

FOLLOWING JESUS

A quiet pebble beach is located on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It is under the shadow of the Golan Heights, not far from the ancient village of Bethsaida. It was here, early one morning, that Jesus stood and shouted across the water to His friends in a fishing boat.

"Catch anything?"

Peter recognized His voice, jumped overboard and swam to shore. It had been several weeks since Jesus had risen from the grave. He kept appearing and disappearing. By the time the other fishermen got to shore, Jesus and Peter had a fire going and breakfast was almost ready.

What followed was one of the most personal and poignant encounters in the Bible. Pulling Peter aside, Jesus predicted the kind of death he was going to die:

"When you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go" (John 21:18, NIV).

It was a disturbing prediction. Peter was going to be crucified.

Peter's reaction was similar to the way many of us react when we get a glimpse into the future of unpleasant things—we divert attention away from ourselves to someone else. Pointing at John, Peter asked, "Lord, what about him?"

Jesus' response was instant. "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me" (John 21:22).

Like all of us, Peter was hoping for a guarantee of long life. He didn't like the possibility of early death—especially if it included suffering. He wanted to hold to all the healing verses of the Bible but omit the verses about Christians having to suffer if they follow Jesus.

I understand that feeling. Last summer, I emerged from my healing experience with cancer feeling invincible. Almost immortal. The doctors had told me I was going to die, but God intervened. I not only survived—I was healed. But I didn't get what I really wanted: a guarantee the cancer would never return.

That is the heart of Jesus' response to Peter: "God allows no guarantees. He does not want you to walk by knowledge—but by faith.

"I alone control the length of a man's days,"

Jesus told Peter. "How long John lives is none of your business. You must follow Me."

Following Jesus means risky living. God, however, is far more interested in what we become than whether we reach the goal. In fact, the goal is really found in the following—not the arriving. That, sadly, goes cross-grain to the American concept of success. But God is more interested in building our faith than providing mental security.

The new cancer, pressing on my spine, caused pain in my hip and leg. I finally reached the place where I couldn't stand upright in the bathroom to brush my teeth. Instead I had to lean back against the wall. Reluctantly, I started radiation treatments. Within two weeks, the pain was almost gone. It was a good sign. The tumor was shrinking.

Then, three weeks later as I was completing the treatments, I developed a new set of pains in my back and leg.

The doctor reminded me it could be "good pain." The nerves damaged by the tumor could be regenerating. But there were no guarantees.

"Father," I prayed, "I'm in trouble. I need Your help."

He answered gently. "Would you call on Me for help if you were not hurting?"

Why does God ask rhetorical questions? He already knew how prone I was to become self-sufficient the moment I began to feel better.

"I don't like it when you hurt," He said softly, "but I do like it when you ask Me to help you."

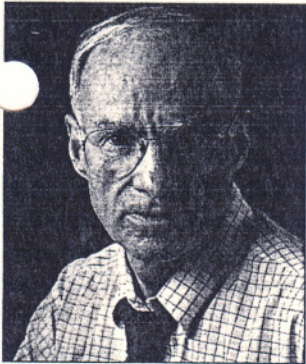
Corrie ten Boom once told me that as a child she had asked her father when God would give her the courage to be a martyr for Jesus. Her wise father replied, "When you take a train trip from Haarlem to Amsterdam, I give you the money for the ticket just before we get on the train.

"And so it is with God's strength...Today you do not need the strength to be a martyr, but as soon as you are called upon for the honor of facing death for Jesus, He will supply the strength you need—just in time."

Most of us are like Peter. We want to follow Jesus on our own terms. And we always like to know where we're going before we start.

God, however, does not reveal the future. He reveals Himself. ■

Jamie Buckingham is editor-at-large of Charisma. He says his cancer is in remission and that he's virtually "pain-free."



BY
JAMIE
BUCKINGHAM