



Cancer

Courage through Christ

by Karen Tripp MS LMFT

Karen Tripp MS LMFT is the author of *God is Bigger Than Your Cancer* and president of Cancer Companions: a ministry dedicated to training, equipping and supporting churches to build church-based cancer ministries to draw cancer families closer to Christ. If you or someone you love is struggling with cancer, find out more at www.cancer-companions.org.

A cancer diagnosis will change your life. It can impact the way you see your body, your emotions, your future, and even your faith. At times cancer can stalk you like a giant; it's always in your sight no matter what you do or where you go. At other times cancer can steal your thoughts and rob you of peace. This is true for both those persons with cancer and their loved ones standing alongside them. For anyone close to this disease, cancer requires a huge amount of focus to process the seemingly endless stream of information coming from the doctors' offices. Evaluating treatment plans, tracking appointments, knowing prescription names, and understanding potential side-effects leaves little energy at the end of the day. Although it's a struggle to take it all in, here are some thoughts to help you cope.

It feels like cancer is taking over my life.

Cancer is a powerful, mindless adversary. If allowed, it can consume your days and your nights. It can rack you with fear and stress out every area in your life. It can even come between you and your loved ones and between you and God. For many, these peripheral battles waged alongside the disease itself can be as difficult as the physical fight. Having cancer doesn't mean it's the most important thing in your life, but it can sure seem that way.

Before a cancer diagnosis, life is full, rich and worth living. The days roll by and life is good. There's the sun on your face, baseball games and ninth-inning victories, silly birthday cards for the grandkids, lending your neighbor a hand, eating fresh vegetables from the garden, singing a longtime favorite hymn at church. All these things bring your life joy, hope, fulfillment and purpose. After such a diagnosis, however, life is tough and uncertain. As a Christian, you know Christ is there for you when your cancer gets you down; He's there with His promises of hope and courage.

Whether Jesus finds you steadily drawing closer to Him, wandering away from the comfort of His presence, or knowing Jesus only as an acquaintance or stranger, it doesn't matter. Jesus sees you as His precious child, and He is with you now. Whether you are waiting for a chemo treatment or scan results, He is with you. Listen to this promise from God: "... Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5b).

Is God really in control of my cancer?

The answer is a resounding YES! There is no radiation room, doctor's office, chemo chair, or lonely night where God is not completely in charge. Do not let the pain and fear that can breed in these places replace your knowledge that God is in charge. God does not want to see His beloved children suffer. God hurts when you hurt and weeps when you weep.

The problem is that even though you may believe God is in control, cancer can easily throw a life out of control. Before the diagnosis, you had plans. You had plans for your career, your retirement, your marriage, your family. Now, suddenly, you have to shift those plans to include the demands of cancer. When people say, “Everything changed when I heard it was cancer,” they’re not just talking about the changes in their body. They’re talking about the changes in how they live their lives. Cancer brings us face to face with the lack of control we have in our lives.

But cancer doesn’t affect God’s control of your life. Look at this verse: “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” (Romans 8:28).

God does not just use *some* things for good; He uses *all* things. God will use your exhaustion, nausea, pain, regret, loneliness, fear, and even an initial misdiagnosis for good. God is completely in charge. So, if God’s purpose remains a mystery, rest in the certainty nothing bad ever happens that God cannot use to complete His purpose. God can use tumors, low cell counts, fatigue, and even despair to fulfill His purpose. This is not a promise that there will be no pain or suffering in a Christian’s life. Instead, it’s a reminder that God is in control, of everything—even your cancer.

This doesn’t mean God wants you to do nothing. As His precious child, God wants you to insist on the very best medical care. It’s okay to ask for second opinions, seek relief from pain, and insist on help with side-effects. The hard part is finding the place where you get the best medical care possible, while also resting in the knowledge that God is ultimately in control of your life.

Irene is a cancer survivor that found this balance.

Irene’s story:

After battling breast cancer for a number of years, I’ve learned a few things. As a nurse with a loving husband and two teenage sons, I was diagnosed with stage I breast cancer. I woke up one morning and there was a lump in my left breast about the size of my thumb. My doctor said, “This lump is nothing but a fluid-filled cyst.”

