

FROM THE PULPIT

BECAUSE HE LOVED US
THROUGH EVERYTHING

By Chris Kemp

THE SCRIPTURES ARE full of pronouncements of blessings for the righteous. So why do bad things happen to good people?

It is a question that thinkers such as St. Augustine, Martin Luther, the Psalmists, Joseph Smith, and others have discussed for centuries. I doubt that I can add anything new to the discussion. I can barely understand some of the ideas already out there. But what I can do, and what someone in the stake was foolish enough to let me do, is share my story.

I've gone through enough to know that my story is not unique. In fact, I'm certain that there are stories among those in this room that are much more inspirational and much more sobering than mine. You're just smarter than I am, as evidenced by the fact that you're down there and I'm up here. But let me begin with a quick summary of the last three years of my life. If you want more of the exciting details later, I'll tell you, because I never grow tired of sharing how courageous I've been in my suffering.

I'm dying. Oh, we're all dying, I just happen to be doing it with lots of test results and doctors pronouncing odds. In March 2000, I was diagnosed with colon cancer and given less than a 10 percent chance to live five years. Although none of the doctors I consulted confessed it at the time, every one later admitted that they thought I would be dead within six months. And indeed, for the first six months, my body did everything it could to make that prediction come true.

I used to be in good shape. I actually had some muscle. When we lived on the East Coast, I jogged daily and played basketball twice a week. In California, I jogged and played beach volleyball. But I had colitis and

lived with it for close to fifteen years. In November 1999, I had my annual scope, but felt so terrible throughout the holidays that surgery was scheduled in February to remove my colon. I entered the hospital two weeks before surgery to be strengthened with intravenous fluids. After one week, my abdomen became very painful, and in a few days, I looked like I was five months pregnant. Know what? It hurts to be pregnant!

When my surgeon opened me up, he said gallons of fluid rushed out. Evidently my colon had ruptured, and the intravenous fluids I'd been receiving had been draining into my abdomen. He said that if it had been regular food and not fluids, the causticity would likely have killed me. He said I was very lucky. While in there, he removed my colon and some skin around my belly button, as he saw several worrisome spots that he wanted to have tested. I recall little of the days after surgery except that I fell in love with the wonderful powers of morphine.

A few days later, the lab results confirmed that I had cancer. It was labeled Stage 4, the most serious level. When I was able to take a small walk, my wife and I visited the hospital library and discovered that with my particular symptoms, my statistical chance of survival was 8 percent. A year later, when I asked my oncologist if my chances had improved, he said my odds were actually only half that because of the path the cancer had taken out of my colon. He politely refused to upgrade my condition.

It really hit me how serious things were when I started getting visits in the hospital from the nuns. I was at Ogden Regional Hospital, previously St. Benedict's, and when my chart was updated to read Stage 4 colon cancer, the nuns began to visit. They spoke

in low, hushed voices, patted my toes through my blanket, and assured me that everything would be all right. The nurses also began talking in hushed tones, the joking we had shared previously now gone. When my wife commented to one nurse that she hoped I would live long enough to baptize our youngest daughter, the nurse said, "I'd make different plans."

Because the cancer was not present during my scope in November, the doctors knew it was growing very quickly, so I started chemotherapy right away. With the side effects of chemotherapy, I lost even more weight, leveling off at around 120 pounds. I was so weak that when the temperature outside was above 90 degrees, I still needed a coat and blanket to keep warm. One day, I fell and tried to push myself up to my knees. I couldn't do it. I just stayed there until help arrived. My oncologist suggested I re-enter the hospital to see if intravenous fluids would stop my weight loss. He didn't confess it until later, but at that time, he felt he was sending me to the hospital to die.

But I didn't die. The intravenous fluids stabilized me, and during the next two months, my wife hooked me up nightly to 2,000 calories of intravenous fluids. I started to gain weight. One night, I decided to test my strength and see how many pushups I could do, and I got almost to five. I was on my way.

When we lived outside of Utah, we participated in ward fasts for individuals, so we asked our bishop about having a ward fast for me. So one fast Sunday, I was the focus. Because my chemotherapy schedule usually left me feeling very ill on the weekends, I had not been to church for many months. But on this morning, I felt well enough to get ready. When my then-thirteen-year-old daughter saw me, she said, "Isn't this one of you 'bad days'?" I replied that it should be, but lots of people are fasting and praying for me, and maybe that was helping me to feel well enough to go to church. She was silent for a moment, then said, "Oh, cool!" and went to tell my wife.

