

You Gotta Run Through the Hurt

A Dad's Struggle with Childhood Cancer

by Byron Weathersbee

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About the Author

Byron and Carla Weathersbee founded Legacy Family Ministries in 1995 in order to pass on Biblical principles from one generation to another through deepening the roots of students, leading marriage preparation classes, and organizing Family Camps. Currently they lead a 7-week marriage preparation course called *Countdown* each semester for engaged couples. Each year he and his wife Carla disciple college students as well as speak at various universities, high schools, and camps. Byron leads a weekly Bible Study for the Baylor Baseball Team. They have published articles on student ministry, family, and Christian recreation. Byron and Carla graduated from Baylor University. Byron has an MA from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and is currently working on an Ed. D. from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

They have served on church staff for 15 years. Most recently they helped plant an innovative church, University Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, that ministers primarily to a new generation of college students. In June 1997, they began working full-time with Legacy.

His grandest feat is that he bungee jumped over the Guadeloupe River. Byron and Carla live in Waco, TX with their three children Bo (12), Brittney (10), and Casey (6). The thing they enjoy most is water & snow skiing with their family.

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Preface

A Letter to Bo

Dear Bo,

The MOST DIFFICULT CHALLENGE our family has ever faced came in June, 1989, when you were two years old and diagnosed with a muscle tissue cancer around the base of your bladder. After two years of intense chemotherapy, radiation, surgery, and all that goes with childhood cancer, you have won the victory over this life threatening disease. This experience has been the "GREATEST EXPERIENCE" our family NEVER wants to go through again.

God has used the hurdle of childhood cancer to change the way we run through life. We will never be the same. Bo, the purpose of this book is to help you understand all we have been through and how God used your life during our childhood cancer marathon to impact a family, a church, and thousands of individuals.

Life is a race with many obstacles. Only by the grace of God and help of others can we run the race to win. As you run to win, know that your feet must always remain on the narrow road even when the path has ruts or apparent roadblocks. The only way to remain on this narrow road is to have your eyes fixed on your goal, Jesus Christ. He makes this road passable by walking with you every step of the way. Also, you will need to have Christian brothers and sisters at your side to encourage and help you as you attempt to run through life.

Bo, thanks buddy, for having an extraordinary attitude through childhood cancer and making it a bearable and growing experience. May God grant you many years to tell of His almighty healing power that touched your life. My challenge to you is that you will always remember God's GRACE on your life. Keep the faith -- run the race. You are a WINNER!

*I Love You,
Dad*

Chapter 1

Hurts too Much to Walk

Problems, pain, and tough times are inevitable in life. In our world today, difficult uncertainties are all too common. Everyone wants to find easy answers and a quick fix to their dilemmas. In my life I have discovered there are no easy answers to life's complex questions. In fact I have been asking the wrong question. The question is not, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" rather "How do good people respond when bad things happen?" As we learn to overcome problems and pain, growth and maturity take place in our lives instead of defeat and depression.

In high school, I ran track. During the spring, every day I wanted to QUIT. I hated the sport because it seemed meaningless to run around in circles and was

"Pain is inevitable for all of us, but we have an option as to how we react to the pain. It is no fun to suffer; in fact, it can be awful. We are all going to have pain, but misery is optional. We can decide how we will react to the pain that inevitable comes to us all."

-Barbara Johnson

often painful. My track coach wanted to help develop young boys into men. At practice he would say, "Men you gotta run through the hurt!" He understood in order to become a

good athlete that one must run through a threshold of pain. Coach Posey believed that enduring pain is what separated the winner from the loser.

However, later in life I would rely on the words I disliked so much. Although I loved and admired Coach Posey, I never wanted to hear those words again. Those words would come back to me during a tragic time in my life. Besides, tragedy is something that happens to someone else...or so I thought. I can still hear the words of my old track coach's voice ringing through the West Texas wind; "You gotta run through the hurt!"

The Race Begins

In April of 1989, a beautiful brown-eyed girl was born into our family. As I stood over Brittney Nicole Weathersbee, my thoughts praised God for such an incredible miracle. WOW! How complicated the human body is and God designed and made every part of this tiny baby girl.

Little did I know just six weeks later I would be flying in from a seminary course in New Orleans, greeted as I got off the plane to news my two-year old son, Bo, had cancer. Immediately thoughts ran through my head...Would he live through the night? How long would I have with this little buddy of mine? Why would God allow this to happen?

