

MY LIFE-SAVING TESTIMONY:

Journey of Fire – Passion for New-Life

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“Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.

Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.

They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

Lamentations 3:21-23

As it is said in Job 5:7 *“Yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.”* During my yearly physical checkup in the October of 2013, my family doctor informed me about the results of my gall bladder ultrasound: The gall bladder skin had been thickening, causing its shape to become uncommonly abnormal. Even though I did not experience any pain or discomfort at that time, he recommended me to see a specialist for advice. I told the doctor that, the year before, he had already referred me to a specialist, who said there was no major issue with my gall bladder symptoms and even advised me not to do another ultrasound until at least five years later.

After hearing this and pondering for a while, my family doctor agreed to recommend another specialist upon my request. I thus went home as usual, expecting the call from his clinic for a scheduled appointment. I did not pay much attention to the matter nor bothered about who the specialist would be.

DISASTER ATTACKED

About a month later in mid-November, I went to see the specialist as scheduled. It was a sunny and breezy day; I was in good mood and relaxed. In my mind, this was just an ordinary appointment. After seeing me for a short while, the specialist, a middle-aged Caucasian lady with a caring smile, told me many things.

Specifically, she said she would try to book a date for me to do a gall bladder removal surgery as soon as possible and to arrange a CT scan as well. This was because she knew I was working as a pastor and could imagine my busyness during the Christmas season. She was also worried it would be too late if the surgery was done after Christmas, i.e. about eight weeks later. She emphasized that it would have to be done with great caution as she needed to do the removal without pricking the organ, for that might be lethal if any cancer cells leaked out. In addition, if necessary, she might have to do another big surgery on me.

Upon hearing what she said, I was suddenly aware that this specialist is an oncologist! Needless to say, I was overwhelmed by the information she has just revealed to me regarding my current health condition.



“Will you suggest me to do biopsy before surgery then?” I asked.

“No! Absolutely not! A biopsy needle will prick the gall bladder skin. You might lose your life in case there’s anything spread from the gall bladder!”

The oncologist looked into my eyes and said, “Do you understand what I have been telling you?”

Theoretically speaking, I thought I knew what cancer would do to one’s health in general. Right at that moment, however, my mind was preoccupied with shock and confusion. At once, the thoughtful doctor took out a pen and paper, and she began explaining to me again with illustrations how severe my disease was.

She further explained that, if needed, she might have to do a bigger surgery soon after the gall bladder removal so as to remove my whole lymph system, part of my liver, and probably part of some organs near to the gall bladder, such as small intestines and stomach.

In order to encourage me, she continued to say, “My surgeries are always very clean. I have never cut or prick the bile duct in all of my past surgeries.” From what she said, I knew I would surely die if the bile duct was accidentally broken.

ONLY THANKSGIVING

I could not help wondering how many of my organs would be left. Yet, when I left the clinic, my heart was filled with calmness and tranquility. I gave thanks to our Heavenly Father for granting me such a skilful and approachable doctor who genuinely cared for me.

Ever since I was diagnosed with gall bladder cancer, I began to experience this *journey of fire* in my life. Everything seemed to happen at the same time, such as facing a probable death, awaiting arrangements for various medical assessments, test results, and surgery booking, and trying to complete the unfinished tasks of church ministry as well. Actually I was co-teaching a church Sunday school course (entitled *Becoming a Good Steward of our Emotions: A study of Jesus’ Emotions in the Bible*) with my wife Mabel during that period, and there were two more lessons to finish off. In order not to affect the learning atmosphere, after prayers we decided not to share the illness news with brothers and sisters until the last class.

Briefly, God made known to me that I had gall bladder cancer through three doctors (i.e., my family doctor, the oncologist, and a radiologist) and three detailed medical assessments (i.e., an ultrasound, a CT scan, and an MRI scan). Gall bladder cancer is a silent killer; there are three possible ways of treatment. First, the patient can be completely cured in the case of early detection and a successful surgery. Second, the patient can receive a big surgery to remove all or part of some organs resulting in a prognosis of six months to a year of life. Third, the patient can receive hospice palliative care in case the cancer cells have spread too widely.



WHAT DID I BELIEVE?

In facing this shocking storm and on the verge of death, two questions came to my mind. What was I going to lean on? What did I believe?

Truly, I believed that Jehovah is the Almighty God who had the power to kill all cancer cells in my body and heal me completely. In the meantime, I also believed that the Sovereign Lord might have had mercy on me by informing me earlier through three doctors and three assessments that the Lord Jesus is going to receive me to the heavenly home soon.

