

1-1-1995

When the Doctor Says "Cancer": Reflections on the Journey of Suffering

Dan Anders

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Anders, Dan (1995) "When the Doctor Says "Cancer": Reflections on the Journey of Suffering," *Leaven*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol3/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized administrator of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact Kevin.Miller3@pepperdine.edu.

When The Doctor Says "Cancer"

Reflections on the Journey of Suffering

by
Dan Anders

Some dates and words are forever etched in memory. March 15, 1989, and "cancer" are unforgettable to me. I sat in my family doctor's office late that Wednesday afternoon and heard the word "cancer" spoken of me for the first time.

I had tried to make this journey of suffering with others many times. For sixteen years in Houston I made regular trips to M. D. Anderson Hospital to minister to cancer patients. I had buried the beloved mates of two elders from the disease. I baptized, then buried a twenty-something man, a victim of malignancy. I had visited children too young to understand, and folks too old to care.

But this trip was to be different. It uniquely was mine. This was my personal journey with pain.

The Journey Begins

Over the next five months I traveled through uncomfortable-to-hideous medical tests, major surgery to biopsy the almost football-sized lymphoma growing in my abdomen, thirteen weeks of intensive chemotherapy and twenty-five days of radiation treatments. Finally, praise God, CT-scans showed that the monster had been whipped. I was "in remission" from the dread disease!

Then, unbelievably, three years later much of the trip had to be taken again. A lymphoma was growing in a salivary gland, just in front of my right ear. Another operation, by a skilled plastic surgeon,

followed by a year of once-a-month chemo. And again the wondrous words "You are disease-free!" after a CT-scan.

My journey is not over. My oncologist recommends that I have periodic chemotherapy "as long as necessary" in hopes of preventing another growth of cancer in my obviously defective lymph system.

Over the past five years I have had existential reason to reflect, more than I ever wanted to, on traveling with pain. My thoughts have been usually spasmodic, some times regular; mostly alone, occasionally shared; probably superficial, rarely profound. With all their personal quirks, with all their borrowed insights, with all their limitations, but with hoped helpfulness, I share them.

When Pain Comes

Whether we ever understand it or not we all learn one truth: troubles come! Suffering is a universal given. Pain is a fact of life. Soon or late, we all make some trip with discomfort, disease and dying. Philosophers and theologians learnedly call it "The Problem of Evil." We learn simply that suffering is pervasive and personal.

We need to learn early that some pain is natural to life. We cannot come into this world without pain. Ask any mother about giving birth! And, in spite of our fantasies about an easy old-age and a disease-free death, few of us, if any, exit life without some

suffering. Pain happens. It is part of living.

Some pain is brought on by evil actions. Read any daily newspaper. Watch tonight's news. The world is filled with the hideous cries of sufferers tormented by the deeds of others. Whether today's hot spot was Rwanda or Serbia or Chernobyl or Buenos Aires or Los Angeles, there is enough human-evil-caused pain in every day's news to teach us that it is Everyone's story.

Other pain is irrational and absurd. Strain our brain as we may, there is no recognizable reason for some of our suffering. Between my cancer trips, I had an equally unwanted appendectomy. Why? No doctor can explain what causes an irrational attack of appendicitis! It is a mystery. But I can testify that it does happen.

Forrest Gump, at the start of that sterling film, offers a woman a chocolate from his box of candy. "My Momma always said," he relates in his retarded speech, "that life is like a box of chawklits. You never know what you're gonna get." Indeed so.

The Witness of Scripture

God's word certainly is not silent on the subject of suffering. I have made no effort to count the cries of pain in Scripture. It would be a long, major study. The laments from pain echo repeatedly in the Bible's pages.

You can't scratch the Bible very deeply without hearing the cry of pain. The third page in my Bible introduces suffering. The next-to-the-last promises its eradication. And in between those brackets there is an almost unrelenting lament of troubles. As always, the Bible is utterly realistic about life.

In the Psalter alone, psalm after psalm shouts angrily or pathetically or questioningly to God about our human veil of tears. Personal and corporate laments are, indeed, the most frequent genre of poetry in the Psalms.

Try this simple study, suggested by E. Stanley Jones in his book **Christ and Human Suffering**. Take Luke 21:7-19. Read it from a perspective of troubles that will come to humankind. List as many potential sources of suffering as you find. They will range from wrong religious teachings, to economic distress, to natural disaster, to family strife. And you will find several more possible causes of our troubles! This is just one small example of how seriously the Bible takes the reality of pain in our world.

From my own reflection, I believe the Bible affirms three mega-truths about suffering. For one thing, pain was not in God's original design. There is no allusion to suffering in the Creation accounts. Pain is absent from God's creative activity in the first two

chapters of Genesis. God made a perfect world, without evil of any kind.

Also, pain in general is a result of The Fall. Read again the dramatic words of Genesis 3:16-19, God's curse on humankind because of self-chosen rebellion against our Creator. Notice how many references there are to pain and suffering. Since pain was not at the Beginning and pain will not be at the End, I can only conclude that the primacy of earthly pain is a consequence of that original human sin.

But, not all pain is a direct result of personal sin. It is a common human error to conclude that every sufferer suffers for her or his own wrongdoing. As old as the Book of Job, people believed that all pain was punishment for one's own misdeeds.

