

Blindsided By God
*A Story of a Faith Demolished, and
Renewed*

Sample Chapter: Chapter 9 , “The Good News”

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Now that things had been hammered out with our insurance company, we were getting ready to start the first step of Carol's treatment in early January: a mastectomy to remove her right breast and some of the lymph nodes in her right arm. Those dry clinical terms mask the reality of what a mastectomy truly is: an amputation. And as with any amputation, mastectomies are followed by a recovery that is not only physical but emotional in nature, as women lose a part of their body that is not just practical in function, but possesses a deep connection to their view of self and beauty. But in the inverted nature of life after cancer, we were relieved and even excited at the prospect that someone was going to amputate part of her body, because this meant that the tumor was finally going to be removed as well.

You know that you're in a strange and unfamiliar place when an amputation elicits feelings of relief and/or excitement.

I can't help but think that perhaps I needed treatment as well, as I was suffering from some mild version of post traumatic stress disorder. Even the most banal aspects of life frightened me. Our 100 year old house constantly settled and groaned throughout the day, as if noisily lamenting the fact that it could not yet retire because it had been forced to house yet another family, and this one with jumpy young children. During the day, those sounds were normal and even comforting at times. But at night, those same creaks would repeatedly cause me to bolt awake and stare blindly into the dark, wondering if that was just Sophia turning over in her sleep, or an intruder at my basement door, and as if staring would help me figure out the difference between the two. My mind was perpetually preparing itself for the worst, another piece of bad news, another kick to the teeth. I understood what it must feel like to be a deer during hunting season, constantly sniffing the wind for danger, startling at the smallest sounds, and how idiotic he must look to the more chill deer of the wood. But I had learned to be afraid, to always expect the worst, and things were no different the day that Carol went in for surgery.

That morning in January, after a good friend of ours arrived at our house to babysit our daughters, Carol and I left for Sibley Hospital. Sibley is nice facility, located on the far western edge of the city, north of the cobblestone streets of Georgetown, and south of Bethesda, home to a luxury shopping district that features quaint mom-and-pop stores like Cartier, Tiffany and Bulgari. To be honest, I have no idea what they sell in any of those stores, just that whatever it is, I can't afford it. Because of its distance from our house, and the paralyzing morning traffic in the city, I was afraid that we might be late. More than that, part of me was counting on some bizarre happenstance to bar our way to the hospital. After all, it's what I had come to expect out of life. But somehow, we managed to get through the city without a single incident, and arrived at the hospital exactly when she was scheduled to check-in: 9 am. I marveled at our luck.

As we got into the hospital elevator, I would not have been entirely surprised if the cable snapped, and we were not sent hurtling into the hospital basement. And while groaning amidst that smoking wreckage, our insurance company would immediately call my phone to inform me that this would not be covered, as it was a pre-existing elevator condition. But the elevator doors did open, and we were now only twenty short yards away from the front desk of the surgery ward. The end was in sight – we were going to make it.

We approached the front desk, and with a comforting sort of smile, the nurse on duty told us that we were right on time. I think she said that for my benefit, as something in my face clearly communicated that I was in need of some reassurance. All she needed was some form of identification from Carol, and

then she would be admitted for surgery. I finally allowed myself to breathe a sigh of relief. I may have even smiled at that point, although it was something I had not done for a few weeks.

As I indulged myself in a thin and awkward smile, Carol rummaged in her purse for her driver's license. But after a few minutes of searching, I realized that something was wrong.

"Honey," she whispered, "I left my driver's license at home. On the dining table. I knew you would be driving and I just...I just assumed I wouldn't need it."

I knew it. I knew that we could not go the entire morning without something terrible happening to us, for such had become our lot in life. And God forgive me for this, but I was annoyed at my wife. Nevermind the fact that forgetting important things at home was definitely more of my calling card than hers. I was exasperated with her. Still, seeing the pained expression on her face, I summoned up my patented brave smile and proceeded to lie through my teeth.

