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FACING TRIALS WITH JOY

CANCER AND BEYOND



joni&friends



In November of 2018, destructive wildfires tore through southern California, leaving the hills burnt and black. The same month, I discovered I had stage III cancer... for a second time since my earlier battle in 2010. Months have passed since the fires, and as I've driven west on the 101 freeway to various medical appointments, I've been awestruck by the bright spring-green grass growing like a lush carpet over the blackened hills. The sight is a vivid reminder of renewal and resurrection, even in the aftermath of tragic fires. The metaphor is not lost on me, for those lovely green slopes along the 101 tell the story of how God has brought "beauty out of ashes" (Isaiah 61:3).

In the same way, God is doing beautiful things through my reoccurrence of cancer. Yes, the vibrant green hills, like Psalm 121, tell me where my resurrection-help comes from. As I deal with a faster-growing and more aggressive cancer, God is giving me fresh opportunities to discover his beauty, power, presence, and love as never before. I'd like to share some of these discoveries in the hope that they might bless you as you walk through trials of your own.

Thankfulness in Trials

This “new” cancer came as a shock and was discovered by accident when my doctor ordered a PET scan related to my pain issues. “Just to be safe,” he’d said, adding, “but I’m certain we won’t find any cancer.” Well, we did. Thankfully, the tumor on my chest wall was removed quickly, and after I healed, I was able to undergo radiation. Radiation had not been possible in my original fight with cancer because of my fragile quadriplegic lungs. But technology had vastly improved in the interceding years, so the radiation was deemed safe enough. Even during radiation treatment, I had enough air in my lungs to speak and work!

It may sound counterintuitive, but my trials with cancer have brought me countless spiritual blessings. The first time around, and the second, my cancer has:

- Made me more grateful to be alive.
- Given me an appreciation for what little strength and stamina I can muster.
- Drawn me closer to my husband and family.
- Made me more thankful for friendships and the chance to meet new friends.
- Cultivated a sweeter, more precious intimacy with Jesus Christ.

Honestly, sometimes amid my cancer treatments, I would lie in bed and fight back tears of gratitude as I counted all my blessings.

But my cancer has also troubled some people. When I was diagnosed the second time, I received emails from Christian friends wondering if God was putting me through too much. “Quadriplegia, chronic pain, my previous cancer and now a recurrence?” It appeared God were doing me harm instead of good. I don’t blame these friends for this response; it’s natural. But a Christian’s natural feelings and point of view are often beneath the dignity deserving of God. Natural emotions can leave us with a low view of our Lord, as well as a bitter spirit when we face life’s difficulties. But we are not stuck there.

As Christians, we know there is more to life than what’s natural (1 Corinthians 2:9), and that God’s thoughts and ways are higher, bigger, and better than our own (Isaiah 55:8-9). When we are *naturally* troubled by the trials we face, it’s time to gain a higher view of what the Bible says about suffering.

God’s View of Suffering

Our crises—cancer and other tough trials—give us an important opportunity to lean into God and learn what he has to say about our trouble and suffering.

In order to be thankful in our trials, we need to carefully consider what God has to say about suffering in his Son's earthly life, in the life of his saints, and in our own lives.

Let's start with Jesus himself. In Isaiah 53, a prophecy paints a picture of our Lord as a suffering Savior, "a man of suffering, and familiar with pain" (Isaiah 53:3). In Jesus, we see that God himself suffers (Hebrews 5:8). Not only that, he suffers with and for us (Hebrews 4:15). We have a God who is deeply acquainted with suffering, and with his help he means for his followers to step into his example (1 Peter 2:21).

Then there is the apostle Paul. Eugene Peterson once described Paul as a "scarred veteran. A man who visited the extremes." Jesus' disciples all suffered and many were eventually put to death for their commitment to Christ. While I would *not* put myself in the same class as Paul or the apostles, I am a disciple of Jesus like they were. All of us know *something* about scars and about visiting the extremes—for me, it's the extremes of chronic pain, the rigors of cancer therapy, the difficulties of aging with quadriplegia.

