

Following Jesus Through Sufferings

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Introduction

An Unexpected God-appointed Journey

On 1 July 2021, I received the biggest shock of my life. I was at a follow-up specialist appointment on my doctor's referral. I did not expect anything serious. So I had a hard time understanding what the colorectal specialist was saying. But it eventually came through that I did not have piles. I had cancer instead. It felt distressing and bewildering. The diagnosis painfully disrupted my life. An unexpected God-appointed journey began.

When the news of my cancer diagnosis dawned on me, I grappled with the truths of the Gospel and its meaning for my life like never before. I began to ask hard questions, which I had not really grappled with in my 40 years as a Christian and 20 years in Bible-teaching ministry.

I had to face the question of eternity with searing intensity. It was right in my face and I could not escape. Many other questions rose from deep within my heart. I searched for answers from God in His Word with tearful prayers.

This book, "Following Jesus Through Sufferings", is a simple chronicle of my journey with God through the pain and sufferings I experienced since then. I recognise that many have suffered more and in other ways. The questions I asked may not be the same ones you asked.

But I do hope that for those questions that resonate with you, my writings can provide some light and help your journey with God as you face difficult, painful, and sometimes unexplainable sufferings in this life.

May what comfort and encouragement we have received from God help us to follow Jesus better through the valleys of our lives. Let us continue to believe and love God through such shocking and painful times. I pray that what has happened to me will serve to advance the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

1. Longings and Questions

What? Cancer? Me? How can it be? I am still young. There is no one in my family who had cancer. I may not be a health freak, but I surely did what I could to avoid known cancer-causing food. Didn't the doctor previously say it may just be piles? These were the questions and thoughts - fuelled by sheer unbelief at what was happening to me - when the diagnosis was delivered. It was totally unexpected and awfully distressing.

Somehow, in a crisis that concerns life and death, certain desires and expectations become clearer. For example, although I believe that I am saved by grace and on my way to heaven, I also knew that I was not eager to die. My simple and deep longing was to grow old with my dear wife and see my boys grow up. I also wanted to continue to serve the Lord and see souls saved.

But cancer can end it all.

Isn't heaven a better place? Wouldn't you be reunited one day? Don't you have hope? Yes... but what about my longings? My dreams? My desires? Don't they matter? Are they wrong? I have found that my longings can bind my heart with fears and frustrations. They are good but they are not the ultimate goal in life, God told me when I cried out to Him. My longings need to be connected to His glory. His glory is the ultimate goal in life to eternity. Strangely, when I accepted this, then my heart had peace and hope in the midst of suffering.

But my grieving heart continued to burst with indignation and questions. What is the purpose of having clean hands, a pure heart, and a fear of God, if living righteously can still end in suffering? And normal longings are frustrated? What difference does it make? The Lord used Psalm 23:3 to answer me, “He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” I am to walk in righteousness, not for my pleasure, comfort, ambition, or well-being, but for his name’s sake.

So it still matters that I walk in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. The fulfilment of my longings is not the ultimate goal in life. Walking in paths of righteousness points to His glory. That’s what matters at the end of the day. I need a picture of life that is bigger than the fulfilment of my dreams.

This is a difficult journey. Moments of peace can be disrupted by thoughts of that immovable mountain of cancer, and all that flows from it. I get crippled by my longings and chained by my fears. But I also want to become a better follower of Jesus. I want all that happens to lend itself to the advance of the Gospel. These are my desires in this unexpected God-appointed journey.

2. Fear God Alone

The three days after my diagnosis on 1 July 2021 were a whirlwind of activity. I was immediately scheduled for my CT scan the day after, for further confirmation. I had to have difficult conversations, breaking the shocking news to my family and friends. I decided to be referred to a Senior Consultant at Singapore General Hospital (SGH).

Many kind and comforting words were spoken to me. I was told stories of amazing miraculous healings from cancer. I was reassured that of Singapore's excellent level of medical treatment. These are all very true and important. But deep down inside, I knew that at the end of the day, God's will would determine how my narrative would turn out.

My wife and I were deeply grieved on the Sunday evening of 4 July 2021. The next day, we would be seeing the Senior Consultant (my surgeon), and receiving the results of my scan. We would find out how advanced my cancer was, and the diagnosis based on the CT scan. It was nerve-racking not knowing what to expect. We wept and prayed together over the possibility of my wife being widowed at her young age. I told God that this is all so painful that I really could not understand how the precious cross of Jesus communicated His love to us at this hour. But I believe the gospel is true and pleaded with Him to teach us about His love in a moment like this. We chose to cast ourselves at the feet of God for His mercy.

In the midst of our tears and pain, we wanted to fear God alone. The One who holds the power of life and death. He is the Alpha and the Omega. He is the Resurrection and the Life. He decides our appointed path. We cast ourselves at His mercy and grace. Strangely, even though we still did not know how bad my cancer was, we experienced His peace and comfort after choosing to fear Him alone.

On hindsight, I believe this to be a watershed moment in my unexpected God-appointed journey. We look to and appreciate the present-day medical excellence and the comfort of others. But we still look ultimately to the Lord for His will to be done. Since then, I have been reminding myself that I will fear God, instead of cancer.

The next morning, I felt the Lord say to me, “You are going to be okay.” It made me hopeful. Of course, I wanted to be okay! But what I thought was from the Lord could also be my own mind making things up. So I shared it with my wife for the record. My wife felt comforted in the midst of her grief and fears. We went early in the morning to SGH with trembling yet hopeful hearts.

During the consultation with my surgeon, we found out that the CT scan showed a large tumour. But there was no visible spread, and the cancer markers were normal. It was not a terminal case. The colonoscopy that evening confirmed that there was no spread of cancer. We heaved a great sigh of relief! We were spared the worst case scenario. Thank God for his great mercies!

The path ahead was set. God had appointed my journey to have the aim of total cure through treatment. The journey was going to be hard and painful. My body would be affected after surgery. At the end of the treatment, I could have the chance to live on. This was as good as it gets.

I had, in the last few days, experienced intense and unnerving fears over the uncertainty of my life and future. But choosing to fear God alone anchored my heart and enabled me to keep on following Jesus.

3. Sin and Guilt

Is it because of my sins? Am I being punished for my wrongdoing? Is this to pay for the wrongs I have committed? These questions came to mind, as I walked and prayed one evening. A standard, normal, biblical response is to evaluate if my sickness could be due to sin. No follower of Jesus is above the possibility of being tainted or mired in sin, which then invites God's discipline. I prayed, "Search me, O God", according to Psalms 139.

But the connection with the intense grief and sorrow of my condition made this evaluation extremely painful and fearful. I felt as if there was a dreadful darkness descending. I thought that the accuser of the brethren might be at work too. I sensed that I could be slipping into a bottomless pit of uncontrolled fear and depression.

Then, the word of God came to my rescue. I was reminded that Jesus bore my sins on the cross. My iniquities God will remember no more. As far as the east is from the west, God will remove my transgressions from me. It is finished. I am saved by grace through faith. There is now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus.

What was my conclusion? I am far from perfect. But whatever known sins I have committed, I have asked God for forgiveness and the cleansing by the blood of Jesus. I cannot pay for my sins through illness and suffering. Jesus paid it all. I will not be punished further for my sins. Jesus suffered the punishment for my sin. I am flawed. But I stand forgiven, without condemnation. Not because of what I did, but because of God's grace. Because of Jesus who died on the cross for my sins.

So, what I am going through in illness, pain, and suffering was not due to my sins. It was an unexpected, God-appointed journey to His glory.

I also learnt that I must be careful in examining my own heart for sin and guilt. It is necessary, but it must also be balanced and anchored in the Scripture. My personal grief and fears over the dreaded disease made me emotionally vulnerable. I thus became over-sensitive to any accusations that came to mind.

Instead of ruminating over them in the darkness of the hour, I had to evaluate if there was any truth to these thoughts. As long as the Holy Spirit did not clearly convict me of sin and guilt, I needed to focus my thoughts on the objective truths of the Gospel. I needed to pull away from the downward drag of my negative feelings.

I was reminded that following Jesus well through sufferings requires a heart and mind that is constantly instructed and guided by the word of God. I needed to choose intentionally to listen to what the Bible says, instead of what my feelings are shouting at me.

“This is a difficult journey. Moments of peace can be disrupted by thoughts of that immovable mountain of cancer, and all that flows from it. I get crippled by my longings and chained by my fears. But I also want to become a better follower of Jesus. I want all that happens to lend itself to the advance of the Gospel. ”

4. What More Can I Give?

In 1748, during his return voyage to England aboard the ship Greyhound, John Newton had a spiritual conversion. He awoke to find the ship caught in a severe storm off the coast of Donegal, Ireland. It was about to sink. In response, Newton began praying for God's mercy, after which the storm began to die down. After four weeks at sea, the Greyhound made it to port in Lough Swilly, Ireland. This experience marked the beginning of his conversion to Christianity. He is the author of the well-known hymn, Amazing Grace.

Such stories make us think of crises as major turning points in life, and rightly so. We have heard of other stories where the storms of life also led to repentance from sin for believers, or an answer to God's call to ministry. It is therefore normal for Christians to search their hearts, to see if there are sins to confess or a further commitment to the Lord to be made. Ideally, when such a decision is made, the storm will cease and all will turn better.

So when the diagnosis of cancer came, I asked myself the same questions. But I came away with a different answer. After praying and seeking the Lord, I was not convicted of any known or unknown sin to be confessed. As to the question of further consecration, I have been serving the Lord in full-time ministry for over 20 years without holding anything back from Him.

Honestly, if there was anything He wanted me to give, I would gladly offer it to Him, for this storm of cancer to end! But my wife and I had already given up our careers, the opportunity to gain and accumulate wealth, the prime years of our youth, and anything else that serving Him required of us all these years.

