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# THERE MUST BE SOME MISTAKE!

It was just two days before Christmas, and Myra Mahoney was running around in circles. There were cookies to bake, Christmas dinner to plan for all the relatives who would be coming to town, shopping to do, gifts to wrap. And there were church choir and school pageant rehearsals, and—oh, yes—her yearly physical exam. Myra always scheduled her physical in December. That way she wouldn't forget it, and it would be done before the end-of-the-year insurance deadline.

Myra's physical included a routine trip to her gynecologist. As it turned out, that trip was anything but routine. During the examination the doctor discovered a lump in the wall of her colon. "I knew immediately something was very wrong," she says. "There's no way a person can have a lump there without it being bad. Some places, yes, but not there."

The doctor knew it too. Suddenly he was scurrying here and there, making notes, checking this, and rechecking that. "I could tell he was trying not to scare me, even as he insisted I go *immediately* to see a surgeon—like *now!* He made a telephone call right then and there, and 45 minutes later I was in the surgeon's office."

Scared and confused, Myra telephoned her husband, Tim. She needed him with her in case she found out something terrible. The surgeon, a specialist in colon surgery, examined her and confirmed what the other doctor had found. Yes, he said, there definitely was a lump. Myra

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stared into his face, trying desperately to read the significance behind his words. But his face remained calm. It seemed to say, *It's not that bad. It's going to be OK.*

But it wasn't OK. Myra, a 45-year-old mother of two active boys. Myra, who felt perfectly fine and was far too busy to be sick. Myra, who trusted God, prayed, studied her Bible, and did her best to live for the Lord.

Myra had cancer.

Shock. Disbelief. Terror. Then the sudden realization that nothing would be the same again. Not ever!

Christmas preparations screeched to a halt as a parade of doctors and tests and lab reports began. Confused and uncertain, she and Tim decided not to tell anyone except their kids about the diagnosis.

The surgeon informed her that they had a picture of the tumor. Now they had to figure out how to get a biopsy of it. But it could wait until after Christmas, he assured her. Go home, he said. Have a happy holiday. Season's greetings.

Myra couldn't think straight. Her mind played games on her and sent her imagination reeling. It was just too much to take in. Too much.

"Don't worry," Tim assured Myra. "It won't be cancer. It's going to turn out to be nothing at all. You'll see."

Myra looked her husband straight in the face and said, "You're wrong, Tim. It can't be 'nothing at all.' I fully expect it to be cancer."

Two days after Christmas, Myra had the biopsy. Only she and Mark, her 15-year-old son, were home when the telephone rang the next afternoon. Even before she picked up the receiver she knew what she would hear.

"Myra," the receptionist said, "the doctor is in the operating room, and he asked me to see if you're home, because he wants to call you."

It wasn't going to be good news. Myra sat and waited by the telephone for the doctor's call.

It came within minutes. "I just got the results from the lab," he said. "You have squamous-cell carcinoma, possi-

bly metastatic. We have identified the exact position." With his matter-of-fact voice and his technical language, the doctor sounded eerily like an emotionally removed scientist. "You are going to have to go over to the cancer center and get a little bit of chemotherapy and a bit of radiation."

"What?" Myra exclaimed in exasperation. "I don't understand what you're saying here. I know carcinoma is cancer, but what exactly are you telling me?"

What he was telling her was that the type of cancer the biopsy had revealed—squamous-cell carcinoma—is a type found on the skin and sometimes in a few other places in the body, but never in the colon. That meant the cancer had likely spread from somewhere else in her body. If it had indeed started somewhere else, then her colon was only one of the places she had it.

"That was the worst part of the whole ordeal," Myra said. "My son stood right there, seeing and hearing everything." Hardly able to hold herself together, she first called Tim at work. She knew he was going to fall completely apart when he heard the news.

Tim's response was "I'm coming home right this minute."

Then Myra picked up 9-year-old Kevin from school so that the whole family could try to take this in together.

## EVERYONE REACTS

Everyone reacts to life-changing news in his or her own way. Some remain distant and removed, as though the matter is not really of that much concern. Others refuse to accept the situation, insisting there's some mistake. Some break down in inconsolable emotion, others determine to remain stoic, while still others are too numb to react at all. Some people lash out at God in anger, demanding an answer or at least an explanation. Others fall on their knees before Him begging for mercy and a miracle. A few just give up in resignation.

Tim reacted with a flood of tears. "This can't be happening!" he insisted. "It simply can't be! I can't raise these boys by myself!"

Mark showed his pain and shock at the news, but Kevin did not. Myra assumed he was too young to really grasp the significance of what was happening. But that wasn't so. A counselor from his school called and told Myra that Kevin was talking about it at school nonstop, telling everyone, "My mom has cancer." She suggested it might be wise to get him some counseling.

