



JOHN PIPER



DON'T WASTE
YOUR CANCER



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■ ■ CROSSWAY

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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Preface

I originally wrote this on the eve of prostate-cancer surgery. I believed then, and I believe now, in God's power to heal—by miracle and by medicine. I believe it is right and good to pray for both kinds of healing. Cancer is not wasted when it is healed by God. He gets the glory, and that is why cancer exists. So not to pray for healing may waste our cancer.

But healing is not God's plan for everyone in this life. And there are many other ways to waste our cancer. As I prayed for myself, and continue to do so, I also pray for you that we will not waste this pain.

At this time (five years after my surgery) the evidence is that they "got it." But I have learned that one day we think we are well, and the next day we find out we are not. So now when people ask me, "How's your health?" I say, "I feel fine. And the doctors are pleased." Which, being translated, means: "I don't know how I am; only God knows."

That God knows, and cares, and rules, is enough. The passage of Scripture that came to my mind while I waited for the biopsy was 1 Thessalonians 5:9–10: "God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him." That is enough. I am not destined for wrath, but to live with Christ.

Until we see him, may God help us not waste our health or our cancer.



1

We waste our cancer if we don't hear in
our own groanings the hope-filled
labor pains of a fallen world.

All suffering is owing to the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. God subjected the world to futility because of that disobedience (Romans 8:20). So, in one sense, all suffering is judgment. But since Christ bore our judgment, that's not what suffering is for us who believe. For us, the groanings of disease have become the labor pains of a new creation. "We know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. . . . We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:22–23).

When God subjected the world to futility, he did it "in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). So the groaning of our cancer has a double meaning. It means that sin is horrible, and it means that glorious freedom is coming. We will waste our cancer if we don't hear in our own groanings the labor pains of the new creation.

Labor pains mean that something wonderful is coming. That's what our cancer means. "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:17). Don't misinterpret your own groanings. Don't waste the witness of your own cancer.

2

We waste our cancer if we do not believe
it is designed for us by God.

It will not do to say that God only *uses* our cancer but does not design it. What God permits, he permits for a reason. And that reason is his design. If God foresees molecular developments becoming cancer, he can stop it, or not. If he does not, he has a purpose. Since he 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 (Job 2:10), and the inspired writer agrees: “They . . . comforted him for all the evil that *the LORD had brought upon him*” (Job 42:11). If we don’t believe our cancer is designed for us by God, we will waste it.



3

We waste our cancer if we believe it is
a curse and not a gift.

A father who had just lost his child asked me, “Can a Christian family be cursed?” So many things had piled up. My answer is no, but it certainly can feel like it. Satan tries to destroy some of us by increasing our health and wealth, which can strangle our faith (Matthew 13:22). And he tries to destroy others by multiplying their pain (Luke 13:16).

But the reason I say God’s people cannot be cursed is that God said to them, “There is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel” (Numbers 23:23). And more importantly, those who trust Christ are united to him, and in him there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1). No curse. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13). Christ has taken the curse of our condemnation and the curse of our diseases.

That means the diseases we still bear are not a curse. They have been transformed from a punitive pathway to hell into a purifying pathway to heaven. We are not cursed. As hard as it is to feel this, we believe God is not withholding good. He is doing good.

*The LORD God is a sun and shield;
the LORD bestows favor and honor.
No good thing does he withhold
from those who walk uprightly. (Psalm 84:11)*

4

We waste our cancer if we seek
comfort from our odds rather than
from God.

The design of God in our cancer is not to train us in the rationalistic, human calculation of odds. The world gets comfort from their odds. Not Christians. Some count their chariots (percentages of survival) and some count their horses (side effects of treatment), 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." The aim of God in our cancer (among a thousand other good things) is to knock props out from under our hearts so that we rely utterly on him.

5

We waste our cancer if we 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 we lay it to heart if we don't ever think about it? Psalm 90:12 says, "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." Numbering our days means thinking about how few there are and that they will end. How will we get a heart of wisdom if we refuse to think about this? What a waste, if we do not think about death.



6

We waste our cancer if we think that
“beating” cancer means staying alive
rather than cherishing Christ.

Satan’s and God’s designs in our cancer are not the same. Satan designs to destroy our love for Christ. God designs to deepen our love for Christ. Cancer does not win if we die. It wins if we fail to cherish Christ. God’s design is to wean us off the breast of the world and feast us on the sufficiency of Christ. It is meant to help us say and feel, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philippians 3:8) and to know that therefore, “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).



7

We waste our cancer if we spend
too much time reading about cancer and
not enough time reading about God.

It is not wrong to know about cancer. Ignorance is not a virtue. But the lure to know more and more and the lack of zeal to know God more and more is symptomatic of unbelief. Cancer is meant to waken us to the reality of God. 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” (Psalms 1:2–3). What a waste of cancer, if we read day and night about cancer and not about God.

8

We waste our cancer if we let it drive us
into solitude instead of deepen
our relationships with manifest affection.

When Epaphroditus brought the gifts to Paul sent by the Philippian church, Epaphroditus became ill and almost died. Paul tells the Philippians, “He has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill” (Philippians 2:26–27). What an amazing response! It does not say *they* were distressed that he was ill, but that *he* was distressed because they *heard* he was ill. That is the kind of heart God is aiming to create with cancer: a deeply affectionate, caring heart for people. Don’t waste your cancer by retreating into yourself.

9

We waste our cancer if we grieve as
those who have no hope.

Paul used this phrase about grieving without hope in relation to those whose loved ones had died: “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 body, and loss of loved ones here, and loss of earthly ministry. But the 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). Don’t waste your cancer grieving as those who don’t have this hope.



10

We waste our cancer if we treat sin
as casually as before.

Are our besetting sins as attractive to us now as they were before we had cancer? If so we are wasting our cancer. Cancer is designed to destroy the appetite for sin. Pride, greed, lust, hatred, unforgiveness, impatience, laziness, procrastination—all these are the adversaries that cancer is meant to attack. Don't just think of battling *against* cancer. Also think of battling *with* cancer. All these things are worse enemies than cancer. Don't waste the power of cancer to crush these foes. Let the presence of eternity make the sins of time look as futile as they really are. "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?" (Luke 9:25).



11

We waste our cancer if we fail to use it
as a means of 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 cancer. This 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).



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How are we as Christians called to respond when cancer invades our lives, whether our own bodies or those of our friends and family?

On the eve of his own cancer surgery, John Piper writes about cancer as an opportunity to glorify God. With pastoral sensitivity, compassion, and strength, Piper gently but firmly acknowledges that we can indeed waste our cancer when we don't see how it is God's good plan for us and a hope-filled path for making much of Jesus. This booklet is for anyone touched by a life-threatening illness.



JOHN PIPER is pastor for preaching and vision at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis. His many books include *Don't Waste Your Life*, *When I Don't Desire God*, *Stand*, *What Jesus Demands from the World*, and *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*.

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