

Weekly Health Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of December 16 & 17, 2017

Dear Friends and Family:

This past week I was on one chemo pill each of seven day, ending Sunday. I developed a terrible itch again, took a picture of it and sent it to my doctor. I will wait to hear from him if he wants me to go on some kind of steroids to help keep the itch down. I won't have tests again until in the New Year, to see what effect, if any, the chemo is having. Please pray that my numbers go down, toward remission. I am praying for remission as soon as God would allow.

In the midst of all of my unknowns and potential risks, I've found encouragement seeing how Jesus boldly prayed for His followers in John 17. The night before His crucifixion, Jesus prayed this prayer: *"My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one"* (John 17:15).

Notice Jesus didn't pray for fame, wealth, safety or even that His disciples get a pass and go directly into heaven. Instead, He begged His Father to protect them from our enemy, Satan, the *"evil one."* Right here in this world.

Two of our enemy's most powerful weapons are doubt and fear. If he can plant seeds of either in our minds, we can be dissuaded from stepping out in faith. If he can constantly remind us of how far short we have fallen before God, we can despair and fear that God may not love us. Doubt and fear can wrap us all up again this Christmas time.

Jesus knew we would need "protection," because every time we say yes to God, we step a bit further into enemy territory. Yet when we take risks for God, He will protect and preserve us from the evil one.

How did that play out in our scenario? I realized following God doesn't always mean I would know each step, but simply trust Him to be able to take the next step. And we all have experienced and watched in awe as the Lord granted reassurance from all our doubts about whether He would provide for us.

Obedience to God is always risky. There will be doubt and possibly even fear. And yet we see Jesus, praying for our protection. When we know God has called us, and we say "yes" to what feels scary, we'll see God's hand of protection in miraculous ways.

The miracles of Christmas still happen today. Blessed Christmas.

Weekly Health Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of December 9 & 10, 2017

Dear Friends and Family:

Finally, some good news. I had a doctor's appointment last week and he said he too would have preferred that my numbers would have gone down, instead of 133 to 251, but he said as long as they do not go up to 400 or more, because that's when bone damage will occur. He said he wanted me to continue with the Revlimid and watch how I react to it. He said that if I begin to itch badly, he may have to give me some steroids to counter-act the reaction. (I guess there goes my baseball career.) This was one of those times I wished God would appear in a way my eyes could see and give me clear, step-by-step instructions saying exactly what I am to do.

But I didn't see Him. And no Spirit Finger wrote instructions on my wall. Instead, I felt this gentle nudge to pay attention to what He'd already given me this week: A verse: Psalm 91:1-2, *"Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.'"*

I love that these verses give us a script to say out loud, *"He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."* Isn't it interesting the two words God is called here are *refuge* and *fortress*?

A refuge is a quick place you duck into to find shelter. A fortress is a place built intentionally for the purposes of exceptional security. The Hebrew word for fortress is *"metsudah,"* with one of its definitions being an "inaccessible place."

God is not just a quick refuge from the storm, but He's also the place where fear no longer has access to me. *Fear can't catch what it can no longer reach.* It's not that bad things won't happen to me or my family. We live in a broken world where broken things happen every day. But as a child of God, I don't have to live with fear taunting and terrorizing me.

I still don't know why it is taking so long to get my numbers down, but God says I can trust Him to bring His plan for my life around for good. I'm also determined to make some imperfect progress when I'm dealing with fear. I now know I can feel afraid, but I don't have to live afraid. I can say out loud, *"Dear God, You are my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."* And then close my eyes and picture Him lifting me to a place where fear can't touch me.

Blessings to all this Advent Season,

Pastor Jim

Weekly Health Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of December 2 & 3, 2017

Dear Friends and Family:

I had gotten my lab reports while I was in Virginia, enjoying my grandkids. And while the reports showed an increase of the Kappa/Lamb Ratio Serum, from 133 last month to 251 this month, I was not going to let that report ruin my fun and enjoyment with my family for Thanksgiving. Fortunately, I was able to keep it out of my mind and enjoy the festivities. But Monday, as we said goodbye to my family and headed back to Cleveland, I also knew I would have to deal with the reality of those numbers. When I met with my doctor on Wednesday (today as I am writing this), he said that he too did not like to see the number increase, but they are still not high enough to cause more bone problems. That would be 400 or more. He wants me to continue with the chemo drug which causes me to itch, and he said if I start to itch sooner while on the drug, and if it takes longer to get rid of the symptoms, I should give his office a call. I told the doctor I feel like a child who is having difficulty in school, that by the time the school realizes there is a problem, the child is that much further behind.

