

SUPPORTED
IN OUR **Trials**

During my struggle with cancer, I found strength and comfort in the promise that those who trust in God will be supported in their afflictions.

By Denise Neish

“Incurable.” My mind raced to make sense of the word. Three weeks before, I had been diagnosed with breast cancer. During the surgery that followed, doctors discovered 24 malignant lymph nodes. Now my doctor called to tell me that the cancer had spread to my bones.

He asked if I wanted to go forward with chemotherapy, to which I responded, “Of course I’m going to fight it!” With four children to care for, I felt that was my only option.

Fortunately I didn’t have to do it alone. In the Book of Mormon, Alma promises his son Helaman that “whosoever shall put their trust in God shall be supported in their trials, and their troubles, and their afflictions” (Alma 36:3; see also verse 27). I have found this promise to be true. I was supported in my trials with cancer through faith, priesthood blessings, service from others, prayer, and the word of God.

Faith and Optimism

My husband and I broke the news to family and friends that my cancer was worse than we initially thought. We

detailed exactly what we knew about my prognosis, a one- to three-percent chance for cure, but we also outlined our plan for treatment and our belief that if God was willing, I might live.

Our three-year-old twins, Max and Lily, and baby, Macy, were too young to understand the situation, but we tried to prepare Alec, who was eight, for what might lie ahead. When I was first diagnosed, we told him that I would lose my hair and be tired sometimes but that in the end I would be fine. We decided to leave it at that for the time being. We spoke optimistically at home, but at night when I tried to sleep, I was overcome with worry, fear, and sadness. Nevertheless, I knew that Heavenly Father was in charge. I believed that if He wanted me to survive, I would.

Priesthood Blessings

My husband, Branden, gave me a priesthood blessing in which he felt inspired to bless me with “many healthy years.” I desperately wanted to know exactly what those



words meant, but even without all the information, I believed in the blessing and held on to the phrase “many healthy years.”

I asked for blessings frequently during this time and always received inspired and personal guidance. I even received comfort from a blessing I had been given years before my diagnosis. In that blessing I had been advised to continue practicing the piano. I followed that advice, and by the time I was in treatment for cancer, I could play some of the hymns. During my sickness I spent a lot of time practicing the piano because I loved how I felt when I played the hymns and other beautiful music. I marveled that Heavenly Father prepared me in advance so that music could bless and comfort me during my darkest hour.

In another priesthood blessing I was told that I would receive more energy if I would think more about the Savior

and all He had done for me. Believing the blessing, I earnestly tried to think of Him more, and was noticeably strengthened physically as a result.

Service from Others

During my illness I was helped many times by selfless neighbors, friends, and fellow ward members. Two days before our family’s move to Utah from California, a woman from my ward called unexpectedly and offered to help with the children while I did some packing. It was shortly after she arrived that I received the call from my doctor with the devastating news that my cancer had spread. My friend tearfully told me later that she had been prompted to call and offer help that evening. I don’t know what I would have done without her there, when my husband was not home at that time.

When we arrived in Utah, our new home was flooded with neighbors who helped us unload our truck. My kitchen was completely organized, books were placed on



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bookshelves, and milk and bread appeared in my fridge. There were so many people in our house that there was not enough room for everyone who came to help.

The next few months were filled with aggressive chemotherapy. My mother-in-law was always willing to take care of my children every chemo day, despite the high energy required for watching them. I got painful sores in my mouth and throat that made eating and drinking nearly impossible. My oldest niece, who lived a few hours away, came to help with the children for a few days and then, seeing my condition, moved in with us for the rest of the summer. Her appearance in our lives right when our family was floundering was an obvious witness to me that Heavenly Father knew our needs and was not going to abandon us.

During chemotherapy, however, my condition continued to worsen. Unable to eat and drink, I lay in bed, sometimes shivering and sometimes burning with fever. Branden was worried and took me to the hospital twice in one week, but both times the nurses told me my symptoms were normal during chemotherapy. They gave me an IV bag for an hour or two and then sent me home. I was getting weaker every day and knew that I should be in the hospital, but I didn't go back because I doubted that I would receive the help I needed. I did not know what to do.

