

Strength Renewed

MEDITATIONS

for Your Journey through Breast Cancer

Shirley Corder



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To Rob, my husband and dearest friend, who never doubted I would survive my journey through the cancer valley. Thank you for your love, your encouragement, your practical help, and your unwavering faith in our heavenly Father.

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Most of all, I say thank you to my heavenly Father, who saved me for the second time, and who is turning all things together for good—just like he promises in his Word.

Introduction

Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Isaiah 40:31

When I received my diagnosis of cancer, I didn't know anything about eagles. I wanted to renew my strength, but how do you wait on anyone, even the Lord, when you're told you have cancer?

Over the following months, I learned much about eagles and even more about myself. I'm not naturally patient, but the eagle is, and so is the Lord. Gradually I learned what it meant to wait on him, and each time I did, he renewed my strength. *Strength Renewed* contains ninety meditations based on lessons I learned during my journey in the cancer valley.

When I was a student nurse, I studied the subject of cancer. I went on to care for patients at various stages of the disease. As a pastor's wife I knew the havoc cancer brought to the families of patients, and I often became part of the support team. I saw the

destructive power of cancer and the way it seemed to devastate not only the body but often the spirit too.

I thought I understood cancer. Yet on November 10, 1997, I discovered how little I knew of the physical, emotional, and spiritual roller coaster that cancer creates. It took three short words spoken by an uncaring radiologist: “You have cancer.” I’d heard those words before, but this time they were directed at me.

My first reaction to the diagnosis was to call out to the Lord. I knew I needed help from above, and I needed it right away.

I grew up in a home where my parents had a nominal belief in God. As a teenager, I attended church regularly and participated as a young musician and children’s Sunday school teacher. In my late teenage years I experienced a spiritual renewal. From then on, my faith grew. By the time cancer disrupted my life, my husband and I had been in full-time Christian ministry for twenty-eight years.

I know of people who came to faith as a result of cancer, and I praise God for them. Others, like me, were already walking with the Lord when the disease made itself known. Wherever you are spiritually, my prayer is that this book will strengthen your faith. If your relationship with God is still at an intellectual level, then I trust that as you work through these meditations, God himself will ignite the sparks of faith in you. Some people survive cancer without leaning on the Lord. I couldn’t have—and I don’t believe you’d want to.

I also needed friends to keep me company during this difficult time, especially one friend who would walk through the experience with me. That person had to be someone who would love me no matter what I looked like, how I behaved, or what I said. He or she would have to be an encourager but also care enough to say “Enough!” and stop me from wallowing in misery. I would need someone to dry my tears, hold me close when I trembled, and rejoice over the little successes that marked my year in treatment. In short, that person had to love me unconditionally.

I didn’t have to look far. My husband, Rob, stepped into the role without hesitation.

A cancer diagnosis often has adverse effects on a marriage, and sadly, many don't survive. I can understand this. The patient goes through such a wide range of emotions it's sometimes hard to recognize the person you married. Yet Rob never flinched from his role as husband, lover, and friend. He also never wavered from his faith in God and held firmly to his belief that together we would overcome this disease and life would resume some sense of normalcy.

If you are battling cancer, I pray you find such a friend. Please don't isolate yourself; instead, nurture your relationships. Allow the Lord to raise up people who will love you through this time. If you are one of those friends, I pray that as you read the meditations you will empathize with your loved one and grow in your understanding and ability to offer support.

In addition to needing a friend, I longed to meet or speak to people who had been through what I was facing and had not only survived but gone on to have a fulfilling life. Patients I once nursed had recovered and moved on to other places. Beulah, the cancer survivor who came to see me from the Reach for Recovery organization, appeared glamorous, confident, and healthy. This encouraged me, but she had only survived ten years at that point. I was fifty-two. I wanted to meet someone who'd lived much longer.

