

A Brief Testimony to God's Grace
February 3, 2019

Dr. Howard Griffith

I greet Thee, who my sure Redeemer art! My only trust and Savior of my heart,
Who pain didst undergo for my poor sake, I pray Thee from our hearts all cares to take.

Thou art the King of Mercy and of Grace, reigning omnipotent in every place,
So, come, O King, and our whole being sway, shine on us with the light of Thy pure day!

Thou art the life, by which alone we live, And all our substance and our strength receive!
O comfort us in death's approaching hour, strong-hearted then to face it by Thy power.

Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness. No harshness hast Thou, and no bitterness.
Make us to taste the sweet grace found in Thee, and ever stay in Thy sweet unity.

Our hope is in no other, save in Thee. Our faith is built upon Thy promise free.
O! Grant to us such stronger hope and sure, that we can boldly conquer and endure!

Attributed to John Calvin¹
Strasbourg Psalter, 1545

A few days before we were to travel to Paris, on Memorial Day, 2018, Jackie and I went to Fair Oaks Hospital in Fairfax, Virginia. My back had been aching for more than a month. Our dear friend Dr. Allen Roberts of Georgetown University Hospital encouraged us to have a CT scan. It showed that I have cancer that had spread from my small intestine to my back (fracture of T8). From back pain to cancer. Who knew? But God so kindly and quickly let us learn the real situation. That first weekend in the hospital our pastor Paul Wolfe sent me a video. It captured the congregation of New Hope Presbyterian Church singing my favorite hymn, "I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art." What hope and encouragement that brought! Christ is the sovereign Lord. Disorientation began to lift.

The past eight months have been a time of severe trial for Jackie and me. At the same time, these have been months of joy. Amidst pain and trouble, God has done amazing, beautiful and gracious things for us. I mean to tell some of them here, roughly aligned with stanzas of the hymn. God's works are many and very great. We delight in Him. Let all praise be his, now and forever!

- "I greet Thee, who my sure Redeemer art!"

When Jackie told the family of my diagnosis, our five children (ages 27 to 35) gathered. This was the first event in a truly uplifting tide of love toward Jackie and me. (More on that below.)

Jackie asked me to write to the family. We took a video. I had determined that I would seek God's glory through this trial. So, I said, "We are not going to respond in fear. God has us in his hands,

¹ Church historians doubt Calvin's authorship. "By 1545 he was long back in Geneva." Yet, even if not Calvin's own words, the faith and certainty expressed in each verse were surely his.

and he promises that he will not allow the believer's foot to slide one inch. We are going to walk this path, trusting Him" (see Psalm 121:3). This provoked an *excellent* series of questions: "But isn't it right to be sad about this?" Yes, it is. Cancer is evil. It is a result of God's curse on sin (see Romans 8:20-22). We then had great conversations about God's control over natural evils, like cancer, our freedom, and his love.² He is not against me, or against anyone in Christ. He delivered up his Son for me and I am accepted in the Beloved. He uses the sufferings of the present time (see Romans 8:18) so that Christ's resurrection life might be shown in us (see 2 Corinthians 4:7-12). This is the most important thing.

Pastor Glenn Hoburg prayed with us that God would keep us from traveling in our minds to a place that he has not revealed. Later that week, Pastor Paul Wolfe, himself a cancer survivor,³ gave me this advice: "Lots of people will be watching how you respond to this. But Howard, it is OK to be weak." He was wisely giving me permission to struggle with suffering. And biblically, we are weak, like it or not (see Rom 8:18-39). But "weak" is not the same as "unsafe." "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (see Philippians 1:6).

The day before I was to move to Georgetown University Hospital, Jackie had an emergency appendectomy. We ended up on the same floor at Fair Oaks in matching hospital gowns! God brought her safely through that and within days she was (*without complaint*) visiting me at Georgetown. The day after I arrived at Georgetown, they operated on my back to remove tumors, and to rebuild my spinal cord.

- "Thou art the King of mercy and of grace, reigning omnipotent in every place...shine on us with the light of Thy pure day."