I always knew life on this earth was hard. But you know, I wish someone had whispered into my ear years ago, I mean leaned right in and said very loudly, *“Oh, yes, a lifetime with Jesus is going to be a wonderful adventure. There’s going to be joy and hope and beautiful relationships. But, listen, there’s something else you need to know: You’re not going on holiday, you’re going into battle.”*

I imagine I wouldn’t have liked that comment much or maybe plainly would not understand at the time. I probably wouldn’t even have believed it, or I might have told the person they needed to be more positive. But later when the cancer arrows started flying, I would have suddenly thought, *“Oh, yes, I’m glad someone warned me.”*

Perhaps that’s why today I’m writing all this down ... to remind myself and, in case you haven’t heard yet, to gently tell you, too: We need to know we’re in a battle, because otherwise we’ll become disillusioned and discouraged.

We’ll think we must be doing something wrong or even that God has tricked us. We’ll retreat when it’s time to advance. We’ll hide when it’s time to charge. We’ll be caught off-guard instead of guarding our hearts. We’ll even misunderstand who we’re fighting. It’s not ever other humans; it’s always the darkness itself.

There is beauty in the battle. There is strength. There is victory. *“Be strong, and let your heart be courageous, all you who put your hope in the LORD”* (Psalm 31:24).

But it's okay if sometimes we still need to whisper to Jesus, *"This is harder than I thought it would be."* If that's where you today, then know, you're not alone, cause I am right there beside you. Also know feeling this way isn't failure; it's confirmation you are a warrior, mightier than you know, stronger than you've yet to see.

Love is a soft word in our culture. But in the Jesus' Kingdom it's a war cry. And so we fight on — we serve and encourage and work and pray and change the world. Because we are people of God, this is what we do; this is who we are. We are a mighty, fierce hearted force. We cannot be defeated, because Jesus won the battle and cried out "It is finished." While we battle on here, we also stand in that ultimate victory won for us by our Jesus on Calvary's hill. So, "be strong and let your heart be courageous, all you who put your hope in the Lord."

Weekly Health Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of November 25 & 26, 2017

Dear Friends and Family:

I had a wonderful week not being on chemo, but as that week comes to an end, you know, on Monday, November 20th, I started with chemo again. This will be my third week of being on chemo with a week off in-between. That seems to be working as far as my reaction to the drug goes, but we will also find out this week if the chemo, at this rate, is still bringing my numbers down. Keep praying that the numbers go in that direction.

As we all celebrate Thanksgiving Day, I need to ask are we people of thanksgiving, no matter what circumstance we face? Or, what if you woke up today with only that which you thanked God for yesterday, what would you have? I know that there are many circumstances I do not like, but could I truly give thanks to God for it anyway? I am not saying just utter the words, but actually mean and feel a sense of gratitude for what we experience.

Throughout the Bible, when difficulties come, thanksgiving is often the response. I find this truth about the power of thanksgiving over and over in Scripture. What was the prayer Daniel prayed right before being thrown into the lions' den and witnessing God miraculously shutting the lion's mouths? Thanksgiving.

After three days in the belly of a fish, what was the cry of Jonah's heart right before he was finally delivered onto dry land? Thanksgiving.

How are we instructed to pray in Philippians 4:6 when we feel anxious? We are to pray with thanksgiving. And what is the outcome of each of these situations where thanksgiving is proclaimed? Peace. Powerful, unexplainable, uncontainable peace. *"And the peace of God,*

which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).

One of *Webster’s* official dictionary definitions of thanksgiving is: “a public acknowledgment or celebration of divine goodness.” I wonder how we might celebrate God’s divine goodness today, especially if there are difficulties to bear. Are we only fair-weather thanks givers? Or are we able to give thanks for the trials, the difficulties and the problems in life?

I wonder what might happen if we decide, in the midst of our circumstances today, to notice, to pause and then to choose to give God thanks for His blessings, as small as it might be. That’s the three-step process to giving thanks. We first have to notice what God is doing in our life; then we need to stop long enough to choose to give God thanks. It’s really that simple, but that doesn’t make it easy.

Max Lucado, a favorite author of mine once wrote these words (sorry, I don’t remember where). “You have a ticket to Heaven no thief can take; An eternal home no divorce can break. Every sin of your life has been cast into the sea; Every mistake You’ve made is nailed to the tree. You’re blood bought and Heaven-made; A child of God – forever saved. So be grateful, joyful, for isn’t it true? What you don’t have is much less than what you do!”

Here's hoping and praying you all have a wonderful Thanksgiving with family and friends. We plan to be in Virginia with our grand kids. Pastor Jim

Weekly Health Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of November 18 & 19, 2017

Dear Friends and Family:

This is my week off chemo – Hallelujah! My week on chemo also went well and we had visitors from Wisconsin, Char and Larry Holz. It was great having them here – you know - too much to see and do for the time one has. We ate like pigs and shopped ‘til we dropped, at least the girls did. Larry is getting around pretty good, but he is still working to get his legs to do what he wants them to. Just like me, with all the chemo treatments, we are both waiting for God to answer our prayers, and sometimes not very patiently.