I still have good days and bad days. I still go to chemotherapy. I started an additional chemo drug last year, and after a test at the Huntsman Cancer Center, I asked my oncologist if I should try something else since it didn't seem to be working. He said that in the time I've been taking the new drug, it has become the standard, and a test group of Stage 4 colon cancer patients showed that those not using the new drug lived twelve to fourteen months, while those that used the drug lived fourteen to seventeen months. "But



CHRIS KEMP died on 27 July 2004, after battling colon cancer for more than four years. He is survived by his wife Kimberly and their four daughters. The sermon above is the talk Chris gave on 22 February 2003 during the Saturday evening session of the North Ogden Stake conference. Chris also gave a version of these remarks in his response to the 2002 Salt Lake Symposium session, "The Eternal Value of Hardship and Tragedy," (CD/tape/download SL02125).

they all still died, right?" I asked. "Well, yeah, they all died."

NOW, what did I do to deserve this? Why did I suffer from colitis? Why didn't I die from peritonitis in the hospital only to be diagnosed with cancer? Why did I have to suffer and nearly die again but then recover? Why do I likely have terminal cancer yet am defying the odds?

Of course, asking these questions in the context of asking why bad things happen to good people assumes that I'm good, which is usually contested by my teenage daughters. If you want to talk to someone who thinks life is unfair, talk to a teenager. Once, when

pass, but because we want to know that our behavior matters to God, that the choices we agonize over and the decisions we make are taken seriously. God has set forth rules of good behavior, and we want to know that it matters that we choose to follow them. So what do we do when it seems that our choices don't matter, that God doesn't care? What do we do then?

For mortal intelligence, which is all we have to work with so far, some things are unfair. Sometimes I wish we would just admit that. But we try to rationalize God's behavior, as if God needed to be justified by us. In fact, I hope God is not disappointed with all the machinations we go through to try to remove

answers. I'll bet each of us can tell of times when we've been punished for our actions, blessed for our kindness, learned something we know we could not have learned any other way, or seen someone else's agency bless or curse the life of another.

The danger lies in using these reasons as blanket statements, because each of us can also think of people we love who are tormented by these same answers. All too often, the answers that sound so wonderful from the pulpit and in Sunday classes fall far short when we try to apply them to particular instances of suffering.

In his book, *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*, Rabbi Harold Kushner relates a saying from Iran: "If you see a blind man, kick him. Why should you be kinder than God?" That sounds barbaric, but it does state the ultimate conclusion that can be drawn from the belief that if something bad happens, it means the person must deserve it. Not too long ago, Jesse Martinez was simply a twelve-year-old boy attending a church picnic in Ogden when he was killed by a stray bullet from a gang fight a quarter of a mile away. Did friends attending the funeral console the family by telling them their son had been justly dealt with for his sins? Of course not.

I think we as humans want to be judged. We want to know that our lives matter to God.

my daughter was frustrated with me, she told me that my cancer was really messing up her social life.

But if I believe that I am a good person, or at least no worse than the neighbors, do I have a right to question God, to hope for a satisfactory explanation? The issue behind the question is that we want to know that our lives matter to God. I think we as humans want to be judged; we want to know where we stand. We are like little children saying, "Daddy, watch me. Watch me! Was that good?"

A story tells of a man who dies and finds himself in front of two doors, one marked Heaven, the other Hell, with an usher in front who tells him to pick a door and go in. The man says, "Wait a minute. Where is the trial? Where is the judgment? When will I be told whether I was good or bad?"

"I don't know how that rumor got started," says the usher. "We don't do that, never had time for it. Please move ahead and choose."

"But," the man stammers, "I want to be held accountable. I want to be told if I did more good than bad, if I deserve to go to Heaven."

"It has nothing to do with deserving—just choose a door and move on." So the man chooses the door marked Hell.

The message of this story is that we want to be judged, not because we are sure we will

injustice from everything over which we believe God has control.

You're familiar with the reasons we usually give about why things happen: God's will, God's punishments, God's whim; our need to be taught, to learn, to experience something; natural consequences of nature and agency; all part of the grand scheme of things; and so forth. And these *are* genuine

OUR church teaches something that has helped me accept things. A huge limitation in our trying to understand God without the benefit of modern revelations is the belief that the afterlife is only a reward for behavior in this life. This



means that all justice, all mercy, all love, and all teaching must occur in this life because our reward or punishment in the afterlife is based solely on our behavior in mortality. As a consequence, much religious thought tries to justify God in terms of the unequal conditions of this life. But revelations to Joseph Smith teach that this life is only a small part of a larger plan—that teaching and agency existed before our earthly life, and teaching and agency will continue into the eternities. I take great comfort in the LDS understanding that the time we have to grow, and the amount of time in which justice can eventually prevail, extends far past this mortal life.

