

Cancer: Don't Drop the Mic!

**Lessons Learned, Opportunities Opened,
and Purposes Pursued
on the Treatment Trail**

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Part One—Background

It was August 2013, when the Lord turned my world upside down and handed me a microphone—in the form of a call from my doctor while I was at work. My doctor said, “You’ve got cancer.” The situation spoke another frightening and yet compelling message to me, “Along with cancer, you’ve also got a microphone!”

“Don’t Drop the Mic!”

The phrase, “Drop the mic,” at least in urban usage, usually means that such a compelling statement is made that no further comment is warranted. In the matter of cancer treatment, there can never be a “Drop the Mic” moment. Constant, ongoing conversation is needed, appreciated, and part of the treatment process.

This book is a compilation of “Lessons Learned, Opportunities Opened, and Purposes Pursued” through my experience and journey with cancer since my diagnosis in August 2013. The purposes of sharing these learnings are to comfort and help fellow-travelers on the cancer treatment trail, to keep the pump primed so my cancer-afflicted colleagues will keep sharing their experiences and learnings, and to encourage all of us to heed the admonition, “Don’t Drop the Mic”—to the praise and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

At the time of my diagnosis in August 2013, I had been a pastor for 38 years. I was used to having captive audiences on Sunday mornings. But, after my diagnosis, I sensed that people were listening more closely than ever before.



Why were people listening so attentively after my cancer diagnosis, and why are people still listening? The Celtic Christians from Ireland used to speak of “thin places.” The phrase “thin places” referred to both times and places when and where there seemed to be a “thinning” of the separation between mortal life and eternal life. “Thin places,” therefore, are holy places. People listen when they sense a “thin place” because all people are aware of their own mortality.

We Are All in the Same Mortal Line.

We all know, but hate to think about the fact, that we all—**ALL!**—are in the same mortal line. We often suppress that awareness:

- In youth and young adulthood, because the threat or reality of death seems an eternity away;
- In middle age, because we are too busy just surviving the busyness we let co-opt our lives;
- And in old age because of fear or denial of what happens after death.

Since my diagnosis in August 2013, I have kept track, on my prayer list, of people I have known who have died. I thought, back in August 2013, that I was at the front of the “mortality” line among everyone I knew. Yet, since that date, I have known eight people who have died. And, here’s the shocker: I’m still here, and four of those eight have been under 25 years of age. None of us knows where we are in that “mortality line”; but one thing is certain—we are all in that line!

Deep within every person is that nagging realization which King David and his son, the wisest man in the world, Solomon, knew well:

- “There is but a step between me and death” (1 Sam. 20:3).
- “He has also set eternity in the human heart” (Eccl. 3:11).



There is no denying it, repressing it, running from it, or outsmarting it. Death and eternity are realities which confront us all and which compel us to face our own mortality.

Try as we may to hide death and eternity behind a thick curtain, cancer and other life-threatening illnesses draw the curtain open on these topics and often reveal either a dropped mic pretending that there is nothing to say, or a stage, a mic, and a podium with a listening and attentive audience, anxious to hear what lessons and experiences we have to speak about life, death, and eternity. When this happens in your life, “Don't Drop the Mic!”

My Background and Treatment Trail

- August 2013: Diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma.
- September 2013: Stepped away from my ministry as founding executive director at Crean Lutheran High School to focus on treatment.
- September 2013 - February 2014: ABVD chemotherapy treatments at UCLA, with an optimistic perspective due to a 90% cure rate with this treatment protocol.
- August 2014: Diagnosed with recurrent Hodgkin's Lymphoma (10% of those treated with ABVD chemotherapy for Hodgkin's Lymphoma have a recurrence). Treatment: stem cell transplant.
 - August-October, 2014: RICE & BEAM chemotherapy prior to stem cell transplant at UCLA.
 - October 27, 2014: Stem cell transplant at UCLA (50% of stem cell patients are cured; 50% have a recurrence within one year).
- May 22, 2015: PET/CT scan showed that the Hodgkin's Lymphoma returned. Treatment: a clinical trial using Bristol-Myers Squibb's immunotherapy drug, Opdivo.

- June 5, 2015: Screening tests for enrollment in UCLA clinical trial using a new drug called Opdivo.
- June 23, 2015—current (as of the writing of this book): Started Clinical Trial using a new drug, Opdivo, which I receive every two weeks. I am one among approximately 300 patients worldwide, in about a dozen sites, participating in this 2nd phase, FDA registrational trial, praying that this new immunotherapy will become a new, effective, patient-friendly, and durable front-line treatment for many types of cancer in place of the current and harsher front line treatments of surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation.

Lessons Learned, Opportunities Opened, and Purposes Pursued

Upon diagnosis, back in 2013, I knew that I was in for a journey. So, I began a journal which evolved into the “Lessons Learned, Opportunities Opened, and Purposes Pursued on the Treatment Trail” listed in this book. Lessons are still being learned, opportunities are still being opened, and new purposes continually point me in new directions. These continuing lessons, opportunities, and purposes are then added to my journal. This book, therefore, is a snapshot of this living journey from August 2013 until the time of completion of this manuscript. Over these 36 months, I have made approximately 90 entries in this journal—about one entry every week and a half. I expect this pattern to continue as the Lord is faithful to teach me and, I pray, use me to “make the most of every opportunity” (Col. 4:5)—even this opportunity—to lean on Him, to proclaim Jesus’ saving grace, and to encourage and comfort others in their sufferings and treatment all the while our Lord provides for and comforts me.

The purposes of this book are:



- To stimulate discussion about cancer treatment.
- To encourage those on the treatment trail and to assure them of the sufficiency of Jesus for the journey.
- To give purpose to cancer patients as they share their lessons learned with others and respond with impact to opportunities opened.
- And to boldly speak an admonition to everyone, “DON’T DROP THE MIC!”

