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God Will Supply...

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## **Chapter X**

### **God Will Supply...**

I tried to be very observant throughout the entire ordeal with Debbie's cancer. One thing I was careful to do was to keep detailed notes concerning the lessons I had learned during our suffering. Besides the message of Job, discussed in the last chapter, I concluded that there were three other, major lessons, as well as many smaller ones. Most of the items learned also served as blessings for our family.

First, I learned that God sustains His children, even in the very worst of times. Just as He states in His Word, He will never give us more than we can handle. Paul says it so nicely: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (I Cor. 10:13, NIV).

I had observed this promise being fulfilled over and over again during our trial. Some days, things would seem to be the worst I had ever experienced. I literally didn't know how I could make it through the next moment, let alone the remainder of the day. Sometimes I just wanted to crawl off and hide. Better yet, I wanted to simply push a button or have Debbie take a pill and escape it all.

But then the very next day, unbelievably, everything had done an about-face. Once, a particularly bad day in the hospital was followed by a tough night with sleep that was repeatedly broken by nurses, medicines, and the observation of machines. Then just as abruptly, as I walked the hallway early the next morning and watched the sun rise into the summer sky, I was buoyed. Then and there, I just knew that things would work out all right, no matter what happened. I even felt strong enough to try to encourage a woman that I had never met, but who had just lost her mother during the night.

What a change from one day to the next! It was as if David's comment had been written directly to me: "weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5, NIV). And I knew it was the Lord Who was giving me the strength for the victory. He hadn't chosen to heal Debbie, but He did give me His grace to make it through the dilemma. Yes, healing definitely comes in different forms.

Accordingly, I also realized another, very precious truth: just as the Lord had been with Debbie throughout her struggles, providing her with a very real sense of His presence, so He would be with us, when it is our time to face death. So, too, would He be with us in any other calamities that might arise. Therefore, I didn't need to face the unknown future with undue anxiety. I realized quite early that ongoing death anxiety, for the believer, was in all likelihood worse than death itself. As Scripture attests, Jesus Christ came in order to "free those who all their lives were held in slavery to the fear of death" (Heb. 2:14-15, NIV). Christians can overcome excessive fear of death and experience God's peace.

Second, I knew that heaven was real and provided another great lesson that, like Job's experience, could actually be immediately applied to our pain. Paul commands believers who suffer to turn their thoughts away from their immediate circumstances, even their own deaths, to the reality of eternal life. God has guaranteed eternity by raising Jesus from the dead, he says. Therefore, while our suffering is temporal, our life in heaven never ends (II Cor. 4:14-18).

Scarcely could this truth be stated any more clearly and beautifully than it was:

These troubles and sufferings of ours are, after all, quite small and won't last very long. Yet this short time of distress will result in God's richest blessing upon us forever and ever! So we do not look at what we can see right now, the troubles all around us, but we look forward to the joys in heaven which we have not yet seen. The troubles will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever. (4:17-18, LB)

One thing that is so incredible here is not only does Paul tell us to meditate on future truth, but, like Job, doing so can even reduce the level of pain, which is the immediate problem! Initially, eternal life is not only real, but its very nature should give it priority in both our thinking and our acting. The pain is also real, to be sure. But Paul's advice is appropriate even if the pain is not thereby lessened, because eternal life is still ultimate reality, long after the suffering has subsided. In short, heaven lasts longer and is far better than earth. We are justified in thinking ahead and planning for retirement. Why shouldn't we meditate on and plan ahead for our ultimate future in heaven?

Further, Paul's teaching can actually lessen the pain we suffer! A positive word from a medical doctor who informs us that we are healthy often lessens our anxiety, since the emotional factor has been removed from our other symptoms. We

leave the office already feeling better because our feelings have been soothed. Similarly, a proper perspective on the truth of eternity can shift the believer's thinking away from the problems of the immediate situation. We are given the assurance that, at least ultimately, everything will be fine (especially in eternal terms!). Therefore, meditation on heaven actually allows us to refocus our attention away from the suffering, thereby lessening the emotional component. Since our emotions frequently cause the worst pain, this element alone is worthwhile.

I often thought about this message of heaven while Debbie was sick, and it was indeed comforting. In fact, given our circumstances, I couldn't imagine a more encouraging truth than this one. As I meditated on this common New Testament theme, an even more blessed angle occurred to me.

In Matthew 6:19-24, Jesus Christ commands believers to store treasures for themselves in heaven, where it cannot be contaminated by moths, rust, or robbers. Inasmuch as people themselves can be part of our eternal treasures (Phil. 4:1), I now realized that Debbie, herself, was such a prize that I was "laying up" in glory. We had mutually influenced each other in our twenty-three years of life together, and this spiritual fruit was now preserved in heaven. Therefore, she could not be contaminated in any way. She was, in effect, part of a heavenly bank account that could not be stolen, corrupted, or otherwise suffer any additional pain of any kind! It gave me great peace to realize that Deb had been sent ahead of me and was now waiting for me in heaven.

