

# CANCER, COURAGE, & CONVERSION

By Melodee Cooper

As can happen with the trials we experience, cancer became a great paradox in my life. What could have consumed me in despair instead inspired in me a change of heart. Shortly after my diagnosis, I took the challenge by Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles to “not shrink” and made that the theme of my battle.<sup>1</sup> It was in the hardest trial of my young



*Cancer didn't just change me physically—it inspired in me a change of heart.*

life that my heart was turned to my Savior. I began to see the gospel of my youth through new eyes. I learned to see, hear, and understand with my heart (see Deuteronomy 29:4; Psalm 119:34; John 12:40).

### **Spiritual Conversion**

Spiritual conversion, like fighting cancer, does not happen quickly or all at once. As Elder Bednar has explained:

“Conversion is an ongoing process. . . . Gradually and almost imperceptibly, our motives, our thoughts, our words, and our deeds become aligned with the will of God. Conversion unto the Lord requires both persistence and patience. . . .

“ . . . Consistently being true to the gospel is the essence of conversion. We should know the gospel is true and be true to the gospel.”<sup>2</sup>

Before cancer, I had not been tried beyond that which I could bear without turning to the Lord completely, and sadly, I did not always have patience or persistence in the gospel. During my battle to overcome cancer, however, I chose to turn to the Lord in all things. I made the effort to

seek Him, and I put His promise to the test when He said, “Will ye not *now* return unto me, and repent of your sins, and be converted, that I may heal you?” (3 Nephi 9:13; emphasis added). Here are three specific ways cancer has helped me become converted to the Lord:

#### **1. Making and Keeping Covenants**

The blessings from keeping baptismal and temple covenants help us stay converted through trials. I was blessed as those around me kept their covenants to “stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things” (Mosiah 18:9) and to be “willing to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light; . . . mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (verses 8–9).

One such display came only a few days after my cancer diagnosis. I was scheduled to speak in church, and the congregation organized a surprise to show their support: they all dressed in pink. This simple gesture changed my outlook on keeping covenants. There is power in the small, simple efforts.

During my trial of cancer, I also witnessed how “a

*Melodee's husband cut her hair at a “hair-shaving party” attended by more than 25 friends, who all wore hats or scarves to show their support.*

temple marriage provides an eternal perspective and a greater measure of divine assistance.”<sup>3</sup> I was converted to more fully keeping these sacred marriage covenants as I witnessed the strength and blessings that flowed as my husband and I worked together to overcome this difficult trial. I know my spouse loves more than my temporal self; he loves my soul, and this helps me as I strive to love him with all my heart. We didn’t simply make vows “until death do us part.” We are partners for eternity, and if we are committed and converted to keeping our covenants, we will be strengthened to withstand any trial.

## 2. “I Can Do All Things through Christ”

I’m a strong person. Some of my talents include independence, resourcefulness, and assertiveness. But our talents can often become a source of pride that Satan can use against us. Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles warned, “If we are not wary, Satan can

cause our spiritual downfall by corrupting us through our strengths as well as by exploiting our weaknesses.”<sup>4</sup>

When we fail to recognize the Savior as the giver of all gifts, we are often “compelled to be humble” (Alma 32:13). In my case, humility came when my immune system was so depleted that I did not have even enough energy to lift myself out of bed. Despair and fear began to overtake me. I went from being the mom who could “do it all” to being able to do absolutely nothing on my own. In humility, I turned to the Lord and experienced His promise that He will never leave us comfortless (see John 14:18). Angels in earthly form comforted me—a neighbor rushed over to climb my stairs, lift my crying baby from his crib, and calm him. My family members and friends dropped their plans in order to comfort me, clean my house, and cook for and feed me. Humility made me strong, as I was converted to humbly relying on the Lord’s strength to be able to “do all things” (Philippians 4:13).

## 3. Different People, Different Trials

Before cancer, I often found myself shocked that some people weren’t able to handle certain trials. Then I experienced a trial that was extremely difficult to handle, and I realized how wrong I had been to attempt to judge the lives of others. Cancer progresses in a somewhat public eye, so when people saw me as the bald and broken cancer patient, they would express things like, “I don’t know how you do it,” or “When I think about what you’re going through, I realize that I don’t have anything to complain about.” At the same time, I began to say, “Yes, I have cancer. But I have not experienced divorce, abuse, the death of a parent or child, job loss, poverty, addictions, having a child with a disability, or many other major storms that have burdened the lives of others.”

This life is one of testing, but the tests look different for each of us. One insightful Church member observed: “Everyone has different trials, and Heavenly Father is aware of those. If we are humble enough to follow the plan He has for us, we’ll be happy.”<sup>5</sup>



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Through my cancer experience, my heart was changed to understand that not one person's story is just like mine—not their strengths or weaknesses; not their triumphs or trials. So I should quit comparing my life to others' lives.

Years ago, President N. Eldon Tanner (1898–1982), First Counselor in the First Presidency, taught: "It is not possible to judge another fairly unless you know his desires, his faith, and his goals. . . . People are not in the same position. . . . It is not where you are but the direction in which you are going that counts."<sup>6</sup>

My conversion to the Lord helped me understand that without the Savior, none of us will ever have the hope of becoming perfect.

### **Pressing On**

The Savior's promised pattern was true for me: after much tribulation, I was converted, and He healed me (see D&C 112:13).

My doctor proclaimed, "You are cancer free." I celebrated being in remission, but the joy was short-lived. Only a year later we received the news that cancer had returned, this time in my bones. There is no cure this time, but I am still converted. I have not lost faith or the hope in miracles. During times of trial we have more reason to seek and to find our Savior and to take His yoke upon us (see Matthew 11:29–30).

Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin (1917–2008) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles declared, "Though our trials are diverse, there is one thing the Lord expects of us no matter our difficulties and sorrows: He expects us to press on."<sup>7</sup>

I must strive to keep seeking, learning, enduring, and becoming perfected. Conversion is not a onetime event or a chore to be completed. "Conversion is not an end, but a beginning of a new way of life," said Elder L. Tom Perry (1922–2015) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.<sup>8</sup> My conversion process continues as I "try a little harder to be a little better"<sup>9</sup> each day. I also hope to share my testimony and help others in their own conversion process, until I hear the words of the Master Healer: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: . . . enter thou into the joy of thy lord" (Matthew 25:21). ■

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### **NOTES**

1. See David A. Bednar, "Accepting the Lord's Will and Timing," *Ensign*, Aug. 2016, 28–35; Doctrine and Covenants 19:18.
2. David A. Bednar, "Converted unto the Lord," *Ensign*, Nov. 2012, 107, 108, 109.
3. "Celestial Marriage," *Ensign*, Oct. 1998, 70.
4. Dallin H. Oaks, "Our Strengths Can Become Our Downfall," *Ensign*, Oct. 1994, 12.
5. Dave Belnap, in Melissa Merrill, "Faith and Infertility," *Ensign*, Apr. 2011, 29.
6. N. Eldon Tanner, "Judge Not, That Ye Be Not Judged," *Ensign*, May 1972, 35.
7. Joseph B. Wirthlin, "Press On," *Ensign*, Nov. 2004, 101.
8. L. Tom Perry, "When Thou Art Converted, Strengthen Thy Brethren," *Ensign*, Nov. 1974, 18.
9. Gordon B. Hinckley, "We Have a Work to Do," *Ensign*, May 1995, 88.