What more could I give? On deeper reflection, I realized that it was wrong to persist in asking this question. There is a level in our walk with God when He wants to deal with our sin and commitment. But this is not all there is in our relationship with Him. If everything I ask God for is an “exchange” (where if I do “A”, God gives me “B”), then is my relationship with God only a contractual exchange? If I were to keep thinking that there was something I must do or sacrifice to God to end my crisis, then how does His love and grace fit into my relationship with Him?

My answer to the question is: “If we must think along the lines of giving, then give glory to God.” Give glory to God in the storms of my life because I trust Him. Give glory to God in the crisis of my critical illness because I love Him. Give glory to God when there is nothing more you can give, because He loves you.

Let God take my grief and pain, let God take my disease and treatment, let God take all that is going to happen to me in this unexpected journey, to reveal the glory of His love and goodness. I want to rest in His grace and mercy, as I face this storm in my life. When there is nothing more I feel I can give, I want to give glory to Him.

5. It's So Unreal

While my wife and I were walking and chatting one evening, she said: "It's so unreal." I thought for a moment and said: "Guess it's so unreal because I am not experiencing fatigue, loss of appetite, unexplained weight loss, and other symptoms yet. All I'm having now are changes in bowel movement and blood in stool. But the cancer is there, and it will get worse if left untreated."

But on further reflection, it's so unreal because we don't really talk or think about illness, suffering, and death much. Even though we know these are here in our world, they all seem so distant. Until they happen to us. How do you process such information anyway?

Millions around the world have suffered and died because of COVID-19 since 2020. My wife just showed me an article about a missionary who died on the second flight which crashed. He left behind his wife and three young children. What answers can we find in the face of such sufferings? How can we make sense of such pain and loss?

If we say that God is love, it would raise the question: "Why didn't He do something?" To say that He is in sovereign control would make it seem even worse. The truth is, God is love. He is sovereign. Yet He allows such pain, loss, and suffering. We just don't have any easy answers, or even an answer sometimes. Perhaps that is why Job's suffering is so scary to some. And God didn't answer his questions either. God showed Job what he needed.

The only thing we can know for sure is that we live in a broken world and in a broken body. Pain, loss, and suffering are part of existence. The other thing we can know for sure is that God loves us, He is sovereign, and He doesn't always explain why He allows sufferings in our lives. To ask "why" can be frustrating. This world and this life is far too complex for us to comprehend why God does certain things. To ask "what" is more helpful. I asked God what I needed to learn and know, to follow Jesus better.

So death may be so unreal now. But when it becomes real, we need to choose carefully how we respond, so that we can follow Jesus well through sufferings.

Death seems so unreal and distant because it is something we don't really think about until it comes knocking on our door. When that moment comes, it can be rather shocking and disturbing. I had many questions. But I didn't always receive an answer to every question.

I can trust God and keep on following Him. I can look towards the hope of glory promised in the Gospel, even when it hurts so bad, and I don't understand. Or I can give in to my confusion, anger, disappointment, and bitterness. And I can let my sufferings separate me from the One who loves us and gave Himself for us.

6. Comfort and Hope

When the unexpected diagnosis came, I grappled with another irony in my understanding of death. Having pastored for over a decade, I have conducted my fair share of funeral services. The purpose is to bring comfort to the bereaved family through Scripture.

Now that I was the one facing the possibility of death, what was the comfort of Scripture to me? The irony was, I was at a loss when it came to finding comfort in the Scriptures! Why? Because it is assumed that the bereaved are the ones who are grieving, since they have lost their loved one. The loved one who has departed in the Lord has gone to a far better place. No words of comfort are needed for the departed, right?

I was not that person who had departed yet. I may be departing though. And I did not find myself looking happily at the thought of dying and leaving for heaven. To be clear, it wasn't because I did not believe that being with the Lord was far better. It was just that I longed to remain with my family. I wanted to grow old with my wife. I wanted to see my sons grow up, get married, and have children. I didn't expect to leave them so soon. The thought of leaving them filled my heart with grief.

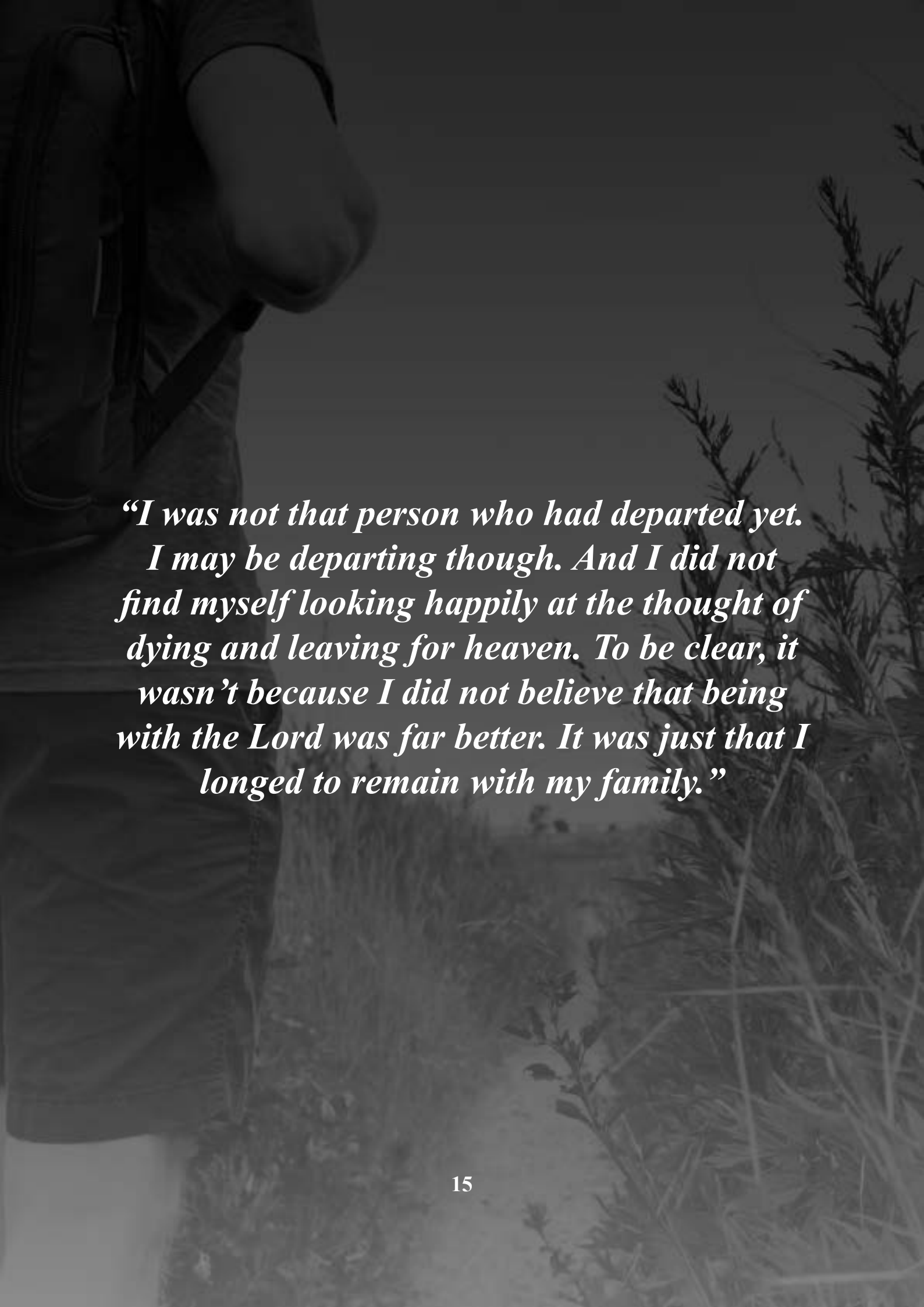
So here I was, with a knowledge of Scripture's comforting words about death for believers, without finding any comfort for myself in those same passages I knew and taught. It forced me to take a step back, to look hard at what the Gospel says about Christ's victory over death.

Victory has been won through Jesus' death and resurrection. Those who believe in Him can now have hope of eternal life. But this hope does not remove the grief that comes to someone in the face of death. There is grief for the bereaved at the loss of the departed. There can also be grief for the departing, because of the impending separation with his or her loved ones.

The grief does not take away the hope. Neither does the hope take away the grieving. Even with the tension between the two, God can fill our hearts with peace, and even joy. But at the next moment, our hearts can still be overwhelmed with pain and sorrow.

I know I grieved, even as I had hope in Christ, because I could not bear to leave my loved ones behind. I also know that I grieved not as one without hope because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Following Jesus through sufferings involves bearing both grief and hope in my heart. The intermingling of the two, along with the tension between them, is part of the journey.



“I was not that person who had departed yet. I may be departing though. And I did not find myself looking happily at the thought of dying and leaving for heaven. To be clear, it wasn’t because I did not believe that being with the Lord was far better. It was just that I longed to remain with my family.”

7. Assumptions and Entitlements

The possibility of death came as a rude shock. The diagnosis of cancer was unexpected. The thought of dying so soon was even more unexpected. But don't we all know we will die one day? And doesn't the Bible talk clearly about death, to prepare believers when it comes? Shouldn't embracing the Gospel with faith empower us to face death without flinching?

But the irony I found was this. Yes, I knew I would die one day, just not now. Why? Did anyone promise me a life till old age? Did God say that His children would all live to be octogenarians? What made me think that I would necessarily live to withdraw my Central Provident Fund savings? Who guaranteed that I could live to enjoy my retirement years?

I realized that these are assumptions in our modern lives. With the advancement of medical science, we think we are protected. With all the reports of longer life spans, we think we are entitled to our golden years. Even with daily news of people dying from accidents, disease, crime, and other causes, we believe those are exceptions.

So when death knocks on our door, we are shocked. Why me? Why so soon? And if we are not careful, we can get very angry. And even bitter. The truth is, no one has promised any of us how long we get to live. The reality is that our mortality has not been removed by science, wealth, or faith. The danger is that we can feel entitled to good health and a long life because of our assumptions.