One morning I received a phone call from a lady by the name of Molly. She worked at the head office of my husband's denomination. She said, "Shirley, you can beat this. I had breast cancer thirty-five years ago, and I am still well today." Those words encouraged me more than any others during those dreadful early days of cancer. I have never met Molly, but she became my role model. If she could live thirty-five years after her diagnosis, so could I. I haven't reached the thirty-five-year mark yet, but it's been fifteen years since I heard those three dreadful words, "You have cancer."

As a result of cancer, I had to take a break from nursing, so I turned to my favorite hobby: writing. Today, I'm a published author—and I love it. If it hadn't been for cancer, I doubt this would have happened.

Years after my diagnosis, I sensed a prompt from the Lord to write this book for people struggling through the cancer valley. You may be a patient, or perhaps the disease has afflicted someone you care for. Possibly you work with someone who has cancer or you're in the medical field. Whatever your involvement, I pray the stories in this book will help you wait on the Lord.

During that long and difficult year of treatment, there were times I soared over the valley. Other times I plummeted to the depths. Yet the loving wings of my heavenly Father always came underneath me before I hit the ground and lifted me back into his presence. He'll do the same for you as you seek to draw close to him through these meditations.

Strength Renewed is a book of daily devotional readings that follows the cancer journey chronologically. You can, however, read the chapters in any order. Stories from my own experience link to relevant Scripture readings. Three questions follow each meditation and will help you apply the material to your own particular cancer journey. Answer the questions as honestly as you know how, whether you are a patient or a supporter. There are no right or wrong answers, for no two people are alike.

Although most of the messages and questions will be geared toward the patient, supporters should also read the material and answer the questions as best they can. Doing so will give them a clearer understanding of what the patient is going through.

Jot down your answers in a notebook and allow the words to assist you in waiting upon the Lord. He will then renew your strength and help you rise and soar as you go through your treatment period.

But those who wait upon God get fresh strength. They spread their wings and soar like eagles, they run and don't get tired, they walk and don't lag behind.

ISAIAH 40:31 MESSAGE

1

The Clock Is Ticking

READ: *Luke 1:26-35*

Whatever Mary planned for her future, it didn't include pregnancy before marriage.

She grew up in the small town of Nazareth where everyone knew everybody. Her parents taught her to believe in the only true God, and she eagerly looked forward to the coming Messiah.

The day an angel visited her with the shattering news that she was about to become pregnant, Mary's life changed forever. Yet because of her obedience, the Messiah became part of her family tree. She became the most blessed of women—the mother of our Lord Jesus. History divided into BC and AD—"before Christ" and "anno Domini." The world would never be the same again.

On November 10, 1997, my life changed forever with the words "you have cancer." Suddenly I knew my life had an end. The days left to me were limited. Even if I conquered the mass that had invaded my breast, one day I would run out of time. Whether I suffered a massive heart attack, got run over by a drunk driver, or, God forbid, died of cancer, I only had a certain number of days left. And they were running out.

Of course, that had always been the case, but until that moment life was too full to consider my mortality. Now I could think of nothing else. *I have cancer.*

Fifteen years later, my life is divided into BC and AC: "before cancer" and "after cancer." Those three harsh words, "you have cancer," transformed my life. Yet they really made no difference

as to how long I still have on earth. God already knows how many days I will live, and they aren't numbered by cancer.

- How did you react to the words “you have cancer,” whether addressed to you or to someone you love?
- What, for you, is the most difficult part of this diagnosis?
- As you look ahead, what sort of future do you visualize AC (“after cancer”)?

Your cancer diagnosis didn't take God by surprise. He isn't confused about what to do. Right now, stretch out your hand. Allow him to take hold of it and walk with you into the future. Yes, your life's clock is ticking—but you know what? God made the clock.

LET'S PRAY: Lord God, you know how scared I am. Help me to trust you and to remember that you made this body of mine—and you don't make mistakes. Please give me your peace and help me remember that you, and you alone, know how many days I have left. Amen.

Did you not . . . clothe me with skin and flesh and knit me together with bones and sinews?

