

An Interview with Becky Baudouin, Author of *Cancer, Faith and Unexpected Joy*



"I've taught you how to live; now I want to teach you how to die. You don't have to be afraid." When Becky Baudouin's mother spoke those words to her, they weren't said lightly. Her mother had an inoperable tumor—and after months of treatment, there was no hope for a longer life. There was, however, assurance of everlasting life. In *Cancer, Faith, and Unexpected Joy: What My Mother Taught Me About How to Live and How to Die* (Kregel Publications/September 26, 2017), Baudouin (pronounced Beau-dwen) shares the invaluable wisdom imparted by her mother during her final days.

Q: *Cancer, Faith, and Unexpected Joy* are insights into dying your mother shared with you following her cancer diagnosis. Can you tell us about the relationship you had with your mom? What was she like when you were growing up?

My mom was very relational and fun. There are five kids in our family, and she was very fulfilled being a stay-at-home mom. She felt it was her highest calling in life. She worked various side jobs as I was growing up to help pay for extras, but I knew being a mom was her first job; she was happy with that. Even though our family life was busy and hectic, I just remember her always being there. She loved and accepted me unconditionally — I didn't have to earn it, and she was always proud of me and let me know it.

I struggled a lot with anxiety growing up, especially in school, and she was very compassionate and understanding of my struggle. She created a sense of safety and security for me because of her unconditional love and acceptance, so when I was with her I felt peaceful and relaxed. She didn't push me — I was pushed enough at school — but rather she gave me the space to be my true self. She was the best example to me of what it looked like to live out her faith and live in community with other people. Her faith in Christ was at the center of how she lived and the way she loved others.

Q: When your mother was diagnosed with cancer, what prognosis did the doctor give her? What did the doctor add after answering the medical questions your family had?

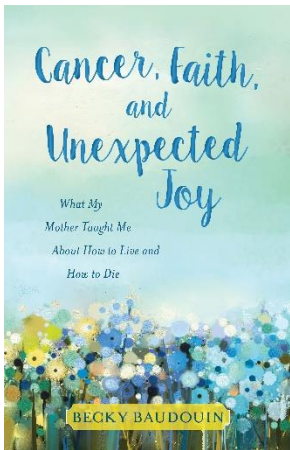
Mom's pulmonologist, Dr. Kraker, told us her cancer was incurable and inoperable. Treatment would hopefully extend her life and give her a bit more time with her family, but the type of cancer she had would spread. There was no hope of her surviving.

However, he did offer a different kind of hope. He asked Mom if she was a person of faith. She answered, "Oh, yes! I have a deep faith in God, and I believe in the power of prayer." We had not yet been able to process or accept what the doctor had just told us, and at this point, I think Mom was holding on to the hope she would be healed miraculously through prayer and faith. Dr. Kraker told us, "If you read even a little bit of the Bible, you will see God tells us we will have troubles in this life. But He tells us over and over again not to be afraid. He promises no matter what happens, He will never leave us. He will help us through all of our trials, and He gives us the assurance of eternity — the promise of Heaven after this life is over." I think he was encouraging my mom and our family to put our faith in God and in the promises of His presence, His help, and Heaven, rather than in a desired outcome. His words helped to set the tone for how we processed this difficult news and how Mom approached her diagnosis.

Q: What role did your mom's faith play during her months of treatment?

We all prayed for Mom to be healed, and she believed she would get well. One night during one of our phone conversations, though, she told me, "The way I see it, either way I'm in a win-win situation. Do you know what I mean?" I thought I understood, but I asked her to explain. "Well, if I am healed of this cancer, then I win more time with my family. If I die, then I win eternity in Heaven with my Savior. Either way I win."

I saw her faith was in God and not in a particular outcome. I saw she was trusting God no matter what. I think her faith in God just continued to grow deeper throughout the course of her treatments, and it enabled her to surrender and accept the reality of what was happening.



Q: As Christians, we should be secure in what will happen to us after we die, but we still experience fear in relationship to death. What is it we are afraid of?

I think we are afraid of the unknown. We believe in the promise of heaven, but even with all we think we know about it, we don't have proof of it or know what it will be like once we get there or about our transition from this life to the next. In 1 Corinthians we read that no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human mind has conceived the things God has prepared for those who love Him.

We can only think about Heaven with our human minds, with our human limitations, and from our human experience. It truly is by faith we believe it.

We also don't want to leave our loved ones. Most of us want more time, and we don't want to miss out on seeing our kids or grandkids grow up. We want to enjoy life and aren't ready for our journeys on earth to be over. We don't want to suffer; we don't want to see our loved ones suffer. We may also still have some doubts about our faith. Most of us do. I think it is understandable, even as Christians, we still have fears around death. We are human.