As James 4 points out: "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes." This is true for the righteous and the wicked, the rich and the poor, the saved and the unsaved, the good Christian and the nominal believer, the modern sophisticated and the rural simple. If you think that you are entitled to a good long life for whatever reason, James exposed this as "boasting in arrogance."

James' counsel to correct the errors in our modern assumptions and entitlement is: ““Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live...”” Yes, I know it is hard to accept. We strive every day to prolong our health, wellness, and life. It is good Christian stewardship. But having done your best does not change the reality that God never promised how long you and I will live. To be able to live to a ripe old age healthily is a blessing, not an entitlement.

I came to the realization that my crisis with cancer and death could turn me away from God, if my underlying assumptions were wrong. I needed to expose and reject any sense of entitlement formed by such unfounded assumptions. If I did that, God could use this crisis to humble and guide me, to shape and mold me, to become a better follower of Jesus.

8. Whispers of Another World

I grew up in church singing children's songs about heaven.

“Somewhere in outer space, God has prepared a place, for those who trust Him and obey.”

Almost every other hymn I had sang in worship has a final stanza that speaks of the golden shore beyond this life.

“In mansions of glory and endless delight,
I'll ever adore Thee in heaven so bright;
I'll sing with the glittering crown on my brow;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.”

Having preached and taught the Bible for years, I am familiar with verses that speak of eternal life and the hope we have in the Gospel. Yet when the probability of death knocked on the door of my life, I realised that all I knew of the life beyond death was only “whispers of another world”.

By “whispers”, I do not mean that life after death is not real or true. Rather, we do not really know of heaven or life in eternity as well as we might think. Why? Because our experiences are only shaped by this life. Our knowledge of this life and its existence shouts loudest to us.

Though marred by sin, our precious memories are the results of daily encounters in this world. Holding our loved ones' hands. Watching a sunset together. Feeling the breeze in our faces. Tasting the bursting flavors of a sweet grape. Hearing our children's laughter. Our natural desires and longing remain attached to these experiences.

In contrast, all that we know of the world to come are found only in Scripture. The glimmers of glory whispers to us through its pages. They grip our hearts with hope and comfort through the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Following Jesus well through the valley of the shadow of death requires active and constant listening to the Good Shepherd's voice. He speaks to me daily through the Bible. He assures me of my hope in the Gospel. Unless we do so regularly, the whispers can be drowned out by the shouting of this world.

I have much to endure in the journey ahead. Pain and suffering because of the treatment of the disease. Fears and uncertainty over the future. Grief and sorrow over what will be lost. All these can crush my spirit, if all I know and can hold on to is in this world. I must therefore pay closer attention to the whispers of another world with renewed commitment.

9. Scripture and Songs

My treatment began within a month of my diagnosis. It was projected to last for a year. It would begin with radiotherapy, supplemented by chemotherapy and immunotherapy, to shrink the tumour. Then, a major surgery would be performed to remove the site of the disease. It would finish with a full regimen of chemotherapy, to fight cancerous cells not visible to the human eye.

With all this focus on the treatment of my physical body, it was easy to neglect the treatment of my soul. I believed that my soul's health and wellness had to be maintained through a constant walk with God, through Scripture and worship in songs. Without the discipline of daily devotions, how could I continue to follow Jesus well in this journey?

So I am thankful that for the most part, I was able to continue to read my Bible in the morning after breakfast and journal my devotional thoughts. There were times when I was so weak that I couldn't do so. Once, after my major surgery. A second time, after a crash during my second round of chemotherapy. But once my strength began to recover, I was delighted to come back to meet with my Lord in His word.

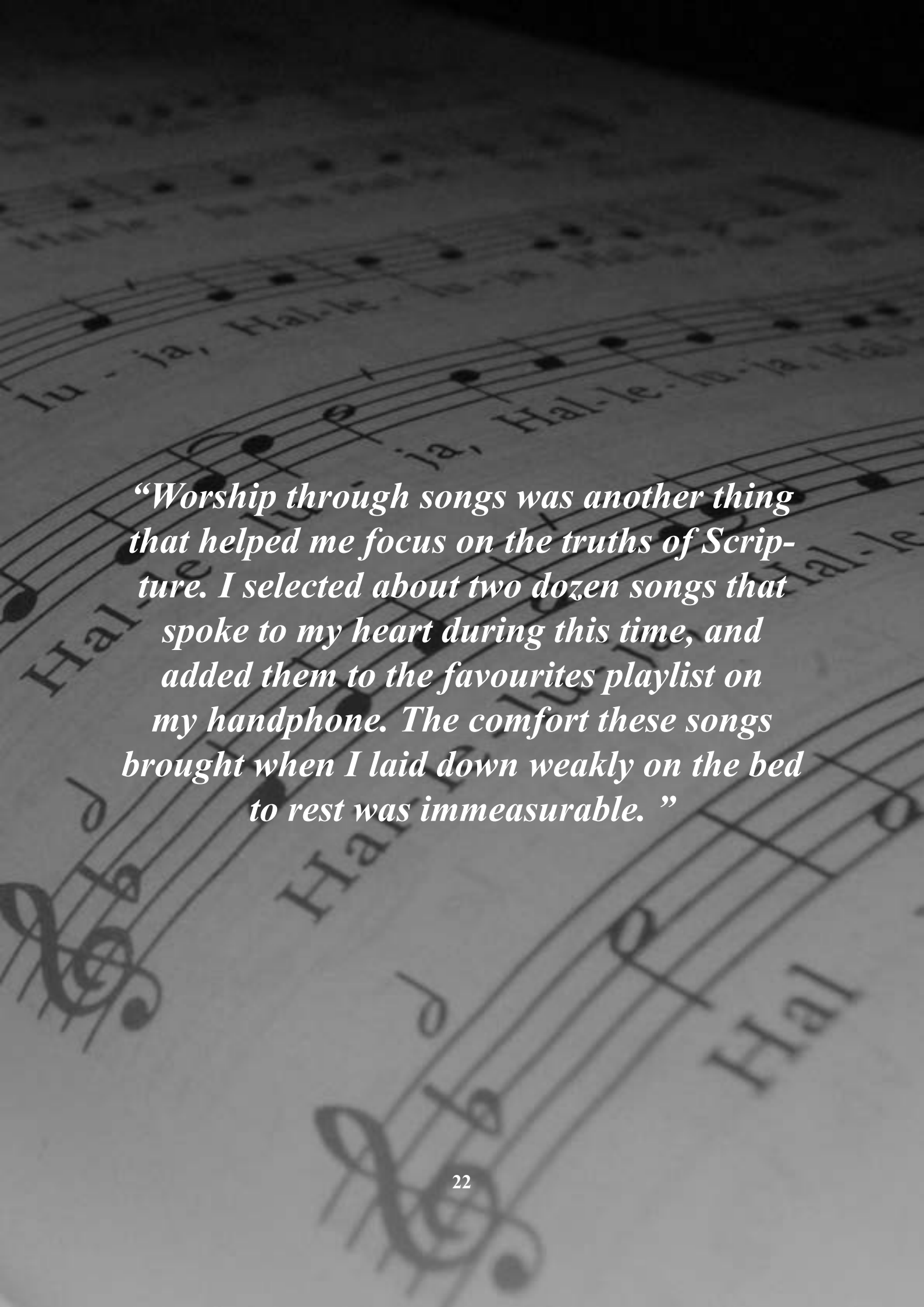
Worship through songs was another thing that helped me focus on the truths of Scripture. I selected about two dozen songs that spoke to my heart during this time, and added them to the favourites playlist on my handphone. The comfort these songs brought when I laid down weakly on the bed to rest was immeasurable.

It has been so helpful to focus on the lyrics of these lovely Scripture-based songs and sing along in my heart whenever my mind was troubled. Instead of allowing my thoughts to wander into dark negative regions, these songs guided me to turn my focus to the Lord.

My wife and I would often share the verses God used to speak to us in our sorrowful struggles. Some of mine are Psalms 23, 1 Peter 5:10, and Psalms 103. Some of hers are Matthew 10:29-31 and Isaiah 30:18. It was also not uncommon for us to witness each other breaking down in tears, as God ministered to us while listening to a particular song.

Through Scripture and worship songs, we drew near to God. We have found that the Lord's constant presence gave us peace, joy, comfort, strength, and hope throughout this difficult and challenging journey.

Following Jesus well through sufferings necessitates an intentional and active engagement with the truth of Scripture regularly. I believe it enabled me to keep in step with the Lord through the ups and downs of my journey. We must find our own ways to pursue the well-being of our souls, by keeping ourselves under the nourishment and comfort of Scripture.



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10. The Key Verse for My Journey

I asked God for a verse to anchor my faith for the journey. After praying for some time, the Lord impressed upon my heart to cling on to 1 Peter 5:10: “And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.”

The first thing I wanted to know was what “a little while” meant. Naturally, my wish was for it to mean a short period in this life. But here is an honest and faithful answer from a commentary: “From God’s perspective, one’s time in this world is notably brief. Thus, no matter how long or intense one’s suffering may be, it will be short compared to the joys of eternity.” In other words, there is no assurance that the promise applies for a short period now. The sufferings of some last till death comes, and one is ushered into eternity.

The next question is why there is such terrible and intense “suffering”. We might like to think that a good and loving God will not allow His children to suffer. But that is not true of the God revealed in the Bible. Think about our Lord Jesus, the apostles, many well-known Christians through the ages, and even those around you today. Being a Christian, a good Christian, a Christian for many years, or a spiritual Christian (you can go on to make your own description or formulation) does not shield or spare you from suffering.

Now, instead of asking why, I have found it a lot more helpful to ask about the “who” in my suffering. In the midst of the storm that suffering brings, God is brought to the scene as the “God of all grace”. One might think that one’s knowledge, experience, piety, or resources can help win God’s special favour in times of affliction. But the truth is, God reaches out to us in hard times because of His grace. Honestly, I have found this to be immensely comforting and reassuring throughout my journey. There are times when I don’t feel very spiritual, full of faith, or positive in my pain and weakness. But I know that God is there with me not because I am deserving or worthy. He is the God of all grace.

