

“Suffering”

By Elder Andrie Chen, Formosan Presbyterian Church

In early 2002, my wife, Julia, went through her annual physical checkup with flying colors. In February, she went to her gynecologist for a checkup. At the end of the checkup, Julia asked the doctor to take a look at her collar bones as one side protrudes the other. The doctor told her that the uneven collar bones might be due to early childhood injury and everything else was checked out all right with her, except that she needed to have her thyroid examined.

After a week or so, we received a copy of letter from Julia’s gynecologist to our family doctor suggesting that Julia’s thyroid needed to be checked. After a series of tests, it was found that both sides of her thyroid had cancerous growth. At that time, we had already booked an Alaska Cruise for mid May. Julia knew that I really wanted to take that cruise and thyroid cancer growth is known to be extremely slow. She decided that she would have the surgery after the cruise. Her doctors agreed with this situation. We wondered why Julia, with such healthy living habits, would contract cancer. But knowing that many, many people survive through thyroid cancer, we did not feel frustrated or upset. We also believed that it was a miracle the way her cancer was discovered. We prayed and trusted everything in the hand of the LORD.

Julia had her surgery at the end of May that year. After the surgery, the surgeon told me that there were some tiny cancer nodules very near her trachea that he did not dare to remove them and recommended radio active iodine treatment. She went to the hospital for three day treatment in an isolated, protective room. I could only visit her for three times a day, no more than five or ten minutes each time. And I could not contact her. At one time when I visited her, I told her jokingly that she was surrounded by green haze. After the treatment, it was pronounced that she was free of cancer. We were happy and thankful.

Before Julia was diagnosed with thyroid cancer, I was already pondering about retiring from ExxonMobil; I was 61 years old at that time and had worked for almost 25 years at ExxonMobil. Furthermore, I was required to travel for business or to attend meetings for professional societies very frequently. After learning about Julia’s thyroid cancer, I made my decision to retire so that we could spend all of our time together. I retired in June 2002 after having exactly 25 years with ExxonMobil.

Julia and I always felt that God wanted us to serve Him as a missionary after my retirement. In February 2004, I went to Taiwan as a volunteer and taught English at Yu Shan Theological College and Seminary in Hwalien for two semesters. Julia needed regular follow up appointments, so she could not commit to do any assignments, but she still went there to support me in both semesters. The life in Yu Shan was rather hard and uncomfortable compared to what we have in the States. However, mentally, spiritually, we enjoyed being at Yu Shan tremendously. One thing worthwhile mentioned is that there was miracle happened to us during this time. Instead of paying for our airfares as we did for our trip to Taiwan first semester, God paid for our trips in the second semester. We won a door prize from China Airlines, two first-class round trip tickets between Houston and Taipei. We used them for our trip to Taiwan in the second semester.

Julia came back to the States in January 2005 and I, in February. We quickly adjusted back to life in the States. Everything was moving along smoothly. Julia was healthy and vigorous. Then, she had an annual physical checkup in July. The Bone Density Test report came back and the radiologist put a big note on it, saying that her bone density was fine; however, there was mass in both of her kidney and required further testing. After further tests, it was confirmed that she had growth in both kidneys and most likely were both malignant. After hearing the news, Julia, like she always does, still trusted that everything was in God's hands. I pretended calm and trusting in our Lord. But when I was alone in my study, I sobbed and cried out to God, asking Him why! Why did He treat us this way? Why did we need to suffer like this? I was completely scared. Julia has not only been my wife; she has also always been my best and most intimate friend. I rely on her for everything. I yelled to God and told Him that I could not lose her.

She had surgeries on her right and left kidneys about one month apart. During the surgeries, it was found that she had a large cancerous growth in the center of her left kidney and that kidney was removed. The right kidney had a benign growth at the bottom tip of her kidney and was easily removed without damaging her kidney. Therefore, she gets to keep a healthy, normal functioning kidney. Her urologist told us that a person only needs to keep one quarter of one kidney to sustain normal life. God is really marvelous. He provides us two kidneys, instead of just one quarter of a kidney. The tumor at her right kidney, even though was benign in nature, was a blood cell tumor. If it were not discovered and removed, it would have eventually bursted open and Julia would have bled to death. Again, we praise God that He led us through everything. Especially, He would lead the radiologist to put in that note. People we talked to, including my brother who is a gynecologist/obstetrician and many doctor and radiologist friends, all told us they were not aware of any cancer was detected from a Bone Density Test.

Meanwhile, Julia was going back for her regular thyroid check. Her globulin index was slightly elevated. Her endocrinologist told us not to be concerned but just to keep an eye on it. It happened that one of our friends also has had thyroid problem. He strongly recommended his endocrinologist to us. Julia decided to switch to this Dr. R. (Dr. R does not accept insurance. Therefore, we had to pay him much more than the previous endocrinologist.) Dr. R ordered one test after another. He was not able to find any cancer nodule but he firmly believed there was one. He told us that Julia had become famous among Houston endocrinologist's circle because her cancer nodule was so difficult to detect.

