

Don't Waste Your Illness

This presentation draws heavily upon an article entitled, [Don't Waste Your Cancer](#), written by Dr. John Piper when he had prostate surgery in 2006. I've entitled this edited version, [Don't Waste Your Illness](#), in order to broaden the scope of the subject to include other serious illnesses and diseases such as heart disease, respiratory diseases like Coronavirus, Alzheimer's disease, Diabetes, Multiple Sclerosis, and Parkinson's disease. This edited version resulted from my recent diagnosis of Parkinson's disease. Piper's ten points were very instructive and helpful for me to read after learning that I had been diagnosed with an incurable disease. So I decided to broaden the limited scope of his article from cancer to include any major illness or serious disease that we humans can contract and develop. With Piper, I believe in God's power to heal - both by miracle and by medicine. I believe it is right and good to pray for both kinds of healing. If a serious illness or disease is healed by God, then He gets the glory. However physical healing is not God's plan for everyone. And there are other kinds of healing that illness sometimes facilitates. In some cases, God's will is for the afflicted to endure their illness for many years or for the remainder of their natural lives. Therefore, as believers, it's important to redeem the circumstances and opportunities surrounding our serious illnesses and diseases and not waste them. In his article, Piper gives ten biblically-based instructions concerning how to avoid wasting your cancer. All ten of them also apply equally to any and all kinds of serious illnesses and diseases - hence this revision.

As you may know, we have several people in our assembly (as well as in some of our extended families) who currently have one or more serious kinds of illness. It is my hope that considering these ten instructions will help you not to "waste" your illness, but rather harness and utilize it for your spiritual good and growth and for the glory of God. Note: Some additional notes are incorporated into this revised edition from Dr. David Powlison of the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation who was also diagnosed with prostate cancer within a few months of Dr. Piper. Below are the ten biblically-based instructions concerning how to avoid wasting your serious illness or disease:

1. You will waste your illness if you do not believe it is designed for you by God.

It will not do to say that God only *uses* our serious illnesses and diseases but does not *design* it. What God permits, He permits for a reason. And that reason implies His design. If God foresees molecular developments within your body that will eventually become a serious illness or disease, then He can choose to stop it or not. If He does not stop it, then He has a purpose for not doing so. Since God is infinitely wise, it is right to call this purpose a design. Satan is real and causes many pleasures and pains. But he is not ultimate. So when he strikes Job with boils (Job 2:7), Job attributes it ultimately to God (2:10) and the inspired writer agrees: "...they consoled Job and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him." (Job 42:11). Therefore if you don't believe that your serious illness or disease is designed for you by God, then you will waste it.

2. You will waste your illness if you believe that it's a curse and not a gift.

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). That's an incredible blessing, whether we are sick or well. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13). He brings His great and merciful redemption onto the stage of the curse. So your illness, in itself, is one of those 10,000 "shadows of death" (Ps. 23:4) that come upon each one of us: all the threats, losses, pains, disappointments, and evils. But in His beloved children, our Father works a most kind goodness and gift through our most grievous losses: sometimes healing and restoring the body (temporarily, until the resurrection of the dead to eternal life), but always sustaining and teaching us that we might know and love Him more. In the testing ground of things like affliction and suffering, our faith becomes deep and real, and our love becomes purposeful and wise (James 1:2-5; 1 Pet. 1:3-9; Rom. 5:1-5; Rom. 8:18-39). Therefore you will waste your illness and disease if you believe that it's a curse and not a gift.

3. You will waste your illness if you seek comfort from your odds rather than from God.

The design of God in your illness is not to train you in seeking comfort from the rationalistic, human calculation of statistical odds. The world gets comfort from this, but not Christians. Some count their chariots (percentages of survival) and some count their horses (side effects of treatment, etc.), but we trust in the name of the Lord our God (Psalm 20:7). God's design is clear from 2 Corinthians 1:9, "We felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead." Therefore the aim of God in your illness (among a thousand other good things) is to knock props out from under our hearts so that we will rely utterly and completely upon Him.

