

Praying in the Face of Pain

By David Lyons and Linda Lyons Richardson

Praying Through the Moguls

“Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete” (John 16:24 NIV).

Praying in the face of pain is not a walk in the park. It’s more like hopping moguls on a double black diamond ski slope—more excitement than most of us feel prepared to endure. My son Ian experienced some abdominal pain while I was in Mexico, and it turned out to be caused by a gallstone—something often more painful than labor pains. Yet as the doctors discovered the gallstone, something wonderful began to be revealed. After the crisis, our oncologist asked the radiologist to carefully review the scan to determine the exact reduction of Ian’s tumor. I’ll never forget her response: “What tumor? I didn’t see any tumor in there.”

A few days later, I wrote this:

March 22, 2008

Thursday was the day of pain. Ian bravely endured the boring of two holes in his pelvic bone for bone marrow samples. I was there holding his hand, and I contributed to the procedure by passing out. I’ll always remember Ian’s hand dangling down from the operating table while I held his hand from the floor.

On Friday, I asked Ian how he’d like to celebrate his two days of relative health before resuming chemotherapy. The crazy idea of skiing came up, the doctor said okay, and we ran with it. A friend offered their ski-out condo. Another offered discount tickets. So, we were on our way!

Then, as we drove up through the mountains, we received a call from the oncologist with preliminary results of Ian’s bone marrow tests. The last sample in early February contained 92 percent cancer cells. Now it shows 0 percent! Zip!

We’ll see how Ian does with skiing. I remember him lying in bed at the hospital and the doctor talking about him walking around the block. At the time, that seemed so far out of reach. Now look at him.

This whole experience has been a bit like a ski slope, with drop-offs and moguls. And spectacular views of God’s stunning handiwork.

So, you want to learn to pray? Sometimes God answers with moguls. Sometimes it’s a marathon.

Praying Without Losing Heart

“Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart” (Luke 18:1, NASB95).

In the days that followed our ski adventure, a more thorough analysis of the tests revealed that we had not yet reached the summit of being cancer free. It turned out that there were suspicious shadows on Ian's CT scan and negligible traces of cancer in his bone marrow. Like the pilgrim in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, we looked ahead and saw a difficult road.

Throughout this ordeal I thought about others with a different story, those who weren't seeing their prayers answered the way they'd like. What about those others living with ongoing disabilities, losing battles with disease, or grieving the tragic death of a child? Did our progress raise hard questions for them? Did our joy deepen their pain? I wondered how I would be responding if things were going differently. Our feelings would be different, but our faith, I believed, would be the same.

Praying in the face of pain can be like an obstacle course; sometimes you end up facedown in the mud. The question is whether you'll get up again to press on. The day we received that ominous diagnosis of alveolar rhabdomyosarcoma, it felt like an emotional hemorrhage had broken loose in my brain. The look of grave concern on the face of the nurse practitioner was seared into my mind. I tried to continue caring for Ian, making phone calls, dealing with what was in front of me. And I called a dear friend to come. Within an hour he picked me up. I managed to close the passenger door before I began sobbing and wailing. I was facing the reality of death. After a while, the torrent slowed. I began to move on and to live with that reality. I did not give up. But the idea of Ian's death had been forced into my field of view, along with the range of possibilities that I was preparing to face, the options I was prepared to accept from the hand of God. And I was still convinced that God is good.

We were facing a road of persevering to eradicate the cancer and rebuild Ian's health. The drama of near death and miraculous progress was passing. The dust was clearing, yet the drudgery of pressing on through weakness and nausea and pain remained. Praying in the face of pain often requires endurance. So we pulled on our hiking boots and trudged on toward the summit we longed to see.

Praying Through Hard Decisions

Pain can be disorienting, bewildering, like an unexpected two-by-four across the side of the head. Our prayers come out like a mere yelp, and it's hard to get much beyond that.

In the thick of things, sometimes my brain would freeze, like an overloaded computer. Sometimes I'd stand in the closet unable to decide what to wear, or wander around in the hospital cafeteria wondering what to eat. The simplest decisions were sometimes just too much. My mental and emotional bandwidth was occupied by the hardest decisions of my life. I longed for someone to step in and make the right decisions for us. It was an unwelcome opportunity to connect more deeply with Wisdom Himself.

The other day I was discussing a sticky issue with my boss when he said, "That's your call, David. You decide what to do." Something inside me groaned. It would be so much easier if he would make that decision for me! I wouldn't have to think and pray in the same way. But leaders make decisions, and he was spurring me to lead.

