Trusting God in the Bizarre

I have tongue cancer. Bizarre, right? I'm not male, nor do I engage in the particularly bad combination of both smoking and drinking, which are the big markers for this nasty invasion. In two weeks I am scheduled for surgery to remove the cancer by cutting out a big chunk of my tongue—which is a particular challenge and sadness for a professional speaker.

One of the things I have discovered is that, even without any drugs, the weight of this diagnosis and the upcoming difficult surgery and recovery has consumed a lot of my mental and emotional energy. Everything in my life has taken a back seat to this crisis.

Let me share some observations from my "Cancer Journey" journal, in no thought-through order because . . . see the above paragraph.

The oral surgeon who biopsied my tongue is a dear believer from church. When he delivered the bad news to me with amazing tenderness and gentleness, he was "Jesus with skin on" to me. I truly sensed the Lord was telling me through my doctor-now-friend that He was allowing this challenge that was going to be hard, and a lot of work, but He is with me. I was so blessed to be able to freely respond by asking, "Would you please pray for me?" And he did. The first of many, many prayers I have received.

Years ago, when an older friend got breast cancer, I asked her if she struggled with anger at God for letting this bad thing happen to her. She said, "Oh no! God has been so faithful and so good to me all these years of walking with Him, I know that He is allowing this for a reason. I trust Him." And that's why she didn't ask the "Why me?" question, either: living in a fallen world, why NOT her? At that time, I prayed, "Lord, I will continue to ask that You spare me from cancer, but if You

don't, I am pre-deciding to respond the way Delores did." So I didn't have to work out my response when the diagnosis came.

My primary care doctor told me a long time ago to stop diagnosing myself; I'm never right. (And not to consult with Dr. Google either.) But that's what I had done concerning the soreness on the side of my tongue that has lingered for months. Two dentists advised me to see an oral surgeon and possibly get it biopsied, but I was *so sure* it couldn't be cancer that I dragged my feet following through. I am fully repenting of "leaning on my own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5) and diagnosing myself. And I now have a fuller understanding of why self-sufficiency is a sin . . . and I'm repenting of that too.

Early in this cancer journey, Jesus spoke to my heart through Revelation 2:10—"Do not fear what you are about to suffer." I know He was addressing the church in Smyrna with that verse, but He pretty much burned it into MY heart when I read it one morning. He knew that, being a pain weenie, I was going to struggle with fear. I have to keep reminding myself of what to do with my fear: Psalm 53:6 says, "When I am afraid, I will trust in You." And in these days of Advent, I get to be reminded frequently through Christmas music that Jesus is Immanuel, "God with us." I need to trust Him; I need to trust IN Him; I need to recall Isaiah 43:1-5, where He says, "Don't be afraid, for I am with you." Just like I used to soothe my frightened children when they were small with, "It's OK, it's OK, Mommy's with you."

One night as I prepared for bed and took my evening medication and supplements, I realized that taking oral pain meds post-surgery is going to be a challenge with a crippled tongue. Then I realized that I am going to be losing a body part, and I need to grieve that. The next morning, on the phone with our church's women's pastor who was checking on me, I shared about this realization. As she prayed for me, choked up with compassion, my tears started to fall. The moment I hung up,

great heaving sobs overtook me. And I grieved.

(As hard as it was on me, losing a body part because of disease, I also cried out of anger that the enemy has deceived so many people, especially young people, into thinking that they would be happy if they would just have perfectly healthy body parts amputated. I cried out of compassion for their inevitable double grief of not only losing a *healthy* body part, but the eventual realization that they were lied to about what would fix everything in their thoughts and feelings. And that evil spirits laugh at their pain.)

