



WHEN CANCER SLOWS YOU DOWN

RAY PRITCHARD





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Chris Fabry had a question for me.

It happened during our interview on Moody Radio.

“What have you learned from your journey with cancer?”

There are many ways to answer a question like that, and none of the answers are wrong because we all learn different things when we go through a trial.

This is Day 87 of 180 days of treatment for prostate cancer. It is also Day 9 of 28 days of radiation treatment.

The doctor told me my fatigue would increase, and that’s true. My tiredness has gone from 4 on a scale of 10 to a 7 or an 8. I wake up weary and don’t want to get out of bed. It’s a combination of the hormone and the radiation. The fatigue is likely to increase even more as the radiation goes on.

But I have no complaints. None at all. The system is good, and I trust the invisible rays are crushing my renegade cancer cells and rendering them useless. We won’t know the outcome of the treatment for some months to come, and like everything else in life, there are no guarantees, but I’m glad to be finally treating my cancer.

So, what have I learned?

To answer that question, I need to add one detail. During an ice storm in January, I made the mistake of walking our dog while wearing tennis shoes. A car came up the road, and Sadie (our four-year-old Aussiedoodle) tried to get me out of harm's way.

I never saw the ice until I hit it, taking the brunt of the fall on my left shoulder. Three months later, I have yet to recover completely.

I'M IN A HURRY!

That was when Josh, our oldest son, said, "Dad, I don't know why, but God seems to be slowing you and mom down." He's right. We canceled a trip to Hungary in January, Chattanooga in February, and South Korea in April. Now that I'm in the throes of cancer treatment, I am homebound almost as much as we were during the pandemic four years ago.

So, what has God been teaching me?

What follows is an insight I wouldn't have had before my cancer treatment. *I've been in a hurry all my life.* Let's start there. I've been rushing from one thing to another since I was a teenager. That never really changed when I became an adult.

It's funny the little things you remember.

Fifty years ago, I enrolled at Dallas Theological Seminary. One semester they asked all the students to join small groups for encouragement. I was busy, but I reluctantly went to the first meeting. I arrived late, and the leader said, "Let's give each other nicknames based on the first letter of your given name." It might be Gregarious George, Dutiful Dan, or Curious Carl. The exercise baffled me (and still does), so the leader said, "Let's call you Rushing Ray."

Fast forward maybe 12 years. I'm now pastoring in Garland, Texas. A friend invited me to speak at a youth retreat in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He couldn't come to pick me up, so he sent his youth pastor. He didn't have a picture, and the youth pastor didn't know me. But he picked me out of the crowd at the airport very quickly.

How?

"The pastor told me to find a tall guy in a suit who looked like he was in a hurry. I knew it was you," the youth pastor explained.

And so it goes over the years.

I've been in a hurry to preach, write, travel, lead, speak, and all the rest that goes into my life work. I've been in a hurry as a husband and a father. I've never found it easy to relax for very long.

Now here I am, 71 years old, and God has slowed me down almost to a complete stop. Cancer does that.

This thought crystallized in my mind a few weeks ago. I am an impatient man. That insight would not have come to me a year ago, but there it is.

I can say that more directly. *Every major mistake I've made has come because of impatience.* Every foolish thing I've said, every dumb comment, every unwise action traces back to an impatient spirit.

That's what I told Chris Fabry, and that's what I've been thinking about these last few weeks.

LESSONS FROM THE GOLDEN CALF

Sometimes you look for truth in the Bible, and sometimes it hits you in the face.

That happened to me recently when Marlene and I read through Exodus together. I had heard the story of Aaron and the golden calf many times, but I never knew why it happened.

Then I read these words from Exodus 32:1-2:

**"When the people saw that Moses was
so long in coming down
from the mountain,
they gathered around Aaron and said,
'Come, make us gods who will go before us.
As for this fellow Moses
who brought us up out of Egypt,
we don't know what has happened to him.'"**

The story is almost unbelievable.

Moses has already been up the mountain to talk with God and receive the Ten Commandments.

