

“In *Cancer, Faith, and Unexpected Joy*, Becky’s mother becomes my mother; her grief, my grief; her hope, my hope. With a combination of emotion, vulnerability, and dailiness, this book offers practical comfort and wisdom for anyone in a place of trial or suffering. Buy two; give one as a gift. You’ll both be relieved not to navigate the journey by yourself.”

—JANE RUBIETTA, international speaker and author of
Worry Less So You Can Live More

“Becky Baudouin invites the reader to step into her family story and pull up a chair. *Cancer, Faith, and Unexpected Joy* is an engaging, powerful memoir about love and loss, mothers and daughters, and healing in the midst of death. I sat down to start it, finished it the same day, and invited my husband into a long conversation about it that evening. Baudouin’s subtitle and repeating theme, ‘What my mother taught me about how to live and how to die,’ becomes a lesson in living and dying for each of us. All of us know someone who could use this book right now. Bravo, Becky!”

—LETITIA SUK, author of *Getaway with God: The Everywoman’s Guide to Personal Retreat*

“Becky’s extraordinary skill as a writer and her astute spiritual insights provide readers with a glimpse into how one woman navigated the heartbreak of losing her mom to cancer. From her mom’s diagnosis to her untimely death, Becky captured each moment with her mom as a treasured memory. The book’s rhythm of succinct chapters, the spiritual truths woven throughout, the setting of home, her childhood memories, and her past and present struggles all make Becky’s story ring with authenticity and familiarity. If you’re walking alongside someone who is battling cancer, you’re sure to resonate with Becky’s experiences—and gain wisdom and hope from her well-told journey.”

—SEPTEMBER VAUDREY, author of *Colors of Goodbye*

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*What My
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About How to Live and
How to Die*

BECKY BAUDOUIN

 Kregel
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Taught Me About How to Live and How to Die*
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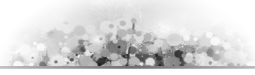
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*This book is dedicated in loving memory
to the most courageous woman I have known:
my mother, Carol Stephens.
In faith she held on to Jesus while letting go of this life.
She makes me want to be brave.*





Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	11
<i>Introduction</i>	13
1 High and Low	17
2 Times and Seasons	20
3 Defining Me	23
4 Hundred-Dollar Piano	27
5 Green Cake	31
6 Bookends	33
7 No Turning Back	35
8 Game Changers	39
9 Walk with Me	43
10 Do Not Be Afraid	49
11 God's Sharpie	52
12 Burden Bearers	55
13 A Win-Win Kind of Faith	59
14 Let's Just Get This Over With	65
15 In Everything	69
16 Ripples	73
17 Grieve As You Go	77
18 No More Shame	80
19 Margie and the Dog	86
20 Surrender	90
21 Letting Go	93
22 Holding On	99

23	Give Me Jesus	101
24	Beautiful Day	106
25	Life Goes On	108
26	Obituary, Long Version	112
27	No More Pain	116
28	Life After	119
29	Mexico	122
30	Irreplaceable	125
31	Coming Home	127
32	Always a Part of Me	130
33	The Most Wonderful Time of the Year	133
34	Bells	138
35	A Ten-Year-Old's Guide to Being Happy	141
36	Just a Matter of Time	145
37	Ravioli and Candy Bar Bingo	149
38	Shooting Stars	152
39	Live Well, Die Well	157
40	A Word About Groups and Grief	164
	<i>Questions for Personal Reflection and Journaling</i>	
	<i>or for Small-Group Discussion</i>	167
	<i>About the Author</i>	175



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My Lord and Savior, Jesus—Thank you for the gift of life, the promise of your presence in every moment, and the reality of heaven.



Introduction

My mom was diagnosed with cancer the week of Thanksgiving, and for Christmas she asked me to buy her a book. She wanted something positive and faith-filled by a popular Christian teacher on television. As I browsed the aisles of my local Christian bookstore, I came across the book *Seeing Through the Fog* by Ed Dobson. I immediately recognized the author as my sister's former pastor from Grand Rapids, Michigan, who had been living with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) for more than a decade. When I saw his latest book and read the inside cover, I knew I needed to get it for my mom. Here was a man who was living and dying at the same time, and he still had hope. He was terminally ill, had lived for years with this horrible disease, and was trusting God through the process of gradually losing the mobility and function of every part of his body.

I found the title my mom asked for and bought both books. I read Dobson's book before wrapping it in Christmas paper and placing it under the tree. His story was powerful. It was encouraging and painful, faith-filled and honest. Mom read Dobson's book first because she needed to hear from someone who was living with a similar condition. She was desperate for something real to hold on to.