"It'll be okay. Don't worry. Hm. HMMMM. Let me call some people and see if they can get it from the house."

The nurse looked between me and my wife, and apologized for the inconvenience. "I'm sorry about all this, it's just that we need to verify your identity before we get started. I'll let the surgeon and the team know about the delay, and hopefully they can wait until you can go and get it."

"...Hopefully??" I squeaked.

"Well, if it takes too long, they may just opt to cancel the surgery for today and reschedule."

It was at that moment that I truly and completely forgot how to smile.

In my fragile state, without an emotional floor beneath my feet, this minor inconvenience was nothing less than a catastrophe. Rescheduling was not an option, because all that would do is give the cancer a few more days or even weeks to divide and further spread to another part of her body. This might seem like the ravings of a pathological cynic, but given the frightening details I had learned about triple negative breast cancer, it was not unjustified. My mind raced as I considered our options: our babysitter could not drive over with the license because she didn't have car seats for our daughters. If I tried to go back myself to get it, it would take me over an hour, and the surgery would probably be cancelled.

My only choice was to ask someone who lived near us to go and pick up the license, and then drive it clear across the city. But to further complicate even this option, we had just moved into the city and knew very few people. And so in complete desperation, I called the one and only person who I knew worked close to my home: my mechanic, Steve. That's how desperate I was. Now to be fair, he was also a friend of mine, but still, getting him to do us this favor was a longshot at best. As I typed in his number, I also prepared myself for the worst.

In a strained and harried voice, Steve answered, "Hello, who's this?" See? A mechanic to his core.

"Hey Steve, it's Pastor Peter Chin."

And in a slightly more congenial tone, "Oh. Hey."

"Steve, I'm in a real jam. Carol is going into surgery right now, but she forgot her license at home, and she needs it to get admitted. Would you...would you be able to go to our house and pick it up, and then

bring it to Sibley? There's someone there looking after the girls, you would just have to pick it up from her. But I know it's a long way and..."

But before I could say anymore, Steve cut me off with his usual brusqueness, saying, "Yeah, no problem – where do you live?"

I gave him the address of our home and the hospital, and in thirty-three minutes, Steve managed to get to my house, pick up my wife's license from our babysitter, and make his way across the city during rush hour traffic. When he pulled into the hospital parking lot, I was waiting for his car and grabbed the license from him, but not before giving him my heartfelt and breathless thanks.

In typical Steve-the-mechanic-and-friend fashion, he replied. "Sure. Good luck."

I then sprinted back inside, and forced and bullied my way into an already overcrowded elevator. I remember my elevator mates looking at me not with annoyance, but with compassion, figuring that if I was running that fast in a hospital, there was probably a very good reason for it. A hospital may be the only place left in America where people still extend such empathy to one another.

As I ran up to the front desk and slammed that piece of plastic in front of the nurse, she looked at me with wide eyes of surprise. I think she was shocked that I had gotten it so fast, but also that I had taken her words about rescheduling with such absolute gravity. And sensing my urgency, she hurried to get Carol checked in, and told us that the surgery would go ahead as planned, and without delay. For the first time in thirty three minutes, I exhaled. She had made it. But frankly, my heart could not take another surprise today. The relatively minor realization that Carol didn't have her license had almost given me a full blown panic attack.

Fortunately, I wasn't alone at the hospital as I waited for Carol's surgery to start. John Benson was there with me. I had not expected John to be there – he just decided to show up because he thought I might need the company. He was right. It was comforting to have him by my side, even though we didn't say much that morning besides pray that the surgery would go well. I knew that he understood how I was feeling that morning, and didn't feel the need to say anything in particular, or make small talk. We just sat, and waited.

But before long, I felt like something was wrong. They were supposed to come and get me once surgery was about to start so that I could talk to Carol before she went in, and that was half an hour ago. For some reason, the mastectomy had been delayed. I looked anxiously about the waiting room, as if the reason for the delay was written on the walls, or the TV, or on the face of others. Dread fell on me, and my heart began to race, and my arms and legs shake with tension – I knew that something was not right.