Myra had her own way of reacting: head-on and matter-of-factly. "We have lots of people counseling us already," she told the school counselor. "I know this is serious, but I truly don't think I'm going to die. Thank you for your concern. If we need more help, we'll call you." Any help Kevin was to receive, Myra determined, would come from people who shared their Christian point-of-view.

Tim's father reacted to the news in a get-the-job-done businessman sort of way. "I'm sending you two first-class airline tickets," he told Myra and Tim. "I want you to go anywhere in the world you need to go to have this taken care of. Don't worry about the cost—just get it fixed. Everything's going to be OK."

Myra was especially surprised at how her sister, to whom she was especially close, took the news. "It's going to be OK, Myra—it really is," she said calmly and confidently. What Myra didn't know until much later was that as soon as she got off the phone, her sister broke down and sobbed uncontrollably.

It's important to understand and accept that people will react differently. No one should be criticized or judged for not reacting the way another person does or in a way someone else expects that person to. Until we're in that position, none of us really knows how we would respond.

Take Justin's family, for instance. Justin, a successful type-A businessman, had been diagnosed with a brain tumor that was very likely malignant. The day before his sur-

gery, his family held an all-day get-together at his home and a special dinner with all his favorites. Although he appreciated having his family around him, the day was awkward and exhausting. His son, who came from graduate school in another state to be there, seemed irritable and angry the entire day. Justin's wife, Nancy, acted as though nothing was wrong and insisted on laughing, telling silly stories, and chattering on about unimportant things. His daughter kept her distance, burying herself in work in the kitchen.

"I couldn't talk to any of them," Justin said sadly. "I longed to tell them how scared I was and how much I love them all and what I wanted them to do if I didn't make it, but no one wanted to hear it. So I, too, tried to pretend nothing was wrong and that my son was just in a bad mood and my daughter was in a funk. But when I went to bed that night, I cried myself to sleep."

### FROM FEAR . . .

Wise King Solomon would have this reassurance to offer Justin: "When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet" (Prov. 3:24).

Most of us would respond, "You aren't facing reality, Solomon. You obviously have no idea of what fear is!"

Actually, he did. So did the apostle Paul when he penned these words to the suffering Christians in Rome: "You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'" (Rom. 8:15).

When we face something so fraught with ominous mystery as cancer, we *do* feel afraid, even we who love and trust the Lord. It's our human nature. To deny it forces us to suffer in silence. How much better it is to face the fear, to express it openly, and then turn it over to God. Ps. 46:1—which promises: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble"—is not a mere platitude. It is the truth.

How do we know? Because we have God's promise of everlasting protection. Just look at these verses of holy Scripture: "He [God] will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart" (Ps. 91:4). "I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear" (Isa. 41:13).

### . . . TO PEACE

You say it's not natural to find peace in the midst of a diagnosis of cancer? No, it isn't. That's why we must tap into the supernatural peace of God through Jesus Christ. It was Jesus himself who said, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

In the face of such news, there's no peace unless it comes from the Lord.

"Everyone acted like I was going to die," Myra says. "Some people even told me so. Others just told me awful stories with sad endings, but I knew exactly what they meant."

It seems to be human nature to recall the most dramatic and tragic of stories. And it's true that where cancer is concerned, our minds tend to reel with unhappy endings. The perception of the finality of a cancer diagnosis is hard to shake, although we're beginning to gain a more realistic understanding of the possibilities. In a couple of months my daughter and I will be taking part in a three-day walk to help raise breast cancer awareness. The wonderful thing about this event is that while some people, such as Lisa and I, are walking in the name of a survivor (we're walking on behalf of my mother), the majority of the participants are themselves breast cancer survivors. There's every reason to be hopeful.

Still, you're entering the world of the unknown. How far has your cancer advanced? What will the chemotherapy do to the cancer and to your body as a whole? How

about those other terrifying sounding treatments? You may not know, but you know the One who has the answers.

"If I were to go home to be with God, I knew full well that I would be going to a far better place," Myra said with conviction. "But I didn't want to die. There were so many things I still wanted to do and accomplish. I desperately wanted to continue in my relationship with my husband. And I hated the thought of my children being hurt and having to grow up without a mother. I really, really wanted to live! And so it brought me great peace to know that God was with me and understood my fears and my desire to survive."

Peace in the diagnosis of cancer. Peace in the face of treatments prescribed and debated. Peace despite all the fearsome stories and dire warnings. Everything familiar and secure is gone. The unthinkable reality sets in—and yet there's peace.

