

Our Journey

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David:

We want to share with you the Journey that my Wife (Ruth) and I have recently experienced. These days have been the best and the worst of times.

December 15th, The Beginning

Wait . . . What? Did I just hear the “C” Word? There it goes again, the Doctor tells me they found a Neoplasm on my Pancreas, and it may be Cancer. This is bad, I thought to myself. Tumor on the Pancreas . . . Oh, this is very bad!

I have been healthy my whole life. I am active and healthy for an older guy. I ride horses, teach Therapeutic Riding to patients with disabilities, and I love my job as a professor teaching students at Baylor University. I just don’t get sick!

For over a month, I have been experiencing abdominal pain on the right side, diarrhea, and back pain that attacks in the middle of the night. Tough times – Can’t eat, can’t sleep. The Doc already took Xrays of my back and said it looked fine. He thought my symptoms might be some kind of common gut problem like diverticulitis. Fortunately, he was very thorough. At one point, he said, “You know, your symptoms are not fitting a normal pattern, I think we need to do some advanced testing, to rule out something serious. I’m going to order a high resolution CT scan.” It was this decision, and this moment in time, when I felt the Holy Spirit talked to my physician, to help find my problem much sooner than almost all others diagnosed with this hidden problem. I believe this decision may have saved my life.

It is Wednesday, December 15th only 10 days till Christmas. The Doctor called that evening with the news and we started a journey we never would have wished to be on. He told us that a mass was found on my Pancreas and it could be Cancer.

Doctor Todd Blattman must have pulled some strings, because just 3 days later, on Saturday morning at 7:00 A.M. – and one week before Christmas, I was able to get a high resolution MRI of the abdomen. Bad news, the tumor was confirmed in the Body of the Pancreas, and the Radiologist said it is “likely Cancer.” The only way to verify that the mass is Cancer is to do a biopsy. Ruth stayed very positive, as usual, and everyone said we just need to take it one day at a time and not assume anything. Hope still abounds, maybe it will just be a cyst or polyp.

Monday, Day 5 at 8:00 A.M. They took about 18 gallons of my blood for testing (not really, but it sure did feel like it). I walked out feeling more like a prune than a man. The number of tests were too many to count, and the results we got later were about 12 pages.

One of the tests was for CA 19-9, a Cancer Antigen test. Of course, out of all the tests, this one was the most important, the most difficult to analyze, and took the most amount of time to send the results. We won't get the results for about a week.

In the medical community, the week before and after Christmas is about the worst time of the year to get new appointments. In our church, We are in a small fellowship group called a "Barn Fellowship" and we shared what was happening. Our Fellowship is made up of some pretty powerful Prayer Warriors, and I have gained many insights from them. We asked them to pray for us and to pray that we would be guided to exactly the right people we needed to see, and at the right time. Boy did he answer all our prayers!

Somehow God opened the doors to allow us to get an appointment with the Waco Gastrointestinal group 4 days before Christmas, and Day 6 of the journey. We met with Patricia, a GI Nurse Practitioner. She was so helpful. Up until today, we had no information about the Pancreas, what was happening to me, nor what was going to happen. The only information we could get was from the internet, and the information from the net was sparse and inaccurate. For the first time, we heard about how the Pancreas makes all the enzymes you need to digest material, then dumps it into the small intestines to work. My tumor is preventing the Pancreas from making the enzymes I need, so all food and fluids race through the system undigested.

Patricia said it was essential that we get a biopsy, because no one will start treatment until the biopsy is confirmed. The method they use to get a biopsy is to take you to the operating room, and use a large endoscope (similar to an upper GI) but with ultrasound and a needle. They pass the endoscopy scope tube down through the mouth, down through the esophagus and stomach and get the biopsy from the nearby Pancreas. Patricia took us to meet with the lady that schedules the GI operating room and procedures.

The young lady doing the scheduling was behind a glass partition with her back to us, facing her computer. She had many background questions I answered, while Ruth got out her iPad and started to look up beads (she is into designing and making jewelry right now). After looking over everything, the scheduler said, I'm sorry we can't get you in for the biopsy until the middle of January. We only have two doctors who can do this procedure, and one is gone. As she turned her back again to look at the computer, I elbowed Ruth and mouthed to her "Pray for appointment!" About 15 seconds later, the scheduler said Hmmm, let me check on something. She gets up, goes into another room, then comes back and says: "The weirdest thing happened, one of our procedures just cancelled, can you come in the Monday after Christmas for the biopsy, only 6 days away. Ruth and I both almost shouted together "YES!" with big grins on our face. What an amazing miracle God performed for us!

