

Lessons of a Loser

I'm a huge loser. I've lost huge amounts of stuff, and I'm not talking about stuff like car keys or socks (always just one per pair) in the dryer. In a single two-month period I lost my marriage (of thirty-three years), my ministry (I was pastoring a nice little church in beautiful beach town in California), my health (I broke my neck and was diagnosed with an incurable cancer), my house, my income, and on and on. I'm not whining or looking for sympathy, I'm just setting the scene so you have some context for what I'll share about some of the lessons I learned through the losses I experienced. I'm not the only loser around. Everyone's lost something – a parent, a childhood, a friendship, a mind. What was I saying? Oh yeah, I hope that something among these simple thoughts will help you in some way as you process your own losses.

I figure if you're going to be a loser, you should be a *good one*. That's why I like to say, "*If you fall down, while you're there, face in the dirt, look around for quarters.*"

Let me first tell you about a friend that I met in my sufferings, my buddy named "*Chemo.*"

My Buddy: Chemo

"I have been crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me, and the life which I now live in this body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." **Galatians 2:20**

"If anyone would come after me he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life must lose it, and whoever loses his life for me will find it." **Matthew 16:24**

"May I never boast in anything except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ through the world has been crucified to me and I to the world." **Galatians 6:14**

"I bear in my body the marks of Jesus." **Galatians 6:17**

When you're not big enough to defend yourself against a bully it's good to have a burly friend. Cancer's a bully, and like most who are trying to beat that bully, I consented to have a bunch of chemicals infused into my bloodstream to assassinate cancer cells living in me one-by-one. No doubt you know someone who also has become acquainted with this buddy of mine.

As absurd as it sounds, let me tell you how Chemo became my *friend*. When suffering the ill side effects of chemo (loss of appetite, hair, strength), at first I thought of it as an enemy sent to poison me. But then a picture (more like a video) came to my mind.

I'm standing on railroad tracks, unaware of the oncoming train behind me. I'm about to be smashed, when a friend sprints up and body-blocks me with all of his might – knocking me off the tracks just in time. He saves my life, but in the process breaks three of my ribs, gives me a concussion, knocks out several teeth, and inflicts a wide assortment of other cuts and bruises. Was it worth it? Sure, because even though I was traumatized by it, I walked – more like limped – away alive!

Chemo, like the cross, saved my life. Both Chemo and the Cross *hurt* me, but ultimately *helped* me. Eventually I've become a healthier person, and yet still bear some of the "marks" that remind me what it was that made me better.

When I refer to the "cross," of course, I'm talking about *our* cross, the one that Jesus told us to take up, carry, and die on. Crosses hurt on the way to killing their victims. The cross on which we die to our old life hurts us on the way to taking away our old bad life.

Dying to sin and self is always going to be painful. We like our old selfish ways and we hate to give them up. But the cross that *hurts us* also *helps us*. Without this cross-induced *death*, how can we experience anything that even resembles *resurrection*? We can't be raised to a *new life* with Jesus until we die to our *old one*. Even Jesus wasn't raised until he died. Nobody likes pain and we naturally resist dying. But this is the kind of death that does us good. So, instead of a *foe*, this kind of death is a *friend*.

When I was suffering the "ill-effects" of some very potent chemotherapy, I tried to remember that these symptoms were a sign that it was accomplishing something good. When I looked at myself in the mirror – bald, scrawny, decrepit as I was – I tried to remember that this was a good thing. The chemo was doing its thing. I was dying so that I could get raised up again with a new life.

My Birthmark

"How great is love that the Father has lavished on us that we should be called the children of God and that is what we are." **1 John 3:1**

I've always had a lot of hair. As I recall, one barber actually charged me extra because of it. Instead of the normal gradual receding of the hairline over the years of aging, it happened suddenly, and overnight my head looked like a forest that had been clear-cut. Among the aforementioned unpleasant side effects of chemotherapy was a premature loss of all my hair, and I mean *all*, as in right down to eyebrows and eyelashes. Try to imagine yourself without those. I've never had very becoming facial hair (beard or mustache), but without eyebrows you just don't look right. Baldness happens to some of the nicest people I know. Some even have a better look (I don't know, they look *cleaner* than people with hair), but I wasn't one of them, especially bereft of eyebrows to offset the extraterrestrial appearance I'd assumed.

