

# Diagnosis



## Joshua

My son likes his peanut butter and jelly sandwiches cut into long, thin strips. It's a little extra effort, but every time I make him a sandwich, I spread a thick layer of peanut butter on one piece of bread and an equally thick layer of jelly on the other. Then I mash the two onto each other, bringing together the classic blend of sweet and salty, and I cut off the crusts. I read somewhere that the crust is good for you, like the skin of potatoes, but Joshua doesn't like it. Even now at seven years old, he hasn't grasped the need for nutrition yet, and sometimes I count it a moral victory that he's getting in his fruit group from the jelly side, so I don't press the crust issue. Then I cut the sandwich into four long, thin pieces.

His name is Joshua Michael Kelley—not very original, I know. When he was born in 2004, *Joshua* was the third most popular name for boys in the United States; “Michael” was second most popular. No points to us for creativity.

But we didn’t consult the lists for trendy names during those days. We named our first-born child “Joshua” for two reasons. First and foremost, we loved the name. We thought it inspired strength and conviction. We still hope the day never comes when his name gets shortened to “Josh”—I think that shortened version takes away from the power of the original. We wanted him to be named Joshua—the whole name, with the whole meaning. That’s the second reason for our choice.

*Joshua* is a Jewish name, and while we have no physical Hebrew lineage, we resonate with the meaning: “the Lord is salvation.” Being a family of faith, we enjoy the implication of the name and hope that someday he’ll grow to appreciate it as well. We want Joshua to live a life in which he knows who God is and is confident in himself because he’s confident in God. We don’t necessarily expect him to be a tremendous scholar or someone of great prestige or fame (though watching my son play for the Atlanta Braves would be just fine with me). No angels came down out of heaven to make a grand prediction about his future. But we do want him to walk in confidence, knowing that God is salvation—nothing else. Even in hopeless

times, God is salvation, regardless of what career or family track he chooses.

So that's the name we chose. We decorated his room in blue and red; we had a picture framed commemorating his name and the meaning behind it. And we expected to live happily ever after. In 2004 we imagined Joshua standing up for his moral convictions throughout his teenage years. I think we hoped that he would choose to believe rather than doubt as he made career and educational decisions. We did not, however, expect the reality of life to come crashing into our insulated world as quickly as it did.

## PB & J

My wife, Jana, picked up Joshua from Parents' Day Out on October 17. That in itself was a little unusual because I usually picked him up. About eight months earlier we had made the decision to drastically alter our lifestyle. I loved to teach and write, and so we decided to make a go of my being an independently employed freelance communicator. Catchy job title, right?

I left my job working as a student pastor in Nashville, Tennessee, to try to make it happen. In true romantic fashion, Jana went back to work teaching fourth grade while I went to chase dreams. Our hope was that she would do this for two years until my work was steady enough for her to be a stay-at-home

mom again for a while. In the meantime I would stay at home with Joshua and work during his naps and on the days he went to his preschool. That's why he was at Parents' Day Out rather than Mother's Day Out; I was too insecure to call it Mothers' Day Out since, well, I'm not a mother. But on this particular day, Jana was on fall break from her school, so I took that Tuesday to work all day while she had full Joshua duty.

After Jana picked him up from his day at school, we hit the park in downtown Nashville. Joshua still has a half-broken front tooth as a reminder of the day because I got a little too ambitious on a teeter-totter. As we scoured the ground around the playground looking for a miniscule piece of a two-year-old incisor, Jana mentioned that one of the workers at the day care had noticed a rash on Joshua's belly when she was changing his diaper. That was trouble because it violated one of the cardinal rules of day care: Don't send a sick kid to be around the well kids. Just to confirm it was nothing, I dutifully promised to take Joshua to the doctor the next day—always an interesting adventure for a dad.

The next day was Wednesday, October 18, and Joshua and I gathered up some trucks into his bag. We set out for Harpeth Pediatrics to get what I was sure would amount to some overly smelly cream that I would have to spread onto the trunk of his body for a week. While I didn't relish the thought of smelling like an old man with skin problems, I did like the idea of being

able to stride into the preschool and assure everyone that I had taken the appropriate steps to make sure Joshua was well. I made him a sandwich so we could have a picnic after the doctor's visit. I made it just the way he likes it. Peanut butter on one side, jelly on the other. Smash it together, and cut it into long, thin strips.

## Cancer

It's not that difficult to tell when someone has something he needs to tell you but really doesn't want to—you can almost always sense the news coming. It's the same feeling you have right before a news broadcaster interrupts the regularly scheduled programming for a special message. Or when your spouse is talking on the telephone to someone in grave, hushed tones, only to hang up and invite you to "have a seat. I have something to tell you." It's that feeling where you hold your breath without knowing it and you feel your heart beating inside your head.

