

It was an early spring day, a little cool, but warmer weather would soon be here. Backing my truck into the garage at the end of the day is something I've learned to look forward to. It meant another day was over and whatever time was left belonged to me and the family. As I walked into the kitchen, the sound of ESPN echoed from the living room where my youngest son Nic was watching baseball highlights for the tenth time that day. In a softer voice only a parent would recognize, he states "Hey dad there's a sore on the roof of my mouth and it hurt's when I chew". As a parent you imagine a canker sore or some minor problem we all deal with from time to time, but an inspection was in order. He opened his mouth to reveal a white bulbish growth on the right side of the roof of his mouth about one quarter inch around. The sore had "tree root like" tentacles that extended ever to the two middle molars. After all the basic questions, Nic stated that he first noticed a problem about a couple weeks earlier but somehow thought that it would go away by itself. So we scheduled an appointment with an oral surgeon.

My wife and I are both born again Christian's, so typically when your child has a problem you say a prayer, and seek out a remedy. After a brief inspection, the doctor indicated that this growth looked somewhat like a cyst and that minor surgery would most likely be necessary. He confessed he had not seen many quite like this one. But we should not get overly concerned, he felt it would require less than an hour of surgery to remove. That's the news Deb and I were looking for. As parents we all need a little comfort from the doctors when it concerns our children, not matter how small or trivial the problem. We scheduled the procedure for the up coming week and returned home. We knew all would be well. Why wouldn't it, we prayed.

Deb and I drove Nic to the doctor's office mid morning for what was to be a brief surgery. Nic was as relaxed as possible. We knew this was not going to be a pleasant procedure for him. Just the thought of someone cutting away and removing tissue from a very sensitive area, not to mention the limit on his diet, days possibly weeks without chips or popcorn would be enough to get a lesser man down, but he didn't show any signs of panic. We said another prayer just to put us all at rest, and entered. The doctor assured us that this should not take long and we were to relax in the family area while he proceeded. The time passed slowly I must admit, but sure enough the doctor arrived when he said he would. He had a slightly puzzled look on his face. He said he did not like what he saw and that he was not quite sure how aggressive to get in removing the growth, indicating he had not removed it all. This did not sound good. I do remember him saying to us once again not to get overly concerned, that he would send out the tissue samples to be tested and these things usually turn out benign. The troubling thing was the underlying tone in his voice, a small seed of doubt was present, but we trust in the Lord, Nic will be fine. We all returned home where his mother proceeded to care for her baby like only a mother could. Chips were out but ice cream was in, yep, best pain killer known to man, so he relished in mom's TLC and ice cream, soon all would be well.....until the phone rang three days later. There was that tone in his voice again, Mr. and Mrs. Yocco, this is Dr. Schneider, "I certainly don't like to have to tell you this but the test results

have come back positive, your son has cancer, it's a mucocipoid carcinoma on the roof of his mouth, could you bring him in tomorrow for further evaluation and we'll discuss where to go from here"?

I don't know about you, but I guarantee this..... If you have never heard those words concerning a family member (especially a child) there are none other's quite like these that will get your attention. Immediately your mind plays out the worst case scenario, so you need to make a conscious effort to remain calm. As the father, I'm the anchor, the port in the storm, the go to guy for the rest of the family. But I quickly found myself looking for comfort and surety that all would be well, this is my son, these things don't happen to us, they happen to other people. So quietly I begin to pray, having no where else to go.

During the interview the doctor stated that he no longer felt qualified to handle Nic's case and that we should consider going else where. Our first choice was Mayo Clinic in Rochester MN... However, after further discussion the doctor suggested with the travel distance involved we might want to consider Children's Hospital in Milwaukee. An excellent facility and quite capable of handling Nic's case, also if we liked he would make contact with the proper physicians necessary to get the ball rolling. Milwaukee Children's sounded fine and made sense.

Our first visit consisted of an interview along with more testing to confirm the findings. Once again the test results were positive and would be appraised by a cancer review board. They discussed various options but radiation therapy or surgery were the only two that seemed viable. A few days later we were to report to the nuclear medicine clinic where they handle all of the leukemia patients. (I'll attempt to paint an accurate picture). We walked into a waiting room filled with children of various ages that were going through this dreaded disease. Some appeared bloated and hairless from the treatments they were experiencing, the look in their eyes that reflected the many hours, days, weeks and months of agony and frustration. These children looked exhausted from the mistreatment of life they have had to endure. The room was, for the most part, void of hope and happiness, with a feeling of despair. Some of the parents in the room wore a thin veil of optimism, but to this newcomer family it was quite transparent. Oddly enough though Deb and I were attempting the very same thing, we were trying to put on a face of confidence, trying to convey that all would be well, but Nic saw through ours just as quickly as we saw through every one else's. If you've never had the heart ripped out of you before, I assure you this place will do it. After that brief scan of the waiting room and its inhabitants, Nic gives us that questioning look, is this what's going to happen to me? Will I end up looking like this? To return a look of surety, a look of don't worry was almost impossible, I wanted to cry for those kid's in the office but even more so I wanted to cry for mine. At this point Nic has yet to complain or question, why me? As parents Deb and I are very proud of the trooper of ours, all the while we're praying, "Lord, don't let anything happen to our boy".

Up to this point God remains silent and uncomfoting, that's alright though we figure He's busy and we're busy too. It could be that we're on different wave lengths and were missing each other, but I feel sure we will hear from Him soon

enough. Plus all of those good people from our church are praying now, so God will do something.