Because when the doctor says the tumor is inoperable, when the treatments don't work as well as we had hoped, when life as we know it comes to a screeching halt—we all need the same thing: hope. Whether we have strong faith in God or we don't even know what

we believe, our paths intersect at this point of need. We struggle to accept the unacceptable. We hope and pray for the best, because we don't have control over the outcome. Even if we had all the money in the world, we could never buy the end result we so desperately want. We find ourselves living in a fog—in a state of limbo—unable to prepare for the future because we don't know what will happen. In these moments, we need to know we are not alone. We need to remember that God really is in control and he has promised to never leave us or forsake us. We need to be reminded that God will help us through whatever may come, that we can always trust him, and that we don't have to be afraid.


Having grown up with a debilitating stutter and an anxiety disorder, I had been afraid for most of my life. My mom had always been a source of unconditional love and acceptance, and the thought of losing her was more than I could bear.

For months she battled cancer with an amazingly positive attitude. She fought hard to get well, and she believed God was healing her. She told us not to worry and assured us she was going to be around for a long, long time. Then she turned a corner that surprised us all. Just seven months after her diagnosis, when she was hospitalized with multiple complications, something inside of her began to shift, to change. I had sometimes worried that her strong faith would lead her into a state of denial at the end, but I was wrong. Instead, she was fully present in her reality. In tune with her body and with her Maker, she gently told my siblings and me that she was dying. Her words were beautiful and, at the same time, incredibly difficult to accept. "I've taught you how to live, and now I want to teach you how to die. I want you to see that you don't have to be afraid."

I knew it would be harder than I could imagine. I did not know, however, that the process would be both sorrow-filled and beautiful. In our darkest moments, God's peace and comfort would fill every corner of our grieving hearts as we walked my mom to heaven's door.

My mom was as intentional in death as she had been in life, choosing to love, forgive, and trust. This is her story, and mine as well. It is

a story for anyone living with the tension of wanting to hold on and needing to let go. It is for those who want to learn how to live and how to die, for those who need to see that really, truly, we don't have to be afraid.



Chapter 1

High and Low

*In his hand is the life of every creature
and the breath of all mankind.*

JOB 12:10

Mom half laughs from shock as she tells me, “Becky, he thinks I have lung cancer.”

The moment she says it I know it is true. I don’t want it to be true, but I am a worst-case-scenario thinker. If the doctor saw something that looked like cancer on her scan, I don’t need another test or a second opinion to convince me.

It’s the third week of November, and my husband, Bernie, our three daughters, and I are in northern Michigan for the Thanksgiving holiday. This morning—the Monday before Thanksgiving—my niece Maggie was born. I was thrilled and a little surprised when my sister Kari asked me to be in the delivery room with her and her husband. I never even considered inviting family members to the births of my own daughters; I didn’t want anyone except Bernie in the delivery room with me. I didn’t even really want to be there myself! I felt honored to be invited to Maggie’s birth, however, and I experienced one of my highest highs as I held my new niece moments after she was born and kissed my sister’s wet cheeks.

Mom didn’t make the three-hour drive up north to be here for Maggie’s

birth; she wasn't feeling well. I called her this morning to give her details about the birth of her new granddaughter. Now, with my stomach in knots, I listen as she tells me that my older sister, Deb, who lives a couple of miles from my mom, had driven her to the emergency room that afternoon. She had been feeling weak and experiencing shortness of breath, and they thought something was wrong with her heart. But after taking an X-ray, the doctor says the problem is definitely not her heart.



When I was a kid, there were three things I feared the most: that my parents would get divorced, that I would never outgrow my stuttering problem, and that my mom would get cancer and die.

And that wasn't even the worst of it. In the deepest part of me I feared that not only would she get cancer and die a horrible death, but that she would still be smoking, right up to the end, and that I would hate her for it. Throughout my childhood, I begged her to quit. I hung motivational signs all over our house and tried to guilt her into stopping. She made several attempts, but it took many years of trying and failing before she quit for good.

In her early sixties, after having smoked for nearly fifty years, she finally found a way to break free from her addiction. I had heard that after five years of not smoking, the lungs rejuvenate and become like new. So cancer was no longer one of my biggest fears. I was much more concerned about heart disease, high blood pressure, or a stroke. My uncle Art, Mom's only brother, had died suddenly of a heart attack while visiting our family several years earlier, and I feared it was hereditary, that something similar might happen to Mom.

