

Beyond Cancer's Scars

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Laying Claim
to a Stronger
Spirit

F. Elaine Olsen

Author of Peace for the Journey



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Courageous is the soul who contends with suffering, wrestles with suffering, lays claim to a stronger spirit because of suffering, and refuses to retreat from the battle until something is gained from the suffering. Even if that something is as small (or as huge) as befriending another soul walking a similar path.

Judith Guerino was that friend for me. This book is lovingly dedicated to her life and witness. Her courage lives on inside of me.



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gave me a reason to fight when all I wanted to do was quit. My prayer for each one of you is that one day you might read these words and draw strength from them for your own seasons of struggle. You are my legacy, my letter to the world, my four beautiful graces from God. I hold you close in my heart.

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Prologue

From Poverty to Promise

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

—2 Thessalonians 2:16–17

THE WALKING WOUNDED, this is what I saw when I looked into the faces of the crowd that had gathered for the annual Cancer Survivors Picnic at Cape Fear Valley Medical Center. The sweltering June temperature was no match for the courageous souls who linked arms that afternoon to reflect upon their trails of survivorship. I was one of them, only recently returning from my personal battlefield, which was named *breast cancer*. Five months earlier, I'd sat next to a few of these valiant soldiers, hunkered down in the trenches of chemotherapy and wondering if I'd live to see another day.

I did live to see another day; others did not. This sobering reality accompanied me as I stepped up to the microphone and began to share with the crowd a few words about my survival. In January, I'd been asked by a hospital social worker to be the keynote speaker for the picnic. I heartily agreed, naively assuming that by June, I'd really have my act together—by June, I'd really be surviving. But by the time June rolled around, I could barely lift my spirits enough to take a daily shower and get dressed, much less prepare and deliver a rousing speech of hope to other survivors. June seemed so far away from my January, but as I would quickly learn, there isn't an appropriate timetable for hope's arrival. Hope and wholeness walk at their own pace. Hope and wholeness take their time. Their journey toward me was only beginning.

Like the members of my audience, I was one of the walking wounded. And while I came prepared to deliver a neatly typed, three-page discourse to the crowd, what I wasn't prepared for was the draining effect it would have on me later. Rather than leaving the picnic with a feeling of having a mission accomplished, I left feeling depleted, depressed, heavy, and weighed down with a self-imposed obligation that I wouldn't be able to fulfill. It was a duty way above my pay grade and my ability to succeed. What I wanted to do that day was to adopt every cancer survivor I'd encountered in order to shelter them, shape them, and show and share with them the beautiful grace and witness of Jesus Christ that had carried me through my battle. What I did, instead, was listen to their stories—one story after the other, hours on end, until I collapsed beneath the pain that was consuming my soul.

"There are so many of us," I told my husband later. "Too many to hold at one time. I want to do more, be more, give more of myself to this cause, but the pain is so great, and I am only one person."

His response to me was profound. It's partly responsible for this book. "Elaine, you may not be able to adopt every cancer patient as your personal cause, but you can give them the hope and truth of Jesus through your words. You can tell your story and allow it to be an encouragement for others who are walking a similar road. Write your witness, Elaine, and then put it into the hands of others. It will be enough."

I was strongly encouraged by his words, despite the fact that I had no plans to write a book about my cancer journey. My energy level was at an all-time low; my "want to" followed closely behind. The woundings I had experienced over the course of my past year stifled my creative juices and attempted to suffocate the writing process. Still and yet, there was something about my husband's prodding that challenged me to consider his exhortation in light of what I believe to be the overriding purpose of my life—to know God and then, out of that knowing, lead others to know the same.

What had I learned about God in my season of struggle? What sacred truth had been revealed to me in the midst of personal suffering? If knowing God is the great purpose of my existence on this earth, then how had my cancer served as a channel of understanding into the heart and mind of the Father? Further still, could I . . . should I share that understanding with the world? What could I, broken and bloodied from war, possibly have to offer others who've known similar scarring?