4. You will waste your illness if you refuse to think about death.

We will all die, if Jesus postpones His return. Not to think about what it will be like to leave this life and meet God is folly. Ecclesiastes 7:2 says, "It is better to go to the house of mourning [a funeral] than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart." How can you lay it to heart if you won't think about it? Psalm 90:12 says, "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." Numbering your days means thinking about how few there are and that they will one day end. How will you get a heart of wisdom if you refuse to think about this? What a waste, if we do not think about death.

We might also say that serious illness and disease is one "down payment" on inevitable death, giving one bad taste of the reality of our mortality. Illness is a signpost pointing to something far bigger: the last enemy that you must face. But Christ has defeated this last enemy (1 Corinthians 15). Death is swallowed up in victory. Serious illnesses and diseases are merely one of the enemy's scouting parties, out on patrol. However it has no final power if you are a child of God destined to be resurrected and glorified - so believers can look death straight in the eye.

5. You will waste your illness if you think that "beating" your illness means staying alive rather than cherishing Christ.

Satan's and God's designs in your illness are not the same. Satan designs to destroy your love for Christ. God designs to deepen your love for Christ. Your illness does not win if you die. It wins if you fail to cherish Christ while you are alive. God's design is to wean you off the breast of the world and feast you on the sufficiency of Christ. It is meant to help you say and feel, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." And to know that therefore, "To live is Christ, and to die is gain." (Philippians 3:8; 1:21).

6. You will waste your illness if you spend too much time reading and learning about your illness and not enough time reading and learning about God.

It is not wrong to know about illness. Ignorance is not a virtue. But the lure to know more and more accompanied by the lack of zeal to know God more and more is symptomatic of unbelief. Serious illness and disease is meant to waken us to the priority and urgency of knowing God better. It is meant to put feeling and force behind the command, "Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord" (Hosea 6:3). It is meant to waken us to the truth of Daniel 11:32, "The people who know their God shall stand firm and take action." It is meant to make unshakable, indestructible oak trees out of us: "His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers" (Psalm 1:2). What a waste of your illness if you read and learn more about your illness, but fail to read and learn more about God.

Other people will express their care and concern by inquiring about your health. That's good, but the conversation easily gets stuck there. So tell them openly about your sickness, seeking their prayers and counsel, but then change the direction of the conversation by telling them what your God is doing to faithfully sustain you with 10,000 mercies. Robert Murray McCheyne wisely said, "For every one look at your sins, take ten looks at Christ." He was countering our tendency to reverse that 10:1 ratio by brooding over our failings and forgetting the Lord of mercy. What McCheyne says about our sins we can also apply to our sufferings. For every one sentence you say to others about your illness, say ten sentences about your God, and your hope, and what He is teaching you, and the small blessings of each day. For every hour you spend researching or discussing your illness, spend 10 hours researching and discussing and serving your Lord. Relate all that you are learning about your illness back to Him and His purposes, and you won't become obsessed.

7. You will waste your illness if you let it drive you into solitude instead of deepen your relationships with others.

Our culture is terrified of facing death. It is obsessed with medicine. It idolizes youth, health, and energy. It tries to hide any signs of weakness or imperfection. You will bring huge blessing to others by living openly, believably, and lovingly within your weaknesses. Paradoxically, moving out into relationships when you are hurting and weak will actually strengthen others. "One anothering" is a two-way street of generous giving and grateful receiving. Your need gives others an opportunity to love. And since love is always God's highest purpose, then you will learn His finest and most joyous lessons as you find small ways to express concern for others even when you are most weak. For instance, a great, life-threatening weakness can prove amazingly freeing. Nothing is left for you to do except to be loved by God and others, and to love God and others.

