

Weekly Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of December 3-4, 2016

Dear Members of St. John,

This week I am free from chemo treatments, as I celebrate my week off. It is truly wonderful to enjoy this week off, as I feel lots more like my “old” self. But in the back of my mind is that constant question, “will my numbers be down?” Will the chemo treatments do what the doctor wants to happen?

I am reminded what Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego said to King Nebuchadnezzar when he ordered them to bow down and worship the image of gold, or else they would be thrown into the fiery furnace (recorded in Daniel 3:16-18) “Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. ¹⁸But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

Did you catch their last comment? “Even if our God does not save us, we will still not worship the image of gold.” Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego knew that obedience to the true God was the first priority, regardless if they were saved or not. To trust God during the good times is a piece of cake. But let some struggles come into our lives, and then to trust God is OBEDIENCE, plain and simple. Will I trust this God even if my numbers don’t go down? Will I believe God to be loving and good even if I have additional rounds of chemo to go through? These are the opportunities for growth!

Trust and obedience is learned in life as we walk through the events we most certainly do not understand. I love the quote from the book “Wait and See” by Wendy Pope. She writes: “*We have to allow God to do His work in us before He can do a work through us.*”

God prepares us to walk by faith and to trust in Him through the difficult and struggling times of life, because God wants to us to help others when they transverse their life’s difficulties. St. Paul says it so well in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.” As you see me working through my struggles, I hope you are up-lifted and encouraged. As you work through your own struggles, God comforts you so that you can comfort others.

God bless and comfort each of you, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Pastor Jim

Weekly Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of December 10-11, 2016

Dear Members of St. John,

This week I start my next round of chemo, meeting with the doctor first to find out where my numbers are. I really want them to show that they are going down. But after meeting with the doctor and finding out that my numbers are down, just not by much, my doctors said I will have to endure two more months of chemo. Crap! (*Sorry.*) What a disappointment? This means I will be taking chemo through the months of January and February of 2017, and hopefully transplant sometime after that. This means I will have been on chemo for 9 months. I could have had a baby for “crying out loud.”

But the Lord knew the news that would be coming so yesterday morning I studied Psalm 31, especially verses 14-15, But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, “You are my God.”

¹⁵My times are in your hands; deliver me from my enemies and from those who pursue me.” O Lord, please deliver me from all those cancer cells that pursue me, I prayed. I believe that “my times are in God’s hands,” but you know, life’s difficulties and struggle make it very hard to accept. I so want to connect with God in the midst of my everyday life? But how do you do that struggling with cancer and not disappointment?

There are two words that stir me. Move me. Show me. Propel me. Two words I hear Jesus saying over and over again: “Follow Me” (Matthew 4:19). Tucked within these two words, three syllables, 8 letters is the wild secret of a deep connection with God. If we want to know God, we must abide in Him. How do we abide in Him? Follow His instructions. Follow His heart. Follow His example. Not just follow along as we mindlessly repeat the words of the “Jesus Loves Me” song and scribble some notes during the pastor’s sermon. No. Really follow! Follow hard. Follow passionately. Follow fully. Follow with engaged minds and willing hearts and open

hands and ready feet. And where can we start this kind of all-out following? By asking God to let us see Him. When we pray, we invite the divine presence of the Almighty God to do life with us that day. Watch for Him. Look for Him. Make the connection of things that happen as direct evidence of His handy work. In us. Around us. In spite of us. Ask Him to help you see His activity as you seek to follow more fully. And He will. Rest assured God isn't trying to hide from us. He is waiting to be seen by us.

Jeremiah, the suffering prophet of the Old Testament wrote, "Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:12-13). Suffering helps us seek God. Suffering removes all the distractions so that we can really concentrate on following Jesus. Suffering forces us to seek HIM *with all our hearts!*

Please keep me in your prayers, maybe now more than ever. Thanks. I love you all!

Pastor Jim

Weekly Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of December 17-18, 2016

Dear Members of St. John,

Do you know what you want for Christmas? If you ask a child, they will immediately tell what's tops on their list. If you ask an adult, you would probably get a little more thoughtful answer like, "Peace in the World," or maybe "Togetherness and love for my family." Regardless how you view Christmas, from a child's or an adult's perspective, Christmas is usually a time of "I want..."

Do you know what I want this Christmas? You probably would guess "remission from my cancer," and yes, I do want that. But through this cancer, I have discovered that's not the first item on my list. What I want is to lean more on the Lord and less on my own understanding.

Proverbs 3:5 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding." We generally think that strong people stand up straight without any help. They don't slouch. They don't slump. They don't lean on anything or anyone. Those who are weak, though, need to lean, i.e. a person with a broken leg leans on crutches.

But I have discovered that even the strong lean on something or someone. Even people who can stand alone, straight and strong, lean on... That's why David wrote Psalm 37:1 to all people, strong or weak, it didn't matter, "Fret not." We fret and worry, we try to make sense of life and in doing so we are leaning on something – "our own understanding." So, the big question is, "How well is that working for you?" If you are like me, "Not very well."