When God doesn’t seem to be answering our prayers it can be hard. Sometimes, downright awful. One minute I’m determined to trust God. In the next, I feel myself slipping. The “why” questions tumble in so hard. My heart hurts. My eyes leak. Ever been there?

I don’t want to oversimplify what to do in these times. I know from prayer requests I’ve received over the years many of us are facing really tough issues. Situations where the answers

aren't easy or clear cut. But I have discovered a few things that have helped me when God seems silent. 1) Press in to God when you want to pull away. When I really want to hear from God, but He seems silent, I sometimes find I want to disengage from my normal spiritual activities. Skip church. Put my Bible on my shelf. And let more and more time lapse between prayers. But Psalm 61:2, reminds us that the best thing we can do when our hearts are growing faint is to call out to God, not pull away from Him: "From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I."

2) The Bible also promises we will find God if we seek Him with all our heart. Jeremiah 29:13 says, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." All my heart includes the parts that are broken. Bring it all to God. He can handle our honesty and will lovingly respond. But we have to position ourselves to go where truth can be found. Go to church. Listen to praise music. Read Bible verses. Memorize Bible verses. And, especially, we keep talking to God in prayer.

3) Praise God out loud when you want to get lost in complaints. In the midst of what you're facing, find simple things for which to praise God. I don't mean thank Him for the hard stuff. I mean thank Him for the other simple, good things still in your life. A child's laugh. A bush that blooms. The warmth of a blanket. The gift of this breath. Next, Psalm 40:3 reminds me God will give me a new song when I make praise the habit of my heart and mouth: "He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the LORD and put their trust in him." This Thanksgiving remember to count your blessings. You will notice there are many more blessings than difficulties.

4) Put yourself in the company of truth. That friend who speaks truth? Listen to them. Stay connected with them. Let them speak truth into your life, even when you're tired of hearing it. Stand in the shadow of their faith when you feel your own faith is weak. Let them lead you back to God time and time again. Proverbs 12:26a reminds us: "One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor ..."

It's okay to feel hurt and confused. Our God is big enough to handle our honest feelings. But don't let your feelings lead you away from God or away from His truth. Press into Him. Praise Him. And put yourself in the company of truth.

As you stay with God in these ways, you'll become ready to receive His answer when that time comes.

God bless you all with an extra measure of His love in Jesus.

Pastor Jim

Weekly Health Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of November 11 & 12, 2017

Dear Friends and Family:

This Monday (Nov. 6) I started on another course of chemo, one pill a day for seven days. So far, so good. Then I am off again for seven days. I am to call the doctor if I experience any reaction, itchy red rash, shortness of breath or wheezing. These last two reactions could indicate a blood clot in the lungs, which is one of the side effects of this drug. This being on chemo this long is getting old real fast. I am not sure I can wait much longer.

There was a woman in the Bible who also felt she could not wait any longer and had trouble with God's timing. Her name was Sarah, Abraham's wife. She felt impatient just like I feel impatient. After waiting 10 long years for the baby God had promised her (Genesis 12-21), Sarah decided to help God hurry things along. *Surely 10 years was way too long for anybody to wait*, she likely reasoned.

So, Sarah gave her maidservant Hagar to her husband, and the two of them had a child. Even our modern-day television dramas don't hold a candle to what ensued! It turned out "helping" didn't help at all, and the promise still wasn't fulfilled. Fourteen years later, Sarah and Abraham had a visitor who reminded them of God's promise, causing Sarah to laugh out loud and say, *"After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?"* (Genesis 18:12b).

Do you hear your disbelief and questions about God's timing echoed in Sarah's? I certainly hear mine. *Now, Lord? I thought I would serve You in the Church for many more years, and then Cancer hit!?! Isn't Your timing a little off here, Lord?* God answered Sarah's question in a way that answers ours, too. *"Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son"* (Genesis 18:14).

Less than a year later, Isaac, the child whom God had promised 25 years before, was born. God was not late. His timing was perfect. It was Sarah who had been in a hurry, but God called Isaac's birthday *"the appointed time."* According to the dictionary, "appointed" means "predetermined; arranged; set." Isaac's birth came at the exact time God had planned all along! His birth also provided both Abraham and Sarah a reason for a hardy laugh, in fact that's why they name their son "Isaac." The name Isaac means "he laughs." How does the old saying go... "He who laughs last, laughs best." Isn't it wonderful when God surprises us with His love and mercy, which were there right from the beginning and we just didn't see it, until, surprise? I am still waiting to go into remission, and I know that one of these days, He will surprise me with it.

God may seem like a tractor in the road, slowing down our dreams, but He knows the entirety of our story from beginning to end. He also knows how our story weaves into the lives of others. We may be tapping our watches, but God is never late. He may seem slow, but He's always right on time. God Himself holds the appointed time in His hands.