I thought of a gifted Chinese missionary from my former church in Toronto, ten years my junior, who had been diagnosed with brain cancer just a few months prior. Within two months from the detection of his cancer, he went home to be with the Lord. I recalled a book I recently read entitled *Counselling People with Cancer*. The author's father was a pastor. At the age of 54, he was diagnosed with cancer when he found discomfort in his waist. He passed away nine weeks later.

THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Cancer is an unexpected, life-shattering diagnosis. From literature review, denial is a common initial coping strategy for dealing with a cancer diagnosis, either from the patients or their family members. Filled with confusion and shock, people need some time to accept the facts. I was really thankful that God gave me some time ahead so that I could prepare myself for possible death.

In retrospect, both my wife and two children experienced denial in their first few days of learning the diagnosis. They thought I would be okay gradually. Thence, during those days in dealing with my extreme loneliness, besides continuing with my daily devotion, I started daily (instead of weekly) singspiration and prayer with Mabel. Individually, we also began the journey of reading cancer-related articles and books.

Thanks to our Lord for His mercy and guidance. From the above-mentioned book, *Counselling People with Cancer* (1998), written by Jann Aldredge-Clanton, my heart was greatly comforted by the quoted similar experiences of the patients, though most of them were deceased. I learned to put into practice the theology of hope and Sacred Bible Stories suggested in the book. In his book *Triumph over Cancer* (2015), the late Chinese theologian Rev. Dr. Arnold Yeung shared his long struggle with cancer. In his other book, *New Life Passion* (2011), he strongly stated the true meaning of trusting God, "Death, I have a longer life than you!" (p. 84) and "I will glorify the Lord even in the face of death!" (p. 85). A renowned Christian youth advocate, Josephine So, shared in her Chinese book *Death Do Not be proud* (2008) about her persistent fight with cancer before passing away. She said, "Death, you can't kill me.....the man who was on the cross gave me a new meaning of suffering.....He gave me the meaning of life."

This cloud of witnesses kept on encouraging me and reminding me of His presence through the grace of God in their lives.



REFLECTION OF MY LIFE

The Holy Spirit then guided me to do one significant task: to prepare my wife and children in both their minds and hearts for my possible death. In other words, I was to prepare them for the moment that might come to say goodbye to me. The effort of doing this task would not be a waste even if God healed me completely in the end. As we all know from the Bible, death will certainly come one day in our lives; what we did now would do no harm but further strengthen the familial relationship amongst us. Why not, then, cherish this opportunity to prepare for my possible death?

Yes, *God's grace is sufficient* (2 Cor. 12:9)! In doing the task, both my wife and I intentionally arranged several family gatherings with a focus on two areas. With the help of our children in preparation, one area was to go through the photos and videos of our past family trips and some special events. Naturally, laughter and fond memories came along. The other area was to walk through my significant life events with them, either successes or failures. Most importantly, to share with my children how God saved me, changed my heart, and blessed my life and our family, just as what Job said (42:5), "*My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.*"

In sharing of the great wonders that God had done in my life, I hoped to encourage my two children not only to give thanks but also to trust God in their earthly life journey. I also showed and distributed evenly to them two small memorable personal ornaments I owned, i.e., a small golden cross, and a platinum pendant with engraving of two Chinese words meaning perseverance. With the kind assistance of a brother in Christ, I signed the power of attorney for my wife to take care of all the finances in case of my death.

THE JOURNEY OF FIRE

During one sharing night, my daughter asked me, "Who's going to walk me down the aisle on the day I get married?" Immediately, my son asked, "Who's going to help me move into the dorm several months later when I go to university?" Whenever I thought of this, my heart hurt so much as a father!

Sometimes we shared and laughed together. Other times we sobbed and shed tears. At this point of writing, I thought of our Lord Jesus Christ in Gethsemane, the night before his arrest, he was deeply distressed and troubled, said to his beloved disciples, "*My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.*" (Mark 14:34) And in Hebrews 5:7, it says, "*During his days on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.*" Our Lord Jesus himself has gone through moments of anguish and suffering on earth, not to mention that he died on the cross for us. Surely he understands our pain.

One night, our sharing was about to end, and all of us wept together for a long time. Our son cried profusely in particular. Finally he stopped crying and asked, "Dad, where do you want to have your funeral taken place?" I told him my preference was Toronto since both of my children were

born in Canada. “Do you prefer burial or cremation?” I would prefer the latter, I said. Later, we discussed funeral items such as its arrangement, the portrait, and so on. That night was a night of sadness for our family of four!