The questions we faced as Ian's parents seemed endless and terribly important. God had answered our prayers to the point where we were nearly certain he was cured. Should we continue the harsh course of treatment set before us, just in case? It seemed foolish not to. We needed clear direction from God and great courage to follow that direction.

As a leader, countless times I'd prayed for wisdom from above. Now, as a parent, I needed supernatural wisdom more than ever. My child's life was on the line! James 1:5 fit like a glove. After exhorting us to embrace trials as friends, James went on to say: "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (NASB95). I realized that James's promise of wisdom was especially addressed to those of us in pain. So I prayed. Boy, did I pray!

In the meantime, one of Ian's best friends beat up one of his not-so-best friends for making fun of Ian's bald head. That's another approach.

Praying Through Our Motives

Some of the wisdom needed in the midst of pain is insight into our own hearts and motives. Pain lays open our hearts like a surgeon. In 1 Corinthians 4:1–4 Paul made it clear that it's very hard for us to see our own motives clearly. In fact, Paul left it to God to sort that out for him. Nonetheless, pain does boil motives to the surface. So I found myself asking God if our motives were more like Hezekiah's or Paul's.

King Hezekiah had been greatly used by God. But when he faced death, it became clear that he was more obsessed with getting what he wanted than with God's grand purposes for his life.

In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, "This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover."

Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, "Remember, O Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." And Hezekiah wept bitterly. (Isaiah 38:1–3, NIV)

Contrast Hezekiah's attitude with the apostle Paul's:

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith. (Philippians 1:21–25, NIV)

Hezekiah felt that God owed him a long life. He feared death because he thought it was "the pit of nothingness" (Isaiah 38:17, NASB95). So when he faced death, he was desperate, clinging to life like he was dangling over the end of his existence. How sad! But our merciful God gave the king another fifteen years. It's interesting, though, to read the next chapter. In those extra fifteen years, Hezekiah unintentionally destroyed what God had built and preserved through him.

Paul, on the other hand, faced death again and again without fear, without self-pity. He did what was prudent to preserve his life, but he did not act out of selfishness. Rather, he preserved his life so that he could serve and bless others.

Why were we praying so hard to preserve Ian's life? Was it because we feared his death? No! It was because we believed God had noble purposes for Ian's life in the years ahead. And those purposes were already being fulfilled. People all over the world were being inspired by his courage and faith. Even the Olympic athletes we'd met at the hospital were inspired. Somehow they identified with the sacrifice and focus required of Ian to fight his battle. He spurred them on as they prepared for Beijing. And he spurred all of us on toward an even greater prize.

Praying for a Miracle

Pain pushes us to stop dinking around with small prayers. You don't ask for a pistol when you really need an army. You don't ask for a bicycle when you really need a truck. Extraordinary needs evoke extraordinary prayers. Besides, hanging out with Olympic athletes inspired us to think big thoughts. Instead of thinking something was too difficult, we began to think, *Why not?*

We've been taught to think big thoughts about God and to ask big things of God. A few months into Ian's battle with cancer, it seemed like we were on a roll, seeing miracles nearly once a week. So in the coming weeks, when I heard an announcement for a big youth conference, I thought, *Lord, would it be*

too much to ask that Ian would be able to fully participate in this conference? Ian and his two brothers really wanted to go, and it seemed so timely for each of them. Ian wanted to go so badly that he said he'd be willing to just sit in the sound room and watch.

This was a big ask. Ian's previous two chemo treatments had left him with a dangerously low white blood cell count and a severely compromised immune system, requiring him to stay in isolation. What we were about to ask—for Ian's blood cell count to be high enough to join a room full of hundreds of people—wasn't as big as asking the sun to reverse its course (as God had done for Hezekiah), but it was the same idea: reversing natural phenomena. But in the spirit of "Why not?" we began to pray that God would miraculously strengthen Ian's immune system so he could fully participate in the conference. A few days later, I wrote to friends:

I'm sticking my neck out in prayer for Ian. I so want him to be able to go to the *Desperation Conference*. Yet his count has dropped below the critical 500 level down to 200. And he was battling a low-grade fever last night. He seemed so frustrated when we discussed the implications if his counts don't rise today. Lord, will You answer our prayers and reverse this before his next blood test this afternoon? It would be such a blessing. And it would be such a disappointment if You don't. Once again, I call on You to pour health and healing into his body.