Dr. Collins had ordered a blood test after examining Joshua; while the blood test came and went, I tried to keep a two-year-old preoccupied in the prison-cell-sized examination room. We played with trucks. Then we played with a lot of medical instruments that I'm sure we weren't supposed to touch. Joshua ate one strip of his sandwich. Then the doctor came back. He sat across from me. Looking at him, I

subconsciously held my breath. My heart started beating in my head. Why was I nervous? We had been to the doctor before. But something was different this time. Then he started saying words that I never expected to hear: “hematology,” “children’s hospital,” “call your wife.” Then he said the word that would become part of our everyday vocabulary at heartbreaking speed: *leukemia*.

What do you do with a word like that? How do you respond? What questions do you ask? I didn’t know; I still don’t know. But I think I do know that some words in our vocabulary are heavier than others, words that linger in the air long after they are said. They echo in your mind and pierce your heart over and over again, and when they are first spoken, they drop to the pit of your stomach like lead. *Leukemia*.

Two hours later Joshua was still playing with his trucks, but he was playing with them on the floor of an examination room at Vanderbilt Children’s Hospital. My wife had joined us, and we were waiting for the results of a secondary blood test they had done. We didn’t speak. We didn’t cry—much. We hoped, we tried to pray, we wanted to believe. And then we had another sit-down moment.

Amid Joshua’s truck sound effects and laughter, we heard the confirmation that our two-and-a-half-year-old boy had a childhood cancer of the blood. And it felt as if someone had punched me as hard as they could in the gut. *Leukemia*. There

was that word again, and there was the lead-heavy residue in the air. It echoed in my heart.

Over and over again the words punched. The emotion welled behind my eyes until I thought my head would explode. How could 82 percent of his blood cells be affected? He's playing with trucks! How could he have cancer? I made him a sandwich this morning! And it wasn't just the emotion that throbbed; it was the questions. So many questions that I didn't even know where to begin.

There were the questions you'd expect:

- Is Joshua going to die?
- How can he be sick? He looks fine!
- Isn't it just a rash?
- How do you treat leukemia?
- What does this mean about the future?

But then there were the other questions:

- Why this little boy, God?
- How could You let this happen?
- Is this punishment for something we have done?
- Are You even real?

Joshua finished his sandwich, and I started to cry. I cried because there he was, eating his strips of PB & J the same way he had hundreds of times before. And while he ate, I wondered how many more times he would.

## Calls

In a span of moments that seemed like months, we had become “those people.” You know those people—the ones with the sick kid. The ones with the terminal disease. The ones with “issues.” The ones you don’t get too close to, not because you don’t care but because you don’t want to think about what life would be like if that happened to you. You know, *those* people.

The worst part is that we were not those people—we were the people who were supposed to “be there” for those people. I went to seminary for crying out loud! I was a professional Christian! We were a family of faith who believed in Jesus and His way of life, and as such we prepared ourselves to counsel those people. We filled our spiritual tool bag with Bible verses and theological sayings. We practiced good eye contact and carried tissues in our pockets to give to someone else. In all of our preparation to be with those people, we never prepared to be those people ourselves.

But I guess nobody ever really does. Nobody is ever prepared for the weight of the words, for the suddenness of the diagnosis. And maybe that’s why nobody really knows the right way to act when you become those people. But when you become those people, some things have to be done. Like, for example, making the phone calls.

Talk about being unequipped. I did not have the skill set



to talk to the grandparents. The aunts and uncles. The friends. I didn't have the emotional equipment. Heck, I didn't even have the informational equipment. I certainly didn't have the spiritual equipment, but the calls had to be made, and made they were. At great length I was able to articulate the diagnosis to both sets of our parents. The effort of squeezing those thousand-pound words out of my mouth made me gag several times, but after a long time in the courtyard of the hospital, I walked back inside to join my wife.

## Beginning

I found her eating pizza. Can you believe it? Freaking pizza!

But here's the thing—she had to eat pizza; when Joshua was diagnosed, Jana was two months pregnant with our second child. I don't think either one of us realized how hungry we were until the sweet nectar of pork and cheese hit our lips, and we devoured what was in front of us. And then, in the middle of the feast, we started to laugh.

Truth be told, I'm not sure what it was that we laughed about, but something was funny and we laughed. And we laughed. Then we laughed more. I quoted a line from *Steel Magnolias* about laughter through tears; then we laughed at how ridiculous it was that I quoted *Steel Magnolias*. She made fun of me for my knowledge of chick flicks. I made fun of her for her inability to stop eating pizza.