Once I established the “who” in my sufferings, I could consider the “what”. What does God want to do? What purpose does God have in all this affliction? What is the direction all these suffering should take? We are clearly told that God “has called you to his eternal glory in Christ”. In other words, He will accomplish what He has saved us to do. He will make what is happening reveal “His eternal glory in Christ”. He wants to take the drama of pain in our lives to show those who are watching who He is and what He is doing in our world.

The most important thing in my suffering is therefore not my comfort but His glory. The glory of His holiness. The glory of His love. The glory of His salvation. The glory of a life beyond this earthly existence. The glory of all that is found in Christ. In this journey of suffering, I am still called to follow Jesus, that others may see His grace and glory in what is happening to me.

11. Giving Thanks

Being diagnosed with a critical illness like cancer can seem an acceptable reason to be fearful, angry, miserable, and depressed. But this is what I found in one of the books I read: “Even with cancer, even in the middle of a difficult treatment cycle, even in your darkest and most fearful hours, be thankful for all you do have. For life, for love, for family, for friends, for the awesome beauty of nature, for the presence of God, for all these things and more, be thankful. Why do I feel so strongly about gratitude’s healing power? It’s because I have seen gratitude bring more significant and rapid improvements to the lives of cancer patients than any other single action.” (Greg Andersen, *Cancer: 50 Essential Things to Do*)

This was an important reminder, as a follower of Jesus. As a Christian, I know that giving thanks is the right thing to do. As a cancer patient who wants to keep following Jesus, I cannot excuse myself from maintaining a spirit of gratitude to move forward with the Lord.

To put this into practice, when I prayed in the evening, I began with giving thanks to God. Like the author I quoted pointed out so aptly wrote: “We’re so busy with appointments and treatments, discomfort and despair, fear and pain, that we lose our perspective. We tend to look at the cancer journey as a long and twisted path, filled with potholes. There seems to be nothing for which we can be thankful. This is faulty and self-destructive thinking.”

There were many times when I felt down. There were days when everything looked bleak and dreary. There were moments when the future looked dark and hopeless. If I were to begin my prayers with asking God for things I needed or wanted, I wouldn't even know how to start. Focusing on the things I wish would change makes me feel even more helpless and frustrated.

But I found that when I began my prayers with giving thanks, I turned my attention to things I could be grateful to God for in my day. Even if it was a little thing, such as thanks that I could eat a little that day, or for the cool weather, it made a difference.

It helped to bring light into the dark corners of my life and drive away the lingering shadows. It helped me to be grateful to God for the things that still worked, rather than mourn over what did not. It helped to keep my focus on what God wanted to do, even as I grieved over what was breaking down in my body.

So to combat faulty and self-destructive thinking in a long and difficult journey of cancer treatment, I give thanks to God every day when I pray in the evening. It has powerfully enabled me to keep my focus, refresh my spirit, remain in His joy and peace, and to keep on following Jesus.

12. Marriage and Love

One of my most painful thoughts was leaving my wife behind in death. This is not an uncommon grief or fear. When American pastor Timothy Keller was interviewed about his diagnosis of stage four pancreatic cancer, he said:

“My fear isn’t dying. My fear is actually leaving her behind and that’s her biggest fear as well. It’s a terrible fear.” (“Tim Keller says his ‘biggest fear’ isn’t dying from cancer but leaving his wife behind”, Christianity Today, 24 November 2020)

I wrestled with questions around love and marriage in the face of my own cancer and the possibility of death. The Gospel seeks to restore the image of God in man by changing us into the likeness of Christ. Thus, for example, husbands are commanded to love their wives, as Christ loved the church. As we grow spiritually over the years, our love in the marriage deepens and flourishes.

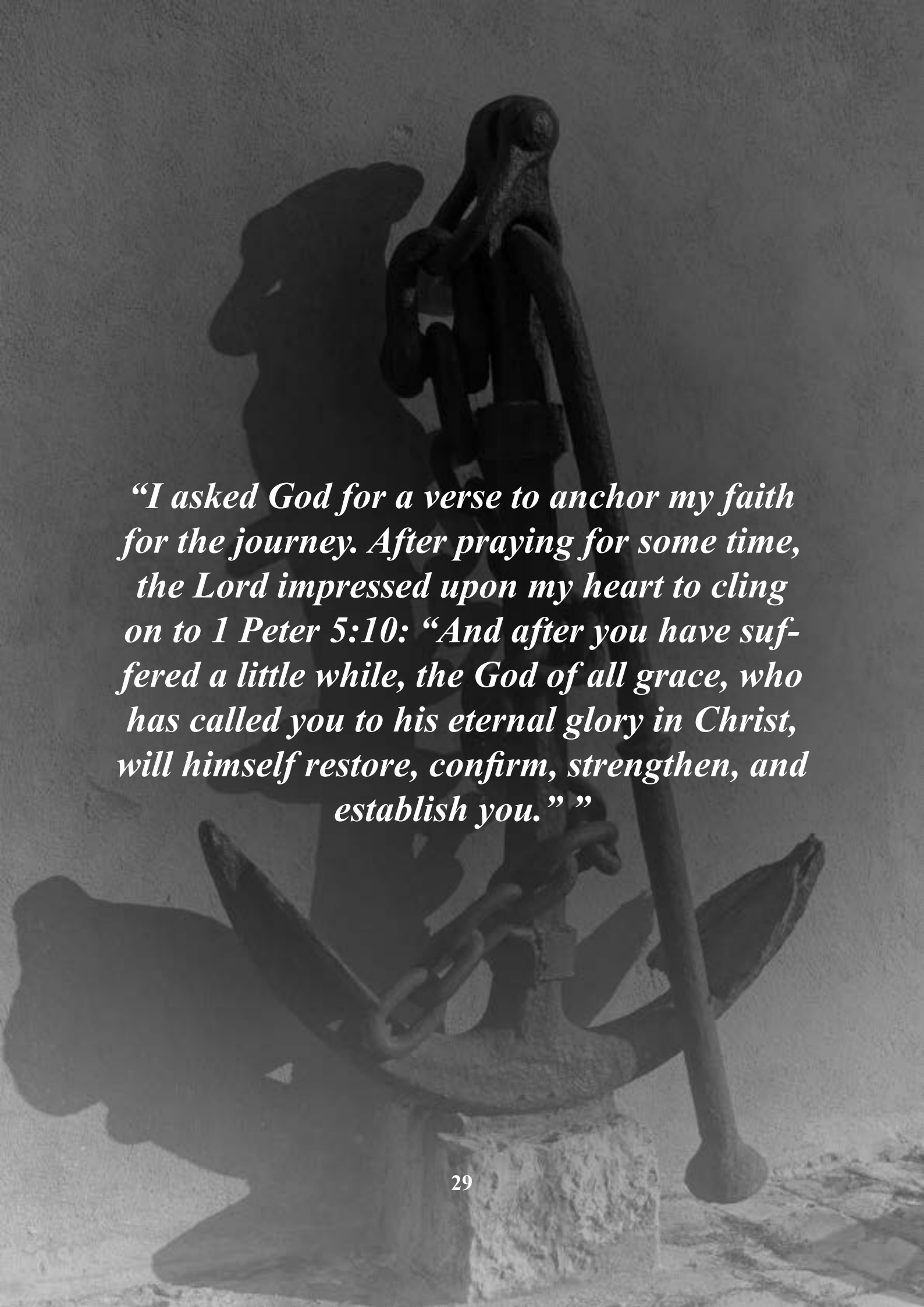
Here are some questions I asked. Do we grow in love for decades only for that precious, intimate, and irreplaceable bond in marriage to be ripped apart at death? Do we become vulnerable and intertwined in expanding areas of our lives, only to be cruelly separated by death? Does growing older help to alleviate the grief of such loss?

I was approaching 50, and the thought of leaving my wife teared me up with grief. Tim Keller was 70 when the same thought was to him one of “terrible fear”. I strongly suspect that the older you are and the longer you have been in a marriage of deep love, the worse the pain will be when death comes for you or your spouse.

What can we do to protect ourselves from such grief and pain, when death breaks up our marriage and takes away our beloved? Could it be that those who endured a cold and loveless marriage will be less affected? Could the answer be to love, perhaps a little less? Such an idea is the antithesis of genuine love that gives selflessly to the one loved, as Christ demonstrated through His sacrifice on the cross.

Well, my conclusion is, I have no answer. As a follower of Jesus, I cannot stop growing and exercising myself in love. God commands husbands and wives to love each other, and I will obey without withdrawing for self-protection. What can I do when death comes and the grief is great? I can only look to the Lord for His comfort, healing, and guidance.

The command to love each other in marriage, even if it hurts terribly when death comes knocking on the door, does not change. It take courage to pursue love in your marriage unrelentingly, when you realise that your grief will be compounded the more successful you are in obeying the Lord.



“I asked God for a verse to anchor my faith for the journey. After praying for some time, the Lord impressed upon my heart to cling on to 1 Peter 5:10: “And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.” ”



13. Sorrow in Causing Grief

It made me nervous. Informing my brothers and sisters of my diagnosis was very hard emotionally. I come from a rather large family. I have two brothers and four sisters. I am the youngest. Both my parents have passed away. There is a 19-year difference between my oldest sister and I. We are not distant, but neither are we close. We make an effort to maintain contact and build better connections over the years, but it is not easy with such a large family.

One of the last things I wanted to do was to bring bad news to them. I did not want to shock them nor bring them grief. With trepidation, I sent WhatsApp messages to them individually to break the news. The response was almost immediate. They sent words of shock, concern, grief, and disbelief. As I read their replies, I began to weep.