As I arrived at the hospital, my wife, Carla greeted me with a warm hug. Her eyes appeared worn out from tears, but she presently was not crying. She carried an unexplainable confidence and peace. After our greeting Carla said to me "Byron, this is the same hospital we were praising God for in the birth of Brittney just six weeks ago. Now we are faced with Bo having cancer. Even though our circumstances have changed, one thing is still the same, and that is God. If God was worthy of our praise in the birth

of Brittney, then He is worthy of our praise though the difficult times. He is the same God!” Unbelievable! She had just made a strong statement. Could she really mean those words only eight hours after our son was diagnosed with cancer?

My beautiful wife, Carla, had demonstrated how good people respond when bad things happen in life. This unveiling would change our perspective of life forever. Even though it is all right to pursue the tough “why” questions about pain, problems, and tough times; we need to keep in mind that God is the same God no matter our circumstances. We should allow God the opportunity to teach us through all of life’s ups and downs.

But it hurts too Bad to Walk

During that first week, I walked over to the window of a 5th floor waiting room and looked outside. I felt numb inside. As I stared through the glass that overlooked four baseball diamonds, I immediately began to cry because of the uncertainty of the future. Would I be able to coach my little Bo in T-ball? Even if he lives, will he be able to run and play like the “other” children. As I walked away from the window, life physically hurt too much to walk much less run. I knew God was God, but the pain was excruciating! People, a sense of humor, and above all, God’s unexplainable peace ahead would smooth the long road.

God’s design for His children is to provide people that would encourage and walk beside us as He develops our character through the hard times. Our cancer marathon was full of people meeting our needs by praying for us, taking care of children, cooking meals, helping pay the enormous medical bills, and working through the endless waves of insurance forms.

However, sometimes people can be awkward guides. A sweet dear woman came by to offer her comfort. She hugged and hugged and hugged and kept hugging then told us that “Everything will be okay. God is in control.” Next she pulled us right up to her face looking eyeball to eyeball and said, “I have this friend that found out she had cancer when she was four years old. Today she is fourteen and all is fine. Although she has been through TEN YEARS OF HELL, everything is okay!” What comforting words...”TEN YEARS OF HELL!” As the friend left the hospital room, Carla looked at me and said “Oh BOY! We get to go through ten years of hell.” We gave each other a “high-five” and burst into laughter. Once again, we attempted to put this huge obstacle invading our lives back into proper perspective.

Keeping Perspective

A few weeks into Bo’s chemo treatments, his cute little blonde curls began to fall out. I knew something had to be done before this became an emotional issue. So, I took Bo to one of our friends that cuts hair and said, “Give him a BUZZ!” Then I jumped in the chair following his shave and said, “I want a ‘chemo cut’ just like Bo’s!” After ten or fifteen minutes of convincing her to cut my hair, she only gave me a crew cut. I looked up at her again and said, “I want it all off, not even a flat top...a buzz just like his.” Finally after the third attempt, she cut my hair to my approval.

We marched into our house like new Army recruits to show Carla our new “chemo cuts.” She first saw me and started laughing. After several minutes of laughter, we gained control and I explained what we had just done. I looked so ridiculous that she did not notice Bo’s beautiful curls were missing in action.

Although my hair grew back, this spontaneous event helped me understand more about God's sacrificial love for me. I realized that God is in the business of seeking ways to identify with His children. The greatest example is when God came in the form of Jesus in order to relate to man. The ultimate adverse circumstance ever faced by a human was the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Although Jesus had never done wrong, He was being harshly punished. Thus, no problem we face in life is a new one for God. He has been there. He knows what we are going through. He knows how bad it hurts. He holds the master plans for our lives. God identifies with our pain.

Been There Done That

The crosses in life always come before the crowns. So when you are knocked down for the last time....remember when Christ was knocked down...He got back up! Due to the price Jesus paid on the cross and the victory won over death as he came back to life, this allows us to bounce back and win the victory over adversity. We have victory in Jesus! We are winners! All we are required to do is get up and keep fighting.

Adversity is a strong character builder in life. The great athletes are constantly gaining new strength by allowing their muscles to endure tough times. In the New Testament, James says it best;

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything.” James 1:2-4

While speaking on a paraphrase of this verse, Charles Swindoll says that around each corner of life, a new set of hindrances will face us. Swindoll reminds us to view problems not as intruders, but welcome them as friends.

After two years of chemo, radiation, and major surgery, God has granted Bo full health. God used doctors, nurses, research, and medicine to heal my son. As I write, Bo will have been off treatments five years. That is the time line where doctors consider him cured...we call it healed!

The past seven years have been the greatest experience we never want to go through again. A growth and maturity have taken place in our lives that could never have been developed in any other way. We have learned that there are no shortcuts or easy roads to deepening our dependence on Jesus Christ. Each day brings new difficulties, but all that we have been through has taught us to trust God the Creator for what we cannot see....and to keep running.