I don’t put my own knowledge above the doctor’s, but I do take heed of my own opinion, research and conclusions, and I know my own body. And God was there to tell me to not let loose of my concerns. It was like I had an angel sitting on my shoulder saying, “Oh, I’m not done with this yet. You keep digging. You keep looking.”

With my persistence, my doctor recommended a surgeon who also said I didn’t have a problem, and he would check me again in six weeks. Well, at five weeks the lump began to dimple, which is a serious sign of a malignancy. When I went back, the surgeon said, “Removing this lump is a waste of your time and mine.”

At that point, I was really digging in my heels and I said, “I want it out!”

Finally, he agreed. Afterwards he came to my bedside and said, “Aren’t we glad we got on this right away? It’s malignant.”

I said, “Yes, we are! Aren’t we sharp?”

So that experience taught me that the single best advocate for your health is YOU. No one is going to help you out and say, “Let me do this dying for you. I’m sorry I screwed up your diagnosis. I’ll die; you live.” The doctors just don’t do that. When a grievous and preventable diagnosis is made and it comes to the dying that has to be done because of it, it’s the patient—not the doctor—that pays the price.

It’s not always easy being your own best advocate. In the nine years between my initial diagnosis and my reoccurrence, I had other lumps and bumps and I insisted that each one be removed. The doctors were beginning to get critical of me. “You can’t jump at shadows. You can’t live your life obsessed with cancer or in fear of cancer.” They were implying I should know better, that I was educated enough to be more professional. Well, there’s nothing professional about having cancer. It’s *personal*.

When the symptoms of breast cancer returned again, the doctors wouldn't listen. The first symptom appeared in December, when my left breast became much smaller than my right one. My oncologist said it was due to radiation, but then there was some oozing along the scar line in March. My surgeon did a needle biopsy, which has an 11 percent failure rate. It came back benign. After the biopsy came back benign, I acted really professional and did not cause a ruckus. But over the following months I called my surgeon and my oncologist, when it began to itch, flake, ooze and then bleed.

In December at my regular appointment, the doctor said, "That's malignant and has to come out right now."

I said, "I've been telling you that for a year."

They diagnosed me with stage IIIB inflammatory breast cancer, which has a five-year survival rate. That was difficult to hear because there are only four stages. A stage IIIB rating is like you're standing with one foot on the cliff and the other on a banana peel, and I didn't like being there. So I immediately got five second opinions. I told the five doctors I was there to interview them for a job. I figure if they can't handle that kind of approach, then maybe I don't need to be with them anyway. This isn't to say this approach is right for everybody. Some people would go running for the hills, screaming, "I could never do that!" But that's the way I needed to do it. They did a mastectomy on that right side and chemo was mandatory.

Six years later, I found a small lesion on my chest that looked like an age spot. For this one, the angel just didn't crawl on my shoulder, but she screamed in my ear: "You're not done with this yet!"

My surgeon said, "It won't be anything, but I'll remove it in two weeks."

I said, "Okay, but I had something a little sooner in mind, like this afternoon. I'll climb on the table and bring the knife, if you don't have one."

When the doctor called with the results, she said, "Irene, I can't imagine what made you insist on having it removed; there's cancer under it." So that immediately put me at stage IV. I went through a very rigorous course of radiation to beat the cancer.

With cancer, some people turn towards God and some turn away. For me, the worse things got, the more I understood the struggles were a request from God to trust Him—to lean on Him. It was as though God said, "Surrender your trust to Me. I have a plan."

It's funny. On the one hand, God has taught me to fight for the care and treatment I need from the medical community. On the other hand, He was teaching me to submit. But it's a different kind of submission. It's not something you give up; it's something you *acquire*.

A couple of Lenten seasons ago, I decided I would surrender my will to God. Not just for Lent, but for all time. Usually, I would give up something like chocolate. I told Jesus, "Surrendering to You is probably not going to work out for either of us, because I'm such a micro-manager. But this is a once-and-for-all gift."

