

A F T E R   C A N C E R

THRIVING  
WITH HOPE

MARISSA HENLEY



P U B L I S H I N G  
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## 31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

A Series

DEEPAK REJU

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The names and identifying details of some survivors have been changed for privacy.

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# How to Nourish Your Soul

*A LITTLE BIT EVERY DAY* can do great good for your soul.

I read the Bible to my kids during breakfast. I don't read a lot. Maybe just a few verses. But I work hard to do it every weekday.

My wife and I pray for one of our children, a different child each night, before we go to bed. We usually take just a few minutes. We don't pray lengthy, expansive prayers. Usually we're brief and to the point. But we try to do this most every night.

What do you see in these examples? Although they don't take long, these practices are edifying, hopeful, and effective.

This devotional is just the same. Each entry is short—just a few tasty morsels of Scripture to nourish your hungry soul. Add it to your daily Bible reading. Read it on the subway or the bus on your way to work. Read it with a friend or a spouse every night at dinner. Make it part of each day for thirty-one days, and it will do you great good.

Why is that?

*We start with Scripture.* God's Word is powerful. Used by the Holy Spirit, it turns the hearts of kings, brings comfort to the lowly, and gives spiritual sight to the blind. It transforms lives and turns them upside down. We know that the Bible is God's very own words, so we read and study it to know God himself.

*Our study of Scripture is practical.* Theology should change how we live. It's crucial to connect the Word with your struggles. Often, as you read these devotionals, you'll see the word *you* because Marissa speaks directly to you, the reader. The readings contain a mixture of reflection questions and practical suggestions. You'll get much more from this experience if you reflect on the texts, answer the questions, and do the practical exercises. Don't skip them. Do them for the sake of your own soul.

*Our study of Scripture is worshipful.* As you look around your life, you see constant reminders of your battle against cancer. In the aftermath of that fight, you may be experiencing emotions that surprise you: grief, confusion, a sense of loss or dread. Maybe you feel hopeful one day but despairing the next. *Isn't everything supposed to be better now?* That's why God's Word matters. It points you to a Savior who is merciful, long-suffering, and gracious to you no matter what. Scripture reveals that his plans are for your good and that he will never forsake you. Cancer changed you, and it should remind you that you can't do life on your own—you need Jesus to help you, and he will. What should your study of the Word lead you to? Worship of him.

If you find this devotional helpful (and I trust that you will!), reread it in different seasons of your life. It will help remind you of God's goodness and power and promises whenever you're fighting the aftershocks of cancer. So work through it this coming month and then come back to it a year from now to remind yourself about what God and the gospel teach you about cultivating a life in Christ.

This devotional starts you on a wonderful journey in which you'll grow in Christ. After you finish reading (and rereading) it, if you want more, you'll see more resources listed at the end of the book. Buy them and make good use of them.

Are you ready? Let's begin.

Deepak Reju

## INTRODUCTION

### Life After Cancer

FILLED WITH BOTH DREAD AND HOPE, I forced a deep breath through my anxiety-stricken lungs and stepped into the counselor's office. Almost two years had passed since I had been diagnosed with a rare cancer called angiosarcoma. The chemotherapy, clinical trial, radiation, and surgery had ended about a year prior, and my scans showed no evidence of disease. Some days, I was thrilled to be alive. I felt happy, grateful, and free. Other days, I felt like cancer still had me in its suffocating grip. The new perspective that made me grateful for each day also made me greedy for years I wasn't sure I'd get to enjoy.

Cancer had been purged from my body, but it wouldn't leave my mind. I was tired of feeling consumed by cancer.

A few minutes later, I sat on the counselor's sofa, telling my story through tears. I started with the facts: The lump in my breast. The phone call two weeks later. The internet search that revealed a grim prognosis. The oncologist at MD Anderson Cancer Center who looked me in the eyes and said, "I can cure you." The months of chemotherapy. The clinical trial that took me away from my three young children for weeks and weeks as I received treatment in Houston, six hundred miles from home. Radiation and surgery, also in Houston. God's faithfulness and provision through dark days of suffering, sickness, and fear.

But my story was more than those facts. Fear, grief, and trauma interwove through those details, but I often buried my emotions as I shared the happy ending of my story. I talked freely about the *when*, *where*, and *how*, but I didn't think people would want to hear the questions I wrestled with daily: *Why? What now?* I often separated the facts from my feelings when I told the story,



but in the safety of the counselor's office, my emotional turmoil rose to the surface and overflowed.

After I concluded my weepy monologue, my counselor gave me an assignment. Throughout my cancer journey, I'd been sharing updates—both medical and spiritual—on a blog. I loved seeing how God used my experience to encourage others. But what would I write, my counselor asked me, if no one else were going to read it?

