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God's Wisdom, God's Walk, and God's Way - Christi's Story

Colossians 1:9-10

Prayer: *Father, I just again thank you for your grace, I thank you for your goodness, I thank you for the blessing that you are. And Lord, we just continue to pray this morning, this is kind of a unique message, it's not a normal type message but one in which I pray your Holy Spirit would be, that you would occupy, that you would just be part of and that you would just continue to dwell here and give us the ability to make this in particular of permanent value. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, a few weeks back, Janice and I went on vacation. We flew out to Scottsdale, Arizona, we spent some time with my sister who's recovering wonderfully from that accident she had many, many months ago and then we met up with my brother-in-law and Janice's sister. From there we went to the Grand Canyon, we saw what God has done there, then we went to Las Vegas to meet with the rest of Janice's family for our annual get together.

But when we were in Scottsdale, we first arrived in Scottsdale, my

sister said, "I have somebody coming over who wants to meet you." And I instantly knew that it had to be Christi Napier, who I think there's a picture of, that's her right there. This is the first time I ever laid eyes on her. She's 60 years old, which is shocking when you look at that picture. I just wondered, how many of you here know who Christi Napier is? Okay. There's a good amount.

Let me just explain. If you haven't been here for a while, you probably don't remember that 14 years ago in 2009 her story dominated much of our hearts, much of our minds, much of our prayers while we were studying the book of Colossians. She just happened to have an incredibly compelling story that mirrored exactly what Paul was trying to teach us through that book. And so many a time during that study I made mention of Christi, of her situation and of her response to her situation as a model of what Paul wanted us to experience as well.

We actually spent months and years following her story and the way that God was using her. And after actually getting to finally meet her in person, I felt compelled to re-share her story. So I thought I would start actually at the end of the story and kind of work my way backwards.

And so some time around 2010 I received what was one of the last notes that I got from Christi. This is what she wrote. She said: "Dear Friends, God has answered your prayers and patient, steadfast intercession through these past 4 1/2 years. For the first time since my very first surgery, Dr. Sataloff found no scar tissue in my trachea. This is a miracle. Every doctor in Phoenix other than Dr. Trainor said this wasn't possible. Even Dr. Trainor could not determine how to stop it. But God, through Dr. Sataloff, after all this time, has touched my trachea. I have no scar tissue. Amazing."

Now to fully grasp how miraculous this four-year journey was, I need to re-read to you one of Christi's earlier emails in which she lays out exactly what she was going through before this final surgery. This is kind of a history. And this is how she opened up her email. She said: "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act, but a habit." That's from Aristotle.

She says: "Dear Ones, February 19 is the anniversary date of my first surgery 4 years ago. When we moved to Scottsdale on December 26, 2006, I had a cough. Strange for me, but I felt fine. I also had some restricted breathing but chalked that up to not enough aerobic exercise."

"On January 12, 2007, I was admitted to the hospital after spending an entire day in bed while my husband was at his new job. I was getting truly scared because I was there alone with the children, knew no one" -- they had just moved -- "knew no one and COULD NOT catch my breath. I spent the whole day literally focusing on getting enough air to simply take another shallow breath.

"When Doug got home, we all loaded up and went to Urgent Care. The dear doctor there examined me, said I had double pneumonia and arranged a room for me at the full Shea Hospital. I arrived on January 12th for what we assumed would be a two or three day stay. Six days later no one could understand how someone so healthy was NOT recovering from pneumonia. Dr. Conomos was my attending physician and allowed me to go home on day 6 - with the understanding that I would return within a week for a bronchoscopy. When I did that, he found that my trachea was 75+% blocked with a 2-inch vertical mass of scar tissue. This blockage had caused the pneumonia, as my lungs were unable to clear. He said it was life-threatening if mucous lodged there - and sent me to Dr. Brian Trainor to consult for surgery to remove it.

"February 19, 2007, Dr. Trainor did my first surgery at Scottsdale Osborne Hospital. He removed half the tissue and inserted a trach tube." That's a tube that goes into your trach and comes out,

giving you an open airway. "I was devastated. Doug was devastated. The children were displaced, confused and frightened. Two weeks later Dr. Trainor removed the other half of the scar tissue - and we thought the surgeries were over. 4 weeks after that, right before my 43rd birthday, Dr. Conomos removed the trach tube. We thought the nightmare was over.

