

## **“Life” Lessons: What Being Forced to Face My Own Mortality Taught Me About Living**

Several years ago, a fine young man asked me for some help with “homework” for one of his college medical classes. He had to get a “complete medical history” for someone with a chronic illness- and he picked me. I try not to think of myself as a “Cancer Survivor,” but the reality is that in May of 2004 I was diagnosed with Stage 4 T-Cell Lymphoma. Through the love and prayers of many, the dogged determination of my lovingly devoted one, months of chemo, and certainly the graciousness of God, I’ve been in remission since the fall of that same year. Despite being a preacher, I rarely speak publicly about that time of my life. It’s not that “it’s too painful to remember” or anything like that, I just don’t want to detract from God’s words with my experiences when I preach. Still, there are times when it somehow seems appropriate to share a few of the lessons cancer and chemo taught me. Strangely, God’s word had been telling me the same things for years, but maybe I wasn’t quite listening- perhaps you will. **So, cancer and chemo reminded me that:**

**1) Physical life is not what’s really important.** I cringe when someone says something like “Your health is the most important thing.” **No it isn’t.** And if that is what they learned from being seriously ill, then they still don’t get it. Being faced with your own mortality should make you understand that “this life” is **not** the most important thing. It can’t be when compared to eternity. I feel sorry for people who don’t believe in life after death as the Bible teaches. They have to try to cram all of what they call “living” into a few years of earthly existence- and usually make themselves and everyone around them miserable in the process. Understanding that “this life” is not all there is, but also that it is not even the best part of us, is essential information to emancipated living. God said, “but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven... for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,” Matthew 6:20-21. As long as we make “this life” and the things of it our priority, we will never really learn how to live it.

**2) You’re not really “ready to die” unless you’re OK with dying today.** Living in such a way as to be “ready to die” is a noble goal. But the reality is that even those who think that’s what they’re doing probably aren’t. Most of us epitomize the old song line by wishing to be “too old to die young.” We’d love to be able to say, like Paul, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith” (cf. 2Timothy4:7) when our time comes, **but never dream of saying it today!** Death is something we prepare for doing when we finally get tired of living- sometime way, way, way on down the line. We really don’t get to choose, but what if you could? If the option was somehow given you to either depart this life today to be with God forever in heaven, or live out the rest of your days on earth and then take your chances at judgment, which would you pick? “He who hesitates is lost.” From one who’s been there, if you’re not OK with dying **today**, then you really haven’t really learned how to live.

**3) Death is not the enemy.** Yes, death is *an enemy*, as 1Corinthians 15:26 clearly states. But the passage goes on to explain that death is an enemy only as an obstacle to our eternal dwelling, cf. 1Corinthians 15:35-50. Thus, death is only a bad thing (spiritually, obviously; it has physical consequences both for the dying and those left behind that can be horrific) when Satan and sin have controlled the life. We hear Revelation 13:14 at funerals, but never seem to apply it ourselves: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.” Take that personally. Your death will be a “good thing” if you are “in the Lord.” Only when one lives subject to Satan and sin is death a true spiritual tragedy. And aren’t the spiritual always more important than the physical? But for those who live subject to Christ and righteousness, death is “graduation day.” It is the “rest from their labors” of which John wrote and Jesus promised. It is the doorway to eternal reward and happiness. Death is only the enemy of those who have invested everything in physical, rather than spiritual, life.

Folks who know of both my profession and illness are occasionally interested in my perspectives on cancer / chemo / surviving. I usually tell them that cancer and chemo were extremely difficult physically, but easy spiritually. When you look in the mirror and see “death warmed over,” it is easy to be spiritual. The real challenge is living with your own mortality in mind when you’re physically healthy! I hope these “life lessons” will help you to be spiritually healthy regardless of your physical condition in 2018 and whatever time upon the earth you have left. (Philip C. Strong; Southport Church of Christ; 7202 Madison Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46227; online at [southportcofc.org](http://southportcofc.org); email to [mrpcstrong@hotmail.com](mailto:mrpcstrong@hotmail.com))