Then I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was my wife's surgeon.

"Reverend, I need to talk to both you and wife about something very important. Will you come with me into surgical?"

I liked Dr. Magnant a lot. She was an experienced breast cancer surgeon with years of expertise. She struck Carol and me as very confident and yet very caring, a good combination for a doctor, and a particularly rare one in surgeons, who tend to be more of the former, and less of the latter. She was also a Christian who trusted God, which was encouraging to me and my wife. But there was also this very likable air about her, a kind of rough-hewn and sardonic humor that I assume came from the fact

that she was raising three teenage sons. I think women in that situation, as a survival mechanism, develop a very sarcastic view to life, and a high tolerance for potty humor and jokes involving the butt and/or farts. She always respectfully referred to me as “Reverend”, which I thought was rather nice of her considering I look like a teenager. Maybe it’s just a habit that medical doctors have because they have such a chip on their own shoulders about being addressed by their official titles as well.

When she tapped me on the shoulder that day, although I didn’t say a word in response, my mind screamed in terror. I just mutely nodded my head and followed her through the automated double doors that led to the surgical prep room. But every step I walked with rising fear that I could barely stifle. I was terrified of what was going to happen, of what she might say. What was it this time? The insurance company? Had the cancer spread, to her lungs, to her brain? Was there some other terrible complication that we never could have imagined? What terrible news did God have in store for us?

I followed Doctor Magnant into the surgery prep room, where my wife lay on a surgical gurney. My wife is not a large person at all, but laying on a hulking gurney and draped in her billowing surgical gown, she looked more like a child than the mother of two children. It broke my heart to see her this way, so fragile and so small. I reached out my hand to comfort her, to lend her any strength I could, but the truth was that I had none to give. I was terrified of what the surgeon would say next, and could barely stand myself.

Doctor Magnant paused for a moment, and regarded us with an inscrutable expression on her face, a mixture of both seriousness and strangely, amusement. She then began cautiously,

“Sooo...we took a routine blood test for your wife as we were prepping her for surgery, something we always do. But when I got the results back, I saw that her hormone levels were a little strange, a little unexpected. So we had to run some additional tests, which is why we haven’t gotten started with the surgery yet. I just got those results back right now, took one look at them, and said to myself, ‘OH...MY...GOD.’ Mrs. Chin, you are pregnant.”

Carol and I looked at each other, but didn’t say a thing. Not a word. I think I tried to smile weakly at her, but I’m sure it was more of a frozen look of astonishment than anything else. A series of rather asinine questions raced through my mind: *“Pregnant? How did she get pregnant? Can someone with cancer even get pregnant? And when did that happen, four weeks ago? That was during that huge snowstorm where we were stuck at home for the whole week, with nowhere to go...”*

“Okay, I guess that makes sense.”

Realizing that we didn’t have anything intelligible to say in response, Doctor Magnant then continued, “Now at this point we have to make some important decisions. First off, you are going to have this baby, right?”

“You are going to have this baby, right?”

It really wasn’t just a question, because it was far more leading than that – it was more of an assumption, a suggestion even. The curious phrasing of her question sparked something in us, a conviction that we might not have had otherwise. Carol and I looked at each other for just the briefest of moments, and immediately agreed:

“Yes, of course. Of course we are going to keep this baby.”

And that became our final decision, that no matter what happened, *we were going to keep this baby*. It was a conviction that would be sorely tested in the coming months, and it would greatly complicate the process of Carol's treatment and recovery in many ways. And you could also argue that it was not the most well-informed, nor well thought-out decision either. And perhaps it wasn't. But at the same time, this decision would completely transform the next year of our lives, giving Carol's treatment and recovery all the more meaning and purpose, because we knew that at the end of it all, not only would she be cancer-free, but we would be welcoming a new life and a new member of our family into the world. It was a decision that I would never, ever regret, and I believe it was the turning point of our entire story. And it all began with that not-so-innocent question that Doctor Magnate posed to us, "You are going to have this baby, *right?*"

Right, we will. It's funny how little it takes sometimes to get someone to do the right thing.

