

The Hand of the Lord

By
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23 Jan 2008

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It was very late at night. I read the email one last time before sending it to the 370 members of the email list. “Stanford passed away at 8:38 PM on Tuesday, January 23, 2007 at the Community Hospice House in Merrimack, NH. Thus ends his courageous battle with cancer. He was strong right up until the end and hopeful that the chemotherapy was working. Sadly the tumors weren't responding to the therapy and Stanford's liver gave out...” Now, instead of helping Stanford prepare for a mission, we would be choosing a casket and planning a funeral.

After clicking the send button I sat there and pondered the last seven months. The day after high school graduation Stanford was taken to the emergency room suffering severe abdominal pain. A CT scan came back negative for appendicitis. Using a laparoscope a tumor was discovered blocking Stanford's small intestine. Through a large incision in his abdomen the tumor and ten inches of his small intestine were removed. A preliminary test on the tumor done in the operating room confirmed any parent's worst nightmare, cancer.

Cancer? How could this be? We had always obeyed the Word of Wisdom. As a family of seven we had all been blessed with excellent health. We could count on two hands the number of ear infections and emergency room visits made in 25 years of raising five children. In the blink of an eye our family was thrust from normal daily life into the world of emergency surgery, life impacting medical decisions, never ending doctor appointments, hospital stays, living wills, and chemotherapy.

Why was Stanford taken at only 18 years of age? His testimony of the Savior and the restored gospel was unshakeable. His fondest desire was to serve a full-time mission. As one of a handful of Mormon youth in his large high school he was a shining example of gospel living. He was kind and thoughtful. He was involved in music, drama, scouting, and seminary. He was full of energy, had a zest for life, and a sense of humor that drew everyone to him. During this trial he received several priesthood blessings from righteous brethren saying he would be healed, and he had the required faith to be healed. Why were his days shortened?

The Lord told the Prophet Joseph Smith, “Thy days are known, and thy years shall not be numbered less...” (D&C 122:9) and “For there is a time appointed for every man, according as his works shall be.” (D&C 121:25) This comforting doctrine has helped me understand in a very personal way that

God knows the end from the beginning. Our days in this mortal probation are known to him and won't be any less than required to accomplish our work in this life.

It has been over a year since Stanford died. I grieve for him everyday, but over the months the Lord has quietly answered many of my questions. Looking back over this trial and the months before it all started, I now see the hand of the Lord directing things, pushing here and arranging there. He knew what was coming. He knew that Stanford was going to get sick and that we as a family and ward would need to take care of him. God was calling Stanford home, but He made things work out the best they possibly could and still meet His needs.

Seven months before Stanford was diagnosed I felt a strong prompting that we needed to get a family picture taken. It had been almost seven years since the last one. Because we followed that prompting we have a family portrait that is very precious to us.

Four months before we learned of Stanford's illness, I was one of 80 people let go in a company layoff. I hadn't been laid off in 18 years. I was worried and scared. Why now? Why me? I didn't know then what Heavenly Father knew. I needed to be in a different place. This was His way of putting me where I needed to be. He knew that Stanford was going to be very sick soon.

Two months later I started a new job as the 25th employee of a small company in Massachusetts. What a blessing! I still had some weeks of severance pay from my old job. I even got a pay raise from the move. My new boss was an engineer I had worked with ten years ago. When he found out I was laid off, he talked me into applying for a job with his company. He convinced the CEO that they really needed to hire me and they created a position for me. Heavenly Father was looking out for us.

I signed up for health insurance and new medical cards arrived as expected. I thought everything was fine. Heavenly Father knew differently. We still had health insurance under COBRA from my previous employer. With new medical insurance I realized we could save several hundred dollars by canceling COBRA. However, for some reason I never did, and left the COBRA insurance in place, knowing it would expire the end of June.

Now that Heavenly Father had everything arranged it was time. Five weeks into my new job Stanford's battle with cancer began. In a way, the timing of the emergency surgery was a blessing. School was still in session for everyone but the seniors who had just graduated. When people at school heard

about Stanford's surgery, many friends and teachers came to see him at the hospital during his week of recovery. I really feel that Heavenly Father timed it so Stanford, who was very social, could have maximum support from, and time with, the many people who cared about him.

Our first appointment with the oncologist a few days later is when we found out there were big problems with our new medical insurance. It turned out it was only valid in Massachusetts, but we live in New Hampshire. Thanks to what I now recognize was a prompting, we still had COBRA insurance, which paid the huge medical expenses incurred thus far. My employer was able to work things out so that we were covered when COBRA ended.