We're taken by surprise, but God never is.

You're helpless, but you have God's unlimited strength to fall back on. There are decisions that need to be made, treatments to be decided upon, a whole new medical language to be learned. Yet through it all, underneath you, supporting and sustaining you, are God's everlasting arms.

## **God Knows You**

With that pronouncement of "You have cancer" and the flurry of tests and procedures and doctors that follow, you may begin to feel transformed from an individual with a name and a family and an entire life into just a cancer patient—or even worse, just "colon cancer." It isn't true. Don't believe it for a single minute. You are the special, individual person God created you to be. You can say with the psalmist David, "I praise you [God] because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (Ps. 139:14).

You say you're worried and concerned about the days ahead?

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Of course you are. But God will not forsake you. He hears your pain and knows your fear, and He waits to comfort you through His Word.

## 2

# NO MORE BUSINESS AS USUAL

You always assumed life would go on as usual. Like all of us, you lived expecting that the important circumstances of your world would pretty much stay the same. Now this has happened, and your cancer diagnosis is all consuming. You find it difficult to concentrate on anything except the disease and what it will mean to you and your family.

"I admit it—I've always been a control freak," Justin said.

It was important to me to be in control of my life and everything that touched it. Then one day I woke up with one eyelid sagging so badly I had trouble making my way down the stairs to the kitchen. I tried to ask my wife what she thought was wrong, but my speech was so slurred she could hardly understand me. She rushed me to the emergency room, and before the day was over I had been told I had a brain tumor that was probably malignant, and I was scheduled for surgery the following morning. Just like that. No one asked me—they told me. One day I was the most important man in the office, and the next I couldn't even open my eye or speak intelligibly. One day I refused to ever take a day off work because I was certain they couldn't get by without me, and the next I didn't give the company a second thought. One day I was in control, and the next I was totally at the mercy of those around me.

No more business as usual.

**IF ONLY . . .**

After the day-long flurry of tests and scans and doctors and nurses, Justin's wife was ordered home to get some rest, and he was alone in his private room. Despite the sedatives, he lay in bed thinking. Recalling that long and agonizing night, he says, "I'm a full-blown type-A personality, a businessman who worked long and hard to get where I was. There in that bed, so helpless and vulnerable, I was plagued with questions: Was the cancer caused by all my cell phone use? Was it my long hours of work? Was it because I never felt I could afford the time to take a vacation? What was it I had done wrong to bring on brain cancer?"

Justin is not alone in his questions. Many people look at their cancer and ask, "Why?" Very often, that very understandable question is quickly followed by "If only . . ."

- If only I had taken better care of myself.
- If only I had gotten my yearly checkups.
- If only I had eaten a healthier diet.
- If only I hadn't smoked for so many years.
- If only I had lost weight.
- If only I hadn't spent so much time in the sun.
- If only I had taken vitamins.
- If only I had walked a mile each day.
- If only . . .

*McCall's* magazine printed an article in March 2001 titled "Hit the Health Jackpot." The first two sentences state, "The evidence is in: Whether you get cancer is largely within your control. Even if your genes predispose you to the disease, how you live your life has more influence on your odds of cancer striking than your DNA."<sup>1</sup>

Whoa! Pile on the guilt!

The "if only" guilt is especially strong in people who suffer from a somewhat preventable disease such as lung cancer. We all know about the warnings on cigarette packages. In many states we see clever and poignant television spots that warn of the dangers of smoking. Parents who

smoke are nagged by their children to quit. We've heard the statistics that tell us that nearly 90 percent of lung cancer cases are smoking related. So when a person is diagnosed with lung cancer—well, here's what 69-year-old Theo has to say: "I was a smoker most of my life. I'm ashamed to say I was just too weak to quit, even though I knew I should. I totally blame myself for my cancer. I smoked even though I knew better."

Yes, Theo should have quit smoking. But if we haven't walked in his shoes, we can't know how difficult that may have been for him. He says he was *totally* at fault for his disease. Totally? Really? What about the tobacco companies who seem to target young people? Like the 80 percent of smokers, Theo started using cigarettes when he was a teenager. What about the romanticized view of smoking with which we're still presented in the movies and by advertisers? What about his parents, who modeled smoking throughout his childhood and his teen years? What about his wife, who was an even heavier smoker?

Guilt and self-blame do nothing to help us fight cancer. Whether or not our "if onlys" have some validity or none at all, holding onto endless guilt keeps us from moving on. It prevents us from throwing ourselves into the things that now need to be done.

Whatever the level of validity, regrets and self-blaming cannot change what is. If you allow yourself to wallow in guilt and remorse, you'll surely sink into despair. You have cancer. Accept that reality. Then, with God's help, get ready for the fight of your life.

