

# Don't Waste Your Cancer

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"Is there anything worse than going through pain and suffering? Yes, watching someone you love go through it." C.S. Lewis - *A Grief Observed*

**If** you have received this because you or someone you dearly care about has cancer, please understand we are *not* attempting to simplify a devastating illness by providing this paper. The information is designed to help you see your cancer from a spiritual perspective. The two men from which this paper was adapted from have both recently been diagnosed with prostate cancer. My prayer is that God would use this information to turn your heart towards Himself in a greater way, and that you would find inner comfort and peace even in the midst of adverse circumstances. *\*See Scripture References on page 6*

The following material is adapted from John Piper and David Powlison. For further information see John Piper's website at [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org). For prayer or spiritual guidance please contact: Grace Baptist Church of Mason, Ohio | 513.398.1989 | gbcmason.org | Pastor Jerry Pelfrey

The original article of which this is adapted from was written by **John Piper and David Powlison** who both have recently been (January and March 2006) diagnosed with prostate cancer.

"I write this on the eve of prostate surgery. (2/15/06) I believe in God's power to heal – by miracle and by medicine. I believe it is right and good to pray for both kinds of healing. Cancer is not wasted when it is healed by God. He gets glory and that is why cancer exists. So not to pray for healing may waste your cancer. I am praying for myself and for you that we will not waste this pain." John Piper

## **1. You will waste your cancer if you do not believe it is designed for you by God.**

It will not do to say that God only *uses* our cancer but does not design it. What God permits, he permits for a reason. And that reason is his design. If God foresees molecular developments becoming cancer, he can stop it or not. If he does not, he has a purpose. Since he is infinitely wise, it is right to call this purpose a design. Satan is real and causes many pleasures and pains. But he is not ultimate. So when he strikes Job with boils (Job 2:7), Job attributes it ultimately to God (2:10) and the inspired writer agrees: "They . . . comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him" (Job 42:11). If you don't believe your cancer is designed for you by God, you will waste it. John Piper

Recognizing his designing hand does not make you stoic or dishonest or artificially buoyant. Instead, the reality of God's design elicits and channels your honest outcry to your one true Savior. God's design invites honest speech, rather than silencing us into resignation. Consider the honesty of the Psalms, of King Hezekiah (Isaiah 38), of Habakkuk 3. These people are bluntly, believingly honest *because* they know that God is God and set their hopes in him. Psalm 28 teaches you passionate, direct prayer to God. He must hear you. He will hear you. He will continue to work in you and your situation. This outcry comes from your sense of need for help (28:1-2). Then name your particular troubles to God (28:3-5). You are free to personalize with your own particulars. Often in life's 'various trials' (James 1:2), what you face does not exactly map on to the particulars that David or Jesus faced – but the dynamic of faith is the same. Having cast your cares on him who cares for you, then voice your joy (28:6-7): the God-given peace that is beyond understanding. Finally, because faith always works out into love, your personal need and joy will branch out into loving concern for others (28:8-9). Illness can sharpen your awareness of how thoroughly God has already and always been at work in every detail of your life. David Powlison

## **2. You will waste your cancer if you believe it is a curse and not a gift.**

The blessing comes in what God does for us, with us, through us. He brings his great and merciful redemption onto the stage of the curse. Your cancer, in itself, is one of those 10,000 'shadows of death' (Psalm 23:4) that come upon each of us: all the threats, losses, pains, incompleteness, disappointment, evils. But in his beloved children, our Father works a most kind good through our most grievous losses: sometimes healing and restoring the body (temporarily, until the resurrection of the dead to eternal life), always sustaining and teaching us that we might know and love him more simply. In the testing ground of evils, your faith becomes deep and real, and your love becomes purposeful and wise: James 1:2-5, 1 Peter 1:3-9, Romans 5:1-5, Romans 8:18-39. John Piper

