

DON'T WASTE YOUR BYPASS

Marvin Olasky, Thursday, June 26, 2008

A recent health surprise (I had to have open-heart surgery to bypass two clogged arteries) exposed my tendency to think, like the Pharisee praying in Luke 18, *God, thank you that I am not like other men, overweight with high blood pressure. I eat heart-healthy, skip desserts, and walk on my treadmill.*

I should have been praying for God's mercy — which He was kind enough to provide, in part through the talents of Austin cardiologists Paul Tucker and Stephen Dewan.

Which leads to a physical recommendation and then some more important spiritual ones. The physical: If you're 40 or above and have a parent who had heart disease, don't assume your own immunity just because you're in good shape.

The classic case is that of Jim Fixx, who popularized jogging and wrote *The Complete Book of Running*, a best-seller in 1977. He ran daily but died seven years later, at the age of 52, from a massive heart attack. An autopsy revealed substantial arterial blockages. His father had suffered a heart attack at the age of 35 and died of one at 42.

The spiritual recommendations stand on the shoulders of Minneapolis pastor and author John Piper. He wrote on the eve of his prostate surgery, "Don't waste your cancer. You will waste your cancer if you refuse to think about death." Amen. A whiff of fatality is a great gift, because it gets us thinking about death while we still have the opportunity in this life to do more than to mourn our sins and wasted time.

(An old novel by Joseph Wambaugh features a policeman who is getting his life together but is fatally shot. His last words are something like "I was just starting to know," but those coming to help him, too late, merely believe him to be saying, "No, no, no.")

One Piper thought hit me straight on, since to comfort others — and myself — I had told people my bypass operation had only a 2 percent fatality rate. Piper criticizes "the rationalistic, human calculation of odds" and notes that we are to rely on God who raises the dead: "The aim of God in your cancer (among a thousand other good things) is to knock props out from under our hearts so that we rely utterly on Him."

Amen — because even if we take heart in percentages when we should not, we know that the long-range certainty (unless Christ returns first) is 100 percent fatality. It's disconcerting to attain the label "cardiac patient." (Who, me? You must mean someone else.) But here's Chapter 40 of Isaiah: "All flesh is grass The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."

Bottom line: If you look in the mirror and see yourself as anything other than a future cardiac, or cancer, or something-else patient, you're fooling yourself.

Piper writes, "You will waste your cancer if you think that beating cancer means staying alive rather than cherishing Christ... You will waste your cancer if you spend too much time reading about cancer and not enough time reading about God." Amen. There was no need to learn a lot about my chest being cut open and my heart temporarily stopped, since no one would be asking my advice during the three-hour operation. The news we can use is the good news of Christ, because our attitude toward that affects everything.

One of Piper's most intriguing comments: "You will waste your cancer if you treat sin as casually as before.... Pride, greed, lust, hatred, impatience, laziness, procrastination.... All these things are worse enemies than cancer. Don't waste the power of cancer to crush these foes. Let the presence of eternity make the sins of time look as futile as they really are." True: Illness can be what the Doctor orders to focus our attention.

Piper concludes, "You will waste your cancer if you fail to use it as a means of witness to the truth and glory of Christ. Here is a golden opportunity to show that He is worth more than life. Don't waste it." Amen. Christ changed my life a third of a century ago. Every year since then has been a gift. Thank you, Lord.