"Since that time, I have had 38 surgeries - typically 2 to 8 weeks apart, 3 T-tubes, two stents, 24 bronchoscopies or more, multiple periods of silence - one for 7 months, 62 scoping procedures, 4 prolonged hospital stays, a collapsed lung, crepitus, a skin graft taken from my left inner cheek, consistent coughing, choking, and inability to swallow from a few days to some weeks, and an emergency room visit that I should NOT have lived through.

"And it's not over yet. Tomorrow Doug and I fly to Philadelphia for surgery number 7 with Dr. Sataloff and his team; # 39 in toto. We arrive late Tuesday, February 15. I have a scope in Dr. Sataloff's office on the 16th, and surgery on the 17th. We arrive at 6am as always, with surgery whenever they decide - usually before noon. We will fly home that evening, God willing.

"Sounds awful, doesn't it? Where is God? What is He DOING? It HAS been awful in a lot of ways. Suffering usually is. PROLONGED

suffering can REALLY stink. 4 YEARS?! A tracheostomy for almost 3 1/2 YEARS? You REALLY think God loves you?!

"1 Peter 4:1, 2 and 19: Therefore, since Christ suffered in His Body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is DONE with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.

"So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. If Aristotle is correct, and excellence is not an act, but a HABIT - then how does Excellence become a habit? We suffer. And so often it doesn't go away quickly. Or one thing goes away relatively quickly only to be replaced by another. And it does NOT have to be something BIG, like disease, or death, or job loss, or multiple surgeries. It can be a difficult boss, a sense of insecurity, a withdrawal by trusted friends, a child whose personality is the polar opposite of yours - or, even worse, EXACTLY LIKE yours. :)

"We ALL suffer - and it doesn't go away. But when we look to God, submit to His will, trust with our minds when our emotions are screaming, throw ourselves on the mercy of God and 'continue to do good' when we want to sleep, eat, shop, work, entertain the pain

away - or reject God altogether as far too dangerous and unpredictable for our controlling natures - THEN we become what we repeatedly do. We become like Christ."

Well from that one tracheotomy four and a half years ago Christi had been led by God down a pathway of intense suffering that led to 48 different surgeries, that led to that email that I read at the very beginning of this message, which said -- quote -- "For the first time since my very first surgery, Dr. Sataloff found no scar tissue in my trachea. This is a miracle." And it truly was and we were actually privileged to be part of it.

And having met with Christi out there in Arizona, she now speaks with a very a very hoarse whisper. She basically talks like this. She speaks with a hoarse whisper and even though her major in college was music and vocalization, she's still filled with gratitude and with thanksgiving for what God has done in her life. She actually went back to school. She went back to Dallas Seminary and she's now a Christian counselor, but she is a testimony to what God can do through suffering.

I was at a party quite a while ago. I was having a discussion with a very sincere and committed Christian couple who at one point said to me, "You're not one of those people who believe that God is

responsible for everything that happens in this world, are you?" Well this question was not unexpected because I knew this couple had come from a tradition that sees God as loving and kind and merciful but somehow removed from circumstances that are painful and debilitating. They just had a hard time getting their minds around a God who would allow his people to suffer. And so I quoted *Romans 8:28* which says: *We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.*

Christi's story is a living present day example of just how that works. It's a tale that God tells over and over again because we have a habit of ignoring what he tells us in scripture about the nature of what it means to be a child of God. Paul had these words to say about our Christian life in *Philippians 1:27*. This is what he said. He said: *Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I*

still have.

Well there's no doubt in my mind that Christi suffered for the sake of Christ. And there's no doubt in my mind that she was precisely and thoroughly centered in God's will all during the time of her suffering and that God used her powerfully and mightily to speak through her loss the nature of faith, of patience and grace, of how God is honored and glorified when we take that path less traveled, a difficult path through faith to glory but God's glory.

Interestingly enough we really got to know Christi as we got to know the book of Colossians. And it just so happened that God used Christi's life as a living example of what Paul was laying out for the Colossian church what it meant to live a life for Christ. And we saw Paul open up the book of Colossians with a prayer. This is what he said in *Colossians 1:9*. He said: *And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.*

Well there's three things that Paul was asking for in this prayer. He's asking first that we could be filled with God's wisdom;

secondly, that because of that wisdom, we would be able to walk worthy of the Lord; and third, that through that walk we might be able to demonstrate God's way. Our lives according to Paul are to be a living demonstration of God's wisdom, his walk, and his way, and we've learned that that's not so easy a task.