## **3. You will waste your cancer if you seek comfort from your odds rather than from God.**

The design of God in your cancer is not to train you in the rationalistic, human calculation of odds. The world gets comfort from their odds. Not Christians. Some count their chariots (percentages of survival) and some count their horses (side effects of treatment), but we trust in the name of the Lord our God (Psalm 20:7). God's design is clear from 2 Corinthians 1:9, "We felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead." The aim of God in your cancer (among a thousand other good things) is to knock props out from under our hearts so that we rely utterly on him. John Piper

God himself is your comfort. He gives himself. The hymn "Be Still My Soul" (by Katrina von Schlegel) reckons the odds the right way: we are 100% certain to suffer, and Christ is 100% certain to meet us, to come for us, comfort us, and restore love's purest joys. The hymn "How Firm a Foundation" reckons the odds the same way: you are 100% certain to pass through grave distresses, and your Savior is 100% certain to "be with you, your troubles to bless, and sanctify to you your deepest distress." With God, you aren't playing percentages, but living within certainties. David Powlison

## **4. You will waste your cancer if you refuse to think about death.**

We will all die, if Jesus postpones his return. Not to think about what it will be like to leave this life and meet God is folly. Ecclesiastes 7:2 says, "It is better to go to the house of mourning [a funeral] than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart." How can you lay it to heart if you won't think about it? Psalm 90:12 says, "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." Numbering your days means thinking about how few there are and that they will end. How will you get a heart of wisdom if you refuse to think about this? What a waste, if we do not think about death. John Piper

Paul describes the Holy Spirit as the unseen, inner 'down payment' on the certainty of *life*. By faith, the Lord gives a sweet taste of the face-to-face reality of eternal life in the presence of our God and Christ. We might also say that cancer is one 'down payment' on inevitable *death*, giving one bad taste of the reality of our mortality. Cancer is a signpost pointing to something far bigger: the last enemy that you must face. But Christ has defeated this last enemy: 1 Corinthians 15. Death is swallowed up in victory. Cancer is merely one of the enemy's scouting parties, out on patrol. It has no final power if you are a child of the resurrection, so you can look it in the eye. David Powlison

## **5. You will waste your cancer if you think that "beating" cancer means staying alive rather than cherishing Christ.**

Satan's and God's design in your cancer are not the same. Satan designs to destroy your love for Christ. God designs to deepen your love for Christ. Cancer does not win if you die. It wins if you fail to cherish Christ. God's design is to wean you off the breast of the world and feast you on the sufficiency of Christ. It is meant to help you say and feel, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." And to know that therefore, "To live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 3:8; 1:21).  
John Piper

Cherishing Christ expresses the two core activities of faith: dire need and utter joy. Many psalms cry out in a 'minor key': we cherish our Savior by needing him to save us from real troubles, real sins, real sufferings, real anguish. Many psalms sing out in a 'major key': we cherish our Savior by delighting in him, loving him, thanking him for all his benefits to us, rejoicing that his salvation is the weightiest thing in the world and that he gets last say. And many psalms start out in one key and end up in the other. Cherishing Christ is not monochromatic; you live the whole spectrum of human experience with him. To 'beat' cancer is to live knowing how your Father has compassion on his beloved child, because he knows your frame, that you are but dust. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. To live is to know him, whom to know is to love.  
David Powlison

## **6. You will waste your cancer if you spend too much time reading about cancer and not enough time reading about God.**

It is not wrong to know about cancer. Ignorance is not a virtue. But the lure to know more and more and the lack of zeal to know God more and more is symptomatic of unbelief. Cancer is meant to waken us to the reality of God. It is meant to put feeling and force behind the command, "Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord" (Hosea 6:3). It is meant to waken us to the truth of Daniel 11:32, "The people who know their God shall stand firm and take action." It is meant to make unshakable, indestructible oak trees out of us: "His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers" (Psalm 1:2). What a waste of cancer if we read day and night about cancer and not about God.  
John Piper