Instead of a women's Christmas Coffee at church, we were blessed to have 25 hostesses open their homes in multiple cities and multiple zip codes for 25 teachers to share the same basic message that each of us made our own. In my final point, about abiding in Christ, I was able to hold up an IV bag and tubing to illustrate what abiding is like: Jesus said He is the vine, we are the branches. Our job as branches is to stay connected so His "supernatural sap" can flow into us. Just like when we're hooked up to an IV, our job is to stay connected. I asked my hostess's husband to record that part of my message as well as my application about abiding in Christ as I wrestle with this cancer. I was able to edit it down to 6 minutes and post it on Facebook with a request for prayer.

https://www.facebook.com/559034244/videos/703017111419005/

Now on my own Facebook feed, I see a very limited number of people's posts. But somehow (cue God to show up) my post made it to hundreds of people's feeds, and 400+ comments and over 3600 views of the video later, I am being prayed for—a LOT! Thank You Lord!

And I need the prayers. I think the cancer is spiritual warfare that God is allowing for His glory and my good. And for other people's good as well, though I may never see it on this side of eternity. One of my friends said, "You are

outspoken and the enemy wants to silence you. What better way than to go after your tongue?" On top of the attack on my body, I've also wrestled at times with fear about the pain. I think it's a spirit of fear. (I've been here before: see my blog post "I'm Scared, Lord.")

But God . . . because He loves me . . . just gave me a connection on Facebook with a young lady who is not only recovering from the same tongue cancer surgery, it was done by the same surgeon as mine! She has encouraged and reassured me about the pain management. We look forward to meeting face to face soon. That is a Christmas gift from the Lord, and it's part of His answer to the prayers of many people.

I have been in this place of experiencing peace from the prayers of God's people before. My last trip to Belarus, before I lost the ability to walk, I posted a request for people to pray daily for me for "stair grace." There are few elevators in Belarus, and the building where we were staying and teaching had two flights of stairs I had to climb several times a day. I asked for 10 people to pray, and 70 promised they would support me through prayer. And boy did they ever. It was amazing how easy it was to go up and down stairs for almost two weeks.

Until the last day, on my last stair climb, when I sensed the Lord telling me, "I have been answering your friends' prayers for stair grace all this trip. Now I'm going to remove the grace so you can experience what it would have been like without the enabling grace." And. It. Was. HARD!!! I was sore, I was out of breath, my polio leg yelled at me. So I know the huge difference prayer makes, and I am so grateful for the prayer support I've already received. I am desperate for the prayers of God's people!

The story continues . . . in God's loving hands. . . as I continue to trust Him in the bizarre.

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blogs.bible.org/trusting-god-in-the-bizarre/ on December 20, 2022.

Leaning Hard

I wondered when it would happen, when the pain and weakness from post-polio, exacerbated by hip arthritis, would set me up for a fall. And now I know. The other day I took a tumble.

I forgot to have my husband put my walker in the back of my mini-van. At some point this year I discovered that leaning on a cane for stability wasn't enough, and I need a walker for literally every step. But this level of loss and disability is still new to me; sometimes I forget that my "new normal" demands things like taking a walker with me. When I got to my destination, all I had was my cane, and I thought, "It's okay, I'll have the cane in my right hand and I can lean on the car with my left to make my way to the back of the van to get my scooter."

But it was a drizzly day, and when I leaned hard on the bumper my hand slipped, and I went down HARD. Fortunately, it was also a cold day and my padded coat helped cushion my shoulder and hip as I hit the ground. I instantly had a new appreciation for that old commercial, "I've fallen and I can't get up!" Yep. That was me.

My cell phone was in my pocket, praise God, and I was able to

call for help. It took two aides to lift me to a vertical position and then get my scooter out of the van, shaken and feeling very fragile but basically okay.

The doctor I was there to see also came out, and when she spoke I knew it was the Lord's voice through her: "Sue, you're trying to do too much on your own." Yep. That was me too.

I've thought a lot about how things have changed for me in the past couple of years as I've lost so much of my mobility and ability to do even the simplest things around the house. And since there is often a strong correlation between the physical world and spiritual reality, each one teaching us something about the other, I've become especially aware of my dependence on my walker and my scooter.

