

Touching Up Our Picture of Health—Conclusion *part 14—Self, Sickness & Survival vs. Salvation*

by Risë Rafferty

Cancer. We were stunned as that reality sunk in this past September. We had noticed the lump on James' throat the day after he had first lifted weights with Ty. James had strained his neck during that workout and as he complained of soreness at the breakfast table that morning, we noticed the lump. For two years, we lived in ignorance of the true nature of this bulge. Thankfully we were with dear friends in Massachusetts the night we were told that James had cancer.

As I opened my Bible later in the privacy of our room, the Lord led me to 2 Chronicles 20, the story of God's victory in behalf of Jehosaphat. It was a great comfort as we applied God's words to our situation: "Thus says the Lord to you, Do not be afraid nor dismayed because of this [trial]; for the battle is not yours, but God's . . . You will not need to fight in this battle. Position yourselves, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, who is with you . . . Do not fear or be dismayed . . . for the Lord is with you."¹ As we still had meetings to give, I was reassured to remember the thought that when we take care of God's interests, He will take care of ours.

After we returned home, the tumor was biopsied and diagnosed as papillary carcinoma—thyroid cancer. Educating ourselves about thyroid cancer, weighing possible treatment options and earnestly praying for and expecting God's guidance were all part of the process of choosing to have surgery in Seattle to remove the tumor, along with the rest of James' thyroid. God used precious friends to make the path clearer for us.

As news got around regarding our situation, concern was expressed in words. Our own per-

sonal picture of health and the health message is often revealed in how we communicate with the afflicted. For the most part, we were overwhelmed with the love we felt from those who shared their concern and for all who devoted time to pray. We felt sustained and knit together with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

However, there were also words that we had to process and seek to understand their source. Some were directed at us, others were more general:

"Well, this just goes to show you that you can't judge anyone. You know that cancer is the body trying to get rid of toxins you have put in there."

"When Jesus passed through villages, there was not a single sick person left. Yet the very same things that are killing those in the world are killing those in the church. Has not Jesus passed through?"

"Why did you choose surgery? Why didn't you choose God's way?"

"You are going to have your thyroid out and be dependent upon pills the rest of your life? What are you going to do during the time of trouble? Well, I guess God could work a miracle, but maybe not since it was your choice to have surgery."

"James must not be following the health message."

Why did James develop thyroid cancer? I wish I had a clear answer. We may never know

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exactly why. The question does not torment me, though, because of what we have learned, as well as some clarification in my own picture of health.

Adversity, including sickness and disease, can have many causes. I have listed five along with a few references that I believe support them:

1. Our own fault (excess, neglect, sin)—“Fools because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, are afflicted.”²

5. Satan—“And the Lord said to Satan, ‘Behold, all that he has is in your power; only do not lay a hand on his person.’”⁹ “Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’”¹⁰ “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the

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2. Chance (circumstances, environment, heredity)—“Time and chance happen to [all men].”³ And the disciples asked Jesus, in John 9:2-3 (NKJV), “‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.’”

3. The influence or actions of others—“Whoever causes the upright to go astray in an evil way, he himself will fall into his own pit; but the blameless will inherit good.”⁴

4. God (whether for discipline; for His glory; as warning or wake-up-call, or judgment)—“For the Lord will not cast off forever. Though He causes grief, yet He will show compassion according to the multitude of His mercies.”⁵ “On his forehead, [Uzziah] was leprous; so they thrust him out of that place. Indeed he also hurried to get out because the Lord had struck him.”⁶ “He causes it to come, whether for correction, or for His land, or for mercy.”⁷ “And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. . . . You should know in your heart that as a man chastens his son, so the Lord your God chastens you.”⁸ An important point to remember in this fourth category is that God’s purpose is to restore, not to destroy.

same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.”¹¹ “The thief cometh not, but for to steal and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”¹² An earmark of this category is Satan’s malicious intent to destroy or exalt his power.

Job’s example in searching out the cause, which he knew not, is a noble example to us.¹³ But there are times when the true cause of our adversity may not be quite clear. We may never know in this life our trial’s source or exact purpose.

To the Christian, however, the response to adversity is of greater significance and value than the adversity itself. Whether from personal sin, chance, the influence of others, God’s discipline, or Satan’s desire to destroy faith, trials and disease become opportunities to grow. They present occasion to reevaluate the life, to deepen repentance and recommit to His ways, to cry out for a closer walk with God, to earnestly and intently seek Him and His will, to strengthen faith rather than allow it to falter.

To glorify the Father’s name through expected agony was our Savior’s desire. While none will ever be called to endure what Christ did, He is our Example in trial and adversity. Jesus prayed, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as Thou wilt.”¹⁴ Did Jesus drink the cup? Yes. Was His prayer heard? “Who, in the days of

His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and **was heard** because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.”¹⁵ Yes, Jesus’ prayer was heard. He was still called upon to suffer, but He was given victory over that suffering. We may not be delivered from disease or death, but we can have Christ’s victory over them.

The apostle Paul wrote, “For to you it has been given on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.”¹⁶ I do not believe it has ever been God’s desire for man to suffer. He is the Mighty Physician, seeking to alleviate pain. He is our Comforter, sympathizing in all our afflictions. Suffering is the result of sin. But if we must travel unpleasant byways, may we so conduct ourselves as to honor Christ.

Unlike us, Christ had victory through His suffering because He carried no guilt. We are guilty. And while James and I experienced deepened repentance through this time of searching, we also had confidence that because of Christ’s victory, we would be victors too.