For good or for ill, a diagnosis of cancer is likely to set off a period of intense soul-searching. Suddenly, forced to come face-to-face with our own mortality, we pause to take stock of our lives. When you look closely at yourself, are you pleased with what you see? Or does your soul-searching fill you with regrets?

Self-examination is demanding, but it's also rewarding. Yes, it pulls us up short in the face of our failures, and

that's definitely painful. But it also awakens us to all kinds of new and exciting possibilities. Yes, it convicts us of our guilt. But it also leads us to grace.

## **So What Now?**

No more business as usual. Instead, we have many new matters of business to take up, many new questions to ask and considerations to ponder. Think of this as *the new approach*.

Will you have surgery? Over half of all cancer cures result from surgery alone. How about radiation? In many people, it can shrink a tumor to where it can be dealt with more effectively. Chemotherapy? Yes, you've heard horror stories about it, but its benefits are unmistakable and can, in fact, be quite remarkable. Chemotherapy is the foundation of treatment for many, many cancer patients.

All these treatments, especially chemotherapy, are very different from what they were as recently as five years ago. The new drugs are significantly more effective and in many cases much less toxic. And oncologists are able to administer them in a way that minimizes side effects while still obtaining the greatest benefit. Side effects are fewer and less intense than in the past. Radiation is more limited in scope and surgery less invasive.

A major part of your new approach will be to learn all you can about your particular cancer, to listen carefully to the advice of your doctors, to weigh the various possibilities with your family, and—most important—to lay it all out before God. Trust Him to guide you, and give Him complete control.

Don't worry that you'll be struggling alone through your treatment. You'll be amazed at the number of loving, caring people, organizations, and groups that are ready and willing to help.

"When the doctor scheduled me for surgery so quickly, I was terrified," Justin recalled. "I didn't want to do some-

thing so drastic without first doing a little research, and certainly not before talking it over with my family. Yet I could just see that tumor growing by the second!"

Justin, stunned and confused, asked the doctor straight out if the surgery had to be done so quickly. Immediately the doctor slowed down the schedule and assured him that a few days would make no difference at all.

If at all possible, slow down your decision-making. Sure, you feel a sense of urgency to decide what you're going to have done and who's going to be involved in doing it. You may also be eager to look into the pros and cons of herbal supplements and vitamins, alternative treatments, and your diet in general. Determine which decisions have to be made immediately and which ones can wait awhile. Act immediately and decisively where you need to; then slow down and gather information and support where you can afford to move more slowly.

Whatever the urgency, don't allow yourself to be frightened or pressured into making decisions about your treatment until you're sure you have a clear understanding of your choices. Ask about and explore the options. Take time to pray and wait upon the Lord. Search the Scriptures. In many cases, if you back off a bit, you'll not only be able to make better decisions but also have much greater peace of mind.

A major step toward achieving a positive revised approach is to get over your desire to keep your diagnosis a secret. Once you conquer this, you'll be surprised at how much support and positive feedback you will get. Ken, a survivor of prostate cancer, is an energetic supporter of moving past the secrecy. "Once I was open about my cancer, I started getting a steady stream of E-mails. And as I progressed through the various stages, I sent updates to my family, friends, and colleagues. It was so great to know I wasn't alone. The feedback was critical to helping me maintain a positive attitude, and I'm convinced that maintaining a positive attitude is vitally important when you're facing surgery."

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Also, by being open about where he was, Ken discovered people he knew who had faced the same situation. By sharing their stories, they offered a special kind of support and provided him with information that helped ease his fears and offered him concrete guidance.

Today Ken says exactly the same thing he so often said in his E-mail messages: "I'm truly blessed to have such loving, supportive friends. And should I need any additional support in the future, I know without a doubt they're still there."

Jeremy Geffen, M.D., in his book *The Journey Through Cancer* wrote, "I've found that the true miracles of cancer rarely take the form of drugs, potions, or herbs. More often than not, the true miracles take place in the minds, hearts, and spirits of patients and their families."<sup>2</sup>

I'm sure that to some degree that's true of all cancer patients, but for Christians it's absolutely central. It's the miracles that heal, and it's the miracles that bring us in line with the mind of Christ.

Consider Jesus' example. When facing the Cross, He prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Christ was facing something He could not change and still remain true to the redemptive purpose of God the Father. There was no other way. He simply had to endure the horror of the Cross.

It's when we have no choice but to endure that we need to cling tightly to Heb. 4:16 and to hold it close to our hearts: "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

It's this mercy and grace that will help us endure the roller-coaster emotions that are sure to hit.