It's hard to explain just how wonderful surrender can be if you haven't experienced it. I don't worry about outcomes and decisions. I pray for what I'd like to see happen, but I always say, "Your will be done and not mine." It's a daily discipline because I do have a tendency to have a hand in everything. If you can keep from having to be in control, if you open your hands to Jesus instead of closing them, there'll be a huge release of tension. It'll create a space in your life to appreciate the things around you, instead of being caught up in the details. It took me years to learn to get into the moment. But I've found that's the way surrender works—one moment at a time.

What if I decide on the wrong treatment or the wrong doctor?

As medical advances increase, there are pivotal times in cancer treatment when you have to make a decision. “Should I go on with the radiation or stop after chemotherapy?” “Should I take this doctor’s advice or get a second opinion?” “Should I take a break from treatment or plow straight through?” “Should I try to shrink the cancer first or have the surgery first?” Many of these doctor office conversations involve percentages and predictions, but no guarantees. The decision gets left to you. The question is how do you make a decision without fear of regret?

Here is the story of Christina, an amazing breast cancer survivor who faced many difficult decisions during her cancer journey.

Christina’s story:

When the cancer spread, I was once more completely filled with doubt that I had ever known God’s plan for me. My head knew God was in control, but I was worrying and acting like it all depended on me. If I had just had that hysterectomy, or if I had not smoked before I was 20. My dark thoughts went on and on. I had godly people telling me I had done something wrong and that God was punishing me. They said I had “unforgiveness” issues. I just wanted to know what God wanted me to do, so I could do it and everything would be all right.

Finally, God showed me that’s not how it works. God isn’t waiting for us to do the right thing, so He can make His will happen. God’s will is supreme, with or without us. We need to seek His will, but He doesn’t need us to complete His plans.

God can take everything, *even our mistakes*, and use them for His will. You don’t have to walk a perfect walk. When you really get it in your heart and in your head that God’s in charge, it takes the pressure off of you. Then you know all the worry in the world isn’t going to add a day to your life. I seek God’s plan for me through prayer, fellowship and the Word, and I make the best decisions I can. Then I leave it in God’s hands because, thankfully, He’s in control, not me.

In your life, God can use medical science, the knowledge of doctors, and the counsel of the wise to complete His perfect will. But God does not *need* you to make the right decision. Nor does He need your doctor to give the right advice or for your treatment plan to be completed perfectly for Him to do His will in your life. God’s will may mean complete healing for you from cancer. Or perhaps God’s will is for you to live with cancer, until He carries you to your heavenly home in His omnipotent loving arms. Regardless of which path your cancer journey takes, trust Him to lift you through it all. God will always take care of you, His beloved child. Let the sweetness of this promise from God fill your soul:

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

Sometimes my mind gets stuck on the “whys” or the “if onlys.”

Our minds use questions as a way to sort through confusion and find clarity. Say you’re going to someone’s house for the first time and you come to an intersection and get confused on which way to go. You begin to wonder, “Did he say take a left at the gas station or a right?” The question in your mind helps you clarify the problem, so you can find the solution and prevent a mistake. When facing cancer, the mind often seeks to make sense of the chaos, so you can figure out what happened, solve the problem, and prevent a reoccurrence. The problem here is that cancer comes with no easy answers.

Sometimes the questions focus on your body: “How can I have cancer if I feel fine? I’ve never been sick, what happened?” Maybe the confusion comes from the “if onlys”: “If only I’d gone for the test sooner.” “If only my family tree didn’t have so much cancer.” “If only I had changed doctors sooner.” “If only I’d eaten better, exercised more, and never smoked.” At some point the questions can lead to God. “Why me?” “Why now?” “God, what are You doing with my life?” “What purpose is there for my cancer?” Each of us in our own way is seeking some level of control in an uncontrollable situation. The only way to relieve yourself of the emotional turmoil is to let go of what you don’t know and hold on to what you do know.

Eric, a leukemia survivor, beautifully explained this idea to me. He told me on his cancer walk he eventually got past all the *why* questions and discovered the only question that mattered was, “Who?” *Who is God?* and *What is He showing me through this?*

God reveals His heart to you through His Word and His actions. Think of all the times God has shown up in your life, whether you called out to Him or not. What did you learn about Him at those times? Is He spiteful, stingy and withholding? Or is He gracious, giving and sacrificial? Let’s face it. He loves you so much He sent His precious Son to die for you.