Thyroid cancer has a high rate of cure. Surgery seemed to be the best option, so we scheduled the day. We trusted that “the Savior is present in the sickroom, in the operating room; and His power for His name’s glory accomplishes great things. . . . It is our privilege to use **every God-appointed means** in correspondence with our faith, and then trust in God, when we have urged the promise. If there is a need of a surgical operation, and the physician is willing to undertake the case, it is not a denial of faith to have the operation performed. After the patient has committed his will to the will of God, let him trust, drawing nigh to the Great Physician, the Mighty Healer, and giving himself up in perfect trust.”¹⁷ “Christ is the greatest medical missionary that ever lived. He never lost a case. . . . He stands [by the physicians] as they perform their difficult surgical operations. We know that this is so.”¹⁸

In harmony with this decision, James began to juice and take other immune boosters. Ten days before the surgery James was anointed. It was a beautiful, affirming time of worship. We sang as Jehosaphat and the people had done when going out to victory against the enemy. By

the next week, the tumor had shrunk noticeably.

While the surgery was termed successful, our battle with this cancer is not over yet. We are still on the pathway of making more decisions regarding follow-up. It is still so new. But we are confident that He who has carried us thus far will see us through to the end.

You may not have chosen the path we took. The work is between God and our own souls. It is an individual journey. I believe He takes into consideration our particular constitution, frame, circumstance and lifestyle. And we may make mistakes along the way.

Throughout my experience in sharing health information, I have seen the health message disregarded or ignored as “just about health.” “Eating such and such does not make me sick or hasn’t given me cancer, so what’s the big deal?” I have also seen the health message nearly idolized as a way to attain to holy flesh. In either case, the emphasis is displaced upon self, sickness and survival. I hope that through this series my intent has been clear to explain how and why I believe our health message is ultimately connected to salvation. God longs for us to prosper and be in health with the intent that our souls would prosper.¹⁹ The health message is not about what you should or should not eat. As I’ve heard it said, “It’s about living for Jesus. The battle is not over disease; it’s over self-will.”²⁰

Yes, sickness is often caused by our own

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inattention to the laws of life. But contracting cancer, or having a heart attack or stroke, or even catching a cold, does not necessarily mean that the victim is living in sin. Elisha died of a slow lingering disease. And yet, he was God’s faithful, obedient servant, even unto death. There is blessing in obedience, but it may not always come packaged as we think it should.

James and I are not discouraged. If anything, this trial has caused us to strive to become stronger in certain areas. (James now eats *all* of his vegetables.)

The context of the health message is inseparable from the three angels' messages. Jesus said in Luke 21:34 (KJV), "And take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and care of this life, so that day come upon you unawares." Overindulgence, intemperance, and being engrossed in the cares of life simply outline the issues we have been discussing for months. Overeating, unhealthy eating, lack of exercise, over-stimulation from entertainment, destructive habits, stress, all affect the spiritual functions of the brain, whether we realize it or not. **Jesus Himself made the connection between the effects of our lifestyle and the state of being unprepared for His second coming.**

The enemy will seek to keep our minds in a slumbering state, just like the ten sleeping virgins. He will use whatever individual weakness works with us. He is battling for the heart. As we go forth daily to the battle, we must use our spiritual armor to guard the avenues to the soul and maintain healthy brain nerves through which heaven seeks to communicate with us. And then, friends, in life or in death, in sickness or in health, we can trust the excellent loving kindness of the Lord. In spite of Satan's assaults, or chance, or our personal faults and sins or others' sins against us, God will bring us forth more than conquerors.

If you will remember, the story that led to the title for this series was of an artist who stepped back to admire his work. But as he did so, his helper who was standing by struck his hand against the painting, smudging the fresh paint. The artist lunged forward in rage only to realize that his helper had saved him from falling off the scaffold to his destruction. When I first learned the importance of living healthfully for Christ, I must admit my own picture of what and how it should be done needed some serious touch up. Christ has had to work quite a bit on my canvas.

How is your picture of health looking? The real picture of your physical and, more importantly, spiritual health? Do we really understand its purpose? Certainly, we don't want to become ill or suffer. Our mortality frightens and angers us. And well it might—it wasn't what we were created to experience. But when life in this world brings us a seeming destruction that smudges our carefully constructed plans and goals (in our case, cancer), let us use it to further our zeal and passion for God and our heavenly home. It could be that our pictures need some smudging, not because they are incomplete or lack detail, but because we have not understood the true purpose of health.

Why was a health message given to a young religious movement over a century ago? It was provided to help men guard the heart and experience fullness of life in Christ. Surrender to God in this area of our lives simply reflects our trust in the Master Painter.

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¹ 2 Chronicles 20:15, 17 (NKJV)

² Psalm 107:17

³ Ecclesiastes 9:11 (NKJV)

⁴ Proverbs 28:10 (NKJV)

⁵ Lamentations 3:31-32 (NKJV)

⁶ 2 Chronicles 26:20 (NKJV)

⁷ Job 37:13

⁸ Deuteronomy 8:2, 5 (NKJV)

⁹ Job 1:12 (NKJV)

¹⁰ Matthew 13:27-28 (NKJV)

¹¹ 1 Peter 5:8-9 (NKJV)

¹² John 10:10

¹³ See Job 29:16

¹⁴ Matthew 26:39

¹⁵ Hebrews 5:7

¹⁶ Philippians 1:29 (NKJV)

¹⁷ *Selected Messages*, Book 2, p. 284.

¹⁸ *Selected Messages*, Book 2, p. 285.

¹⁹ 2 John 3

²⁰ Vicki Griffin, Health Educator, Soquel Campmeeting, July 2003