The funny thing about family is that no matter what has transpired over the years, there is a kinship deep within us because we are related by blood. Their love and support moved me deeply. At the same time, I felt really bad to have caused them such grief. It wasn't easy to tell them about my cancer. Maybe, that is why some don't. Until someone else eventually breaks the news. Looking back, I'm glad I did.

My disease became a rallying point for my brothers and sisters to get together on a more regular basis with me. Because of the Covid-19 situation, we could only meet on Zoom most of the time. I would give an update on my treatment and progress, and give thanks for God's guidance, providence and blessing. They would ask how I was doing physically, mentally, and emotionally, and this gave me opportunities to share how my faith influenced my response to this critical illness.

Some of my siblings are not Christians. I realised that God had opened a door of opportunity for me to witness for Jesus. I had the freedom to share my thoughts and feelings about what I was going through with a transparency that constantly included what God had been teaching me, and how He had been providing for me. I am grateful for these Gospel opportunities.

Another thing that God did was to bring three of my sisters together to provide meals during my treatments. This was a constant and practical expression of their love and concern. I also cherished the short moments of interaction when they came over with their healthy home-cooked meals.

Overall, I think it is not too far-fetched to say that what happened has helped bring my siblings and I closer. We talked about life and health. We shared our deeper desires and thoughts. And if I had avoided the sorrow in causing them grief, I would have missed the chance to involve them in my journey, or it would have made it awkward for them to reach out to me.

I think most of us would not want to bring bad news or cause grief to others. But I have found that it is the right thing to do, especially with family members. The Lord wants to use what is happening to reach out to my family. Whether they accept the invitation or not, they deserve front row seats. I get to invite them in.



14. Relationship and Community

The crushing blow of being diagnosed with a critical illness seems to be a good reason to withdraw from your community. Add the hectic schedule of cancer treatment, and it may appear that it is time to disengage from various relationships.

It may seem counter-intuitive but it is important to continue, and even start new communities. Relationships are central to our experience of life and illness. I found that it was meaningful and nurturing to invest time and energy in communities that supported my journey.

One thing I am thankful for was the creation of a prayer chat group by my church's staff team. It has been extremely encouraging and uplifting to share my needs, progress and milestones with a community of concerned Christian brothers and sisters who are supporting me in prayer.

In the first half of the year, while I was physically able, I continued to meet my church's staff team on Fridays for staff devotion and prayer. On Saturday afternoons, I met my discipleship group to share and pray with them. On Wednesday evenings, it was the church's prayer meetings.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, these were done on Zoom. This turned out to be even better because it reduced the risk of infections, whether from Covid-19 or the common cold, that would delay my time-sensitive treatment schedule. Although virtual meetings were not the most ideal, it was still an important way to remain engaged in my communities.

As a result of my siblings' concerns, I also began meeting them regularly over Zoom to share the updates and progress of my treatment. Three of my older sisters banded together to cook and deliver meals twice a week. When they came to deliver the meals, I appreciated our short conversations.

After my major surgery, I had ileus, which greatly weakened me physically. Within a month of my recovery from it, my full regimen of chemotherapy began. My physical condition in the next half of the year did not allow me to continue with those Zoom meetings. Yet, it was something I knew I would pursue when I was able to.

But here is a word of caution based on advice I received. Cancer survivors should pursue supportive and nurturing relationships, and put toxic relationships "on hold". Why? Because toxic relationships create toxic stress, which lowers our resistance and ability to cope with cancer treatment. There is a time to work on improving these relationships, but it does not have to be during this time.

I have found relationships and community to be very important in the support and nurturing of my well-being during the treatment journey. The concerned people who loved, helped, and prayed for me greatly encouraged me to keep on following Jesus.



15. Faith and Healing

One morning, about two weeks after my treatment began, I read a verse that caught my attention during my devotional time. It was 2 Kings 20:5: “I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Behold, I will heal you.”

This was God’s answer to Hezekiah. Would this be His answer to my cancer? I don’t know. Is this because of a lack of faith? I don’t think so.

In the Gospels, many people came to Jesus for healing. There were those who said to Him: “If you can, heal me”. In response, Jesus rebuked them for a lack of faith. There were those who said to Him: “If you will, heal me.” Jesus healed them in His compassion, without any rebuke.

What was the difference? “If you can” questions God’s power to heal. “If you will” questions God’s will to heal. The former is a lack of faith in His ability. The latter is a submission to His sovereign will.

I don’t think I should doubt God’s power and ability to heal. But neither should I presume on His sovereign will that He will heal my cancer. So I believe that God can, but I am not certain that He will. My cry to God in the submission of faith is: “If you will, heal me.”

Coming back to Hezekiah, what else can I believe? From 2 Kings 20:5, I can believe that God hears my prayers. I can believe that God see my tears. That is of great comfort and encouragement in this unexpected God-appointed journey.

I believe that God can heal me and give me many good years to come. I can know that He hears and sees my pain and sorrow. I can look forward to His answer and wait to hear Him say: “Behold, I will heal you.” But whether God chooses to heal me is not a matter I can presume upon, no matter how great a faith I think I may have.

Today, there seems to be a lot of confusion over faith and healing. The assumption is that as long as you have faith, you will be healed. If you are not healed, then you didn’t have enough faith. That puts a tremendous burden on the afflicted, who are already suffering from sickness. It becomes your fault if you are not healed!

This thinking and teaching on faith and healing is flawed, because it assumes God must heal because you have faith. That is only one aspect of the truth. I have faith in God’s power to heal, and I also have faith that His sovereign will is best. Just because I have faith in God’s healing does not mean He will necessarily do so. Our faith in God’s power must include faith in submission to His will. With such faith, I was better able to follow Jesus through sufferings.



“One thing I am thankful for was the creation of a prayer chat group by my church’s staff team. It has been extremely encouraging and uplifting to share my needs, progress and milestones with a community of concerned Christian brothers and sisters who are supporting me in prayer.”



16. Trials, Then and Now

More than 20 years ago, before my wedding, I watched a video testimony of a young Cantonese Malaysian Christian couple. The husband had nose cancer. He was diagnosed shortly after he was married. For him and his new wife, it was a journey filled with grief and hope in the Gospel. They gave bold and powerful witness for Jesus, before he eventually passed away.

Then, I was getting married. I was also Cantonese and Christian. I was terrified at the thought of getting cancer and dying after my marriage. Instead of inspiring my faith, what happened to them filled me with fear. I remembered wrestling with this issue in prayer before the Lord.

The answer that gave me peace was 1 Corinthians 10:13: “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” I believed the Lord told me something to this effect: “Don’t worry. I allowed them to suffer for My Name because they were able to endure it. You can’t. It is beyond your ability. So don’t overestimate yourself!”

I learnt that God tests us not to pull us down into sin and defeat, but to lift us up to new heights of faith and victory. Of course, what is “beyond your ability” and what you are “able to endure” is not determined by what you think or feel about yourself. In reality, we don’t really know. Even the apostle Paul felt that he suffered “beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself” (2 Corinthians 1:8) But God, in His wisdom and love, knows and He is faithful to act according to His good purposes.

So, we cannot take this verse as a promise that everything that happens to us will be according to what we believe we can handle. If we do, we give ourselves permission to get angry and disappointed with God, when the trials of life seem too hard and our grief overwhelms us. Instead, this verse presents us with a truth - that God will use our trials to accomplish His sovereign will. Even when we feel that hardship is crushing us, we know that we are able to endure it through His grace.

Now, over 20 years later, I was diagnosed with cancer. To be honest, I didn't feel that I was able to endure it. But I believe that God will not allow this to pull me down into sin and defeat. I trust that He knows what is beyond my ability. I believe that His grace is sufficient for me. This confidence in God's faithfulness does not mean I was spared the pain, struggles, uncertainties, fears, and despair in my cancer treatment. It meant that I could have peace and strength to keep on following Jesus through it all.



17. Grief and Compassion

We read in Isaiah 53:3 that Jesus was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Perhaps, some might picture this to be a person with a sad long face all day, every day. Was Jesus really such a picture of misery and depression? Our Savior was the perfect Man while on earth, and He grew in favour with God and man. Our Lord knew grief, but he also knew joy. He was balanced in His emotions.

What does it mean to be “acquainted with grief”? It meant that Jesus experienced various sorts of sorrow and grief throughout His life. It was knowledge by experience. I was introduced to such a knowledge of grief through my cancer treatment. This is a little of what I learnt.

Grief is experienced in pain. You come to know a variety of grief when you experience different types of pain. Since my diagnosis, I have experienced intense, prolonged, unrelieved physical pain at various times. I have also suffered mental and emotional anguishes due to the fear, uncertainties, and losses that this disease brought into my life.

Grief recedes when pain subsides. I was not in grief all the time. There were times of rich and genuine joy, like when the Lord gave a positive outcome after a phase of treatment. There were periods of peace and quietness, when my weakened body enjoyed rest from the beatings of the treatment. There were even moments of excitement and vigor, when I felt I could have a life again. At those times, the grief was almost forgotten. Knowing grief does not mean staring at it all the time.

Grief can create deeper compassion in us. I found that something changed in me with the continual experience of grief with pain. It felt like the “bowels of my compassion” had been more deeply moved. When I watched a movie or drama with my wife, a scene of grief and loss would connect easily with me, and I would begin to sniff and even tear. There seemed to be a quicker identification with someone experiencing pain, and their grief resonated with me more deeply.

So when the Bible describes Jesus as a man acquainted with grief, I don't imagine a sad and mournful look on His face. I understand this to mean that He can identify easily with my pain and connect deeply with my grief. He knew such intense pain in His physical body when it was “broken” for me, that He understands what it means to be hurting. I am comforted to know that He will look on me with genuine compassion as I take my next feeble step forward to follow Him in this journey.



18. Control and Responsibilities

One of the hardest and most painful things I had to do was give up control, to focus on my treatment. In modern thinking, the idea of control is often viewed negatively. It is associated with micro-management, domination, and even tyranny. To put my sharing in the right perspective, I am referring to the control needed to fulfil my responsibilities.

