

Accepting Cancer as a Gift

By Don Green

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Preached on: Saturday, October 24, 2009

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Speaker Jerry: I want to introduce Pastor Don Green, our main speaker this morning. Don was before being ordained, a litigation attorney in Chicago for 10 years. After leaving his law practice, he graduated from the Master's Seminary in Sun Valley, concluding his Masters of Divinity and Masters of Theology with highest honors. As an ordained elder of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley which has a membership of over 7,000, Don pastors Grace Life, a group of more than 500 adults. He has ministered to many families dealing with cancer. He is also the managing director of Grace To You where he oversees the daily operations of John MacArthur's International Bible Teaching ministry. Don and his wife, Nancy, who have been married since 1988, have six children. I give you Pastor Don Green.

Don Green: Good morning to everyone. It's a real privilege for me to be here and as we kind of finalize the workings of the microphones together, I want to thank Good Samaritan Hospital for giving me the opportunity to be here this morning with a special thanks to Dr. Gowda, to Dr. Winston wherever you are and to Chaplain Anderson for providing the leadership and the logistics to make all of this happen for us this morning. It's very encouraging to me as a pastor to see doctors caring for and looking to provide for the spiritual needs of their patients and their families. That's a wonderful gift from God and I'm very encouraged by that.

You need to know something about this morning. They assigned the topic to me, "Accepting Cancer as a Gift," and I have been wondering for quite a while how I was going to exactly explain that if you have cancer God has given a gift you, but the things that I say here are my responsibility. They did not screen my message before I came this morning and so the things that I say don't necessarily reflect their personal views, they reflect my views and so if you find what I have to say helpful this morning, thank them for letting me come; if it's not helpful, you have to blame me and me alone for whatever I have to say.

I had a chance to meet some of you earlier and just at least say hello but I wanted to know for my own benefit how many of you in the audience are currently being treated for cancer? Just a few of you? Several in the back as well. And how many of you are here that have family members that have cancer even though you, yourself, are not being treated for cancer? Yeah, when I asked that question a while back to our fellowship

group, there were maybe 25 percent of a group of 400 stood up and then about another 70 percent of the group stood up. It's amazing how pervasive cancer is to the society in which we live and how many of you are affected by it and I just want to say that even as I was preparing for this, that I've been praying for you even though I didn't know you by name. I've been praying for you, asking for the Lord's blessing on you and even praying for you as we entered into this time here together. I'm here as a friend, as a pastor as I speak with you this morning.

I'm sympathetic to cancer patients and to their families because cancer affected my family from the very beginning, even before I was born. My parents buried my eight-year-old sister, Debbie, to cancer. She had died from Hodgkin's disease before doctors developed effective treatments for it. Now it's something that she probably would have survived, back then, the Lord took her. My father had lung cancer before he died from other causes and as Jerry mentioned, as a pastor, I have ministered to many families with cancer including the exemplary E. family as they honored Christ through Diane's passing. I say all of that simply to say this: I don't take the topic lightly. I realize that if you're here, there are significant things that are on your heart, concerns about what the future holds either for you or for your loved one; uncertainty about that. There's a lot at stake for you today and I take that seriously and the responsibility to speak and the opportunity to speak before you is something that I cherish.

So with that said, I want to be real clear with you up front and kind of let you know that I'm not going to adopt an artificial approach this morning. I'm not going to try to guess at what you would like me to say. That wouldn't do any good. I'm going to speak to you from the perspective from which I live my own life and the perspective from which I conduct my ministry because that is the only way that I can help you accept cancer as a gift. You see, I'm a Christian first and foremost. I'm a follower of Jesus Christ. I'm a sinner saved by grace. And I believe that the Bible, the 66 books of the Bible, is the trustworthy word of God that alone can give you satisfying answers to the challenges, the very significant challenges that you're facing in life right now and it's the only source that can answer the profound questions that must be on your heart to one degree or another; the questions that maybe you even have difficulty articulating exactly why it is that you're troubled, the Bible has the answer for those. So I want to ask one thing from you this morning as you listen to what I have to say. I'm going to have four basic points that I want to bring out, but whether you're here as a Christian or as someone from another kind of faith, I simply ask you to hear me all the way out; hear me all the way to the conclusion. You have come this far in bad traffic, you might as well make the most of it. And if at the end, if at the end you want to throw tomatoes at me, you can throw tomatoes at me but I just ask you to hear me all of the way out and know that I'm here representing the God of all comfort who comforts us, those who know Christ, in all of our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves have been comforted by God. So I ask you to hear me all the way out because some of the things I'm going to say are going to be hard to hear but I want you to hear them and I believe that God has appointed this time for us to be together.