The pizza helped a lot for some reason. Maybe it was a reminder that some things in life would still be stable and regular, like our need for food that's bad for us. We would still sleep, still work, still live. And as we settled down a little bit and the initial shock of how life had just changed started to sink in, I had time to start processing some of those questions we were just beginning to have.

What does one do—one who believes in the gospel of Jesus Christ and gets paid for speaking and writing to others about how to do so better—what does someone like that do with news like this? At least in part, I think the right answer is to believe. Have faith. But what I began to realize is that up to that point in my life, *faith* had largely just been a noun.

A condition. An emotion. A feeling. Something like that. But sitting there with greasy pizza fingers, I knew the noun wasn't going to cut it any more. I couldn't just sit there and have faith, like I could just sit there and grow fat off pizza. Faith had to become a verb. Having grown up in an upper-middle-class household, never facing any major disease, poverty, racism, or even shortage of money; having never been without work, never been without education, and never been without cause to believe that all those things would just be there tomorrow, I realized that faith had never been hard. It had never been work. But it surely was now.

## All

But this was a moment when we couldn't just *have* faith; we had to *choose* faith. It had to be as conscious as any other decision; like choosing to exercise in the morning, faith needed to be discipline. And just like hauling yourself out of bed to go for a jog at 5:00 a.m., choosing faith was hard. Annoyingly hard. Frustratingly hard. But in its hardness, I also began to realize that I don't get the old adage that faith is a crutch for the weak to lean on.

That's what enlightened people say. They say that faith is for the weak minded and the heavy laden. They say that faith is for those who find their circumstances too difficult to face. So these weak-minded simpletons feebly turn to the idea that there is something more, someone more, out there with a grand design of the universe because the reality they are in is simply too much to bear. They can't accept that everything happens by chance, and they happen to be the victim of a cosmic lottery that hands down cancer to peanut-butter eating, truck-playing two-year-olds. They can't face reality so they believe.

I don't think so. In that moment it would have been much easier *not* to believe than to believe. See, if you choose to believe in the God of the Bible, the God of David and Abraham and Jesus and Paul, you have to believe everything about Him. You can't just pick and choose parts of Christian theology to take in and others to reject. To take God's love is also to take His

justice; to take His compassion is also to accept His wrath. It's not like a cafeteria line where you can just take mac and cheese and key lime pie because that's what your appetite tells you to take. You also have to take the asparagus.

You see the problem just as I did. If my family was really going to choose faith, then we would have to come to grips with the fact that there are parts of God and His plan that at best we don't understand; at worst we don't even like. We could no longer pick and choose certain parts of our belief system; we had to embrace all of it.

As we picked through the pages of the Bible during those first days, some promises jumped off the page at us. Verses like Psalm 112:7: "He will have no fear of bad news; his heart is steadfast trusting in the Lord" (NIV). Or the well-worn favorite Romans 8:28, where Paul reminds us that God "works all things for the good of those that love Him and are called according to His purpose" (NIV). We wanted to believe those verses. Badly. But the problem was that we feared bad news. Daily. Hourly. We were very much afraid. And Romans 8:28 felt like a pill that good Christian people were trying to shove down our throats. It's not that we doubted the truth of those verses; it was simply that we didn't see or feel how our pain was matching up to them. So began the collision of those well-worn Bible passages with our real-life experience. In my spirit, if not out loud, there was always a pause when I read a passage of hope.

I was crying out almost constantly for the reconciliation of what I believed to be true with what I was experiencing.

I remember clearly feeling that collision on one particular instance regarding one particular psalm, and I was both gratified and disturbed to see that this psalm acknowledged the inherent difficulty of our situation. Psalm 46:10a reads: “Be still, and know that I am God” (NIV). Now that’s a great verse. In the chaos of blood tests and diagnoses, we would have loved nothing more than just to be quiet. Not just verbally, but in our minds and hearts, too—to calm down and just trust. Unfortunately, we couldn’t. But then again, neither could the psalmist.

The psalm starts with encouraging words: “God is our refuge and strength, a helper who is always found in times of trouble. Therefore we will not be afraid, though the earth trembles and the mountains topple into the depths of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with its turmoil” (Ps. 46:1). That’s a pretty good description of what those moments feel like when you have to choose faith. Everything that just moments before you would have considered unshakable starts shaking. You want to emotionally crawl under a table or stand in the doorway in the midst of your circumstantial earthquake because the things of greatest strength, the things of most stability, the mountains and the earth and the oceans are falling down. But God, the most stable thing of all, is your help. He is ever present. He is not absent

even in times of trouble. That is, He is safety; He is security; He is a place to hide from the elements outside, the destination to run to when no one else will take you. He is your refuge.