Day 10 - We had a lovely but very scaled back Christmas Day. We celebrated Jesus' birth and what Jesus means to our lives, while having a heavy burden on our shoulders. Early Christmas morning, I opened my computer and it said the results are back from my CA 19-9, the Cancer Antigen test. What a day to get the results like that!

The CA 19-9 Cancer Antigen Test has a number we don't understand, but next to it said the number was rated "Very High." To be honest, Christmas morning is not the best day to find I had a high Cancer Marker. It seemed to be poor timing.

In two days (Monday after Christmas) we would be going in to get the biopsy. I have worked professionally with patients with Laryngeal Cancer for several decades, so I found I was having to give myself the talks that I normally would give to the patients. Be Patient; This time can be the worst time waiting to find out what the mass really is; Don't get ahead of yourself; Take one day at a time.

The Monday after Christmas, we went in for the Biopsy procedure. We and our Fellowship group had prayed that God would open the right doors, and that he would bring the best medical people into our lives, and that those people would have a strong faith in God. Once we get there, they took us back to a little hospital pre-op room, made me put on the most humiliating gown ever created by mankind (you all know what I mean), and then we waited. Our Gastrointestinal Doctor, Dr. Hanysak comes in, introduces himself, and as he is typing on the computer, he says that yesterday he was discussing my case with my family doctor at church. We shared that we felt that God was walking side by side with us through this journey. He hesitated for a few minutes, trying to decide if he should share any personal details about himself. He took a deep breath, and then shared that he currently has Kidney cancer and is on Chemotherapy. He had just reviewed all of my tests and information and had spent time talking with my regular doctor after church, so he knew exactly where I was in the process.

He was like an angel from God. He spoke about how we were feeling at the time, he spoke about his journey, he spoke about how God has been his rock and guide through the process, and then he asked if he could pray for us. We formed a prayer circle, and he prayed for very specific things about my journey, while I wept.

When he finished praying, we all said Amen. Ruth said "We want to now pray for you." After looking a little shocked he said "I have learned through this process that I will take any prayers I can get. We prayed very deeply for him and his journey, and the Holy Spirit was extremely strong in our prayer circle.

Day 14th, the middle of the week between Christmas and New Years, somehow (of course this was from God, with help from our doctor friends) we were able to get into see the best Hepatopancreatobiliary surgeon at UT Southwestern in Dallas. We took all of our records, scans, and biopsy information with us, and he spent a fair amount of time reviewing all the medical information with his team before seeing us. Since he was a part of the medical school,

he arrived with a long line of baby ducklings following him into the room (residents and baby-docs). He was also a Christian and we bonded quickly. We had many people and previous medical training places in common.

He was caring, thoughtful, and had a deeply empathetic voice as he launched into his findings. We had told him that we only found out about this 2 weeks ago, and we don't know what any of this means. The previous doctors were gathering the information needed, but did not have the expertise to interpret all the information, so they were mostly silent. This was the time we were going to find out our future.

The Doctor said that although the biopsy has not been identified, he is relatively sure I have a localized Adenocarcinoma in the body of the pancreas. There is no evidence of metastasis. That is good news. However, the tumor is wrapped around the Superior Mesenteric Artery, which makes the tumor inoperable at this time. He said we would first need to start on a very strong form of Chemotherapy, and then hope the tumor shrinks enough to allow them to operate on it.

He did a magnificent job of explaining how important the pancreas is. I do have a great deal of expertise in human anatomy and have taught it for years, however, since I am in the profession of Speech Pathology, we basically stop studying most of the anatomy at the level of the diaphragm. The Pancreas is below that, so I knew very little before this, except the fact that the Pancreas is was one of the worst places to get cancer.

At the end of the conversation, we asked about the future. He said that it is unlikely that I will be cured of the pancreatic cancer, and that this will likely be a life-long journey. My wife, Ruth, is a prayer warrior and has an incredible faith in God. For the past two weeks, she had been my rock (she still is) and had great faith that everything would come out alright. This was the first time we could talk to an expert to get the final news. When he was so direct with us, Ruth broke down and wept as we held each other. She kept saying, "I don't want to lose you." The Doctor said "We will give you a few minutes" and the Doctor and his ducklings somberly filed out of the room so we could wrap our heads around the news, and that our future, and our lives, had just changed fairly significantly.

