

The day leukaemia changed my life

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A year ago today I suddenly became unwell.

And everything changed.

At first the doctors were puzzled about my condition, which is never reassuring. It wasn't till the 20th May that I was officially diagnosed with [chronic lymphocytic leukaemia \(CLL\)](#), a slow growing form of blood cancer, which at the moment is relatively stable.

I have [previously mentioned that I've been unwell](#), and also posted some of the [thoughts that have helped me](#) in my journey so far. Throughout the rest of this article I have linked to some of those posts where I have explored specific ideas in more detail. **Until now I've not written about the details of my illness.** There were lots of valid reasons for my reticence. But one year on, I now feel ready to share, and **details of my story follow towards the end of this page.**

Also, I do believe in [the power of prayer](#), and perhaps some of you might like to pray for me.

I am aware that many of you will be suffering also, and there is comfort to be found in knowing [you are not suffering alone](#). Sharing is good for me, but maybe also good for those who will feel aspects of what I say resonate with their own experiences.

Feel free to share your own story in the comments section below, including where relevant a link to any online articles, or any tips you would like to pass on to others. One reason we suffer is so that [we can comfort others with the comfort that we receive](#).

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Cancer Affects Christians Too

The last twelve months have been **the most challenging of my life by far.** I've developed a fresh awareness for what it's like to suffer. It has been very tough on my family, especially my wife. But [we have also got a lot to be thankful for.](#)

There are **so many people with stories far worse than mine**. But before April 28 2017 I had not come face to face with my own weakness and mortality. And now I am aware of my frail humanity every day. It changes your perspective dramatically.

For example, [Matt Chandler](#) is a well known Christian pastor. He might have expected that after all he had achieved for God's kingdom in leading a large church, he would have been spared suffering and the possibility of an early death.

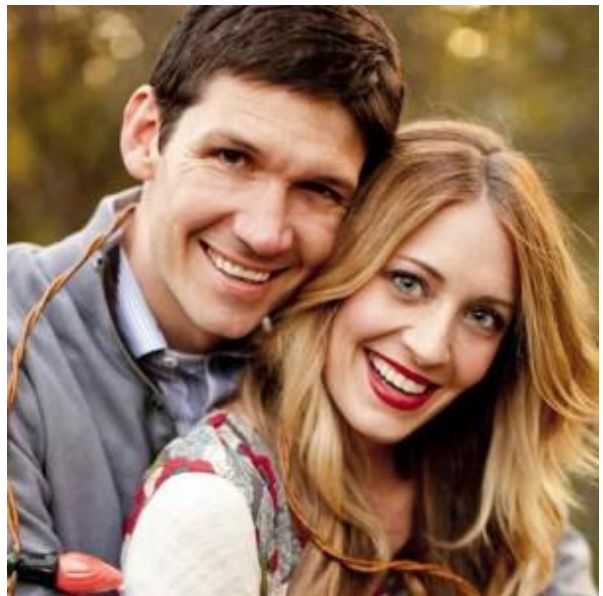
Some Christians think we can do a deal with God where **if we serve him, then he is somehow obligated to protect us from all harm**. But it doesn't always work out that way.

One Thanksgiving Day Chandler collapsed at home with a fit and was diagnosed with brain cancer. He required brain surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy.

When Chandler's wife asked the doctor what the best case and worst case scenario was, the unconventional answer was that the best case would be that he would never be given the all clear, and that his cancer could come back to bite at any time. As for the worst case, he was told **"well, you could always be hit by a truck on the way home and die instantly"**.

I will never forget Chandler preaching at Jubilee Church still with a closely cropped head of hair because of chemotherapy.

Matt explained to us then that he will never be free of what is effectively a sword hanging over his head. He lives each day as a man who may die tomorrow.



Yet with a steely gaze, staring down the congregation as though we were one man he implored us, **"the only difference between you and me is that I realise it."**

None of us can guarantee we will live to 90 years old with no sickness and then peacefully pass away in our sleep. But the uncertainty works both ways. Nine years after Chandler's diagnosis of an aggressive brain tumour, he is still enthusiastically serving the LORD, and is an example of how many cancers can be successfully treated.

This underlines that although to the newly diagnosed person with cancer it feels like everything has changed, in many ways nothing has changed except our awareness of our true situation. Nonetheless the **revelation of our mortality is a massive shock to the system**. And to be honest I took months to really get over the emotional reaction to receiving my own diagnosis. I have always believed [Christians should take counselling when needed](#), and have found that to be helpful

Being diagnosed with cancer or another potentially fatal illness has a way of bringing into sharp focus our vulnerability and potential mortality. We have no way of knowing how long we have left, nor what quality of life we will have along the way. **It's as though a curtain has been lifted and we see a glimpse into another world**, one which previous generations and people who live in less developed environments are only too familiar with.

In the world most Westerners inhabit, early death is so rare it feels unfair whenever it does come our way. In this other world, everyone lives knowing only too well they might die at any time, perhaps because of infectious diseases many imagine to be eradicated by antibiotics and vaccinations. For people with my condition, for example, a simple flu could lead to a hospitalisation or worse.

