

HOPE  
BEYOND  
CURE



DAVID McDONALD

“Two devastating words left me feeling hopeless and lost. *Tumour* and *incurable*.”

So begins David McDonald's desperate search for hope through the unflinching gaze of his terminal cancer diagnosis. His dreams shattered, his family distraught, his body wracked by chemotherapy and his faith severely tested, this Christian pastor went back to the Bible to find out for certain: Is God there? Does he care? When there is no cure, does God still offer hope?

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No matter what you believe in, when struck down in your prime by a terminal illness, the reality of our human mortality can hit like a tsunami. *Hope Beyond Cure* is a remarkable story of courage, resilience, belief and the power of faith.

ROB CLARKE (*Business consultant and former Chief Operating Officer at Australian Rugby Union, Sydney*)

This is a moving read, raw and open. It shows the real hope Christians have. But this is also a book for those with no faith—who have cancer or who care for someone who does—because it brings intensely practical insights to this modern scourge.

I highly recommend reading it at least a couple of times.

DR DAVID BELL (*Medical Oncologist, Royal North Shore Hospital, Sydney*)

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It's been more than ten years since David McDonald became the Brumbies' team chaplain. In my early years as a player I didn't speak to Dave much. Religion wasn't something I needed in order to be a good player. I know now I was very naïve, not necessarily about the religion part but about what Dave actually offered to the team. Since retiring from playing and becoming a coach, I've spoken to Dave more and more often. He sits in the background not as a crazy stalker, but as a passionate supporter. He's a good listener and down to earth. He's not like your typical chaplain—I don't want to offend your typical chaplain, but he's not.

Dave was admitted to hospital in the first week of December 2011, one week after my mum passed away. She had been diagnosed with stage-4 bowel cancer just six weeks earlier, and given no hope of cure. During those six weeks after her diagnosis, I battled a huge amount of anxiety and spent many sleepless nights. When I wasn't at the hospital, I spent all my time trying to find something that would fix Mum.

As I read Dave's book for the first time, I had to compose myself and dry my eyes on many occasions. I had only ever seen cancer from one side, and I realized I wasn't looking for a fix for Mum—I was looking for hope.

I have found this hope in Dave's book, and in Dave himself.

**Stephen Larkham**

Assistant Coach, Wallabies Rugby Union Team, Australia

Because we're all cancer sufferers or potential cancer sufferers, we all need this book for our present or our future. Dave doesn't pull his punches about his illness; yet he does point to hope. Because it's written from personal experience, not an ivory tower, it's always real and never trite. This book will make you smile, might make you cry, and may just change your life. Make sure you read it.

**Carl Laferton**

Senior Editor, The Good Book Company, London

Author, *Original Jesus*

This book deals with issues close to my heart, since my mother died of cancer earlier this year. My only complaint is that it was not published a year earlier—it would have been the perfect book for her to read. *Hope Beyond Cure* is a moving and deeply encouraging combination of truth, mature reflection and hope, communicated by someone who has known the pit of despair. Read this book and give it away. Its contents should be shared with every person facing death—which, in the end, includes us all.

**Constantine R Campbell**

Associate Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Chicago

Although David is a theologian and pastor, he writes as a fellow human hemorrhaging emotional and physical pain. I've seen firsthand how inoperable cancer stole his future and threatened his hope. If you are doing it tough with illness or hardship, or you just have questions and doubts regarding Jesus, this book is for you. It will not give you pithy, cold and callous answers, but an insightful personal reflection toward real hope beyond cure.

**Richard Chin**

National Director, Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students, Sydney

No matter what you believe in, when struck down in your prime by a terminal illness, the reality of our human mortality can hit like a tsunami. *Hope Beyond Cure* is a remarkable story of courage, resilience, belief and the power of faith. David McDonald's story will not only inspire you to rise up against your own affliction and never give up, but more importantly it will challenge you to look beyond the here and now for strength, healing and peace.

**Rob Clarke**

Business consultant and former Chief Operating Officer at Australian Rugby Union, Sydney

I admire the honesty with which David talks about his journey with terminal cancer. We get not only insight into his tears and fears but the reactions of those around him as well. He also talks honestly about how his cancer challenged his faith—with 1500 students praying for you, it can be hard to grasp why you are not immediately cured! Faith in a miracle can lead to irrational avoidance of reality and pain for the family—but David never falls into that trap. This is a warm and honest story of hope, love and faith on a journey filled with uncertainties.

