

HELP!

I HAVE BREAST CANCER



brenda fields

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I HAVE BREAST
CANCER

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The reason you're reading this book is probably because you've recently been diagnosed with breast cancer. Even before your biopsy was done you were probably aware that current statistics indicate that one in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in her lifetime.¹ But it's hard to personalize a statistic. The sense of shock is very real when *you* are the one who receives the diagnosis.

Once the initial shock wears off, your mind seems to explode with questions. Am I going to need chemotherapy and radiation? Am I going to be disfigured by a surgical procedure? Who will take care of my family while I'm ill? What about my job? How am I going to tell the rest of my family about this? Am I going to die?

There are additional questions you've probably pondered but then brushed aside. Perhaps you've wondered if breast cancer is God's way of punishing you for something you've done. Or maybe you don't

¹ See "Surveillance Epidemiology and End Results," National Cancer Institute, at: seer.cancer.gov/. Accessed 4/14/10.

understand why God is allowing this to happen to you. After all, if God is good, why does he allow people to suffer in this way?

Underlying most of our questions, at least to some degree, is a sense of fear. I can empathize with that fear because in August 2004, I heard the words, “Your biopsy came back positive,” and my journey with breast cancer began. Today you find yourself on that journey as well. This isn’t a path we chose for ourselves, and I won’t pretend it’s always going to be easy, but hopefully, as we discover God’s perspective on our situation, we’ll find answers to some of our questions that will prove to be helpful. It is my prayer that in the pages that follow you will find hope, peace, purpose, and comfort to encourage you in the days ahead.

1

“You Have Breast Cancer”

We had friends from Arizona visiting with us in the days preceding my biopsy. On the day they planned to return home, I had a mid-morning appointment scheduled for the biopsy. Once our friends knew about my appointment, however, they decided to delay their departure for a few hours. My husband, who is an obstetrician/gynecologist, had gone to work early, hoping to get a jump-start on what he knew would be a busy day.

There was really nothing about this appointment that alarmed me. With a history of fibrocystic breast disease, I was accustomed to returning for additional mammogram images so they could double-check something they had seen on my original films. I was not even particularly alarmed when I was advised to have a biopsy. The actual procedure was uneventful and the doctor was reassuring, though he cautioned

me that he couldn't be absolutely certain of anything until the pathology report was completed.

As I drove home that July afternoon the sun was high in the sky and the hillsides beside the freeway were still covered with green. While traveling the ten miles between the hospital and home, my mind began to wander. I thought about the fun we had enjoyed over the weekend with our family and friends. Then, seemingly out of the blue, a thought flashed across my mind. I had a sense that my biopsy was going to be positive. Was God preparing me for what lay ahead? I don't recall feeling any sense of panic, but the thought stayed with me as I pulled into the driveway.

I calmly explained to our friends what the doctor had said and they seemed comforted. I hadn't planned it, but suddenly I found myself saying, "I think my biopsy is going to come back positive." The pained expressions on their faces prompted me to add, "But no matter what happens, I'm going to be OK." I agreed to let them know the biopsy results as soon as we got them, and they left to return home.

Life was reassuringly routine over the next few days. As usual, my husband was occupied with seeing patients and delivering babies. He has the privilege of participating in the miracle of birth many times

a month, but the wonder of a new life is still fresh and exhilarating to him, even at 2:00 in the morning. But not all his patients are healthy pregnant women. He may be the first one to detect the possibility that a woman has any one of a number of diseases, including cervical cancer, ovarian cancer, or breast cancer. When the pathology report comes back positive, he is frequently the one in the unenviable position of delivering that news to his patient. This time, he had to deliver that news to me.

How did you react when you got the news? Even though I had entertained the thought that my biopsy would be positive, I still wasn't ready when it turned out to be a fact. The words just seemed to hang suspended in space when my husband told me. Everything he said seemed muddled and fuzzy, almost as if spoken somewhere off in the distance. To be honest, I can't tell you what he said after he said the word "positive." I knew that meant I had cancer. What about you?

- ▶ Are you full of fear?
- ▶ Are you in denial, trying desperately not to believe what you've been told?
- ▶ Are you depressed?
- ▶ Are you angry?

Angry, that was me! I wondered if God realized I had four very young grandchildren, all between the ages of four years and three months? Their moms needed my help, and, to be honest, I wanted to live to see them grow up. Didn't God know that my sweet mother-in-law had Alzheimer's and needed me to help care for her? What about my husband? His job was very demanding. I didn't want to be the one to add stress to his life. Besides, I had always planned that we would grow old together. I was ashamed of my initial thoughts because I really did know that none of this came as a surprise to God, and I knew I should be trusting him.

I remember a note I got from Laurie. Her encouragement was particularly meaningful to me because she had recently completed treatments for breast cancer. I was quite surprised when she spoke of it as an adventure! My idea of an adventure didn't include breast cancer! I was sufficiently intrigued by her comment to actually look up the word in the dictionary. It defined adventure as "an exciting or very unusual experience; a bold, usually risky undertaking; hazardous action of uncertain outcome."² I knew Laurie was a godly, courageous

2 *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (2nd edn.; New York: Random House, 1987).

woman, so I tucked that thought into the back of my brain and found it strangely comforting.

Diane, a pastor's wife, was diagnosed three days before her forty-seventh birthday. She had just returned from a women's retreat where the speaker's message had been about suffering. Together with her husband, she was in the middle of raising four children aged sixteen, fourteen, twelve, and ten. Of course, she also had all the responsibilities that come with being a pastor's wife. Many people depended on her. Initially she wasn't shocked or even particularly frightened, just surprised. However, when they scheduled her for a lumpectomy, her outlook became more serious, and fearful feelings began to emerge. The prospect of chemotherapy was very unsettling to her as she envisioned herself bald and without eyelashes. She was especially concerned about the care of her children, as she realized the impact chemotherapy and radiation would have on their lives as well as hers.

Kathleen is a single attorney who serves in an executive position for one of the USA's leading comprehensive cancer centers. She was forty-nine when she was diagnosed. Six months before, she had felt something, but now a mammogram confirmed she had breast cancer. Her immediate response was,

“I knew it.” She recalls that, as reality settled in her mind, “There was this incredible sinking feeling, as if time had stopped.” As an only child she found it very difficult to tell her parents. The thought that their daughter might die before them was incomprehensible to them. Her dad spent that night searching the Internet, and they both wondered if there was something they had done to cause Kathleen’s cancer. She worried about two things: disfigurement, and the time it might take to get treatment. “I had a busy life and didn’t want to push the pause button.”

Whether you’re a grandma, a mom with growing children, a single woman with a successful career, or someone fitting a completely different description, your story will be unique to you in many ways. But our collective experiences will share some things in common. For one thing, I’m fairly confident that facing a life-threatening disease was never part of the plan any of us envisioned for our lives.