The very next day Ian's blood count rebounded beyond the minimum we were hoping for (500) and soared to 2,400! I imagine a chart of Ian's blood counts with skid marks at the bottom where it had been plummeting to zero but instead did a sudden reversal and raced back beyond 2,000. At this point, Ian's immune system was probably stronger than mine.

What kind of God does that? It was exciting to see him reveal himself like that—to us, to our friends, and to our neighbors who were all watching closely. Before all this pain, most of our neighbors were not interested in our faith. Now they were on the edge of their seats watching us pray, and even praying with us.

We all love miracles, but few of us want to live in the place where we need a miracle to succeed or survive. We'd rather watch from the audience. But sometimes God chooses us out of the crowd to join him up on stage, where he intends to amaze everyone. "You there, in the green sweater. Come on up here." Not knowing what to expect, we stumble forward, just as curious as everyone else. No, a lot more curious than anyone else. And when it seems like only a miracle will do, we begin to pray as we've never prayed before.

Praying Through Anxiety

We had mountaintop moments in which we confidently stuck out our necks asking for miracles, but anxiety was no stranger to us during those times. We were filled with faith, but we were still human. Once again I had crawled out on a limb asking God for something so big—for Ian to go to the conference—and I was anxious out there. In desperation, I clung to Philippians 4:4–8 and waited for him to show up.

Paul told the Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!" (v. 4, NASB95). Throughout that day, as we waited to hear the results of Ian's blood test, I tried to keep myself focused on the Master, just as Peter needed to keep his eyes on Jesus in the midst of a chaotic storm. The Lord is not anxious. He knows what is needed.

Then Paul said, "Let your gentle spirit be known to all men" (v. 5, NASB95). Regardless of the situation—and in spite of my natural tendencies when I'm feeling anxious—I tried to avoid becoming harsh and forceful with the people around me. Instead, I asked God to fill me with his gentle Spirit so thoroughly that others would see him and not me.

Paul continued by saying, "The Lord is near" (v. 5, NASB95). I thought, *Ah! It's not up to me. I am counting on You to walk with me through this day, into and through each situation. I know that You*

can handle it all. I so readily try to take things into my own hands, especially when I feel responsible. I refuse to do that today. Please keep me strongly aware of Your powerful, loving, and peaceful presence.

Then Paul got to the heart of it: “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (v. 6, NASB95). So I prayed, *O Lord, help me to continually convert every shred of anxiety into prayer. You know the anxiety I am feeling on all fronts today. Right now I commit each front to You. I roll Ian’s situation into Your hands. I trust You with him, his health, and what is best for him regarding this conference. Accomplish Your purposes today, however You choose.*

The passage also contains a wonderful promise: “And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (v. 7, NASB95). *Oh, I need that! I cried to the Lord. Please make me an island of peace today. Rather, make me an overflowing fountain of peace. Others around me will need it, too. But it has to be Your peace. Whatever peace I might naturally bring is gone today. May Your peace surround me like a bodyguard, fending off every anxious thought.*

Finally, Paul exhorted us: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things” (v. 8, NASB95). So I prayed, *Yes, I refuse the Enemy’s whispered doubts and accusations. Help me to dwell on what is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, good, excellent, and worthy of praise—which sounds like a description of You!*

Of course you feel anxious when you’re in pain. Or when you’re hurting over someone else’s pain. The question is what you’ll do with that anxiety. Paul urged us to convert every shred of anxiety into prayer. Praying in the face of pain leads us into new spiritual territory, where we learn to pray under fire, to pray for miracles, to pray when we’re worn out, to pray through our motives, to pray through our anxieties. Much of what happens through our praying happens *in us*. God uses prayer to change us. But most of what drives us in prayer is what we hope God will do in our circumstances. Will he say yes or will he say no?

When God Says Yes

As we continued to pray through the summer of 2008, the weeks brought one victory after another, including the doctor’s amazing reversal about radiation and surgery that I described earlier. I described that *Yes!* to our friends this way:

August 12, 2008

God did it! CT scan: 100 percent cancer free! Bone marrow tests: 100 percent cancer free! Plans for surgery and radiation therapy: Reversed!

Thank you for praying. You play a part just as vital as the doctors and nurses. We use our hands. You use your knees.

So, how are we feeling? Ian threw his arms around his mom when he heard. Renee called me with tears of joy. Friends were literally jumping for joy. Ian ran around telling everyone at youth group tonight. And me? Well, I’m quietly reflective.

You see, today I had lunch with a colleague who has two sons. One is severely handicapped. The other one was recently killed in a tragic car accident. We cried together as he told me about how he felt when the police came pounding on his door to tell him.