**Prof. Bruce Robinson**

Professor of Medicine and cancer researcher, Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, Perth  
Western Australian of the Year 2013-14

This story starts with the words *tumour* and *incurable*. David McDonald heard these words when he became a victim of lung cancer. He takes us through the emotional roller-coaster of his diagnosis and treatment, including the challenges to his Christian faith. Eventually Dave transforms those first horrible words into new words: *faith*, *hope* and *love*.

This is a moving read, raw and open. It shows the real hope Christians have. But this is also a book for those with no faith—who have cancer or who care for someone who does—because it brings intensely practical insights to this modern scourge. I highly recommend reading it at least a couple of times.

**Dr David Bell**

Medical Oncologist, Royal North Shore Hospital, Sydney

Can anything good come out of cancer?

I have watched David McDonald deal with the most significant and unwanted challenge of his life. In these pages he opens his heart about the journey this has taken him on. It's raw, it's real, and yet Dave manages to bring into light the surprising power of this thing called hope—true hope. I have

seen God at work in his life and I can honestly say my friend is more hope-filled than I can ever remember. His journey shows us why, and his story will speak to all of us.

**Marcus Reeves**

Senior Pastor, Crossroads Christian Church, Canberra

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**David McDonald** had been in Christian ministry for more than two decades—as a pastor of Crossroads Christian Church and a chaplain to the Brumbies Super Rugby Team—until a diagnosis of stage-4 lung cancer shook his world. Dave is married to Fiona and they have four adult children and two grandchildren. He remains an avid sports fan and loves spending time at the beach whenever possible. Dave is now the National Director of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches in Australia, and he blogs from time to time at [macarisms.com](http://macarisms.com).

H O P E  
B E Y O N D  
C U R E

DAVID McDONALD

*Hope Beyond Cure*

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For Fiona, Marcus, Grace, Sid,  
Matthew, Elizabeth, Luke, Sharon,  
Connor and Liam

# THANK YOU

I have so much to give thanks for.

I thank God especially for my wonderful wife, Fiona. I'm grateful for her generous love, partnership and support, as well as for her continuous research into my cancer and the possibilities for treatment. And I thank God for my children, Luke and Sharon, Matt and Elizabeth, Grace, and Marcus, and I thank them for their love and generous support and encouragement. While my family's world has been turned inside out and upside down, they have encouraged me as they too have learned to keep their trust in God.

I thank God for my father and mother, Norman and Ruth, who have shared the cancer journey and supported me in prayer and wisdom—often from the other end of the telephone. And I thank God also for the rest of my family and so many friends who have supported me through prayer and practical displays of love and kindness.

I thank God for my home church, Crossroads—for their prayer and practical support and for the opportunity to resume ministry among them. I thank God for good friends all over the world who have prayed, visited, called and written words of love and care, as well as for

individuals, churches, and groups who have never met me but have prayed faithfully for me.

I thank God for the medical staff watching over me on this journey—Bill Burke, John Tharion, Desmond Yip, David Bell, Melissa, Maureen, Kate, and so many others.

I thank God for Tara, my editor, who has worked hard to help me communicate this message more clearly.

I thank God that you are reading this book.

Above all, I give thanks to our great God who has shown me such mercy. I thank him for answering the prayers of so many by extending my life and reminding me of the hope of eternity.

David McDonald

October 2013

# CONTENTS

Introduction	9
<b>1</b> Hopeless	13
<b>2</b> Shattered dreams	21
<b>3</b> Searching for hope	27
<b>4</b> Faith	37
<b>5</b> Hope	51
<b>6</b> Love	71
<b>7</b> Now	85
Afterword	91

# INTRODUCTION

“Cancer-free to no hope in less than two weeks.”

I found this headline on a cancer forum recently. How, you might ask, could things change so quickly? The truth is, they hadn't. There had been a bad case of miscommunication.

I have cancer, so I browse these forums from time to time. I can't do it every day because I find it too sad, too overwhelming. People are sick, confused, powerless, dying—and, so often, they're completely lacking in hope. Every day there are desperate cries of anguish, pleas for prayer, outpourings of grief. Sometimes there's an explosion of anger at the merciless killer, cancer.

Reading the headline above helped me to clarify exactly what it is that I want this book to achieve. My goal is to shine a light on hope *beyond* a cure.

Don't get me wrong. I'm 100% pro-cure. I long for my cancer to completely disappear. I pray that it will, and I pray the same for others. Medical advances and new discoveries excite me. I love hearing that someone with cancer no longer has any evidence of disease. And I love the possibilities of a new start, with a new outlook, that come with this pronouncement.

Yet when the prognosis is bad, when all attempts at medical intervention have been exhausted, when prayers have not been answered as we might wish—what then? Is there still hope?