What do I mean? I wanted control over my strength to lock the doors and windows at night. I wanted to fulfil my responsibility as the head of my home, to ensure our security. I wanted control over my health, to send my boys to the MRT station if it rained heavily in the morning. I wanted to fulfil my responsibility as a father, and protect my children's well-being. The list goes on, and my loss of control in various situations caused me sorrow. I struggled with the inability to do simple and basic things for my loved ones.

But I learnt that I had to let go of these control and responsibilities, to focus on my treatment. I had to stop beating myself up inside. I had to trust that God would take care of these things that I had been doing. I had to allow my wife and boys to take over, and do what I wanted to do for them. Honestly, it was not easy, but it was necessary. Otherwise, I would jeopardise my treatment journey.

Initially, when my treatment began, there were still a few things I could do. But as the treatment intensified, my body became weaker and my movement options were increasingly restricted. I had to keep letting go, to keep moving on with the pace of my treatment. Letting go of my desire to have control freed my mind from unhelpful agitations. Letting go of my desire to carry out my responsibilities permitted my body to rest and respond better to the treatment.

I remembered that after my major surgery, when my surgeon came to see me, he took a look at my debilitated condition and said kindly: “This is a season for rest.” It reminded me of Ecclesiastes 3:1-3.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;

I learnt that to move forward with God, in my appointed season, I had to let go. Not because I was abandoning my duties. Nor because I was quitting. Neither was it because these were things I did not care about. But because this season of my life required change. No matter how much I wished for things to remain the same, holding on and refusing to let go would hinder my ability to follow Jesus well.

“One of the hardest and most painful things I had to do was give up control, to focus on my treatment. In modern thinking, the idea of control is often viewed negatively. It is associated with micro-management, domination, and even tyranny. To put my sharing in the right perspective, I am referring to the control needed to fulfil my responsibilities.”



19. Uncertainties and Faith

We seek security in life. Uncertainties makes us fearful and anxious. The thing about having cancer is that you have to live with uncertainties. My surgeon kept saying to me: “Only time will tell.” This is one of the painful and difficult challenges of cancer: Living without certainty.

First, there is the uncertainty of the outcome of each phase of treatment. How would the tumour respond to the radiotherapy, chemotherapy, and immunotherapy? What was the result of the CT scan? Was the surgery successful? What does the histopathology say? Are the margins clear of microscopic cancerous cells? How would I respond to the full regimen of chemotherapy?

Second, even after completing my year of treatment, I was not out of the woods. My doctor told me that the first three years had the highest risk of cancer recurrence. And if I was declared clear of cancer, they would still monitor me until the fifth year to be sure. My surgeon said he would monitor me for ten years, because he saw recurrences even in the seventh year.

As I grappled with this information and what was happening, I realised that these uncertainties could cause me to live in fear, or they could drive me to walk by faith in God. Fear would descend on me, if I insisted on having certainty for my sense of security. On the other hand, faith could encompass my heart, if I allowed these uncertainties to drive me to cling to the Lord for the security of His will.

One benefit of being uncertain about whether I would still be alive in the next five years is that I can cherish each day God gives me. It can help me think and choose more clearly what is worth living for. Every day of life I enjoy can bring greater clarity, focus, and purpose on what matters in eternity with the Lord.

Hebrews 11:8 tells us: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.” Is it possible to obey God and live well by faith, without the certainty of where you are going? Abraham did. Will there be struggles in the heart, and perplexities in the mind? Certainly, we read in Genesis that Abraham had questions too. Yet, we can still live by faith even amid uncertainties, if that is God’s appointed path for us today.

Well, having cancer, getting treated for cancer, living with cancer, is not easy. It can rob me of my security, with all the uncertainties it brings. But it does not have to. I can choose to live in fear and frustration, or in faith and with focus on the Lord. The latter is actually how Christians are to live. With cancer, I have greater reason to do so to keep on following Jesus.



20. God's Power and Love

Since God is all powerful, why doesn't He heal? Why would God not remove the suffering of those He loves? The logical connection between power and love, when applied to healing the sick, seems irrefutably convincing. The overwhelming desire of the afflicted for their suffering to end can make the same connection oppressively compelling.

But when God does not do what we think He ought to do, our beliefs about God are greatly challenged. Does this mean that God is not powerful enough? Or is it because He is not loving enough? Why does He not do something about my pain? The lack of an explanation oppresses us and weighs us down. I wrestled with this, and an author I read offered valuable insights.

In one of his books, Philip Yancey explained why God allows the righteous Job to suffer: "Satan's accusation that Job loved God only because "you have put a hedge around him," stands as an attack on God's character. It implies that God is not worthy of love in himself; faithful people like Job follow him only because they are "bribed" to do so. Job's response when all the props of faith were removed would prove or disprove Satan's challenge." (Where is God When it Hurts?)

This perspective broadens the horizon of our suffering beyond our comfort and healing. The issue at stake is whether God is worthy of our trust and love. If our faith in God is only due to His protection and healing, how would we know if we truly love Him, or if we only love His blessings? How can we say that God is truly worthy of our love?

In the same book, Yancey put it this way: "God wants us to choose to love him freely, even when that choice involves pain, because we are committed to him, not to our own good feelings and rewards. He wants us to cleave to him, as Job did, even when we have every reason to deny him hotly. That, I believe, is the central message of Job."

On the question of power, Yancey highlighted this limitation in another book: “Power can do everything but the most important thing: it cannot control love. The ten plagues in Exodus show the power of God over a pharaoh. But the ten major rebellions recorded in Numbers show the impotence of power to bring about what God desired most, the love and faithfulness of his people. No pyrotechnic displays of omnipotence could make them trust and follow him.” (Disappointment with God)

We may consider instant miraculous healing a sign of God’s power and love. It is. He does heal. But God does not always heal. Neither does He always end the suffering of His children. In a relationship with God, the question is not only about whether God loves us. It is also about whether we love God, whether we really love Him. The issue is whether God is worthy of our trust, love, and worship, even when He doesn’t do what we desperately want Him to do for us.

I learnt that even though God has the power to heal, and even though He loves me so much that He sent Jesus to die on the cross for my sins, He can still allow me to suffer. He may choose not to relieve my pain. When God does that, I get to find out whether I still trust Him. And when I do, I get to tell others that my God is truly worthy of my love and worship. As a follower of Jesus, I have a precious opportunity to witness for Jesus. I can point others to Someone worth living and dying for, and it is not myself.



21. The Priority of the Gospel

My major surgery was successful. The histology report was excellent. No microscopic cancerous cells were detected. I had near complete response to the radio-chemotherapy, shrinking the tumour to the size of a small ulcer.

But my recovery had a complication. It wasn't serious, requiring surgical treatment. Yet, it was prolonged and painful. I had post-surgery ileus. My intestines were not moving. I was not able to tolerate food.

Four days after my surgery, I threw up. On Sunday, my surgeon came and tried to insert a tube into my stoma to initiate the discharge. But he didn't have a tube of the right size. The stoma nurse came the next day to do the procedure, and my stoma began to have plenty of discharge. My doctors and I were elated!

That week, I began to consume food slowly and my doctors prepared to discharge me on Friday. But on Thursday, after lunch, I began to feel bloated. My stoma stopped having discharge. My doctors came and advised monitoring and waiting for my intestines to push through.

But it didn't happen.

Instead, I lost my appetite for dinner. And I became more and more uncomfortable in the evening. I walked along the corridors to move my intestines, but it didn't help. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't sit. I couldn't lie down. It was a dark and painful night.

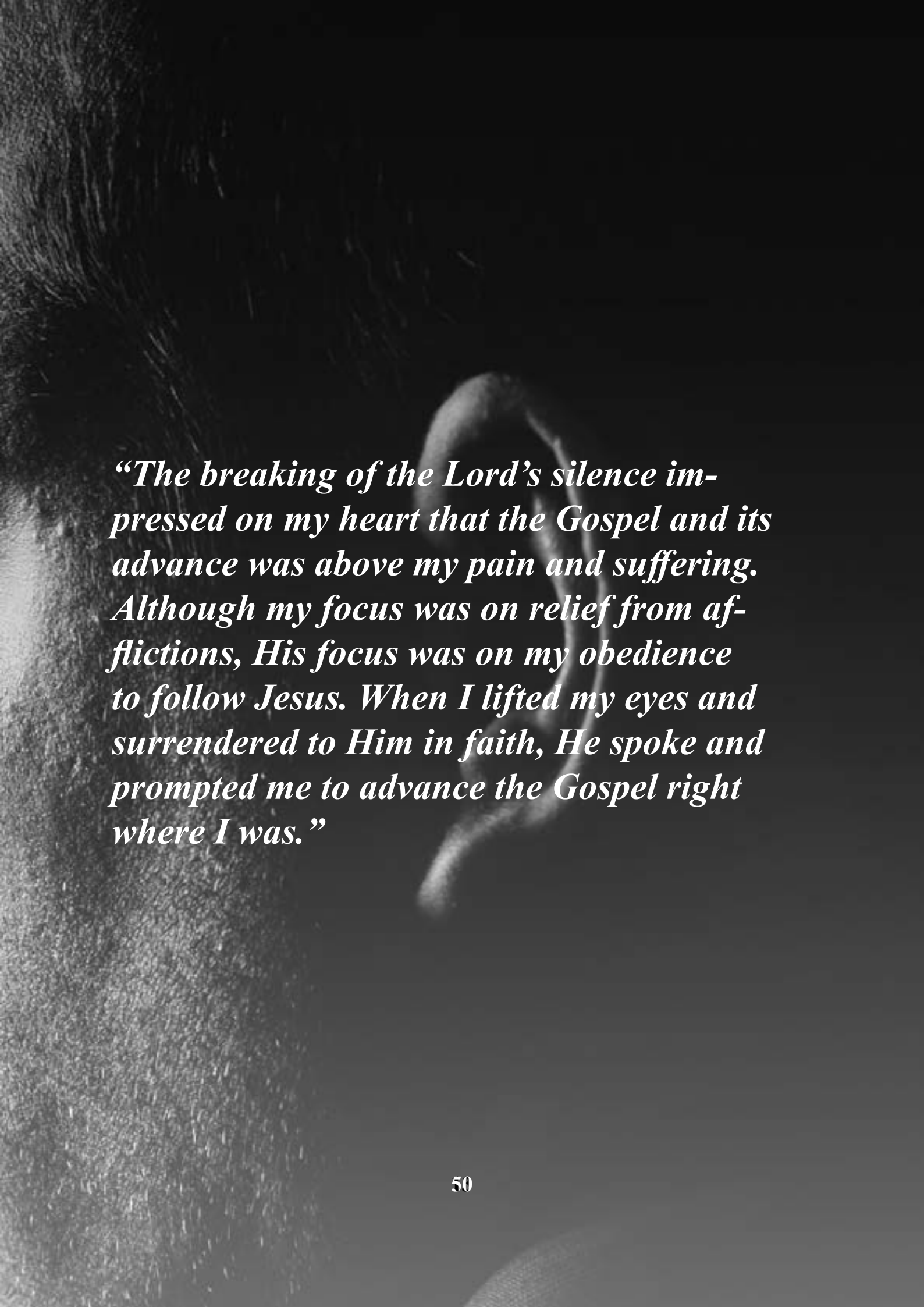
I prayed and cried to the Lord that He would bring me relief and a breakthrough, and let my stoma begin to work. But He seemed silent. The Red Sea did not part for me. There was no deliverance from my afflictions. There was so much tension, pain, and discomfort that I felt like I couldn't live. Neither could I die. I was in the depths of misery in that long and dark night.