I went home, sat at my laptop, and placed my fingers on the keys. I was free to type whatever I wanted without worrying about anyone else's feelings. I wouldn't upset anyone with my honesty. I wouldn't alarm anyone with my fears. I could finally let all my anger, sadness, and anxiety run freely on the page. The dam burst, and I wept and typed and wept some more. I had been physically healed a year earlier, but that day began my spiritual and emotional recovery.

If you're reading this devotional, you probably have a similar story or know someone who does. You got that phone call. You sat in the waiting rooms, weighed your options, and went through treatment that was both physically and emotionally challenging. Maybe you're physically healed; maybe you're still battling. Either way, you're wondering how you move forward through life after cancer. How do you cope after your cancer diagnosis changed everything? Wherever you are in the process of adjusting to life as a survivor, this devotional is for you.

You may feel surprised by the challenges of survivorship—I felt that way too. Perhaps you made it to the finish line of chemo, radiation, or recuperation from surgery only to find that your spiritual recovery was just beginning. For me, the bell I rang at the end of my cancer treatment might as well have been a starting gun for the even longer race of survivorship and all its challenges.

This new, unexpected race is very different from the marathon of treatment. Most of the spectators cheered your victory and then went home—they don't know you're still running. You

may even feel guilty if you tell your friends that you're struggling, because, after all, you're one of the fortunate ones who survived. But while you do feel grateful for each day, each day still brings significant challenges, and you still need support.

Over the course of thirty-one days, this devotional will take an honest look at the challenges of cancer survivorship: the tumultuous fears, the difficult feelings, the changed relationships. It will also direct you to your greatest and surest support. We'll see that God himself comes alongside us in our suffering and that the grace of the Lord Jesus is sufficient to sustain us on the hardest of days (see 2 Cor. 12:9). Hoping in him—his unchanging character and his work of deliverance—helps us keep moving forward.

So we'll go to church, even when we don't feel like it. We'll ask for help, because our grief can be isolating. We'll cry out to God when our anxiety threatens to overwhelm us. We'll humble ourselves and fight to thrive with hope, not because there is anything special in us but because we know that Jesus cares for us (see 1 Peter 5:6–7).

We're in this together, so throughout this book, I'll share insights from fellow cancer survivors. I hope their stories will encourage you as you see that you aren't the only one who feels this way. The details of our experiences may vary, but many of our struggles are similar.

As you read this book, my prayer for you is this: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Rom. 15:13).

## DAY 1

# The Aftershocks of Cancer

*We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Rom. 5:3–5)*

AT MY FIRST APPOINTMENT after nine months of treatment ended, a nurse walked into the room and said, “I see you have a history of angiosarcoma.” That was the first time I ever heard my cancer described that way. I was grateful that cancer had been relegated to my medical history, but it was continuing to impact my present and my future.

Maybe you feel the same way. Your treatment is over, but the aftershocks have left you shaking. I resonate with what one cancer survivor told me: She felt like she had come undone during her cancer treatment and had to put herself back together again. It's tough to put things back together when aftershocks keep coming.

Do you feel rocked every time you catch sight of your post-cancer body? Or when you sit in the waiting room of a doctor's office, reliving your medical history as you fill out forms? For me, aftershocks struck when I saw moms shopping with their daughters and wondered if I'd live long enough to parent a teenager. Being a survivor isn't easy.

In today's passage, Paul writes, “Suffering produces endurance.” The Greek word he uses for *endurance* is the same word James uses when he writes, “The testing of your faith produces *steadfastness*” (James 1:3). Suffering produces spiritual endurance, just as strength training produces physical endurance. A friend of mine describes suffering as strengthening her faith muscle. Just as our physical muscles grow stronger when they are

tested over and over again, our faith muscle grows stronger as we learn to believe God's promises and depend on him when we suffer. As our faith muscle grows, God also grows our character, and the end result is hope.

This devotional is designed to help you grow in your faith as you face the unique challenges of survivorship. Cancer tested you. Maybe you saw your faith grow stronger as you clung to Jesus. Or perhaps your grip on him seemed to loosen as you faced difficult, even hopeless-seeming, circumstances. Whatever your reaction, God carried you through and cared for you—in ways you might not even be able to identify yet. As, in the course of this book, we look at your past, present, and future as a cancer survivor, we'll keep coming back to our Rock and refuge: the Lord Jesus.

In what ways are you feeling the aftershocks of cancer today? Maybe you feel battered and exhausted from your cancer battle. You're ready for a break from the faith exercise of suffering, but you're still struggling with the fallout of cancer. Just as the Lord was present with you in your suffering after your diagnosis, he will be with you in the struggles of survivorship. You may not feel ready to rejoice right now. That's okay. God will never stop pouring out his love into your heart through his Spirit as he uses every trial to grow your endurance, character, and hope in him.

**Reflect:** How are you being tested by the aftershocks of cancer? How do you see God strengthening your faith muscle as a result?

