

Calvary Chapel



A LONG JOURNEY THROUGH AFFLICTION

Story by Carmel Palmer

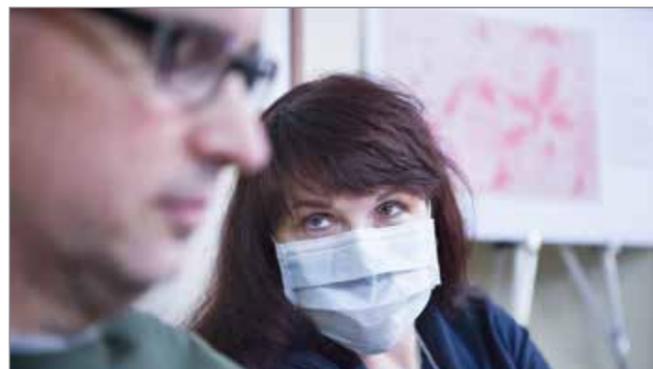
PASTORS BATTLE THROUGH INTENSE BOUTS OF CANCER

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Above: Pastor Steve Marquez, CC Fort Smith, AR, uses his cane. The church has encouraged and supported Steve during his battle with cancer. Two of his three sons, Jared, right, and Andrew, follow.

Photos by Rachel Putman

Below: Monica Marquez, Steve's wife, wears a mask since his immune system was compromised as they await Steve's appointment with his oncologist.



Pastor Steve Marquez of CC Fort Smith, AR, (CCFS) stared bleakly at his wife Monica from his hospital bed. Once active and athletic, cancer and multiple surgeries had weakened him to an almost infant state. Weakly, he asked, "They aren't bringing the giraffe today, are they?" As every morning, Monica answered yes. When nurses rolled in the x-ray machine, its tall neck decorated like a giraffe for younger patients, it meant Steve would be lifted to slide the x-ray board under his back. Nurses urged him to relax, but Steve stiffened and struggled, anticipating excruciating pain. Steve later read Robert Morgan's book, *The Lord Is My Shepherd*. He reported, "A sheep which has stumbled into a pit will first rest, then, when it realizes it can't get out, will fight with all its might only to end up on its back. The more it struggles, the more pain and danger it's in. As soon as I read that, I started bawling. I knew I was that sheep." Diagnosed with renal cell carcinoma in April 2014, Steve's journey through cancer has tested not only his faith and strength, but also his church's and

family's. Yet Steve and other CC pastors recovering from cancer are using their trials as an opportunity to support each other and declare God's glory. "I wouldn't wish this on anyone, but I've never been closer to the Lord or more broken," he declared. "I don't want things to return to normal. I want this ordeal to change me fundamentally."

A Time to Weep

When Steve started experiencing weakness and recurrent fevers in January 2014, he suspected a parasite contracted during the previous fall's mission trip to Cambodia. The next months' fruitless tests more irritated than concerned him—he just wanted to get on with life. As other symptoms emerged, Monica's research pointed toward kidney cancer, but Steve's urologist initially dismissed the idea, losing valuable time before an oncologist's final diagnosis. When Steve told their three sons—then ages 24, 17, and 15, Monica left the room, unable to watch, "They just stared at me," he remembered. "I got them in a group hug and said,

'Guys, it's ok, you can let it out.' They all burst into tears." Before they could tell their church, a well-meaning pastor leaked the news online, prompting an emergency meeting where Steve read from a prepared statement. Though he had pastored the tight-knit fellowship of 70-some adults from its 2002 inception, he was unprepared for the response. "Even typically unemotional men came to me sobbing," he recollected. "When anyone in the body faces something like this, it's devastating enough. But I'd never realized how many lives I affected as a pastor." Supported prayerfully and practically by their church and the wider CC family, the Marquezes maintained a hopeful outlook. Knowing Steve, a bi-vocational pastor, had already been unable to work for months, a CCFS member launched a fund-raising page, mobilizing a nationwide network of giving. Prayer and encouragement poured in along with financial help. In July, when surgeons removed a 7cm tumor along with Steve's left kidney, they were mystified to find it growing alongside his main artery, not entering it as it ap-

peared in x-rays. The Marquezes spent their 20th anniversary in the ICU, but with much to celebrate—tests showed no sign of remaining cancer, confirming friends' words from the Lord and the promise Steve felt he had received:

Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the Lord delivers him out of them all. He guards all his bones; Not one of them is broken. —PSALM 34:19-20

After a month's rehabilitation, Steve preached only two Sundays before debilitating back pain sent him out of the pulpit and back to his walker. Monica flew back from a California conference to care for him. Doctors assured

individual nerve endings. Afterwards, a surgeon told the Marquezes, "We didn't do this surgery. There was an angel in the room guiding us, because it's impossible for us to do what we did."

His pain medication lowered to better monitor his condition, Steve was in constant agony. "This is where the tables turned," he recalled. "Suddenly fear overtook me, this incredible darkness. The Lord won't leave or forsake us, but it's like He lifted His hand just for a moment to show me who I was in my own strength. I've never been a fearful person, but this was uncontrollable and all-encompassing. If Monica left for a moment, I was terrified."

"I'D LOST 80 LBS. ... I WAS TIRED OF EVERYTHING I COULDN'T FIX AND READY FOR GOD TO TAKE ME HOME. ... A DOCTOR KNELT BY MY BED, TOOK MY HAND, AND SAID, 'STEVE, YOU CAN'T GIVE UP.' I SOBBED, 'I'VE ALREADY GIVEN UP.'" STEVE MARQUEZ

him it was unrelated, but as the pain worsened the oncologist agreed to see him. "The night before the appointment," Steve reported, "my leg gave out and I collapsed, hurting myself badly. We rushed to the ER. After a CT scan, a physician informed me matter-of-factly, 'You don't have a back problem. You have a 6cm tumor in your spine.' The first tumor may have grown for years; this one had developed in weeks—that's how aggressive it was. I looked at Monica in shock and said, 'I wonder if I'll still be alive by next Christmas.'"

The tumor was entwined in muscles and nerves—without immediate surgery, Steve risked paralysis from the waist down. Within hours, he was rushed to Little Rock's more advanced hospital, where he came under the care of Dr. Stephen Shafizadeh and his team of five surgeons. "He was the most humble, straightforward surgeon I'd ever met. I had complete confidence in him," Steve asserted. "Had I been slightly worse, they would've sent me home, but he believed they could help, and I believed him." Steve had to spend two weeks rehabilitating his weakened body before undergoing a series of procedures, including two major surgeries in two days. His lung collapsed; rods and pins were inserted along his spine. During the final procedure, Dr. Shafizadeh had to scrape the cancer off of

Monica added, "The first diagnosis was a tidal wave; the second was a tsunami, coming fast and violent. It turned our lives upside down more than you could imagine. My husband has always been unstoppable. I was used to him taking the lead, but here he was incapable of moving himself. I needed to be strong for him." Since Steve was too weak to hold his Bible, Monica read to him and wrote verses on bright posters covering his walls. But she



Monica Marquez

struggled with her attitude, she confessed: "Many times during those six weeks I just wanted five minutes to myself, or to reply angrily. But I kept hearing God's gentle voice, 'Don't respond the way you want to. This is where you learn to die to self.' But God is great and merciful. He continuously gave me grace and strength to press in to Him for what needed doing."

Steve was discharged to a rehab facility. "I was a mess," he declared. "I'd lost 80 lbs. and hadn't shaved for weeks. I was tired of everything I couldn't fix and ready for God to take me to heaven. One day, a doctor knelt by my bed, took my hand, and said, 'Steve, you can't give up.' I sobbed, 'I've already given up.' He persisted, 'If you give up, you

die. You have to fight this.' I said, 'I don't know if I have the strength.' He replied, 'You've had a lot thrown at you, but you're still standing. Jesus was God, but He was also human. He wept.' I thought, *Oh, wow—Jesus cried. He suffered pain.* We miss that side of Him sometimes. We always want to be strong—'Yeah, I have cancer but praise the Lord, it's fine.' Jesus was genuine from the pinnacle of His divinity to the depths of his humanness." Steve wept the first time he read the Bible himself: "It was so incredible to be holding the God of the universe's Word in my hands. I'd forgotten His promise that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. This was one of those 'all things.'"

