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Palumbo Family 2006 (Rachel, Luke, John, Matt, Tami, Elisa and Mike)

Cancer, My Teacher **By Tami Palumbo**

On January 15 this year I received the most dreaded news that anyone can receive from a doctor, *“The cancer has invaded your liver and it is inoperable. We can give you stronger doses of chemo with the hope that it would extend your life some months. But otherwise there is nothing we have to offer you.”*

I have been fighting this battle with breast cancer six and a half years; only God knows if I am nearing the end. Although it has been a difficult journey, it also has been a fascinating one. God has taught me about His faithfulness, goodness and love. I want to testify to the truth of Romans 8:28 ...*that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* (NIV)

Cancer has drawn me closer to God

Spiritually speaking, I am not the same person I was seven years ago.

It all started in the summer of 2001. My husband Mike was in CA at the time doing a residency for a doctoral degree; I was in Phoenix visiting my parents along with our five children who at the time were between the ages of 4 and 14. I had a week of mornings to myself as my parents took all five of the kids to Vacation Bible School at their church. I took advantage of my time alone and spent time in extended Bible study and prayer.

It was a time in my life when I was dissatisfied with my spiritual life. I felt I was spending more time “doing” than just “being.” I remember crying out to God that I wanted to know Him more. I wanted to see His glory. I begged Him to use my life in whatever way to bring honor and glory to Him. I even prayed the Prayer of Jabez. *“Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory.”*

Little did I know that by the end of August of that summer I would embark on a new and frightful journey, yet one that has allowed me to experience God in incredible ways, to know Him more intimately and love Him more deeply.

Cancer has taught me to practice the presence of God

During our recent LAM retreat, Jack Voelkel pointed out a truth we all know yet sometimes forget, *“I am never alone.”* Weeks before my initial diagnosis, I was leading a study on Psalm 23 with the women in our church. The morning of my needle biopsy as I was rereading this Psalm and praying, I sensed the Lord telling me, *“Take my hand, Tami – I will lead you. I will lead you slowly so you won’t fall, and I don’t expect you to go quickly because you don’t know the way or what lies ahead. But I will tenderly and lovingly lead you.”* God has never left me.

My husband Mike has been an incredible example of faithfulness during my illness. He has accompanied me to appointment after appointment and treatment after treatment, **yet there are times when even Mike cannot be by my side.** For instance, during my radiation treatments I was placed in a cold, sterile room and told to lay half-naked on a stainless steel bed with just a small pillow for my head. After my body was lined up according to the infrared markings on the computer, the technicians would scurry out of the room as the foot-thick concrete door closed behind them and the red light would begin to flash “Danger Radiation.” **It was a lonely and frightening time for me.**

One day as I was lying there for my treatment feeling humiliated, I envisioned what it was like for Christ on the cross. I thought that I am in this situation of having cancer not by choice, yet, Christ chose to suffer and die and be humiliated on the cross because of my sins. **My heart overflowed with gratitude as I felt God’s presence in a powerful way that day.**

I have had some of the best praise and worship times as I sat quietly in a cold, dark room waiting for the radioactive material that was injected in me to course through my body so a PET scan could be performed. I have felt His presence in the middle of the night when sleep evades me and my thoughts are racing. Psalm 23:4 has become a reality for me, *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”*(NIV)

Cancer has taught me that God is sovereign over all things

About six months ago, Mike suggested that I listen to a health report on *Fox News*. He thought it would be of interest to me. Poor Mike, little did he know how I would react!

It was an interview with a woman who had written a book about her battle with breast cancer. There were many similarities between the two of us in terms of our age, the stage and type of cancer when we were initially diagnosed, etc. She flew across country to one of the top cancer centers in the country for her treatment and she had a friend who is an expert nutritionist make up a specific diet for her. Seven years later, she is cured, looks beautiful and has written a book. She is healed and I am not!