We looked at the lives of Christi and her husband Doug and in the struggle that Christi has had taking a simple throat surgery and turning it into a life-threatening medical condition. Her response to the trial was exactly what Paul was aiming at in his prayer for the Colossians. Instead of growing bitter or angry, Christi praised God for the opportunity to glorify him through this trial. I mean she did the three things that Paul was praying for: She was filled with God's wisdom and his power, and because of that she was able to walk worthy of the Lord and by walking in that way she was actually demonstrating God's way.

And Paul goes on to pray: *May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.* And again we pointed out, you know, being strengthened with all power, it's not like having lightning bolts coming out of your fingers. Instead it's the power to experience -- quote -- *"endurance and patience with joy."* It's to be able to: Count it all joy when you encounter various trials, knowing that those

trials are oftentimes the showcase that God uses to display his character and his attributes which is actually his way.

I said the place where you most readily find God displaying those attributes is the place of weakness, it's the place of powerlessness, it's the place of risk, and that's exactly where Christi found herself time and time again. I mean we didn't know for certain at the time of her final surgery that she had actually arrived at the end of her journey. She had been given great news by her doctor who told her she had a 12-week reprise before going back for another exam. She knew this could actually be the end of her nightmare or beginning of another relapse into a continuing journey.

And this is what she said. This is how she acknowledged that. She said this: "And let's not forget the greatest miracle: God's grace; faith and patience; and the prayers of the saints have sustained us through all these years. And even if He'd chosen not to bring about a miracle - we could have continued on with peace, joy and security in Christ. We have been and could have continued to be happy." She said, "We couldn't lose. God's grace; faith and patience; and the prayers of the saints work - either direction.

This quote echoes in my mind - and has throughout this trial:

'Love of God is pure when joy and suffering inspire an equal degree

of gratitude.'" "

And so this morning I really, I want to take a step back, I want to just look what was taking place with God and Christi and actually with us and with this church at large. And I want to draw some inferences if not conclusions from what it is God allowed Christi to go through because I think God's not interested in wasting anything, in particular in wasting our pain.

And in a sense God told Christi that he had a very large task for her to undertake and that God was going to use these awful circumstances to grow her, to glorify himself and to teach those around her and those of us in this church just how God operates in the center of trials and suffering.

Christi's experience is living proof of her statement that -- quote -- "God is for us, that He loves us, that we are secure whether we feel that way or not; that God will force evil to bleed good into our lives and the lives of those we love." And I just love that. "That God will force evil to bleed good into our lives and the lives of those we love."

And just as God gave Christi the grace of his wisdom, his walk and his way, so she too has given to us three different areas that are

emblematic of her faith. They serve for us as sources of enlightenment, education and encouragement. I mean I really do believe God chose Christi to be able to instruct us so that we could understand the process, so that we could grow and learn when it comes our time to struggle and to suffer.

First thing I think Christi has done through all of this is that she has enlightened us. We say, okay, how? How did her struggle in particular do that? I'd say the first and most important lesson to derive from this is the corollary of Romans 8:28: All things work together for good, and the corollary is that everything and I mean by that absolutely everything has what the Greek calls a telos. That's a direction, it's a purpose, it's an appointed end. And for believers that is to be shaped and molded uniquely into the very image of God's own Son.

You see, the universe exists to magnify and glorify the Son of God who came to earth, lived a perfect life and then died to pay the price of our sin. And we believers, we are put here on this planet to glorify the one who died for us. And so all of the events in our life have that telos, that purpose, and that's what gives an eternal meaning to virtually everything that we experience.

I mean to a non-believer nothing points to anything either through

good luck or bad luck. And everything about Christi's experience pointed to the bad luck of biological misfortune, whether it was bad medicine or surgical procedures or techniques or failed cures, the world sees it in terms of lawsuits and better doctors, but Christi never saw it that way. She saw it right from the very beginning as a spiritual battle instigated by physical suffering.

Pain and suffering appearing suddenly has a way of bringing out the very worst or the very best in each of us. It was C.S. Lewis who said this: "What a man does when he is taken off his guard is the best evidence for what sort of a man he is? Surely what pops out before the man has time to put on a disguise is the truth? If there are rats in a cellar you are most likely to see them if you go in very suddenly. But the suddenness does not create the rats: it only prevents them from hiding. In the same way the suddenness of the provocation does not make me an ill-tempered man: it only shows me what an ill-tempered man I (already) am. The rats are always there in the cellar, but if you go in shouting and noisily they will have taken cover before you switch on the light."