So the New Testament proclamation of heaven, combined with Debbie's presence there, made it all the easier to meditate on this reality rather than on my temporal circumstances. Like the message of Job, this was a great comfort to me every time I contemplated it. I do not remember a time when either theme failed to lift me up.

The third major lesson I learned was an even deeper impression of the value and sanctity of life. In a primary sense, Debbie was my closest earthly friend and the value of her life was ever before me. Secondarily, the response to our plight by family, loved ones, and friends alike was nothing short of incredible. I guess some are disturbed by the lack of support they get in such times. But all I could do was praise God for the overwhelming show of support on our behalf.

Relatives who sacrificed so much of their vacation and personal time to be with us, church members who brought special meals, the ministry of our church worship team, colleagues who taught classes for me so I could be home with Debbie, those who sent various gifts of other sorts, as well as loving cards and phone calls were all witnesses of love. I couldn't see them any other way. It was as if each one had the word LOVE stamped on it in bold letters.

Through this, I learned that our burdens are not meant to be carried alone. Others want to assist us and are both capable, as well as being worthy of our trust. I learned to give up jobs that Debbie or I had always handled ourselves, and, one by one, discovered that I didn't have to worry about them any longer. This was a refreshing truth to discover.

More than physical burdens, I also shared the emotional weight that I carried, especially with those close to me or with friends who had suffered similar losses. The more someone responded, the more I would share with them. Those who not only told me that they would pray for us, but were diligent in doing so, were also appreciated.

At the same time, these friends and loved ones were also suffering. Although it hurt to relive certain episodes or details by discussing them, it was often what they wanted or needed. Strangely enough, I also noticed that repeating an incident several times made it easier for me to think about and retell it the next time. At any rate, I enjoyed being able to minister to them and return the favor they had given us. It was uplifting to me when I could encourage others who were also grieving Debbie's sickness and death. Many times, it was either Job's lesson or the message of heaven that brought the blessing, too.

After all, I mused, this mutual sharing is a crucial part of the ministry in the Body of Christ. I was able to witness firsthand the pure sacrifice that occurs when brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ surrender themselves in so many ways for the benefit of others. Isn't this at least part of what the apostle Paul had in mind when he spoke about sharing and suffering together in Christ's Body (1 Cor. 12:26)?

While these three areas plus Job's experience were the predominant lessons that I learned, other ideas also became very meaningful to me. Once again, each of these served as independent benefits, too.

I learned to appreciate the small blessings of life, whether it be a sunny day or a smile from Debbie. Even a warm meal and a good night's sleep were special. Time with the children or a note or call from a concerned friend were also welcomed. Often I thought about the fact that Deb got sick in the summer, when I could be home with her virtually the entire time. It seemed like nothing was too small to touch me.

Another blessing was how Debbie taught me to take just one day at a time. Chiefly by her example, she showed me how not to worry about the future. Sometimes, I even realized that I could only take a portion of a day at a time, even just an hour or two, since there was so much uncertainty. I realized that making each moment count for the Lord is something that we don't seem to emphasize too much any more.

I learned more than one lesson about my emotions. On the one hand, I remembered that feelings are a gift from God and are a blessing in themselves. Even during the most painful times, I could still appreciate the fact that I had feelings at all, the good along with the bad. I even became a "hugger"--something I never was before and, to tell the truth, have not kept up too much since those days. But at the time, these expressions of love and friendship were very meaningful to me, and I needed them. Men can show emotions, too!

But on the other hand, I had to apply other lessons I had learned long before--emotions also had to be controlled. Feelings can become very unruly when left to themselves, so not all experiences were good. The kind to be avoided and corrected are the ones that come from telling ourselves untruths. These can lead to additional suffering, and of an even more painful variety. I reminded myself very often (and told others, too) that we are most harmed not by what happens to us, but by how we cope with it and what we tell ourselves about it.

Closely aligned with controlling our emotions, I witnessed the benefit of practicing several of the biblical disciplines. Meditation was a blessing, as well as a calming influence in my life. Familiar Scripture passages leapt to life, overflowing with special meaning that they did not before have in the same way. The Book of Psalms probably became our favorite over the summer. Debbie was always blessed by Psalms 91 and 148, no matter how often I read them. Individual texts like Psalms 3:5, 4:8, and 16:11 had a profound impact on me.

I also noticed that giving a witness to God could be more than hounding others. It could be a very natural way to share a message during the time that it will be the most readily received. In the hospital, for example, I tried never to pass up an opportunity to mention our faith to a doctor or nurse, even if it was only in some small way. Debbie did the same, probably even more than I did. It was hard not to notice that an honest word given during genuine suffering is respected by all. It was our prayer that it would affect lives, as well.

