

Adventuring with God

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Friend or Foe?

Sometimes it's hard to see who's approaching in the shrouded mist of darkness. Like a sentry on duty, we are often startled awake, and in the confusion we shout with as much bravado and authority as we can muster, "Who goes there?" If there's no immediate answer, we are left with an awful choice: Will we shoot, or wait to see who emerges from the darkness? After all, we don't want to shoot a friend. Yet self-preservation urges us to strike back before our approaching enemy has a chance to destroy us.

Have you ever been caught in this dilemma? A situation comes at you out of nowhere and you can't determine at first whether you are dealing with a friend or a foe. Often the situation is uncomfortable, unpredictable, maybe downright depressing. Your tendency is to "shoot" it—end its presence in your life—but down deep you wonder ... is this a friend in disguise?

I felt this way when my cancer diagnosis came. It seemed to come out of nowhere. I had no time to get ready for it or see its face clearly. My immediate reaction was to fight back with all the weapons I had—first denial, then prayer, then authoritative faith gathered through reading the Word and seeking to apply it to my situation. This would be gone in no time, I told myself. It was a test of my faith and I would, with God's help and the faith-filled prayers of other Christians, conquer it in a timely fashion. It would not get close enough to harm me.

There were many points at which I expected God to intervene and shoot my enemy. Even following the biopsy that conclusively showed a malignant tumor, I

hoped for a phone call that would overturn it: "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Hedrick. We've made a mistake. The results we reported were for someone else, not you. Your pathology report is negative."

As I waited for the scheduled surgery, I decided that my deliverance would probably be announced as I was prepped for the operation: "I don't see the shadow on the ultrasound now ... something has happened! You must have been healed between the time of the biopsy and now. I guess you won't need the operation after all, Mrs. Hedrick."

I remember thinking as I was rolled down the hallway, with heated blanket on my lower body and an IV attached to my arm, "This is okay. God has allowed the operation to take place, but this is all I'll have to do. Today is my day of deliverance from this awful enemy. After I recover from this, I'll be able to resume my normal life."

It's now six or seven weeks since that operation, and next week I will begin the unthinkable: 12 weeks of chemotherapy. To be sure, God graciously has answered many prayers offered in faith since my initial encounter with this foe. The surgeon gave me a good report concerning my lymph glands: I was clear of any signs of the cancer spreading beyond its initial site. And I had incredible peace of mind and heart throughout the entire process—an obvious gift of the Holy Spirit. I also recovered quickly from the surgery and experienced no complications from it. I'm back at work and to some degree life *has* returned to normal.

But the “enemy” is still close at hand, and its presence means a long summer of treatments that will include both chemotherapy and radiation. I still wanted to find an answer to the fundamental question troubling me: Why didn’t my Father deal with it as I expected He would? Why did He allow it to keep approaching me with its menacing threat of danger? Wasn’t this the time to shoot and ask questions later?

Since my diagnosis I’ve discovered that many other Christians have dealt with this “enemy.” Some are prominent Christian leaders. In his article entitled “Don’t Waste Your Cancer,” John Piper discusses ten ways we can thwart the plans of God for us by wasting the opportunity we’ve been given to walk through the cancer journey with Him. It’s not like we can choose to have or not have it; our choice is how we will respond to the experience. One verse he quotes is the same one God gave to me early on in my process: 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.”* Piper comments, “The aim of God in your cancer (among a thousand other good things) is to knock props out from under our hearts so that we rely utterly on Him.”

As I prayed to receive revelation about my particular situation, the Lord gave me another verse that I found rather surprising. It wasn’t a warm and fuzzy promise that God would deliver me from all my troubles (as I would have preferred). Rather, it was a somewhat matter of fact statement about our Savior. *“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears”* [that makes me feel a little better with regard to how I petitioned the Father to spare me from having to undergo chemo] *“to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered”* (Hebrews 5:7-8).

As I continued to meditate on this passage, the truth finally dawned on me. My cancer diagnosis wasn’t a foe—it was a friend that would teach me how to

better obey my Father. It didn’t *look* friendly, but it had good intentions for me. Its effects might not *feel* good for a time, but its benefits would far outweigh its short-term pain. *“It [God’s discipline] produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it”* (Hebrews 12:11).

I’m not sure who penned the following words, but they speak to our human condition. The difficult circumstances that seem so threatening and dangerous to us, so uncomfortable and difficult for our flesh, may be friends in disguise.

“Come then, affliction, if my Father wills, and be my frowning friend. A friend that frowns is better than a smiling enemy.”

Sometimes what we see as threatening really *is* our foe. That’s why our Father quickly answers these prayers offered in faith. But other times, the answer to our prayer for deliverance is “no” because what we are facing is actually a frowning friend. Only He can perfectly discern the difference. That’s why we must develop an unfaltering trust in His love and goodness towards us. Only then can we offer Him our lives in joyful submission, like Jesus did.

There is a special joy and privilege associated with obedient children. While we may not enjoy the process of learning obedience, we will gain a new dimension of intimate fellowship with the Father that can’t be enjoyed by those who insist on living life on their terms. I am obviously still in school ... I’m sure that this cancer journey will teach me much more as I continue to walk it out. I’ve barely begun to mine all its hidden treasures. But for now, I can rejoice in knowing what Job knew, that *“He knoweth the way that I take; when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold”* (Job 23:10).

If you are encountering any shadowy figures or suspect circumstances at the moment, don’t be too trigger-happy. What you want to shoot or run from may turn out to be your greatest blessing in the end!

“O Love That Will Not Let Me Go”

O Love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe, that in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

O Light that followest all my way, I yield my flickering torch to Thee;
My heart restores its borrowed ray, that in Thy sunshine's blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be.

O Joy that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to Thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain, and feel the promise is not vain
That morn shall tearless be.

George Matheson (1882)