So the first thing that I want to say to you: how can you accept cancer as a gift and how in the world could we even begin to contemplate that, the first point that I want you to hear this morning is this, is that God, the God of the Bible, the God of the universe, that God designed your cancer for you. He designed your cancer for you. You see, the God of the Bible is involved in everything that happens. There is nothing that happens apart from his will. He is intentionally working out his purposes in absolutely everything that happens. That's what the Bible teaches about him, that God, it says in Ephesians, God works all things after the counsel of his will. God in everything that happens has a purpose for it. He is working out what he planned to do and so, my friends, your cancer is no accident. It is not bad luck. It is not a perverse twist of fate, because all of those things, the idea that this is bad luck or fate has done me wrong, all of those things suggest that you are somehow subject to impersonal forces that have no regard for you and that is a truly hopeless position to be in. If it's simply an impersonal force, there is nothing to appeal to. There is no one to appeal to. There is no purpose. There is no meaning. There is no way forward. That's not the case. In your heart, you know that that's not true. There has to be more to it than that. No, God, a personal God, a knowing intelligent God designed your cancer for you.

Megan alluded to the verse in Matthew 10:30 where Jesus Christ said, "The very hairs of your head are numbered," and in Psalm 139 it says that God formed your bones in your mother's womb. Even on a purely physical level, God is intimately involved with the details of your physical condition from the hairs on the top of your head, when it says that they are numbered, he has to count longer for some of us than he does for others, to the interior workings of your internal organs and your bone structure and your skeleton. God has had a hand in all of that, my friends. Every little bit of it. Now, follow me here when I say that God designed your cancer for you: if God has done the lesser thing of numbering the hairs on your head, then it's obvious that he has done the greater thing, the more significant thing of watching over the development of the cancer that affects you or your loved one. Something that affects your entire life, you'd better believe God has had a hand in that.

Now, having said that, I realize that is a difficult truth. God designed it. It did not surprise him. God is not reacting to an unexpected development in your life. He brought cancer into your life in one way or another, and because God is good and he always does good, I can say with absolute assurance and on the authority of God's word that he intends this cancer to be a gift to you no matter how ugly the packaging of the gift may seem to be as you sit here today, even if you can't understand how it would be good at the moment.

Now listen, I want you to understand something about me, even: it wasn't that long ago that I would have personally reacted against someone who said something like that to me with some of the different kinds of trials and sufferings that have been in my life. It's not that long ago that I would have reacted against it because the questions that we naturally ask are along the lines of, "What did I do to deserve this?" Or, "What kind of God brings cancer into someone's life?" And the questions become a little bit accusatory and defensive and I understand that having asked some of those questions years ago from the bottom of my own heart in reaction to different kinds of trials, but here's what I want to

say to you, my friends, if I can call you friends just having met so recently, I beg you with what I'm about to say: don't react against that statement that God designed your cancer for you. Don't react against it because the reality that God designed your cancer is the starting point to benefiting from your cancer, the starting point of accepting cancer as a gift. If a transcendent God designed your cancer in your life, then there is a transcendent purpose in your cancer even if you don't recognize it as you sit here today. There is purpose and the fact that there is a design in your cancer means this and this opens up, if you haven't thought about it this way, this opens up whole worlds of thinking and understanding and pursuit in your life that would otherwise be closed to you. If God designed your cancer, and he did, then suddenly there is more to your cancer than the next lab report or the next treatment regimen that lies ahead. All of a sudden there are transcendent purposes that are at work in your life for you to learn, to understand, and to appropriate.

God himself is at work in and through your cancer and when you start to grasp that, even if it's just like kind of patting an elephant in a dark room with your eyes closed, you say there's something bigger here than what I can really get my arms around, when you start to grasp that, you can start to ask different questions and you can ask questions that start to ennoble your cancer and give it a sanctified, a holy purpose that maybe you had never seen before because you start to ask questions like this, "God, whatever may have happened in the past, what do you have for me in this cancer as I look to the future?" Rather than questioning, "Did I do something in the past to bring this on to me or why is God opposed to me," you can set all those questions aside and start to ask constructive questions that lead to wonderful answers. "God, what is it that you have for me in this cancer? Even though I wouldn't have chosen this, now that I have it, what would you have me gain from it?" God designed your cancer and when you start to ask questions like that, what you need to do is turn to God's word. You turn to God's word, the 66 books of the Bible, and you start to find your answers to those questions.