One rather profound lesson was learning that our lives are tiered. Emergency situations make us realize that very few things that we think are crucial actually are so. The wages we earn, money in general, the size of our house, the appointments we had lined up, business interests, hobbies, or summer vacations all get tested very quickly in the light of their eternal value. This is not to say that none of these, or the myriads of other things that sometimes clutter our lives, is important. Many of these items still need to be done, but the point is that an entirely new meaning is cast over them, as well as everything else that we do. And some of our practices simply fail the test altogether.

Here I made one of many mental notes. It's good to remember, I reminded myself, to be just as serious about life's priorities when current concerns are not so pressing. The re-evaluating and ordering of our lives should always be a prominent consideration. As strange as it may sound, I realized even more than I did before that sometimes the seemingly frivolous pastimes, like strictly free time with children, can be as significant as anything else.

The last of my lessons concerned my immediate family. There were a great many things to be thankful for, in spite of the sobering experience of the summer. Here I had to begin with Debbie. She had always been the consummate mother and wife. Now, in front of her family, she modeled patience, love, and many other virtues. In retrospect, I do not remember any complaints from her, in spite of her situation. There were no heart rending pleas, and virtually no requests. Her teasing and laughter were rewarding. I was so unspeakably thankful for the almost total absence of any physical or emotional pain.

Without hesitation, I attribute the lack of pain to her experience with the Lord in the CAT scan. Especially given her past fears, her present victories were inexplicable apart from His guiding hand. Beyond just having a "head knowledge" of biblical truth, her total assurance of His love, acceptance through Jesus Christ, and absence of any fear of death were nothing short of astounding. They came as a result of the wondrous grace of her loving Lord. She responded to this realization with daily praise and a cultivation of what she termed the awesomeness of God. She had modeled not only motherhood at its finest, but also devotion to God. He was the apex of her life and it was obvious. We learned from her testimony.

The children also did remarkably well during her sickness, as well as afterwards. Beyond my concern for Deb's physical condition, the four children were my chief interest. I learned a lesson about them, too: they had been exceptionally resilient, just as Judi had predicted to me. Of course there were many painful times, due to the loss of their mother. Many tearful discussions had taken place between us. But over both the summer and the months afterward, I was amazed again and again at how well they were adjusting. During their recovery, Debbie's memory was definitely not receding into the background. We took great pains to remember her regularly.

Another welcome feature of their recovery was that they were growing spiritually, as well. Here and there I heard some questions being raised by the older ones, but these were almost exclusively very early after Debbie's death and dissipated in short amounts of time. Not that questions are bad, and I knew that they could even facilitate further growth. But I was still thankful for the brevity of this stage.

Although he definitely had more questions than the others, the chief example of spiritual growth and maturation also came from my oldest child, Robbie. Though he had trusted Jesus Christ by faith as a small child, he now dates the time of his

salvation from his own experience with the Lord just several months after his mother's death. The other children also kept up their interest in spiritual things, such as reading Scripture and their enjoyment of the worship portion of our church service. I regularly noted how their mother's death had little affect on their love for the Lord. Maybe it was precisely Debbie's attitude towards her Lord that caused them to respond this way.

Last of all, it seems that I could write volumes on the affect that Debbie's death had on me. In addition to all of the many lessons and blessings outlined in this chapter, her suffering has had numerous, profound influences on my own spiritual life. Having previously written a book on Christian doubt and another on death and immortality, I had now experienced the latter first hand. Many of the realizations outlined above, both theoretical as well as practical, were gems that came from her testimony and experience.

But there was also a penetrating affect on my ministry. Even though only a few friends actually mentioned it to me, I realized fairly early that others were watching us. How would we respond? Would we recover gracefully? Could I apply the principles that I had directed others to do?

I began to be asked to speak on the topic of bereavement. Whenever I did, especially when I gave Debbie's testimony of how the Lord had changed her life, I could tell that those present were giving me perhaps more attention than I had ever seen before in an audience. It was simply obvious that people were responding to her story. I had done well over a hundred radio interviews throughout my career, but when I spoke on this subject on a very small station, I perhaps received more comments than I had ever had before.

What was the Lord telling me? Was He directing me to an additional emphasis in my speaking and writing? I have concluded that Debbie's testimony, as well as the rest of the story, including both the heartache as well as the blessings, should now be a regular part of my ministry. It is my deepest hope that these accounts will touch many lives, just as Debbie would have wanted. As painful as certain elements were, the experience of a humble housewife and mother will attest, even in her death, to the awesomeness of her Lord.

I will never forget you, Debbie. I will love you forever, my love.