Strengthened Bonds

"In crisis, you either let God draw you closer or you fall apart," asserted parishioner Cheryl Blatt. "Our fellowship has had great growth through this, not necessarily in numbers but among the people here." Friends since age 12, Monica and Cheryl reconnected in adulthood at CC Santa Fe Springs, CA, where their husbands served on the worship team. A few years after the Marquezes left to plant CCFS, the Blattts felt called to follow. She reflected, "As difficult as it's been without our shepherd, this time has knit us together like never before. Even people who weren't in leadership would see a need and step up, whether making coffee or cleaning the church." Church members cared for the boys in their parents' absence and provided a trustworthy car for long commutes to Little Rock. Clement Dufrene, a CCFS board member who attends CC of the Ozarks in Rogers, AR, laid aside his ministry responsibilities to take over Steve's, commuting 1.5 hours every



Above: Steve winces in pain while doing a physical therapy exercise with very light weights.

Below: An MRI tech prepares Steve for a scan to determine if the cancer had been eradicated or had regrown. Photos by Monica Marquez





Left: Paul and his wife Amy await Paul's 33rd and final radiation treatment. Amy stayed by Paul's side as they traveled to Houston from Baton Rouge for 7 weeks in a row to receive treatment.

Photos by Matthew Curran

Bottom left: Amy hugs Lulu, a treatment nurse, as they depart the radiation treatment center the final time.

Bottom right: Paul wipes away a tear after putting drops in his eyes. Radiation to the sinuses severely dried out his eyes. Early prognosis was that Paul would lose sight in at least one eye, if not both. So far Paul has retained perfect vision in both eyes.

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Sunday and Wednesday to teach. At Steve's request, Clement will remain until Steve's recovery is complete. Steve continues in long-term chemo and still sometimes wears a brace, but tested cancer-free this March. Finally able to return to CCFS, he is thrilled to see the church flourishing. "Sandy Adams, pastor of CC Stone Mountain, GA, once told me the difference between a church and a Bible study is, if the pastor left, would it continue? Whatever happens to me, I know this fellowship will carry on."

Suffering: a Door to God's Kindness

When Steve learned Pastor Paul Hammontree of Calvary Christian Fellowship (CCF) in Baton Rouge, LA, was also diagnosed with an aggressive cancer, he called him immediately to offer prayer and encouragement. Acquaintances before, the pastors' friendship has deepened as they support each other through their physical and emotional battles. Steve continued, "Fighting a battle like this, you can get very self-consumed, but the most important thing

is always to put others first. Reaching out to Paul has strengthened me." Paul taught from 1 Corinthians 12:12-14 the Sunday he told CCF his diagnosis. He likened functioning as the body of Christ to hiking trips in his native Colorado, where groups reached the summit by leaning on and encouraging each other: "God's desire is that we lean on each other in our time of need. I never like being the person saying 'I need help,' but God knows I need to be in that spot." Paul's voice suddenly broke as he contin-

ued, "He's faithfully brought me where I need you—the body—to help me up this mountain."

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. Surely He will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence.
PSALM 91:1, 3 (NIV)

After a month of unsuccessful antibiotic treatment for an apparent sinus infection, Paul's doctor ordered a biopsy. "It's possible it's cancer, but," he reassured Paul, "I've been ordering these biopsies for 30 years without any being positive." The morning of his diagnosis, while reading Psalm 91, Paul recalled, "I felt God telling me very clearly, 'You're going to hear some news today that will rock your world.'" Hours later, he was diagnosed with sinonasal undifferentiated carcinoma (SNUC). An MRI revealed a baseball-sized tumor in his sinus cavity, pushing against his eye and growing into his brain.