JOB 10:10–11

2

Search for Peace

READ: *Psalms 46:1-11*

You have cancer.” How was this possible? There was no history of breast cancer in my family. I ate a healthy diet and looked well. I held down a full-time job and participated in many church activities. How could I have a life-threatening illness? Besides, cancer happened to other people, not me.

“Oh Lord,” I whispered. “Where are you? How can this be true?” My mind raced as I tried to grasp the news I’d just heard. How I wished I could undo the last hour and step back in time.

Psalms 46 assures us that even if the earth is shaken and the mountains fall into the sea, God will still be there as our shelter and strength. He will always be ready to help in times of trouble.

My earth had certainly been shaken. I searched for assurance that God was still close by, that he would be my shelter and strength. I walked across the parking lot on my way to the car. On my way home. On my way to break the news to my husband . . .

High above my head, wisps of cloud drifted across the African sky, nudged by a breeze I couldn’t feel down on earth. A tiny image of a plane soared noiselessly across the blue. The warmth of the sun seeped into my body and brought with it a feeling of calm. Somewhere in the depths of my body, beyond the reach of ultrasound, God was at work. I didn’t understand how I could have cancer, but God knew, and he was still in control. I had to believe that.

- What are some of the ways cancer has shaken your life?
- How did you hear the diagnosis of cancer? Do you believe God was with you at that time?
- In hindsight, can you think of any one thing God has done to prepare you for this challenge?

Cancer may have blindsided you like it did me, but it didn't take God by surprise. He saw it coming, and he promises to be your shelter and strength.

LET'S PRAY: Loving Father, I don't know why this happened, but I have to believe you're still in control. Help me to grow closer to you through this time. Please grant me your peace. Amen.

Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

JOHN 14:27

3

It's Not Easy

READ: *James 3:3-6*

It didn't take me long to learn there's no easy way to break the news of cancer. I tried rehearsing different approaches, but it always ended up the same: "I have cancer."

People responded in different ways. My husband looked aghast and then took me in his arms. When I phoned Stephen, the older of our two sons, his initial reaction was silence. Then he reminded me that God was in control, not medical science. David, our youngest, swallowed hard, then pulled me out of my chair and enveloped me in a comforting hug. My elderly mother took a deep breath and went into battle for me.

Family members, friends, or mere acquaintances all shared one reaction: shock. No matter how they tried to hide it, I always saw a look of horror flash across their faces.

Some immediately tried to reassure me. Others sought *my* reassurance that I'd survive. A number asked me questions, often before I knew the answers myself. Still others launched into pep talks or quoted Scripture at me. Several even saw the need to tell me about someone else they knew who had cancer. Two things soon became clear: I couldn't find an easy way to tell them, and they had no idea how to respond.

In his letter to the early church, James compares the tongue to the rudder of a ship. He points out that a small rudder can steer a big ship (3:4). I didn't know how to break the news, but I prayed that the Lord would guide my words.

- How do you tell people about your cancer diagnosis?
- What has been the most encouraging response?
- In what ways has the news impacted those closest to you?

When one person gets cancer, the whole family gets cancer. Thank the Lord now for those who will stand by you through this time. They need your prayers—and your understanding.

LET'S PRAY: Lord, I hate having to tell my family this news. There doesn't seem to be an easy way to say it, so please give me the best words for each person. Give them the strength they will need over the coming weeks. Please draw us close during this anxious time. Amen.

[Love] always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:7

4

I Wasn't Born Brave

READ: *Joshua 1:1-9*

I always imagined Joshua to be a strong and capable leader, a brave and fearless warrior. After Moses died, God chose Joshua to lead the children of Israel. He brought them to the Jordan River. After they crossed it they would at last take possession of the Promised Land. It is interesting that not once, not twice, but three times in the first nine verses of the book of Joshua, God commands the new Israelite commander to have courage, to not be afraid. Why would he do that if Joshua was the tough man of war I thought him to be?