Well, we know Christi's condition came on suddenly and it was as it were suddenly a flipping on of a light and revealed what was in her basement, and it could have been bitterness, anger, demanding-ness or humility or it could have been graciousness, kindness,

gentleness, and trust. You see, whatever that sudden flood of light revealed, one thing is for certain, it was never a surprise to God. You see, wherever we are as his children, that is the place that God deigns to meet us in, but that's never, never permanent.

God accepts us just as we are but he has no intention whatsoever of leaving us just as we were. It's God's intent to move us always from darkness to light, to grow us as the fruit bearers for his glory in whatever state he finds us in. *John 15:8* says: "*By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.* "

Well, Christi understood first and foremost that's what she was here for, but she also understood another part of John 15 that directly affected her life. This is *John 15:2*. It says: "*Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.*"

Well the surgeon's knife was in fact God's pruning knife, and the prunings was extraordinarily painful. Whether she knew it consciously or not, Christi was acting out exactly what Paul had prayed for for the Colossians with God's wisdom, his walk, and his

way. You see, first God -- Christi was filled with God's wisdom. She was wise enough to make the connection from her physical circumstances, which were temporary, to the eternal circumstance that she found herself a part of. She understood *2 Corinthians 4:18* which said: *We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.* And secondly, because she had that wisdom, she was able to walk worthy of the Lord.

You know, the very first email we ever got from Doug and Christi said this. This is right at the very beginning. They said, "Just a quick update to let you know that Christi is home recovering from surgery today. We will write more later when we have had a chance to get some sleep and pray about the day's events. Briefly, what we expected to occur today really didn't happen. We are adjusting to this news and will visit with him" -- that's their doctor -- "later this week to hear what his plan is. We are confused and wonder if he is confused, as well. We are praying now about consulting a different doctor that was highly recommended by some dear and praying friends. Please pray along with us - that we may be guided by our LORD and obedient to Him. Thank you for your faithful prayers, emails, cards, and even text messages. They are always a great source of encouragement, which was an extra blessing

this day! Blessings, Doug and Christi"

That was the very beginning. That was the start of a journey that would take them places they never imagined. They had absolutely no idea the depth of the struggle and the physical pain that was laying in wait for them. They were to be tried and tested in their own version of what was literally a fiery furnace.

This is Christi's description of one such incident. It's lengthy, so bear with me. She says: "Dear Ones: These past 10 days have been a new challenge altogether. Dr. Sataloff sewed back the flap that covers the trachea when eating or drinking in an attempt to keep the scar tissue back. He said (and believed) the stitches would release in 3 - 4 days. While in surgery they keep me very hydrated - so I could live off that alone for a couple of days. I would then need to try to force some liquid down for a day or two, while the flap gradually closed back to normal.

"What actually happened is that the flap never closed back. By last Sunday morning I'd lost several pounds, was terribly weak, and was on the verge of dehydration. Doug was worried and so was I. My trachea is so open at the top that I cannot even swallow my own saliva without choking. It was a true dilemma.

"Doug took the kids to church and graciously allowed me to pray about what to do. I have chronic pain due to the stitches in the vocal cord area, but when I try to choke down some liquid, it burns at a 10 pain level. There was also the concern about pneumonia - if I tried to choke down liquids and got too much in my lungs that I couldn't cough out.

"As I prayed that morning, God began to bring to mind 3 things: 1) I've faced major pain like this before. It isn't fun, but I survived by His grace. 2) I've faced dehydration before, and the last time I landed in the hospital for 5 days. This time I truly wanted to stay out. 3) I've been called to long fasts on fresh juices, water and veg. broths before - and after the initial few days, began to feel healthier and stronger instead of depleted.