So it deeply blessed me when a friend dealing with stage-four renal cancer was featured in a video where she quoted from J.I. Packer in Joni Eareckson Tada's book *A Lifetime of Wisdom*:

> *"God uses chronic pain and weakness, along with other afflictions, as his chisel for sculpting our lives. Felt weakness deepens dependence on Christ for strength each day. The weaker we feel, the harder we lean. And the harder we lean, the stronger we grow spiritually, even while our bodies waste away. To live with your 'thorn' uncomplainingly – that is, sweet, patient, and free in heart to love and help others, even though every day you feel weak – is true sanctification. It is true healing for the spirit. It is a supreme victory of grace."*

The weaker we feel, the harder we lean. And the harder we

lean, the stronger we grow spiritually, even while our bodies waste away. Whoa.

"Leaning hard" is the opposite of our American, self-sufficient, can-do independence. But it's the secret to spiritual vitality and power because "leaning hard" means we access Christ's strength instead of our own puny efforts.

"Leaning hard" is my new way of understanding "abiding." And abiding is where stability comes from, just as I am far more stable when I'm "leaning hard" on my walker when I have to walk and on my scooter when I get to ride.

The memory of leaning hard on my slippery car bumper, only to discover it was not a reliable place to support myself so I landed hard on the ground, was also a powerful lesson in the futility of leaning hard on myself or anything other than Jesus Christ Himself. I now have a kinesthetic memory of that spiritual truth!

It stinks to fall, of course, but I sure do love the insight that came from it.

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Apart From Him, We're a Boat

Anchor

January 14, 2014

My computer had no battery and no way to connect to the power supply. It was useless. All the programs installed on it, all the information on the hard drive, were completely inaccessible because it needs power to run.

It needs power to do what it was designed to do.

It needs power to be a computer and not a doorstop. Or a boat anchor.

I was reminded of Jesus' simple statement (that we really don't believe): "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for *apart from Me you can do nothing*" (John 15:5).

Apart from a power supply, my computer can do nothing. It, however, has the good sense to demonstrate the startling truth of Jesus' statement, unlike us. We're more like a car out of gas that can still roll downhill without power, boasting in the delusion of self-deception: "Hey, look at me, look what I can do all by myself!"

But Jesus really meant it. Apart from Him, we can do nothing. He's the glue that holds the atoms and molecules of the universe together, and He holds us together. Unless our lungs inflate and our hearts continue to beat, unless there is air for us to breathe in, unless our red blood cells dump out carbon dioxide and absorb oxygen, we can do nothing. We're as dead as my computer without a power supply.

Write a poem, a novel, or even a shopping list? Apart from Him, our brains don't work and our thoughts, if they exist at all, are meaningless, random biochemical explosions.

Plant a garden, fertilize and water it, eventually harvesting

vegetables or fruit? Apart from Him, the creator of seed and soil and fertilizer and water, we got nuthin.'

Get a job, any job? Apart from Him, we have no connections to people that He made, there is no structure within civilization to provide for employment, there is no basis for money for trade.

Actually, apart from Him, there *is* something we can do. We can sin. We can act independently of God, in either active rebellion or passive indifference.

Apart from Him . . . we can do nothing of value, nothing that lasts, nothing to be proud of or grateful for.

What Jesus called us to do is to abide. To hang out with Him. To teach ourselves to live in awareness of His presence, reminding ourselves of the truth that He is always with us, as He promised (Matt. 28:20). To actively depend on Him. That may look like mentally taking His hand no matter what we're doing. Or mentally sliding over into the passenger seat in the car to let Him drive through us. When we're afraid, clinging to the truth of scripture, praying over and over, "When I am afraid, I will trust in You" (Ps. 56:3).

Abiding is the spiritual discipline of staying plugged in, connected, to our power source.

Just like my poor little powerless computer.