I was told that while chemo poisons *bad cells*, which is what you want it to do, at the same time, it exterminates a bunch of *good cells*, ones that you'd prefer, if possible, to keep – like the hair-producing ones. Chemo is not discriminating in that way, it just assassinates everything in its path, preferably without killing you at the same time. So when you see your hair falling out in clumps, a person could choose (in some freaky way) to celebrate this as an indicator that the chemicals were doing their thing. The assassins were hitting their targets, so chalk up the loss of mane as collateral damage. I didn't need a blood test or an x-ray to tell me that cells (some bad and some good) were being gunned down by *the new sheriff in town*. The evildoers were being brought to justice and getting what they deserved. So when I felt *bad*, I could somehow boost my morale by knowing something *good* was happening.

The good news was that the assault on the top of my noggin uncovered a pleasant surprise – a birthmark that I didn't know I had. After all, I'd never seen my scalp before. As long as I can remember, it's been covered with hair (once black, then grey). Upon careful inspection, my friend Mark said the mark looked like Africa; Dan said, Brazil; and my daughter in law, Tori, said it resembled a heart. I'm going with the heart, claiming that God kissed me when I was entering this

sometimes-heartless world! Though it never left a mark, except to wear off their delicate hair in that one spot, when my children were babies, I just couldn't get enough of kissing them on the head. When I can get away with it, I still like to do it. God planned me (and you), happily anticipated my birth ("planned parenthood" at its best), stood there in the birthing room awaiting his opportunity to gently and affectionately brand me on the crown of my head as one of his with a kiss.

Besides killing cancer cells, another good quality of chemo is that it uncovers clues of God's love for us! I'm pretty sure that his benevolent brand of one type or another exists on everyone who comes into his world. He wants everyone to have a good beginning. Sometimes we just have to be ravaged by one form of suffering or another in order to see the brand and appreciate its worth. He kisses everyone, but most people gradually cover up the evidence with hair – his love is thus obscured.

Though he loves us in such a fanatical way, he has a funny way of showing it sometimes. There's this "free will" system that he's intent on protecting so that his love can be freely reciprocated. It's the one aspect of God's character that requires such reciprocation. It's a part of him that is mutually enjoyed between him and his beloved. When things are working the way they're supposed to, he enjoys giving his love as much as we enjoy giving it back – and he enjoys receiving it back!

There was a time during my dark night of the soul that I said to a friend, "I hate free will! It causes too much pain for me and for the rest of the world. It's not worth it!" When he recoiled, I explained my situation and how the free will experiment had broken my world. Eventually though, I came back around to see that without it I wouldn't be able to freely respond to the kiss on my head. If I had been programmed like a computer, given a line to recite, "I love you," neither he nor I would be gladdened. If my love was involuntary and my worship artificial, its inherent ecstasy would be lost on both of us as receivers and givers of each other's love. As it is, we both enjoy an unimpeded and unforced romance between us. Sometimes I still do object to the free will experiment, but I do love both being loved and loving him back, and I'm pretty sure he loves it too.

I've since grown a new coat of hair and the kiss-mark is once again obscured. But when I begin to doubt my place in his heart I look at the pictures of my bald head and remember that I'm inerasably marked as his beloved.

My Brace

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Ephesians 1:13

During my much less than happy time a few years back I broke my neck. The cancer had all but dissolved one of my vertebrae, which through surgery, was replaced by titanium rods and plates, which are being held together with screws (lots of them). Before and after the surgery I had to wear this uncomfortable and awkward neck brace, like the ones you see on TV when someone's had a car accident. It made me look quite pitiful, and if there was an upside to it, it was the special treatment I got in bank lines and at crosswalks. I'd never in all my life so often heard, "Go ahead, sir."