Then on a Friday afternoon my phone rang. It was the head nurse at the hospital. She said she had been thinking of me all day and knew that she needed to call me before her shift was over. When she learned of my condition, she had me admitted to the hospital immediately. I later learned from my doctor that her intervention at that time likely saved my life.

During the chaos of my month-long hospitalization, the members of our ward brought meals to our family, helped watch the children, visited me, cleaned our house, planted flowers, pulled weeds, did laundry, and sent encouraging cards and messages. They fasted and prayed for me, and when I was home, the young men brought the sacrament to our house.

Family and friends, many of whom lived far away, reached out to show support in various ways. Through their service, I was able to feel not only their love but also the love of Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Throughout my treatment, which included chemotherapy, radiation, a hysterectomy, and other surgeries and drugs, I prayed more than ever before. My prayers were more often for peace of mind than for anything else.

Turning off the radio and praying during the hour-long drives to the hospital for chemotherapy became a habit. By the time I reached the hospital, I always felt Heavenly Father's love for me and could optimistically go about my day.

I also prayed often to know what I should do. Branden and I applied the scriptural advice, "Study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right" (D&C 9:8). Sometimes those prayers led us to do things differently than prescribed by the normal protocol, but we felt peace about our course.

When a scan revealed that the tumors in my spine and hip were almost completely gone, a doctor cautioned me that even though the results were positive, we should not expect too much. Despite his pessimism, I continued to believe with all my heart in my priesthood blessing promising "many healthy years." I continued chemotherapy for three more months and then moved on to radiation.

At that point I needed to choose a radiation doctor. When I met with a certain doctor for the first time, he cautiously told me that he felt we could apply radiation to the areas on my spine and hip without doing too much damage to my heart and that we might have hope for remission. This was the first doctor who had been so positive. I felt good after I spoke with him, but I still prayed for a confirmation to know if he should be my radiation doctor. The answer came immediately in the form of a beautiful, happy feeling that enveloped me.

Feasting on the Words of Christ

I found it crucial to "feast upon the words of Christ" (2 Nephi 32:3) by reading the scriptures daily and listening to talks from recent and

past general conferences. Many times the message I listened to was exactly what I needed to hear that day. A talk given by Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles shortly after a battle with cancer was especially meaningful to me. In that talk he observed that "not shrinking is much more important than surviving!" ("Apply the Atoning Blood of Christ," *Ensign*, Nov. 1997, 22). Because of his words, I decided that no matter what happened, I would not shrink.

Moving Forward

A little over a year after my diagnosis I had a scan that showed no trace of cancer in my body. I was declared to be in remission, something I was originally told would not happen. After two years of remission, I had a small recurrence of the cancer in my bones, but I continue to feel well, take care of my family, run, and enjoy good health, even as I take drugs to fight the cancer. I have even been able to run a marathon and several half marathons recently. I know that my blessing promising "many healthy years" is being fulfilled, and my faith in those words gives me peace.

I have learned multiple life lessons from cancer, but most significantly, I could never deny that Heavenly Father has been with me. I have felt Him beside me, and I know that He has sent several of my brothers and sisters to help me at critical times. I know that in God's wisdom, not every righteous son or daughter is healed. And I also know that whatever answer comes from God is the right answer and is for our eternal good. I am grateful to be well, but more than anything, I am grateful for God's love and mercy for His children. ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.



GOD NEVER LEAVES US ALONE

"I testify of angels, both the heavenly and the mortal kind. In doing so I am testifying that God never leaves us alone, never leaves us unaided in the challenges that we face. . . . Always there are those angels who come and go all around us, seen and unseen, known and unknown, mortal and immortal."

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "The Ministry of Angels," *Ensign*, Nov. 2008, 31.