “I’ll do it, but I won’t like it,” I told Him, temporarily forgetting that my primary concern was to obey, and He would take care of the rest.

I started the Cancer Prayer Support Group in October 1991 with four people. My intent was to have a one-hour, once-a-month meeting. *That shouldn’t be too depressing*, I figured.

But almost immediately I could see that the people coming to the group needed more support than that. Not only that, but I found that I actually felt *better* after the meetings rather than worse. So we started meeting twice a month and have been doing so ever since. And guess what soon became a great source of joy in my life—the support group! As the months rolled by, I secretly began to pray that I would be able to quit my job and volunteer with cancer patients full-time.

In July 1995, on the fifth anniversary of my cancer surgery, I told our congregation how God had blessed me through my cancer experience—through my friends in the support group and through Marc Hirsh and his wife, Elizabeth, who had become very close friends and prayer partners with my husband and me.

I concluded with this sentence: “Someday I hope I can quit my job and minister full-time, sharing God’s peace and love with cancer patients.”

I knew it was an unrealistic wish—there was no way financially that we could afford for me to quit my job and volunteer. But less than a year later, my prayer became a reality when Marc asked to meet with Ralph and me. He said he had been praying about something and felt it was the right time to ask.

“Would you join our clinical staff, ministering to the emotional and spiritual needs of our cancer patients and their families?” he said. “I will match whatever you’re making at your present job.”

I tried to sound very spiritual. “I’ll pray about it,” I said.

But Ralph gave me an incredulous look and said, “You’ve been praying about this for a year. Say yes!”

My own story—“God, You are making a really big mistake here.”

So since May 1, 1996, I have had a job where I listen to patients’ hopes and fears, praying that God will heal them physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I ask Him to bless each one, and I believe that He will. I see cancer—or any illness or trial—as a very deep pit, but I believe that the love of God is deeper still. And the reason I believe this is because of—and not in spite of—my own experience with cancer, which God has transformed from an ordeal to a blessing to others.

In the year before my new job offer, I had been meditating on the Bible verse Ephesians 3:20 which speaks of our God “who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” (NIV).

There is no doubt in my mind that God has done far more in my life than I could ask or imagine, and I know that He can do that in your life too.

Do I think He’s going to give you a job as a patient advocate for your oncologist? Probably not.

Do I think He is able to do something equally amazing in your life? You bet I do.

I can’t tell you how, when, or where God will bring a blessing through your trial of suffering. But I can tell you why—because His Word promises He will. Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (NASB).

God will bring blessing through your trial because you matter greatly to Him and He longs to show you that. He may bless you with physical healing, or He may bless you by healing you emotionally of some deep-seated hurts. He may bless you spiritually with the joy of knowing Him in a way you never have before. Or He may bless others through you in unimaginable ways.

My blessing from cancer is certainly *not* the one I sought, but because God knows me and loves me, He knew how to bless me.

When God & Cancer Meet

He knows you. He loves you. He can bless through your trials . . . if you let Him decide the blessing.

Be encouraged: God wants to bring blessing through your cancer experience; you just need to let Him decide the blessing.