Chemotherapy is controlled poisoning of the body. The goal is to kill the cancer, but in order to do that they knock down the patient over and over. Before starting chemotherapy the type of cancer must be known. In Stanford's case four world-class pathology labs were never able to determine the type of cancer. Finally the oncologists just started trying chemotherapies most likely to work. At the time, it didn't seem like a blessing not to have a specific diagnosis, but in a way it was. We feel Heavenly Father planned all along to call Stanford home. However, by not having a firm diagnosis, Stanford was able to have hope right up to the end.

The first five months of his treatment Stanford almost didn't seem ill, other than losing his hair due to the chemotherapy. He attended youth conference and other activities during the summer. He attended early morning seminary with his brother, although he had already graduated. In September he was ordained an Elder. In October, he was well enough to go on an eleven-mile bike ride with me in Mine Falls Park. In November he started a part-time job with my company as a documentation clerk, which worked in around his chemotherapy. It was his first job and he was so proud of his paychecks.

The crisis. The evening of November 20th we had family home evening as usual. Just before bedtime we gathered to have scripture study. We usually read a chapter taking turns reading a verse each. Stanford lay on the bed and listened, but didn't feel like reading. We all went to bed thinking this was just another night like so many before. About 4:00 AM Stanford woke me up. He was in extreme pain and medication was unable to make it stop. His doctor told us to go to the emergency room. This is the day that everything suddenly got a whole lot worse. Looking back on it now, it also was the day of a miracle.

A CT scan in the emergency room showed uncontrollable internal bleeding. The doctors told me that Stanford would die within a few hours; that there was nothing they could do. I then had to do one of the hardest things I've ever done in my life. I had to tell my dear, sweet, hopeful, faith-filled son that he was going to die. Words can't describe the feelings I had at that time. I told him what the doctors had said, and Stanford said, "Dad, that can't be right. Help me pray." I helped him turn over to kneel on the emergency room bed. In faith he prayed vocally and poured his heart out to God. I don't remember much of what he said, but I do remember him telling Heavenly Father that this wasn't right, that he still had things to do. I believe that is when the miracle occurred. In response to Stanford's great faith the bleeding stopped, and Heavenly Father spared his life another nine weeks.

This crisis made it clear how great a blessing my new employer was. Stanford was now homebound and needed 24 hour care. The CFO said, "John, don't worry about work. Family comes first. Don't worry about your paycheck. You will still get paid. Take all the time you need." This never would have happened with my previous employer. Heavenly Father had put me where I needed to be. I was able to be Stanford's primary care provider for the last two months of his life. Because I was there Stanford was able to be at home, except for weekly medical treatments, until the last few hours of his life.

Now that Stanford was very ill, our ward and the community at large became very involved. His care was very demanding. Ward members volunteered time to help out. Meals were provided. Volunteers did projects around the home. Stanford's Sunday School class insisted that their "I Love Isaiah" party be held in our home so Stanford could attend. The high school principal visited, as did other teachers. The high school gaming club came weekly to play cards with him. The record breaking mild weather in December and January made it possible for school performing groups to set up in our back yard to give Christmas concerts just for Stanford. Out of state extended family members came and stayed many days to spend time with Stanford and help out. Dozens of Stanford's friends visited. During this time, Stanford's optimism and faith lifted others and made it a pleasure to take care of him. Our ward family was knit together with love, service, prayer, fasting, and concern.

Through this experience with Stanford I have learned to better recognize the "still small voice". This is what bears witness to our souls of the truth. This is how the Lord talks to us, not in the wind, or the

earthquake, or the fire, or the noises of the world. It is in the quiet moments when we can “be still and know that He is God”. (1 Kings 19:11-12)

The day of Stanford’s passing was a time to “be still and know that He is God”. Through the modern miracle of instant communication I was able to get the word out by email to people around the world that Stanford had been taken to the Hospice House and was going to die soon. All immediate family members, many of our ward family, and others who loved Stanford gathered there. I remember looking around at those who came and feeling such great love for each of them.

At this time of emotional turmoil Heavenly Father blessed me yet again through Stanford’s compassionate oncologist who spent the whole evening with us. Recognizing the end was near he felt prompted to ask me if we performed something like last rites in our Church. Because he prompted me I was able to give Stanford a final father’s blessing. The spirit was strong and many in attendance felt angels in the room.

As the moment of Stanford’s passing drew near we gathered around his bed and began singing primary songs. Stanford took his last breath to the closing words of “I Am a Child of God”. He was sent off with a mother’s lullaby, a father’s blessing, and a room full of love. Heavenly Father welcomed Stanford home.

Over 1200 people attended Stanford’s funeral. His life was celebrated. His high school choir sang beautifully. The plan of salvation was taught. Seeds were planted. His favorite hymn “Called to Serve” was sung. Stanford’s mission had begun.