

The News

A man got a call from his doctor and was told that there was bad news and even worse news. “What is the bad news” he asked. The doctor said, “Well, the results of your blood test reveal you have a terminal disease that is always fatal within 24 hours, and there is no cure.” “So, what was the worse news” the man quivered? The doc replied, “I should have told you yesterday.”

I really don't have to tell you that one day the phone is going to ring, do I? Let's face it, we are just not going to get out of this place alive. We know that and yet it still seems to come as such a shock when the old doc has bad news or even worse news for us.

Let me get straight to the point without making this big dramatic build up. My “bad news” came in July, 2001. After a few days of drilling into my hip and taking out core samples the size of a 3 inch pipe, the distinguished team of oncologists called me into the “bad news” room. They sat me down and in a calm but confident voice told me the news that no one wants to hear. “YOU ARE GOING TO DIE. DIE. DIE. YOU ARE GOING TO STINKIN' DIE.” Ok, maybe the specialists were a little more tactful than that but that is how it sounds to most people.

Blah, Blah Blah

Did you ever see the Far Side cartoon about what dogs really hear? In this cartoon a man is talking to his dog and is telling him all kinds of doggie things, and then he says his name (Spot, I think) and then says more doggie things. In the next frame you see what the dog actually hears and it goes something like this: Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, Spot, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Doctors don't realize that patients are kind of like dogs when they are called to the “bad news” room. Here is what they hear in that room: Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, STINKIN DIE, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

So what was my bad news? Acute Myelogenous Leukemia – two months to live. Yep, that's it. When you go to online medical dictionaries to get more info on this particular type of disease you generally find the following detailed description – Acute Myelogenous Leukemia: STINKIN' DIE. I was told, in a very professional manner, that survivability of my particular type and subtype was very low. Without treatment the chances were 0.00 no matter how many carrots you choose to eat. And to make matters worse there are no magic bullets like in other forms of leukemia. Some chronic forms of the disease have these really cool pills that you take then and wham, no more disease. Of course there is a slight downsize to the magic bullets. They cost \$800 dollars a pill, and you take one a day for the rest of your life. Your nose hair grows really long and you end up looking like a walrus but that is a small price to pay for a longer life, right?

Still here

As I write this it is 2014. For those of you who are math challenged that means I have been alive over 13 years past the two- month “STINKIN' DIE” date I was given. All kinds of people die every day and many look and smell like a walrus. So why write about it? The real reason is that many people begged me to write it. My journey with a terminal disease has been a little out of the ordinary, and many have felt it is worth

telling. This book is about something bigger than beating cancer or just generally avoiding the compost pile. If that is your goal forget it. The worms always win that one. No, this is about something bigger and more important.

It is about joy and triumph. I have been through the war and understand the battles. I shared the same pain during my seven months of painful and radical poisoning that all other chemo patients experience. I had the same tubes sewn into my chest and ripped out by Neanderthal interns. I got to pee every 45 minutes during that seven months and had no idea what sleep was like everyone else. I ate my meals through my chest tube too. I used to tell the doctors that I was having steak and potatoes when they would come into my room and see the putrid green slime draining into my veins that gave my body the needed nutrients it needed. Traditional meals were relegated to long term memory in those months. Most of us dreamed when we would taste food again. For this southern Californian, it was torture not being able to eat Mexican food.

And yes, like all the over chemo patients I had the lovely mucositis. Nothing can adequately describe the feeling of having sores and holes bored through your tongue and throat and throughout the pipes that lead all the way to the other end of your body. And then you get to sit on big donut when you limp into the bathroom. I wonder if doctors ever wonder why they get those blank, unbelieving stares from patients when they come into your room and ask, "So how are we doing today?" If it was possible to move our swollen, mangled tongues and gasp out the words, we would say something like this: "How do you think I am doing? My complete plumbing system is full of canker sores and it feels like I gargled Drano. I have never slept more than 40 minutes in the last two months, I forget what food tastes like, and whenever I smell the food carts going by my room I want to vomit so bad I get migraines holding it back." That is what that stare is trying to communicate, but we never quite communicate it right.

Here is the point. I went through what everyone else does in a seven-month hospital torture. But here is the difference. It was a joyful time. Yes, you heard it right. It wasn't always fun but it was joyful. I have never at any time been afraid or concerned.

There is only one reason for this. I have been a Christian for 40 years and it is real. The day I trusted Christ as my Savior my life was changed and the fear of death left me forever. When I got the news that I was going to "STINKIN' DIE" it was, of course, a surprise, but it was not a bad surprise. It wasn't "bad news." Here is a portion of an e-mail I sent out to my general mailing list four hours after I first received that supposedly "bad news:"

"Personally I still can't believe how I am doing. I should be a basket case but I am absolutely triumphant. I am actually happy and totally enjoying the witnessing opportunities. I think I have totally blown away the doctors with peace that God has given me. His hands are embracing me so strong and with such love that this is one of the most thrilling things I have ever gone through. The world calls this denial but they are a bunch of idiots. When the doctor first told me I had acute Leukemia, I responded that I was glad it wasn't an ugly one."

That is how I felt and what I wrote just after I got the “news.” Seven months in the hospital was a thrilling part of my life’s journey. My wife and I were missionaries, and we had lived and worked in third world countries over twenty years and to us this was just another chapter in the incredible journey with God we were experiencing. Even if it was the last chapter, I was determined to make sure it was the best. I grew up the turmoil of the infamous sixties and one day I saw a poster in a hippie pad that said, “Death is the greatest trip of all; that is why God saved it until last!” I love life and I am not a Goth that dresses in black and has a death wish, but on the other hand, death is not a big deal when you know where you are going. It is a doorway to life and having studied and taught the Bible for many years, I do have a good idea of what is on the other side of that door, and it is incredible. It is last part of an amazing and joyful journey.

I teetered on the very brink of death five times during those seven months in the hospital. I fully expected to step through that door. It was an incredibly peaceful experience. I like the bumper sticker that says, “Don’t be caught dead without Jesus.” It is a very comforting feeling to face that moment, and he is with you. It is very real. It is amazing.

Did you see the images of the coastal towns in Sumatra after the giant tsunami left its wake of devastation across the land? In town after town the houses and buildings were literally gone. But then you would see a large building standing all by itself. A few structures stood against the tide. They had secure foundations. They were built with strong materials.

We will all face our tsunamis in life when the tide seems relentless and enormous. But if our foundations are secure and we are built with the right materials, we will stand against the flood. I can speak as one who is still standing. That is why I am writing this. It is not about beating cancer, it is about being triumphant over it whether we live or die. This is not about having the right attitude, it is about having the right relationship with the only one who can keep us standing when the floods hit.

Some of my stories are funny and sometimes serious but they are always real. When you put all the stories together you end up with a foundation that has stood against the tsunami. It may be that your life needs a few of these stories right now. Maybe you just need a good laugh or two. Maybe you just smell like a walrus and want to know if it will get better.