NAVIGATING THE



STORMOF SUFFERING



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We know that suffering is part of our life here on earth. Everyone either has suffered, is suffering, or will suffer. We know that suffering is an inescapable part of life, but as Christians we also know we look forward to something far greater. Revelation 21:4 tells us that for those who will spend eternity with God, there will be no more death, no more mourning, no more crying, and no more pain – no more suffering. However, that's not the way it is in this life; we understand this all too clearly. We must remind ourselves that the Bible repeatedly says that there are things that we can learn and things that God intended for us to learn from suffering. David said in Psalms 119:71 that it was good that he had been afflicted, that he might learn God's statutes. David recognized the importance of learning from suffering and we can as well. Suffering often causes us to focus on the important things in life. Those things that draw us closer to God are good. Those things that drive us further from God are not.

It is always best to measure life in terms of our nearness to God. The closer we are to God, the better our quality of life. Of course that's not the message that the world tells us. We live in a world where our lives are often measured by our circumstances. But it is important that we stay close to God, in good times and bad. Suffering doesn't make us wise, but we really can learn during our suffering if we are open to God's teaching. In order to learn from suffering, our hearts must remain open to the Lord's guidance and maintain our willingness to learn. I don't know about you, but if I'm going to suffer, I would rather get something out of it. If I must suffer, I would like to be closer to God as a result. I would hate to suffer without gaining any spiritual benefit.

I hope this message helps and encourages you as I share some of the lessons I have learned in my journey with cancer this past year. The lessons I have learned are applicable to every one of us because we all suffer. God has taught me more in this last year than He taught me in my first sixty-three years. I would prefer to have learned these lessons by simply taking a pill or drinking something, but that isn't the way it works. Realistically, it's in our times of suffering that God teaches us the most important lessons.

I had to learn an early lesson the hard way. When I first received the diagnosis that I had cancer, I spent a good deal of time looking back and thinking about my life. I thought about opportunities I had wasted, people I wished I had reached out to, and things I wished I had done. I thought about times that I felt like I had disappointed God and, as you can imagine, that's a recipe for a crushed spirit.

If you're not a Christian, if you've not made Jesus the Lord of your life, if you've not been baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, then a time of suffering really should be a reflection on your life, your sins, and on the fact that without the blood of Christ, there is no forgiveness from your sins. But if, on the other hand, you are a child of God, you are a baptized believer, and you are walking faithfully with Him even though you're not perfect - none of us are - then it's **not** a time to think back over your mistakes. It's a time to rejoice in the wonder of God's great gift of grace.

1 John 1:7 clearly states: "...if we walk in the light as He is in the light [it doesn't say if we walk perfectly], we have fellowship with one another; and the blood of His Son cleanses us

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from all unrighteousness." As I reflected on this passage, I thought, "Jesus has forgiven me; God has forgiven me of those sins; God has forgiven me of those times when I have disappointed Him. So why am I weighing myself down by thinking about them?" I thought about Hebrews 8:12 where God says, "...their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more." (these same words are found in Jeremiah 31:34) So why should I spend time thinking about things that God has forgotten? I realized what a futile waste of time that was, so I began to focus on what God had done for me!

I remembered this story I heard from a minister in Atlanta a couple of years ago. He spoke about visiting a terminally ill member of their church:

The man said, "You know sometimes I feel as if I haven't been good enough and it worries me." The minister said, "You're right. You haven't been good enough, and I haven't been good enough. Nobody is good enough. That's why Jesus died on the cross. God knew that on your own you couldn't be good enough; He wanted you to be cleansed with Jesus' blood and that's why He sent Jesus to die for you. In Jesus Christ you're good enough because God sees Jesus in you and forgives you of your sins. He doesn't see your sins."

That's Good News! I have a reason to rejoice instead of looking back and being crushed by my past shortcomings. That's a lesson - an important lesson - that I learned. If you're a child of God, it is important you don't spend time beating yourself up about the past. Instead, look forward to the future and rejoice in what God has done for you through Jesus Christ.