Then, I resolved to worship and praise God, in spite of my physical afflictions. I cried to the Lord Job's words: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." In agony, I uttered the Lord's teaching on prayer: "Your will be done, Your kingdom come." I chose to place His purpose and will for me above all that I was going through.

I remember clearly that then, He spoke to me. "Reach out to your neighbour." There was a patient beside me in the ward for the past nine days. We had been friendly with each other. The Lord impressed on my heart to reach out to him simply by saying I'm a Christian, and initiating a spiritual conversation to see how it went.

The breaking of the Lord's silence impressed on my heart that the Gospel and its advance was above my pain and suffering. Although my focus was on relief from afflictions, His focus was on my obedience to follow Jesus. When I lifted my eyes and surrendered to Him in faith, He spoke and prompted me to advance the Gospel right where I was.

I am humbled and thankful for the lesson God taught me that long and dark night. Even when I was in pain and seeking relief, the Lord emphasised the priority of the Gospel. What matters above all, is the will of God in every experience in life. And it is always His will that we follow Jesus to advance the Gospel. This aligns with what Acts records, and resonates with the leading of the Holy Spirit in my heart.



“The breaking of the Lord’s silence impressed on my heart that the Gospel and its advance was above my pain and suffering. Although my focus was on relief from afflictions, His focus was on my obedience to follow Jesus. When I lifted my eyes and surrendered to Him in faith, He spoke and prompted me to advance the Gospel right where I was.”



22. Embrace the Negative Positively

The Lord taught me another important lesson that long and dark night. It helped me to be a better follower of Jesus.

I strive to be meticulous when it comes to health and recovery. I listen to what the doctors say. I put in my effort to do what they advise. I give them feedback on my symptoms for their assessment. I desire to avoid any undesirable and painful outcome.

So that was what I did during my hospitalisation. My doctors told me to walk. And I walked. They advised me to eat only half portions, and slowly. So I ate little, with an eye on the clock. They encouraged me to drink more water, and slowly, to avoid dehydration. And I sipped water slowly, with careful measurement to reach the target.

It doesn't take much imagination to see how discouraged and frustrated I was when the pain of that long and dark night came. I had done everything I was told. I took extra care to inform my doctor of what I was experiencing. Yet, I felt miserable and suffered for a long time, without relief. It was a recipe for despair.

The Lord taught me that I had to embrace the negative positively. When things go wrong, even though I think I have done everything right, I cannot give in to anger and despair. These are some of life's realities I have to acknowledge.

1. Life throws us many curved balls, even if we try to do everything right and properly.
2. Even when I pray and believe in Him, there are times I have to endure pain and stress when my faith is tested.

3. Trying to control or change some situations with my existing knowledge and actions will only create further stress and frustration.
4. So we must constantly allow Him to humble us and lead us to surrender to His will in faith.
5. And this has constantly brought me peace, joy and hope, even when my pain and suffering is still going on.

I learnt these lessons at about 3am that morning. At 5am, I was brought in a wheelchair to take an X-ray. At 6am, the doctor came and told me that they had detected a bloated stomach, and no movements in my intestines. To resolve the problem, they had to insert a tube through my nose to draw out the contents.

The nose tube insertion was extremely uncomfortable. But by that time, I no longer cared nor feared it. After the nurse completed the procedure, 700ml of content was drawn out of my stomach. I was told that this was seven times more than what should be in my stomach at any time. Once the excess content was removed, I finally had relief from my pain. I actually reflected on how this must have felt when Japanese soldiers tortured people by pumping water into their stomach during World War 2. It must have been even more painful.

My doctors could not discharge me as planned. It was confirmed that my ileus has not resolved. So I had a tube through my nose and another tube re-inserted into my stoma to draw out the contents. This was intended to facilitate the movement of my intestines. After that long and dark night, these measures finally led to the movement of my intestines in the following week. I had not taken food for almost two weeks.

It was sobering to realise how seriously the Lord took my prayer to become a better follower of Jesus and to advance the Gospel. He will do whatever it takes to help me to learn. The lessons were hard to forget.



23. Fixing My Eyes On Jesus

The journey of cancer treatment had been grievous during the initial radiotherapy and chemotherapy, with intense and debilitating pain at the end. It continued after my major surgery with the complication of ileus, which kept me hospitalised for 17 days and physically weakened me for many days. Then, I had to undergo a full regimen of chemotherapy with a stoma, which restricted and lowered my quality of daily life.

In the days that followed, I began to research and read up on what would happen after my stoma was reversed. And what I read was rather depressing. What lay ahead was medically termed Lower Anterior Resection Syndrome (LARS). This is a condition in which a patient whose rectum has been removed will experience persistent bowel problems and instability after the stoma is reversed.

Some research and studies showed that the quality of life for such patients was not necessarily better than those who live with a permanent stoma. Patients with LARS deal with incontinence, urgency, and frequency as part of their bowel problems, possibly for a long period of time or for the rest of their lives.

This sent me into fear and depression. Already, I had been facing a lot of pain and suffering since my cancer diagnosis. Now, I had nothing much to hope for even after the treatment was completed.

But God was teaching me how to follow Jesus better. Yes, the future did not look bright. Yes, I had been experiencing difficulties and pain for an extended period. But that did not mean that what I feared would define my life.

Instead, I had to fix my eyes on Jesus, to persevere in running the “race marked out” for me. I needed to take my eyes off my problems. I needed to turn my gaze away from an unknown and fearful future. I needed to fix my eyes on Jesus to keep on following Him.

I thank God for the power of His word that pierced through my fears and depressions, to re-direct my focus onto Jesus. I thank God for His truth that scattered the shadows and brought light to my soul. “If there is a secret to handling suffering,” an author wrote, “the spirit must be fed so that it can break free beyond the constraints of the body.” The Christian faith does not always offer resources to the body, but it overflows with resources to the spirit. We have hope to a perfect body in the future, but we have grace sufficient for a renewed spirit now.

So to follow Jesus well, we must not be fixated on physical healing, but on spiritual renewal each day. The inner man, the spirit, when fed and nourished by the truth of God’s Word, will enable us to live for God, even with pain and suffering, and in the face of physical loss. As Hebrews 12:1-2 reminds us: “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus.” That is how I can follow Jesus well.



24. Love: Acceptance and Understanding

Perhaps, one might think that a cancer patient should be the main recipient of love. Indeed, I am thankful for many expressions of love, communicated in different ways, from many dear people. However, I also found that going through hardships in this journey was not an excuse to be not exercising myself in love. A cancer patient can continue to be a giver of love.

Going through time-sensitive treatment for cancer exerts considerable stress on how we live. The Covid-19 pandemic imposed further restrictions. The safety considerations kept members of my household from going out, except for essential activities. Dining out was not an option either. Social life and interactions were severely restrained.

Initially, we all worked together in a good spirit to keep things safe for me. But as the days became weeks, and the weeks stretched into months, it began to take a toll on my family. There was one particular conversation, when we were trying to work out our response to a new Covid-19 development, when harsh words were said to me. I was shocked and hurt.

I could have retreated in emotional pain, hiding behind my situation as a cancer patient. Then, I would have reason to put the blame on the lack of love towards me. But I took a step back from the heat of the moment, and reflected that my loved ones had been going through a rough time too. The combination of Covid-19 and cancer had taken away their freedom.

While as a cancer patient I cannot love them by doing things for them, I realised that God wanted me to learn to love by extending my acceptance and understanding to them. Yes, they should defer to my needs in my weakened and vulnerable condition. And they wanted to. But it wasn't easy to endure. So sometimes, the frustration was expressed.

1 Corinthians 13:7 reminds us: "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." This is true for care-givers of a cancer patient. It is also true in the reverse direction - for the cancer patient, towards those he cares about. I cannot expect everyone to be perfectly loving in every situation, and with every word or action. They are doing their best. They get tired too. They can make mistakes. Instead of allowing myself to get irritated, hurt, or upset, I can love them better too.

I learnt that to follow Jesus well through sufferings, I must continue to learn how to love others by extending to them acceptance and understanding. It may not be the easiest thing to do at times, but it is very necessary to grow in love.

