



SPEAK LORD, I AM LISTENING

Alison Birtle recounts God's still small voice and its impact on one patient and his family.



Alison Birtle
is a consultant
oncologist

It was hard to ignore – Like Samuel hearing that quiet voice in the night.¹ That was certainly my experience of the voice I least expected, especially on New Year's Eve. In the middle of a pandemic. Whilst on call.

As an oncologist I regularly see patients who are too unwell for treatment. Palliative Care Gold Standard Framework Rating Amber means time is short – weeks rather than months.²

Two days earlier, I had met an extremely ill 47-year-old man called Guy. His cancer was progressing rapidly, and I had arranged new scans. My urologist, who had done the scans in a day and reported them, messaged me to say take a look. Multiple liver secondaries, appearing over four weeks, 8cm in size, a 20cm local recurrence. My first thought – make sure palliative care is involved.

Then it came at 11 am on 31 December 2020. Not a whisper, but a shout. Not a nudge, but a shove – 'treat him'. I tried to avoid what would be a logistical headache. And he was too unwell.

a louder call and a flashback

Four months earlier, my beloved older brother John had died of lung cancer in Australia. His last CT scan was very similar to the one in front of me now, and John had died eleven days later. Another reinforcement to

me that chemotherapy in this situation would not only be ineffective but wrong.

God, however, was having none of this and brought in the big guns. The sun came in through the window of my office, onto the desk, and behind one shoulder was Jesus. And behind the other, he had brought along John. 'TREAT HIM'.

I fairly ran out of the office, not quite knowing where to start – remember New Year's Eve?

I then 'coincidentally' bumped into everyone I needed to not only start, but to complete my mission – the lead outpatients and chemotherapy sister, an HCA who was a friend (and a Christian), the oncology pharmacist. Space was found, a best guess dose of chemotherapy prescribed, and I then called the patient. I also prayed for the words to use and put a quick message asking for prayers on my CMF prayer group.

Ninety minutes later, I was in a clinic room with Guy and his wife, Jaimie. I explained the scans and said I wouldn't usually treat him as he was too unwell, but that something – a gut feeling I called it, not feeling brave enough to say who sent that feeling – had told me to try. Without it he would have a few weeks to live, with it I could possibly shorten that further but there was a tiny chance it might make him feel a bit better. A tiny chance. We did an emergency will, and do not attempt resuscitation notice (DNACPR).

At the end of the consultation, I said, 'I hope you don't mind but given the circumstances, would it be ok if I put you on my prayer group?'. Jaimie paused and said she had done the same that morning as a practising Christian. Guy himself was an atheist, having to be dragged into church for school nativities, but when I asked his wife and Guy himself if they would like us to pray together, this weary, exhausted, emaciated dying man said yes.

The next few hours were a tribute to my team – all of whom stayed late on New Year's Eve to treat Guy. Then it was over to God. I had already asked him to work through me – after all he had asked me (nicely) to do it in the first place.

an unexpected recovery

On 25 January 2021, Guy virtually danced into clinic – unbelievable! Let me be clear, this wasn't a curative situation, and a response like this just doesn't happen.

So I knew it wasn't by me – it was *through* me. I couldn't take the praise. So we gave thanks and the three of us prayed together again.

Fast forward – Guy had a complete response to chemo. I have never seen anything like this. Over the next 18 months he changed in so many ways. Of course I hadn't known the pre cancer, 'old' Guy – the career man, spending time out on the road and with clients, and less time with the family, although he loved them dearly. The 'new' Guy was different – spending time chatting with everyone, interested in everything, enjoying walks out, and coffee and cake in the afternoon. He was the sort of person who radiated light and drew people to him.

Guy started asking questions about faith. He went to church with Jaimie and became the poster boy for 'Beer and Bible'. I went to Jaimie's – and now, by default Guy's – church, and it became natural for us all to go together. His quality of life was excellent for most of the next 20 months. Whenever he had a relapse, I asked God what I should do next, and who to ask for help, and each time, he came back with a reply. Guy's cancer never behaved like anything in a textbook or guideline, so he needed a bespoke treatment. He had a number of operations and episodes of chemotherapy, although never given in such a dramatic manner as on that New Year's Eve. Yet every time, there was success. But each time, after a period, the cancer returned, and in July 2022 he embarked on this path again.

