



How serious illness led Wesley Finegan to recall an important spiritual principle

Meeting disappointment HEAD-ON

As a teenager, I read these words on a calendar:
*'Disappointment – His appointment'
Change one letter, then I see
That the thwarting of my purpose
Is God's better choice for me.¹*

I had no idea then how relevant those words would become to me personally. In January 1994 I was found to have a high-grade, rapidly growing, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. This illness came at the peak of my career as a consultant in palliative medicine when I had plans for improving the care of cancer patients at our local hospital. God had different plans for me.

Following surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy I was in remission, but one year on, I was retired from my clinical position because my immune system had not recovered sufficiently. I was offered a job in medical education, specialising in palliative care. All seemed to be going well and I was quite content. I felt that God had placed me in a position where I could introduce the gospel to educational projects dealing with end-of-life issues. I was sure I could see God's plan for my life.

Then in January 2001 I slipped on ice, injuring my left arm. I treated myself with ibuprofen, support and rest until the swelling subsided and my range of movement had improved. One month later, at a routine oncology follow-up, the registrar noted some axillary swelling. We agreed that it was probably residual haematoma but I was sent for a CT scan. It showed a lymph node mass. Biopsies showed only the effects of injury but when the mass continued to grow, it was excised. The histology showed a lymphoma, believed to be a recurrence, which caused obvious concern.

I was understandably anxious on the day I was to receive the results of the relevant tests. My Bible reading for the day included these words: 'So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said; "He is the LORD; let him do what is good in his eyes."' (1 Samuel 3:18). Was God warning me? I went to the hospital, trying to prepare myself for the worst news I could imagine. On the contrary, analysis and comparison of the tumour DNA, confirmed that I had a new primary non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. It was the first time the oncology team had seen such an event. I started chemotherapy, but half way through the course, developed cardiac problems associated with the doses of adriamycin I had received in 1994 and again in 2001. Treatment was therefore switched to daily radiotherapy for four weeks. Now, having completed treatment, my CT scans are clear.

Lessons

What lessons have I learned from these events? I will share some of my thoughts and fears. Recorded in special diaries I kept

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during both illnesses. When I heard I had cancer again I didn't know what to think, and didn't know what to say to God. Why was God changing all my plans again? I felt confused and disappointed. My mind went to Romans 8:26, 'In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.'

In my search for comfort, I had zoned in on that verse, but I was shown over several months, that I had to see it in context. My daily readings repeatedly included Romans 8:27, which reads, 'And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.' Those last five words jumped out at me! In my diary I recorded all the major events in my illness and tried to group them under the headings of 'Disappointment' or 'His appointment'.

At every significant point in my illness I had some kind of message from God. It came in the form either of a reading, a phone call, a letter or a visitor giving us encouragement and hope. God has been reminding me of his promises and that whatever happens, it is his appointment. I have recorded 46 such incidents in less than one year.

God has been teaching me:

- To read his word expecting to hear him say things that are relevant to me.
- That he speaks through his word, people and events
- Not to rush into interpreting what he is saying to me (as I did the day I expected to be told bad news)
- To ask for what I *need* – not what I *want* (Philippians 4:6)
- To pray for things that are *his* will- not mine (Romans 8:27)
- That he has a plan for my life and that his plan is the right one for me (Psalm 22:4-5). If I had not fallen, and not had the CT scan would my new cancer have been discovered as early?
- That *his appointment* for my life is best, even if I do feel some *disappointment* over how he carries out his plan.

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1. The full text of the poem is published in A Naismith (ed), *1200 Notes, Quotes and Anecdotes*, London: Pickering and Inglis (1971). The author is not named.