

I've never met Helen. We share a bond, however, having paid dues to a club we didn't even know we'd signed up for. Helen is new to the club, and while I'm not a long-time member, I am an enthusiastic tour guide. Helen has been diagnosed with Stage Four breast cancer. On a scale of one to four, that's pretty bad news. She is scared. So was I, when it happened to me.

Dear Helen,

I know it feels as if a wall of water 100 feet high is about to overwhelm you, but believe me, it is just a *feeling*. Realistically, the waves are pretty high, but not insurmountable. You don't have to swim or even tread water.

Just climb in the boat.

Many years of allergies and intolerances to chemicals, medications, and most foods had left my body, brain, and emotions teetering. Add to that a panic disorder and it begins to sound laughable. So when I discovered the growing mass in my breast, I hid the evidence of it from my friends, my family, and even my husband. For two years I was afraid to speak it, say the word *cancer*, lest it become real. Yet remarkably, in my fear-frozen mind, I thought it would be easier just to die from the cancer rather than face the treatment—treatment that I “knew” to be a death sentence.

Thinking I had only weeks to live, I could postpone it no longer and finally told my secret. Not only did I have an apple-sized tumor in my right breast that had burst through the skin, but the lymph nodes in my armpit had swollen to the size of a lemon. I couldn't put my arm down. Two kinds of cancer had sprouted in my breast and the nastier of the two had spread with determination to my bones, in fact, a tumor gripped three lower vertebrae and invaded the middle one, pressing against my spinal cord so that I was numb from the waist down. (Eventually my back broke and left me a half-inch shorter.) Cancer had also set up camp in my left hip, my right pelvis and ribs, and the right side of my skull. To say that I was in awful pain is barely scratching at the truth.

And that is where I was when I “turned myself in”—unwillingly—to the oncologist. (Can you imagine how overwhelmed *he* felt when he saw me?) The diagnosis: *Stage Four*. I was told I was terminal.

I had no physical strength of my own to help fight the cancer—or its cure—nor did I have any emotional or mental reserves to help myself through it. Instead, I had surrendered myself to despair and fear. I was waiting for that 100-foot-tall wave to consume me. I, who had been a faith-filled Christian for 45 of my 49 years—when it came to *other* people's needs, hadn't trusted God with my own needs. There aren't enough words to describe my desperate state.



And then I got into the boat.

I lay down on the floor with my arms wide open and gave myself (wrenchingly, passionately, totally) to His seamanship. I didn't suggest where He might take me, or question His

reasons for the storm; I just lay in the bottom of the boat. And rested. And at every point in the journey He has faithfully brought me through. Praise the Lord; He does not handle our poor decisions by ladling out guilt. He allows *course corrections*. That's grace.

Everyone's cancer experience is unique—his or her timeline and recipe for treatment are personalized. Here is what I experienced:

Radiation on my spine to reduce the size of the tumor (15 days duration). An even more sobering fact came from the oncologist: I had been a few days away from being paralyzed.

Acupuncture to deal with the pain, numbness, and side effects of chemo (twice weekly for several months).

Chemotherapy (every three weeks for a few months). The doctors were astonished at how quickly and dramatically it reduced the lump in my breast to the size of a lemon, and the one in my armpit to that of a grape.

Surgery: a modified radical mastectomy. My surgeon—a highly regarded thoracic specialist—told me later, “In the ten years that I've been a surgeon, this was the most difficult, and at the same time, the most successful surgery I've done.” Disabling nerve damage to my right arm, a forewarned possibility, never occurred.

Yet more chemo—different from the first (infused weekly for several months). This particular poison was wretched, and did more damage to me than was listed in the brochure that came with it.

Then radiation on my chest and shoulder blade (daily for 27 days).

Since then, I get a monthly infusion of a bone-strengthening medicine, and daily take a tiny maintenance pill. I continue to have monthly blood tests, twice-yearly bone scans and mammograms, and thrice-yearly tumor-marker tests and physical exams.

A friend who had gone through a really nasty time of cancer and treatment just before me had this advice to offer, and now I pass it on to you with the same emphasis: “IT'S AWFUL—BUT DO-ABLE.” Frankly, I am bitter about the phrase, “Jan is *battling* cancer.” Phooey! I didn't have enough strength or will to do “battle.” I was just trying to survive the *treatment*! But, Helen, it *is* do-able.

