

## **Accepting Cancer as a Gift**

Good Samaritan Hospital, Los Angeles: October 24, 2009

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*These are Don's sermon notes for a message he was asked to give to cancer patients and their loved ones. This is not a transcript of the actual message. It is posted online by request.*

I want to thank Good Samaritan Hospital for arranging this time and inviting me to speak today, with a special thanks to Dr. Gota, Dr. Winston, and Chaplain Jerry Anderson for providing the leadership and overseeing the logistics necessary to make this happen. It is encouraging to see medical personnel care for the spiritual side of their patients' needs.

You need to know that they assigned the topic but they did not screen my message today. The things I say are my responsibility and do not necessarily reflect their personal views. If this is helpful, you can thank them for inviting me to attend; if it's not helpful, you have to blame me.

As we get started, can I just ask who is currently being treated for cancer? How many of you have family members with cancer? God bless you. I have been praying for you even leading up to this time.

I am very sympathetic to cancer patients and their families. Cancer has affected my family from the beginning. My parents buried my 8-year old sister Debbie from Hodgkin's disease many years ago before doctors developed effective treatments for it. My father had lung cancer although he died from other causes.

As a pastor, I've ministered to many families dealing with cancer. I have visited with patients who were sick from chemo; I've talked to their loved ones after the patient passed away. I don't take this topic lightly. There's a lot at stake for you in these days.

Because of that, I'm not going to adopt an artificial approach this morning. I'm not going to try to guess at what you would like me to say. I'm going to speak to you from the perspective with which I live my life and with which I conduct my ministry.

That is the way in which I can help you accept cancer as a gift.

I am a Christian. I am a follower of Jesus Christ. I believe the Bible is the trustworthy word of God that alone gives us satisfying answers to the profound questions that must be on your heart to one degree or another.

What I ask is that you hear me all the way out. You've come this far on a weekend day, you might as well hear everything. If at the end, you want to throw tomatoes at me . . . then throw tomatoes at me.

### **1. God Designed Your Cancer for You**

The God of the Bible is involved in everything that happens. He works out things according to His purposes.

*God works all things after the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:10).*

Your cancer is no accident. It is not bad luck. It is not a bad twist of fate. All those things suggest that you are subject to impersonal forces that have no regard for you. In Matthew 10:30, Jesus said *The very hairs of your head are numbered.*

If he has done the lesser thing by numbering the hairs on your head, it's obvious that he has done the greater thing of watching over the development of something that affects your entire life.

This is a difficult truth, but in one way or another, God designed for you or your loved one to have cancer. It did not surprise him. He is not reacting to an unexpected development. He brought cancer into your life.

And because God is good and always does good, He intends this cancer to be a gift to you—even if you cannot understand how it would be good at the moment.

It wasn't that long ago that I would have reacted against that. What did I do to deserve *this*? What kind of God brings cancer into someone's life?

But don't react against it. The reality that God designed your cancer is the starting point of accepting cancer as gift. It means there is transcendent purpose in cancer, even if you can't discern it as you sit here today.

Suddenly there's more to your cancer than the next lab report or treatment regimen. God is at work in and through your cancer. When you start to grasp that, you start to ask different questions—questions that ennoble your cancer.

*God, whatever may have happened in the past, what do you have for me in this cancer as I look to the future?*

When you start to ask questions like that, turn to God's Word, the sixty-six books of the Bible, to find your answers. The Bible gives us a lot to consider.

## **2. God Calls You to Think about Death**

I'm not assuming the worst about your physical future. You should seek the best treatment you can get. It is good and natural to hope that you can overcome cancer.

I am pro-doctor and pro-hospital, because I believe God usually uses those means to bring healing to those who are suffering.

But let's say you were cured instantly now. You'd still be facing death eventually. It's woven into the nature of our existence.

*It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living takes it to heart (Ecclesiastes 7:2).*

*So teach us to number our days, that we may present to you a heart of wisdom (Psalm 90:12).*

We aren't wired to think about death. It is an unpleasant subject, even frightening for many. Most of us like our lives to one degree or another. We don't want to leave our loved ones. Left to our own wisdom, we don't know what happens after death.

So the very real temptation is to ignore death and not contemplate it. Imagine that! We ignore that which is certain to come.

Cancer is a gift because it brings the reality of death to the forefront of your thinking. If you accept it as a gift, and you take death into account in the way you react to life, it will change you—for the better.

*This isn't a very good analogy, but perhaps it will be helpful. Cancer is like a fire alarm or a warning gate at train tracks. When the alarm goes off, when the warning gate comes down, it alerts you an unrecognized risk. The apparent well-being of the moment is threatened by a coming risk.*

*We understand that in daily life. We just need to carry that over to the reality of cancer. It reminds us that death is coming so that we'll factor it into our approach to life.*

### **3. God Calls You to Think About Judgment**

This is another hard part, but I wouldn't be faithful to my calling if I didn't bring this out to you. Death isn't the end. We will stand before God and give an account for our lives.

*It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27).*

That's a big problem for all of us. God sees us differently than we see ourselves. Most people think they're good enough to go to heaven. "Yeah, I'm not perfect, but the good outweighs the bad, so I think God will let me in."

But that's not true. The Bible says:

*There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one (Romans 3:10-12).*

*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).*

You have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. You have not obeyed Him or loved Him perfectly. When you sin against an eternal God, the result is eternal punishment. The Bible says that unforgiven sinners face judgment in hell.

*Those who do not know God and those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9).*

No works or religious rituals can cleanse you from that guilt. You can't be good enough to earn his favor. You can't fix your sin problem. The Bible says that in God's sight:

*All our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment (Isaiah 64:6).*

God calls you to think about judgment so that you will realize you are not ready for it.

*Here's another analogy to help you think this through. Whenever you travel somewhere, whether to the grocery store or to another city, you think ahead to where you're going and then plan everything to arrive at your destination.*

*That's what cancer should do for you. You think ahead to death and judgment so you take them into account **now** while there is still time.*

#### **4. God Calls You to Come to Christ**

If you've stayed with me so far, now I can give you the good news. God has provided a means not only of escaping eternal judgment, but of knowing with certainty that you will enter heaven with your sins forgiven when you die.

He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world on a mission of mercy to save sinners from judgment. God has appointed Christ as the means by which sinners can be reconciled to him and have their sins forgiven.

*Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" John 14:6.*

How can that be? It's based on his death and resurrection.

*1 Peter 3:18: For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.*

When Jesus died on the cross, he wasn't dying for his own guilt. He was innocent. Instead, he offered his innocent life on behalf of guilty sinners. God punished Christ for your sins so that you could be forgiven.

Then God raised him from the dead to show that Christ had conquered sin and death and judgment.

Now He calls you to Christ to receive salvation—not as something you deserve, but as a gift from his hand.

*Matthew 11:28-30: Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.*

You receive eternal life; he receives all the glory.

God's salvation is a gift.

*Romans 6:23: For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Cancer is a preliminary gift designed to lead you to the greater gift of eternal life. Come to Christ—not for the deliverance from cancer, but for the deliverance from sin. Then trust Him for what He does. Psalm 23:

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

*Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*