But that's not all.

Exodus 24 records that Moses and the elders went up the mountain and ate a meal in God's presence.

But that's not all.

The Lord spoke with Moses on the mountain, giving him detailed instructions about the Tabernacle.

Evidently, it took longer than the people expected. But remember that Moses didn't tell them, "I'll be back in three days." He went up Mount Sinai to meet with God.

MEETING THE PRESIDENT

It reminds me of what they say about meeting the president in the White House. The meeting starts when the president is ready, and it's not over until he stands up. You serve at his pleasure.

The same goes for Moses and God. *He stays on the mountain as long as the Lord wants to talk to him.* When the Lord says it's over, Moses goes back down the mountain to meet the people.

That's how it was supposed to work.

When we read the story of the Golden Calf, we tend to focus on the idol itself, but that's not the main point. This story is not just about what happened but when and where and who was involved.

We tend to focus on Aaron's foolishness. He actually took gold from the people and made the Golden Calf. Then he has the gall to say, "This is your God!"

As if he had completely forgotten how the Lord had delivered his people from Pharaoh through repeated miracles.

While Moses was talking with the Lord, **"The people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play"** (Exodus 32:6).

Moses knew nothing about it, but God saw it all. Here is his condemnation: **"These people were quick to turn away"** (Exodus 32:8). Because they were stiff-necked, the Lord said, "Let me destroy them." But Moses interceded with the Lord and reminded him of his promise to Abraham. If God destroyed his own people, the pagans would say, "He never wanted to deliver them in the first place."

THE CALF JUMPED OUT OF THE FIRE!

The Lord relented, but that left Moses with a huge problem. As they descended the mountain, Joshua heard the uproar from the camp and said, "It is the sound of war." But Moses knew better.

**"It is not the sound of victory,
it is not the sound of defeat;
it is the sound of singing that I hear"** (Exodus 32:18).

He was right.

When he saw the wild party and the golden calf, he threw the two stone tablets down in disgust. Then he ordered the idol burned, ground down, and the powder scattered on the water, which he then made the people drink.

How could Aaron have let this happen?

Thoroughly embarrassed, he claimed the golden calf jumped out when he threw the gold into the fire!

Three thousand people died that day as part of the Lord's judgment on their rebellion.

THE HIGH PRICE OF IMPATIENCE

Let's go back to the first part of the story. How could this have happened? The answer is right in the text:

**When the people saw that Moses was
so long in coming down
from the mountain (Exodus 32:1).**

The people said, "We don't know what has happened to him" (Exodus 32:2).

It happened because of the sin of impatience.

They assumed the worst because they didn't know what had happened to Moses. *Impatience led to idolatry, and idolatry led to immorality.*

Now there are 3000 graves to dig.

This is the high price of the sin of impatience.

TWO QUICK INSIGHTS FROM THE LATE 1800S

I ran across a sermon summary by a man named W. Whale in the *Biblical Illustrator*, published in the late 1800s. In it, he lists seven lessons from the story of the Golden Calf. The first two seem especially relevant today:

1. The Difficulty to Human Nature of Faith in the Unseen.

It makes sense if you think about it. As long as Moses was around, he kept the people focused on the Lord. But as soon as he goes up the mountain, the people get restless because (and this is the point) it's hard to keep believing in the unseen things.

We like to say, "Seeing is believing," but in God's economy, the reverse is true: "Believing is seeing." *But that's difficult for most of us.*

2. The Impatience of Man at God's Way of Working.

Moses stayed on the mountain longer than the people expected. He had an appointment with God! As W. Whale puts it, "The people would not wait for the man with God's Word."

I saw a picture of a big 18-wheeler with this sign: "God is moving. Be Patient." That's right, but oh, how hard it is to remember when we get impatient.

How many sins are committed because we are in a hurry? Under pressure, we give in to our passions because, in the crunch, we cut corners we would never cut otherwise. How many stupid decisions do we make because we aren't willing to wait for God?

ARE YOU READY TO DIE?