In July 2006, when we were driving to Rochester, NY to our daughter's house for vacation, Dr. R's nurse called and said that the test results found a cancer nodule at where right thyroid was removed. Moreover, she had a mass on her right kidney. Both of us were shocked. I decided that I should take the tests to see if I can give her one of my kidneys. We also visited my brother who lives in Buffalo, NY during our stay up north. He asked us to ask Dr. R for a copy of the test results. After studying the test results, he opined that Julia's only kidney was all right. His daughter, a radiologist, confirmed his opinion. After we came back to Houston, we took the test results to Julia's urologist. After looking at the test results, he adamantly stated that there was absolutely no possibility that Julia had a tumor at her right kidney. We should have had stopped letting

Dr. R be Julia's endocrinologist at that point in time. Unfortunately, we did not and that caused us a great painful experience.

Dr. R recommended a surgeon Dr. W to operate on Julia's cancer nodule. We asked him if he would be able to find that cancer nodule since it took so many tests before they could spot it. He assured us that he would. He would ask the radiologist who found Julia's cancer nodule to do the test again before the surgery and the spot where nodule was would be clearly indicated. In October, Julia was operated on her neck second time. I was waiting outside for more than four hours. Dr. W came out with an apologetic expression. He could not find the cancer nodule. I almost cried right there, right then.

Julia and I, of course, were disappointed. Julia decided that she would no longer see Dr. R. She called Dr. S, chief endocrinologist of MD Anderson, for appointment. I told her that she perhaps needed to call other doctors because I expected Dr. S would have a very long waiting list. Surprisingly, his nurse called back next day and said that Dr. S could see Julia in two weeks. We knew later that Dr. R had been consulting with Dr. S on Julia's case. We speculated that this was the reason that Dr. S took Julia as his patient right away. Dr. S found that the cancer nodule was on the trachea wall. He asked Dr. C, the head surgeon of the Head and Neck Department of MD Anderson, to be Julia's surgeon.

Both Dr. S and Dr. C recommended that Julia should have the surgery to remove that cancer nodule and have radiation therapy afterward. Dr. C appeared extremely confident that he would be able to do it. He told us three possible scenarios. He gave us the worst scenario first. If the cancer nodule were between the trachea and esophagus, he had to remove the larynx and installed a device at Julia's throat. She would have to breathe and speak through that device. The second and third scenarios were that the nodule was at an easily accessible spot. The second scenario was that the nodule was so large that, after its removal, reconstructive surgery for the trachea was required. The third scenario was that the nodule was small, and the opening could just be stapled together. The first and second scenarios would take more than seven or eight hours. The third scenario would take about three or four hours. Julia decided to take the surgery. We prayed hard about it. I was leaning toward not having the surgery. (Thyroid cancer is known to grow very slowly. One might be able to outlive thyroid cancer.) Julia chose to have the surgery.

The surgery was at the end of August, 2007. We drove to MD Anderson before 6:00 am. After all the preparation work, Julia was wheeled into the operating area at around 8:00 am. I was preparing for the worst and brought enough reading material to last me whole day there. While I was waiting outside, I prayed and prayed. Usually, I would pray that God let me know His will and I will obey His will whatever it is because God is sovereign and I trust His providence. However, that morning, I prayed earnestly that God would not allow the possibility of Julia's larynx needed to be removed. I knew that I was forcing my will on God. I should not have done so. However, I love Julia so much that I just could not help it. At around 10:45 am, a nurse came to inform people in the waiting area about the progress of the operation of their relatives or friends. She told me that they were sewing up Julia's opening and would send her to the recovery area. "Hallelujah!" I praised the Lord silently, again and again. I was called into the recovery around 12:00 pm. I just can not describe my joy when I saw her.

The radiation treatment started at the end of October. 30 treatments at neck area were needed and it lasted a little more than a month. After three, four treatment, Julia's neck looked like had been burned by fire. After five, six treatment, blisters were all around the treated area. It looked horrible. The doctor told us that inside was even worse. Of course, Julia lost her appetite. Her weight kept on dropping. The doctor was very concerned. I do not know how to cook. I wanted to take her to her favorite restaurants. She did not even want to go. She did not want to take the over-the-counter liquid diet supplements because they tasted too sweet. She lost about 20 lbs. and still kept on dropping. Finally, I came up with my own recipe: one pack of high protein breakfast powder, half a cup of yogurt, two large scoop of ice cream, half a cup of whole milk and some fruits mixed in blender long enough to become Andrie's special shake. I changed fruit regularly so that she would not get tired of the flavored shake. I forced her to drink about 12 to 16 oz of my yogurt shake everyday. She was then able to gain some of her weight back.

Today, three years after radiation treatment, her voice is still very hoarse because one of her vocal chord nerve was damaged during the surgery. (She used to sing the soprano solos in the churches we attended. When our church choir sang Handel's Messiah, she was the soprano soloist. Today, I jokingly tell her that she can sing bass part now.) Nevertheless, her voice is improving everyday, albeit very slowly. And some times, she has a lot of phlegm and coughing. But we thank God for all He has done for her. Her urologist proclaimed that she is completely rid of kidney cancer and does not need to go back to him for follow-up. Her thyroid cancer follow-up is now only once a year instead of quarterly. She looks completely healthy and lively. People are all amazed to see some one who suffered five major surgeries with a six year span can still be so well, happy, and content. I would like to share one of the Bible passages that Julia and I love dearly:

Philippians 4:4-7 ⁴ ¶ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵
Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.