What is the purpose in cancer? What is it that God would have you do in response to your cancer or the cancer of your loved one? Well, let me introduce a second point here, again reminding you that I asked you to hear me all the way through because we still have some steep terrain to climb in what we're going to consider today, point 2: God is calling you to consider death. God is calling you to consider death as difficult as it is to say that. Now, before I talk about that, I want to clarify something very important. I'm not up here assuming the worst about your physical future. In fact, I am up here having prayed for God to bring physical healing into your life if that would be his will. I would love to see you delivered from your cancer under the skilled care of the doctors of Good Samaritan Hospital if this is where you're being treated. I would rejoice with you if that happened and I'm not assuming the worst about your physical future. It is good, it is natural for you to want to overcome your cancer. I wouldn't quench that desire in your heart for a moment. And I also want to say because there are so many different people claiming to be Christians and talking about different things out there, I want you to understand that I am pro-doctor and I am pro-hospital. I believe that God usually uses those means to bring healing to people who are suffering from some kind of physical ailment and so I just want you to understand that where I'm coming from. I want your physical healing if God

would bring that. I support the medical staff that is caring for you or for those that you love.

But let's say that you were cured instantly right now and I could wave my hand over you and you would walk out of here, everybody healed from every ailment including my stiff back that has been troubling me this past week. Let's say we could do that and we could all walk out feeling great, feeling like we were 20 again. Do you know what the truth is? The truth is that you'd still be facing death eventually. It's woven into the nature of our existence. Everybody is going to die and the Bible calls us to think about that and to consider that even though it is an unpleasant subject. The great King Solomon back some 3,000 years ago wrote this in the book of Ecclesiastes. He said, "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting because that is the end of every man and the living takes it to heart." The Bible says it's a good thing, it's better even, to go to a place where people are mourning over the death of a loved one than to go to a big party and a big celebration because the party and the celebration and the festivities of that are passing. That's not reality. That's not a permanent condition. And so when we're wrapped up in those things, we're living in a world that our minds are preoccupied with things that aren't going to last. The Bible says it's better to go to a place where people are suffering and mourning, where death has been in the atmosphere because the effect of that on those of us that are still living is, "Oh, do you know what? That's coming for me. That's coming for my loved ones. What is the significance of that? What do I do with death? How do I overcome death?" Those are the kinds of questions that it's designed to provoke. In Psalm 90:12, the great man, Moses, wrote as he was praying to God, he said, "Teach us to number our days so that we may present to You a heart of wisdom." He's praying for God to help him experientially understand how brief life is so that he would live wisely in response to that reality.

Now, we're not wired to think about death. It's an unpleasant subject and even frightening for many. The Bible talks about the fear of death that holds people in slavery, spiritual slavery, fear of what's going to happen, unknowns about what happens. Most of us like our lives to one degree or another, we don't want to leave our loved ones, and left to our own wisdom, we have absolutely no idea what happens to us when we die. We don't know. We don't know. There is no one around on earth today for us to go and talk to and say, "Hey, you died and now what happens then?" I realize some people are wrapped up in near death experiences but the key word there is "near." It's not the real thing. It's not the finality of it and so I don't get too wrapped up in that. So our temptation is to ignore death, not to contemplate it and all I can say is imagine that, we ignore and we push out of our mind the one thing other than taxes that is absolutely certain to come to us. I don't want that for you, my beloved friends, I want you to contemplate death so that you would be prepared for it. Cancer is a gift because it brings the possibility and it brings the reality of death to the forefront of your thinking. If you simply accept the fact, "Yes, I have cancer and do you know what? I accept the fact that this may be the thing that brings about the end of my earthly life," that will put you in a position to consider death in a healthy and constructive way and it's a gift that way.

What I'm about to say isn't a very good analogy but perhaps it will be helpful to understand the perspective. Cancer is like a fire alarm going off or a warning gate at train tracks. When the alarm goes off, when the gates come down, it's telling you that there is an unrecognized risk immediately in your midst. You're believing, you have a momentary bubble of security, unaware of the approaching fire, unaware of the approaching train, but those alarms are designed to awaken you to an approaching risk that you're not prepared to receive. The apparent well-being of the moment is an illusion. It is threatened by a coming risk. We understand that principle about how those alarms work in daily life. What I'm asking you to do and what the Bible would call you to do is to realize that cancer is functioning like that alarm, like that warning, that you would otherwise pass by. If you're healthy, you tend not to think about death. When cancer comes, it awakens you to the fact that, "I'm not in control of my circumstances. I didn't ask for this cancer and I don't know where it's going to come out and if it comes out and the doctor can't cure me, I'm going to die." That's the reality of it. As hard and sad as that is, that's the reality of it and cancer is a gift to awaken you to the reality of what lies ahead; either in the next few months, even if it's a few decades, death awaits all of us. So God calls you to think about death as you respond to your cancer.