When I talked with Chris Fabry, I told him having cancer gives you a chance to think about life and death. There is nothing quite so bracing as a cold splash of reality right in the face. It has a way of clearing out the cobwebs.

Cancer patients think about death because people die from cancer every day. Prostate cancer is eminently curable, yet it is the second-leading cause of cancer death among men, lung cancer being the first.

The Bible says it is appointed unto man once to die (Hebrews 9:27). That's one appointment you won't miss. My doctor says my outlook for a cure is excellent, but when you are 71, you can't kid yourself.

I was always going to die.

Death comes to everyone sooner or later.

No one gets off planet Earth alive.

We're all going to do some "box time" eventually. When I use that line in a sermon, it gets a good laugh because we all know it's true.

At the bottom of my faith is a bedrock confidence in God's sovereignty. All my days were written in God's book before one of them came to be (Psalm 139:16). *That means a Christian is immortal until his work on earth is done.*

But that also means God is large and in charge. He was doing fine before I showed up, and he'll be doing fine long after I'm gone. As Charles de Gaulle liked to say, "The graveyards are filled with indispensable men."

We are all indispensable until we're not.

We would be wise to look ahead to the day of our death. *We should live as if the day of our death was on a billboard right in front of us.* In earlier times, Christians talked a lot about preparing to die. The Puritans wrote books about the art of dying like a Christian. When asked the secret of the early Methodist movement, John Wesley replied, "Our people die well."

GOING "ALL IN"

So I ask myself: "Pastor Ray, are you ready to die?"

Well, I'm not exactly eager to die because I've got more I want to do for the Lord. Plus, I'd like to spend a few more years with my wife, my kids, and my grandkids.

But if cancer takes me out, I know where I'm going. No doubts, no worries, no fears. Fifty-five years ago, I decided to go "all in" on Jesus. I staked my whole future on the truth that he is the Son of God who descended from heaven to earth, lived a sinless life, died on the cross for my sins, rose from the dead on the third day, and ascended into heaven where he sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. One day soon he's coming back to the earth.

I have trusted him completely as my Lord and Savior. *I traded my sin for his righteousness.* I am "in Christ," and Christ is "in me."

I am a believer.

What does that mean? I like how Lewis Sperry Chafer put it: *Believing in Jesus means trusting him so much that if he can't take me to heaven, I'm not going to go there.* I don't have a Plan B when it comes to salvation. Jesus is my Plan A, and he's all I need.

THE ROOT OF IMPATIENCE

Let me return to my central theme for a moment. *Cancer has a way of slowing you down.* I'm living proof of that truth. But I've already said I've been in a hurry all my life.

What's at the root of my impatience?

We might say it many ways, but the heart of it is unbelief. *We aren't sure God will care for us, so we must push our way forward.* It's a lack of trust in the God who made us. Impatience is a sign we don't believe God can handle our problems.

Impatience has a high price tag because it repeats the first sin in Eden: **"You will be like God"** (Genesis 3:5). Eve wouldn't wait, and Adam didn't, and as a result, the world today is broken and bleeding and a full-on disaster.

Is there any hope for impatient people like me?

Yes, and it's wrapped up in one verse in Psalm 27:14, **"Wait on the LORD; be strong, and may your heart be stout; wait on the Lord."**

I like how the Living Bible paraphrases it: **"Don't be impatient. Wait for the Lord, and he will come and save you! Be brave, stouthearted, and courageous. Yes, wait and he will help you."**

My whole message is in those words.

Note that "wait" is repeated. David says it twice because he knew we needed to hear it twice.

But that's not all. He also says, "Be brave, stouthearted, and courageous!"

IMPATIENCE IS EASY

Think of it this way.

Impatience is easy because you're giving in to your emotions. You're rude or mean, or you throw a fit, or you tell someone off because it makes you feel better.

It takes no courage to be impatient. It's a sign of spiritual cowardice. Telling someone off is taking the easy way out.

It takes courage to wait on the Lord.

That leads me to a simple question: *Are you willing to wait for God?* Until the answer is yes, you aren't ready to fulfill God's plan for your life.