Psalm 59:16b says God is “... my fortress, my refuge in times of trouble.” Here is what I want you to know: who God is does not change in your times of trouble. God is still your fortress and your refuge. When you are surrounded by pain, heartache and suffering, God is still as loving and gracious as on the days you felt surrounded by blessings. He has not changed. In the midst of your struggles look for what you know about God to be true. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

After many questions, Robin discovered that trying to figure out why he had cancer doesn’t matter.

Robin’s Story:

I’ve worked in the nuclear business since 1981—first in construction, then in operations. Last October, when I was diagnosed with prostate cancer, I began wondering if I’d done something that might have caused it. I had some radiation exposure in the past, but nothing excessive. I’ve just never been one to take those kinds of risk. I feel I haven’t been a risk-taker and, yet, here I am with cancer.

October of last year, my loving wife, Carla, prodded me to get a physical because I was 50. The exam didn’t show anything but the blood test showed my prostate specific antigen (PSA) test result was high. The doctor said it was probably chronic prostatitis and gave me 10 days of antibiotic. The second PSA was still high, so he referred me to a urologist, who performed a needle biopsy of the prostate.

The results came back to the doctor in a short time. When I went to his office to hear the results, Carla said she wanted to go with me. I told her this was just going to be routine, and she didn’t need to change her plans just to go. Little did I know things were not going to be routine for a long time. When the doctor told me I had cancer, he just said very bluntly, “Hey, there’s no good way to say this.”

I said, “You don’t have to; you just said it.” I went back for the scans, and we prayed they would show the cancer contained to the prostate. If the cancer is contained we stand a good chance of getting it with surgery. The results showed cancer in the prostate, but nowhere else.

I elected to have a radical prostatectomy. The pathology report on the removed prostate, however, was not good. The surgeon said it was difficult to say if the surgery removed all the cancer for sure. He recommended we perform follow-up PSA testing to monitor my condition.

Trying to understand how I had gotten to this place was frustrating. I took care of myself for the most part. I felt I had a good faith walk, and then I look and say, “Why do I have cancer? Have I done something?” I’m a very analytical, process-and-procedure type person. I stop and say, “I’ve done all these steps and yet I didn’t get the results I expected.” That’s part of the curse of being so scientific and analytical: you feel that with this process or that procedure you have a high probability of a known outcome. Unfortunately, it doesn’t always work that way.

For one, I felt my body betrayed me. I’ve taken care of my body, so what did I do to deserve this betrayal? Then I went from denial (“This is not happening to me”); to anger (being mad at everything and everybody); to furious (about what it’s doing to my family). There are times if I’m not careful I regress and cycle through these emotions all over again.

The first time I went back for a check-up was frightening. The doctor tried to prepare me. “This is early, your numbers were so high; don’t expect them to be down,” he said. The PSA results came in below detectable. I had surgery on March 15th and here it is eight weeks later. Wow! The result is below detectable! That’s one of those moments you go, “Whew, I was blessed.” I had goose bumps on my arms—the sweats, the whole nine yards.

But I keep reliving the why of it all. In my mind I think I put that behind me and try to move on, but there’s still times when it comes roaring back. There are days I wake up trying to figure out *why* and I say to myself, “Do I have to go over this again? Is this something I have to re-experience?” I start thinking that in three or four weeks I’ll go in for another PSA, and I pray to God it comes back below detectable.

My cancer’s given me an opportunity to minister in a new way. I was aware of prostate cancer before I was diagnosed, but I did not know what symptoms to look for. I’m more knowledgeable now, and I’m not afraid to share what I’ve learned. These days I make sure the guys I come into contact with know their PSA numbers—or knows how to find them out. I simply ask them what their PSA count is. One out of every six men will have a problem with prostate cancer. We need to be talking about it.

At one of our safety meetings at the facility where I work, I felt compelled to make some remarks about my cancer. There were about 80 people there. I educated them on how I found out about mine and reminded them that age 45 or 50 is not too young for prostate cancer. We have an aging workforce with a lot of men who take their health for granted. I’ve tried to use my cancer in a positive way by reaching others and making them aware. It’s a shame if someone else has to go through it; maybe what I have to say will lead to early detection for someone. That’s my hope.