When Epaphroditus brought the gifts to Paul sent by the Philippian church he became very ill and almost died. In Philippians 2:26, Paul told the Philippians, "Epaphroditus was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was ill." What an amazing response! It does not say the Philippians were distressed that Epaphroditus was ill, but that *he* was distressed because *they* had heard he was ill. That's the kind of heart God is aiming to create with your illness: a deeply affectionate, caring heart for people. So don't waste your illness by retreating into yourself; instead use it to deepen your relationships with others.

8. You will waste your illness if you grieve as those who have no hope.

Show the world a different way of grieving. Paul said that he would have had "grief upon grief" if his friend Epaphroditus had died (Phil. 2:27). Paul had been grieving, feeling the painful weight of his friend's illness. He would have doubly grieved if his friend had died. But this loving, honest, God-oriented grief coexisted with "rejoice always" and "the peace of God that passes understanding" and "showing a genuine concern for your welfare" (Phil. 4:4, 7; 2:20). How on earth can sorrow and heartache coexist with love, joy, peace, and an indestructible sense of life purpose? In the inner logic of faith, this makes perfect sense. In fact, because you have hope, you may feel the sufferings of this life more keenly. In sharp contrast, the grieving that has no hope often chooses denial or escape or busyness because it can't face reality without despairing and becoming distraught.

In Christ, you know what's at stake, and so you keenly feel the hurts of this fallen world. You don't take pain and death for granted. You love what is good, and hate what is evil. After all, you follow in the image of, "a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3). But this Jesus chose his cross willingly "for the joy set before him" (Heb. 12:2). He lived and died in hope. His pain was not muted by denial or medication, nor was it tainted with despair, fear, or thrashing about for any straw of hope that might change his circumstances. Jesus' final promises overflow with the gladness of solid hope amid sorrows: "My joy will be in you, and your joy will be made full. Your grief will be turned to joy. No one will take your joy away from you. Ask, and you will receive, so that your joy will be made full. These things I speak in the world, so that they may have My joy made full in themselves" (selection from John 15-17).

In relation to those whose loved ones had died, Paul wrote: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). There is a grief at death. Even for the believer who dies, there is temporary loss - loss of physical life, loss of loved ones here, and loss of earthly ministry. But the believer's grief is different - it is permeated with hope. "We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8). So don't waste your illness grieving as those who don't have this hope.

9. You will waste your illness if you treat sin as casually as before you were ill.

Are your sins as attractive to you as they were before you had your illness? If so, then you are wasting it because serious illness and disease is designed to destroy your appetite for sin. Pride, greed, lust, unrelenting fear, hatred, dominance, unforgiveness, impatience, laziness, procrastination - all these are the adversaries that illness is meant to divert you from. Each and every one of your sins are worse enemies than your illness or disease. Your inner enemy, indwelling sin, is a moral illness 10,000 times more deadly than your physical illness. So don't waste the power of your illness to crush these foes. Let the prospect and nearness of eternity make the sins of today look as futile as they really are. Suffering is meant to wean you from sin and strengthen your faith. Therefore illness and disease should cause you to treat sin more seriously (and less casually) than you did before you were ill.

10. You will waste your illness if you fail to use it as a means of bearing witness to the truth and glory of Christ.

Christians are never anywhere by divine accident. There are reasons for why we wind up where we do. Consider what Jesus said about painful, unplanned circumstances: "They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness" (Luke 21:12 -13). So it is with serious illness and disease. It will be an opportunity to bear witness. Christ is infinitely worthy. Here is a golden opportunity to show that He is worth more than life. Don't waste it. Remember you are not left alone. You will have the help you need. "My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19).

Remember too that, in your illness, you will also need your brothers and sisters to witness to the truth and glory of Christ, to walk with you, to live out their faith beside you, to love you. And you can do same with them and with others, becoming the heart that loves with the love of Christ, the mouth filled with hope to both friends and strangers. So redeem your serious illness as a means of bearing witness to the truth and glory of Jesus Christ.