Once we had some confirmation of the disease I was facing, I approached Baylor to determine what I should do next. I have been at Baylor for over 22 years and never asked a day off, so I wasn't sure how it worked. The amount of caring and compassion that I got from Administrators at Baylor was mind boggling. It was truly a beautiful thing. After providing the documentation needed, Baylor agreed to allow me to take the semester off, so that I could concentrate on my testing, appointments, and treatments. I was still waiting on the answers from MD Anderson about the Biopsy, so I requested that we wait to inform the faculty, staff, and students. I regret this decision and wish I had not asked to wait to tell my "work family." Unfortunately, it took me longer than I expected to go through this tumultuous time and have the ability to actually explain everything that was going on. I have greatly missed interacting with everyone.

I have taught the cancer portion of the voice class for several decades and have extensive experience working with laryngectomy patients (people who have their larynx removed because of cancer). I have told my students all through these years, that if they or someone they know or love has cancer, they should try to go to MD Anderson. I was able to have a strong relationship with MD Anderson when I was in Houston as a professor at Baylor College of Medicine, Head and Neck Surgery. So, we started the process to see how we might get into to see a Pancreas Surgeon at MD Anderson. My GI Doctor that did the biopsy started the referral process and opened the door for me.

This was Day 15 of the Journey, and the week between Christmas and New Years. I called and talked to the Intake Specialist at MD Anderson. At the beginning, she checked the calendar and said that she might be able to get me in to see the first appointment to see a Pancreatic Surgeon would be late February or middle of March. She said, “You know what, the best thing to do is for us to go through all of your records, and make sure there are no blanks. Once someone sees a blank, it slows down the process. I have a bunch of time this morning, so let’s go through all your records and fill everything in.”

In the process of going through that interview, the Intake Specialist said “Oh my gosh, your GI doctor sent in over 30 pages of records, and went in and filled out every single question.” Remember this was the Angel doctor that did my biopsy, and he took the time to do this two days after Christmas. After several hours of questions, she says “Wait, something just changed a minute ago on the schedule, and an opening just occurred this Monday with a Surgical Oncologist. Can you make it to Houston that soon?” She was talking about the Monday after New Years, the first day everyone at MD Anderson came back from the Christmas/New Years holiday. Ruth and I had prayed for open doors, and had decided if God opened the door, we needed to trust that it was from HIM, and walk through the door by faith. So . . . of course we both simultaneously said “YES.” So on the day after New Years, we packed up and drove to Houston for our Monday morning appointment for many tests and out appointment with the Surgical Oncologist. This was Day 18 of the Journey (two weeks and a half).

During the first few weeks of January, to put things into perspective, I have had more tests, been stuck more times with needles, and had more medical procedures than I have cumulatively had in my entire lifetime up to this point. It has been grueling and difficult, and we have spent many, many days at MD Anderson in Houston. On the rare occasion that we have a few days off, it is usually made up of resting and getting ready to travel back to Houston.

We were assigned a brilliant Oncologist who specializes in Pancreatic Cancer, Dr. Jason Willis. He is a strong Christian Man and a magnificent, knowledgeable physician. Are you seeing a pattern here? We prayed for just the right medical people be assigned to us, and that those people also have a strong faith in God. Over and over again, God has answered those prayers. “Knock, and the doors shall be open to you”, it says in Matthew 7:7.

We had a several hour meeting with Dr. Willis, where he explained all the tests findings, where we were in the process, what was happening to my body, and what we needed to do to combat this terrible disease. Many of the things he shared were not what we wanted to hear, but the other side of the coin was that we were finally getting concrete answers. Both Ruth and I feel that once we know and understand something, we can get used to the idea and move forward with God's help.

The week before our meeting with Dr. Willis, I had started to look up articles about Pancreatic Cancer and treatment, being the good academic creature I am! To be honest, the news was not good and it was very difficult reading when it is about something growing in your own body. I found an extensive review of treatments and most of the article talked about why the unique aspects of pancreatic tumors make them less susceptible to the common Chemotherapy/Radiation/Surgery treatments that are used for other cancers, and for all these reasons, treatment of Pancreatic Cancer has a much lower success rate.