But before we could get too comfortable with this rather momentous decision, Dr. Magnate had another difficult question lined up for us. Without skipping a beat, she cheerily continued,

"Okay! Now, if that's the case, we need to decide about surgery today – we typically don't perform surgeries like this on pregnant women because the anesthetic might harm the baby. So, we could delay the surgery until a later time to give you guys some time to figure out exactly how you want to proceed. But at the same time, you don't want to delay this surgery very long at all because Carol's tumor is more aggressive. What would you like to do?"

We paused to digest what she was trying to tell us. "So...if we go ahead with the surgery now, there are risks to the child. But if we wait until later, there's a greater risk, for Carol, is that what you're saying?"

She nodded her head in the affirmative, but cautiously continued, "Now, that being said, our anesthesiologist here is the best. I'll talk with him, but I think that we can go ahead with the surgery today without harming the baby. Or at least we can minimize that risk. But you should know that there is still some risk involved. It's your decision."

Oh, how I longed for the good old days, when the most momentous decision we had to make was whether we stayed in for dinner, or went out.

We didn't have much to go on to make our choice, besides the quiet confidence with which Doctor Magnate spoke, how she seemed to be somehow convinced that they could do this just right, that somehow a balance between caring for both Carol and the baby could be reached. And so, I placed two precious lives in her hands and replied,

"Let's do it – let's go ahead with the surgery today. We trust you, Doctor."

She seemed touched by my response, nodded gruffly, and placed her hands on both our shoulders. And then she said something that would stick with us, even to this day:

"I don't know what God is up to, but He is up to something. That's for sure!"

I could hardly argue with that.

Before this, I had always thought I knew the answers.

I grew up in a Catholic school, where I was one of only a handful of Asians, and everyone else was Irish or Italian, and had names like Colleen, Maureen, Connor and Gavin. While I don't remember being especially spiritual or religious at the time, I do remember winning a bible trivia contest in third grade. And that is quite strange as I don't really recall ever reading the Bible back then. The only religious material I remember from my childhood was the book of Catholic saints, which I was morbidly drawn to because of the graphic scenes of martyrdom portrayed within.

But even from a young age, when it came to the Bible, I always knew the answers, at least the ones what you were supposed to give. It was the same through high school, college and even seminary – I was pretty sure I understood how God worked, and people would often turn to me in that capacity, to help explain to them what God meant when He said this or that in Scripture. I was the one who knew it all, and it was this sense of easy comprehension that had led me to become a pastor.

I thought I knew it all. But the fact was that I knew nothing at all.

When Carol was diagnosed with triple negative, and then our insurance dropped, whatever juvenile and simplistic conception of God folded in upon itself, unable to support itself in light of the harsh reality of what life was truly like. In just one month, my view of life and of God had been quickly and totally destroyed by a quick succession of trials. And I made the rather painful realization that I didn't understand God and His ways in the least. For once in my life, I had no pat answers to explain my family's situation. It was as if an earthquake had ruined my understanding of God, and of life.

But in truth, it was not an earthquake, a random kind of destruction that served no purpose. Instead, it was more like an implosion, a purposeful kind of destruction that makes room for something better to be created in its place. My flimsy conception of God had been methodically demolished so that He could build a new one in me instead. The process of reconstruction began the moment that I heard about Carol's pregnancy, and that we were going to have a child. It was as if I caught a wild and brief glimpse into the sublime manner in which He really works, a new conception of God's ways, one that was far beyond my ability to comprehend. Like God shouting to Job from the fury of the whirlwind, or the angel Gabriel appearing before the Virgin Mary, it was as if God was saying to me,

"Peter, look! You wanted to know what I was doing, how I work. Look, and see. I am not bound. I am not confined by the rise and fall of circumstance. My works are far beyond your ability to understand, woven with wisdom that you do not even know of. With foresight that you cannot imagine. With love so deep you cannot comprehend. My ways are higher than your ways."