Has God made a promise to you that seems delayed? Has He planted a dream in your heart that has not yet come to pass? I dream about going into remission and moving to Virginia where my grandkids live. You can see I've struggled with impatience too, but let's stand together in confident hope! God is faithful, and we can rely on His perfect timing.

God bless you all.

Pastor Jim

Weekly Health Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of November 4 & 5, 2017

Dear Friends and Family:

Starting the same chemo, the third time, with two reactions before where I had to stop taking the chemo gives me some fear and trepidation. It's like walking through the valley of fear and trepidation. Ever try a certain food a second time after you got sick on it the first time? No, me neither. But here I go again. I do have to agree with the doctor that Revlimid did do the best job on the cancer, even though it made me terrible sick. The good news is that I have now finished the week's course of chemo, with little reaction, just one little patch of itchiness.

Understanding my week, you can see why I had to turn to Psalm 23:4a "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." In life, we all certainly like mountaintop experiences better than valleys — the air is clean, the sun is shining, and the view is amazing. But truth be told, we're going to go through valleys. It's inevitable. You've observed that, haven't you?

Jesus didn't want us to be surprised by difficult times, so just before He died on the cross, He warned us, "Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows" (John 16:33b). "You will have ..." means it's not a matter of if; it's a matter of when. I'm sure you've noticed that you can't plan valleys or schedule them. Who's ever had a flat tire or a root canal at a good time? Nobody! We just move through our lives, taking one day at a time.

But be encouraged that valleys are temporary; they do have an end. Remember Psalm 23 says, "...I walk **THROUGH** the valley." I am going to come out on the other side. I am not going

to get stuck in the valley. The valley will not be my end. My week-long course of chemo came to an end. Praise the Lord.

And valleys, besides coming to an end, have a purpose, a meaning and a goal. God never wastes our pain. He wants to continually grow our faith, so that even in the valley of death, my faith will still declare “I will fear no evil, because God is with me.”

What encourages me most is that God never asks me to go through any valley alone. Notice David refused to be filled with fear in the dark valley, because God was with him in a very real and personal way. Earlier in this psalm, David’s comments about God are in the third person — the LORD is my shepherd ... He makes me lie down ... He leads me... He refreshes my soul ... He guides me. But when David gets to the dark valley, he switches to second person: “for you are with me.” That’s oh so personal. It’s as if David sees the darkness ahead, and he reaches out for God’s hand, because God is walking with him. What a comfort to put our hand in God’s hand, as we take a step into the dark, like taking the chemo the doctors prescribe but not knowing exactly how it will affect me!

I don’t know what valley you are walking through. But I do know that God is walking with you right now in that valley of yours. Just reach out your hand and grab God’s hand.

Love you all. Pastor Jim

Weekly Health Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of October 28 & 29, 2017

Dear Friends and Family:

Well, I put a call into my doctor’s office to see if he wants me to start back on Revlimid, but this time, one week on then one week off. He is hoping, and so am I, that I not react to the drug like I did before, and had to stop it. The doctor’s office finally called to say that one of my chest x-rays was good and clean, but the second one showed a slight touch of pneumonia. The nurse said I should start the Revlimid, but if I have any symptoms, rash, itchiness, shortness of breath or whizzing I am to call immediately and stop the Revlimid. So, here we go again...

Ever find yourself stuck in life, like I seem to be at this time? When that happens, and it will one day, we can either crumble or cling. In Psalm 63:8, King David writes: “*My soul clings to You; Your right hand upholds me.*” It sounds poetic and brave, doesn’t it? But when David penned these words, he wasn’t sailing on a sea of blessing. He was hiding in the wilderness of Judah, on the run from King Saul, who wanted him dead. In layman’s terms, David was *stuck*. But when David’s circumstances threatened to bring him down, he invited his Savior to hold

him up. Instead of giving up, he looked up. Instead of panicking, he prayed. And we can do the same.

David's example in Psalm 63 reminds us that prayer isn't just a prescription for smooth sailing. Prayer is a decision to seek shelter from the storm. **Prayer isn't merely clamoring for our way; it's choosing to cling to the One who knows the way.** Rather than focus on the waves that churned the seas of life, we can talk to the One who could calm the clamor in me. Remember Peter and his experience of walking on water in the midst of a storm? Matthew 14:29-31 ²⁹ Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

Scripture tells us David was eventually released from his stuck place, too. And through him, the Lord established a kingdom that would never end. It's a story with a happy ending, but if we focus only on David's summit, we miss the miracle in the middle. You see, even before God changed David's circumstances, prayer changed David's outlook. Read Psalm 63, and see for yourself. From his desperate cries in verse one of Psalm 63, to his joyful praise in the verses that follow, it's clear this rising king experienced a change of heart. This is the great miracle of prayer.