Q: On the topic of fear, what were your biggest fears as a child, and how were you forced to face those fears, even into adulthood?

As a child I was afraid my parents would get divorced. It was always a big fear of mine. I lived with this sense our family was on the verge of falling apart.

I also feared I would never outgrow my stuttering problem. I had a ton of anxiety related to this, and school was extremely difficult for me because of it. (Interesting fact: When I was in high school, my speech therapist had me create a list — sort of an “anti-bucket” list — of all the things that were difficult for me to do, such as ordering in a restaurant and answering the phone. She had me include things I could never see myself doing, such as speaking in front of a group. Doing a radio interview was on that list as the scariest thing I could think of.)

Because my mom smoked cigarettes, another pervasive fear I had growing up was my mom would get lung cancer and die.

My parents got divorced when I was in college, and my stuttering continued well into my mid-20s. Then, just when I thought the risk for lung cancer was behind her because she had finally quit smoking, Mom was diagnosed with cancer, and she died. I had carried these fears with me for many years, and what I found was even when I had to face them — when they became realities in my life — God was with me. He helped and gave me what I needed in the midst of these dark times in my life. He became my true refuge and my ever-present help in times of trouble.

Q: What was the first decision you made when you learned your mother had lung cancer?

I decided to rearrange my priorities so I could show up and be fully present with my mom during her illness. My husband, Bernie and I had been volunteers in our church's marriage ministry for more than 10 years, but I immediately knew I need to step out and take a break. I knew I needed to pull back from some of the groups and activities I was in so I would have the energy and time to take care of myself and my family and to take frequent trips to Michigan to be with my mom. I realized I had limited time and resources, and I drastically simplified my commitments.

During that season, I didn't volunteer at my daughters' schools and extra-curricular activities, and some people didn't really understand. I just had to say no to some of those things, and I didn't worry about trying to explain this to people who didn't really know me or what I was going through. I took some time off from work, and I missed some things with my kids. However, I knew I would never regret the time I spent with my mom. I knew it was a season that wouldn't last forever. I also reached out and asked people for help. Friends brought meals over when I was out of town, and our kids spent lots of time at their friends' houses. I didn't try or pretend like I could get through this alone or keep juggling everything I had been doing before Mom got sick.

Q: *Cancer, Faith, and Unexpected Joy* is written as a series of journal entries. Was there a reason you decided to document this time, or was journaling something you had always done?

I have always kept journals. Writing is and always has been one of the ways I process what is happening and what I am learning. Sometimes I can't even process something that happens *until* I write about it. During my mom's illness, I had a strong sense I needed to write things down. I wanted to be able to remember things she said and did and what I was feeling and to share these things with my daughters.

Q: How did each of your daughters process the news about their grandmother differently? Why did you choose to be open about your grief with them rather than shield them from what you were feeling?

My eldest daughter, Kate, was very mature and compassionate toward me. She could see how hard the idea of losing my mom was for me and was sensitive to that. My middle daughter, Claire, was very quiet and didn't want to talk about it a lot. She is not as much of a verbal processor, and I realized it's OK for us to process differently. My youngest daughter, Brenna, was very distraught and upset about the news. She was afraid her grandma was going to die and talked about it to me often. She had a lot of fears and sadness.

I chose to be open with my children about my grief because, for one thing, I couldn't hide it. It was just so heavy and present with me, I couldn't keep it from them. I also saw value in letting them walk with me, letting them observe how I dealt with my strong emotions of sadness and fear. My mom was teaching me how our faith is an anchor during these storms of life, and I wanted to do the same for my daughters. They saw me hold on to Jesus during this time, and I think they learned the value in grieving well. I remember Brenna wrote me a note one day, telling me I looked beautiful when I cried because she could see my heart. She was seven years old and very open and tender-hearted. She connected with me in my grief in a profound way.

Q: Sometimes we don't know what to do or say when a friend is diagnosed with cancer. We wonder if we should reach out or give him or her space. In your experience, what is the best approach?

I think it is best to reach out in some way, at least initially. In the book, I talk about my friend Gerry and finding out she had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Her husband told me about it, and I waited several days before reaching out to her. I was in shock and just sick about it, and I kept thinking *I don't know what to say to her*. I was afraid I'd say something stupid so I procrastinated. However, one night I thought, *I have to call her. If she doesn't want to talk she won't pick up*. Well, she answered, and what I realized during our conversation is it was OK I didn't have any words to make it better. It was OK I didn't know what to say. She just needed to know I cared. She needed to know I was there and was going to walk this road with her.