Of course, you have your own scars and burdens as well. But that's *okay*. Why is my suffering—my cancer,

my loss, my tragedy *okay, even acceptable*? Scripture helps us answer this difficult question:

- First Peter 2:21 says, "to this you were called because Christ Jesus suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps."
- First Thessalonians 3:3 reminds us, "No one should be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them."
- James 1:2-3 tells us, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."
- Romans 5:2-4 says, "And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."
- First Peter 5:10 assures us, "And the God of all grace... after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast."

Character Outweighs Circumstances

It was Harry Reader who wrote, "Circumstances do not dictate your character, they reveal it and become

the opportunity to refine it.” Cancer does not dictate who I am; it creates an opportunity for God to refine who I am and become more and more the person that God created me to be.

When we demonstrate our loyalty to the Lord Jesus through a tough trial, our faith has a chance to be confirmed and strengthened. We also bring delight to the Lord as we draw near to him. God receives great joy to see that we hold tightly to him through a hard trial. We can glorify God by trusting him and depending on him when the stakes are high and the odds are against us in our lives. In this process, as the passages from James and Romans tell us, we can be deeply changed for the better.

Transformed in Our Trials

I’m not the same Joni I was before cancer. I know, I can feel, that I’m becoming more like Jesus, and I *love* that. How does this happen? James 1 and Romans 5 give us clues, as does Romans 8:28-29. When we *cultivate a godly response in our suffering*, God makes us more like his Son—mature, full of hope, lacking nothing, complete, and overflowing with the Holy Spirit. Say no to complaining. Saying yes to trusting. Saying no to anxious, fearful thoughts. Say yes to subduing every fearful thought “captive for the sake of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Eugene Peterson reflects that Paul “knows that what God has done *within* him is far more important and lasting than anything that could be done *to* him.”

I say amen to that. Paul’s battles, my cancer, and your trials are all about bringing glory to God. As God changes us through hardships, we have the privilege of glorifying God.

Prayer: Lord, when I face ordeals—cancer, pain, loss, fear—help me to depend upon you and trust that my difficult circumstances are an opportunity to glorify you and become more like Jesus. Let my difficulties reveal my character and give me the occasion to depend upon your all-sufficient grace and love.

Take a moment to pray for those you know who are battling cancer, facing chronic pain, or other trials. Ask the Holy Spirit to show them how to cultivate a submissive spirit to every trial, as well as a godly response.

Do No Harm

With all these insights, it can be hard to trust God when painful circumstances make him *appear* to be against you. You might say, “Joni, in many places Scripture tells us that God does no harm to his children, only good.” Let’s look at a few:

- In Jeremiah 32:41, God himself says, “I will find joy doing good for them.”
- Psalm 84:11 promises, “The Lord will withhold no good thing from those who do what is right.”
- And this famous promise in Jeremiah 29:11, “For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “They are plans for good and not to harm you, to give you a future and a hope.”

These verses, and others in the Bible, seem to guarantee that God should protect us from harmful, hurtful things. *So why would God allow quadriplegia, chronic pain, and then add two vicious rounds with cancer?* The answer: God is less interested in my physical well-being and more interested in strengthening my soul.

“Take notice, therefore, of the *kindness* and *severity* of God,” says Romans 11:22. Hurtful hardships are the severity of God’s sovereignty, and so, I experience pain and harm in my body. But the kindness of his sovereignty is the good that’s being accomplished in my soul: a stronger faith, a deeper wisdom, an increase of peace, a higher joy, an unwavering devotion to Christ, and the ironclad trust that comes from walking through that valley of the shadow of death.

These fruits are of inestimable value to me, to God, and to other people. “No [trial] seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11). This is why Romans 8:28 is such a favorite for so many: “And we know that in *all things* God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Day in and day out during my cancer treatment, Psalm 112:1, 6–8 was such a mainstay, “How joyful are those who fear the Lord... Such people will not be overcome by evil... They do not fear bad news; they confidently trust the Lord to care for them. They are confident and fearless and can face their foes triumphantly.”

Oswald Chambers put it this way in *My Utmost for His Highest*:

May God not find complaints in us anymore, but spiritual vitality—a readiness to face anything He brings our way. The only proper goal of life is that we manifest the Son of God; and when this occurs, all of our dictating of our demands to God disappears. Our Lord never dictated demands to His Father, and neither are we to make demands on God. We are here to submit to His will so that He may work through

us what He wants. Once we realize this, He will make us broken bread and poured-out wine with which to feed and nourish others.