Ultimately, a treatment-related stroke was the cause of his death, but in the days beforehand his hospital room was filled with light, love, and hope. There was no doubt in anyone's mind, least of all Guy's, that death was a beginning. When I went to see him, he said, 'Sis, don't think you always have to save me, because you already have, and you have saved my soul as well'.

Guy kept some notes on his phone, a witness testimony if you like – found the day before he died by

Jaimie. It includes the very real coming of the Holy Spirit in the car park at Sainsbury's, of all places!

Guy's testimony

It was then I felt the Holy Spirit, the comforting, enveloping warmth, tingling, and altered perception. Blissful and peaceful, it almost made me laugh as it came to me. It felt like my eyes had been opened – I had been given membership to a private club that most weren't even aware that existed. It was a moment where I felt touched by something intangible, almost imperceptible, just out of normal reach, a frequency I was able to tune into momentarily.

Now I'd been a staunch atheist, seeing Christianity as a load of old rubbish. Harmless, but merely a psychological crutch for the weak minded and misguided.

But I knew on the start of my spiritual awakening / journey what was definite. One thing was irrefutable; Christian faith had saved me. Many things had happened before meeting my oncologist – through my wife's action and prayer – but I when I met her, she told me, technically, I was too far gone to help. But God had told her to treat me. Which, as you can imagine, was a bit of a shock on many levels. Now, whether God's real or not, I knew that woman's decision, influenced by faith, had saved me. This woman of science had felt God's presence and sprang into action, arranging for me what would normally be weeks to months in the making, what would turn out to be lifesaving treatment in hours, on New Years Eve no less, and in a pandemic.

When I lay there in the middle of the night in pain, contemplating the end, staring into the abyss, it felt very sad. I didn't want to go. All this was unexpected and not the way I'd imagined the end of my life, and I certainly didn't want to say goodbye. My family depend on me, and I love them dearly. The thought of leaving them was unbearable and my heart was breaking.

In my darkest hour, Richard Dawkins couldn't save me, Brian Cox couldn't help. There was only One that could. So I pleaded with him to be saved. Not fully expecting an answer. But he did, and in spades.

Anxiety and despair has been replaced with love and hope, to what is one of the best times of my life. I no longer fear death. If it's God's will I should pass, then onwards and upwards in his glory. To be at peace with God. The hard part is saying goodbye to my wife and children. But, as I like to remind myself, it's not a final goodbye but just 'see you later', as I'm just going on ahead.

At Guy's funeral in August 2022, his witness testimony was read out. At the end were also a few things he said before he died, including that it wasn't a private club – anyone can join. All you have to do is reach out your hand and Jesus will take it. I have no doubt that Jesus took Guy's hand, and that 20 months earlier, he had taken mine and given me a shake into an action that ultimately made a difference to so many people's lives, not least my own. ●



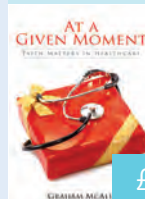
SCAN FOR MORE

key points



- The author recounts how God's prompting led her to treat a patient that conventional wisdom would not have.
- Through an unexpected recovery, God worked an incredible spiritual transformation, bringing hope and joy in a dark situation.
- While not typical, the story illustrates how God can use us in unexpected ways to bring about his purposes in the lives of those we serve.

Real names used throughout with Guy and Jaimie's consent



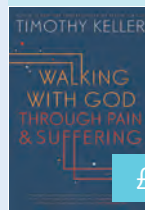
At a Given Moment
Graham McCall

£5



Cure for Life
Bernard Palmer

£4



Walking with God through Pain & Suffering
Tim Keller

£8

references

1. 1 Samuel 3:4-20
2. Gold Standards Framework. RCGP. 2011. bit.ly/45FZhd0