"So, based on prayer and a promise to Doug that we would go to the hospital if I felt faint again - or actually DID faint - I started my plan. I began having fresh juices, wheat grass juice, water and vitamin-infused water about every 2 hours. I had to sit outside or in the bathtub - as at least half the juice would simply drain through the trach tube. It was a mess. And horribly painful. It was like making myself drink fire every time. But after 2 days I began to feel a little stronger, By day 3 I didn't have any symptoms of dehydration. Today (Sunday) I am at about 50% strength

- even though I've lost quite a bit of weight and can still only retain about half of what I drink. The pain continues about the same - around a 7 or 8 pain level unless I am drinking, when it shoots up. However, by God's Amazing Grace I have adjusted to my current "normal" - and am able to pace myself to make a meal, do some laundry, pick up the house and do some cleaning, help the kids with school/schedule, etc., between periods of rest. That's a great improvement from 3 solid days in bed or on the couch last weekend!

"One of my favorite quotes lately has been from Oswald Chambers. He says, 'God is the Master Designer, and will never shield you from the requirements of being His son or daughter. 1 Peter 4:12 says, 'Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing were happening to you....' Rise to the occasion - do what the trial demands of you! It does not matter how much it hurts as long as it gives God the opportunity to manifest the life of Jesus in your body.

"Here's another gold nugget from Mr. Chambers: 'No sin is worse than the sin of self-pity, because it removes God from the throne of our lives, replacing Him with our own self-interests.'

"These words, along with about 15 scriptures from Romans 8, have

been the guards of my heart, mind and motives lately. The longer this trial stretches out - the stronger and happier I become in some ways. And the more keenly and carefully I must guard my heart and mind in other ways. God's Word, prayer, praise, the words of His people, continue to be the guardrails that keep me centered in the right path when my emotions start heading toward the ditch! It is a daily battle and a daily surrender. Praise God for His powerful provision when our hearts and bodies are strained and weary!

"We leave for Philadelphia with peace - and a readiness to bear witness to the Savior. PLEASE pray that we will be faithful and wise to see the opportunities. Pray that we will "spread EVERYWHERE the fragrance of the knowledge of Him."

I just need to tell you as an aside, Dr. Sataloff she mentions was the doctor who did the surgery on her, she knew everything about him, about his family, everything that she spoke to him about, I need to know who you are, who your family are, what your struggles are; so I don't know if Dr. Sataloff ever got saved but not for want of effort on Christi's part. She got to know him extraordinarily well.

And, you know, quite frankly I don't think I've ever encountered

faith like hers before. I read her emails and it made me feel like I was standing on holy ground. She's living out exactly what Paul prayed for 2,000 years ago and she's demonstrating this incredible power of God's Holy Spirit. I mean she's literally, she was filled with wisdom, she's walking worthy of Christ, and third, she's enabled to glorify God by demonstrating his character and attributes as they're flowing through her daily struggle, and that's God's way. God's wisdom, God's walk and God's way, they're all on display through her trial. And through it all she was enlightening us.

I mean the next thing Christi did for us through all of this and perhaps the most important part was she also educated us. You know, it's one thing to have me stand up here and give you some kind of theory about how we're supposed to live out our Christian life, speak about God's wisdom, his walk, and his way, but it's another thing entirely to have a living flesh and blood person demonstrate how that works out in real life. It's the difference between knowing something in your brain and really understanding it in your experience.

And Christi's experience over and over again was to insist that our God is a good God in spite of circumstances that sometimes whispered and more often seemed to shout that the exact opposite

was the case. It would have been so easy for Christi to throw up her hands and just give up just for the sheer volume of times when hopes were dashed and apparent solutions turned out not to be. And so she educated us by literally demonstrating the difference between being an immediate recipient of God's grace and simply being an onlooker.

If you remember, these were folks who I called spiritual rubberneckerers. Rubbernecking refers to the tendency of people to gawk and stare when they go past the scene of an accident. Other drivers are in an accident and rubberneckerers rubberneck or they can't avoid staring at something that happened to somebody else.

Well in a sense with Christi, we were all spiritual rubberneckerers. I mean the accident, it didn't happen to us, it happened to her. We didn't get the grace that God promised to give to all of us when our trials come but she did. And God says in *2 Corinthians 12:9*: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* And so we saw, we saw that sufficiency and power but many of us, myself included, we saw it through the eyes of unbelief. I mean, nobody could be that patient, nobody could be that trusting, nobody could be that anxious to praise a God who appeared to ignore her. We saw that power made perfect in Christi's weakness and because we didn't receive that grace, we

imagine that she didn't receive it as well.