Prayer will probably not instantly set us free from our problems, but it sets us free to enjoy the Lord's presence wherever we are. When we choose to cling in faith instead of crumbling in fear, we discover we're not dangling out there in life alone. Even in our stuck places, God is there, holding us in His unrelenting grip of grace.

Blessings to all of you from our Great God.

Pastor Jim

Weekly Health Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of October 21 & 22, 2017

Dear Friends and Family:

I have had a full week, with bouts of shortness of breath and wheezing. I don't have a cold or anything like that, so my doctor wanted me to get a chest X-ray. When that came back normal, he ordered another test which checked for blood clots in the lungs. That test too was normal. So why the shortness of breath and the wheezing – your guess is as good as mine. My Cancer Doctor was very pleased with all my lab numbers, and he is suggesting that I go back on Revlimid, even though I reacted to it, but one week on and one week off, to see if that will keep me from reacting. I would ask that you all say a special prayer for that. Thank you!

When you and I step out into the unknown, like I will be doing this next week, all the while fear whispers in our ear about the inevitability of our defeat (or in my case an allergic reaction), I am truly thankful for God's Word. Because tucked in its pages, we find story after story of people who can help us learn in the midst of our battles. People who show us what it means to look to and depend upon the Lord.

Take Joshua, for example. If ever someone might feel overwhelmed at a situation totally out of their control, facing Jericho was it. Not only did the wall surrounding Jericho look invincible, but there also was the issue of Israel's army lacking proper weapons for tackling such an impressively guarded city. You can't exactly pull-down walls with arrows and spears. That's a job for battering rams and catapults — items probably missing from their arsenal.

With all these facts and details weighing on him, Joshua is suddenly confronted by a man with a drawn sword. Scripture reveals this is no mere human. This is the commander of the Lord's army — God's presence in human form. And this is no everyday occurrence either. It is an incredible encounter. Seeing the man is ready for battle, Joshua asks, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" (Joshua 5:13b)

Such an honest question, but it makes me believe Joshua isn't walking in complete confidence and assurance. If he were, he wouldn't have asked. But he did. This is where we assume that, of course, God's presence will answer, "Joshua, I am with you, for you and on your side!" But we would assume wrong.

When asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" the presence of God replies, "Neither, but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come" (Joshua 5:14a). Joshua falls face down in humility and reverence — asking what message the Lord has for him, His servant. (Joshua 5:14b) I wonder what kind of message Joshua was expecting, maybe some war strategy and tactics. But instead of detailed plans, Joshua receives a call to worship. He's told to remove his sandals, for the ground is holy. (Joshua 5:15)

It's an invitation and a reminder for Joshua to worship the One who's not only big enough to handle the impending battle, but also loving enough to address the doubt, fear and insecurity running through Joshua's mind. And as Joshua slips off his sandals, I'm reminded of what I need in the face of my own seemingly insurmountable situations: I need to worry less and worship more ...

When I'm desperate for God to give me all the details ...

When I'm wishing He would give me the tiniest peek at His plans ...

When I'm starting to wonder if He's for me or against me ...

I need to pause, lift my eyes to the One willing to meet me in the midst of my fears, and worship Him. Worshiping not only because it honors Him, but because it also changes me.

Worship might not be the first thing that comes to mind when we feel overwhelmed, but it truly is powerful. It reminds our trembling hearts and shaky knees that our God is mighty, our God is loving and our God is a more-than-able God. It both quiets us and strengthens us — perfectly preparing our hearts and minds for whatever battles lie ahead.

I don't know what "walls" you're facing in your life right now, friend. I don't know how overwhelming and daunting they may seem. But I do know the perfect battle plan for each and every one of us. **Worry less. Worship more.** And trust our God to lead us into victory.

Thank you for your many prayers. They are being answered, but in God's timing and in His way. Praise be the Lord.

Love you all. Pastor Jim

Extra Weekly Health Update from Pastor Jim – on Friday, October 13,2017

Dear Friends and Family:

This morning I received the Kapp/Lamb, Free Serum report. This is the one the doctors really look at to see how I am doing. The great news is that my numbers went from 607 in Feb. to 133 in October. That is fantastic because I could not finish the chemo dose. So either the drug worked very well, even though incomplete, or maybe my new immune system has kicked in. Regardless, I am praising God and ask you to join with me.

Years ago, I planned a surprise birthday party for my son, Chris. We planned everything for the surprise. But when the day of the party arrived, my son had dreamed up a birthday plan of his own. He said, "I want to go to the movies with my friends this afternoon," the birthday boy announced as we lingered over breakfast on his special day. "Will you drive us to the theater, Dad?" I wished I could explain my answer, but I took a deep breath and prayed my son would trust me. Then, I replied with a kind but firm "no." Chris' disappointment was palpable. He instantly accused me of being uncaring and unfair, and he spent the rest of the morning pouting in protest.