Christians should not be surprised when they get sick. Nor should they assume that [their faith is too weak](#), or that they must have committed [some dreadful sin that God is now punishing them for](#).

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.” (1 Peter 4:12-13)

How Suffering Can Open Our Eyes to Gratitude



Comprehending our own frailty makes us realise just how valuable life is. And far from being morbid, **this is the route to true joy**, because we learn to appreciate each day and each gift God has given us, and not to waste them.

My psychologist recently urged me to wake up each morning and think, **“this is another beautiful day that I get to live in this beautiful World!”**

Jonathan Edwards famously resolved *“to think much on all occasions of my own dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death.”* (Cited on [Desiring God](#))

This sparks the question, when I do pass on, hopefully many years from now, how do I want to be remembered?

To be honest, it is not as a blogger or author.

Still less as a doctor.

I want to be remembered as a good husband, father, family member, and friend.

These months have brought renewed focus for me on how to be a better person to those closest to me. This has also driven my commitment to [study the commands of Jesus and learn to obey them](#).

I am genuinely grateful to be alive, and eager to put myself fully at God's disposal for the future. Whatever strength he gives me I'm determined to use for his glory, and for my family. I take a lot of pleasure in being able to do small things for other people these days.

I have **received so much from so many kind people these past few months**. I'm very grateful for the help of the Doctors, nurses, counsellors, my physio, and all the others who have supported me, including of course my family and friends. God has been good to me. I am keen to pass on that kindness, and [the offer of true hope](#), whenever I can. I do also hope that through my writing, I can still help others I will never meet. I've found myself giving out more copies of my book [Hope Reborn](#) than ever before.

Reminding myself to be thankful towards others, and to God in prayer has been perhaps the most important way to turn my thinking around from the negatives to the positives. [I don't thank God for my suffering, however, I thank him in it](#) and for what he is doing through it.

"give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Adrian's 'Watch and Wait' Cancer Story So Far

So, for those who are interested, **what actually happened a year ago**, and what haven't I been sharing with you all these months?

When I woke up on the morning of the 28 April 2017, I had no idea I would end up in hospital that night.

With the retrospectoscope, I do remember having a slight cough for a couple of weeks before then. But it wasn't enough to stop me enthusiastically leading a half hour walk alongside a Swiss river with work colleagues a couple of days before.

I'd worked a normal day, and was on my evening commute home. I needed to change trains. I got up, walked to the door of the train and, as I stepped onto the platform, felt my legs buckle under me. I was also suddenly very breathless.

As I stumbled slowly along the platform my Smart Watch told me my heart rate was 144bpm. And my mind was muddled and felt like it had turned to cotton wool.



Those symptoms of weakness, breathlessness, heart racing, and mild confusion lasted weeks.

I couldn't keep walking, asked for help, and sunk into a seat. The ambulance took an hour to come, but eventually I was carried out of the station, and taken to hospital. There **I was diagnosed with pneumonia, and sent home with antibiotics.**

Within a couple of days, I had been admitted to my local hospital for more tests and different antibiotics as my condition hadn't improved. I'll never forget the phone call I received while on the ward. The haematologist from the first hospital confirmed my identity, and then told me she was fairly sure I had leukaemia from looking at my blood under a microscope.

A message like that shakes you to the core of your being. And trying to deal with it whilst still feeling so sick from the infection wasn't easy at all.

The waiting for confirmation was the hardest, and I have a renewed sympathy for those dealing with the suspicion of a serious illness like cancer. And, although I was expecting it, I don't mind admitting that the final confirmation I received a few weeks later hit me hard.

After weeks of various antibiotics not working, within days of my CLL diagnosis, I was admitted to [UCLH in London](#). By then I was developing sepsis as the infection spread. I was treated aggressively for several days with yet more antibiotics, and my infection was finally brought under control.

I was left with fatigue and weakness as a result of the infection, and told it would gradually get better. I quickly tried to return to work. But, I found it very difficult indeed over the next few months, despite the best efforts of my employer to make it as easy as possible for me. Even though I was working from home the majority of the time, and they kept taking work from me, I wasn't really coping at all.

CLL affects your immunity and so it makes you more susceptible to infections. As well as that first pneumonia, I have had repeated throat infections and a nail infection.

CLL can't quite decide whether it wants to grow in the blood like a leukaemia, or in the lymph nodes like a lymphoma. In most patients it does a bit of both.

My CLL also decided to grow inside my tonsils and then my lingual tonsils which led to two throat operations in a couple of months. The first was done as an emergency, as my tonsils had got so large I was beginning to struggle to swallow or breathe.



Although **my CLL is slow growing, and so far I haven't needed chemotherapy**, it has also made its presence known by giving me ongoing significant physical, emotional, and mental fatigue. This means that if I want to walk for more than a very short distance I now use a stick, and I struggle to concentrate for long.