I began to cry, “That’s not fair! She doesn’t even have kids to live for.” I sobbed in my kitchen as I prepared our meal. Then God impressed upon my heart. *“Who are you the clay to question me the potter what I am doing? I can do with her as I please and with you as I please.”* In my Bible reading just a few days before, I had come across Isaiah 29:16, *“You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘He did not make me?’ Can the pot say of the potter, ‘He knows nothing?’”*(NIV)

Jack’s words during the same retreat hit a nerve with me as he reminded us not to compare ourselves to anyone else. God has specific plans for each of us. I took it as *“Don’t be envious of someone else’s good health and strong body. God has a purpose for me.”*

Cancer has taught me about the “sacrifice of praise”

I don’t remember where I got this quote from but I wrote it in my journal last July:

When I think of a sacrifice of praise, I think of the word embrace. Embracing the will of God, even when the feelings aren’t there, is offering to God your heart, wholly dedicated to his purposes. It is believing that, according to Romans 12:1-2, you can prove in practice that God’s plan for you is “good, pleasing and perfect.”

We have experienced the sacrifice of praise at various times as a family but one time in particular stands out in my mind. In August 2005 Mike and the children were in Chicago helping our oldest son move to Wheaton College. I was in a natural health clinic in Cleveland, Ohio and **I had just found out that the cancer had metastasized to my bones.** Up till then we had been optimistic about the treatment we had chosen to fight my cancer. I traveled to Wheaton to be with Mike and the children.

As a mom I was very concerned about how we were going to tell the children the bad news and how they were going to handle it. I had asked many friends to pray for us as we shared this latest development with our kids. The evening after I arrived we sat the kids down and discussed the situation with them.

We talked, cried and prayed together. Then we began to sing praise songs in Spanish with Jonathan accompanying on the piano. **After a moment, tears were dried, smiles returned, joy was restored, and God’s presence filled the room.** It is easy to praise God when everything is alright. It becomes a sacrifice to praise Him when we don’t feel like it. But that is what we are told to do.

Cancer has taught me to surrender completely to God's will

By nature I am a controller. I love to plan and organize and make sure that everything is under control. My parents tell me that when I was in grade school and had to walk the length of our street to school, the neighbors would make comments that I didn't look like I was going to "attend" school, instead I looked like I was going to "teach" school.

Cancer is something I can't control. Even though I don't like it, I have to surrender my will to God and say as Jesus said in the garden, *"Not my will, but yours be done."* I have learned that God can be trusted. **In fact since I have taken my will out of the picture, God has been able to do much more than I ever imagined.**

Cancer has made me long for heaven

As the disease has progressed, my ability to do things has diminished. I used to be very athletic. I grew up playing softball and running track. I loved to snow ski and water ski. Two years ago when we were in MN for the first winter in 24 years, my family had the chance to learn to snow ski. I longed to ski with them as I sat inside the chalet watching them slip and slide. Yet, unless God heals me, I won't be skiing again until I am in heaven.

This past February, some dear friends paid the way for us to go to Hawaii for vacation. As our plane landed on the island of Maui, the pilot said over the intercom, *"Welcome to paradise!"* I chuckled as I contemplated that this earth is not paradise. Later in the week, as I sat on the beach enjoying the incredibly beautiful view, my thoughts turned to the true Paradise and **I rejoiced in the fact that Heaven is a real place prepared for all believers, and that it will be even prettier than Maui!**

Cancer has allowed me to experience the love of Christ through the body of Christ

I don't have enough room to begin to tell of the numerous times we have been ministered to by brothers and sisters in the Lord during my cancer journey. From Keila and Kiana Pieters donating their long hair to have a wig made for me to friends sending us on a dream trip to Hawaii, God's love hasn't ceased to amaze me; churches who didn't know us but took us under their wing and provided for all of our needs because that is what Jesus says we should do. Our lives have been blessed through the love of the body of Christ.

Some final words

I am feeling well right now. I don't feel like I have a terminal disease. I hope and pray for healing because I feel like there is still so much for me to do here on this earth. But my life is in God's hands. In Job 14:5 it says, *"Man's days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed."*(NIV)

I hope this is not good bye, but if it is I will be waiting for you on the other side and "getting things organized" for all of you.

I would like to conclude by sharing this passage of scripture:

“Therefore do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.” II Corinthians 4: 16 – 5:1 (NIV)

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