Is *cure* the ultimate hope for people with a terminal illness? Is this what seriously ill patients around the world long for above all else? I don't know, really. I haven't asked enough people. My guess is that we have a range of hopes. But this hope founded on cure worries me. If we hang everything on finding a cure and it doesn't happen, what then?

What gives cancer patients the motivation to get out of bed each day, knowing that more pain awaits? And how do those caring for cancer patients—spouses, children, parents, friends—hold on to hope when, despite their best efforts, all they can do is watch helplessly as their loved ones suffer? How does anyone endure when life is painful and difficult and only getting worse? Can we find hope in anything less than a cure? And, more importantly, is there hope beyond cure?

Sometimes people are cured from serious illnesses. Some get to celebrate the wonderful news that there is no further evidence of disease. I long for the day when I can say that I've been in remission for a year, or five, or ten, or more. But the reality is that we're all likely to get sick again. It might be the recurrence of cancer or something else altogether. We may recover, and we might keep recovering, but there will come a day when we won't. Death will catch up with each of us eventually.

What, then, of hope? Is it ultimately meaningless? Or is there hope in the face of death? And if there is such a hope,

does it change how we live? These are crucial questions, and yet so often people don't ask them. The details of everyday life consume all of us in such a way that we don't pause to consider the bigger picture or the inevitability of our own death. I may not have cancer when I die, but I will still die. Is there hope for me—or for any of us?

I've asked these questions at different points in my life, but since my diagnosis I've asked them with a different urgency and intensity. And I've found that the Bible still answers these questions with a resounding "Yes!" There is hope beyond death, and it's found in Jesus Christ. Since my diagnosis I've journeyed back through the Bible and the foundations of my faith as I've struggled with fear and doubt. This book chronicles some of that journey because—even if you are facing terminal illness—I want you to find encouragement and embrace the real hope that is found only in God. God offers this hope, a hope that stands on the evidence of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, to every one of us—to those who are terminally ill as well as to those who are in full health. If Jesus is alive today, then there is hope beyond death. Death will not have the final say because there is hope beyond cure. I know, because I am living in this hope.

A black and white photograph of a person walking away from the camera down a long, brightly lit tunnel. The tunnel walls are made of concrete and have a rough, textured appearance. The floor is also concrete with some tactile paving near the ends. The light is very bright at the far end of the tunnel, creating a silhouette effect on the person walking.

# 1 HOPELESS

Two devastating words, spoken to me by different people in the same week of December 2011, left me feeling hopeless and lost. *Tumour* and *incurable*. These cruel words took my breath away and ushered in the darkest period of my life. They introduced me to all manner of fears and doubts, shattered my plans and dreams, devastated my family, and challenged my faith in God. These two words changed everything.

I'm fifty years old and enjoying my thirtieth year of marriage to Fiona. We have four children—two boys, followed by a girl, and then another boy. The older boys are married and we are eagerly anticipating the birth of our first grandchild. I live in Canberra, Australia, where I've been working as the pastor of Crossroads Church for nearly two decades. I love my job because it's all about helping people to see the incredible difference that God can make in their lives.

Early in 2011, our family made the momentous decision to leave Canberra and move thousands of kilometres away, to the far north of Australia. We planned to live in Darwin, a remote city with a tropical climate and a reputation for



its spirit of independence. We love talking with people about God and, having spent years doing this in Canberra, we had decided to start a new church in a new location.

It was difficult to announce to our church in Canberra that we were moving on, but the time seemed right. We made preparations and encouraged some others to join with us in this new venture. After a couple of trips north we'd found a house, schools for our children, a job for my wife as a doctor at the local Aboriginal Health Service, a rugby club to join, and a boat ramp to launch the boat we were planning to buy. Although we'd never said so, I think both Fiona and I saw this as a mid-life move. We were looking forward to another twenty years in ministry in the Northern Territory.

The months leading up to our move were hectic. One of the other pastors at our church had been overseas for four months, so my workload was particularly heavy. In addition, since I was leaving, I'd accepted a number of invitations to speak at conferences. Although our plan was to leave in January, we packed up our house in late November to avoid the massive increase in moving costs over the Christmas period and were basically camping in our house. In the last week of November I spoke at a conference in Melbourne for people who were thinking about starting new churches. It was exciting to meet so many men and women heading out to new adventures. I was something of a poster boy—the middle-aged bloke who, instead of hanging up his boots, was venturing out for another season.

And I was ready to go—but for one baffling problem. Every time I'd climb the three flights of stairs to the