Becky, he thinks I have lung cancer. It isn't a firm diagnosis. She needs to have more scans, see a pulmonologist, and have a biopsy. I cry and pray with her on the phone. I try to sound positive. I tell her that an emergency room doctor can't officially diagnose someone with lung cancer using an X-ray, that maybe it's something else, something not so serious. My attempts to calm her fears do nothing to calm my own. My

mom has been a constant source of unconditional love and acceptance in my life, and now I am afraid I might lose her.

We have a dinner-time ritual in our house that we call “high and low”; one of our daughters likes to call it “happies and crappies.” We got the idea from a movie. We take turns sharing the best and worst parts of our day. I like it because I believe that words are gold—powerful connectors with the potential to make us feel heard and loved. And it reminds me that life is a mix of sweet and bitter, mountains and valleys.

In bed at my sister’s house that night, the Monday before Thanksgiving, I sob as I tell Bernie, “I’m terrified my mom is going to die.” It is the lowest low after the highest high. In one day, in the span of one sunrise and sunset, I’ve tasted sweet and bitter, new life and the shadow of death. Fear as I have never known it settles over me and fills me with dread. And it keeps me from seeing the One who holds both life and death in his hands.



Chapter 2

Times and Seasons

*There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens.*

ECCLESIASTES 3:1

We'll find out the results of the biopsy on Wednesday. I've taken a couple of days off work so I can drive to Michigan and go with Mom to her appointment. She calls me Monday morning to tell me that I don't need to come.

"I called the office this morning to ask if they had the results. I didn't want to wait until Wednesday if they could just tell me over the phone. It's definitely lung cancer, and we'll find out more when I see the pulmonologist. So you don't need to come anymore because I canceled my appointment."

I understand that she needed to know. The wait has been hard on all of us. But it's not the news we wanted to hear. I would have gladly waited longer if the results could somehow have been different. I think about what she has just told me, and for a millisecond I consider canceling my trip. The girls are in school, and I know that I will need to take more time off work in the months ahead. This trip is no longer necessary, so maybe canceling would be a good idea. Mom is thinking the same thing and says, "Why don't you wait and come another time when I need you? This week there really is nothing for you to help me

with, but I'm sure there will be times down the road when I will need you to come."

In this moment, I see with clarity that I am entering into a new season. Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 3 that there is a time and a season for everything: to be born, to die, to plant, to uproot, to weep, to laugh, to mourn, to dance, to embrace, to refrain, to be silent, to speak. When Bernie and I were newlyweds, we went through a honeymoon season. We spent every possible moment together and focused on building our new marriage. When I was expecting our babies, I slept extra hours, ate whatever I craved (which was often Mexican food late at night), shopped for all kinds of baby essentials, and read books about pregnancy and parenthood. I attended birthing classes and I nested. I was completely focused on preparing for motherhood. And when we moved into our house, we spent months painting all the rooms, hanging curtains on the windows and pictures on the walls, and making it our home. There is a season for everything.

Now, my mom has cancer, and I can feel my focus and priorities shifting. I realize that I am going to need to rearrange some things. I'm going to have to step out of some of the activities and ministries I am involved in so that I can fully show up and step into this new season. This is a time to go. This is a time to say "I'm still coming. Yes, I'll be there. Even if there is nothing for me to do, I'm coming just to be with you. Just to sit with you—to weep and to laugh, to be silent and to speak, and to embrace—because now is the time."

I decide that I will go as often as I am able. I will not later regret taking time off work and asking friends to help juggle my kids after school. I will not regret putting miles on my car and gas in the tank, spending hours on the road driving to and from her house. I won't regret telling my husband that, as often as I can, I need to go be with her. Somehow I know that these will become the moments I will cherish, the memories I will hold in my heart forever.

When a dear friend of mine was diagnosed with cancer, her adult daughter was living on the West Coast, more than two thousand miles away from her parents' home in Chicago. When she heard the news that

her mom was sick, she says she made the easiest and best decision of her life. She quit her job, packed up her stuff and her dog, and moved home. She had a year and a half with her mom, and no regrets. She knew that home was where she needed to be.

Seasons change, and with them our priorities. We must seize the moments because we will never get them back. We've got to let the smaller stuff go, and quite simply, we need to learn how to say no to the things that will erode our strength and energy, distract us, and use up our limited time. Because saying no to lesser things will free us up to say yes to the things that matter more. Now is the time to go, to embrace, to speak words that need to be spoken, to weep, and to laugh. Now is the time to listen and tell stories and ask questions. Now is the time to forgive and to ask for forgiveness, to pray together and to pour out our hearts. Now is the time to love better than we ever have before.