Forget Not His Grace

(谷蔡德芬) Lillian Koo

7/2020

翻譯陳林爾微EnglishTranslation: Winnine Chan

I have some thoughts and reflections that I wish to share with my brothers and sisters in Christ while I still have the opportunity.

Before I begin, I need to be clear with you about my faith and belief.

I deeply believe that God is good.

I know that God holds the highest absolute authority. “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” Romans 9:15

I also know that God’s will and His ways are higher by multiples of thousands than ours. Isaiah 55:8-9 “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

My husband is a civil engineer. I often think that whatever his work is, either building an over pass, a reservoir, or a highway, do I have the know-how? What about my elder brother’s launching of satellites, his projects in guided missiles and other space science research? How much more significantly greater and more awesome is our God. It is beyond any comparison. God’s wisdom is unfathomable. Then, why would I insist on understanding God and His ways? It is simply impossible.

Then, I must remind myself, God is not accountable to us for His work and He does not owe us an explanation.

What I am going to write in the following happened in 2018. I want to write this down because it has been a long time and I don’t want to forget. More importantly, what happened to me has so deeply impacted me that I wish to share with you.

We often say life is new birth, old age, illness, and death, but in reality life is only new birth, illness and death. One may never reach old age! Old age is actually a blessing. I am 74 this year, namely, an old person. This is a blessing in itself and I am very grateful for the years, months and days my Heavenly Father has given me.

My lung cancer was discovered in September 2015. It will be five years by September this year. I still remember what my doctor said that if it is not progressive breakthroughs in medical research and the discovery of generation after generation of new drugs, the survival rate of lung cancer patients cannot have gone beyond two years. Won’t you agree that this is worth giving thanks for?

In 2018 there were changes to my illness. Constant pleural effusion sent me to an operation called Pleurodesis to bring inflammation to the two layers of pleura to result in adhesion. It was not a major operation but it caused me tremendous trauma. I was in ICU and hospital for 5 days, in pain for 5 days and nights. This was also a very painful operation which the doctor said I would be in pain for three to four weeks before it settled down. I was really scared but the grace of God shortened my ordeal. I was slowly recovering after the third week.

However, in these three weeks, I had no appetite. I could only sleep with the help of sleeping pills every night. Every day, I used a large towel to make a tight pillow to put pressure on my right chest to relieve the pain from coughing or from moving my body. I had to breathe lightly. The 24-hour pain medication only slightly relieved my pain. I did not want to speak because speaking would pull my lung, resulting in pain and shortness of breath. This small operation reduced my weight by 4 kg to 46 kg. In two months, I was down to 39 kg. I was still without appetite and sleep. I was put under palliative care receiving home visits from nurses and dieticians. My cancer had advanced me from a stage 3.5 to stage 4 (terminal) patient. To speak the truth, I was shocked and equally depressed. I thought, “This is it!” Nevertheless I accepted this in my head knowing I had to go sooner or later. Unbelievably, by the grace of God, my appetite slowly improved and my weight rose to 44.5-45.5 kg.

I am not in pain now (\*), but I still shudder as I look back to those days when pain was without boundaries. I am particularly prone to pain. Like any chronic patient, this illness puts me through endless jabs of needles for blood tests, CT Scan, chemotherapy, lung effusion and lung biopsies. I was so tense that I squeezed my muscles, clench my teeth, and held my breath until it was over. My ears are not pierced and this tells you how scared I am of pain! (Of course I never felt I needed that done!)

I would like you to know that it was during this time when there was a tube inserted into my lung, when every breath was causing me pain that I prayed. Suddenly I thought of Jesus! He was nailed on the cross for our sins to bear this brutal punishment, to bear such agonising pain and suffering. I could not fathom and I could not imagine but as I did, I almost cried. I was made to understand more that the price Jesus paid for us was a price of blood! He had taken on this brutal form of punishment for us. I was shocked, I was pained, and tremendously saddened. Such grace is undeserved. How can I even compare my little bit of pain to the excruciating pain suffered by Jesus. I felt the more pain I had, the more I could understand and could become closer to Jesus.