Now, point 3, I said that God designed your cancer, God calls you to think about death, point 3 may be the most difficult one for you to hear but it's where God calls us, it's what cancer forces us to think about. Point 3 is this: God calls you to think about judgment. God calls you to think about judgment. This is another hard point but, friends, I would not be faithful to my calling as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ if I didn't bring this out to you. Understand this, that death is the end of your earthly life but it is not the end of your existence. The Bible very clearly states that there is a life that goes on after death; that your soul lives on after your physical body dies. And at that time when death comes, the Bible says that each one of us, you and I, will stand before God and face him and give an account for our lives and the way that we have lived. Hebrews 9:27, I quote these verses so that you know that I'm not speaking out of my own opinion. Hebrews 9:27 says, "It is appointed for men to die once," that's what we contemplate in the second point, "and after this comes judgment." There is the rest of your life, there is death, and beyond death comes judgment.

That's what the Bible would have you consider and, my friends, that's a big problem for all of us because God sees us differently than the way most of us see ourselves because most people, speaking even beyond the walls of this room, you know the line of thinking that I'm about to describe, most people think that they're good enough to go to heaven; that the good about their lives outweighs the bad and God weighs it on the scales and says, "Okay, 51/49, you cut it close but you're in." It doesn't work that way, beloved. That is not God's standard at all. That's not true. You cannot be and you are not good enough to go to heaven. That is the testimony of the Bible because the Bible says in Romans 3, it says, "There is none righteous, not even one. There is none who understands. There is none who seeks for God. There is none who does good. There is not even one because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." All of us without exception. This applies to your speaker as much as it does to you today. We're all in the same boat and that boat is sinking. You have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. You have not

loved of God perfectly. You have not loved him with all of your heart, soul, strength and mind. You have not obeyed him in perfection in everything that you think as well as what you say and do and I haven't either. I haven't either.

And here's what we have to contemplate. Look, I like to tell people and this is just true, I want to deal with reality. I want to know what the truth is and respond to what the truth is rather than to respond to what I would like it to be. Well, in the Bible, God has told us what reality is and as Megan even said earlier, when you sin against an eternal God even one time, the result and the consequence of that is eternal punishment. The Bible talks about the place called hell where sinners are punished. Jesus himself talked about it more than anyone and we need to calculate that into the way that we think about life and God and death and what comes after because the Bible says that unforgiven sinners face judgment in hell. Listen to what the Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Thessalonians, he said that those who do not know God and those who do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus will pay the penalty of eternal distraction away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power, and try as we might, you can't go out and fix this. You can't go to church and go through rituals that will cleanse you from your sin. You can't give money and wash away your sin. You can't be good enough to earn God's favor. You just can't fix your sin problem. The Bible says that in God's sight all of our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment. God is perfect, he is holy, he is righteous, and he does not let sinners into his holy presence and let them into heaven. Those are hard words but they are true words and here's the thing: God calls you to think about judgment so that if you're not a Christian, you would realize that you're not ready for it. He says that not simply to convict you of sin, although that is part of the purpose, but the conviction of sin is designed to cause you to recognize that, "I'm not ready to die because after I die judgment comes and I'm not ready to face judgment." Judgment is going to come to all of us.

One final analogy that I would like to use. Whenever you go out to go someplace either to the grocery store or if you're going to travel to some remote place on the earth like Indiana where I'm from, or across the sea, wherever you're from, wherever you're going, you form everything, you start by saying what is the end destination; even if you don't think consciously about this, you say, "I'm going to Paris or I'm going to the city of Commerce or whatever," and you say, "Okay, this is where I'm going and now I'm going to calculate how to get there so that I arrive at my destination and I can accomplish what concerns me when I get there." You think ahead to where you're going and then you step back and you plan everything so that you arrive at your destination. Here's the point, my friends: that's what cancer should do for you and that is why God intends cancer to be a gift to you. It's designed to make you not only think about the brevity of life and the ultimate reality of death, but to think even beyond the crossing the river of death to the fact that judgment awaits and when you say judgment and you say, "I am not ready to stand before a holy God," then you ask the question, "Where can I find hope? Where can I find deliverance from my sin? Where can I find forgiveness so that I'm ready to face God in judgment and I know that he will accept me and bring me into heaven?" Do you know why I'm talking about these things to you? Do you know? It's because I want you, every one of you to be in heaven with me when I'm there; to be in heaven with Diane E., and everyone else that loves Christ. I want you to be in heaven. I don't want you to know

the awful reality of eternal judgment. That's why I'm talking about these things. I would not diminish your suffering for a moment but there's more to this than the suffering of this life that we have to think about.