And at the center of the so-called accident was Christi dealing with this unique agony that never seemed to let up and yet somehow she was uniformly cheerful, optimistic and encouraging. I think many of us thought, well, if that was me in her place, I just, I wouldn't be able to do it. Some of you even told me there's no way I could respond like that. I know some of you felt guilty, some people thought had I been Christi, things would've turned out very, very differently and it would not have been pretty. And what God and Christi both intended for us to see is that the grace he gives to those who are at the very center of the struggle is not at all the grace that he gives to those who are rubbernecking on the outside. I've said it many, many times, I said, boiling oil grace is only given to you when you're in boiling oil.

So before you say I could have never have done that, realize you're not the one receiving the grace that Christi received. And Christi received that grace for one specific reason, it really was a matter of attitude. She received that grace because she sought it.

See, God's grace is there for us but it's a grace that can be refused. God warns us in *Hebrews 12:15*, he says: *See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of*

bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.

See, Christi received that grace by fostering an attitude that for most of us would be highly counterintuitive. She literally sought out evidence of grace in the midst of circumstances that seemed to have none whatsoever. A grueling bronchoscopy without sedation becomes an opportunity to thank God for a faster recovery time. The horrific pain that accompanies forcing liquids down her throat while sitting in a bathtub gives rise to praise and thankfulness that God still gives her the strength to do housework, pray and read scripture in spite of the pain.

I mean, God chooses, just like he did with the apostle Paul, not to remove the thorn in her flesh, and she responds just like Paul did. Paul said: *Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*

So through Christi we got to see this entire process worked out in realtime in a real person and what she taught us in all of that was that attitude makes all the difference in the world. Christi had

no control over her circumstances but she did have control over how she received them. And it was her attitude that directly produced her gratitude and her gratitude made visible God's grace in her life.

I mean think about it, Christi's physical pain would have been no different if she was a flat-out atheist. I mean having a focus on Christ didn't make the pain any less painful but it did give a context to her suffering that made all the difference in the world. And her continued attitude of trust in the midst of a trial that had countless setbacks gave her a platform to educate us on how that is done.

That attitude extended also to had he been husband Doug. This is a note that he wrote to us. He said, "Healing or no healing, the question is do we trust God? Do we really believe that He knows what is best for us and is involved in this whole process? I was asking myself 'Do I really believe that God can heal Christi in an instant if He wants to?' That is a tough question for any level of faith. I can answer very quickly intellectually and theologically. Sure he can. But the logical next question then becomes, 'Then why doesn't He?' 'Doesn't He care?' 'Is He not hearing everyone's prayers?' 'Is it my lack of faith that prevents healing?' And a dozen related questions. But then I was struck

with the bigger question. 'What takes more faith - faith in believing God can heal Christi in an instant - or faith that God is still loving, still sovereign if He chooses not to right now, or never?' Ah. That is challenging. But I want my faith to be so deep, so rooted in what I know to be true about the character of God to know and believe that he is good, he is loving, he is involved, and he will accomplish his perfect will. I want a faith that even though I don't know where it leads, I can have confidence in the One who is leading. So we continue this walk and we will see where it leads."

Well, Doug and Christi both taught us that having an attitude that focuses on thankfulness and gratitude no matter what the circumstances made even the horror of her pain more bearable. And we saw how she sought out ways to be thankful many of us would have deemed unworthy of thanks. She taught us by way of example that attitude is everything when you are in the center of a trial.

As I said, she enlightened us, she educated us, and she thirdly encouraged us. She enlightened us by demonstrating that everything really does go back to Romans 8:28, that everything is rooted in God doing in our lives every moment of every day all those things that work together for good and that good is being shaped and molded into the image of Christ. She educated us by demonstrating

what we all know but seldom see, that while we can't change our circumstances, we can change the way that those circumstances are received and that an attitude of gratitude can change an entire outlook at a trial.

And finally she encouraged us by her example. And I really enjoyed that word "encourage." You know, the word "encourage" means to literally help somebody find more courage. You know, when dad is in the swimming pool and he's clapping his hands and he's trying to get his daughter to jump into the deep end, he is encouraging her, he's giving her the courage to do something that she's afraid to do.

Well, we had the privilege of watching the grace of God work itself out in the life of a precious saint suffering an unimaginable trial, and she showed us that even though the deep end of the pool was scary and painful, that God was there with her, holding her up, supporting her, giving her peace and power and wisdom and strength; and so her courage became our encouragement. And that's exactly what encouragement does. And just like that dad, she went into the deep waters and showed us that we had no fear of drowning eternally because God would never abandon his sheep. We saw him lead her through. We saw him lead her through the fire and the flood.

