

The shadow of death: One doctor's personal battle with cancer

By Carolyn Kimmel
Good News Daily



“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” (Psalm 23:4)

The words of the 23rd Psalm are familiar to many people, Christians and non-Christians alike, but not many of us know what it would really be like to walk through that valley . . . and whether the faith we declare really would keep us free from all fear.

Dr. Yang Chen, however, is walking in that valley – having been diagnosed with metastatic lung cancer – and he attests, without a doubt, that God is walking with him and filling him with indescribable peace.

“I knew in concept that God was adequate in every situation; now I know that experientially,” shares Chen, 55, who is a professor of Medicine at University of Colorado Denver and Director of Endoscopy at University of Colorado Hospital. “My own faith has deepened. Everytime we choose to trust God when we’re faced with a difficult situation, we find ourselves experiencing Him in a deeper way.”

Sure, but what about the middle of the night? Doesn't panic ever overtake him as he thinks about the treatments he must endure? Never a moment of terror as he contemplates not living to see his three children grow up?

"I Peter 5:7 says to cast all your worries and cares on God for he cares for you, and Philippians 4:7 talks about the 'peace that passes understanding.'" We experienced that peace almost instantaneously. It isn't something we could've conjured up ourselves. That peace is, in fact, real though I can't explain it. It is something that God produces in our lives," Chen says with a calm about him that attests to his sincerity.

One of the first things Chen did after he was diagnosed was start a website to encourage others who might be facing a similar battle – and to point them to his Source of strength and courage. (You can find his website at www.adoctorsjourneywithcancer.net) He has gotten quite a response from people who visit his site and email him, some who are believers and some who are searching.

"Imagine this happening to you. Could your life become a confusing, complicated whirlwind in just an instant? One simple discovery could do it. It's now happened to me," he writes on his home page. Here, he tells readers the story of how he developed a persistent pain in his left shoulder blade beginning in December 2007 and a persistent cough he assumed was from post-nasal drip...of how a chest x-ray found several nodules in his left lung that were highly suspicious of metastatic lung cancer, that is, cancer that has spread to other parts of the body. (The cancer may have come from radon that he didn't know was present in the house he bought nine years ago.)

"As a doctor, I knew instantly the implications of such an ominous finding. The average survival in this scenario even with therapy could be less than 18 months. With no history of smoking or cancer in the family, I was stunned," he shares. "It is amazing that in the twinkling of an eye, my life could take such a drastic and unexpected turn. At the prime of my professional life and still raising a family, my future now seemed uncertain at this moment in time, and the news had arrived in such a harsh and unexpected fashion."

Chen pondered how to tell his wife, Alice, and their three children, ages of 16, 10 and 5. "On a daily basis, I'm dealing with telling patients they have cancer; now it's me."

Remarkably, Chen says he felt God answered his and his wife's prayers to prepare their children's heart for the news: All three took it so calmly that Chen wondered if they understood what he said, but over several days, it became apparent that the children were processing the information as they slowly began asking questions. When Chen asked his 10-year-old son what he thought God was trying to teach him through his daddy's cancer, the boy replied, "I think God wants me to trust Him more." That answer deeply touched Chen.

"I found myself trying to imagine the pain and suffering that my family would go through if I died. It brought tears to my eyes," says Chen, now in stage 4 of 4 in his disease. "It was my wife who reminded me that the Bible is so filled with God's special love and concern for widows and orphans. I began to look up these passages and I really found

comfort. He is my Heavenly Father and so He is my family's Heavenly Father. If I am not here, He will take care of them." Chen is taking a cocktail of three drugs in his chemotherapy regimen, as well as radiation therapy. He has had dramatic response to the chemo – the best his oncologist has seen in 30 years of practice.

"An awful lot of people are praying for you," Chen told his oncologist, who was surprised that people would pray for the doctor. It gave Chen another opportunity to witness to the faithfulness of God to the prayers of His people.

"I'm finding that a cancer diagnosis is opening a lot of doors and opportunities for spiritual conversations,"

Chen said. His colleagues are interested to see how his faith is going to impact his personal journey with a life-threatening disease– "I'm a reality show for them," he quipped. He is enjoying a freedom to share God in spontaneous ways and not worry about what people will say.

Chen still firmly believes in the words of Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you; plans to give you hope and a future." How can he hang onto hope with such a grim diagnosis? "We all live by faith in one way or another, but what matters is whether the object of my faith is truly trustworthy," Chen said. "I can either choose to put my faith in God, or in myself, or in other people, who are human just like me. I've lived long enough to see how futile it is to just rely on myself. And if I am my own God, now my God has cancer!

And other people fail despite their best intentions. So who am I going to trust as my No. 1? God."

And in that faith, Chen explains, he has faith in God's character – that He is good, a fact he knows from having a personal relationship with Him.

"I also have faith in God's wisdom," he said. "Faith means I realize God knows what's best for me...And I have faith in His sovereignty; even though the circumstances of my life may change quickly, the foundation of my life is unshakeable."

It's that eternal assurance that moves Chen to declare that God is still good – and to hope that God will use the story of his experience to demonstrate that to others. To those who happen onto his website, he invites, "I would be honored if my personal adventure might encourage you, and especially so if it should prompt you to consider how the One who makes all of life possible might become your friend as He is mine."