But the best perk came at Golden Gate Park at a massive free-of-charge open-air concert that my kids and I attended. A wealthy benefactor had underwritten the cost of the event where hundreds of thousands of music lovers attended for free. We got there late and the music had long since begun. It was an gorgeous day – uncommon to San Francisco – and there was an expansive

forest of people already planted on their blankets and beach chairs. We started toward what looked like a possible empty spot to sit when an usher immediately prohibited us from entering an off-limits area, but then beckoned us to follow him. To our amazement, he led us to a little fenced-off area right up close to the stage. *“Yay! Look how God provides,”* I whispered to my kids as we laid our blankets down and began savoring the music and sunshine.

As I looked around, I noticed that all the spectators in that special area had something in common. At first I couldn't put my finger on what it was, but then it dawned on me. They all had braces, collars, crutches, or wheelchairs. We were in the *disabled section!* Quite accidentally, my collar came through for us, about which my kids said, *“Dad, from now on, wherever we go, as long as we need seats, you go with us!”* Oh yeah, suffering has its perks.

In the verse above I'm particularly drawn to the concept of being *“included in Christ.”* The way the brace procured for us good seats had absolutely nothing to do with my *abilities*, but everything to do with my *disabilities*. The disabled – and nothing but the disabled – were included in a place of privilege, up close to where the action was. All of us hobbled, propped up by walkers and crutches, we, the *Company of the Broken*, had the best seats in the house!

I was thinking that we're all invited to God's free show, that Jesus' sufferings underwrote the whole salvation event. It's *his* suffering – not ours – that got us into the show to begin with. He's the only one I know who *chose* to suffer, to lose on purpose. He qualified us to get “in.” Our ticket is not *our* suffering, but *his*. You don't have to suffer to be saved. He did all that kind of suffering, the redemptive kind – *“saving sufferings.”*

But it's *our suffering* that seems to get us some pretty good seats, to be up close to him, in a place of intimacy with him. Paul, an early sufferer of some note, wrote that he craved with all his heart to *“know Jesus in the fellowship of his sufferings.”* (Philippians 3:10) Along with a special comradeship between sufferers at the table there's a unique communion with the one at the head of the table, Jesus our model sufferer. He beckons us to take up our own cross and follow him – to not only be willing to suffer *for him* but *with him* in his sufferings.

In my journal during that season I wrote – *“When I'm hurting it's like I have something in common with you. I know that you are “close to the broken hearted,” and I have enjoyed your presence over and over, but this experience seems even more than that. It's not just that you are close to me when I'm suffering, but that I am close to you. I know that you are feeling my pain, but if I am not mistaken about this, I'm feeling some of yours, and when I do, my sufferings seem more sensible, almost desirable. If they press me closer to your heart and give me a better idea of what you felt as human, and even feel as the God who still suffers, then I can endure.”*

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” David originally wrote these words in the twenty-second chapter of his journal. He was venting his own personal pain over his unbearable persecutions and rejection. Fast forward a millennium and a half, Jesus eked out these same words while dying on his cross. That Jesus could identify with the Psalmist's pain (and ours) is an exquisite thought! But what takes even more of my breath away is that David, in his day, was able to actually feel something of what Jesus would someday feel. He sampled *“the fellowship of Jesus' sufferings”* before Jesus even suffered them, and it's my understanding that it was necessary for him to experience them in order to prophesy about them.

I'm saying that David didn't merely *predict* the sufferings of the Lord; *he entered into them* through his own sufferings! He felt some of what the Lord was going to feel, a kind of *prequel* to Jesus'

agony. And who could've been a more apt candidate to feel Jesus' heartbeat as a sufferer than the one known as the man "*after the contents of God's heart*"?

Could it be that our sufferings today can accomplish the same thing *after* his sufferings happened in history? If David can feel what Jesus *was going to feel* and enter an exquisite fellowship with him because of it, cannot we feel what Jesus *felt* and thus be included into that same communion?