Now I just want you to imagine, imagine if Christi had been taught that she is a child of the King, and because she's a child of the King, she should expect health, wealth and prosperity as her legacy, that she was the king's kid and therefore she was entitled to it. What if she had been taught that God would remove her from the deep waters of trials instead of walking them with her?

What if she bought the lie that the fires of testing would pass her by? Where would that teaching have taken her? And what if she never knew that God says in *1 Peter 4:12*: *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.*

What if she had never heard God's promise in *Isaiah 43*: *"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."*

What if she had never been told that God never said he would transport us around trials but that he would walk us through them

and that we were to welcome those trials with joy? I mean *James 1:2* says: *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.* You know, James wrote those words while he was in the midst of trials and persecution.

I confess I used to recoil at his use of that word joy. *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet various trials.* I can understand James telling us to persevere, stay the course, suck it up, but to have joy? See, I used to think that joy was related to happiness, but it's not. See, happiness is a feeling of well-being based on my circumstances, based on actually what's happening. Joy is the certain knowledge that God loves me, God keeps me, God strengthens and empowers me no matter what my circumstances are.

And Jesus knows all about joy in terrible circumstances. In fact, joy is what led our God to the cross. And we look to Jesus: *Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.* And in that verse God's Holy Spirit lets us know what it was that Jesus actually despised about the cross, and it wasn't the pain, it wasn't the abandonment of his disciples, it wasn't the apparent

victory of his enemies, it was the shame of the most glorious person in the entire universe being reduced to the level of a worm.

Psalm 22: But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; "He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!"

See, Christi knew that if Jesus could look through that horror and somehow, some way find joy, then she, too, could find joy no matter what her circumstances were. Christi showed us exactly what that joy looked like being played out in her life.

She finished her final email with these words. She wrote: "This quote echoes in my mind - and has throughout this trial: 'Love of God is pure when joy and suffering inspire an equal degree of gratitude.'"

She goes on to say, "I don't think this is 'pie in the sky' theology. I think it is something that happens as we learn through trials that God is for us, that He loves us, that we ARE secure whether we feel that way or not; that God will FORCE evil to bleed good into our lives and the lives of those we love. I believe this trial has been God's way of teaching us that we have the divine

right to be grateful in joy AND in suffering; that we don't have to believe the emotions of despair and destitution that fall upon us like vultures. I don't always practice this truth. I absolutely do not always feel it. But I get it in new ways. My whole family does. And our security rests more upon the character of God and His unshakeable love for us than on what we think we can arrange or control. That's Wisdom. That's God's Modus Operandi. Bless Him Forever. So now we WAIT - with Hope and Confidence that we are Loved. That's a good place. PRAISE GOD- and again, THANK YOU, Dear Brothers and Sisters. This is YOUR story as much or more as it is ours. You've been so faithful. We will keep you posted. Love, Christi."

Unbelievable to me all these events happened 14 years ago. Since that time -- feels like yesterday, but since that time I've seen God repeatedly do in the lives of his saints what he did in Christi. In fact I've seen it in my sister Patty's trial herself. I've seen God wrestle good out of circumstances where you think there's none to be found. I've seen him turn even deep shame into joy.

I conclude by going back to Paul's prayer for his Colossian brothers and sisters. This is what he says, he says: *And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that*

you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

Those three things that Paul asked for in his prayer was that, number one, we might be filled with God's wisdom; number two, because of that wisdom that would be able to walk worthy with the Lord; and so number three, through that walk we might be able to demonstrate God's way. And again, Christi showed us that that is not so easy a task, but by God's grace she accomplished it.

Christi was filled with God's wisdom, she was walking worthy of Christ and she was enabled to glorify God by demonstrating his character and his attributes as they flowed through her daily struggle, and that is God's way. By taking up her own cross as she did, she enlightened and educated and encouraged us. And how did she do it? Well, again, in conclusion, she told us right from the start. She quoted Aristotle, and she said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act, but a habit." Would that we, too, would discover that habit. Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for Christi. I thank you for the opportunity that we had to actually meet her, to actually have a conversation

with her, because I think you have used her powerfully. I just continue to praise you for the example that she was, the example that she is and the encouragement that she continues to be. And I pray for each and every one of us when we have our own struggle, our own strife, our own difficulties, that we will remember her example. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.