Sleep was hard to come by. I was tired but I could not sleep. I woke up every two or three hours. As my eyes stared into the darkness, I was suddenly reminded of the wonders of how a human is created. See, we can try our hardest but we are unable to force our mind to fall asleep and rest our body. This is incredibly amazing!

I had no appetite and I could not force myself to eat. I felt my stomach was full. Refluxes brought even the small amount of food I consumed a few hours earlier to come up my throat and then slowly go down again. I was in a state that I did not want to put any food into my mouth all day and still I was not hungry. When my condition improved, I was reminded of God’s wondrous grace and work on me. He gives us the feeling of hunger (which in itself is unique), and it motivates us to want to eat. This provides us our body’s needs but also gives us joy and satisfaction to enjoy the beautiful food around us!

During this time, I realized what it is like to have your energy zapped, to be without strength. If I had to pull a door handle to open the door, I had no strength to do it. I was fine if I had to push it outward because I was using my body and not my hands! I could not summon my strength through breathing. Also, I was coughing so hard that I could not sing. Thus when I was at church, I could not enjoy the joy of singing together with everyone. I had to pause constantly to cough. I was not singing in sync to the melody. It was most frustrating. There is so much joy when I have recovered to gain my breath so that I can follow the tempo of the songs. You have no idea how happy I am and how much I enjoy singing now.

In my frailty, I felt I was losing grip on my life by drips and drops. I felt it was time to say good-bye. I had no strength left to do anything else. If I had dropped something on the floor, even picking it up gave me dizziness and shortness of breath. I was at times complaining to God. Oh, of all illnesses, if it’s not the lungs, I would not suffer so much. Every bit of energy from the body has to come first from breathing!

God remained silent. One day, I ‘accidentally’ watched a documentary on TV. It was an interview of Dr Justin Yerbury. His family has a history of Motor Neuron Disease (MND). It was the slow dying of cells in the spinal cords, causing the loss of control to the muscles. The patient will lose the control of fingers, lifting up the arms, walking, speech, ability to swallow and breathing. Death comes at the end. This illness took away his grandmother, his mother, his little sister, his cousin, and an auntie. His cousin was not even twenty when he died.

He was discovered to have this illness in April 2016. In six months he was totally paralyzed. He was in a wheelchair for the interview and was working hard with his assistants in research to find a cure to this illness. He was competing with time. If there was no cure to slow the onslaught of this illness, at least he hoped to produce drugs to slow its progress. This documentary also interviewed his doctor. He said, in an agonizing voice, that if any one wishes to design the cruellest of illnesses, the most painful of it all is MND. It has no mercy and no drugs can stop it. It makes the patient live in severe anxiety, anger, pain, fear, worry, frustration and loss of hope. The patient loses control and dignity is slowly disappearing before his eyes.

Then, I know God has spoken to me. Yes, Lord, I know. I will never dare to complain!

After my illness, I realised God’s creation of us humans is absolutely amazing. Blood will stop to bleed from where you have pricked a hole in the skin. God gives skin lustre but mine loses it because of the drugs I take. No matter how thick and how oily the skin moisturizer I applied to my skin was, it was like applying to plastic wraps! My skin remained dry, my face wrinkled and my entire body scaly. My eyes also become sensitive to airflow. Cold or warm air coming from air vents in the car seems to find a hole in my eyes and go straight to my brain. That was most unbearable.

My mouth also became very dry. When I woke up in the morning, my lips were stuck to my teeth. I had to separate them very carefully with my tongue. I realised that God has given us saliva not just to swallow our food, to help with digestion, but also to protect our teeth! My nails became soft and they split. The skin on my fingers became thin, especially on my thumb and index finger. They were sensitive to both hot and cold temperatures. The skin split if I used them too much. Any action that requires the thumb such as peeling oranges, mandarins, shelling pistachios, breaking eggs, doing up buttons, etc. is hard work. Then I realized that God has made the skin thicker and the nails tougher at the thumbs! There is a lot of other things to prove that God’s creation is so wondrously crafted. He thinks of everything so that we may live comfortably. We may take things for granted but they are all God’s grace!

Truthfully speaking, if we pay attention, God’s grace is everywhere. Acts 17:26 “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth, and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.” Man has no freedom to choose which period he was born in, which race, which nation, which family and who the parents are. There is no choice whatsoever to choose if you were born poor or rich, farmers or royalties, wealthy and powerful in the big cities or in the poor remote villages. The distinction is there the moment you were born.