Our five children and their spouses came to help. Some spent nights in my hospital room. Others visited frequently. The comfort of their presence assured me of God's love. Jackie needed care, recovering from surgery. Alex came from California twice in June/July, then brought his family of 5 for an indefinite visit in August. Abigail, who works at Georgetown Hospital as a Social Worker, came to visit every day. Her husband Carson visited on weekends. Calvin and Brittany, and Samuel, drove from Richmond. Graham and Marye-Ann flew from Las Vegas, where Graham was stationed in the Air Force. They brought so many kinds of popsicles they had to store them at the nurses' station. Alex and Kathleen sent me a tablet to watch movies, slippers and a very warm blanket.

We started to receive an abundance of cards and emails assuring us of prayer (RTS faculty colleagues, students, members of the body of Christ from all periods of my life). I cannot think of metaphors large enough for the good wishes. It was beyond belief. Surely God has been answering those many prayers. This is a great comfort, because it is hard to pray when you are sick. All these expressions of love were expressions of *God's* love for us.

The apostle urged the Ephesian Christians "be filled with the Spirit" (5:18). This "being filled" is not a "crisis experience," or a passing event.⁴ Paul commends it as the present life-experience of everyone in the Church. He then describes the image of this life (verses 19-21): speaking and

² See the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 3.

³ Paul Wolfe, *My God Is True! Lessons Learned Along Cancer's Dark Road* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009).

⁴ In the grammar, "be filled" is an "ongoing imperative."

singing to one another with the Word of God and devotion to the Lord (worshiping together); giving thanks to the Father always and for everything; and submitting to one another in the fear of Christ (putting the needs and desires of others *first*). This was my aspiration on going to the hospital. With the Holy Spirit as my Lord, I will let this time be one of joy and fulness. Give thanks to God. Greet people who come in the room, show an interest in them, thank them. Most of all, try to serve Jackie. That is the way to offering Christ “all our substance and our strength” (hymn verse 3). I received remarkable care from the very professional nurses and doctors at both hospitals. These people’s devotion and skill amaze me. Many nurses and doctors became friends. There were ups and downs, but always God renewed my faith.

While I was in the hospital Jackie had to manage our home life, then drive to Georgetown to be with me, every day. It was frankly amazing. She advocates my needs like a tiger, working with doctors and nurses on my behalf. Since I moved home in September, she lovingly carries my total care, morning to night--meals, administering IVs, daily medicines, visits to the oncologist, planning weekend visits from the kids, etc. She pays the bills and works through the seemingly unlimited insurance company hassles.

Jackie has devoted herself completely to me and my needs. She reads to me daily from Spurgeon’s *Cheque Book on the Bank of Faith*, and we read Scripture together and pray. She is happy to do it all. Honestly you do not know what God is giving you when your spouse vows in faith, “forsaking all others... in sickness and in health.” I am very much dependent on her love.

As a member of the Presbyterian Church in America, it filled me with joy to learn that Potomac “Presbytery” (gathering of regional elders) prayed for me that week. Then a couple of weeks later the larger gathering, the “General Assembly,” did the same under the leadership of my wonderful former student Dr. Irwyn Ince.

The elders of Grace Presbyterian Church of Washington DC, where Jackie serves as Counselor, came to Georgetown one Saturday afternoon to follow James’ exhortation, “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord” (5:15). Sometime later, the elders of New Hope Presbyterian Church, Fairfax, where Jackie and I worship, visited to pray likewise. Then came the elders of All Saints Reformed Presbyterian Church from Richmond, where I served as Pastor until 2007. Each prayed, with great thought and heart. These men are shepherds. We do not know what to pray for, but the Spirit helps us in our weakness, and God knows the mind of the Spirit. It helps to be able to call on God as “my Rock.”

Dr. Allen Roberts, a director of Georgetown University Hospital, came to visit and brought advice, prayer and good humor. Our son Graham (Captain, USAF) had requested a humanitarian transfer from Las Vegas to Virginia. He and Marye-Ann wanted to be close enough to help care for Jackie and me. With Allen Roberts’ recommendation, he received approval within a month (!) and moved to Yorktown, Virginia. No parent could wish for more. All this is from our God.

- Thou art the life, by which alone we live, And all our substance and our strength receive!
O comfort us in death’s approaching hour, strong-hearted then to face it by Thy power.