So what's the answer? Here's the good news. I've spent all this time basically giving you bad news, now I want to give you the good news, point 4 is that God calls you to come to Jesus Christ for salvation from sin. God is calling you to Christ. You see, God has provided a means long before any of us were born. God established a means not only of escaping eternal judgment but for you to know with certainty that you will enter heaven with your sins forgiven when you die. That is glorious news because it means that there is no longer any fear in death. If you know that your sins are forgiven and you know that you're going to go to heaven and I know, the Bible says you can know, if you know that, then all of a sudden the glory of this is in the context that we're meeting here today, in the context of cancer, is that all of the power and all of the fear of cancer has been taken out. This robs cancer and this robs death of its power because it no longer holds fear for you because the worst that it could do for you is to end your earthly life and if you know Christ, the end of your earthly life is simply opening up the gates of heaven into eternal bliss, eternal perfection where Christ is and where the goodness and the love and the comfort of God exist in undiminished perfection. That's what I want for you.

What is that means? It's actually quite simple. The Bible says that that God sent Christ into this world on a mission of mercy, not just a mission of mercy to heal people and to show love to them although he did that; that was really secondary to the main point that Jesus Christ came into the world in order to offer his life up on the cross as a sacrifice to his Father to pay for the sins of everyone who would believe in him and give their lives to him in repentance and faith. Christ came to buy us out of our bondage to sin and deliver us over safely to our Father in heaven. That was the purpose for which he came. God appointed Christ as the means by which you could be reconciled to God and have your sins forgiven. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me." And the Bible says in 1 Peter 3:18, hear these words closely because I'm almost done that "Christ died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that he might bring us to God." When Jesus was hanging on the cross crying out to his Father, God was pouring out the punishment that should have gone on your sins, should have been on you, he took the guilt of your sins and put them on Christ and punished him as a substitute so that your sins could be forgiven and the righteousness of Christ could be counted to your account. And through that transaction, God has established the means where you can have a perfect righteousness on your account so that when you stand before him in judgment, he would look at you, see the righteousness and blood of Christ covering you, and say, "Ah, yes, a righteous one. Enter into the joy of your Master." Not based on anything that you've done, not any good works that you've done, but all done in the righteousness of Christ.

How do you receive that? How do you receive that forgiveness? How do you receive that gift? You come to Christ. You come to Christ confessing your sins, acknowledging that you are unworthy, and asking him to save you which was the purpose of his coming to earth. Do you know what's beautiful about that? Jesus receives absolutely everyone who

comes to him in that way. He never turns away a repentant sinner. Everyone that comes to Christ receives the forgiveness of sins. Listen to what Jesus said and thinking about your cancer, thinking about your loved ones, thinking about the heaviness of your own guilty conscience, listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 11, he said, "Come to Me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls." If you don't know Christ, God brought you here today to hear that message; to hear Christ pleading with you and inviting you saying, "I know that you are a guilty sinner but that is why I came." Christ pleads with you and says, "Turn away from sin and come to me and I will save you to the uttermost. I will give rest to your souls. I will deliver you not only from sin in the judgment to come, but I'll deliver you from the fear of death right now." He can promise that because he didn't only die, he was resurrected. He is a living Christ, a living Savior who conquered death and is worthy of your complete trust and your complete embracing him as your Lord and as your Savior. That is how you are fit for heaven, not by what you do but by receiving this gracious Christ who offers himself to you even as we are talking here today.

Do you know what's interesting and I'm closing with this: the good folks here at Good Samaritan Hospital set the theme of this time together as "Accepting Cancer as a Gift," do you know how the Bible describes salvation, the salvation I've been talking about here today? It describes it as a gift. Romans 6:23 says that "the wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Cancer becomes the gift, a preliminary gift that is designed to help you see the eternal gift that God has for everyone who believes in Christ. And when you receive Christ, then the words of Psalm 23 can be yours personally and experientially and with this I close. This is the offer that God makes to you today if you don't know Christ. This is what belongs to you as a Christian even if you are suffering from the worst forms of cancer. Psalm 23 and I close with this as a prayer, even, "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows." Listen to the confidence and the serenity of these closing lines for the one who knows Christ. This is the birthright of every true Christian. This line is the offer that is extended to you today that you would enter into this rest where David said, "Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life," follow me right up to my dying breath and after that last breath, "I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." God bless you.