Joshua wasn't born brave. He needed a lot of encouragement. As he stepped out in faith, he had to make a conscious decision to not be afraid. He chose to step with courage and dignity into the frightening situation God had opened for him. God knew this man's potential, yet Joshua was terrified.

I wasn't born brave either. In the few days between the mammogram and my surgery, I alternated between feelings of calm and dread. The odds of my surviving to old age seemed poor. The surgeon warned I would almost certainly need radiation. It had never occurred to me there might be more than surgery. I planned to go back to work as soon as my stitches were removed, but for how long would I be able to work? Would I be badly disfigured by the surgery? Would the cancer ultimately destroy me?

The words of the radiologist kept ringing in my ears: "I doubt if they'll be able to get it all out."

I had a good surgeon—but would he be good enough? Would my body cope with the demands of surgery and radiation? Several times a day my mind whimpered, “I’m afraid. This is too much for me.” Each time I sensed God saying, “Don’t be afraid. Have courage. I’m here. I won’t let you down.”

- What is your greatest fear?
- How do you think God might respond to your fears?
- Can you think of a verse in Scripture that will give you courage to move forward? Look it up now.

Make no mistake, a cancer diagnosis is a living nightmare. Stepping toward the surgery and into the unknown is terrifying and requires great courage. It’s okay to be scared. God is not disappointed by your fear. He doesn’t scold you for your reluctance to move on.

LET’S PRAY: Lord God, you know my fears. You understand how overwhelming life seems at the moment. Help me to keep my eyes on you. I want to face the future with courage and dignity. Stay real close, Lord, please. Amen.

In God I trust and am not afraid. What can man do to me?

PSALM 56:11

5

In Need of a Miracle

READ: *Acts 3:1-8*

As the news got out about my cancer, it became difficult to remain positive. As a nurse and a pastor's wife, I knew of many who had lost their battle with cancer. I had watched others in whom the disease continued to advance no matter what treatment they went through. No hope. No future.

Well-meaning folks told me to trust God for a supernatural miracle of healing. That made me uneasy. Did they mean I shouldn't trust the doctors? Did they want me to refuse medical intervention and expect God to heal me without conservative treatment? Others urged me to follow through with the surgery and any further treatment and trust God to work through the doctors. Should I continue treatment, or should I trust God for an outright miracle?

The crippled man in Acts 3 was en route to his usual location—a spot near the so-called Beautiful Gate. Every day his friends placed him near this temple entrance so he could beg for a living. Lame from birth, the man was beyond medical help. The situation could only deteriorate as he grew older. He looked around at other crippled men and could see the way his life would end. No hope. No joy. No sense of anticipation.

As the small group drew near to the gate, the beggar spotted two men on their way into the temple. He called to them in hopes of a handout. Instead, they instructed him to pay attention.

"I don't have any money," Peter said, "but I'll give you what I have."

The man probably looked at them with a flicker of hope. Would they give him clothing? Food? Anything would help his miserable existence.

Instead, Peter reached out, grasped his right hand, and heaved him to his feet. The man's ankles strengthened, and for the first time in his life he could walk.

When I read this passage, I knew I should ask the Lord for a miracle but continue with the medical plans. The Lord would heal me in his way and in his time. I just needed to trust.

- What decisions confuse you at the moment?
- Whom can you speak to about those decisions?
- Why not ask the Lord now for a miracle?

Forget the future and focus on the present. Tell God how you feel, and don't be afraid to ask him for a miracle. But don't forget, he can also work a miracle through your doctors—he created medical science.

LET'S PRAY: Lord, thank you that you're in control of my future. Help me to trust you, and please grant me a miracle of healing in your time and in your way. Amen.

So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

JOHN 8:36

6

Let's Be Real

READ: *John 9:1-11*

Jesus and his disciples came across a man who had been blind all his life.

"Who's to blame for this man's blindness?" the disciples asked Jesus.

"No one," Jesus replied. He explained that God's power would be revealed as a result of the man's disability.