Later that day, when my disgruntled son waltzed through our front door right into the middle of his own surprise party, he traded his grouching for a grin. And as a noisy rendition of "Happy Birthday" filled the room, he suddenly understood the reason for my "no." Then, before he raced off with his friends, he returned to me for a hug. "Thanks for spoiling my plans today, Dad," he said. "Yours were even better!"

It's been many years since that surprise event, but I often find myself thinking about that day when my own plans don't unfold as I'd hoped. When I'm praying for better numbers, and yet they remained high; when I'm pleading for a "yes," but the answer I got was "no"; when I'm asking for change, but everything seems to stay the same. I remind myself of this truth: A frustrating "no" may be setting the stage for a forthcoming "yes." Wee have a loving Father who knows things we don't and many times, He needs to "wreck" our agenda in order to render His.

Jeremiah 29:11 reminds us that, ultimately, God's plans for us are good: "For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. They are plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future

and a hope.” It takes faith to believe that promise when life isn’t going as we’d expected. But I’m learning that we don’t need to understand all of God’s ways to accept His will. We simply need to trust His heart. The Bible reminds us God is love (1 John 4:8), and God is kind (Psalm 116:5). God is for us, not against us (Romans 8:31). God’s plans won’t always mirror ours. And sometimes His ways surprise us. But I believe that, someday, when we look back at our lives through eternity’s lens, we’ll want to throw our arms around our faithful Father and say, “Thanks for spoiling my plans, Dad. Yours were even better!”

Love you all; Pastor Jim

Weekly Health Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of October 14 & 15, 2017

Dear Friends and Family:

Well, my worst fears were realized as I started coming down with an itchy rash. I called my doctor’s office right away, and very soon later his nurse called back saying, “Stop the chemo right away.” Fortunately, I was able to catch it soon enough without any major problems, because we wanted to go to Virginia this past weekend. We were able to go and thoroughly enjoyed our grand kids and family. Two of my grandkids have birthdays this week: Colton turned 5 on Monday, October 9th and Bre turns 10 on Wednesday, October 11th. We had it all, birthday cake and candles, ice cream, presents and lots of fun. I got back in time to have labs on October 10th, the results of which I do not have yet. That will have to wait until next week.

Jesus said, “Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock” (Matthew 7:24-25).

Have you ever struggled with letting a circumstance define you? This seems to be a lesson God lets me live over and over again. He wants to be my only definition of who I am, how valuable I am and how much I count.

I am a child of God, holy and dearly loved. I know this. I teach this. I believe this. Yet it is so easy for me to slip into redefining myself when situations arise. Quietly, I slipped away with Jesus and did what I’d done a hundred times before. I held all those difficulties and problems up to the Lord and asked Him to help me see this situation the way He wanted me to see it. Not the way others see it, not the way my heart is tempted to see it, but the way He sees it.

Matthew 7:24-27 brings me some perspective: We need to more than hear the words of Jesus, we also need to put them into practice. Without practice, will I ever be ready when those difficulties come? Jesus also reminds us that it is not “IF” the rains came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, but when all that happens. That’s when I need to be ready for what this world will throw at me. Again, that’s why practice is so very important.

Do you know what amazes me about these verses? Both the person doing right and the person doing wrong experienced hard times. In each case the rains came, the streams rose and the wind blew and beat against the house. But only one person, the person who heard Jesus’ words and put them into practice survived. Which person do you want to be?

God’s Blessings to all of you. Love You lots!

Pastor Jim

Weekly Health Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of October 7 & 8, 2017

Dear Friends and Family:

Well I am almost through the chemo 21 day regiment. So far no itchy rash, which is good. In fact, we are planning on leaving for Virginia today, to see our grandkids. I have not seen them since the end of August at Becki's wedding.

Have you ever felt as if God is fed up with you? Perhaps you feel your mistakes are too great to be forgiven. Maybe you wish you could go back to a time when things were better. If so, this verse offers us words of encouragement. *"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."* (Isaiah 43:18-19)

The prophet Isaiah spoke these words to Israel during a time when they were in captivity. They had lost everything they thought they'd keep forever. Because of their rebellion, they assumed God wanted nothing to do with them anymore. Yet God responded: *Forget the past. Whatever you've done or how far you've strayed, I'm doing a new thing in your life today!*

Wherever you find yourself today, God is doing a new thing in your life. Isaiah teaches us how to embrace all God is doing.