**"GOD'S DESIRE IS THAT WE LEAN ON EACH OTHER IN OUR TIME OF NEED. I NEVER LIKE BEING THE PERSON SAYING, 'I NEED HELP,' BUT GOD KNOWS I NEED TO BE IN THAT SPOT. HE'S FAITHFULLY BROUGHT ME WHERE I NEED YOU —THE BODY—TO HELP ME UP THIS MOUNTAIN."
PAUL HAMMONTREE**





believers. Our fellowship is very real—there’s no pressure to pretend to be strong. There’s been a real ministry of the Holy Spirit in this time, not only in leadership but trickling down through the whole church. We’ve seen Him multiply the loaves and fishes. Jesus died for this church—He will by no means leave it orphaned.”



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“Abbreviated SNUC can sneak up on you,” Paul explained. “It’s described as ‘dismal’ because it’s incredibly rare and aggressive, and treatment is rough. Little is known on how to treat it, so they just hit it with all they’ve got. Less than 7 percent of patients survive past ten months. But God had been preparing me for this news. For months, my teaching had a recurrent theme of God working all things for good. I kept telling people, ‘There are no bad things, just good things that haven’t turned out yet.’ I had a good understanding of that before the diagnosis.”

the tumor would cost him one or both eyes. But his surgeon, one of a handful experienced with SNUC, operated endoscopically, leaving Paul with 20/20 vision and no scars. As Paul’s story spread through the CC network, he was connected with SNUC survivor Matt Jarrett of Harvest Riverside, CA. At a prayer meeting days before surgery, Paul saw Matt and his wife Sarah walk through the door. “They flew out here just to show me there was hope. It floored me, but at the same time it didn’t surprise me,” he testified, “because that’s just who our Father is, pouring out His undeserved kindness. What cancer has shown me more than anything is His kindness. I now see Him as my loving Father in a way I never could before.”

Throughout his painful, exhausting treatments, Paul saw God’s goodness: CCF’s assistant pastor was ordained weeks before the diagnosis. Another man who worked for a major insurance company guided the Hammontrees through legal battles to get coverage for rare but effective treatments. Doctors warned Paul the surgery to remove

Paul called Sandy Adams to get contact information for Damian Kyle, a CC Modesto, CA, pastor whose Bible teaching Paul has appreciated. Paul and Damian had con-

versed at the Deep South Leaders Conference just after Damian began his own battle with cancer of the lymph system. Paul asked Damian how he had told his congregation about his cancer. “Both Sandy and Damian have been incredibly supportive with phone calls, messages, and prayer,” Paul stated. “Every time Damian called, he had a word from the Lord that was exactly what I needed to hear. Sandy has been with me on this journey every step.”

Paul commuted between week-long chemotherapy and radiation treatments in Houston to weekends at home. Though he teaches as much as possible, his body has been too battered for the last month to manage it. Mouth sores make talking painful. “Sometimes my flesh rises up,” he admitted. “Hopelessness and uncontrollable sadness pour in. I know the truth, but this darkness can’t be reasoned away. When I open His Word, light washes over that darkness. Later I’ll get a text or email and discover someone was praying at that exact moment.”

Before getting involved with Calvary Chapel, Paul pastored a mainline denomination where church politics left him with disdain for congregations. However, he attested, “After experiencing the CC family’s love in action, I’m so grateful God’s plan was for us to be linked to other faithful

Above: Paul and other pastors and leaders of CCF pray for a man leaving to serve on the mission field in Haiti. The work of the ministry continues to thrive.
Photos by Erin Whitney

Top: Paul hugs Miss Edie, one of his most faithful prayer supporters. Paul received encouraging notes throughout his ordeal from parishoners and pastors at times when it was needed the most.

“WHAT CANCER HAS SHOWN ME MORE THAN ANYTHING IS HIS KINDNESS. ... I SEE HIM AS MY LOVING FATHER IN A WAY I NEVER COULD BEFORE.” PAUL HAMMONTREE

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