

## “Cancer-Free”

This article is not “about me” or my struggles, but a bit of background is necessary. In May of 2004 I was very ill. The first symptoms, though they were not recognized as such by anyone at the time, began surfacing in early February of that same year and had gotten progressively worse. By mid May, I had lost a lot of weight and was only mobile with the aid of a cane and in considerable pain. I had already been hospitalized for a week and sent home with what turned out to be a wrong diagnosis (not blaming the doctors, as they were doing their best and going to great lengths to help me). But by the end of May I was back in the hospital and on a cocktail combination of Morphine and Valium that wasn’t really working. Then finally, a diagnosis: Stage 4 T-Cell Lymphoma. The doctors hadn’t seriously considered that option since it wasn’t supposed to affect someone of my age (39) and condition (very active and healthy previously). But there it was eating holes in the bones of my pelvis, hips, and all over my back. To wrap this part up, after several months of intense chemotherapy, the cancer was in “remission” and has, evidently, remained so without reoccurrence to the present, May 4, 2021. However...

I still cringe when I hear the words “cancer-free.” As encouraging as those words are for those touched by them, I’m not sure they’re accurate. Is anyone, especially a survivor, really “cancer-free”? It affects the rest of your life. There is tremendous damage done to your body, both by the disease and its treatment, which never goes away. Then mentally, it’s always there somewhere in the back of your mind, waiting to come to the forefront of your thoughts with an inquiry from a concerned friend about your continued health, or a casual comment from an acquaintance (or stranger) that uses the “C” word. Obviously, television or movies depicting someone battling the disease, and especially funerals of those who have succumbed to it, can be tough to take. No, I’m not at all sure anyone is ever “cancer-free,” especially mentally. Dates of symptoms, dates of hospitalization(s), dates of a confirmed diagnosis, dates of treatment... each year provides ample reminders. But the point of this peace is not really about cancer at all, but its spiritual counterpart called “**sin.**”

The **diagnosis** is clear and certain. All of an accountable age have, at the very least, had it, *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”* Rom.3:23. Cancer may be the diagnosis for many; sin is the diagnosis for everyone.

The **treatment** is not painless, for one has to first admit their condition, *“If we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us,”* 1John 1:8. As difficult as it is to say, “I have cancer,” likewise confessing, “I am a sinner” isn’t much easier. Acknowledging the disease is the first step to treatment. Then, one must be willing to change their lifestyle. Although my cancer had no known cause, and therefore nothing I had done could be said to have caused it, this is not so with “sin.” We all know what causes it- *“the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life”* (1John 2:15). We have to make up our minds to *think, feel, and live* differently to survive, and continue to survive, this disease of “sin.” This is repentance, and *“unless you repent, you will all likewise perish,”* Luke 13:3. After these preliminaries, then comes the treatment itself, baptism: the chemo or radiation that *puts to death* “sin.” *“Therefore we have been buried with Christ through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in*

*newness of life,” Rom.6:4. Though sin, like cancer, may return (especially if we don’t continue the process of repentance), without the treatment of baptism, it can’t be killed. For, “baptism now saves you- not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience- though the resurrection of Jesus Christ,” 1Pet.3:21 (remember that one cannot be raised with Christ without being buried with Him by baptism, cf. Rom.6:3-11).*

Chemotherapy was hard. I lost somewhere in the neighborhood of 60 pounds (I wouldn’t look at the scales until I had regained some weight, so I’m not sure of the exact amount). It peeled layer after layer of skin from my fingers- both because it settles in the extremities, and from dehydration caused by a lot of vomiting. It damaged the nerves in my hips, hands, and feet making them extremely sensitive, and at times, painful. It brought on early onset and worsened arthritis (at age 39, my doctor said I had the joints of a 65 year old). But as hard as these things were and are, the more difficult part came after the chemo was over...

Not just being “ready” to die (if that was to be), but being ready to die *today*, was hard but liberating. Remembering and maintaining that mindset is more difficult once the perceived immediate threat is removed. So it is with the disease of “sin,” its treatment(s), and “survival. Baptism- putting *to death our man of sin*, is, for some, a hard decision to make...deciding to do it *today* is harder. But remembering and maintaining that *liberty* after its “treatment” can be even more difficult. The same Paul who wrote “*I have been crucified with Christ*” in Gal.2:20, also penned “*I die daily*” in 1Cor.15:31. He didn’t forget his sin, or what was required to heal its effects on him and others. It’s much easier to dismiss being ready to die *today* when your reflection in the mirror doesn’t look like you already have. Indeed, one of the causes Peter provides for becoming “*useless*” or “*unfruitful*” as Christians is “*having forgotten his purification from his former sins*,” 2Pet.1:9. If we are truly “ready to die today,” we must remember what it took to give us spiritual life and liberty. Don’t forget. Remember and live accordingly.

Cancer survivors are never really “cancer-free”- it’s regularly if not continuously on our minds. Both the physical and emotional scars that it leaves behind and threat of its return never really leave. So it is with the “spiritual cancer” of sin. We may have been diagnosed, treated, and survived its initial onslaught, but it’s effects and influence won’t go away easily or completely, cf. 1Tim.1:12-16. Realizations that were initially birthed, and commitments that were originally made, must be grown and maintained. Spiritual life-style changes must become permanent rather than discarded once the immediate threat is removed. Commitment is required. Vigilance is required. Cancer is hard. Chemo is harder. But its certainly not easy being a “survivor” either. Please don’t misunderstand, I am truly not complaining. I’m just using my experiences to hopefully teach a valuable spiritual lesson: Spiritual “survival” (living *free from sin* as a Christian after becoming one): doesn’t remove the scars and effects of the past; and it takes a lot of faith, commitment, and grace; but at least it gives a foundation of faith on which to stand and continue fighting for our spiritual future. So for “survivors” of cancer and the spiritual cancer of sin, remember where you’ve been and keep fighting to never return. May God bless us all.