“So to follow Jesus well, we must not be fixated on physical healing, but on spiritual renewal each day. The inner man, the spirit, when fed and nourished by the truth of God’s Word, will enable us to live for God, even with pain and suffering, and in the face of physical loss. As Hebrews 12:1-2 reminds us: “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus.” That is how I can follow Jesus well.”



25. Unrelieved Pain

Not every part of the cancer treatment journey is filled with pain. But there are times when the pain intensified for me. When the radiotherapy concluded, I had sharp intense pain at the area of treatment, that lasted for about a week. Another time was when my post-surgery ileus caused acute discomfort for 18 continuous hours. This experience of unrelieved pain became regular and repeated during the full regimen of chemotherapy.

The question I want to answer here is: What did I do when facing unrelieved pain? Most of us don't enjoy having pain. We avoid it instinctively. As Christians, we pray immediately for relief. But what can we do if God doesn't answer at once? Here are some things I learnt.

1. Endure. Honestly, I don't think there is any other way sometimes. After you have tried everything that is medically possible to remove and alleviate your pain, you just have to wait it out. I have gotten upset and depressed. I have also been frustrated and angry. But no matter how I feel about the physical pain, it will not go away because of my emotional response. Extreme negative emotions, on the other hand, can make things worse. They can cause you to do things that are unhelpful. They can keep you from responding well when a decision needs to be made. I don't know why exactly. But perhaps our bodies just need time to recover, or the Lord is sending help in His time for your relief. Until then, I just have to hang in there and wait patiently. So endure.

2. Change your focus. I am assuming that as a believer, you would have ran through your theological grid to understand this unrelieved pain. You would have called out Scriptural promises for strength and comfort. You would have prayed several times, crying out to God to heal and deliver you from your affliction. After you have done everything that is spiritually possibly to move the mountain of your pain away, it is still there... unrelieved. What can you do? I learnt that I have to change my focus. Naturally, I focused on my pain, and pleaded with God for its removal. But when He didn't relieve it at once, I had to change my focus to asking God to show me what He wanted me to learn from it. I asked instead for His will to be done. It takes faith to surrender to God in this way. It brings a peace that surpasses understanding. So change your focus.

3. Give thanks. I can't seem to help it, but when pain comes and doesn't go away, I start to have negative thoughts. Continued physical pain takes a toll on our emotions, and we go into a downward spiral mentally. Before long, I can find myself adrift in a dark and oppressive sea of misery. But I don't have to. I learnt that I can stop it by giving thanks. No matter how much pain I have been experiencing, I have found that there are still things I can be grateful for and give thanks to God. It has almost become a discipline for me to push myself to identify things that are genuinely worth giving thanks for during times of unrelieved pain. Every single time, after I gave thanks, I begin to see the silver lining with every dark cloud. So give thanks.

Times of unrelieved pain are never easy. Pain is pain. No matter what you think about it. No matter how much of it you have experienced before. I have never gotten so used to pain that I can take it lightly. I have only learnt to recognise it better when it comes. And I have found some things I can do, to emerge stronger and better as a follower of Jesus. I hope that these thoughts can be helpful to you too.



26. Framing and Perception

Cancer changed certain realities about my life. How I understand and see these changes determines how I will think and live. An article by Joe Rigney on the Desiring God website, “The Stories We Tell Ourselves, Questioning How We Frame Reality” (published on March 12, 2022) helped me. He called it “Framing”.

Here is what he wrote to introduce this thought.

“Let’s talk about framing. Not framing as in home construction, but framing as in the way we perceive reality. Framing refers to how we see things. In particular, it refers to the fact that, as human beings, we don’t merely see things; we see things as. If you see a bear, you don’t just see a bear. You see the bear as dangerous. When you see a sunset, you don’t just see the sunset; you see the sunset as beautiful. That’s what I mean by framing. We see things as.

And not just sight, but our other senses as well. We hear the buzzing of a fly as annoying. We hear the laughter of a child as delightful. We smell the aroma of cookies as pleasant. We taste and see that honey is good. Framing, then, has to do with the immediate and snap judgments we make about reality and its relation to us.”

It is important to reflect and evaluate how we frame what is happening to us. How I see cancer and the changes it brings will determine its meaning, reality, and relation to me. For example, I can see cancer as a destroyer of my life, future, happiness, and ministry. That is if I only perceive this event on my own terms, and assessed it according to my desires and assumptions. Alternatively, I can see cancer as an unexpected but God-appointed journey that will accomplish His purposes in my life.

This is about how we perceive change and the reality it brings. This is about the value we assign to that changed reality for our lives. The truth about framing is that it is not static. I instinctively framed cancer as the worst thing that happened to me. But over time, I began to attach positive values as I began to see what God may want to do through it.

For framing to change, I cannot hold on only to what I think and feel about my situation. I must allow the medical realities of my condition to guide my understanding of these changes. I must also allow the truth of Scripture to instruct my evaluation of these changes. In the process, I must identify any assumptions that are inaccurate and not aligned with the Bible, in order to change them.

It is not easy to accept the loss and changes which cancer has brought to my body. But with proper Biblical framing, I want to see what has happened the way God sees it. I want to attach the value and significance that are aligned with both earthly and eternal realities. The right framing enables me to keep on following Jesus through suffering and loss.



27. Pursuing Wellness

I have shared many thoughts and reflections in my unexpected God-appointed journey. What we think and how we think about life affects the way we endure suffering. More importantly, it determines how well we follow Jesus. Much of what I have shared so far reveals my interaction with the truth of Scripture. But another thing I have learnt in this journey concerns pursuing wellness in my fight against cancer.

The basic premise is that instead of merely relying on treatment (radiotherapy, surgery, chemotherapy), I need to support my recovery by eating and exercising well. This also means that I have to consider carefully and responsibly how to pursue physical wellness. I believe that this is part of following Jesus well. Our physical body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. When our body is not doing well, I take it as God's wake-up call to review and evaluate the changes that are required to help it recover and do even better.

It is possible for Christians to become so focused on the spiritual aspects of life that we become careless about the physical requirements to live well for God. I have decided that as part of following Jesus better, I am also going to eat and exercise well. Since my diagnosis, I have reviewed and made massive and drastic changes to my diet, to ensure that my body gets the best nutrients and support in the fight against cancer. I have also developed a new daily exercise regimen to continue working out throughout my treatment, rain or shine.

I consider this as basic Christian stewardship of the body God has given me. It is my due diligence, in addition to seeking medical treatment. So I can look back and say I did everything I knew and could do in my fight against cancer, no matter what the outcome may be. To me, this makes the whole concept of following Jesus better, more balanced and holistic. There isn't a part of my life for which I should not be doing my best to seek His glory. In every aspect, I want to follow Jesus well.

I found that many who interacted with me during my cancer treatment were concerned and interested about this. With fellow believers, my efforts in eating and exercising well give them reassurance. With non-believers, the same conversation on how I am pursuing wellness allows me to witness how the Lord is leading me on a topic they can relate to. This actually builds their confidence in the rationality of my faith, which I have found useful when witnessing to them about other things God has been teaching me.

So I learnt that to follow Jesus well through suffering, I must also take good care of the physical aspects of my life. I need to give due care to my own body. Neglecting physical wellness is neither responsible Christian stewardship nor rational witness to others.

Conclusion

My unexpected God-appointed journey took me through the suffering of cancer and treatment. The pain you experienced may be different. But I hope that my thoughts and reflections can still be of comfort and help.

The truth we all have to face is that our physical bodies are not going to last forever. When they break down, suffering inevitably follows. It may be due to a disease, an accident, or old age. If our sense of purpose and security is tied only to our physical well-being, such suffering can seem meaningless and become crushing.

I believe we need another focus that is presented in the Bible. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 says: “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

To not lose heart, we need to look to the things that are unseen and eternal. These are the things that the Gospel of Jesus Christ presents in the Bible. They speak of a life beyond this life and a home beyond this world with God that has a weight of glory beyond all comparison. When we embrace by faith what the Bible teaches us, we cling to this hope of ultimate deliverance.

Then, we live better, even when our physical bodies can no longer function as they once did. As we endure suffering in our bodies that are wasting away, our inner selves can be renewed day by day. I pray that this is what you will pursue in the midst of your pain. May what I have written contribute somewhat to your ability to follow Jesus through sufferings.

Gospel Light Christian Church



Our Vision: An Acts Church for Today

We dream of being like the Acts 2 Church in the book of Acts. They were a people

Centered on our Savior
Filled with the Spirit
Rooted in the Scriptures
Faithful in Supplication
Genuine in Sacrifice
Effective in Soul-winning
Joyful in Sufferings

Our Mission: Leading Generations into a Life-changing Relationship with Jesus Christ

The Bible tells us that God made us for Himself, and our hearts are wired to know and to worship Him.

Therefore, our hearts are restless until we find our rest in God.

Gospel Light Christian Church exists to help you find a relationship with God.

We want to lead you into a life-changing relationship with Jesus!

There are 3 key points to note in our Mission

1. Life-Change- we aim not just for information, but transformation. A real relationship with Jesus changes lives.
2. Leadership- we can't change your life. But Jesus can. And it is our duty and privilege to lead you to Jesus.
3. Legacy- the Great Commission is unto the end of the age. The church envisions generations of disciple-makers being raised for the Kingdom.

gospellight.sg

Following Jesus Through Sufferings

Life can throw curved balls at us. Even for those who are Christians, who have been trying their best to do God's will. When sufferings come unexpectedly, like a lightning bolt out of the clear blue sky, what matters is to keep on following Jesus well. This journal records the thoughts and reflections when Chee Keen was diagnosed with cancer. "Following Jesus through Sufferings" offers encouragement, guidance, and comfort to those undergoing trials and afflictions.

About the Author

CK Seethor is a pastor at Gospel Light Christian Church. He entered full-time ministry in 2000 and travelled to China on teaching missions for several years. Since 2006, he has been pastoring the Chinese congregation at the local church in Singapore. He is married with two boys.