To us, waiting is nothing more than passive resignation, giving into our circumstances, throwing up our hands in despair, and walking off the playing field. We don't "wait" for the Lord because we think "waiting" means giving up.

But that only shows how little we understand the Bible or the Lord. *From a biblical perspective, waiting isn't passive; it's the most proactive thing we can do.* To "wait" on the Lord means to get out of the way so he can act. Because you are confident in God, you refuse to take matters into your own hands.

When Jesus stood before his accusers, he did not defend himself. **"When they heaped abuse on him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats, but entrusted himself to him who judges justly"** (1 Peter 2:23). If you think it's easy to keep silent in the face of false accusations, it's only because you haven't tried it lately.

Nothing in life seems as hard as waiting. Maybe for a phone call or for a word from the doctor. Maybe for a job or for a letter you expected last week. Maybe for the fever to break or for someone you love to come home again.

People in the hospital understand this concept because hospital days don't last twenty-four hours; they last seventy-two hours. *You look at the clock, thinking it has been five minutes and it has only been thirty seconds.* Twenty minutes later, it has only been three more minutes. This gives you plenty of time to think.

Take heart while you wait on the Lord. Though for the present you are sorely mistreated, this too shall pass. In the meantime, let God be God and give him room to work.

Waiting time isn't wasted time if you are waiting on the Lord.

That's a promise you can take to the bank.

YOUR PATIENCE, LORD JESUS

How will we ever learn to wait on the Lord?

The power to change is not in you. *The power is in the gospel of Jesus Christ.* If we try to change ourselves, we will fail because we are too weak. Our hope is in the Lord.

In one of his books, F. B. Meyer talks about a method of prayer that helped him appropriate the power of Christ in his own life. When he felt himself getting angry or irritable, he asked the Lord for the quality most needed at that moment:

Your patience, Lord Jesus.

Your kindness, Lord Jesus.

Your love, Lord Jesus.

Your courage, Lord Jesus.

Your wisdom, Lord Jesus.

Your joy, Lord Jesus.

Your compassion, Lord Jesus.

“All that you are, Lord Jesus, all your shining beauty, all of it, come in this moment and fill me now.”

Jesus didn't come to make us nicer people. He came to make us new people. If you read this message and think, “I should try harder to wait on the Lord,” that’s a good sentiment, but it misses the point. We need the Lord Jesus living in us.

SHOULD WE PRAY FOR HEALING?

Before we wrap up, let’s touch on a question that needs a careful answer. Marlene and I have been overwhelmed by many friends who said they are praying for us. Specifically, they are praying that God will heal me of cancer.

A man I’ve known for 35 years sent me this wonderful email:

Good morning, Pastor Ray,

I heard the news recently about you having cancer. I wanted to encourage you to fight the good fight and beat it. I talked to the Lord the other day and I told him that we still need you here, and I received a sense that he agreed with me.

I will keep you in my prayers for sure.

When I wrote back, I thanked my friend and then said this:

If you and God agree that I should still be here, then I will happily join in and agree with you and with the Lord above. He always gets the final word!

People ask, “Do you believe in divine healing?” That’s the only kind there is. It just comes in many different varieties.

Most of us think of healing as “getting rid of the disease.” It’s like running the clock of life backward and restoring the person to their previous state. *But in the Bible, healing means coming into a right relationship with God first and foremost.* Healing touches every part of life—body, soul, and spirit. It brings us to a place where we can receive God’s blessings in a new and powerful way. That goes far beyond “Pray for my son because he broke his arm in football practice.”

Healing is not going back to what we were before but going on to all God wants us to be. Think about that for a moment. When we pray for healing, we dare not focus on the physical to the exclusion of the spiritual, emotional, and relational facets of life. We are not healed until we are made whole on every level of our existence.

To put it another way, what’s the point of being physically healed if we end up just as crabby as we were before? *If we’re still greedy, impatient, or critical, the miracle has been wasted on us.* If we dwell on our resentments, even after God delivers us from cancer, what have we gained? We need healing that works both ways—from the outside in and from the inside out.