In Part Two of this book, I share the many Lessons Learned, Opportunities Opened, and Purposes Pursued that have impacted my life, that have given meaning and purpose to my life even during this journey, and that have, by God’s grace, been a positive encouragement to others, either patients or loved ones, on the treatment trail! In my online journal, several of the Lessons Learned, Opportunities Opened, and Purposes Pursued contain links to other resources or documents related to each Lesson, Opportunity, or Purpose. Also, as stated in the Foreword, at the end of this book are QR codes which link to my actual and growing Journal and to a “Don’t Drop the Mic!” blog. I invite readers to access these documents to read ongoing and additional Lessons, Opportunities, and Purposes, and to join a blog in which they too can share with others their Lessons Learned, Opportunities Opened, and Purposes Pursued.

Ephesians 6:19 well communicates my prayer for this book and for my life’s passion on this journey:

“Pray also for me, that whenever I speak [or write!], words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the Gospel...”

Please join me in “making known” the Lessons we are learning and then sharing these Lessons through the Opportunities and Purposes that are opened as together we respond to the admonition, **“DON’T DROP THE MIC!”**

Part Two— Lessons Learned, Opportunities Opened, Purposes Pursued



1 Jesus is the Treasure

Lesson Learned, Opportunity Opened, or Purpose Pursued:

Jesus is the Treasure, not the Bearer of the Treasure.
Jesus is Greater than Health, Healing, or Any Earthly
Blessing.

This journey has unmasked a common misconception held by many Christians—including me—prior to cancer. So often my prayers have been very selfish: “Lord, please forgive ME, please heal ME, please open this door for ME,” and on and on.

Even Lazarus, after his sisters’ pleas for him and our Lord’s gracious response of restoring him to life, died a physical death sometime later. The real gift, the greatest gift, the only gift, blessing, and reality that really matters is Jesus.

Indeed, Jesus is far more than the Giver, the Bearer, the Author of earthly blessings. JESUS is the Treasure. With Jesus will come forgiveness, life, and eternal salvation. That is ... He is! ... the greatest treasure.

Have Jesus and you have all that really matters.



2 Jesus is Sufficient

Lesson Learned, Opportunity Opened, or Purpose Pursued:

Jesus is Sufficient, Even More than Sufficient,
for Anything We Face in Life.

Oh, it seems close sometimes. The discomfort of chemotherapy, or the multiple sticks to start an IV, or the hearing of not as good news as you had hoped after a PET-CT scan can all leave you occasionally wondering, “Are You really sufficient?”

And, yes Jesus is. Somehow, He brings strength through my wife, or an email or a card from a friend, or simply through His Holy Word or powerful Spirit. And, I reach shore again, the storm stills, and peace returns.

The Lord said, “My grace is sufficient” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

After feeding the 5,000, Jesus made sure His disciples knew there were twelve baskets of leftovers. More than sufficient.

After promising that we will never be tested beyond what we can bear, our Lord promises that if it does get too hot in the furnace, He will provide a way out. That’s a more than sufficient Savior.

Our Lord Jesus sees that we may not always get or have or experience or be what we want, but always what we need—even more than sufficient.

Our world tempts us to think that more is always better; Jesus teaches us that He—and He alone—is sufficient.

3 The Lord said, “Go....”

Lesson Learned, Opportunity Opened, or Purpose Pursued:

The Lord Said, “Go ... to the Place I will Show You,”
“I am With You Always.”

“Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the place I will show you” (Gen. 12:1).

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Our Lord has a habit of Calling and Sending. He calls us to come to Him. He then tells us to go places we often had not wished to go! But, in going where He sends us, there is the peace, joy, and strength of knowing that Jesus “goes with us.”

In August 2013, our Lord Called me from a busy and exciting life of a Christian high school administrator and pastor to “go” to a place I had no desire going—to a world of cancer, chemotherapy, and ongoing challenges.

May I journey to every place our Lord sends me in the peace of the promise of Deuteronomy 31:8,

“The Lord Himself goes before you and will be with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”



4 Even this!

Lesson Learned, Opportunity Opened, or Purpose Pursued:

“I Can do All Things Through Him Who Strengthens Me.” Even this!

The above passage is from Philippians 4:13. I grew up with a limited, inaccurate, and (confession coming!) very selfish understanding of this verse. For some reason (probably my own self-centeredness), I had always understood this verse to mean that I (emphasis on me!) could do anything I wanted because the Lord would give me strength to do it.

I was wrong on several counts. First, the Lord doesn't want me to do some things that I want to do. Second, the Lord is not interested in making me into a Superman with superhuman strength or qualities. And, third, the Lord knows that my sinful, human, weak nature is in desperate need for His daily (hourly! Minute by minute!) strength.

The Lord showed me that life serves up many dishes that are not to our liking or taste. The Lord promises that “in this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). The Lord has demonstrated and revealed to me that “through Him” I can even endure cancer, chemotherapy, a stem cell transplant, and disappointment after disappointment, because He strengthens me. It is His strength, not mine, that enables me to do—even this cancer treatment.

Blaise Pascal, the great mathematician and scientist, after coming to faith, wrote about the integration of the Lord's presence and power with his own scientific pursuits and achievements in a short prayer that we all would do well to remember and pray daily:

“Lord, help me to do great and difficult things as though they were little and simple, since I do them with Your

power; and little things as though they were great and important, since I do them in Your name.” (paraphrase)

Here is a Bible verse that strengthens me regularly:

“To this end I labor with all His energy which works so powerfully within me” (Col. 1:29).

END OF SAMPLE