The second lesson I learned was the importance of studying God's word. Actually, this was more of a reminder than a new lesson learned. As you know with any illness, you have a lot of decisions to make and some of them are very difficult. Often you have to be a part of the decision-making process without really knowing what you are deciding. When I received my diagnosis of cancer, I made an early choice not to spend an enormous amount of time researching melanoma and chronic lymphocytic leukemia. That doesn't mean that I was simply ignoring my cancer. It doesn't mean that I was not making decisions about it. When I learned that I had melanoma and it had to be removed, I met with my dermatologist and my oncologist, and asked, "Who is the best at removing melanoma? Who is the most experienced?" They both agreed that a doctor at UAB was the best in the state and he was the doctor I chose to remove the melanoma. When more problems continued, I asked my oncologist, "What do you think about me going to MD Anderson, one of the premier cancer centers in the nation?" He replied, "That would be good." So I went there. I found out while I was there (from their top melanoma physician) that a doctor in Nashville at Vanderbilt is a world-renowned melanoma doctor. I came back and talked to my oncologist, and I went to see the physician at Vanderbilt who is working with my oncologist on my treatments. So it's not that I haven't tried to get the very best care. It's not that I have not tried to seek out those who know the most about my cancer. But after searching out the best professionals, I chose to let them make the decisions about my treatment. I am not relying on Internet searches as I make decisions about my cancer.

Good choices beget good choices. The decision not to spend an enormous amount of time researching cancer treatment options on the Internet allowed me to spend time focusing on God and His Word. Isaiah 26:3 has always been one of my favorite verses: "Thou will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee because he trusts in Thee." I believe this passage teaches that in order to have peace, I need to focus on God. I asked myself, "Where do I start? What do I really want to focus on first?" When I received my diagnosis, I thought about what I wanted to read and study. I thought about what Jesus said to Philip in John 14:9 after Philip said, "Jesus, show us the Father." Jesus said, "Philip, I've been with you all this time and you ask me to show you the Father. If you've seen Me, you've seen the Father." So to see God, I said, "I'm going to read the synoptic gospels. I'm going to read and re-read Matthew, Mark, and Luke." So I read through the synoptic gospels over and over again to see God more clearly. What a blessing! I still go back to Matthew, Mark, and Luke frequently, and I also read John's gospel. I've read many other passages but that's where I started. I think that's a beautiful place to start.

Suffering has helped me rediscover the treasures found in Bible study. I remember visiting with a terminally ill brother in Christ thirty years ago. We sat in his living room and he said, "You know, I never noticed in the Bible how many passages there are about Heaven." Now I find myself searching and studying those same verses about Heaven. But I have also discovered the tremendous number of passages that speak about suffering. You can't read through the Bible without reading about suffering and there is a reason for this: we're all going to go through a season of suffering at some point - God intends for us to learn from it.

During some of my darkest times in this journey, I had a discussion with my former boss. He and his wife have been through a lot of struggles with her health and have made many trips to different hospitals. We were talking one day and I said, "You know, every time I go to the doctor, it seems as if it's always bad news. It only goes in one direction." As we talked about it, he made a good comment. He said, "You're never going to find peace in the doctor's office." If you're in remission, you're only one blood test away from cancer coming back. You're only one PET scan away from knowing it has spread. It is always hovering in your mind - whatever your illness is or even if you are healthy.

One of our dear sisters this past week was shocked to find out that she had cancer. "It's like being hit on the side of the head by a two by four, isn't it?" There's never any peace when it comes to discouraging medical news. I have rediscovered that the only place peace is found is in the Bible. So as I cope with cancer, I focus on the Bible. I think it's the best place for me to focus; I think it's the best place for each of us to focus. I think it's the place God intended for us to focus because His book has words of comfort, guidance, and hope that no doctor can ever give us. Only God can give eternal hope! And because of His comfort, His guidance, and His hope, we can have peace.

The third thing I learned had to do with the encouragement I received from my church family. I have seen the encouragement of my congregation for other people. I felt the encouragement when my mother died and when my father died, but because this has been a year's journey thus far, I've seen it over and over and over and over again for me. It truly has been overwhelming. A week doesn't go by that Susan and I don't feel completely overwhelmed by the love and

compassion of our church family. I can't tell you how much the cards, the hugs, the kindnesses, the gifts, and especially the prayers mean to people like us and to every part of God's family.

A good friend at church recently came up to me on Sunday morning, and was obviously struggling to get some words out: "I wanted to ask you how you're feeling, but I know you get tired of answering that question." My sincere reply was, "No, I never do. I can truthfully say I never get tired of answering that question because that means somebody cares about me."