Chapter 2

Be Healed

“I am so sorry, your son has cancer!” From the first day of hearing the news that my two-year-old son, Bo, had cancer, my mind raced with questions concerning healing. *Can God heal my son? What must I do in order for healing to take place? Do I have to have a certain verse to “name and claim” in order for God to work miracles? Is God still in the “miracle business” or were all those miracles in the Bible a one-time event?* Also, I was extremely confused regarding what was God’s job and what was the medical profession’s job.

The first night I spent in Bo’s hospital room, I cried out to God in many ways. Then I redirected my thinking. After all, I wanted to see my son up and running around. I wanted him healthy and normal. So I began to look at God’s Word for a “magical potion” of what to pray and what to do in order for God to heal him.

As I reviewed the New Testament, I came across a leper, Peter’s mother-in-law, a blind and lame man, a little girl who had died, and great multitude of others who experienced the healing power of Jesus. It was incredible to think Jesus had personally touched each of these lives and made them whole again.

“Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. “And they praised the God of Israel” (Matt. 15:30-31)

Wow! They praised God for all they had seen. I thought to myself, *If I saw something that incredible, I would praise God too!*

Then I continued my search for a simple formula of healing. Should I lay hands on Bo? Should I anoint him with oil? Many of the miracles Jesus performed utilized the laying on of hands and anointing with oil. I became more and more confused. Finally, I cried out to God for understanding.

As I continued to review the healings, all of them appeared to have a common denominator. The common strand was that Jesus always performed signs and wonders in order to point to God the Father. Several days later, one of our

Jesus always performed signs and wonders in order to point to God the Father.

secretaries at the church showed me this verse: “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it” (John 11:4). This verse is written in the context of Jesus healing Lazarus. It helped sum up what I had been learning regarding healing. I truly understand that God heals to bring glory and honor to His holy name. Therefore, when God heals, He is utilizing the healing to bring people into His loving arms. Does God desire to bring glory and honor to His holy name in our society today? Yes, He does! Then I believe God can and still does heal.

How Does God Heal?

I am reminded of the joke;

Q: Where does a fifteen hundred-pound grizzly bear sleep?

A: Anywhere he wants!

That thought somewhat describes my feelings toward the question “How does God heal?” The answer very simply would be, “Anyway He wants!”

In our healing experience in Bo’s life, God used doctors, nurses, and medicine but ultimately He provided the healing. The healing journey took two long years of chemotherapy, radiation and surgery. Medicine is a wonderful gift from God. God has designed us to utilize the abilities He has given us. As we continue through the journey of life, man continues to improve on better ways to live. It is God’s design for us to use our abilities to improve all we can do, so God can do all He wants to do.

The facts are that Robert Scott Weathersbee is now alive and well. It has been five years since his last treatment and there are no signs of any cancer. God used years of medical study, trial and error, and caring professionals to help heal my son. For you see, “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”(Rom. 8:28). And if you back up to verses 25 and 26, you will find we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. It is in our weakness that we truly allow God’s Spirit to work according to His purpose and plan.

I’ve come to the conclusion that the *how’s* are not as important as the *why’s*. God has used this experience and wants to continue to use it in the future to give a correct opinion of who He is. I have discovered that God’s healing is a subordinate work. His real work is using His Spirit to bring people into a right relationship with Him, to know and experience His gracious plan for their lives.

So if God is going to do what He is going to do...why should we pray? Can the power of prayer contribute to healing? In a landmark study of 400 heart attack patients, Dr. Randolph Byrd, cardiologist and faculty member of the University of California Medical School, attempted to see if the power of prayer could be measured. The patients were given state-of-the-art treatment and divided into two groups, one that was prayed for consistently by various prayer groups and one that was not. Neither the doctors nor physicians knew who was in which group. The study showed that those being prayed for noted significant improvement. However, Dr. Larry Dossey made this observation, in spite of the power of scientific investigation. "I believe science will never erase all the mystery that surrounds healing."¹

Obviously, there are no set formulas concerning healing other than God is God and He desires to relate with His children.

Why Did Garth Die?

Ten days before my son was diagnosed with cancer, the son of the preschool minister who served on my church staff was diagnosed with leukemia. His name was Garth Roberts. Garth was a full of life seven-year-old when his family discovered this horrible news. His family believed in God; they prayed just like we did for God to heal. Our church family prayed around the clock and even set up an intercessory prayer room. We believed Garth and Bo would be healed of their life-threatening diseases as we prayed. In early July 1995, Garth Roberts was healed of cancer – his healing came in the

¹ Larry Dossey, "Science, Prayer, and Healing," *Body Mind Spirit*, Jul/Aug 1994 (Vol. 13, No.6).

form of death. Garth went to heaven to be with God. There he would never have to experience pain and suffering again.

