

Word of Encouragement from a Cancer Survivor

by Jowanda Thomas

**"But as for me, the nearness of God is my good;
I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,
'that I may tell of all Your works."
(Psalm 73:28)**

It happened, Sunday morning, October 31, 2004. Prior to getting out of bed I did my end of the month self-breast examination. I found a lump, but I wasn't alarmed. I knew I had cysts, so I thought, "It feels like one of these cysts has grown larger." While showering I examined myself again and once more felt the same lump. It was my week to teach Sunday school. So I jumped out of the shower, got dressed and helped my husband, Kevin, and our three children get ready for church.

When I awoke our youngest,- he smiled and began singing "Rise and shine and give God the glory, glory." I joined him as I awoke his big brother and older sister. As we ate breakfast and traveled to church this song became our theme for the day.

When I arrived at church I literally gave no more thought to the lump. I was excited, about teaching the Sunday school lesson, *Creating a Renewed Trust* from Psalm 73. This Bible passage speaks about Asaph who despite distractions never stopped worshiping the LORD. His life was worship. He was born into the tribe of Levi, which meant from birth he was dedicated to help with the religious life of Israel. He was a musician and one who sang psalms in their worship services. He was the chief musician, played the cymbals and wrote Psalms 50 and 73-83.

What does Asaph's story have to do with the lump? Let me tell you. Like Asaph, I'm a worship leader. At our church I lead worship in song, sing lead, direct our choirs and help choreograph our praise dancers. Through His providence God gave me this lesson to teach, because He knew this word in Psalm 73 would sustain me through what I was about to face. I related to Asaph's ministry and emotional storms and I admired his choice to trust God in the end.

I was 40 years old when I found the lump last fall. But when I went to my doctor after several days of tests, she told me I was facing stage three breast cancer. According to my doctor that meant chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation. I was devastated. I was confused. I was scared. "How could this be?" I thought to myself. "I've had mammograms since I was 35. Five months ago I was given a clean bill of health from my physician after my mammogram. How could this be?" I leaned on Kevin and cried.

The day after the diagnosis Kevin and I told our children, Joshua, Kristin and Jonathan. Immediately we took them out for dinner and a movie. We wanted to teach them that even during the storms, life goes on and that God must be glorified. "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28).

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The next two days after the diagnosis, I lamented, prayed and talked to the Lord. I didn't know what to expect. Three days after the news, I began sanding on the promises of God. Kevin called the prayers warriors to arms. We had a arrayed ourselves for the battle. But God would fight this one for us.

My doctors immediately advised eight rounds of chemotherapy, using three different types of drugs. I took my first round Thursday, December 2, 2004. It lasted three and a half hours. The drugs were so strong I felt as if I were dying. The next day was my husband's birthday. Instead of celebrating, I was rushed to the hospital with all the signs of a heart attack. The doctors initially thought the chemotherapy may have caused blood clots in my lungs. So instead of hearing "Happy Birthday" from our family, Kevin spent the night consoling our children and I alone in a sterile hospital room. I couldn't eat. I could barely walk. And I talked only if I had to. We thanked God that it was not a heart attack, but leaned on Him for strength to overcome the adverse side effects of the chemo.

The days following my release I was weak. All my hair fell out. My tongue, fingernails, toenails, and the palms of my hands turned bluish black. My skin became rough and peeled. My gums receded. And my teeth became sensitive. Like Asaph I needed a renewed trust in God. As I lay in bed long nights and lonely days, I thought, "I'm afraid chemo is going to kill me." I know God can use chemo and it works for many, but I wanted nothing more to do with it. My fears might not make sense to some, but I wondered how I would find the strength for seven more treatments. Then I wondered how I would convince my husband and our parents to agree with me? So I prayed, "Lord Jesus, let it please You to help my husband understand I don't feel I can take anymore chemotherapy." By faith I told him and by faith Kevin *and* our parents agreed with my decision to stop chemotherapy.

I called my doctor to ask if she would remove the cancerous tumor right away. Hesitantly she agreed. While waiting for the surgery date I did my best to pray, exercise and improve my nutrition. Just five weeks after being diagnosed with stage three breast cancer, the doctors opened me up, but found necrosis, dead tissue. The tumor had shrunk to the size of a pea! The cancer was dead! Prayer! Renewed trust! God! He had moved faster than I ever thought He would. As a result my family, friends and I have experienced first hand the power of prayer.

I have quite a bit to live for - my work for the Lord, my loving and supportive family and extended family beginning with my husband, our three children who are now 6, 9, and 13, my church family and my friends. My reasons to live.

Like Asaph in Psalm 73 I believe in the power of prayer. But I also believe women need to value selfbreast exams and early detection through mammography. Although I did my exams and was followed by my physician, though my family has no history of breast cancer and though I have never smoked, I was diagnosed with breast cancer.

I wrote this to encourage you to renew your trust in God, **but also to urge you to take responsibility to do** your part to stay healthy. Take time to do your monthly self-exams. Schedule your mammograms. Talk to your physician.

And most of all like Asaph, talk to the Lord. Your health matters to God, because you and your ministry matter to Him. He wants to do wonderful things in our lives, so that we may make more and better disciples of Jesus Christ by telling of all His works. Make His nearness your good, because He is the LORD GOD our refuge