When one more person asks me how I'm feeling, that means one more person cares and that somebody is thinking about me. It is such a blessing to know that people care. When you go through difficult times (such as losing a loved one or facing health issues), it helps to know that the church loves you. It helps to know that people are going to bring food and that there is going to be an outpouring of support for you because you are loved. These are the things that make such a tremendous difference. I've learned that even the smallest act of kindness means something to those who are suffering. So when you think of something you could do for someone who is suffering but you think that it's not really going to make a difference, know this: it does make a difference. No matter how small, every act of kindness makes a difference to those who are discouraged, those who are suffering, and to those who are grieving. Seize every opportunity to do something – no matter how small it might seem. I can assure you...it means the world to someone who is hurting.

Another thing I learned - it's probably the most important lesson I've learned, and it took God sixty-four years to teach me - has to do with my faith. To help you understand, I'll need to tell you a little bit about my journey because otherwise it doesn't make sense. All of this started back in December of 2013 when I was playing with my grandchildren in Atlanta and my son said, "Dad, you've got a little spot on the top of your head. It wouldn't hurt to get it checked." I said, "OK, I'll do that." You know, at my height and with men not using a hand-held mirror, I never saw that spot. To this day, I never looked at it; I don't know what it looked like. My wife said it just looked like a large freckle, but I went to my dermatologist. He took a biopsy and sent it off. I really didn't think much about it because I had been through this type of procedure previously. The lab report came back cancer-free, but they noticed some atypical cells and it was recommended that we get a larger sample. I still wasn't too concerned about all of this. The doctor took another biopsy, a larger sample, and sent it off. He called a few days later and said, "I hate to tell you this but it is melanoma. It's cancer and you'll need a surgeon who can do more serious surgery than I can do here in the office." After talking with my dermatologist and oncologist, we agreed on a surgeon at UAB Hospital and I went there to have the surgery. When I first received the diagnosis, it was a shock but I had faith that God would heal me. I had faith that the surgeon would go in, remove the spot, do a skin graft from my chest, and everything would be fine. God would help me to be a better elder by my having had cancer because I could now relate to people with cancer. After I received the diagnosis of melanoma and before I had surgery at UAB, I saw my oncologist who did a blood test. He said, "Oh, by the way, you also have chronic lymphocytic leukemia. Did you know that?" I said, "No, I sure didn't." So at that point I learned that I was dealing with two kinds of cancer.

I went to UAB and had the surgery. Since the surgeon was also taking out a lymph node, I prayed the melanoma had not spread. My hope was that the melanoma would just be confined to the area on my scalp. By removing this spot on my scalp, that would be the end of it. At least that was my hope. But it didn't exactly work out that way. There was cancer in the lymph node, so the surgeon recommended radiation, which I wasn't too excited about. To this day, I still grimace when I think about that moment.

About two-thirds of the way through the radiation treatments, a couple of new spots appeared on my scalp. The radiologist said, "Well, we probably ought to have those biopsied." I was beginning to get alarmed because again it seemed as if everything was going downhill. It wasn't fitting into my plan of what I wanted God to do, so I prayed and prayed and prayed that it was not cancer - that it was just too much radiation or something other than melanoma. But it was - the cancer was spreading. The radiologist stopped the radiation because it was not working. At that point we went to MD Anderson in Houston where I consulted with four different doctors. That particular trip was not a good experience; coordination and communication were so poor that it really didn't benefit us. I know that is not the common experience that most folks have there, and I'm thankful that our experience is not the norm.

At this point, the cancer was advancing, the radiation wasn't helping, and I had been to the famous cancer center where I basically got no help, no encouragement, and no plan. I was at my lowest point and my spirit was absolutely crushed. For that entire month, I struggled with my faith until one day I realized that my faith was not really MY own faith at all. I had faith that God was going to heal me at the point in time that I thought was best. I thought that God was going to agree with me about when He was going to heal me. I had it all planned out about how this was going to help me to be a better Christian and a better shepherd. I realized I was not trusting God for HIS plan. I was not trusting God to heal me if and when He wanted to heal me, and I can't tell you what a difference that realization made. My faith had to be in God and His plan – not mine!