1. **Forget the former things.** It's impossible to see where God is leading if we're always looking back. The Israelites longed for former days when they had God's favor. They remembered when God made a way of escape through the Red Sea, when He protected them from the enemy and how He provided for their needs. The Israelites were looking to the past for present solutions. Yet, their past victories couldn't do anything to free them in the present. They needed a new work. A new miracle. A new victory.
2. **Recognize your future is now.** Just as a seed spouts below the ground before we see evidence of a new flower, God is already at work in us doing a new thing. It's not something in the future. It's springing up *now*. We can't see it yet, but it's in motion. God's work of new life within us happens every day. He works to strengthen our relationship with Him, both spiritually and practically. We must focus on the work He is doing in our lives right now. Can you perceive it?
3. **Commit to God's plan.** Whether we see possibilities or problems in our lives, God is making a way for us. The Israelites thought they didn't deserve anything from God. Yet God doesn't condemn His children, rather, He lends a helping hand. *"... I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."* (Isaiah 43:19b)

No matter your past, God has already set into motion a new direction and a new purpose for your life. Will you commit to His plan? Blessings to all of you. Pastor Jim.

Weekly Health Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of Sept. 30 & Oct. 1, 2017

Dear Members of St. John

Well, I have been one whole week on Revlimid, and so far, no bad reaction. Keep praying that will be the case, because the next dose will go up from what I am taking now, from 2.5 mg to 5.0 mg. But God has promised that all events in my life will work for my good. God speaks. He gives the promise. And we believe.

Simple, right? Yet believing God's promises is sometimes the hardest part. Believing is daring. Believing flies in the face of all we're experiencing. We feel uncertain, scared we're making it all up. Our faith feels woefully wobbly and feeble.

But if we dare to believe, we'll be blessed. This truth holds the capacity to anchor our hearts while we face the two struggles in our lives.

Our first struggle is to believe we are who God says we are. Unfortunately, we often believe less about ourselves, and often excuse that by saying, *"My mother was moody, and I am, too"* or *"My father was short tempered, and that's just the way our family is wired."* Struggles with stubbornness, strife, feelings of inadequacy, or the ability to hold a grudge are simply a given — a family legacy like freckles or muscular legs or blue eyes. We've accepted a lesser version of ourselves.

What if, we truly accepted and dared to believe that we are who God says we are?

Beautiful (Song of Solomon 1:15); **Accepted** (Ephesians 1:6); **New creations** (2 Corinthians 5:17); **Precious in His sight** (Isaiah 43:4); **Unquestionably free** (John 8:36); **Chosen** (John 15:16)

Our second struggle is to believe the stunning promises God whispers to our hearts. How many times do we struggle because what God speaks to our hearts makes no sense? We wonder, *How? How can this happen since _____?* I struggle to grasp God's infinite abilities, because the deep issues I wrestle with in private seem impossible to overcome. Or I'm baffled by the logistics. Though we desperately long to believe, so much of what we see is the exact opposite of the promise. Our hearts soak in the promise but cannot comprehend the how.

What if we dared to believe God could do anything — anything at all — in and through us? What if, our hearts were open in the midst of our most baffling, uncomfortable, unlikely situations?

As God birthed the Messiah through Mary, His chosen vessel, so He births beautiful things through each of us. What promises are you holding on to? Has God whispered a stunning promise to your heart — one so big there's no way it can be accomplished apart from Him? I have! I have been asking for complete remission with my cancer. Only God can and will do that for me.

God bless you all with God size faith.

Pastor Jim

Weekly Health Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of September 23 & 24, 2017

Dear Members of St. John

After waiting a whole week to hear from the specialty pharmacy in Michigan, they will finally send the chemo pills on Tuesday, so that I can start with them right away. In talking with my

doctor, he says if I have any reaction, to stop the pills and call him immediately. I am a little leery about taking a drug I was so terribly allergic to the first time around. But the doctor assures me that he is giving the smallest dose possible, 2.5 ml, whereas the full dose was 25 ml. I will be taking these pills for 21 days, and then have one week off. Pray that I don't react badly to the drug.

Change involves movement — old to new, known to unknown, native to foreign. It always requires a road trip of sorts. This is the theme in the book of Ruth. It opens with Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, leaving their hometown to settle in Moab. A few verses later, after Naomi's husband and sons die, she moves again, but this time with her daughters-in-law.

Somewhere on that road trip back to Bethlehem, Naomi encourages Ruth and Orpah to turn back. She gives them an easy out, essentially saying, "You don't have to do the hard thing here. You can go home." Stuningly, Ruth chooses sacrifice. She tells Naomi, "Where you go, I go; and where you live, I'll live" (Ruth 1:16b).

Ruth didn't just choose Naomi, she chose the God of Israel ("your God is my god"). The same is true for all of us in the midst of hard decisions. We aren't just choosing the destination; we are choosing to believe in the trustworthy nature of God. We are binding ourselves to His provision. Like Ruth, we're often compelled to go somewhere new without knowing what waits on the other side. Rarely do we have a divine explanation as to how this moment will work out when we travel toward the unknown. Still, we walk toward the promise that God is good, even when the circumstances are unclear. Oftentimes, God draws people to Himself by drawing them out of their comfort zones first. When we're estranged from comfort, we gain clarity on His redemptive work in our lives. Our faith grows roots when we lack tangible stability.

