

TO LIVE IS CHRIST: LESSONS LEARNED IN THE VALLEY OF DARKNESS

TODD PETERSON

It all started very innocently. I was sitting at the eye doctor with my son, watching him look into all of the cool machines that tested various parts of his eyesight. I wondered if I should get an eye test since my eyes were last tested in elementary school. I inquired, and the optometrist promptly scolded me for my negligence. A week later, I was sitting in the same place my son had been, looking into cool machines.

My appointment was routine until the last phase where the optometrist dilated my eyes. He would tell me later that he wasn't going to do this, but something changed his mind. As he looked at my right eye, I could tell he was shocked by something he saw: "I'm not sure what I'm seeing, but something is in there that shouldn't be."

He said that he'd never seen anything like it before, that it looked like a tumor, and that I needed to see a specialist. The aide came back and said that the next appointment for a specialist would be the following week. The optometrist sternly replied, "No, he needs to see someone tomorrow." That's when I began to realize that this may be something much more serious.

Facing a Fearful Prognosis

The specialist I saw the next day confirmed what the optometrist saw: I had a melanoma in my right eye, a very rare and very deadly location for melanoma cancer found in only about six out of every one million people. The specialist told me that there was no one in El Paso that could treat me. So, three days later, my wife and I were on our way to Phoenix to see a cancer specialist who could give us an idea of what we were facing.

In Phoenix, the doctor was straightforward and told us that even if they could radiate or remove the tumor itself, this form of cancer spreads through the bloodstream and usually attacks the liver. The cancer cells were already in my bloodstream, and there was nothing they could do but wait and see if

it would metastasize. If it did spread, there was no known treatment available to stop it. He said I had about a 30% chance of it spreading, and at that point, I would only have about 6 to 9 months to live.

*I realized that I
had to get a hold of
what I believed to
be true about God.*

My wife and I had no idea that this type of prognosis was even possible, and the immediate weight of his words seemed overwhelming. I learned then

what it is to cry to the Lord out of the depths (Ps. 130:1-2).

I remember very distinctly driving back home in the passenger seat, making call after call to tell family and friends what we had learned. I remember hearing reactions of shock, fear, and sadness and trying to process all of those same emotions myself. One of my employees lost her father when she was 16, and I had heard many stories of the difficulties she experienced going through the rest of her teen years and early adulthood without a father.

Would this be the same for my ten-year-old daughter? Would I not see her complete high school or walk her down the aisle at her wedding? Would I not be able to see my 12-year-old son through the formative years of high school and college and on to adulthood? Would my wife and I not grow old together after all?

When we returned home, we faced the prospect of telling our children about my prognosis and the possibilities that lay ahead for our family, including

the fact that this might be our last year together. I realized that I had to get a hold of what I believed to be true about God in light of these circumstances before I could try to explain it to them.

Am I Ready to Die?

It is said that during adversity, you find out what you truly believe. The Lord had graciously saved me at a young age, but I now realized that many of my beliefs about life and death were largely academic. Many questions came to mind that I had always believed to be true, but the possibility of them actually coming to fruition soon gave them a new sobering reality.

Did I truly believe that there was life after death? Did I truly believe that I would be with God when I died? Did I truly believe that Jesus's death would atone for my sins? Was I ready to die and stand before God to give an account for my life?

Even as these questions were coming to my mind, God mercifully began to impress upon me his great love for my family and me. He reminded me that he had set his love upon us from the foundation of the world, that we might know him in this life and in the life to come. His plan for our lives would always be better than the plans we were making, and he would use what seemed like a devastating prognosis for our good and his glory.

Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus is the “founder and perfecter of our faith,” and as faith began to well up in my heart that day, I knew that it was birthed by the Lord. I could never create it on my own. My soul was being “strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:1).

Discovering and Spreading Hope

Over the following weeks and months, as we walked through multiple surgical procedures to stop the tumor from growing, God began to impress two distinct truths in my heart. One: for the first time in my life, I began to feel joyous anticipation at the thought of being with God one day, perhaps much sooner than I had ever imagined. In his presence, there is fullness of joy, and at his right hand are pleasures forevermore (Ps. 16:11).

Two: I experienced the distinct awareness that each day, every encounter with other people was an opportunity to reflect the realities of a personal relationship with God and the hope in the gospel of Jesus. The Lord prepared me to give a reason for the hope in me (1 Pet. 3:15).

On my frequent trips to MD Anderson in Houston, I began to see each encounter with patients, workers, doctors, and nurses in the hospital as a small moment of opportunity to reflect the reality of the “peace that passes understanding” (Phil. 4:7) that comes from a relationship with Jesus even in the direst of circumstances. I bought shirts that said “Jesus Strong” and “Pick Jesus” so that I would be a billboard of hope as I walked through the hospital.

I’ll never forget an encounter with a nurse on an elevator. She looked at me and saw my shirt that said “Know Jesus, Know Peace” and then saw my patient wristband. As tears welled up in her eyes, all she could say was, “I’m just overwhelmed at your shirt. Thank you!” She worked there every day, but the message that there was hope beyond the death she regularly witnessed was comforting and life-giving.

I also began to realize a very profound insight about myself: I wasn’t ready to die. I didn’t feel that I could stand before the Lord and honestly say that I had done my best to reflect the truth of the gospel to those around me in my life up to that point. Cancer had given me a new urgency that I have never lived with before, one that saw life as much more fleeting, but one filled with daily opportunities to share the hope that is in Jesus.

Christ is Mine in Life and Death

Eight years later, God has chosen to continue to preserve me year after year and continue to let me live day to day for his glory and the testimony of his love through the gospel. There are still no real treatments for the cancer if it spreads, so I still have to get checked twice a year to see what God’s plans are for our lives.

The reality is that we are all in that same boat. None of us are promised tomorrow; we are all truly living day to day by God’s grace.

But through this cancer journey, God has pulled back the curtain of my mind to see his plans and his promises clearly in life and death: in life, that joy is not only found in the current relationships that he has given us, but also in the opportunity to be God’s ambassadors, to be a part of his merciful ministry of reconciliation as he makes his appeal through us (2 Cor. 5:20).

And even in the face of death, the peace of knowing that in God, we can indeed have faith that he will work “*all* things together for good” (Rom.8:28).

The day is coming when all of the trials of life will be over, and we will live for all eternity in the rest and joy of the presence of Jesus Christ, our Savior.

I now truly understand Paul when he declares, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21).

TODD PETERSON

Todd Peterson serves as an elder at [Cross of Grace Church](#) (El Paso, TX).