I remembered vividly another night in a supermarket. My wife was busy picking groceries. All of a sudden, a feeling of loss grabbed hold of me. All the food and products in the store appeared to bear no relations to me soon. The people and things around me seemed so far away. I have never experienced this feeling, a feeling that I would leave the world very soon. Uncontrollably, my eyes welled up with heartbroken tears. For the first time, I sensed the nearness of death; it was a taste of the searing heat of fire!

WAITING GAME!

Waiting for the cancer treatment is another story. It was a time in which we learned to be patient and put our faith, trust and hope in the Lord. According to Jann in her book, *Counselling People with Cancer*, it is a shocking and life-shattering warning to patients who are diagnosed with cancer. The waiting game and learning to live with unknowns are two of the biggest challenges. Jann said, “Doctors give them good news one day, confusing news the next day, no news for several days, and then bad news” (p. 17). This process creates an emotional rollercoaster controlled by others, which brings forth more stress, anxiety, and pain.

In my first visit to the oncologist, she said she would arrange a CT scan for me, based on which she would decide how earlier to book a date for the removal surgery. Having done a CT scan for a few days later, a clinic staff called to inform me that the radiologist responsible for analyzing my report recommended an MRI procedure for more detailed images of my organs before deciding on the feasibility of surgery.

“When will I do the MRI then?” I asked.

“There is a long wait for the MRI schedule, so it’s hard to tell.....” The staff told me.

Having to wait for an unknown period of time produced a sense of being out of control and helplessness. From time to time, it triggered low mood, worry, and fear. “Am I waiting for treatment or for death?” People just could not understand the constant feelings of uncertainty and insecurity, said Jann (p. 56). Nevertheless, I was thankful for my wife’s unspoken company alongside me during those days.

PEACE FROM GOD

Can you imagine how I lived my life in the first 14 days since the initial diagnosis of cancer? Two weeks’ time is nothing compared to a lifetime, but to me, those days seemed to be as long as half a century. How many nights do you think I could sleep well in those two weeks?



Surprisingly, the answer is.....14 nights. Both my wife and I were speechless. To us, this experience is the best illustration of the renowned painting, *Peace in the Midst of the Storm*, by Jack Dawson. “In the painting, black clouds and lightning cover the sky. Waves crash down a jagged rocky hillside with raging waters below. Just beneath the waterfalls and just above the river of water, you will notice a bird with her nest of babies tusked underneath the edge of a rock. In the midst of a giant storm, this bird found a sanctuary, a safe place to rest her wings.” (see faithfarmfamilytable.com)

In the Bible, the Lord Jesus promised His disciples, “*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*” (John 14:27) He also said, “*I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*” (John 16:33)

Surely, the peace given by the Lord will shield us and protect us regardless of the surrounding environment. Only in Christ can we have peace in the midst of the storm. To me, not only can Jesus Christ calm the winds and waves (Matt. 8:26), but He can also calm our troubled heart. He has called us to fix our eyes upon Him (2 Chron. 20:12)! Our Heavenly Father, who is the Almighty God, granted us peace that transcends all understanding in the midst of our trouble and despair (Phil. 4:6-7; Psalm 4:8). It is His mercy and grace! A true portrayal of His presence! May the name of the Lord be exalted!

The Holy Spirit also inspired me that this was a spiritual warfare. What would I lean on? It was neither on the doctors’ skills nor on the calls from the clinic about the assessments and treatments. But our hope was in our Lord! For our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth (Psalm 124:8). Praise to the Lord for He is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble (Psalm 46:1)!

PREPARE TO DIE, QUEST TO LIVE

In those days, honestly, I would say that emotionally I had sunk into the lowest valley. Thankfully, a thought came to Mabel’s mind when she prayed during her quiet time:

“It’s a fact that my husband is now facing cancer, and it’s significant for our whole family to prepare for his possible death. In the meantime, Father, you are the only true Almighty God, who is loving and kind. I pray for my family that you will give us strength each day and sustain us. I pray for my husband, please strengthen him with grit, and grant him the willpower of life in particular. I earnestly pray that you will heal him completely. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

When I listened to Mabel’s sharing of her courageous prayer in tears, I felt much encouraged. Yes! I prepared for death, I would also ask for life. Here, I would like to quote from Rev. Yeung’s *New Life Passion* (pp. 84-85):



“Death is certainly horrible... I was so near to death in the past few weeks; he tried to use various ways to make me regret... he forced me to believe that he is the last station of life. Yet I see death as a door, when I go in... I am able to rejoice, ‘Death, I have a longer life than you.’ For when I go through the door, death is behind me forever, whereas eternity is ahead of me.