Our fear of saying or doing the "wrong" thing shouldn't keep us from reaching out because they are most likely in the same boat, scared and not sure of what to do or say. The important thing is to be there. To show up and let that person know you are in this with him or her, that you want to walk this journey together, and offer support any way you can. We also need to keep in mind some people are very private, and they may not invite us into their journey the way we would like. It can be painful and feel like they are pushing us away. It's important to listen to their wishes as well and to be sensitive to where they are at.

Q: Many people say God will never give us more than we can bear, yet you'll never find that stated in the Bible. What did you learn about facing circumstances you never thought you would be able to bear and the power of bearing one another's burdens?

Yes, that is a quote is used often, and many people think it is in the Bible. However, it's not. The idea God burdens the strong with more difficult, weightier problems is just not true. What we do see over and over in Scripture is God equipping people who feel inadequate. Moses, Esther, Mary (the mother of Jesus), Paul (with his thorn in the flesh) . . . even Jesus, the night before He was crucified, was overcome with sorrow to the point of death. Jesus asked his disciples to stay and pray with him. He prayed, "Father, if it is possible, take this cup from me." Jesus felt our human weakness in those moments. We see in each of these stories how God gave everyone what they needed in the moments when they felt weak. Rather than being strong enough to carry their burdens, they learned to depend on God. They drew their strength from Him. God's power is made perfect in our weakness, and we find strength when we come to Him in our moment of need. He also strengthens us through one another as we come alongside each other and help carry one another's burdens.

Q: What does it mean to grieve as you go?

Most of our losses are not singular, meaning one loss in one moment in time. There are layers and levels to our losses. Grieving as you go means as you experience each layer of loss, you grieve. For an aging parent, it may mean giving up certain freedoms and becoming more dependent. If a loved one has a progressive illness, we may feel we are losing pieces of him or her at a time. In these situations, we grieve each layer, each stage of loss. Then after a loved one dies, whether suddenly or after an illness, we will experience more layers of loss in the weeks, months and even years that follow. Holidays and milestones, moments when we wish our loved one could be there — we grieve those losses as they happen. We acknowledge our sadness. We grieve what we've lost and what we missed out on and never got to have. We grieve what now can never be.

Q: What was the last lesson your mom taught you?

Surrender. My mom taught me what it looks like to surrender, especially when things turn out differently than we had hoped. She accepted what was happening, even though we had prayed for something different. She entrusted herself to the One who is all-loving and wise and trusted in His plan. This posture of surrender brought a deep, abiding sense of peace leading up to her final moments on this earth. She was deeply at peace and taught us when we surrender to God, we really don't need to be afraid. He is completely trustworthy.

Q: Even though cancer plays a major part in your book, isn't there something everyone facing trials can take away from reading *Cancer, Faith, and Unexpected Joy*?

Absolutely. I think the commonality and place of connection is when we find ourselves facing something out of our control, a problem or trial no one can fix. A sickness no doctor, no treatment and no amount of money can fix. A loss or tragedy that cannot be reversed. From a human perspective, these are hopeless situations with circumstances that cannot be changed. Yet there is hope of another kind. We have our faith as an anchor, and God promises His presence and help in every difficult trial we face. He promises never to leave us or forsake us. This is true hope — not that our circumstances will change, but that God will get us through those circumstances.

Q: The holidays will be coming up soon. What words of encouragement would you like to offer those who are facing their first Thanksgiving and Christmas without their loved one?

Expect the holidays to be hard and for feelings of sadness and loss to be magnified. Also expect God to comfort and help you through these difficult seasons. It's important to think about things ahead of time and come up with a plan. It can be tempting just to play it by ear, but with the holidays being such a busy, stressful season with lots of social events and scheduled family gatherings, we really need to be intentional about what we would like these days to look like. Some questions to consider are:

- What traditions do we want to hold on to, and which ones are too painful this year? Do we want to try something new, such as traveling to a new location or going out for dinner or a movie?
- Do I need to be with people, or do I need to spend time alone? Usually it is a combination of both, but it's very important to consider.
- In terms of the "have-to's" (decorating, shopping, baking, sending out Christmas cards, parties, etc.), what is most important for me to do, and what can I let go of? Maybe you don't send out cards or decorate to the extent you normally would. Maybe you cater the dinner and shop online.

Talk to your loved ones about these things, and be honest about how you are feeling. Then try to come up with a plan that will allow everyone space and time to be together and to grieve. Lean into the true meaning of the holidays. For Thanksgiving, we still have much to be thankful for. Spend some time focusing on those things. At Christmas, embrace the hope of Christ's birth, allowing Emmanuel — God with us — to bring you comfort.

Learn more at www.beckybaudouin.com. She is also active on [Facebook \(Becky Baudouin\)](#), [Twitter \(@beckybaudouin\)](#) and [Instagram \(beckybaudouin\)](#).