

Real Life Stories
Paul Neilly - From Surgeon to Patient

Paul Neilly, a surgeon in Northern Ireland, died in 2004. This is a shortened account of his testimony which first appeared in 'At the Cutting Edge'.

Just over a year ago I had an article published in the Life Times Magazine. Unknowingly I was describing a medical condition that was to change my own life and perhaps also accelerate my promotion to a better place (Heaven). None of us know what the future holds and if we did perhaps we would not be so complacent about life, death and eternity. My desire is to tell you my story and hopefully by God's Holy Spirit to encourage you to reassess your position before God and ensure that you have made provision for the future.

Until this point in my life my daily schedule had been very busy and I, like others, had my fair share of frustrations. However, I was satisfied that I had arrived at where I wanted to be in life and had achieved most of my goals. I had a loving wife, three young children with a bright future, a career with many rewards and most precious of all I had the assurance of eternal life. Over recent months it has been my relationship with God that has been the pivot around which my life has rotated.

The Early Years

As a seven year old I couldn't have realized how important the decision would be to ask Jesus Christ to be my own personal Saviour (and Lord). Even at that young age I felt convicted of being a sinner and was convinced that I needed to ask forgiveness of my sins. I was persuaded that I needed to ask Jesus into my heart . . . I knelt down with my mother & prayed the sinner's prayer . . . I am grateful to both my parents for my Christian upbringing and the godly example they set. There were periods when only God knew how rebellious I was toward Him. Thankfully God remained faithful to me.

Education

It was not until I reached sixth form that I realized if I wanted to be the doctor in the family, which I believed was my calling, I'd better knuckle down. At last I started medical school in 1981, and there I met a lot of other people with the same aims in life. Most significantly I met many who had a love for Christ some of whom have remained dear friends.

During my 5 years as a medical student I studied extremely hard but looking back on it I enjoyed every moment. My objective was not only to qualify as a doctor, which on its own was a daunting task, but also to become a surgeon. I reckoned the odds were stacked against me but, after 10 years as a junior doctor, I was one of three doctors in my year to become a general surgeon. I was finally appointed as a consultant General Surgeon with an interest in Colorectal Surgery to Altnagelvin Hospital on 1st February 2000.

Family

Along the way I met the girl who was to become my wife. She was a nurse, and a Christian friend. Married in 1989, Averil has taught me patience and the importance of taking one day at a time in our Christian walk with God. After setting up home initially in Glengormley we now have 3 children; Hannah, Matthew & Samuel.

Changing Circumstances

As a medical student & junior doctor, having cared for patients with terminal illness, it became my firm desire never to have cancer myself, and to die a peaceful death in old age. This hope extended to my wife and family but since the winter of 2001 we discovered that God had different plans. We were to experience problems that would turn our lives upside down. On 14th December after returning from a pre-Christmas meal with friends, my wife developed excruciating abdominal pain and within 12 hours was on an operating table in Altnagelvin Hospital. She had a malignant ovary and although it appeared to be early disease the certainty of mortality was made that bit more real. She then required a further operation in March 2003 to try and prevent recurrence.

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My personal hopes of a long cancer-free life appeared to be dashed on 25th July 2002. After several months of symptoms I eventually conceded to having investigations. This included a colonoscopy and as a colorectal surgeon I was accustomed to performing this test. Being on the receiving end was however a different matter.

I was given light sedation and was able to make the diagnosis of bowel cancer myself. To compound the issue I then had a CT scan which revealed multiple tumor deposits in both lungs. If ever I needed God - now was the time. Averil was unaware of the fact that I was having the test that morning. When she was called at home, being the astute person she is, she quickly came to the correct conclusion. The bottom had fallen out of our world. Both father and mother had developed cancer within the space of 7 months and the likelihood was that I would be dead within the next year. Naturally we were distraught but on returning home we turned to God's Word. Our text for that day was Daniel 12:13 but more precious than the verse itself was the title in Spurgeon's notes: 'Nothing to alarm us'. We were obviously very alarmed but God was offering reassurance of His protection and indeed I am living proof that He has done so over the past year.

On Friday 2nd August I was lying in my own operating theatre, my name was on my own operating list as patient rather than the operator and I was having an operation that I regularly carried out for others. This would be defined as palliative procedure as I was, and still am, officially defined as being terminally ill. The primary tumor could be removed but the lung secondaries would persist. I was operated on by 2 friends, who were both Christian surgeons; my colleague Robert Gilliland and a consultant from Belfast, Keith Gardiner.

The Great Physician (the Lord Jesus) also played a part. This became particularly evident as, at one point, a stapling device failed but thankfully this was quickly recognized. If not, I would probably have required a colostomy. This, I believe, was an answer to the prayers of God's people. Not only were my family praying for me but also our Church, Limavady Baptist Church, had organized a special prayer meeting for the period I was in the operating theatre.