At the end of the article, it talked about the future of Pancreatic Cancer treatment and talked about some of the potential treatments that are being developed for the future. It discussed creating a Gene therapy (Anti-Kras G12D) where they could target the specific mutation that makes Pancreatic Cancer so virulent. The idea is to try to inject the tumor with RNA that will (if it works) stop the cancer cells from replicating and trying to spread to the rest of the body (metastases).

Dr. Willis is also the person that is in charge of all Clinical Research Trials in this area at MD Anderson. At the end of the conversation with Dr. Willis, I asked are there any Clinical trials that may be available that would fit with my specific case. He sat back, smiled, took a deep breath, and said "I am so glad you asked. We have a Clinical trial for a very promising treatment. It was put on hold because of the COVID Pandemic for the last year, but we just opened up the trial a few weeks ago." He said "I think you would be a great candidate for this study, and I think it might be very good for you." He then said, "In fact, I wrote an email to my research team about you, but I did not want to send it without talking to you first!"

The Clinical Trial is the promising future Gene therapy that I read about in the article. Knock, and the door shall be opened, seek and you will find. Once again, we feel God opened up an amazing door for us.

The aspects of the Clinical trial get very complex, very quickly, but I will try to explain as simply as I can. A medical technology group in Israel (actually in the city of Jerusalem), has studied and discovered the mutation that results in almost all Pancreatic tumors. The cancer cells in the tumor are stuck in the on-state and keep replicating. This Gene therapy will send DNA into those cells and (if it works) will turn the cancerous cells to the off-state and stop them from making more copies of themselves. They created a technique to inject tiny (about the size of a grain of rice) capsules directly into the tumor, and these capsules will leak out the DNA material over a 3 month period of time to hopefully kill the cancer from the inside out.

By the way, there are only 3 places in the world to receive this promising new therapy. Israel (Silenseed in Jerusalem) , Slone Kettering (New York City, and one of the most famous cancer centers in the world), and MD Anderson. God opened up the door for me to be one of only 10 participants for this study at MD Anderson.

Silenseed: <https://www.silenseed.com/>



In the meantime, I will still be taking Chemotherapy. They said since I am very healthy (other than this cancer). They are going to put me on one of the most aggressive Chemotherapy regimes. It has the best chance of being successful, but also has the strongest side effects, but they feel that I can do it, and can handle the rough treatment regime. The idea is that the injections will be attacking the cancer from the inside out, and the Chemotherapy will attack the cancer from the outside in.

So, last week, (Week 7 of our Journey), We had the surgery for the injection of the Gene therapy capsules into my tumor. The Doctor that was going to perform the surgery was, once again, amazing. He has written 4 anatomy and endoscopy textbooks and is the best endoscopist at MD Anderson. When he came by, I asked him about the number of capsules that he would try to put in since I had been told that they could inject anywhere from 1 capsule up to a possible 8 injections. He explained that he would start the injections, but often times after two or three injections things would come up (such as bleeding or complications), and they would stop injecting at whatever that number was. I asked him if more is better, and he said, “absolutely, and we will put in as many as possible.” I told him, “Then let’s pray for 8!” He got a big grin, held my hand, and said “let’s do that.”

After the surgery, we were informed that the research medical team was able to put all 8 of the capsules into my tumor. The original surgery was booked for less than 2 hours, and they took nearly 4 hours, but they were able to get all of them imbedded directly into the tumor. What a huge blessing!

Cute story: Right before they took me back for surgery, my wife said, “When they put you to sleep, instead of counting down (10, 9, 8, etc.), I want you to say ‘I Love Ruth, I Love Ruth.’” They wheeled me into the operating room. There were 9 people on the medical research team, and as they prepared the incredible amount of equipment in the room, I told them about my wife’s request. They all laughed and thought it was a great idea. The anesthesiology tech, sort

of mumbled, “I don’t think you will get but one or two of those out before you go under to sleep!”

When they put the mask on, the Anesthesiologist said “Ok, we are about to push the medication to put you sleep, so start saying ‘I Love Ruth.’ I starting saying “I Love Ruth” and all the people in the room called out “ONE!” I kept saying “I Love Ruth” and actually made it to 10 times. The last thing I heard was them all call out “TEN” and then comments like “unbelievable!” I wondered if I could get to 11 and then realized that my mouth no longer worked or moved!