That's why Solomon in Proverbs says, "forget leaning on your own understanding! Trust in the Lord." In other words, "don't try to go it alone. Don't worry. Lean on the Lord." We can memorize that passage. We can sing "I am Trusting Thee, Lord Jesus." But learning "how to lean on the Lord" comes only through living out of lives, cancer and all. All these difficulties teach us two things: 1) leaning on my own understanding is simply *NOT* worth it; 2) Leaning on the Lord is the *ONLY* way to go.

So, this Christmas I want to be able to "thank the Lord for my cancer," because it has taught me to lean more heavily on the Lord. I don't understand cancer. The doctors don't know what caused my cancer. But the Lord is working through my cancer to create a more "leaning spirit" in me.

This Christmas I invite you to thank God that He uses our difficulties in life to help us lean more heavily on Him.

Loving you lots, Pastor Jim. Merry Christmas!

Weekly Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of December 24-25, 2016

Dear Members of St. John,

At the beginning of December, I was hoping my cancer doctor would have said that the double chemo treatments are doing their job and I would be ready to begin transplant preparation in January of 2017. Well, on that visit, my doctor told me I would have to go through another three rounds of chemo instead. "Rats!" I got through that disappointment only by the grace of God and your prayers of support, let me tell you.

This past week, I get a call from the transplant team and it seems that I will start transplant preparation in January and not March or April like I thought. This preparation is to determine how good a candidate I am for

transplant. I will have all my main organs checked out, blood work galore, a total body x-ray scan and unfortunately another bone marrow biopsy (the last one really hurt). This will be two full days down at the Cleveland Clinic on January 16th and 18th, 2017, so start praying me up now. Thank You!

I think my personal Christmas has come early, thank you, dear God. I know I have several hurdles to cross yet, but the difference now is I can begin to see a little flicker of light at the end of the tunnel, and I can't tell you how joyful and excited I am about that.

But this Christmas is not just about the good news that I have received, it is also about the best news the world has received, that a Savior has been born to you, who is Christ the Lord. It is because our Jesus came in the first place, that we can bear our burdens, endure the suffering that life brings, and will rise up victorious in Christ. St. Paul writes in Romans 8:37-39 "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.³⁸ For I am convinced that... (*nothing at all, not even cancer*) ... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This is why the angels sang so loudly and joyfully that first Christmas. While they cannot understand "never being separated from the love of God," they saw the difference Jesus' coming made for us. Their life is secure and safe in heaven. And so is ours! But we have to get through this miserable world first, and God assures us, we will make it, guaranteed, because He is walking beside us every step of the way! Thank You, Jesus!

I can't say I have always been positive and optimistic throughout this ordeal, but I can say God has been continually assuring me "nothing, not even cancer, can separate you from Me." As you read this on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, I pray that the blessings of "never being separated from your God" would so fill your hearts this Christmas, that your joy bubbles over and that you would join me in praising our Loving God. God is Good, all the time. And all the time, God is good!

Love each of you this Christmas more than you will know.

Pastor Jim

Weekly Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of December 31/January 1, 2017

Dear Members of St. John

As we end one year and begin another, I am enjoying a week off from chemo. I so look forward to that time, where my body can feel a little more normal, if normal is even possible having cancer. But I think better than "normal" is the word "content." Am I content in the situation I am in? That's the really big question, isn't it?

Paul writes in Philippians 4:12-13, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation... (because) I can do all this through Christ who gives me strength" Philippians 4:12-13. I don't know about you, but when I read those words, I think to myself: This is a tough pill to swallow. Content in any and every situation? Really?

It is so tempting to want to wallow in the "why" questions and tell God He'd hurt our feelings. Why did this happen? Why didn't You stop this, God? Why weren't my prayers answered? Have you ever been there? Have you ever had a big situation in your life where you just couldn't process why God would allow this to happen?

Asking why is perfectly normal. Asking why isn't unspiritual. I have done it a thousand times over my diagnosis. However, if asking this question pushes us further from God rather than drawing us closer to Him, it is the wrong question. If asking the why question doesn't offer hope, peace and confidence, why ask it?

I am not always successful at this, but when I find myself with thousands of upsetting "why" questions, I try to change it to "what" questions. Instead of wallowing in why did this happen, I ask instead, now what am I going to do with it? What can I learn from this? What other opportunities could God be providing? What maturity could God be building into me? Switching from "why" questions to "what" questions paves the road to parking our minds in a much better place.

Even better than the "what" questions are the "who" questions. Who loves me so much to have exchanged His life of ease and wonder and to take my place as a humble, suffering servant? Who loves you and me that much that He would go to hell for us? Who cares so much for us that He was born in a manger bed, lived a peasant life, all so that He would grow up to die on a cross? You know this "Who!" He is Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Who is walking beside me through all these eight months of chemo treatments? Who will be in that same room with me throughout my transplant? None other than our Jesus!

Throughout the coming New Year our Jesus will be the “WHO” that walks with us, to accomplish His “WHAT” in us, so that we really don’t even need to ask “WHY?”

Blessed New Year to each and every one of you!

Pastor Jim

