

# On my way to Heaven

*Facing death with Christ*

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“Remember him —  
before the silver  
cord is severed, or the  
golden bowl is broken;  
before the pitcher is  
shattered at the spring,  
or the wheel broken at  
the well, and the dust  
returns to the ground  
it came from, and the  
spirit returns to God  
who gave it.

(Ecclesiastes 12:6-7)

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In 2001 my mother visited us in Cambridge and, walking to church one Sunday, fell and broke her hip. From then on she died slowly and painfully over the next four and a half years. The pain was not physical so much as psychological, as she gradually lost all her freedom. As I watched her die, I prayed that I would not live into a similarly long and (through no fault

of her own) increasingly incapacitated old-age, a burden to my wife and family, and an embarrassment to my friends, ‘*Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything*’. I once said to the churchwardens at St Andrew the Great that I did not want to live to be a problem to those who cared for me: bad-tempered, irritable, snapping orders at my wife, Fiona, while she pushed me around in a wheelchair. One of the wardens replied that the only change would be the wheelchair!

# Cancer

In the spring of 2007, while on sabbatical in New Zealand, I first had pains roughly in the area of the gallbladder, which led eventually to going into Addenbrooke's Hospital in December 2008 to have the gallbladder removed. But when he went in to do so, the surgeon found cancer which had invaded the liver, originating in the gallbladder. It was past surgical

**The surgeon found cancer**

solution and radiotherapy, and there was apparently no effective chemotherapy regime to cure

gallbladder cancer. The oncologist estimated I might have six to nine months to live. My prayer when my mother died had been answered. I

**It was not the end of the story, but the beginning**

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said to the surgeon when he broke the news, that what he had just told me was, for a Christian believer, not bad news but good; it was not the end of the story, but the beginning. (And I saw an imaginary speech bubble appear above his head, saying, “This man is in total denial!”)





But I have lived 62 years of very happy life on the earth and, for over 40 of them, Jesus has been my Lord and my Saviour. So I can have no regrets. My main reaction was then, and remains now, one of gratitude. God *has* done all things well, and I believe he is doing this thing well too. He is taking me back to himself when I have all my faculties, when I am still active in ministry, when my family have reached independence with their own spouses and careers, and when my wife still has the energy and vitality to face a new life-stage.