The idea of an eternal plan is scary to a lot of people. But I find great comfort in the teaching that God was once a man. For me, it helps to know that God understands what I am going through, and where my inadequate knowledge sometimes leads me. He understands me, not because he is an omnipotent being who has never known anything but Godhood, but because he chose Godhood after having perhaps at one time walked a similar path to mine. Or yours. God is not God because there is nothing greater, but because he progressed to Godhood through his understanding, compassion, and love.

The question of why bad things happen to good people is really a very personal question, because our answer not only reveals our moral view of the universe and what constitutes blessings and punishments, but it also reveals the nature of our God. It can create theological battles, with each side shouting their respective scriptures and authority, confident in their particular rationale.

When we see suffering, we want to help so much, to fix things. But helping bear each other's burdens doesn't always mean removing pain or discovering why someone is suffering. Sometimes it means just standing beside them and feeling the weight of their burdens *with* them.

One day, a little boy came home quite late from school. "Where have you been?" his mother asked.

"On the way home, I saw a boy crying because his bike had broken, so I stopped to help him."

I didn't know you knew how to fix bikes," the mother said.

"Oh, I don't," replied the boy. "I just stopped and helped him cry."

I am humbled by those who have helped me cry. Family and friends pray for me, and I think my name is on the prayer roll of at least twenty-five temples. Friends of different faiths have told me that their congregations are praying for me. My old ward in

Connecticut joined my current ward's fast, as did the mission branch of a missionary from my ward. Many friends from out of state go out of their way to visit. I wrote to a Jewish friend about my situation, and a month later, when he was at a business convention in Las Vegas, he flew up to spend the night. I have been the focus of cancer walks by several friends throughout the country. What did I do to deserve this?

REALIZING I'm not owed anything, has God been fair with me? If someone said, "You can hold your children, visit with friends, love your wife, but the price you have to pay is cancer," would I sign up again?

During my hospital stay, I had a notebook in which I would write down my thoughts when I couldn't sleep. On one particularly restless night, I began to prepare my case against God. From my morphine-induced state, my reasoning was impeccable. My plan was to point out all the bad things that were happening and show God how unfair he had been. So I began writing. The list soon grew beyond my cancer to everything bad I could think of—from lousy dates to losing money. But after some time, I was struck by the thought that I'd better write down some of the good things also, in case God countered with those. (It is best to be prepared when confronting God.) I didn't get very far before I realized that just the few good things I'd written so far outweighed all of the bad, and that I would beg for more suffering if it meant keeping even some of the good things. I put my notebook away and fell asleep.

I recognize some people don't feel that way. And when I hear how much worse their situations are, I wonder if I would not also curse God. I've learned not to judge people's burdens. Big or small, suffering is suffering. Friends say they don't know how I handle this. But I'm ashamed to admit how easy cancer is sometimes. At the same time, I don't know how others handle their burdens. I think God strengthens us. I feel sorry for those who don't feel it. Because when they look at their lives, the question should not be whether the glass is half empty or half full. Rather, the question should be: When the glass is almost empty, do we believe in a God who can fill it again?

Once, after I came home from chemotherapy and was feeling particularly rotten, my then-six-year-old daughter, the one I *did* have a chance to baptize last year after all, came to my side of the bed and asked if I wanted to hear a song she had made up. "Sure," I said. She raised her head

up and loudly sang. "Chemotherapy stinks! Cancer really stinks! But I love you, and you love me, and we are a happy family." Then she hugged me and skipped out of the room. Good thing too, because it's bad when your kids see you cry.

In Lance Armstrong's book *It's Not about the Bike*, he tells of receiving an email from a military man stationed in Asia, a fellow cancer patient. "You don't know this yet," he wrote, "but we're the lucky ones."

Am I lucky? I don't know. But I like the God cancer has given me. There are so many times I wish I didn't have cancer, but the relationship I have with God now compared to the one before is one of those things I would not trade for anything in the world.

I have a feeling that when we get to heaven and stand before Christ, armed with our lists of all the suffering and despair we've endured and ready to do battle for our reward, in the end we will happily accept Christ's judgment. Not because he's endured everything and is just, nor because he's suffered for us already and is merciful, although that is a big part of it. No, when that time comes, I believe that we will freely give our lives over to him because as he rises to embrace us we will know, through our sobs of joy, that this man truly loved us through everything. ☺



BENCHMARK

A soft chime of light sifts
over the edge of a dark,
bear-hump hill.

The distant freeway hums,
the white postal truck jumps
its measured laps up the street,
and a white-booted cat
slinks across the driveway.

I look to find my benchmark
for the day and to do an exact thing
beyond the previous day's work,
a thing that eats away at unrest,
makes the unworthy thing worthy,
and invites me to understand.

So when the blanket-night of stars
drifts back over my time zone,
what I have done may be
a bit of what I have lived for.

—RICHARD SHORTEN