

Reflections on my cancer

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On the 12th of August 2014 I underwent a major operation to remove my left kidney which had been taken over by a large cancerous tumour. My immediate and extended family were very supportive of my wife and me during this time, as was the Pukekohe congregation, and we have been humbled by the concern, love and kindness shown to us by many of you in our Reformed Churches of New Zealand. Thank you for your love and prayers.

During my recovery I had time to rest and reflect. I found it helpful, both spiritually and mentally, to write down some of my thoughts and feelings. Those notes have formed the basis of this article. I pray these reflections may be of interest and help to some of you. I don't want to suggest that my experience is unique. Many in our denomination have had, or currently have cancer, and mine has been light and of short duration compared to what others have suffered, and are suffering. Yet, having cancer, of whatever variety and degree, makes one think about life and death and eternal realities. Another pastor who experienced cancer wrote, "...a little cancer goes a long way. Though we did not suffer the most, we certainly suffered enough – enough to be given a unique opportunity to consider the reality of suffering in the light of the gospel."ⁱ This is the purpose of this article.

Diagnosis

I am 57 years old and through all these years the Lord has blessed me with excellent health. I have hardly ever been ill and, until recently, the only operation I had was for a groin hernia, which was repaired with day surgery. Late in June last year I had symptoms that gave me concern and went to see my doctor. He sent me for blood tests and then for an ultrasound. The scan revealed a large cancerous tumour that had taken over and distended my left kidney. This was followed by a CT scan and a visit with an urologist. The weeks between the ultra sound diagnosis and receiving the result of the CT scan were the most difficult for us as we did not know how far the cancer had spread. If it had gone to my liver or my lungs then my life expectancy would be relatively short.

First reactions

One morning during those weeks I was home by myself, sitting in my study, reading and praying. I looked around at all my books, many of which I have read, but a good number I have not. Some I plan to read in my retirement. Suddenly it struck me that maybe I would not get to retirement age and these books would remain unread. This loss triggered the thought of other possible losses: my wife as a widow, my children and grandchildren, our lovely home and beautiful garden with the camellias and rhododendrons in flower. Suddenly I was overcome with emotion and for the next half hour I wept and prayed. This was unusual for me (the weeping, not the praying!) as I am not usually an emotional person. At my elbow was my collection of books on suffering and dying. Looking at those I noticed a

book presented to me after I had led a Young Adults Camp in Rotorua two years earlier - *O love that will not let me go – Facing Death with Courageous Confidence in God*, by Nancy Guthrie. I picked it up and began reading and was greatly helped by a quote from Andrew Rivet, a Christian scholar who died in 1651 at the age of 77. Just before he died he wrote this;

“The sense of divine favour increases in me every moment. My pains are tolerable and my joys inestimable. I am not more vexed with earthly cares. I remember when any new book came out, how earnestly I longed after it – but now all that is but dust. You are my all, O Lord; my good is to approach to you. O what a library I have in God, in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge! You are the teacher of spirits – I have learned more divinity in these ten days that you have come to visit me, than I did in fifty years before.”

That same morning I was preparing a sermon on Psalm 119:105-112 and was reading a commentary by Charles Bridges on this great psalm. The thoughts and reflections of Bridges were just what I needed. I read, “The time of special need is at hand with us all, when we shall need substance and reality for our support – the true confidence of a living faith. Those who have never felt the nearness of eternity, can have but a faint idea of what we shall need in the hour when ‘flesh and heart fail’, to fix a sure unshaken foot upon ‘the Rock of ages’.”ⁱⁱ I was able to apply to myself the words of the psalm before I preached it to others.

During this time of waiting and uncertainty I also drew much comfort from the doctrine of the providence of God and the wonderful summary and application of this in the Heidelberg Catechism Q & A 28; “How does the knowledge of God’s providence comfort you? We can be patient when things go against us, thankful when things go well, and for the future we can have good confidence in our faithful God and Father than nothing will separate us from his love.” I was very thankful for the many blessings God had given to me over so many years and now, when things were going against me, I knew I had to be patient (more about that later).

The diagnosis of cancer and the uncertainty of our future was a sudden and sobering reminder that our lives and times are in God’s hands (Psalm 31:15). Like most of us, Harriet and I have often talked about our plans for the future. We thought that when I retired from pastoral ministry we could spend a few months helping out churches in our denomination that did not have a pastor. We had talked about a long holiday around the South Island with our caravan. Suddenly all these plans were called into question. It reminded me of the warning in James 4:13-17 against making plans as though our lives and future were in our own hands. We always knew that our plans were *Deo Volente*, Lord willing, but my cancer impressed this on us with new clarity. It reminded us that we “are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (James 4:14).ⁱⁱⁱ

Surgery

Five weeks after I first saw my doctor I had a visit with a urologist through the public health system, and two weeks after that I was admitted to Auckland Hospital for surgery. It was a major operation as the surgeon wanted to be sure that the cancer has not spread to other organs in my body. Thankfully the surgery showed that the cancer was completely contained within the kidney membrane.

