

When Bad Things Happen to Good People and Cancer Strikes

Training Objective: That the cancer patient and his or her family members will be reassured of the loving presence of Jesus while they are struggling with the problem of pain in what has become a practical rather than a theoretical context.

I. What

A cancer patient and the members of the patient's family are facing a difficult trial, spiritually, emotionally and financially. Focusing on our relationship with Jesus in the midst of that trial is a source of much needed strength. "Come near to God and He will come near to you." (James 4:8)

II. Why

A. One of the most terrifying words in the English language is "cancer."

While cancer is a treatable disease, it is still a leading cause of death. The patient and the patient's family may be facing mortality issues for the first time in a practical rather than theoretical way.

The patient and family are facing a number of fear issues and stresses:

1. Fear of the loss of life or the loss of a loved one.
2. Fear and guilt over leaving a family saddled with a huge debt. Cancer treatment is expensive. Even with insurance, the out of pocket costs can be extreme.
3. Cancer treatment itself is long, difficult, often painful and has many potential adverse side effects.

B. The patient and family will often be facing a spiritual crisis.

Satan tries to use times of great stress and fear to sow doubt. (1 Peter 5:8) The patient and the family members will often be struggling with questions of faith:

1. How can a loving God permit such suffering to happen to them?
2. Fear that the illness is a punishment from God and be experiencing fear and guilt.
3. Praying and not receiving the hoped for answers. They may begin to question the point of prayer when God does not take away the cancer and have some difficulty reconciling Matthew 21:22 with their experience.

III. How

A. Pray - Ask that God will give you wisdom and empathy to help the patient and the patient's family. (James 1:5) Their greatest need at this time is for comfort and assurance.

B. Pay Attention – Listen to what the patient and family members are saying. Be sensitive to also hear what they may NOT be saying. Our culture encourages putting on a brave front and hiding our fears, vulnerabilities and weakness from each other. As Christians, we are sometimes too quick to give pat answers and proof texts without really understanding what the other person is experiencing. (Proverbs 18:13) In dealing with cancer, you can expect to be dealing with a complicated mix of fear, anger, sorrow and guilt.

C. Plan & Prepare – Once you have an idea of the needs of the patient and the family members, you can begin to provide meaningful comfort.

1. Assurance of God's loving presence:

a. Jesus never promised us a life free from pain and trials. He did promise us that He would be with us through our trials. John 16:33: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (NIV).

b. God is faithful and promised to be with us. While we may feel that He has abandoned us and is not listening, He cannot lie and we can trust His word.

1) Hebrews 13:5: "I 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'" (NIV).

2) Matthew 28:20 "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (NIV)

c. The God who is with us understands what we are experiencing because Jesus lived a fully human life:

1) We see Mary and Joseph together for the birth of Jesus. (Matthew 1: 18-25.)

2) Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt with the young Jesus (Matthew 2: 13-15)

3) Mary and Joseph moved from Egypt to Nazareth with the young Jesus once Herod had died. (Matthew 2: 19-23)

4) Mary and Joseph took Jesus to Jerusalem each year for Passover up through Jesus' twelfth birthday. (Luke 2: 41-51)

5) This is the last time Joseph is mentioned in the Gospels. This is a strong indicator that Joseph had died before Jesus began His ministry.

6) At the crucifixion, Jesus entrusted his mother's care to John (John 19:25-27) This is additional evidence that Joseph was dead since it would have been both unnecessary and culturally inappropriate for Jesus to have done this if Mary had had a living husband.

What conclusions can we draw from this?

- Jesus lived a fully human life and experienced everything we experience. It is a virtual certainty that He experienced the loss of a beloved earthly father, perhaps after an illness.
- See also Lazarus, etc. He certainly suffered the pain of other losses.
- We therefore have the assurance that God understands our sorrow, fear and suffering, not because we watches us from a distance but He has walked in our shoes.
- Having lived a fully human life, Jesus certainly understands our struggles, pain, fears and even our anger.
- It can make a profound difference to the cancer patient and family members to understand that Jesus understands us as a fellow sufferer and not just as a remote deity watching us from a distance.

2. Selected miscellaneous comfort passages:

a. Job 5:11: "The lowly he sets on high, and those who mourn are lifted to safety" (NIV).

b. Psalm 27:13-14: "I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord." (NIV)

c. Isaiah 41:10: " So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." (NIV).

d. Romans 8:37-39: " But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. " (NIV)

e. Philippians 4:6: " Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." (NIV).

D. Presence - Your presence with the patient and family will often mean more than anything you can say to them. There is a tremendous loneliness in dealing with cancer. Friends frequently have no idea what to do or say and withdraw.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." (NIV)

IV. Resources

A. Publications

1. **The Problem of Pain** by C. S. Lewis
2. **A Grief Observed** by C. S. Lewis

B. Videos

1. **Through the Shadowlands** (2004) - British BBC docudrama about C.S. Lewis's struggles with his wife's cancer.
2. **Shadowlands** (1994) – USA version docudrama about C.S. Lewis's struggles with his wife's cancer.

(While videos are fictionalized, they can be useful as an introduction of C.S. Lewis to people who are not inclined to read.)

Author's Comments

My perspective on this topic was framed during the last year and a half of dealing with my wife's cancer. In speaking to other cancer victims and people with various life threatening health conditions, many of the things I discuss in this study are a common experience. There is a great need to experientially rediscover the presence of a loving Christ by our side in our troubles.

Some things to avoid:

Well meaning people often don't know what to say and resort to the old saw "It's all part of God's plan." Besides being theologically suspect, this sends entirely the wrong message. A non-believing friend of mine was told that after his wife was diagnosed with cancer and his response was that he wanted nothing to do with a god who would plan to give someone he loved such a terrible disease to further some cosmic plan.

Be very careful if you choose to pull out Romans 8:28: "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." While completely true, it can be presented in a manner that comes uncomfortably close to "it's all part of God's plan."