I was on a roller coaster with many ups and downs, both physically and emotionally. It was never a concern of mine as to why we should have been afflicted like this but rather it was my desire to know what God was going to achieve through it.

I reckoned if anything was going to come of this I would have to survive long enough to at least regain some degree of good health. I felt compelled to tell others of God's mercy, not only by saving me, but also by promising eternal life to anyone who simply puts their trust in Him.

I was aware of Christian stalwarts and men of God in the Bible who actually thanked God for the suffering they experienced. I reckoned they must have been mad, but having experienced something of "*the shadow of death*" [Psa. 23:4] myself I now recognize "*the peace of God which passeth all understanding*" [Phil. 4:7].

As a direct result of what we have been through we have been blessed. It would not be true to say that life is now simply beautiful like a bed of roses but, if so, there are the thorns, which can make life very painful at times. However, for those who have put their trust in Him we have many guarantees of God's provision for us. We have the reassurance that God is our refuge and strength in times of trouble and that, if we leave whatever is burdening us with Him, He will give us rest [Psa. 55:22] and [Matt. 11:28].

At times I didn't know if I had any future left here on earth. Particularly as a result of the complications associated with chemotherapy, I have often had the heartfelt desire to die. On many occasions I have thought, as my namesake Paul the apostle wrote, that it would be better to be with Christ [Phil. 1:23, 24.] However, God has given me more time to continue my responsibilities as a husband and a father.

New Opportunities

Much more important than this, God has given me a ministry which would otherwise not have happened. I have been able to return to work and can help my patients in a much more personal way than ever before. Having a

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worse medical condition than many of my patients I am better able to address, not only their physical, but also, their emotional and spiritual needs.

I know that many people have now heard my story and I trust that God will use this to His glory. It is my hope that my story will encourage you if you are walking on your own, to earnestly seek after Christ. The Bible tells that for those who seek Him they will find Him. [Lk. 11:9] and that those who do not seek Him, the Bible tells us are fools who will ultimately be cast into hell [Rev. 20:15].

One of the advantages of having cancer is that you often have time to prepare for eternity. However, many people die suddenly, nobody knows when the Lord Jesus will return to take those who trust in Him to their reward in heaven [Jn. 14:3]. Paul in the New Testament, warns us that now is the accepted time to make this decision for Christ [2 Cor. 6:2].

Have you turned to God and asked for forgiveness of your sin? Do you have the promise of eternal life? Not only that, but has He promised He will never leave you or forsake you in this life, as well as eternity? I pray that you will answer God's call and that you find Him as your own personal Saviour.

Since the above was written Paul wrote two further personal letters printed below.

Dear friends,

It is now near the end of January 2004 and I write from Foyle Hospice, which humanly speaking, should be my last port of call.

I arrived here via a short stay at Belvoir Park Hospital, where I had some Radiotherapy. Although Brain Metastases (Advanced secondaries) have now developed, I thank God that, though weak in body, I am lucid in mind and, reasonably so, in speech.

These past weeks have been an emotional rollercoaster, yet I have proved God's unfailing and loving presence. He has allowed me to see my young family saved, and to learn that my story is being made known to a worldwide audience.

It is my prayer that it will be for His glory alone -- and that many will come to know my Saviour through its challenge. Life is brief ~ It is time to seek the Lord, and there isn't necessarily time to prepare.

I know God can yet touch me in response to the earnest prayers of His people. However, he may wish to use me as a "corn of wheat" (Jn. 12:24).

Whatever, His will be done ~ I am content.

Yours In Christ,

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Dear friends,

On Sunday 15th February, 2004, my loving husband Paul went to be with the Lord. We thank God that he remained lucid in mind and saw his son Matthew pass his 11+ examination. He saw his testimony being widely distributed but still longed for news that someone had accepted Christ as a result of reading it. On the morning of Paul's funeral, I was contemplating his passing into Heaven and what it was like for him to be present with his Saviour. At that moment I opened a card and found this poem. It was as if Paul had written it for me! It gave me the strength and hope I needed for that day.

Averil Neilly

SAFELY HOME

I am home in Heaven, dear ones
Oh! so happy and so bright!
There is perfect joy and beauty
In this everlasting light.

All the pain and grief is over
Every restless tossing past
I am now at peace forever
Safely home in Heaven at last.

Did you wonder I so calmly
Trod the valley of the shade?
Oh! But Jesus' love illumined
Every dark and fearful glade.

And He came Himself to meet me
In that way so hard to tread
And with Jesus' arm to lean on
Could I have one doubt or dread?

Then you must not grieve so sorely
For I love you dearly still
Try to look beyond the shadows
Pray to trust the Father's will.

There is work still waiting for you
So you must not idly stand
Do it now while life remaineth
You shall rest in Jesus' land.

When that work is all completed
He will gently call you home
Oh, the rapture of that meeting
Oh, the joy to see you come!

. *Gleaned from "At The Cutting Edge"*