
My Personal Story – The Hand of God in my Illness

God “is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think”

Ephesians 3:20

In 1988 I accompanied my elderly mother for her appointment to our family GP. Because he knew us well, he took one look at me and said, “I think you ought to have blood tests, Pat.” I wasn’t there to talk about myself, but he insisted on checking me over. And so began the first of the very obvious workings of our Father in this episode of my life. I was admitted to hospital the following day for further tests and at the age of 47, was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia - a type of cancer that affects the blood and bone marrow. My active family and ecclesial life was turned upside down with no prospect of recovery from this diagnosis.

Anthony (my husband) and I had been due to go overseas, and I organised accommodation for my mother for this time, so by God’s good Grace, she was able to move out of our home into care a little earlier, leaving Anthony and the children with one less worry. Anthony was blessed to have a university lecturing position which gave him flexibility to visit and travel, my daughter was working and due to get married in a few months, and the two boys were university students.

Chemotherapy

I had a series of chemotherapies which in those days had an 80% success rate. God granted me remission and I was able to attend my daughter’s wedding. It was only at this point that the doctors advised us that in order to be permanently cancer-free, not just in remission, I would have to have a bone marrow transplant. This was quite a shock! We hadn’t considered this before and there were obstacles. There was no bone marrow registry in South Africa at the time, which meant I had to find a compatible donor myself. I had two siblings as the best option, but with only a 25% chance of being a match. By God’s grace, *both* were suitable! I had to move to Johannesburg (600km away from our home in Durban) to the only hospital in South Africa where the procedure could be done. Again, God provided. My cousin and her husband lived close to the hospital and willingly opened their home for Anthony to stay with them as long as required. They were an enormous source of strength and encouragement to us both - physically, emotionally and spiritually. There was also an ecclesia close by who were very supportive and visited regularly. In fact, one sister who was over 70, walked with a pronounced limp and a stick, visited me by bus after work one day, and still had to get home alone after dark. I was enormously appreciative of the effort she made.

Waiting

In 1988, in most countries in the world, people my age were not considered for this transplant. In South Africa, 50 years old was the cut off, and I was again blessed to be given the opportunity. 60% success rate? Sounds good. Viewed from a different perspective: A 40% failure rate, which I considered a death sentence. Anthony felt that he had prayed for healing and God had given us remission and he felt that we needed to have faith that this was God’s answer. I felt that God had offered an opportunity for complete healing but maybe I was clinging to any hope. We decided to go for an interview to get more information, but God had already decided for us: I was no longer in remission, and the transplant was the only option.

The process was traumatic and at times, tedious. Anthony watched in horror as they killed off my entire bone marrow, nearly killing me in the process and leaving me behind with no immunity. Then the transplant and the waiting to see if my body accepted the transplanted marrow, waiting to see if it was rejected, waiting . . . always waiting.

Continued blessings

But the blessings didn't stop. During this time, at the University where Anthony worked, the students went on a political strike. The university closed, exams were cancelled, and the holidays extended the closure. Anthony was able to spend considerable time in Johannesburg where I needed him, aware of God's Hand in having employment that allowed him such an inordinate amount of Carer's Leave at exactly the right time.

I saw the windows of heaven opened, showering down more blessings than I knew what to do with: I was well enough to be allowed day-leave from the hospital to attend my son's wedding. I received cards, letters and phone calls of love and encouragement from around the world, from ecclesial family I hadn't met. One brother phoned me every week to find out how I was. The Sunday schools sent cards and drawings. A dear friend gave up buying a new car to fly out from the UK to visit me for a week. People gave gifts and money and meals to my family. Music recordings of hymns, weekly summaries of exhortations, and an 8-year-old child saying, "No problem! God will fix everything." So many people helped in so many different ways for such a long a time. One particularly special surprise gesture was from a young couple from our meeting who came to the hospital straight from their wedding service and before the photoshoot, to visit me in their bridal wear. It really touched me that on their special day, they had the compassion to visit a very sick woman in hospital.

Two years from my diagnosis, my Oncologist had had 19 patients with Acute Myeloid Leukemia, and I was the only one alive. Five years post-transplant we had a Celebration of Life party as I was then considered to have the same risk of developing cancer as any other person. I considered it a miracle from the only Source of Life.

The power of prayer!

What did I learn from all this? I learned the value and power of prayer. I learned to leave everything in God's capable Hands. I don't always get it right and I'm still learning. I learned that there is a multitude of ways to show you care, to help others. It taught me how important it is to show you care for others during illness or times of stress or in grief. I learned how many people loved and care for me. I learned the value of memorising Bible verses and hymns so that I could repeat them to myself for comfort in the long, lonely hours of the night. We had just been to a Bible School where Bro Bob Lloyd had given us a 'pill' per day – a verse to learn by heart. I sure needed them.

"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee because he trusteth in Thee"
– Is 26:3

If thou but suffer God to guide thee

And hope in Him in all your ways.

He'll give thee strength whate're betide thee

And guide thee through the evil days.

"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." Heb 12:11

From the very beginning I knew I was in God's Hands. His full purpose was unknown, but I was confident that while "no discipline seems pleasant at the time, I was being trained and prayed for the "harvest of righteous and peace." I knew He was always near to me and now, in retrospect, I am deeply grateful for all the spiritual lessons and blessings I received. I was initially given a

maximum of two years to live ... as I write this, I am over 80 years old and so currently have had an extension of more than 30 years added by His grace and have had the blessing of life in abundance: a fabulous marriage, seeing all my children married, enjoying eleven grandchildren, and now, even a great-granddaughter.

Pat Oosthuizen

Green Hymnbook 147

– I found all these words very relevant.

*If thou but suffer God to guide thee,
And hope in Him through all thy ways,
He'll give thee strength, whatever betide thee,
And bear thee through the evil days:
Who trusts in God's unchanging love
Builds on the rock that naught can move.*

*Only be still, and wait his leisure
In cheerful hope, with heart content
To take whate'er thy Father's pleasure
And all-discerning love hath sent;
No doubt our inmost wants are known
To Him who chose us for His own.*

*What can these anxious cares avail thee?
These never-ceasing moans and sighs?
What can it help, if thou bewail thee
O'er each dark moment as it flies?
Our cross and trials do but press
The heavier for our bitterness.*

*Sing, pray, and keep His ways unswerving
So do thine own part faithfully,
And trust His word, though undeserving,
Thou yet shalt find it true for thee;
God never yet forsook in need
The man that trusted Him indeed.*