Actually I love my life... I long to see my children grow up... I would love to live longer. But I will definitely not allow the thought of “loving to live longer” become my ultimate concern... I will glorify the Lord even in the face of death. This is the way to tear off the mask of death and not to fall for it.” (Our Translation)

I was greatly encouraged by the wisdom of Rev. Yeung in facing life and death. His life story empowered me to pray for the willpower and hope for a new life. May His will be done!

MIRACLE OF GOD, FULL OF MERCY

Praise the Lord! Towards the end of November, on the 15th day from the initial diagnosis, I was scheduled to receive both an MRI scan and the pre-operation procedures, including a heart test, bloodwork, a chest x-ray, an interview with a nurse, and so on (though the removal surgery was cancelled for the time being). It was a really long and difficult day. We woke up early around 5 am that morning and stayed for more than seven hours in the hospital. The actual MRI procedure took almost half an hour longer than usual as there were a lot of organs needed to be scanned.

That night, we as a family gathered together again for sharing, which ended with a family prayer time and tears as it was in the past two weeks. When I finally lay down in bed, both my body and soul were weary. Even so, I could not fall asleep and my brain was consumed with questions.

“When will I know the result of the MRI? Since I know that an MRI aims at detecting how far the cancer cells have spread, I wonder how many of my organs near to the gall bladder have been affected. As far as I know, hospice palliative care is the only option if the cancer has spread and no probable treatment is available. The MRI scan result implies the feasibility of a removal surgery. What’s next if the surgery is no longer required? And if I should go ahead with the surgery, as the original surgery booking has already been cancelled, when will I be scheduled for the surgery again? Will it be too late in my case? How far will it affect my chance of survival?” These are all valid questions, yet I did not have an answer to them.

Furthermore, my heart was occupied with prayer, thankfulness, reminiscing, struggles, worry, and sadness, especially when I thought of my beloved wife and children. For the very first time since I was diagnosed with cancer, I was unable to sleep that night.

When it was about dawn, I prayed to our Abba Father, “Thank you, Father, for ‘granting’ me the cancer. For you let me experience your presence from the very beginning, and you allow me to experience your providence and guidance all along. Thank you!”

Here, I would like to clarify this prayer. I did not mean to thank God for the cancer per se. What I did mean is that from the very beginning of the cancer attack, God let me experience His presence and providence, and He did not forsake me.

I got up when I finished my prayer to God. While I was still thinking and my feet had just touched the ground, the phone rang. My wife then said to me, “Honey, the staff from clinic is on the phone and wants to talk to you,” handing me the phone.

“Hi, we got your MRI result and now you can do the removal surgery,” The staff said.

“Oh, when will the surgery be?” I asked.

“On the same day that it was originally booked and later cancelled. The time is at noon. You need to be there two hours earlier.”

Wow! The Almighty God is a God of miracles! After going through all the ordeals in those two weeks, the surgery was now scheduled on the same original booked date. More amazingly, it was postponed from very early morning at 6 am to a more desirable time at noon. Our God is full of mercy and grace!

Several weeks later when I recalled the above episode, I found that the prayer accurately reflected my mental state at that time. I was in the lowest valley; I was exhausted and weary. Seeing no way out, I trusted and submitted to my Lord with all my heart and turned to put my focus on thanksgiving for His presence and providence. Right at the time of my whole-hearted submission, I received the call from the clinic staff who informed me of the surgery booking. I deeply believe that my submission was pleasing to our Heavenly Father whose faithfulness is great, as said in Lamentations 3:23.

It was exactly a week’s time before I could do the surgery. Within that week, the discomfort and pain inside my body increased. In the meantime, I continued to live with the unknown and struggles, learned to trust and obey, and treasured our family sharing time. The days slipped away by turns of the above cycles and repeated change of mood.

EL SHADDAI, TOTAL GRACE!

On the day of surgery in early December, we arrived at the hospital right at 10 o’clock. The preparation work was smooth. Then, we stayed in the waiting room until noon as instructed. A nurse on duty came in and called my name. Just when I was about to stand up, she told me an unexpected news, “Oh, it’s not your turn yet! I am here to inform you that it’s one and half more hours to go for your surgery. An ambulance has just sent in a patient who is suffering from appendicitis. He is very painful and in danger, so we need to do a surgery on him now. Your doctor booked the emergency operating room for your surgery, which is not an ordinary operating room...”