Living from Tree to Tree

Still, it can feel overwhelming. While I was going through cancer treatment, I was greatly encouraged by this excerpt from an article called “Lord, Help Me Endure One More Day” by Josh Squier. He writes:

I once watched a documentary about the toughest school in all the military (or so the film claimed). It was the winter session of the Army Mountain Warfare School which contained unbelievable trials—physical and emotional—that seemed to assail the students from the time they arrived. But the event with the highest dropout rate was a multi-day hike up a snow packed mountain. It required traversing the whole mountain, from bottom to top, through over ten feet of snow drifts with a large, heavy rucksack slung to their back and no special equipment. They had their feet and sheer determination.

On the morning of the infamous march, a drill instructor spoke to the soldiers. I expected it to be something full of bombast and bluster,

urging the group to complete the task at hand or face swift retribution! Instead, the wise soldier simply said, “If you want to quit, look at the top of the mountain.” He went on, “But if you want to make it through, then just find the closest tree and tell yourself, ‘I’m going to make it to that next tree and then reevaluate.’ And then when you get to that tree, do the same thing again, finding the next closest tree. If you’ll do that, tree by tree, soon enough you’ll find yourself at the top of the mountain.”*

Life is like staring at a mountain from the bottom. The climb seems impossible. In those moments, working your way toward the next tree is simply praying for endurance: “Lord, get me through this season, this day, this hour, even this prayer. Do not let me go, that I may not ever let you go.”

I like the way Josh Squier puts it, “Sometimes you have to live from tree to tree.” Life is that *hard*. But God is our ever-present help in any trouble; he’ll help you keep discouragement at bay. In our trials, Satan delights in marshaling the forces of darkness against us. But God is in the ring *with* us. Your Maker is the Father of compassion. We can count on him as our loving Father to supply help and protect his

*Squires, Josh (2019)“Lord, Help Me Endure one More Day [Blog Post] Desiring God

precious treasures—his children. Scripture tells us how he fights for us. Meditate on the following translations of Zechariah 2:8-9:

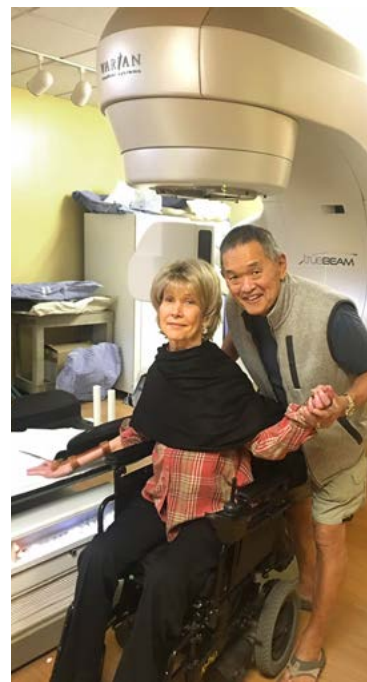
- “... Whoever touches you touches the apple of the My eye. I will surely raise my hand against them” (NIV).
- “Anyone who harms you, harms my most precious possession. I will raise my fist to crush them” (New Living Translation).
- God says, “Anyone who hits you, hits me - bloodies my nose, and blackens my eye... they will be stripped down and thrown out” (The Message).

Jael: My Friend the Radiation Machine

Meet my friend, the radiation machine. Not many people would say a machine was their friend, but the large and lumbering 3D-Conformal Radiation Machine has been a fierce ally in my battle against cancer. In fact, fear of that machine completely dissolved when I named it. I called it Jael, after the heroine in the book of Judges who ruthlessly killed Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite armies. Jael drove a stake through his head to help rescue Israel from her enemies. That fateful day, Jael, a simple Bedouin woman, was lauded for seizing the opportunity to act on behalf of God (see Judges 4).

You can see why I call the big radiation machine Jael! In my case, Sisera the Canaanite commander is the enemy cancer cells. As I completed the last of my 35 sessions under Jael with her x-rays aimed at the cancer in my chest wall, I thanked God for the machine’s fierce aim against my dreaded disease.