From a faith perspective, I don’t feel like I’m being punished or that God is doing this to me. What it really comes down to is that the *why* doesn’t matter. Why me? Why now? It’s not important. What’s important is that some kind of good will come of this. Certainly there’s been good for me and my family, even though it’s painful. It’s amazing to think God could take something like cancer and make something good come from it—but He did.

Cancer is not something I can cope with alone.

Cancer often changes the roles we have in our relationships, making them different from what they were. For instance, those battling cancer might easily find themselves saying,

“I’m the one who takes care of others. I don’t want people taking care of me.”

“I am the one who works and provides for the family. Who will pay the bills if I can’t work?”

“I don’t want my kids to see me weak. I’ve always been the strong one for them.”

Why does cancer bring a change in roles? One reason is because it’s difficult when undergoing cancer treatment to do everything you use to do. Once you take the time spent in doctors’ offices and add the impact of fatigue, side-effects and stress, there’s little energy left over to cover your responsibilities. Of course, the same is true for your primary caregiver. While trying to cover his or her responsibilities, the weight of caring for a loved one with cancer can be exhausting. So you both need help.

Here are three, common *helping hurdles* cancer families face when seeking assistance:

“What can others do to help?”

The primary focus of coping with cancer is overcoming physical obstacles. The truth is there is only so much another can do to help your body through treatment. But what about relieving the stress in your caregiver’s life? Would it relieve the stress in your household to have someone else mow the lawn, shovel the driveway, walk the dog, dust the living room, or

pick up the prescription? Try keeping a list of what others can do to help as well as a list of people who can give you a hand. Let these caring people choose from your list how they can help you.

“You don’t know how hard it is for me to ask others for help.”

Some of you are shaking your heads and thinking, I cannot ask people to do the things I am supposed to do. Of course, there are plenty of reasons not to ask someone for help. Here’s a few: “I never ask people for help.” “I’m the one who helps other people.” “There is no one to ask.” “I’d rather do it myself.” “They have enough to do.” “I don’t want to be a burden.” “Everybody’s busy.” “I don’t want to impose.” Enough? What if the Lord is placing people around you to care for you and lift your burden? What if your medical staff, family, friends, church and cancer-support groups are given to you by God to help? Maybe it’s *your turn* to be cared for.

“I don’t want to be disappointed.”

Asking for help does not always turn out well. Sometimes when you ask for help, people say, “no,” and you become disappointed. Then other people, when asked to help, say, “yes,” and then don’t do what they said they would. Now you’re *really* disappointed. Why bother? Why bother asking others to help you when there’s a chance they’ll disappoint you? It doesn’t make sense that some of the people closest to us disappoint us when we need them most, but it happens. Help may not come from the places we expect it, but allowing others to serve you in your time of need is not just a blessing to you but to others as well. It’s true. Others are blessed when they serve you. Don’t let your fear of disappointment separate you from the blessing you need and the one you can give.

There’s always hope.

Cancer is a trying ordeal for the individual coping with it as well as his or her family and friends. Dealing with this radical life event is made easier when leaning on God in faith. Nobody knows for sure what their reaction will be to a diagnosis of cancer. The very word conjures up so many negative images and feelings we often don’t even want to mention it. The truth of the matter, however, is that God reigns supreme in this universe—over untold millions of galaxies, over everything beyond our grasp and, yes, even over our cancer.

Don’t despair in your situation; there is always hope. God knows what you’re going through, and He understands your pain. Seek Him in His Word. There you will find Him—ready to listen, ready to help.

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (Romans 15:13 RSV).

A Prayer:

Lord, Father, God, I come into Your presence with a solemn heart and a fearful mind. I am in need of Your intercession. I pray that this cancer which has invaded my body quickly fades into remission. I know with each passing day I come closer to the day You open Your arms to welcome me into Your Kingdom but, until then, let my weakness lean on You for strength. Let my mind surrender my worry, and grant me the peace and rest in my body I need. You are the God of miracles, and if it be Your will I ask this on my behalf. I put my faith and trust in You, as You know me better than I know myself. Teach me to ask others for help and support when I lack the ability to care for myself. Wrap me in Your warm and caring love, and may all I do glorify Your Name forever and ever. Amen.



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