Five days passed before I was able to scribble down a few initial thoughts. Once I began, the words came quickly, thoughts flowed freely, and forty days later, I typed the blessed "Amen" to the final prayer of this book.

I cannot fully explain the healing process that took place in my heart over the course of writing these words. I only know that my willingness to pen them released the cleansing

grace of heaven into my war-torn soul. The daily discipline of applying fresh ink to blank paper refreshed and strengthened my spirit.

When I began writing this book, I didn't need to be rescued from my breast cancer. Most of that had already taken place. I did, however, need to be rescued from a lesser, more hidden cancer—the cancer of hopelessness and despair. No amount of chemotherapy or radiation can cure that type of cancer. Only God has the power to reinstate hope and expectation where hopelessness reigns.

Over the course of forty days, God moved me beyond cancer's scarring to lay claim to his higher purposes for my life. Just when I thought I had nothing left to offer, God brought meaning to my season of struggle. Perhaps with this book, he will allow me a small measure of influence in your season. I consider it my highest privilege and sacred trust to enter into your suffering story, even as you take the time to pause and consider mine.

My prayer for you is that with these reflections, you'll begin to trace the faithfulness of God in your own life and progress from a place of personal poverty to a place of eternal promise. I pray that you'll be able to nurture and lay claim to a stronger spirit, despite the scarring that has come to you through suffering. The eyes of the Lord are on us, and his deliverance is certain for those of us who tether our expectations to the loving work of the cross. Place your hope in Jesus, and if you're willing, place your hand in mine. Together, let's walk toward promise. As always . . .

Peace for the journey,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Elaine". The signature is written in a dark ink and is positioned below the text "Peace for the journey,".



Poverty Is a Good Starting Point

“I tell you the truth,” he said, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”

—Luke 21:3–4

OUT OF MY poverty . . .

This is where I begin, where I lay down my pen as an offering before the Lord. It would be easier to walk away from my story, to keep my words to myself—words buried deep within, words not yet realized, words trapped beneath the weightiness of my recent cancer season. With the dig will come discovery, of this I am certain. The revelation may not be what you’re looking for, and because of this, my heart grows weary and faint with the wondering.

Will they be enough, Lord? Are these words worth fighting for? Is there ample ink left in my well—enough words and enough willingness—to write this chapter of my story? Will this surrender be costly? Will the end result reflect the fight required to get there? Will joy replace current sorrow? Will fullness replace this emptiness I’m holding? Will hope supplant doubt? Will kingdom work be done through weakness?

Indeed, out of my poverty, I come to the altar of God’s grace. Like the widow in Luke 21, there’s not much left in my personal coffers, or so it seems. Two small coppers are what remain after a long season of costly suffering. Cancer has brought me to the end of a treacherous, winding road, only to realize that another one awaits me—the road of survival. Two coppers won’t get me very far, but my releasing them to God? Well, perhaps they’ll carry me further than what my understanding will allow me in this moment.

I love the widow's giving story, penned some two thousand years prior to mine. Hers moved the heart of Jesus, because out of her poverty, she willingly gave all that she had. I want to give the same . . . to go "all in" with Jesus, believing that on the other side of my costly release, some holy truth will be spoken by the Father on my behalf—words that will serve as a living memorial for the generations to come, who will enter into my story even as I have entered into this widow's.

I don't imagine the widow had much life left in her when she entered the temple that day. Grief was undoubtedly part of her story, poverty her present reality. Yet her days were underscored by an overriding commitment to her faith, her church, and her God. She gave all that she could; some would say even more than she should. But Jesus would call it enough, "more than all the others." She may not have heard him, may not have been privy to his pleasure in that instance, but I am certain she felt it. Costly surrenders willingly given to God may not feel pleasant prior to their release, but when offered as a final gesture of faith, there's a goodness that gives witness to the moment.

We don't know what happened to the widow going forward from that one moment. Perhaps that's the point—not what God did for her that day, but rather what she did for God. And while we're only given access to this one window-frame look into her story, something tells me it's one of her most important stories, a life-lesson kind—a teaching memory captured via the lens of God's Word, providing us with a hook to hang our hopes on, fertile soil to live our lives upon, and a firm foundation to heal our hurts within. It is a truth that simply and profoundly validates the impoverished witness of a widow who surrendered "all that she had to live on" into the treasury of God's ministry.