My doctors tell me that in the Jael-radiated area, the chances of cancer recurrence are extremely slim. They also prescribed drugs that I will take for the rest of my life that are intended to destroy maverick cancer cells in other parts of my body. But while Jael has been an ally, it is God the Holy Spirit—my ally through each treatment—who is the source of my hope, joy, and lightness of heart.



Jael has played her part, as have my doctors, and as do the medications they have prescribed. But it is the Holy Spirit who gives me joy, hope, confidence, and excitement in my inner being, whether my cancer returns or not. The same Spirit of Jesus who accompanied me every moment under the radiation machine holds every moment of my future secure, whatever might come. So, I don't worry.

Like another hero in the Old Testament, the prophet Samuel, I can say, "thus far the Lord has helped us, and He will continue to help us." The future is his. Worry fades away when we trust God with the future, and when his indwelling Holy Spirit gives us light and hope, even amid dark trials, in sickness, and lying under radiation machines.

Death: The Door to Glory

Through two bouts of cancer, I have experienced healing thanks to effective care by my medical team and the intercessions of many friends. My doctors tell me that the threat of my cancer recurring is diminished. But what makes cancer such a fearsome disease is the fact that treatments are not always successful, and that despite the best efforts of doctors and the prayers of faithful friends, not every cancer journey ends with a celebration of physical healing.

If you or a loved one is battling cancer, you already understand that the disease forces you to face the reality of death at close range. Cancer can be an inconvenient prod that moves us toward discovering what the Bible has to say about death. When we feel afraid and grieved at the prospect of our own death or loss of a loved one, we need to lean all the more into what God tells us about the glory we can expect in eternity.

- In Philippians 1:20-21 Paul writes: "I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

For Paul, and for those whose trust is in Christ, life in the present world is full of purpose, but death means something richer and better. While Paul is willing to continue living and working for Christ's sake, he is confident that death will be an amazing thing—a passage into a new kind of life that is glorious beyond compare. Paul is eager because he knows that heaven is just around the corner!

- In Romans 8:18-21 Paul says: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For

the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.”

Suffering from cancer, or the effects of poisonous chemotherapy treatments, is a potent example of the bondage to decay that we experience in this life. Our present sufferings are real and difficult. Without discounting suffering, Paul urges us to consider the glory that will become our new reality in heaven. In light of the coming glory, the darkness of our current trials dissipates like shadows vanishing before a sunbeam.

- Revelation 21:4-7 paints a picture of life to come in heaven: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’... To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.”

A fight with a terminal disease is an opportunity to examine the state of your own soul. Have you made peace with God? If you lose your battle against cancer, do you have confidence you would be welcomed home into heaven? If you are not certain, now is the time to secure your eternal life with Jesus Christ. First John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Ask God to forgive you and send his Holy Spirit to live inside you, giving you hope, and the power to live a life that pleases your heavenly Father.



From the very beginning, I looked at this battle for my health through the lens of Genesis 50:20 when Joseph said to his wicked brothers, “You meant it for evil, but

God intended it for good *for the saving of many lives.*” I like that last part—God allows all things to happen so that our suffering might be a platform for our own salvation, as well as the saving of many other lives, whether our doctors, nurses, or the people we met in the waiting room. I purchased a lot of “hope rocks,” poured them into a bowl, and (with permission) set it out alongside a little handwritten sign: “Take one...and... Be Blessed.” We prayed for the salvation of every nurse, technician, and radiation patient who took a little rock.

Closing Words of Sustenance

Fighting cancer is not easy and I am tired. But I am *happy*. I have been sustained throughout my surgeries, radiation treatments, and more by prayers, the presence of the Lord, and life-giving words. I'd like to share some of these soul-nourishing words with you, that they might strengthen you in the circumstances of your life. First, if you are drowning in discouragement, cry out to the Lord using these words from Psalm 116:

- “I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. The cords of death entangled me...Then I called on the name of the Lord: ‘Lord, save me!’ The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.”