What is so for your reading is also true for your conversations with others. Other people will often express their care and concern by inquiring about your health. That's good, but the conversation easily gets stuck there. So tell them openly about your sickness, seeking their prayers and counsel, but then change the direction of the conversation by telling them what your God is doing to faithfully sustain you with 10,000 mercies. Robert Murray McCheyne wisely said, "For every one look at your sins, take ten looks at Christ." He was countering our tendency to reverse that 10:1 ratio by brooding over our failings and forgetting the Lord of mercy. What McCheyne says about our sins we can also apply to our sufferings. For every one sentence you say to others about your cancer, say ten sentences about your God, and your hope, and what he is teaching you, and the small blessings of each day. For every hour you spend researching or discussing your cancer, spend 10 hours researching and discussing and serving your Lord. Relate all that you are learning about cancer back to him and his purposes, and you won't become obsessed.  
John Piper

## **7. You will waste your cancer if you let it drive you into solitude instead of deepen your relationships with manifest affection.**

Our culture is terrified of facing death. It is obsessed with medicine. It idolizes youth, health and energy. It tries to hide any signs of weakness or imperfection. You will bring huge blessing to others by living openly, believably and lovingly within your weaknesses. Paradoxically, moving out into relationships when you are hurting and weak will actually strengthen others. 'One anothering' is a two-way street of generous giving

and grateful receiving. Your need gives others an opportunity to love. And since love is always God's highest purpose in you, too, you will learn his finest and most joyous lessons as you find small ways to express concern for others even when you are most weak. A great, life-threatening weakness can prove amazingly freeing. Nothing is left for you to do except to be loved by God and others, and to love God and others.

David Powlison

### **8. You will waste your cancer if you grieve as those who have no hope.**

Paul used this phrase in relation to those whose loved ones had died: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). There is a grief at death. Even for the believer who dies, there is temporary loss—loss of body, and loss of loved ones here, and loss of earthly ministry. But the grief is different—it is permeated with hope. "We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8). Don't waste your cancer grieving as those who don't have this hope.

John Piper

Show the world this different way of grieving. Paul said that he would have had "grief upon grief" if his friend Epaphroditus had died. He had been grieving, feeling the painful weight of his friend's illness. He would have doubly grieved if his friend had died. But this loving, honest, God-oriented grief coexisted with "rejoice always" and "the peace of God that passes understanding" and "showing a genuine concern for your welfare." How on earth can heartache coexist with love, joy, peace, and an indestructible sense of life purpose? In the inner logic of faith, this makes perfect sense. In fact, because you have hope, you may feel the sufferings of this life *more* keenly: grief upon grief. In contrast, the grieving that has no hope often chooses denial or escape or busyness because it can't face reality without becoming distraught. In Christ, you know what's at stake, and so you keenly feel the wrong of this fallen world. You don't take pain and death for granted. You love what is good, and hate what is evil. After all, you follow in the image of "a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief." But this Jesus chose his cross willingly "for the joy set before him." He lived and died in hopes that all come true. His pain was not muted by denial or medication, nor was it tainted with despair, fear, or thrashing about for any straw of hope that might change his circumstances. Jesus' final promises overflow with the gladness of solid hope amid sorrows: "My joy will be in you, and your joy will be made full. Your grief will be turned to joy. No one will take your joy away from you. Ask, and you will receive, so that your joy will be made full. These things I speak in the world, so that they may have my joy made full in themselves" (selection from John 15-17).

David Powlison

### **9. You will waste your cancer if you treat sin as casually as before.**

Are your besetting sins as attractive as they were before you had cancer? If so you are wasting your cancer. Cancer is designed to destroy the appetite for sin. Pride, greed, lust, hatred, unforgiveness, impatience, laziness, procrastination—all these are the adversaries that cancer is meant to attack. Don't just think of battling *against* cancer. Also think of battling *with* cancer. All these things are worse enemies than cancer. Don't waste the power of cancer to crush these foes. Let the presence of eternity make the sins of time look as futile as they really are. "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?" (Luke 9:25).