The image of a “refuge” is found throughout the Bible. Sometimes it’s a high place, safe from threatening armies. Other times the word describes a city that is set up for all the greatest sinners to go to when no one else will take them. In still other verses the “refuge” is a cave to hide in to escape the elements of nature. Ultimately a refuge means that no matter what’s going on outside, no matter what circumstances threaten, no matter how hard the wind and rain blow, no matter how bad the cancer is, no matter how bleak the job market seems, no matter how far gone the marriage might be, there is a place to come that is secure. And, according to this passage, the place to come is not really a place at all but a Person.

Surely the Lord is big enough to provide shelter from all the disease, all the shattered dreams, all the pressure, all the expectations the world can throw at us. After all, we see in Psalm 46 that when the mountains are giving way and the earth is falling into the heart of the sea, when the very basis of all visible things is being picked up and thrown about and the firmest of created things are being destroyed, our response should be simply *Selah*.

You can see that word at the end of verse 3. It appears

throughout the psalms as well as other places like Habakkuk 3. Though there is some discrepancy over its exact meaning, most agree that its effect is a pause. Silence. It is the moment when the music ceases in the psalm because what has just been said is so weighty that it bears a moment of further reflection. These are dire circumstances in Psalm 46, the circumstances of real life—those that make us doubt if God is real and if He is really active in our lives. Yet there is safety no matter how hard the wind blows or the mountains crash. There is security in God. The turmoil of the world is represented in the psalm by the ocean that is in an absolute uproar because of the mountains toppling into it. Another kind of water is mentioned, too—a river. A river that brings peace and gladness and life to all it touches. That's what God is like to the psalmist.

In the river we find peace. We find safety. We find God, and we can be still. And that's why the psalm closes with the directive that it does. Despite the circumstances, no matter what happens to the mountains or the seas, God is still God. No matter what happens in your son's bloodstream, God is still God. Be still. *Selah*.

Here's the problem though. It's not just that the mountains are quaking, that the earth is giving way. That the seas are roaring. That everywhere around us there is instability and destruction. The problem is that the language the psalmist uses is not coincidental; it's judgment language. It is virtually the

same language the minor prophets used to describe the coming judgment of the nations. Judgment is not coincidental, nor is it random. It is a thought-out, well-planned, intentional act by God Himself.

The psalmist says as much down in verses 7 and 8. In verse 7 he affirms our greatest comfort that the Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. But in the next verse he confirms what we fear; “Come, see,” he says, “the works of the LORD, who brings devastation on the earth.” That throws a wrench into the nice concept of God’s being a refuge because He’s not only what we run to but what we run *from*. These circumstances—the mountains crumbling and the seas foaming—are not just happenstance. They are not just casual incidents. They are the works of the Lord. Those circumstances in our lives that make us feel as though we need a refuge are, at best, allowed to be there by the Lord and, at worst, caused directly by Him. He may be our refuge, but it seems He is also our tormentor.

That’s the reality of God’s role in our lives. Even though He is our refuge, He is also the cause of our trouble. Some would go so far as to say that there is nothing in the universe that God does not directly control, whether winning the lottery or having a car crash. Others would say that He simply allows some things to happen—the bad things. But in the end the result is the same. In taking God as our refuge, we must also



realize that these circumstances are in our lives because He has seen fit for them to be there. That's the whole truth.

Isn't that the definition of *cruelty*? Isn't that proof positive that our worst fears are true, that God doesn't really love us and that all of our doubts have substance? The picture seems to be one of a heartless deity who plays with underlings like ants, blocking their path with an object only to fry them with a magnifying glass when they look for another route. And that's the uncomfortable part of choosing faith.

That was the beginning of our journey with the Lord. It continues to be a journey with a lot of questions and not a lot of answers. The best we could muster were mere observations for the way things are rather than explanations of *why* things are the way they are. It is a journey of hospitals and treatments, of medication and addiction, of joy and pain. It's a journey of trying to embrace the fact that God is our refuge but not a comfortable one to hold onto. It's a journey of realizing that He is our safe place, and yet He is not safe at all. It's a journey of realizing more and more of what it means to walk deeply with God and all the doubt, fear, anxiety, peace, and joy that come with it and how those things can possibly coexist together. It's a journey of understanding that there is nothing like pain to force long-held ideals and beliefs from the comfort of intellectualism into the discomfort of reality and trying to square with them there.

Maybe you know what it feels like, too, to struggle with things that are too big for you to understand and yet to sense that this is the path God has chosen for you. And because He did, you keep going. You walk. You put one foot in front of the other.

And so we checked into the hospital. Joshua was to begin chemotherapy the next day. Apparently there was no time to lose.