The book of Ruth concludes with a testimony to how even the most painful transitions can be redeemed for good. Ruth opens with famine and death but ends with fulfillment — Boaz marrying Ruth and Ruth giving birth to Obed, the grandfather of David, from whose line came the Savior of the world.

If you're making a hard choice or facing a tough transition today, be encouraged. Ruth's story serves as evidence that even the most painful interruptions can double as God's provision, that God is present and active in our midst and that no road trip can ever lead us to a place where God hasn't already arrived.

Blessings, Pastor Jim

Weekly Health Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of September 16 & 17, 2017

Dear Members of St. John

The lab reports all indicated the cancer is still alive and well in my body, and that my immune

system really has not kicked in to combat it. My doctor wants to add some chemo to help my immune systems attack the cancer. That's a good idea, but the problem with this is, the doctor wants to use Revlimid, the first cancer chemo-drug I was on and reacted so badly to it last year. The doctor says that they will give me a very small dose to start, and gradually increase it, so as to hopefully desensitize my system against the drug. Wow, I really did not expect that. I had prayed this whole month for a complete turn-around, but instead my numbers are up and I have become a human test subject. Did you like tests in school? I know I did not. And even more than that do I dislike the testing in life. But the Bible says "... the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:3-4).

Life is often like going to an amusement park. One approaches the line for the roller-coaster and waits patiently for our turn. Now if you are a little apprehensive, like me, the closer you get to the front of the line, the more anxious you became. I started looking for a way out — some way to avoid venturing into the unknown. To my surprise, one of the people in line with me said, "Don't be scared. I was afraid the first time I rode it, but it was super fun!"

More often than I care to admit it, I find myself in line for something in life I'm unsure about. I anticipate the ride will be rougher than I want — too much for me to handle. And I want out. I worry. I whine. I cry. I beg God to get me out of the line. I'm apprehensive and anxious about the direction my life is heading and I let the world know it. But here's what I've learned: While God may not always remove me from my circumstances, He is always with me. He knows I'll be okay. Thankfully, God doesn't let my apprehension or anxiety about my future stop me from embarking on rides I might otherwise avoid.

God doesn't place me in situations where I will be tempted beyond what I can bear. He also ensures that when I'm feeling weak, I can hold on to Him, take comfort in His presence and trust in His strength to get me through. God, in His loving care, often places people in my path who've been on the ride I face and can encourage me to move forward.

I've been walking with God long enough to know that building my faith often requires unexpected rides that may leave me feeling worried and unsettled. I've also learned that God can be trusted. He will hold my hand and be with me the entire way. And while the ride may seem wild at times — building my faith is the ride of a lifetime. And it's one ride I'm learning to enjoy. Love You All – Pastor Jim

Weekly Health Update from Pastor Jim – Weekend of September 9 & 10, 2017

Dear Members of St. John This week was very important in showing me where I stand following transplant. I am sorry I don't have the results to share with you this weekend, but I can tell you what I will be going through. On Tuesday, I have numerous lab tests, that will measure the

various conditions of where my immune system is in its development. Then on Friday, I will be meeting with my cancer doctor to find out what all the lab tests means and what we need to do going forward. I have been praying all month, leading up to this week, that the Lord would do something big and bring me to full remission. I can't wait to see how God will answer that prayer. Though I will always be grateful for what I learned during this incredibly hard time, the last thing anyone wants is go through a more difficulty and trial. I found great comfort in Romans 5:2-5 "We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." Here the apostle Paul is not just issuing an invitation to the Roman church to endure more suffering, but to experience the joy of faith in those trials of life. Why? 1. Because suffering produces endurance. Paul doesn't dismiss the reality of suffering, but he reminds us that we can become strong through suffering. 2. Endurance produces character. This gift of character is priceless. It's honed in the rocky places. It becomes who we are and who God knows us to be. It transcends beyond the trial, showing up in the form of wisdom, insight and courage. 3. Character produces hope. Hope in Jesus becomes our focal point as we walk with Him through the suffering. 4. God's love is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us. What held me up this last year and half remains true today. God is the same yesterday, today and forever. He loves me. He loves you. His love is poured over us in abundance when we are in a trial. 5. What is the invitation in our trial? To that of a new journey, a new normal, where we will learn how to trust God anew. We can rejoice, even in the hard places and difficult times, for God's love will carry us through. Will you respond to that invitation and place your trust in the Lord? Throughout our lives, we are constantly invited to trust in God, rather than anything or anyone else. That is hard thing to learn, and maybe that's why there are all the problems in this world. But behind all the trials and difficulties we experience in life, stands a loving God, who gave His best, His Son Jesus, for us and our salvation. With a heart full of love for you all. Pastor Jim