In hospital I began reading the Psalms. I read regularly and systematically through the Psalms, but decided to begin again in hospital as this seemed an appropriate part of the Bible for my present circumstances. This proved most beneficial and I was able to draw much comfort from many of them. When I had trouble sleeping at night I meditated on what is known as “The Evening Psalm”, Psalm 4, “I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone O Lord, make me dwell in safety” (v 8, cf. Ps 3:5).^{iv}

Many people came to visit me during my week in hospital, including my family, my sister in law from Australia, members of the Pukekohe congregation and other Reformed churches in Auckland, and my fellow pastors from these churches, and all were a great encouragement.

Further reflections

When I arrived home I continued reading the psalms and also began reading the book of Job; I thought that would aid my reflections on suffering and trial and how God uses these in our lives. I noted that Job spoke honestly to God about his suffering. I was reminded that Job’s friends were the most help to him when they came to visit him and sat with him for seven days without saying anything; yet when they began to talk to him they only intensified his suffering with their distorted theology and insensitive applications. Thankfully, friends who came to visit me were of better comfort and consolation!

In the weeks leading up to my surgery Harriet was very emotional, partly due to the shock of the cancer news, and partly because of the uncertainties of my situation and our future. Those of you who know her will know that she both laughs and cries easily. Harriet wondered if her crying demonstrated a lack of faith and trust in God. I reassured her that was not necessarily so; some people are more emotional than others and for many crying is a helpful release of emotion. In situations of grief and uncertainty our emotions will fluctuate and that is entirely understandable. What you do is more important than how you feel. Are you still attending worship? Are you praying? Are you reading your Bible? Are you meeting with God’s people? Are you getting some sleep? Are you emotional? My wife was doing all these things and recognising this helped put her crying in perspective.

My wife’s reactions also highlight the need to care for the carer in times of illness. Often the focus goes on the person with cancer and the spouse may be ignored. Thankfully that was not our experience. A friend came specifically to visit Harriet to encourage her;

another woman in the church took her out for coffee; and we particularly appreciated cards that were addressed to both of us.

This experience has made us more aware of the brevity of our lives and of death. We all know that one day we are going to die. Most of us put it to the back of minds as something that will happen in the distant future. But cancer, a serious accident, or the death of a relative pushes death to the forefront of our minds. Solomon encourages us to think about death: "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart" (Eccl 7:2). My wife and I have taken this to heart and have discussed what Harriet would do if I died before her: would she continue living in our large home? Have we made adequate provisions for her living on her own? None of us want to be morbid and overly pre-occupied about our death, but we do need to be realistic and each one of us needs to be prepared. That preparation should include practical matters, but even more our *spiritual* preparation. Ask yourself; Do I know God as my Creator and my Father in Heaven? Do I trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of my sins? Am I living a godly and holy life? Am I prepared to die? Do I have assurance of salvation?

The temptation I struggled with most of all was impatience. During the early stages of my recovery I was impatient with my pain, with my weariness, with the loss of my sense of taste, with not being able to be at my work, and with not being strong enough to attend church services. One Saturday evening I was struggling with all this and had to confess my impatience to God, ask for forgiveness and pray for more patience! The next morning I continued reading in the psalms and read Psalm 40:1, "I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry." Then I read James 1:4, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, when you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance." These were verses from the Holy Spirit for my situation! I needed to wait patiently for the Lord and to persevere in my trial! I had to remind myself that two months of recovery is a very short time of illness in a life-time of ministry, and that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). Furthermore, "Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Back to work

I had six weeks off work and preaching, although the elders of the church urged me to take all the time I needed to fully recover. At week seven I led the morning service only and preached on Philippians 1:12-26.^v The apostle Paul was in prison awaiting possible execution by the Romans. He wrote to the believers in Philippi that he was torn between two choices: "to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far" or to "remain in the body" (v 23f). He expressed this succinctly in this well-known phrase; "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (v 21). My thoughts and feelings through my surgery and recovery were similar to those of the apostle. There was immediate gain in going to be with the Lord, but there was

also the desire to stay here on earth to be with my wife, children and grandchildren and to be of some use in the Pukekohe church and in our denomination. Thankfully, God makes these decisions, not us, and I was content to leave that in his hands.

As I write this it is almost six months since my surgery. In a few weeks time I will receive another CT scan to see if there is any further evidence of cancer. I am fully back at my usual work and am feeling fit and well. After I had recovered a member of our church asked me if I viewed life differently. Yes, I do. I am more aware of my own mortality and that this present life is a gift of God, and not to take this for granted. My wife and I are thankful to God for his grace and favour to us in our marriage and in preserving my life, health and strength. I am reminded that on the one hand no one is indispensable but on the other that each one of us must make good use of the time, gifts and opportunities God has given to us. I have gained a new empathy for those who are unwell or having major surgery. And, finally, I am very grateful for the love of God and the love of his people, in Pukekohe and in our denomination.

J. A. Haverland – February 2015

ⁱ Paul D Wolfe, *My God is True – Lessons learned along cancer’s dark road*, Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 2009

ⁱⁱ Charles Bridges, *Psalms 119*, Edinburgh, Banner of Truth Trust, 1974, p 278

ⁱⁱⁱ There are other biblical reference to the fleeting nature of our lives; “You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man’s life is but a breath.” Ps 39:5, cf. Ps 90:3-12

^{iv} Psalms 16, 27, 28 and the beginning of Psalm 18 were also especially comforting.

^v You can hear this sermon on the Pukekohe website – www.rcnzone.com/pukekohe - as well as a sermon I preached on James 4:13-17 just before my surgery.