**Act:** In the inside cover of this devotional or in a journal, record the survivorship challenges you've faced. Leave room to record how God will use these challenges to grow your steadfastness and faith in the days to come.

## DAY 2

### Looking to Jesus

*Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1–2)*

WHEN MY DAUGHTER WAS LITTLE, she loved to watch our local university's gymnastics team compete on television. She was fascinated by the gymnasts' strength, agility, and skill, not to mention their sparkly leotards and fancy hair bows! When I got tickets so we could attend a meet, I thought she would love to see the gymnasts up close. But as we sat in the arena, my daughter struggled to pay attention. On TV, we watched close-up shots of one event at a time. But in person, four events were going on at once. It was hard to know where to look.

Life after cancer can feel the same way. During months of treatment, your life shrank down to the essentials. Your calendar was stripped of activities. You focused on treatment, rest, and recovery. Then treatment ended, and you were thrown back into real life—things to do, places to go, people to see. You're experiencing a constant swirl of emotions: joy, relief, and gratitude, along with fear, grief, and doubt. It feels hard to know where to look in the midst of all that's going on around you.

In today's passage, we're reminded to look to Jesus as we run the race set before us. The NIV translates the beginning of Hebrews 12:2 as "*fixing* our eyes on Jesus." The Greek word for that verb indicates our intentionality—we are focusing our attention on our beloved Savior. Perhaps it was easy for you to throw yourself on him in the dark days of your cancer treatments . . . or perhaps chemo sickness, mental fog, or doubt made it difficult.

Now that you're out of treatment, the challenges have changed, but you're still running a race that requires faith. What is the state of your spiritual life right now? Have you gotten distracted away from your Savior?

Take small, practical steps to look to Jesus again. Reading this devotional is one way you can focus your attention on him. Try offering a short prayer to God: "I need your help." Pull out your Bible app and listen to Scripture for a few minutes. Take a deep breath and focus on a favorite verse. Text a friend and ask them to pray for you—maybe even to read this book alongside you.

When you focus on Jesus, you'll see the founder and perfecter of your faith. He's your Savior and Redeemer. His righteousness is now yours as a gift of God's grace. He endured the cross as your substitute and is now seated at the Father's right hand, where he continually intercedes for you (see Heb. 7:25). Looking to him strengthens you for the race you've been called to run as a cancer survivor.

**Reflect:** What thoughts, feelings, people, or tasks are crowding your field of vision? How have they distracted you away from knowing and loving Jesus?

**Reflect:** What are practical steps you can take to turn your eyes away from your after-cancer troubles and to fix them on Jesus instead?

**Act:** Look at the practical suggestions offered in today's reading and commit to using one this coming week.

## DAY 3

### Looking Back

*Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases. (Ps. 103:2–3)*

WHEN YOU LOOK BACK on your cancer diagnosis and treatment, what do you see? For cancer survivors, the past is full of challenging terrain. We see how God cared for us, provided for us, sustained us, and healed us. We're grateful for all the ways he proved his faithfulness to us. But we remember the hard times too: the fear on the faces of our loved ones after our diagnoses, the hours we spent in oncology offices and chemo rooms, the dark nights when we cried out to the Lord and begged him to heal us.

Psalm 103 shows us where to find comfort when we recall painful memories. If you have time today, I encourage you to sit down and read it in its entirety. Over the course of this psalm, David looks back, praises God, and reminds himself to “forget not all [God’s] benefits.” Then he recounts those benefits, giving demonstrations of God’s character and examples of how he showed his faithfulness to his people (see vv. 3–19). In response to God’s works, David blesses the Lord with all that is within him and encourages all creation to bless God’s name (see vv. 1, 20–22).

Yes, God has healed your cancer, and that is a great blessing. But when David wrote that the Lord “heals all your diseases,” he was referring to a healing even more wonderful and more permanent: the spiritual restoration given to those who repent and turn to the Lord in faith. The good news of the gospel is that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we’re healed from a threat much more deadly than cancer. Look back at what God

did in your past: Because you put your trust in Christ, he set you free from bondage to sin and death forever. You've been forgiven, justified, adopted, and granted eternal life. No matter your earthly circumstances, you can look back on both the good memories and the dark ones and say, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits."

Remembering God's past faithfulness strengthens your faith muscle. It helps you to more confidently trust him with your uncertain future. When the hard memories cause you to fear a return of your cancer, recall how God has redeemed you and how he cared for you when you were in the valley of suffering. You can depend on him to be faithful again through whatever challenges you may face ahead.

**Reflect:** What challenging memories from your cancer experience are you wrestling with?

**Reflect:** What are some of the ways God has been faithful to you, both by working salvation for you and by preserving and providing for you after your cancer diagnosis?

**Act:** Record examples of the faithfulness that God has shown you throughout your life generally and throughout your cancer journey specifically. Consider how you can preserve this record so that you and others can look back on it in the future.