Why is God calling me to weep with those who weep as I rejoice with those who rejoice? I find myself remembering John Hersey’s book *Hiroshima*. The main character was spared “accidentally” from being killed in the nuclear blast. As he ran into the city to find his family, he was confronted with hundreds of victims staggering out of the city, maimed and burned. It was so overwhelming that he began frantically running from person to person, apologizing that he was not hurt. Somehow that makes some sense to me right now.

Why me? Why not my colleague and his son? Why us? Why not them? Does God love us more than them? NO! He is writing a different love story with them. The angel Gabriel addressed Mary saying, "Hail! Favored one!" Did she feel favored as she watched her son being executed? Did Elizabeth feel favored when she heard that her son had been beheaded? God's favor doesn't always look the way we imagine.

And there is the heart of Amazing Grace. We tend to associate the phrase "Why me?" with being hit by tragedy. Instead, that should be our response to God's blessing.

As I look back, maybe God was preparing me. At that point, I did not know that within a few months the cancer would sneak into Ian's brain. The bell was about to sound as we were shoved back into the ring for another round of praying in the face of pain.

When God Says No

We finished out 2008 with a holiday season full of rejoicing, even as we pressed through hard chemotherapy. Then came 2009, which turned out to be a very different year. We prayed for miracles with the same faith, the same fervency, but Ian's health deteriorated before our eyes.

From David's Journal

April 24, 2009

Medicine has played its last card. It is very clear to everyone involved that Ian's healing is in God's hands alone.

We've seen God step in before. Even the most skeptical doctors acknowledged that Ian has never followed the norms. He keeps baffling them. With God's help, he's won every battle so far. He's undefeated and facing his toughest match.

Renee and I are deeply exhausted. Somehow tonight it feels like our emotional and spiritual support are wearing thin.

The image in my mind is that of a little girl sitting in the midst of a raging battle. Bombs explode and bullets whiz by, but she does not move. She's waiting. She's waiting for her dad, whom she knows will keep her safe. And we wait. We wait knowing that nothing will keep our Daddy from accomplishing what he intends. We know he will keep us safe. We're taking him at his word.

April 26, 2009

We've been praying crazy faith prayers here. I feel like one of those pilots in a Star Wars movie, strapped in for a life-or-death firefight. I engaged in the spiritual battle in earnest Saturday afternoon. At 11 that night Renee texted me from home to say good night, and I replied that it would be awhile before my head would hit the pillow. I was still stoked and going after it in prayer. But soon the Lord impressed on me that he gives to his beloved even in his sleep. So I slept until about 6 a.m., then resumed my part in this battle, while Ian carries on his.

Yesterday afternoon Renee and I had a profound time alone with Ian. He was alert and seemed to be "with" us. Tears were flowing as I said something like this:

Ian, I'm sure that somehow in the midst of all this Jesus is making himself known to you in amazing and personal ways. And we want you to know that however he is leading you, we want you to follow him. As far as we can understand his leading, we believe that he intends to heal you. But if He is clearly telling you that he wants you to leave us and go home to

be with him, then we want you to do that. I really mean that. Even though in the coming hours and days you'll hear us intensely battling for your healing in prayer, if Jesus himself is calling you home, go for it. Don't worry about disappointing us. That would be very hard for us, but we'd be happy for you. However, if you hear Jesus calling you to fight, then I want you to FIGHT with all you have. I know this has been incredibly hard for you. But if Jesus is telling you to fight, then he will strengthen you. Don't lose heart, son. Just follow Jesus however he leads you. And he will enable you.

Then I strapped in for battle and kept at it for hours with a few breaks. Later, one of the dear nurses was marveling at Ian and said, "He is fighting so hard!" My heart rose with hope that Ian had heard his orders from Jesus and swelled with pride over my son's response.

I prayed fiercely. I prayed as I wanted others to pray for me. I prayed as we had prayed before, when we'd seen God do the miraculous again and again. But I was about to learn that praying is not always about getting the results we hope for. Sometimes God has something even bigger in mind.

Questions for Reflection

- How has your pain changed your prayer life?
- What are the best answers to prayer that you have experienced?
- What might it mean for you to "pray with your umbrella open" today?

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About the Authors

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Linda Lyons Richardson was a merchandise-display artist and garden gift shop owner. She graduated from Montgomery College, University of MD, and studied at Corcoran School of Art. Unfortunately, Linda passed away in 2011. She is survived by her husband Steve and two children.