I received an email from a man whose daughter was diagnosed with brain cancer. After outlining her course of treatment and thanking his friends for their prayers, he said very simply: “Keep it up—we believe in a miracle-working God.” He signed his letter, “Teary-eyed but believing good things are ahead.”

That’s the right balance. That’s how Christians talk when facing a medical emergency.

You get the best medical help you can.

You face reality squarely.

You ask your friends to pray.

You remind yourself and others that we believe in a miracle-working God.

And you keep believing, even though the “good things” that are ahead may come in heaven, not on earth.

WHO’S GOT IT BETTER THAN WE DO?

As we started this cancer journey, Marlene said, “Honey, this is just the next step in God’s plan for us.” Since then, we start every day by praying

for faith, gratitude, and no grumbling. So far, the Lord has answered those prayers.

When Jim Harbaugh was coach of the Michigan Wolverines football team, he told a story that stuck in my mind. When he and his brother John were growing up, the family occasionally went through a tough time. In those moments, their father would ask his sons, "Who's got it better than we do?" And the boys would shout back, "No one!"

What a marvelous way to look at life. *If you know Jesus, you have everything you need now and forever.* You are forgiven, redeemed, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. You have a new life now. Someday, you will spend eternity with Jesus in heaven.

God is our Father, the Lord Jesus is our Shepherd, and the Holy Spirit is our counselor. The Bible is our guide, the church is our home, and heaven is our destination.

Who's got it better than we do? No one!

THEY WHO WAIT UPON THE LORD

What is the answer to the besetting sin of impatience? Perhaps we can do no better than to end with a beloved verse that offers a beautiful picture of life under God's control:

**They who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31).**

We are not waiting for the latest medical breakthrough, a message from our loved ones, a new job, an end to a prison sentence, an offer of a better job, or a check for a million dollars. *We are waiting for the Lord.*

We are not waiting for something.

We are waiting for someone.

Waiting for the Lord is the highest expression of our faith: "I know God is going to resolve this situation. I don't know how, and I don't know when, but I know he's going to do it. I'm not giving up. I'm waiting on him."

Waiting on the Lord means that even in those moments, you choose to trust in the living God who is all-sufficient for your needs and say, "I am going on with my life." Not without doubt and often with tears, but I am going on nonetheless.

Waiting is not passive but active because you believe God is at work amid the crisis.

We are invited to wait on the Lord.

We are promised an exchange.
God will fit the supply to our moment-by-moment need.

Do we need to fly? Run? Walk? It will be given.

He will come to us if we turn to him. *God's unlimited power flows into our failing humanity upon the simple condition of waiting on the Lord.*

Are we weary?
Are we discouraged?
Are we confused?

Those words describe all of us from time to time. *But when God delivers us, we exchange our weakness for his strength.* If that sounds mysterious and even mystical, I grant that it is so. I can offer no empirical proof except the promise of God and the testimony of millions of believers who have found those words to be true.

We mount up with wings as eagles.
We run and are not weary.
We walk and do not faint.

Cancer has slowed me down, but it has not destroyed my faith. I thank God for this cancer because it has shown me how weak I am and how much I need the Lord.

Here, then, is a promise for all of us. *God will give us all the help we need because he has all the strength and power in the universe.* He has so much that it never runs out, and we will never come to the end of it.

They that wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. This is the promise of God.

Lord, thank you for slowing me down. Please deliver me from an impatient spirit. Teach me what it means to wait on the Lord. When I am tempted to interfere, please remind me that you don't need any help from me. Amen.

GOING DEEPER

1. What does it mean to wait on the Lord? Why is that so hard for most of us?
2. In what areas of your life are you struggling with the sin of impatience?
3. "Believing in Jesus means trusting him so much that if he can't take me to heaven, I'm not going to go there." Is that your testimony?
4. "Healing is not going back to what we were before but going on to all God wants us to be." What does this statement mean?
5. Who's got it better than we do?

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