While the nurse was still talking, I suddenly understood my current surgery arrangement. The oncologist, upon receiving my MRI result which implied the green light for the removal surgery, immediately booked a date in the emergency operating room, so as to make sure I could have the surgery the soonest possible. I was so thankful for the opportunity of surgery as well as the wonderful arrangement. Our God is truly the God of providence!

Finally, it was my turn for surgery. A nurse led me to the operating room. It was indeed the very first surgery in my whole life! It could be a removal surgery only or a bigger one. In the process of surgery, it was possible to discover any problems such as spread of cancer cells and/or a dim prognosis.

Somehow, I did not say a word when I was lying on the operation bed. While the nurse on my right was putting an apparatus on me, she said, “Why are you so peaceful?” The anesthetist on my left, a Mandarin-speaking Chinese, also wondered, “Yeah, you look like very peaceful!” Then the oncological surgeon responded, “He’s a church pastor; God is with him!” All six people in the room laughed, including me. Truly, our Heavenly Father is the God of peace. His presence brings peace, so that people will know He is the true God.

The oncologist then followed, “Today, we are going to operate a gall bladder removal surgery on Mr. Mak. We might also operate a bigger surgery on him.” At the same time, the anesthetist injected a needle into my arm. I thus prayed instantly, “Oh, my Lord Jesus!” I did not even repeat this for the third time before I fell into sleep. My wife Mabel, on the other hand, was staying in the family waiting room, praying.

The Almighty God is a great healer! Several hours later when I woke up, I was still alive! The oncologist told my wife that it was a very successful surgery. From the photos taken inside my body during the surgery process, it was rare to see such an uncommonly abnormal gall bladder. Furthermore, I needed to wait for a month to see her for the lab report because of her vacation. Throughout the waiting period, I could sense the negative effect of the surgery on the immune system of my body. I had significant weight loss and I got sick easily, which was unusual for me.

In my next clinic visit in early January of 2014, the oncologist informed that I did not need any follow-up treatment due to early detection and a very successful surgery unless I experienced other symptoms or discomfort. Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! This is a ‘from death unto life’ announcement!

FROM DEATH TO LIFE, PASSION FOR NEW-LIFE

Looking back at those two months, I would say God has guided me through the valley of the shadow of death. His presence and providence greatly encouraged me. A big thank-you to all of our family, friends, as well as brothers and sisters in Christ, who have walked with me and my family through their sincere prayers, caring support, plus actions of love. Most of all, my heart is filled with gratitude towards our Abba Father who graciously granted me this passion of new life.

Here, let me recap what we have gone through as follows with thankfulness:

- 1) Troubles came in sunny and calm days, yet God kept and sustained us with His presence and unfailing love.
- 2) It is God's amazing grace that He granted us His peace which transcends our understanding even in the face of death.
- 3) My beloved wife has walked with me through mountains and valleys in the past, and in faith and love she accompanied me in this journey of fire.
- 4) Through family sharing together, our family of four prepared for my possible death, and through mutual support, encouragement and prayers, we cherished and strengthened our family relationship.
- 5) God granted me responsible and caring doctors as well as amiable medical professionals; for their appropriate and careful treatment, I am thankful.
- 6) Family, friends, as well as brothers and sisters in Christ showered us with their love through continual prayers and supportive actions. What a testimony of the love of Christ!
- 7) Our God is a true and loving God! "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you."
- 8) I had crossed over from death to life, and God granted me a new life passion. I am now a "new" creation and I desire even more to follow and serve the Lord for the rest of my life.

I experienced the nearness of death in this journey of fire, which brought forth a lot of impact and changes to my life. Many earthly things do not seem to be as important to me as before. I am always thankful for this astounding experience through which God strengthened my soul with His power and love, my relationship with my wife and children become even more intimate, and I cherish even more the fellowship with family, friends, as well as brothers and sisters in Christ.

As Jann depicted in her book, cancer can be one of the greatest curses on earth, yet simultaneously, it might also bring out the greatest blessings in one's life. May glory be to God our Father (p. 66)!

*"I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonders.
I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.*

*Those who know your name will trust in you,
for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you." (Psalm 9:1-2, 10)*

Let us sacrifice thank offerings to God our Heavenly Father!

Let us live our earthly lives with joy, love, peace, and hope.

Sincerely, I pray for God's abundant blessings to be upon each of our families.

Take good care, brothers and sisters!

May all glory be to God! Amen!