After the surgery, the Anesthesiologist MD came out to the waiting area and called out, “Mrs. Garrett? Mrs. Garrett?” Ruth waved her over and in a waiting room with at least 20 other people, she told Ruth about me making it to 10 ‘I Love Ruths.’ She then asked if she could pray for Ruth and I. She prayed strong and loud, that God would bless the results of the surgery I had just had, that HE would take over the chemicals put into the tumor and make them effective. She prayed that the Devil would be removed from any part of my body or the process and be cast out. Ruth said that this Doctor had the strongest amount of Spiritual Armor from anyone she had ever encountered. She was fearless, bold, calling on the power of God, and rebuking the Devil. She did not care who heard her, or what they thought. After she finished praying with Ruth, Ruth asked if she could pray for her. She looked very surprised and said “No one has ever done that before.” Ruth prayed for the Doctor, for the ministry that she had, for the lives she was blessing (who were often at one of the lowest points in their lives), for her strength in God and for the Spiritual Armor she exuded. When Ruth finished up, she looked up and later told me that the Doctor had the biggest ‘Man tears’ she had ever seen. Both of her cheeks were wet with tears dripping down to her chin. This may not be the most politically correct way to describe this, but you get the image. This Doctor had the strongest, boldest, unabashed Christian faith of anyone we had met. Ruth gave her a pair of earrings she had made and told her that as a part of Ruth’s ministry, she will be praying for her and other Women of faith every Monday morning.

Yesterday, Week 8 of our Journey, I just completed my first Chemotherapy. I have to admit that in the hotel, we got ready to head over to the hospital, and I broke down for about 5 minutes. All of the reality of the situation hit me at once like a ton of bricks. I have Pancreatic Cancer, and am about to go through Chemotherapy. Ruth held me tight as I cried, and she prayed for me. As she prayed, the Spirit of the Lord filled the room and filled me up. As we went over to the hospital I felt strong and walked with the strength of my wonderful wife, and my wonderful God. I was still a little afraid, I was still unsure of what we were about to go through, but my Wife and my God were walking side by side with me. It was not an easy procedure to go through. It took over 7 hours of chemicals put directly into my veins from a port that was surgically implanted in my shoulder. The last of chemicals was put into a form of ‘fanny pack’ that had the chemical and a pump that slowly injected the chemical over the next 46 hours because it is so toxic. I did experience many of the side effects that were explained to us, but overall everything went very well, and much better than we expected.

I want to end by sharing some of the things Ruth and I have learned over the last 8 weeks.

1. Even if you are experiencing some of the worst circumstances in life, God can bring a strength to you, if you ask and receive the gift. Ruth and I have both been Christians all of our lives, but our relationship with God has grown significantly over this time. In fact we have grown Spiritually in ways that likely would never have happened if we were not going through this difficult journey.
2. Early in this process, Ruth told me that we needed to “*Pray Forward.*” She said that as we walk this journey, we need to pray for what is coming ahead of us, even though we don’t know what that will be. We need to pray for HIM to lead and guide us down the pathway, and pray for God to open the doors to where HE wants us to be. He has done this with us in so many miraculous ways. Usually, God’s open doors are just shown by a good feeling we should head that direction. The doors we have experienced seem to have great neon signs saying “Step Through here.”
3. We have learned that God works through other people in our lives. God uses good strong Christian people to accomplish HIS beautiful goals here on earth. In the past, we were often reserved about sharing our struggles with people and were reserved about sharing our personal faith walk when we were struggling. No longer. Ruth and I have learned that being open with people, being open to share what we are going through, and being open to share how God is walking side-by-side with us, has led us into some of the most beautiful encounters with fellow Christians that we have ever experienced.
4. We have learned that Hope is a powerful tool, given to us by God. As we went through all of these appointments and were provided with all the difficult facts related to Pancreatic Cancer, Ruth and I had to spend some time trying to figure out the “Hope versus Reality” conundrum. We faced questions like: Are you in denial of the facts if you have faith that God will be with you and can heal you? Is Hope just a way to not face reality? The answer is NO! Hope is not ignorance of the facts of the struggles you are facing, Hope is not stupid. We can be fully aware of the truth of our situation, but can at the same time know that God is above all things. Hope is something God created, and has personally given this gift to humans as we go through life’s struggles. He has and will continue to perform miracles in the lives of those who turn to him. He already knows what will happen in the future, He has it all mapped out. I do not know if God will heal me, but this one thing I do know. He will be walking by my side, and in my heart, wherever this Journey takes me.