The first speech by Eliphaz slings arrows of doubts at Job's integrity (Job 4:7-21). And the last speech by Bildad harps on that same bad note (Job 25:1-6). Throughout the book, Job consistently — I think, correctly — argues that he is not guilty of sin. His suffering was not a punishment (cf. Job 31). There is much innocent suffering.

If one flawless proof is needed, look only at Jesus. We know that our Lord "was tested by what he suffered . . ." (Heb 2:18 NRSV). And we further believe that in him "we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15).

Why Bad Things Don't Happen

Other wrong explanations besides "suffering as punishment" have been proposed. George Buttrick discusses several in his **God, Pain, and Evil**.

Some reason that pain is good in itself. In extreme, perverted forms people inflict pain on themselves (masochism) or on others (sadism) to get pleasure — even sexual satisfaction. Buttrick argues that this view "Is life unhealthily turned in on itself." "Pain of itself," he writes, "is not good. On the contrary, it is incipient death . . . all pain of itself is ultimately fatal."

Others assert that pain has no real existence. The philosophical background of this rationale is solipsism, the belief that self is the only reality. There are patent flaws in this concept. If there is nothing real outside your solitary self, then there can be no pain or joy from outside yourself. The sheer stupidity of a firm solipsism is laughable: no other persons! no Yosemite Valley! no ocean surf! no God! — just me with my own self — created cosmos of inner reality.

Many people believe that present pain comes from our sin in a prior incarnation. The world's Hindus, and many new age reincarnationists, hold this view. There is some merit. Pain does come in part from the past.

On the simplest level, we inherit bad things willy-nilly from our ancestors: a crooked toenail, arteries that collect plaque, normal cells that turn malignant.

We also inherit a huge load of sin baggage that burdens us with racial prejudice, national hatreds, ethnic stereotypes, and other damaging attitudes that pollute human life.

Still, in spite of Hindu philosophy or the new-age babblings, there is no empirical proof that anyone has more than one human lifetime. For most of us, the Bible's dictum is good enough: ". . . it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment" (Heb 9:27).

Others hold that all suffering is a consequence of our human desires. Buddhism holds that desire is the root of all evil. Only meditation on the Buddha's Noble Four-Fold Path can eradicate human ambition, striving and thus suffering.

It is true that much human pain comes from wrong desire or unfulfilled expectations. "Those conflicts and disputes among you. . . come from your cravings that are at war within you" (James 4:1, 2).

But Buddhist philosophy self-destructs on two big facts: our basic desires are God-given, and desire is a permanent human reality. Not even the most devout, saffroned mendicant monk fully escapes desire.

Others believe that in some sense all suffering is God's will. This is a major biblical heresy. Pious believers have tried from earliest times to comfort themselves or others by affirming of some hideous horror, "This is the will of God."

I think it is a major non sequitur to jump from all suffering to the divine purpose. To say that God wills all pain makes him a monster, in my judgment. John Wesley bluntly said that a God who makes innocent babies suffer "is my Devil."

My own view is that if it helps you personally to believe that God's plan lies back of your troubles, God bless you. But please don't inflict that bromide on any other sufferer! You probably will only add more torment to their pain.

When the Thorn Stays

One of the thorniest problems, then, that we Christians must confront is why God does not remove all the troubles of the faithful who beg him to act.

Make no mistake, God repeatedly promised to give his children the things for which they ask.

Matthew 7:7-11 would be text enough. But there are many others (e.g., Matt 18:19; Mark 11:24).

It is an equally plain truth that we are not given all that for which we ask! Jesus was not spared the cross, in spite of his "prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears" (Heb 5:7). God did not pull Paul's fleshly thorn (2 Cor 12:7-9a). Why?

Perhaps we are left, in some sense, to fall back on the will of God. Some have found Leslie D. Weatherhead's discussion on **The Will of God** to be helpful. This British minister tried to distinguish between God's "purposed will" — good, redemption, love, salvation — and God's "permissive will" — disease, suffering, death. So, God "purposes" health for us, but he "permits" disease. Maybe, in Weatherhead's sense, we could affirm with Job that "no purpose [of God] can be thwarted" (Job 42:2).

It must be said, I think, all-too-briefly for now, that how we deal with our troubles is more important than the why. We may never determine the reasons. But we certainly can learn from great sufferers the best ways to respond to our inevitable, incurable pains.

At the end of the exceptional movie, "Shadowlands," a grieving C. S. Lewis mourns the loss of his wife, Joy, from bone cancer. He reflects that, instead of choosing to insulate himself from his own sorrow, "I choose suffering. Pain now is a part of happiness then."

Perhaps, till the end of our painful journey, we are left with Mystery. With unanswerable questions. With no alternative but trusting God. Then we can say with Job, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5, 6).

That, after all, is our rightful human place. Prostrate, in the dust, before our God. Only then can he lift us up.

Additional helpful reading

C. S. Lewis, **The Problem of Pain**

Paul Tournier, **Creative Suffering**

Leslie D. Weatherhead, **Salute to a Sufferer**

Nicholas Wolterstorff, **Lament for A Son**

Philip Yancey, **Disappointment with God**

_____, **Where Is God When It Hurts?**

Dan Anders is preaching minister of Malibu Church of Christ, Malibu, California.