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SURVIVING CANCER

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Karen was thirty-three years old. She was living and working as a missionary in La Paz, Bolivia. Between January and October, she got hepatitis, typhoid fever, amoebic dysentery, had her gall bladder and appendix removed, and a benign tumour removed from her right knee cap. She was treated for all of these in Bolivia and continued working all the time.

In November, she went back to the United States to visit her family. At about 10.30 one night, she was taking a bath and shaving under her arm when she felt a hard, immovable lump in her breast. Suddenly the warm water that had been relaxing her body felt very cold. Fearing what the lump might indicate, she jumped out of the bath and called a friend who is a nurse. She happened to have a doctor's appointment the next morning for something else, so her friend urged her to tell the doctor about the lump.

The doctor examined it and then sent her on a whirl-wind on additional tests. Her final doctor's visit that day was with a surgeon. She was stunned when he told her that she would need to be hospitalised to have a biopsy. If the biopsy showed malignancy, then he would do a radical mastectomy immediately. (In 1976, if a tumour was malignant, a radical mastectomy was automatically done while the woman was still under anaesthetic.)

After the biopsy and operation, when Karen awoke from the anaesthetic, the tight bandage wrapped around her chest told her immediately that she had breast cancer and had lost a breast.

This very frightening experience was life changing for her—she temporarily lost her independence, her privacy, and her active lifestyle, and she had to face her own mortality.

Karen found losing her independence very difficult. She had been an independent single woman living the unpredictable, sometimes dangerous and exciting life of a missionary in the underdeveloped, impoverished country of Bolivia, in South America. But following her surgery in the United States, she couldn't drive and had to depend on others to take her to the hospital five days a week to receive cobalt treatments. They had to pick her up at 7.15am; when it was 20 degrees below zero. She later learnt that they were "honoured" that she'd asked them to help.

Singer and songwriter Carly Simon was asked once about her experience with cancer, "What would you have done differently?" And her response was, "I would have allowed people to bring me their 'chicken soup'—I wish I would have accepted their help, more."

Karen discovered that in her situation she had no choice but to give up her privacy

She grew up in Bismark, North Dakota, which was a beautiful city of about 25,000 people in the 1970's. Because she was a missionary, she had done a lot of public speaking and was well known. When she had surgery for cancer in November of 1976, the news spread like wild fire. People visited her in the hospital, saying, "Do you remember me? You spoke at my church years ago?" When Sally had first gone to the mission field in 1968, her picture was on the front page of the newspaper with an article about her going to South America to help people. Now, there was another picture in the paper with the headline, "She helped others, now it's time for her to receive help."

She had lost all privacy. It was humiliating for her to have the whole city and much of the world know that she had cancer.

Coming to terms with a diagnosis of cancer is difficult but that's not all you have to come to terms with. Karen found that she had to give up many activities she'd taken for granted.

Prior to her operation, she was a workaholic. Her self-esteem was wrapped up in her work. The surgery and radiation treatments delayed her return to Bolivia for four long months. She feared that her missionary career was over, especially when she heard that her work was being turned over to other missionaries. In her grief and anger, she failed to see the tender words, "until Karen returns."

She found that other people needed to make decisions for her about her activity level following surgery and treatments. They were not trying to interfere with or run her life. They were truly thinking of her health. And the time would come again, when she would be able to set her own pace.

At thirty-three years of age, Karen had to face her own mortality, and it's a difficult age to have to think about your own death. She was full of energy and dearly loved her work. All of a sudden, she was faced not only with the possible loss of her work and a part of her body, but of life itself.

As a Christian, she knew that through faith in Jesus Christ, if she died she would go to heaven and that would be great. If she lived, that would be great, too. She had heard it said, that in heaven there are no tears and pain. If this is true, and she believed it was, death would set her free from cancer and all the pain and fear that it brought.

Karen came to realise that "life would never be normal again", but what she would have to do was to try to find a new normal, where she could live her life to the fullest.

One of the very difficult things about cancer is how the diagnosis of the fact that you have cancer, affects those people around you. Karen said her deepest heartache was to see her family and friends suffer shock, worry, and sorrow over her condition.

She found that her cancer actually scared some people away.

The first Sunday that she went back to church after her surgery, she found people didn't want talk to her. In fact, they walked away from her or avoided her completely, and this really hurt her deeply, until she realised that they were avoiding her because they didn't know what to say. Many were in shock and dealing with their own emotions.

Billy Graham wrote in his autobiography, *Just As I Am*, that when people get sick and suffer, they wither turn away from God in anger and bitterness or they grow closer to Him in trust and confidence. Karen chose to replace the three most dreadful c's—cancer, cobalt, and chemotherapy—with the most powerful, victorious C—Christ! Her battle with cancer became a mountain top experience in her relationship with God. You also have that choice. Trials such as cancer are not enemies of faith, but opportunities to experience God's faithfulness.

Sometimes it takes an illness to make us realise we need God. God created you and He cares about what is happening to you, He is with you now, and wants to give you the strength, encouragement, and love that you need. He invites you to give all your problems, even cancer, to Him. He says "*Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*" (Matthew 11:28)

Karen's mother once said to her, "I wish I could carry this burden for you. I can't, but Jesus can and will. He knows about scars, hurts, and pain." If you do not yet know that Jesus Christ has won the victory for you over sin and death, let Him take your heavy burdens as He walks with you through your illness.

With Jesus in your heart, you do not have to face the future alone. He promises to be with you every step of the way, every day.