Death is not an impossible mystery. As Christians we know it is what all the children of sin must endure (see Genesis 3:19). Believer or unbeliever, we must all face it. That realism is something I so admire about this hymn. Calvin asks God to make us *strong-hearted to face it* by Christ's power. We are already raised with Christ in the inner man. Already redeemed with the precious blood of Christ, at death, believers go to heaven to be with Christ. Nothing in Scripture could be clearer.

During most of June-August I was in and out of the hospital. There were a number of complications (sepsis and infections) that delayed the start of chemotherapy. This was frustrating in itself, but the complications too were sometimes life-threatening. At one point they realized that I was producing blood clots from both legs. Ugh. We all thought that would end my life. Thankfully, Dr. James Malatack put me on a blood thinner that worked magic and has continued to work. But before we knew that outcome, I became quite discouraged. Alex helped me then. He said, "Dad, when you get discouraged it discourages the rest of us. We need you to express your hope for eternal life with Christ." My 35-year-old son, giving me the counsel I needed! I cannot thank God enough for his covenant faithfulness, giving Alex that faith and that love for us all. It helped me to revisit and renew the basis of my assurance of salvation, Jesus' death and resurrection for me. I have not spoken explicitly with each child about my mortality. But I know each one has had to think it through, and I know God is causing each one to grow in grace. Samuel calls frequently to pray with his Mom and me. I am extremely proud of each of them.

This is important also. God himself has been very near to us in this pilgrimage. All summer I hoped to be able to teach my "Christology" class in the Fall semester. I was sorry to have to give that up. But the Spirit has renewed my faith and hope. He has enabled me to pray, and to know he hears and answers. In place of teaching, I was able to finish an essay on which I'd been working and praying about for more than a year, "Covenant Theology in the Reformation." This was a huge gift from God. More important though, is that God has assured me of his presence. His greatness is control and authority, *not distance*. He is near to all who call upon him.

- Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness. No harshness hast Thou, and no bitterness. Make us to taste the sweet grace found in Thee, and ever stay in Thy sweet unity.

There is no harshness in Jesus Christ. He is full of sweet grace to our foolish and sinful selves. Something I have been praying about for a few years was my lack of attention to the needs of my children when they were small. During this summer especially, God gave me the opportunity to apologize individually to them. I had the time, and they had the willingness, to express some matters for which I needed to ask forgiveness. And of course, they forgave me without reservation. If I may exhort at this point, please do this as soon as you can with your family. It is rich grace from God, well worth the tension and difficulty of admitting your wrongs. Repentance is truly rewarding. "The joy of the Lord is your strength." As one sweet example: on Christmas day, we did nothing but laugh. I don't think there was a furrowed brow the whole day (but maybe I missed it, ha-ha). God has given me opportunities to express repentance to other people as well.

- Our hope is in no other, save in Thee. Our faith is built upon Thy promise free. O! Grant to us such stronger hope and sure, that we can boldly conquer and endure!

Jackie and I have been home together since September. We have deeply enjoyed our time together. We pray, sing and read Scripture together. God speaks to us each day through his Holy Word. He

gives *himself* to us in Bible reading and prayer. He has answered so many prayers. We would be empty and cold without this Bible reading.

On August 4th Brittany gave birth to Marie Shelton Griffith, our 4th, and on February 1st, Abigail gave birth to Rowan Perry Middleton, Carson's and her daughter, our 5th grandchild!! They are both healthy and perfect.

The cancer has not shrunk, but grown, alas. But we have the very best medical treatment, and God's sovereign control over it all. We ask him for healing. The financial side causes stress along with the medical side, because I am now on "Long Term Disability." But the Reformed Theological Seminary community, especially President Scott Redd and insurance administrator Linda Cochran, has supported us beautifully at every crossroad. Our fellowship remains rich. Jackie's sister Barbara and her husband Mike visit almost every week. Her sister Chris calls each day to encourage us. Peter Lee has sent us Scripture texts every day for months. We have enjoyed the great privilege of visits from my mentor and friend, Dr. Dick Gaffin. Fred and Kathy Kuhl have walked with us through many days good and bad. Our friends have sent us many needed meals. My life-long friend David Coffin drives me to Georgetown for radiation and chemotherapy. We reminisce, talk theology (what else is there?), and discuss the future of the Church.

"So, we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16). "Our hope is in no other save in Thee."

Howard Griffith