When I look at my parents’ families, our family was the only one which fled Mainland China to settle in Hong Kong. Various political movements came and there was famine and the cultural revolutions. Many of my relatives who remained in China suffered mental anguish and even death. I was able to live in Hong Kong with my parents and had a good western education. Can life guarantee us certainty? Now I live to the 21st century, in Australia, a democratic country with excellent medical health system, and my doctor is even a good friend of mine! (Amazing?) If I had remained in Hong Kong, I don’t think I could afford to be sick. A sister in Christ has an elder sister in Hong Kong who also has lung cancer and the target drug she takes each day cost her HK$1700 per tablet. It is one per day for some three years. Besides I read in a news report that the target drug I take now is in its third generation. It is three times more expensive than the first generation. Could I have afforded it?

My children are grown up, and by God’s grace, I even have granddaughters. My second granddaughter was born in April this year. The Coronavirus COVID-19 prevented us from seeing her. However, we are grateful enough just looking at photos and videos of a healthy and bouncing little baby.

I have a loving family of origin where I receive tremendous support and care. There are many good friends in or outside the church who are very caring and helpful. From September 2015 to now, prayers for me have been incessant. Many sisters in Christ have extended to me various ways of help and encouragement such as preparing me soups, meals, nutritious drinks or health supplement, transporting me to and from treatment, or raising fund for the Cancer Foundations, etc. One sister in Christ gave me a jar of perfumed cream to sooth my nerves when she found out I was not sleeping. I feel most undeserved but deeply grateful. Your deeds may not be known by everyone but my Heavenly Father knows. May he remember you and bless you!

Since I got sick, I have become very sensitive to death. I look at the world, everywhere and every day, there are many who died from extraordinary circumstances. There are children, the young and the old. The causes of death vary. They may be accidents, conflicts of wars, natural disasters, etc. I am now sitting safely at home, enjoying the comforts of my home, fresh air, clean water, cars to take me around, and many family and friends who love and care for me. I am so blessed. Why am I still making noises?

Speaking about my home, I am just so full of gratitude! Where I am, if you have heard the story of how God has prepared it for me, you will know it is all the grace of God. The house we were some twenty years ago, all bedrooms were upstairs. There had to be much going up and down the stairs. The house we moved to nine years ago had a slope leading to the front entrance. In my present condition with shortness of breath, it would have been extremely difficult for me. God knows and He has prepared for my future. There is no slope and no stairs where I live today. Thank you my Heavenly Father!

When I thought about people who lost their lives unexpectedly, I felt that I am more fortunate. At least I am given time to plan. Not only did I have time to organize my affairs, more importantly, I could improve relationships. If I had offended any one, I had the opportunity to say sorry and ask for forgiveness. I could not think of any one I had offended (though this does not say there is not) but I felt I had let down a sister in Christ. She had needed help and due to some circumstances then, I was not able to help her. I had felt uneasy in my heart since then. I arranged a meeting with her and asked for her forgiveness. I thank God for the reconciliation.

In mid-2018, my younger sister came from the US to visit me. I used this opportunity to quickly say sorry to her for the incidents that I remembered. She however said they did not bother her at all but she mentioned one particular incident that I had forgotten. I have always loved my sister and we were very close in growing up. However, when she went against the family’s advice to marry someone we felt was not right for her, I got so angry that I refused to attend her wedding. Only two family members went and of course I did not go. Since then, because she was going her own way, we drifted apart and she was greatly hurt. When I heard her mention this incident, I was stunned. Oh yes, I remembered. Good heavens, what have I done? Have I done something so cruel to her? I was devastated. I was so remorseful! If I truly loved her, if I had given her my advice, I should respect her decision and make it good for her life. Whether it was right or wrong, I should have walked with her, cared for her and supported her. If she fell, I should have been her safety net. This is love! What did I do then? I thought I was right. I was but self-righteousness. Because she disagreed with me, I punished her, I boycotted her.