The news of this child to be born was a revelation that God did not do things in the simplistic and fundamentally karmic manner that I had always pigeonholed him into, good circumstances = God, bad circumstances = not God. His plans could not be fathomed in 140 characters, and His purposes not known in a single month, or year, or even lifetime. In other words, God did not work according to my ways, or my wisdom, or in my timeframe – only according to His own. God's plans are not the events of our lives that we mildly expected to unfold the way that they do. They are earthquakes, to which the only proper response is to stand in silent awe. That day in January, a new life had been announced, but also, a new understanding of God had been conceived.

But this should have been no surprise to me, because you find this exact same dynamic embedded in the story of salvation, the story of Jesus Christ. You can almost imagine a (slightly heretical) conversation going on between angels regarding the gospel:

“So God wants to send a Savior, does He? Someone to bring heaven to earth, lead people in repentance back to their God? Hallelujah! It’s safe then to assume that He will send a king, or a conqueror, because that makes the most sense for that mission. Perhaps Gabriel will be sent, or Michael! That would be cool. Michael is the impressive sort.

What? God is going Himself?? AS A BABY? And to a carpenter’s family Nazareth, that’s ridiculous! And how exactly does He plan to redeem and restore creation?...

What’s that about a cross?”

You see, God does things His own way, not necessarily the way we think is best or can understand most clearly, and His purposes cannot be captured with crude principles and observations. But just because we fail to comprehend what He is doing does not mean He is not doing anything at all. And the sooner we accept this and put aside our simplistic and mechanistic understanding of God, the more clearly we can see God for who He truly is, and the better prepared we are for the reality of life in the world, and life in Christ.

But it also wouldn’t be fair to say that there is no earthly rhyme or reason to God and His ways – why would He have given us such magnificent and rational minds, unless they could be used to understand Him? Because I think every so often, in God’s mercy, our minds can discern why He is doing what He is doing, and those are moments of awe-inspiring wonder. I even caught such a glimpse that day. You’ll recall how Carol’s tumor was triple negative, meaning that it would not respond to any modern day hormone treatments. This was a huge blow to us because we could not understand why God would allow my wife not just to have cancer, but such a dangerous form of the disease. It made no sense to us...at the time.

But after the news of Carol’s pregnancy, it eventually dawned on us that if Carol’s tumor had been treatable with hormone therapy, those same hormones also would have ended her pregnancy. We would have had to make an incredibly hard decision between giving Carol the best possible treatment, or ending the pregnancy – there was no middle ground. But since her triple negative cancer could not be treated with hormones anyway, we were not forced to make this incredibly stark decision. Hormone treatments were not an option. Now, this did not change the fact that Carol still had a very dangerous form of breast cancer, but it was encouraging in some small way because it took away that sharp sense of disappointment that we had been feeling because Carol was not able to take advantage of those new advanced therapies. That may seem a small comfort, but hey – given what we had been through thus far, a small comfort was better than no comfort at all. And what’s more, we began to discern some semblance of a plan, that maybe, just maybe, God was still at work in all of this chaos.

With that, I watched as they wheeled Carol into surgery, and I returned to the waiting room, my thoughts and heart filled to the brim, like Mary pondering the words of Gabriel. Hours later, Doctor Magnant returned to tell me that Carol’s surgery went well, and that she felt confident that she had removed all of the tumor that she could, including some lymph nodes to which the cancer had spread. I thanked her for taking such good care of my wife. But I also thank her to this very day for giving us the courage to do the right thing.

Carol was transferred to a hospital room to recover, and as she rested, I reflected upon everything we had discovered that day. And I realized that I was as clueless as I had ever been, perhaps even more so. God’s ways were no clearer to me than they were 24 hours ago, and I could not comprehend what He was doing, not in the least. But at the same time, I was not anywhere near as hopeless as I had been the

day before. Because even though I did not understand what God was up to, I knew that He was up to something, just as Dr. Magnant had said.