

Serving the Lord through Cancer and Widowhood

"But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourself this day whom you will serve ... But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Joshua 24:15

This framed verse hung upon the wall of our New Jersey home, a wedding gift to my late husband and me. While it hung on the wall, we were given opportunities to serve the Lord in ways we never would have chosen. This passage continues to remind me that each of us has daily opportunities to make our stand for our Christian faith, and serve the Lord in the life circumstances that he determines for us.

My first marriage was storybook in nature. From the time my husband and I were introduced to the time we married—just six months—it seemed God personally guided the joyful process of courtship, engagement and marriage.

In seven years we were blessed with two children, and were happily serving the Lord as we had planned. We were very active in all aspects of ministry at our church in New Jersey. With Christian education a priority for us and no WELS Lutheran school in our state, we had decided to homeschool our children.

Our church activities and our well-laid plans came to a screeching halt when after months of mysterious symptoms, my husband was diagnosed with stage 4A pancreatic cancer. This cancer was fast growing, debilitating and painful. By the time the illness was discovered, we had lost valuable treatment options and precious time. Stage 4A meant he had weeks, maybe months left to live.

Initially we felt shock and disbelief. We had questions. How could we serve the Lord as we wanted when we didn't plan this? If my husband lost his battle to this illness, who could love and care for us as much as he? What would happen to the kids and me? Where could we turn for help? Drawing courage from our Christian faith, we turned to the LORD.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither your ways my ways," declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'" Isaiah 55:8,9

As the reality of the diagnosis set in, we accepted that God had permitted this illness and promised to work everything for our good. With that knowledge, we began a concerted fight for life. We were swept into the world of cancer: consultations, blood draws, hours of waiting and hours of treatment, radiation, reactions and side effects to drugs, pain, irritability, sleeplessness, and hope that the cancer would shrink and become operable.

Over the next nine months, we got a hearty dose of what it meant to serve the Lord as *he* had planned. My husband used each medical appointment and waiting room visit as an opportunity to share his faith. This faith fueled his passion for life and unhampered desire to live, even though treatment after treatment failed to shrink the cancer. The bodily setbacks served as further witnessing opportunities to

the medical staff and others around us. The many examples in the Bible of God leading his people through unbelievable situations or healing illnesses through his mighty power served as our motivation in the face of these apparent defeats. We humbly marveled at God's mercy and promises to sustain his people. We were blessed to have our church family and extended family lovingly serve as our encouragers and supporters throughout this time.

We prayed boldly for total healing, knowing all things are possible with God. But each prayer we ended with "according to your will, Lord." As the chemotherapy drugs overpowered my husband's weakened body and the cancer grew faster, hospital stays became more frequent and lengthy. Though the illness ravaged his body, there grew within him a quiet confidence. He came to peace during his last days knowing that God had sustained our family so far, and in his love, God would continue to sustain us and guide us even in my husband's absence.

"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." Hebrews 13:5

My husband received his heavenly reward, thanks to his Savior Jesus' life of perfect obedience and death on the cross in his place. I became a widowed mom. Widowhood is not a role that anyone chooses. I wrestled with this new station in life, and even did some kicking and screaming. Yet God gave me the example of other widows, those found in his Word and women in my own life, to help me accept that this role was *from the Lord*. Moreover, it was an honorable role, especially chosen for me. The Lord provided *himself* as my defender and father to my now fatherless children. My desire was to walk with the Lord and have him guide us in this new family situation. Since we were without the earthly head of our family, we needed to put ourselves in a position to be around other Christian families and so benefit from their example. The kids and I moved to Wisconsin to begin a life near a new church home that had a Lutheran school. The Lord put key individuals in our path to encourage us in our faith and daily life.

The Joshua verse hung in our Wisconsin home for three years. Two of those years I was a widow. The third year I was a widow engaged to a surviving spouse. My now husband, an administrative pastor at a congregation in Michigan, was widowed suddenly as his wife was called home to heaven. They had been given the blessing of six children. He also was adjusting to being a surviving spouse with young children.

That framed verse from Joshua now hangs in our Michigan home, surrounded by pictures of our eight children. This second marriage too is *from the Lord*. The Lord brought two grieving families together to be one. It is a joy to share with our kids the faith their departed parent had while here on earth. Our children know that their departed parent now enjoys heaven with their Savior in perfect health, and while we are still here we serve the Lord in ways he provides each day.

What does the future hold for our family? The future holds the same for us as you. Each day each of us has an opportunity to commit our ways to the Lord and serve him in whatever life situation we face. So whether we are experiencing the depths of grief or the challenges of illness, we can confidently know that Jesus promises to sustain us through these times to show his love, bring us closer to him and glorify our Heavenly Father.

Prayer Suggestions:

1. Thank the Lord for the freedom to serve him no matter what your health or current life situation.
2. Ask the Lord to give you wisdom to know and acknowledge his will with an open mind. As opportunities change in your life, ask the Lord to guide your acceptance of these changes. Ask him to help you willingly change your area of service as he sees fit.
3. Ask the Lord to use a favorite Bible verse of yours to serve as a reminder of your faith and encourage you in it. May he use this verse to give you strength for the challenges you may face in your life.

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