Yes, this is where I willingly choose to begin this chapter of my story. I don't have much in the way of worldly possessions to surrender into the treasury of God's ministry, but I have this pen in my hand and, every now and again, a few moments of quiet that belong to just Jesus and me. Out of my poverty, I give them both to the Lord, believing him for strength enough to chronicle the witness of my cancer season.

Poverty is a good starting point for the rich increase of God's immeasurable favor. When we begin there, when we reach the end of ourselves—when the heart beats wearily, the tears come easily, and the coppers are down to two—then we, like the widow, have a hard decision to make: give to God out of our poverty, or give in to it. While both decisions begin with insufficient funds, the former is the only one that will end in surplus, the only one that will seed and grow and multiply with the loving excess of heaven's grace.

Giving to God out of our poverty is perhaps the greatest act of faith that will ever be credited to our kingdom accounts. Hard surrenders made in the leanest of all of life's seasons indicate an underlying, undeniable, and underscored personal trust in the work of the cross—a bleeding juncture that pinned Christ's sacred flesh to solid faith. Out of

his poverty, Jesus deposited his final coppers into the treasury of his Father's ministry. And when Jesus did so, heaven began its accumulation—an exponential increase that continues through us because of the hard surrenders we're willing to deposit into the treasury of God's ministry.

This is my lean season, perhaps the leanest I have ever lived. It is a time of low reserves and few leftovers. In faith, albeit a painfully small measure, I've scraped up my remaining coppers, and I willingly bring them to the altar of God. It's all I have to live on, just a little bit of hope, a little bit of strength, a little bit of a seemingly very little. But something tells me that my impoverished estate just might be the most important “little” of my life.

Perhaps you understand. Perhaps this day you are counting your coppers and coming up short. Your poverty of pocket has cast worry and fear into your heart. Sickness, financial strain, relational hardships, addictions, emotional trauma, and all manner of ills and aches have worked their way into your season, and your faith is delicately dangling on the edge of doubt . . . maybe even a step or two in doubt's direction. You want to quit, want to walk away from your life, want to hang up your hopes and selfishly hold on to the few coins that remain. Surrendering all that you have to live on seems too costly and too little to make much of a difference to anyone.

Like me, and like the widow from two thousand years ago, you have a decision to make. Out of your poverty, you can give all that you have to God, or you can give in to your depletion. Only one choice will lead you to the surplus of heaven. Only one choice will afford you the privilege of seeing the multiplication of God's increase through you. Only one choice will invest your little and grow it into “more than all the others.”

Trusting God is that one and only choice, and today, I'm making the decision to do my banking with the King. I cast my two coppers into the treasury and begin with a few words about a fledgling faith and the suffering season that has recently served as the backdrop of my life. And while it seems too little of a thing, it also seems like a good place to start. For whenever a heart is depleted and emptied out, there's room enough for a fresh planting of God.

I certainly could use one. Could you use one as well? Then I invite you to God's temple this day and offer this prayer of initial supplication for a fresh planting from his heart:

With hands wide open, pockets emptied out, and our hearts' strong willingness to trust you with our futures, Father, we come to your treasury this day. Out of our poverty, we offer up to you all that remains in our possession—our gifts, our talents, our time, our energy, our depletion, our failures, our sufferings, and our wills. It seems too small a surrender, Lord; two coppers hardly seem enough. Take them; multiply them; do what you will with them. From our poverty, seed your kingdom. Amen.

LAYING CLAIM

- ☞ How do you identify with the widow's sacrifice? Are you down to your last coppers? Describe.

- ☞ Why might poverty be a good starting point for seeing the rich increase of God's favor? Why might wealth be a detriment?

- ☞ When has your costly surrender been replaced by a fresh planting of the Lord?

- ☞ Take time to read the widow's story in Luke 21:1–4. What do you see in it? What is God asking you to surrender in this current season of living?