All along the way I was to see the hand of God CLEARLY. He placed just the right people (family, friends, strangers) in my path to soothe me (or rebuke me) with Scripture, letters, or song. And don't even get me started on the errands run, meals offered, and gifts given. My husband, as well as others, became

"Jesus with skin"—taking tender care of me and providing tangible evidence of His love. Several of the nurses and the surgeon, all Christians, prayed with me, too, as did untold numbers of people around the world. I was contacted by e-mail, from people I'll never meet, who wrote that they or their church had me on their prayer list. Amazingly, my allergies began to dissipate as well as my cancer.

As the worst of it passed and my strength grew, I became bold in my witness—mostly in astonished response to His sparing me in so great a way. I devised a few questions—or listened for cues—that would give me the opportunity to tell a quick version of my story to anybody, anywhere: the front door, the grocery store, the prosthesis shop.... This skill became especially strategic in the chemo room—which in my case included 15 recliners in a U-shaped space where we were "all hooked up to I-V bags and nowhere to go." The men and women in that room couldn't help but listen to my stories of God's great grace and the hope that I have for eternity. I eventually led song times and prayer for the regulars. I took in my camera and caught us in funny moments (honestly there were many!), gave back rubs to the less comfortable and sat and held hands with the emotional. Who knew that God needed a missionary in the chemo room and that it was to be me? I never could, or would, have gone there on my own.

Now I'm *thriving* in that boat.

In fact, I am so recovered in strength and mobility (three years after the start of treatment) that I run twice-yearly neighborhood yard sales (and am writing a book on how to do it); cut hair regularly for 25 people (not including the new chemo patients who come for their "first" haircut); own a jewelry

and ornament-making business; provide childcare daily; garden with passion; edit our church newsletter; and lead a Bible study group. And that's just for starters. In addition to being married to the same wonderful man for 27 years, I have three children (ages 18 - 23), and attend the frequent concerts of my youngest son's Christian rock band. I'd vote for 29-hour days if they offered them.

Where am I now with my cancer? The doctors can't find it. All the scans and tests show no cancer. Is it gone? Don't know. Will it return? Could be. I'm not worried, and I'm not waiting. I'm getting on with the life God has given me. *Loaned* me.

I am standing at the prow of the boat, enjoying the scenery, and eager to encounter the next wave—whatever it will be. I would willingly go back into the storm of cancer, knowing now what I do about God's abilities to show Himself even at the darkest, most harrowing time.

What I am saying is... however grim things look now, *you will move past it*. Be patient with yourself. Be at rest. Allow others to help you—it's good medicine for you both. I'll be interested to see how you use the gift that cancer is in your life.

I pray peace for you, and while I am at it, healing too.

Lovingly,
Jan

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Tales of a Reluctant Sailor—a little background about this letter to Helen:

I am on our church's Prayer Chain which sends the requests by e-mail. In January 2003, a friend sent a request about *her* friend—named Helen—newly diagnosed with breast cancer. I dashed off a reply letting her know that I would be glad to talk to Helen since my experience was so recent.

When approval came, and asked that it be in written form, I suddenly realized the enormity of my offer; to write something that would be honest, yet encouraging—that would tell the tough stuff, yet honor the intertwining works of medicine and God in my life, and perhaps offer hope for Helen's situation.

Writing my sorry "pre-boat" story turned out to be pretty awful at first. I could see the sins of unbelief and pride in my life more clearly than ever before: *Unbelief* in God's ability to use whatever means He chose to affect healing, and

pride in thinking that I ultimately knew more than God in what the outcome would be. I saw my old self as the walking dead; existing—but not living.

Honestly, as I wrote I was startled to see the change not only in my health, but in my attitude, and especially in my spiritual self. The remarkable part of this story is *not* my deliverance from death's immediate door, but the deliverance from my mind-set—the spiritual pit in which I had taken residence. This was obviously a case of God's mercy over any merit: Please know that I had nothing to bring to the table—not strength, not logic, not skill, not will, not faith—I was "bankrupt in every account." I presented the emptiness of my self—and that's when God was finally able to make of me some use.

So, I sent the letter on to Helen, and then as an afterthought e-mailed it to four others—kind of as a thank you for their having stuck with me through the

icky times, and knowing that they had witnessed the overturning of my life.

Within a week and a half, I was getting e-mail from literally around the world. Those four had e-mailed my tale on to their cancer-affected friends, who had mailed it on...you get the idea. I began to find out that social workers, pastors, cancer support group leaders, hospital chaplains and so on were using it. It was translated into Chinese at one point, and was published in a newsletter at another. Imagine my astonishment when my oncologist and surgeon, who checked this story for accuracy, started handing out copies of it for their "hopeless case patients."

Praise the Lord, He can use even bad examples as good examples.

Just get in that boat.

October 2003

Three weeks ago, I got an e-mail: Helen was declared to be in remission.

I still have not met her.