When I struggle to work all of this out in my head, it just does not compute. Garth's family had faith. They believed God could heal. Our church family in Tulsa prayed faithfully. God was using his story to bring others to Christ. So, why did Garth die and my son live?

I await the day I can find an answer to this complex dilemma. Maybe one day Garth, Bo and I can all sit down at the feet of God and talk to Him about it.

Come to think of it, Garth is the one who really "gets to live" and experience life as intended – eternally! Paul says in Philippians 1:21, "For me to die is gain!" I would have to agree with Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:54-57 when he said death is a victory! Thus, there is no reason to be afraid of death. If we are to live on earth, then let us live life to it's fullest in and for Christ. But if God's desire is for us to die, then as one who knows Christ, we can experience life as intended – perfect, complete, and with God. Talk about healing!

What if God does not heal?

So what if He chooses not to heal, then what is my response? Many times God uses suffering to bring us to a greater dependence on Him. Paul said it this way, "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of

Many times God uses suffering to bring us to a greater dependence on Him.

Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But

he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

It seems to me, God can make Himself known more through the junk of life (suffering) than the spectacular on-time events (miracles). At least we tend to search for Him more during pain and frustration.

God’s Spirit is working whether we acknowledge it or not. Our job is to trust Him with the big picture and allow His Spirit to be unleashed in our lives no matter the circumstances.

Confusion Brings Understanding

In the beginning, I was extremely confused regarding my son’s cancer. Although I seem to continue to struggle and stay confused in life, God has helped me process my initial questions regarding healing.

Can God heal? Yes, He has and continues to do so!

What must I do in order for healing to take place? Put my faith and trust in Jesus, and allow God to work however He so desires and completely trust Him no matter the outcome.

Do I have to have a certain verse to “name and claim” in order for God to work miracles? God’s miracles are His subordinate work, thus all of God’s promises lead to a right relationship with Him.

Is God still in the “miracle business” or were all those miracles in the Bible a one-time event? You better believe God still works miracles because I have experienced one through my son!

Chapter 3

Piling up Stones

In our generation, we have a tendency to move from one event to the next never taking time to savor the moment. Also our lifestyles are not conducive to reflection or using personal memorials as a way to remind us of particular occurrences. When running life's race, we are taught from an early age to "never look back" or "keep your eyes on the finish line." Although this is well meaning advice, many times in life it would do us good to slow down, look back, and reflect on the path we have just encountered.

As I study Old Testament characters, after an encounter with God these men would build altars or rename places in order to remind them of God's providence. Instead of rapidly moving from event to event and never looking back, these men knew how to stop and celebrate God's visit. A great lesson can be learned from these faithful men and women. Sometimes we need to slow down enough to reflect on all that God has done in our lives. We need to pile up some stones as we celebrate God's activity in our lives.

Pile 'em up

One of those experiences occurred for Jacob. After Jacob had received Isaac's blessing and made Esau extremely angry, his mother sent him away for awhile. During

his long journey, Jacob stopped to rest one night. He put a stone under his head for a pillow. That night he had a beautiful dream regarding angels going up and down the ladder with God standing at the top. God said to Jacob, "I am taking care of you. I will be with you wherever you go." (Genesis 28:10-22)

When Jacob woke up he realized he had just participated in an awesome encounter with God. The encounter provided peace and freedom to know that God was with him. Thus, Jacob took the stone he had used for a pillow, stood it up, and named the place Bethel, which means the place where God lives. Jacob then left the stone there to REMIND him of his dream. Jacob wanted to be able to go back to the time and place where God had said, "I am taking care of you and I will be with you wherever you go."

Bo's "Just Did It" Victory Celebration

As a reminder of all we had been through with our son Bo's childhood cancer experience and in order to celebrate how awesome God had been in our lives, my wife and I decided we should have a "Victory Celebration." We felt we needed to pile up some stones regarding our race with cancer.

On our way to join our family for a Thanksgiving feast, Carla and I started talking about the completion of Bo's protocol. It had been a tough 17 months filled with chemo and radiation treatments, hundreds of hospital stays, thousands of finger sticks (blood tests), and many sleepless nights since beginning our journey. Carla said to me, "You realize we only have seven months left with Bo's treatments." I kept driving and thought to myself..."only seven more months, you mean we do not have to go through another summer in and out of the hospital...that is great!"