Second, when I found this quote from Charles Spurgeon, I printed it out and carried it with me:

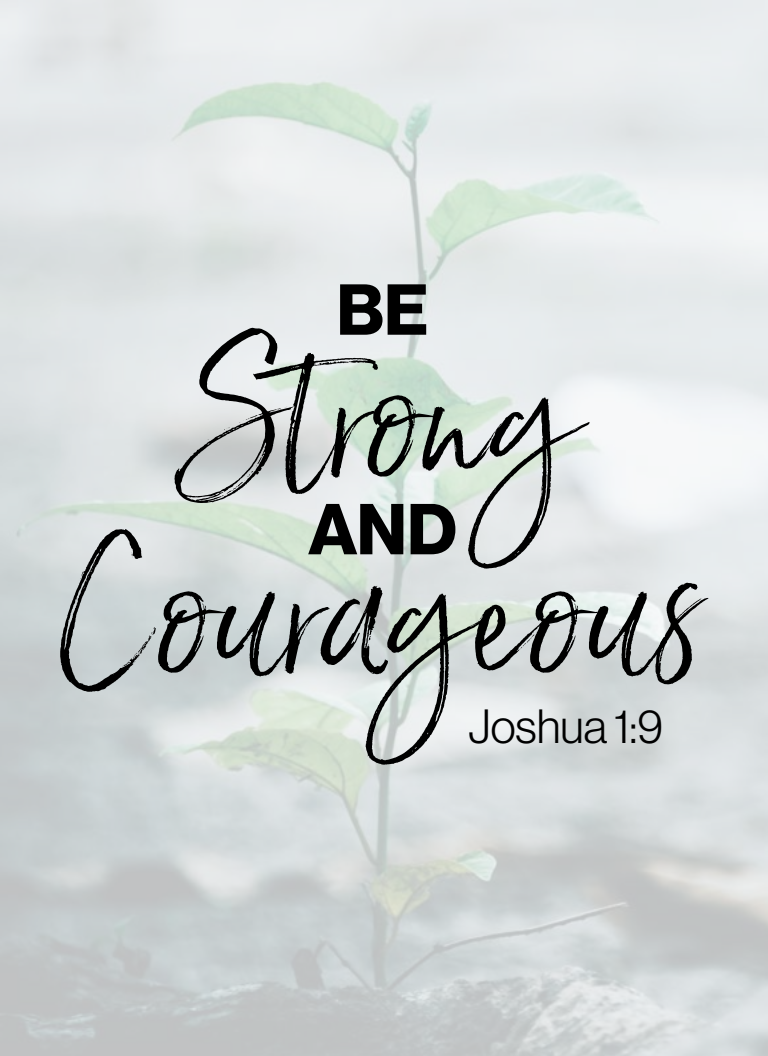
- “I know of nothing in which I could hold Pontius Pilate as an example to you, save in this one thing; he placed the Name of Jesus on the cross. Writing these words with his own hand, he refused to alter them: ‘Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews.’ Pilate, the vacillating governor, for once stuck to the truth, and would not be driven from it.”

Whenever you have a cross to bear, write the name of Jesus the King on it and stand firm on what you have written. Jesus himself carried a cross far heavier than yours, and his hearty sympathy is with you. He is so united to us that all our crosses are his own. Even when the cross weighs heaviest upon you, be glad that you are honored to suffer with Christ. Then, as Spurgeon says, you “are thus crowned as well as crossed. Write his name on all your crosses!”

Constantly attach the name of Jesus to your trial; see your crosses as his, and they will not seem unduly heavy or burdensome. Allow Jesus to tell you, “My burden is light, so keep lifting it with my grace.” And what a difference it will make.

Finally, should you be blessed enough to one day put cancer behind you, then join me in celebrating with Mary's words from Luke chapter 1. She rejoiced, saying:

- “Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.
How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!
For he took notice of his lowly servant girl...
he has done great things for me.
He shows mercy from generation to generation
to all who fear him.
His mighty arm has done tremendous things!...
He has helped his servant
and remembered to be merciful”
(New Living Translation).



BE
Strong
AND
Courageous
Joshua 1:9

If you need further resources, would like more information on other books by Joni Eareckson Tada, or wish to know more about a relationship with Jesus Christ, contact *joniandfriends.org*.

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