I have no idea why I got breast cancer. In my family I have the dubious honor of being the first and, at the time of this writing, the only one ever to have the disease. When people heard of my diagnosis, one of their first questions was often, "Is it in your family?" In other words, "Who's to blame?"

I had often heard cancer referred to as "the Big C" or simply "CA." Now I wondered why people didn't want to call it by its name. Was it their way of coping with the disease, a form of denial? Or were they for some reason ashamed or embarrassed by their diagnosis? After all, if you get the flu you don't mind telling people. So why should I be ashamed of having cancer? I hadn't done anything shameful to cause rogue cells to form the malignant tumor. Yet visitors also avoided the word *cancer*. They spoke of my "illness" or my "problem." They encouraged me to fight "it" and to believe the Lord could help me overcome the "challenge."

From the outset I decided to be open about my diagnosis. I had cancer. I didn't understand why God allowed me to get this dreaded disease, but he had. And according to his Word, *all things*

would work together for good because I loved him (Rom. 8:28). I had to believe “all things” included cancer. If I didn’t accept that, I would be saying my diagnosis was beyond God’s control. And I knew it wasn’t.

So I determined to remain as upbeat as possible, learn as much as I could, and be open about my disease. I had cancer. It wasn’t my fault, and I had no one else to blame. Somehow God would use it for good. I had to believe that.

- How do you refer to your cancer? Do you call it by its name?
- Are you able to trust God with your future, or do you struggle with this concept?
- What does it mean to you that “in all things” God is at work in your situation?

It’s important to face your diagnosis. When you call cancer by any other name, it becomes more difficult to come to terms with an already tough situation. Cancer is finite. God is way bigger.

LET’S PRAY: Lord, I don’t understand why you’ve allowed me to get cancer, but you have. I want to believe you’re going to use this in a good way, so please help me to speak openly about it. Use my openness to bless others, I pray. Amen.

In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

ROMANS 8:28

7

Who's to Blame?

READ: *Philemon 1-10*

Well-meaning people made suggestions as to why I developed cancer. Some blamed my food, although I ate a healthier diet than most. Others suggested soil contamination. There wasn't much I could do about that. Anyway, everyone ate vegetables from the same soil. Several people thought it was because I didn't breast-feed my babies. While that is believed to be one of many possible contributing causes, not everyone who bottle-feeds their babies gets breast cancer. So why did I?

Could I really blame the food my parents fed me as a child? Could I have avoided cancer by doing something different? Whose fault was it? No matter the cause, it had happened. Nothing would reverse the diagnosis.

The book of Philemon was written by Paul when he was under house arrest. Although he was able to receive visitors, Romans guarded Paul around the clock and he was not allowed to leave home. Nevertheless, he continued to lead others to Christ and encouraged the young churches with his writings.

At least Paul knew why he was in custody. His open preaching and involvement with the Christian church brought about his arrest. Yet as he dug deeper for understanding, he remembered the Lord's words: "Just as you have told others about me in Jerusalem, you must also tell about me in Rome" (Acts 23:11 CEV).

Paul saw his incarceration as part of the Lord's plan to extend the kingdom. As a result of his imprisonment, he now lived in

Rome. He had ample opportunity to teach about Jesus and led a number of people into the Christian faith (Philem. 7).

Despite his difficult circumstances, Paul believed that Christ was in control. He believed God could use him even while under house arrest. Instead of lamenting his misfortunes, he continued to encourage others.

- Can you see any ways Jesus might use your cancer to bless others?
- Is Christ really in control of your circumstances? If so, what does it mean to you?
- Is there someone you can encourage today?

I didn't know why I had cancer, but as I read about Paul, I asked, "Is it possible that I am right where the Lord wants me to be? Does he want to use my circumstances to reach out to others?" These were not easy questions, but as I worked through them, I found myself looking for ways to use my circumstances for good.

LET'S PRAY: Lord Jesus, I grapple with why I have cancer. Help me to accept that whatever the reasons may be, you are able to bless me. Please also bless others through me. Help me to get my eyes off my suffering and to rejoice in your love. Amen.

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:17