I looked at Carla and said, "We need to have an incredible off-treatment party when this is finished to honor all those people who have helped us so much the past two years." Carla agreed and then shifted the conversation to other important matters.

As we drove the seven-hour drive to my hometown of Rotan, Texas, my mind never shifted to other important matters. But continued to dream about ways we could have a big blow out celebration party. I wanted all of our family and close friends to attend. But I knew we would never get people to drive all the way from Texas and Louisiana just to attend a two-hour party in Oklahoma. People are so busy that even the ones from our church in Tulsa probably would not have time to attend. My mind kept racing with ideas of how we could celebrate the end of Bo's treatments. I kept dreaming possibilities, but nothing seemed to be good enough.

I reflected on some exciting events we had done in youth ministry that involved people. Each year, one of the most rewarding times was going to camp. Also, our family had been able to have a wonderful experience at a Family Camp at Pine Cove one summer. Thus, the idea of having a big weekend party at a camp in order to reflect back on all God had done seemed like the right thing to do.

The dream turned into reality the weekend of July 5-6, 1991 at New Life Ranch. The "Bo Just Did It Victory Celebration" was one of the greatest experiences of my life. Using a takeoff of the Nike promotion of Bo Jackson's "Just Do It." We had a Bo "Just Did It" theme complete with

Bo knows...

Chemo
Finger sticks
Hospitals
Doctors
Nurses
Nausea
Baldness
I.V.'s
Radiation
Surgery
Hospital Food
Nintendo
Insurance
Port Needles
CBC's
Low Blood Counts
Transfusions
The Red Cross
VICTORY OVER CANCER.

About 220 of our friends attended the weekend of action packed excitement. On Friday night, we had a Victory Celebration in order to praise and worship God for the victory He had provided over cancer. This worship encounter provided a time of reflection for how God healed Bo, used His people to meet needs, and demonstrated His grace upon our lives.

The best way to describe the Victory Celebration was that it was a real experience about real people that had been shown a great deal of love by a REAL GOD.

My Good ol' Memory

My only regret about the Bo "Just Did It" Victory Celebration is that we did not record it on VCR tape. In my life there have been major events I would like to have on videotape, and Bo's Victory Celebration was one of them.

I have come to realize that not taping these events has become a positive mistake. You see, now I have to rely on my good ol' memory. All of these events are very personal to me and have a special place in my memory bank. Also, Carla and I will have to creatively communicate those special events in order for our children and grandchildren to "picture" them. Although we do not have video footage of these significant occurrences, no one will ever be able to tape over the memories we have copied in our minds.

I am sure Jacob relied on his memory of "the place where God lives", Bethel, as a reminder of God's significant activity in His life. The promise of "I am taking care of you. I will be with you wherever you go" (Genesis 28:10-22) must have come in handy several times as he struggled in life and even wrestled with God. God had shown Himself to Jacob in a significant manner, and Jacob would never be the same because he knew how to pile up stones as a reminder of God's provision, grace, and love.

During our struggle with childhood cancer, we have tried to pile up a occasional stone along the race to jog our memory about God's faithfulness. Hopefully this will enable us to stop once in a while, look back over a painful journey, and remember the way God so graciously provided for our every need. God had once again proved that we are special to Him and that He can be trusted with every circumstance in our lives.

As we look back during the race of life, let's never forget that the reason we are looking back is to gain courage to look ahead by faith to the one who has already won the race for us...Jesus Christ. Therefore, identifying with Paul in Philippians 3:12, we have "not already obtained all this, nor have already been made perfect, but we press on to take

hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of us". We have victory in Jesus.

Celebrate! Let the party begin! Don't forget the video camera or at least a few stones.

Conclusion

A final letter for Bo

Bo,

As you face bad things in your life, always remember that you can spend a lifetime in search of answers to the "why" questions. Please understand that you still have to live through the dailyness of life. Go ahead pursue the tough questions about pain, problems, and, tough times, but keep in mind that God is more concerned about our character than our intelligence. As your character is being developed, allow God to teach you through all circumstances. So, bear in mind, "You gotta run through the hurt!" These words are never pleasant or comforting, but they are worth living out.

Understanding pain,

Dad

NOTE: As a result of the perspective gained through the Weathersbees' battle with cancer, Byron & Carla have begun a new ministry to families called Legacy Family Ministries. Their purpose is to help families refocus on what is most important -- God and each other through family camp weekends, parent forums, engagement classes, and loving every minute with their three children. Contact them at Legacy Family Ministries, P.O. Box 20324, Waco, TX 76712, 254-772-0412, or visit Legacy's website at www.legacyfamily.org.