Realizing now how alone, helpless, sad, painful and wronged she must have felt, that we might have even caused her husband’s family to despise her or bully her, I knew I have contributed much to her pain and suffering! My heart is painfully wrenched of my ignorance and evil behaviour. I was most remorseful and regretful! Whatever wrong or hurt I had done, I could not revert. I only knew with pain in my heart that I could not go back to repair what had been done.

I also realized that she was not angry with me but came all the way from the US in 2016 for two months to help me pack and set up my new home. She even accompanied me to Hong Kong and back before flying back to the US. I felt so ashamed; I had no place to hide. I held her tight and cried out loud, repeatedly saying how sorry I was! I dared not ask for forgiveness. We both embraced and wept. She kept comforting me and this made it harder for me. However, this was absolutely a moment of the cleansing of the heart and liberating of the spirit. I am so thankful to my Heavenly Father.

(\*Remarks: We migrated to Australia a few years after her marriage. Thirteen years later, in 1993 when my father was ill in Hong Kong, I reunited with my little sister. She was living in Hong Kong then. At that time, I felt I was being generous for not counting the past but to renew our sisters’ relationship. She never mentioned her pain of being deserted, being punished and being rejected. (She should have been extremely disappointed in me.) She had buried all that within her heart until that day when she told me. I am most thankful that God has given me the opportunity to say sorry and to see how ugly my sinful nature was. Years later, her husband deceived her financially and she also discovered he had extra-marital affairs and they were divorced. \* I obtained permission from my sister to publish this story.)

Later on my sister asked me if there was anywhere that she had hurt me, I thought about it very carefully (If I had to think carefully, it means there could not be any) and I could not think of any. It made me even sadder!

I am most grateful that I had the opportunity to pour my heart out, to say sorry for my mistakes, my ego, my ignorance and my stupidity! Besides thanking my Heavenly Father, I am also grateful to my sister for her openness.

Ever since this episode with my sister, I felt most uneasy with myself. Have I hurt anyone else and was ignorant or forgotten about it? I asked God to reveal to me. There were times that we had said things that we felt was innocent but they was hurtful to others and we were totally oblivious. May God help me and have mercy on me this shameful sinner!

I have to say too that at the right time I was able to find sisters in Christ who helped with my meals. I am so grateful. It was like rings locking into each other. Only God at His mercy could have arranged this so perfectly.

See, God has been telling me in many different ways that He is with me. If only we would pay attention, we would have seen Him by our side all the time.

I don’t know the number of days I will have ahead of me but I know that it will end one day. I also know that we are only pilgrims on this earth. Nothing on this earth is more important than eternal life. This is the home we will go to one day. It’s a place that we will be with the Lord and there is nothing better than this. II Corinthians 4:18: “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” Let us have our priorities right.

I had not realized that my illness could have become other’s help! God actually gave me the opportunity while I was frail and weak. It greatly encouraged and comforted me and gave me great motivation and positive energy for life. I knew of a brother in Christ who also had lung cancer and when it was discovered, it had advanced to stage four. He was extremely shocked and scared because his two sons were only in their early twenties and were still living at home. I had the cancer first and I was able to share my journey with him. He told me that I could understand all of his negative emotional turmoil. He even said to me that it was his greatest blessing to have known me! His words took me totally by surprise! Could I be so significant? In my bewilderment, I felt actually comforted and blessed that I could be useful in people’s times of need. What a true blessing and the blessing is all mine! I was ill but I had become other’s help. God is so good to allow me this opportunity!

I will mention here that if I had to be admitted to hospital one day and if I did not wish to be visited, you would understand. To receive visitors is a strenuous exercise. May be I did not want you to see me losing dignity in my haggard self. Since God has extended my life, I embrace this gladly; to enjoy life and be thankful at the same time to be God’s witness. If it is His will, I wish I could give others a little bit of help.

Are you able to name the different kinds of grace I have written here?

II Corinthians 4:16 “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.”

**All glory be to our Father in Heaven.**

(\*Remarks: This was written originally in August 2018, and I had shared this on the pulpit on a Sunday Worship Service. By the request of the Chairman of the Diaconate, I have edited this in written form. I still have pain in my body. Since November 2019 to now, I need to take medication at regular intervals to control the pain. Even so, I thank my Heavenly Father for the pain medication. Every day is the grace of God!)