After the second throat operation my doctor urged me to remain on sick leave for now. I gave in and haven't so far returned to work.

By the grace of God I have a generous sick leave policy supported by an insurance product. I do recommend you check if you have cover for a similar situation. I feel so grateful for God's provision in that regard, since we would otherwise have had to sell our house.

I'm told that the good news is that **my CLL itself is not that dangerous at the moment**, and my doctors predict it may well be several years before it needs aggressive treatment. But it has certainly made it's presence felt in the meantime.

They call the process I am in right now, "[watch and wait](#)". For someone who is used to "fixing" problems it sure seems strange to be told that the best thing to do at the moment is to simply see what happens. People with CLL are often told we have cancer in every drop of blood in our bodies, but the doctors say nothing should be done about it just yet

The Leukaemia Care charity has a great [Watch and Wait campaign](#) at the moment, [if anyone would like to give to them I have a Just Giving page](#).

When you are in the middle of a period of suffering that feels like it will never end, you feel you are watching and waiting for something bad to happen. But as Christians we can also wait on God to act to deliver us. As we seek healing, we must also learn patience and that [not everything will be given to us in this life](#). I have elsewhere shared [ten tips for those who are seeking to be healed](#).

For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many. (2 Corinthians 1:3-9)

Suffering and the Hope Faith Brings

I've been finding that **my CLL has a complex relationship with my faith**. Perhaps some of you who have faced periods of suffering have experienced something similar.

In the early days of my diagnosis my low energy, fatigue, and general feelings of apathy, together with my emotional upset at the diagnosis made me withdraw from God.

I found prayer, Bible reading, and attending Church all lost their comfort. It all became just an effort that I didn't have the energy for. I felt like I was backsliding. And my hope began to fade, as at times I felt as if this "early" disease had already destroyed my whole life.

To be honest, my faith had not been in a good way for a few months before I became unwell. My energy and enthusiasm levels were already low for me, and although I had no way to realise it at the time, perhaps my body had actually already been struggling for a while. If I noticed at all I'd just assumed it was the fact I was commuting for the first time in years. Although I'd gradually given up most of my hobbies such as preaching and writing, I was able to work as normal.

Once I began to realise that there was a physical reason for my low energy and enthusiasm, I gradually began to find my way back to Jesus.

Now, once again, **my faith is hope giving and so precious to me**. Indeed God has used my sickness to draw me closer to Him than ever before. He really does turn all things around for our good.

A couple of things have helped me. One is re reading a book I co wrote in 2014 before I was sick, called [Hope Reborn](#), which is basically a summary of the Christian gospel. These simple chapters have reminded me afresh of things I've always believed but which are now becoming more precious to me.

The second is listening to a playlist I've put together on both [Spotify](#) and [Apple Music](#), which I've called "[Gospel hope](#)". These songs are often written out of an emotional place, but for those of us with a faith gently take our hearts, and point them back to trusting again in what we believe Jesus has done for us.

The final thing that has helped is getting more serious about prayer and Bible reading.



I'd love to hear from other Christians who have suffered with chronic illnesses, including cancer, about what has helped them, and how their illness has affected their spiritual lives.

A disease like cancer destroys everything in its path if we let it. But hope makes all the difference. My hope is coming back to life.

I won't let my illness take over the blog. But perhaps knowing what's been going on will colour how you read some of my other articles. And I invite you to join me, to some extent, on my journey.

We will all face similar situations at some point. Either in our own lives, or in our loved ones. One piece of advice I would have is to do your best to **prepare yourself for such eventualities, without being caught up in fear**.

I do ask God that he would heal me. But I don't know if he sees my sickness as somewhat like the thorn Paul had in his flesh (see 2 Corinthians 12:1-10). Perhaps he has more work to do, turning it around for my good (Romans 8:28) and using it to shape me. I would certainly love to be fully well again. But even if God doesn't heal me, I will still serve him, more wholeheartedly now than before.

But beyond all this, [the Christian faith uniquely offers a hope](#) that goes beyond this life into a glorious life to come. Whilst we are in no hurry to make that transition, it does mean that we have a hope that [alters the nature of our grief](#) when we do lose someone, or when we mourn our previous healthy lives after becoming sick. I have written before about [the hope that the Easter Story brings](#).

I would value your prayers as my family and I face this journey together. I have a better quality of life since going on to long-term sick leave rather than trying to work. I am enjoying

being able to catch up on things at home I should have done months ago. I have even been able to reconnect with some old friends.

I thank God for a multitude of ways in which my situation could be much worse. And I thank him that I can face the future **knowing Jesus is with me, and will continue his work in me.**

I'll leave you with the words that I have clung onto more than any others over the last months, with links to my series on them:

[After you have suffered a little while](#), the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself [restore](#), [confirm](#), [strengthen](#), and [establish](#) you (1 Peter 5:9-10)

If you have read this far, and would like to know more about **[How to Become a Christian](#)**, then a free chapter of my book Hope Reborn explains how to do this.