John Piper

Suffering really is meant to wean you from sin and strengthen your faith. If you are God-less, then suffering magnifies sin. Will you become more bitter, despairing, addictive, fearful, frenzied, avoidant, sentimental, godless in how you go about life? Will you pretend its business as usual? Will you come to terms with death, on your terms? But if you are God's, then suffering in Christ's hands will change you, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly. You come to terms with life and death on his terms. He will guide you, purify you, cleanse you of vanities. He will make you need him and love him. He rearranges your priorities, so first

things come first more often. He will walk with you. Of course you'll fail at times, perhaps seized by irritability or brooding, escapism or fears. But he will always pick you up when you stumble. Your inner enemy – a moral cancer 10,000 times more deadly than your physical cancer – will be dying as you continue seeking and finding your Savior: "For your name's sake, O Lord, pardon my iniquity, for it is very great. Who is the man who fears the Lord? He will instruct him in the way he should choose" (Psalm 25).  
David Powlison

### **10. You will waste your cancer if you fail to use it as a means of witness to the truth and glory of Christ.**

Christians are never anywhere by divine accident. There are reasons for why we wind up where we do. Consider what Jesus said about painful, unplanned circumstances: "They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness" (Luke 21:12 -13). So it is with cancer. This will be an opportunity to bear witness. Christ is infinitely worthy. Here is a golden opportunity to show that he is worth more than life. Don't waste it.  
John Piper

Jesus is your life. He is the man before whom every knee will bow. He has defeated death once for all. He will finish what he has begun. Let your light so shine as you live in him, by him, through him, for him. One of the church's ancient hymns puts it this way: "Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger" (from "I bind unto myself the name"). In your cancer, you will need your brothers and sisters to witness to the truth and glory of Christ, to walk with you, to live out their faith beside you, to love you. And you can do the same with them and with all others, becoming the heart that loves with the love of Christ, the mouth filled with hope to both friends and strangers. David Powlison

### **Hebrews 4:14-16**

Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. 15 For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

### **Psalms 23:4**

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

A Prayer for those who are hurting:

Dear gracious Father, we come to your throne of mercy to find grace in time of need. Our appeal to you is *not* our own merit; we come through the work of your son, Jesus Christ. Our boasting is the righteousness of Christ alone. We ask for wisdom that we may respond to our trials and afflictions in a way that honors you. We ask for your strength to help us and enable us to remain faithful when our faith becomes weak. We know that you have all power to heal. We also know that your plan at times does not grant healing on this side of Heaven. Give us the grace to understand that the ultimate healing is to be called into your presence. We pray for the family members who also carry the heartache of such trials. May they also rest in your grace and remind them of your ever presence. Grant those who are in medical care over ourselves or our loved ones the needed grace and help them make the appropriate recommendations and decisions. Father, may we not be guilty of wasting our illness, so please use us to glorify your name in health, sickness or even in death. You alone are worthy of our complete allegiance and devotion.

In Jesus precious and holy name, Amen!

**2Corinthians 12:7-10** And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. 8 For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. 9 And he said unto me, **My grace is sufficient for thee:** for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong. (Apostle Paul under great testing)

**Philippians 4:6-9** Be careful (anxious) for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. 7 And the **peace of God, which passeth all understanding**, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. 8 Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. 9 Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you. ("hearts" - right feeling, "minds" - right thinking)

**Psalms 23** The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. 3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

**Psalms 42:5** Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? **hope thou in God:** for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance.

**Romans 8:35-39** Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. 37 Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. 38 For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, 39 Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, **shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

**Philippians 1:21** For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

**Philippians 3:8-10** Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, 9 And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: 10 **That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings**, being made conformable unto his death;

**Psalms 90:12** So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

**Psalms 116:15** Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.

**1Thessalonians 4:16-18** For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: 17 Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. 18 **Wherefore comfort one another with these words.**