I began to pray, and I still pray each day, that the Lord will heal me if it's His will, but now behind every prayer, every time, I say, "Lord, help me to trust You to do what's best for Your kingdom and for me because I know You love me." I know He loves me because He sent Jesus to die for me. He loves you and you know that because He sent Jesus to die for you.

So why can't we trust Him? Why can't we trust Him not only with our soul but also with our health? Trust His plan. It may be totally different from my plan and your plan. For me, so far, it's been totally different - but I know His plan is better. I don't even know what His plan is yet – but I know it's better than trusting in my own plan. God's plan is PERFECT.

I want to be like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. When they were about to be thrown into the fiery furnace, they said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "The God we serve is able to deliver us from this fire, but even if He doesn't, we're not going to bow down and worship your gods, O Nebuchadnezzar." They said, "We know God can save us but He may not choose to, and that's OK because we want to be faithful to Him." That's the kind of faith I want. God may choose not to heal me this side of Heaven. He can choose to heal

me anywhere in this process, and I want to trust His plan. Regardless of the outcome, I can't tell you what a stress reliever that has been. When you're developing your own plan and you have the expectation that it's going to occur right here at this particular point in time and with this particular drug but then it doesn't happen, it's devastating. But if it's God's plan, then I'm ready whenever He's ready. So it's a great relief – I don't have to have a plan.

I've thought often about Romans 8:28. Perhaps I've misconstrued that passage through the years where the Apostle Paul says, "In all things God works together for the good of those who love Him." "For the good of those who love him" doesn't mean that everything works out "for good" based on our definition of the word, but it's going to work out "for the good" based on God's definition. Understanding this as truth relieves me of tremendous anxiety and stress. The chemotherapy I started in September failed; the melanoma is still growing. I can tell you that if I had not learned this spiritual lesson about faith, I would be crushed again. I'm sure I would have had my own plan – another plan – as to how God was going to heal me. But now I know that He has a plan, a plan I'm going to trust. And it doesn't have to be my plan. I think it's important for us to trust God. We need to examine our faith as to whether we trust God or if we only trust ourselves. We need to ask ourselves if we're trying to make God agree with us or if we can be willing to agree with God.

As we think about these lessons that God has taught me from suffering, I want to ask, "Do you have faith in God? Do you trust God or do you trust yourself? Do you have trust in your plan or in God's plan? With regard to your health, with regard to your struggles, with regard to your trials that are unique to you, do you trust God for the answers?" Always remember that God's plan is an eternal plan, flawless, timeless and perfect.

Until we join Him in heaven, the Lord established the church to be our spiritual family on earth. As family, we care for each other and pray for each other and help each other through our struggles and sufferings. This is a beautiful part of God's eternal plan. The church is one of God's richest blessings this side of eternity. When the family of God lives within His plan, we never suffer alone.

I'm not a complicated person - I like simple things. I like scriptures that I can put in my spiritual tool box so that on Monday or Tuesday when I struggle or when I'm faced with something difficult, I can pull a helpful passage out of my spiritual tool box. The verse regarding suffering that I have leaned on most is 1 Peter 4:19. Peter says very simply, "Those of you who suffer according to God's will should commit yourselves to your faithful Creator and continue to do good." These are simple marching orders: commit yourself to your faithful Father and keep on keeping on. He will not let us down. I trust Him with my health; you can trust Him with your health, too. The best part? We can trust Him with our very souls.

Commit myself to God. Continue to do good. That's easy. I can remember that. Above all, I can **live** that. Let God Be God: Life-Changing Truths from the Book of Job by Ray Stedman (Discovery House Publishing)

Genesis 1 and Lessons From Space by Dr. Nobie H. Stone (Warren Christian Apologetics Center)

Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering by Timothy Keller (Dutton Publishing)

Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms by Dr. Glenn Pemberton (ACU Press)

















"Lord, plant my feet on higher ground"

Lord, lift me up, and let me stand

By faith on Canaan's tableland;

A higher plane than I have found,

Lord, plant my feet on higher ground

I'm pressing on the upward way, New heights I'm gaining every day; Still praying as I onward bound,





My heart has no desire to stay Where doubts arise and fears dismay; Though some may dwell where these abound, My prayer, my aim, is higher ground

I want to scale the utmost height And catch a gleam of glory bright; But still I'll pray till rest I've found, "Lord, lead me on to higher ground"