After all the tests, it was the consensus of the cancer review board that Nic's tumor would best be removed through surgery, no chemo, no radiation. We were introduced to a young female ENT surgeon who seemed competent enough, but when it is your child, you want the best. You find yourself wondering, is there anyone really qualified to operate on our son? At this point we need to put some of the uncertainties behind us, trust in these doctors and pray that they are able to remove the tumor.

There are so many questions running through our minds, it's an emotionally draining time and we hope and pray it all comes to an end soon. Finally a little good news, Dr Flannery seems to be quite certain she will be able to remove the tumor surgically without removing any of the hard palate (the roof of the mouth), which is wonderful news. During the interview process, she explained to us that the removal of the tumor may require the removal of some of the hard palate and may also include extracting one or more of the molars of the upper jaw. If it came to this, the repair process would be much more involved requiring prosthesis to the effected area so that food and liquids would not enter the nasal cavity, also there would be a need to occlude air to the nasal cavity so Nic would be able to speak. Finally, there is concern about removing tissue from the back of the mouth near the area of the gag reflex, which would present an entirely different and more complex set of problems. Deb and I are becoming more concerned than ever, this tumor is presenting itself to be a much larger problem than originally envisioned.

The surgery was scheduled for three days later. We are all optimistic and so anxious to have this behind us. The family is praying in all earnestness for the Lord to assist the physicians in any way necessary. *Please Lord Let this be it.* Nic has been through so much to this point, blood tests, CAT scans, MRI's. Not to mention the poking and probing by all the physicians who have examined him throughout this process, and their uncertainty.

The morning of the day of surgery, which is surgery number 2, we are all up early, with a certain amount of optimism. We are anxious to proceed and put the whole matter to rest. We know this won't be a picnic for Nic and he really hasn't said much or complained about anything to this point, we are all thinking "let's just go and get rid of this thing". We arrive at the hospital and Nic is taken to pre-surgery. Deb and I are by his side for as long as they allow. We say our "see you in a little while" and "we'll be praying for you", "don't worry, your going to be fine", and we go into the family center along with all of the other families waiting for their loved ones to emerge from "under the knife". We watch as the doctor's approach the family members sometimes with smiles indicating all went well, and sometimes asking to speak with family members in a more private room, perhaps indicating that things may not have gone as well as hoped. It's funny how we learn body language so quickly, maybe we perceive things correctly and maybe not, mostly we care about our little guy. Sure enough Dr. Flannery approaches us with a reserved smile, she says "things went pretty well in there, we feel quite confident that we've gotten it all". "Nic is in recovery and you'll be able to visit him

in about an hour". Deb and I have a certain amount of cautious relief allowing us to breathe a little easier now. Nic is taken to his room and the nurse comes in to give him a shot of morphine for the pain. The whole experience seems surreal; just one month earlier none of this existed and now our lives have taken a far different direction. Here we are watching our son go through a valley in life wishing we would do more, all the while realizing there is little else we can do. It breaks your heart

After a couple of days in the hospital we get to take Nic home. His face is bruised and swollen with his left eye almost completely closed but there is no other outward sign of the surgery or cancer. These are good things. Over the next few days Nic is on the mend, just in time for his 15th birthday, (June 7, 1998). The family is all over for cake and coffee. This family tragedy has brought us all closer together. It has made us appreciate each other more and not take life for granted as we all tend to do. The next couple days are slightly restful, time to reflect and give thanks to a loving God for a wonderful medical facility and a qualified surgeon, or perhaps for removing the cancer Himself. We aren't sure at this point what His involvement was, we're just thankful to Him and that the tumor is gone.

Two days later the phone rings and its Dr. Flannery. "Mr. Yocco the lab has notified me that there are some remaining cancer cells existing in the hard pallet and in the bone of the jaw above the molars of the right side. We would like you and your wife to bring Nic in for more tests and consulting?" That was a hard call to get. Deb and I were cautious about letting our guard down about this being over, trying so hard to avoid the sinking feeling that knots your stomach and rips your heart. A million questions instantly run through your mind, how much more will Nic have to endure? Is there going to be an end to this? What's God doing? Hasn't He heard any of our prayers? Have we done something wrong to merit this? The questions are endless with little or no answers. "Yes Dr. Flannery we'll do what ever you ask." One week after Nic's birthday we are back in the hospital face to face with the doctor. Dr. Flannery informs us that there are indeed cancer cells in the upper jaw bone and the hard pallet. The medical staff was hoping to avoid this scenario due to the complications that will exist after the surgery, the need for prosthesis, reconstruction of the jaw, possible disfigurement, and concerns regarding the gauge reflex. Basically she pointed out to us that a section of the hard pallet about the size of a penny would have to be removed along with two of the upper molars on the right side and a portion of the upper jaw bone. Also the cancer board thought it necessary to proceed soon to prevent the cancer from spreading further, possible to the brain.

Wow! This cannot be happening to us. Why does the news keep getting worse? Why is there no end to this misery? How much more can the young man stand? Are these people qualified? Why isn't God intervening? Why does He remain so silent and distant? Why, why, why? Again so many questions with little or no answers. Deb and I are becoming a little helpless at this point searching for any words of encouragement for Nic. We feel close to panic but to what end? I guess we still need to put up a brave front for him, but we know he can see right through it, so let's suck it up one more time and schedule another surgery. But

what about all those unanswered questions? There has to be answers, there has to be reasons? What are we doing wrong? Or, what are we not doing that we possibly need to be doing? Please Lord let this be the end of it.

The next week, Monday morning, we're in the hospital for hopefully the last surgery. Nic is in relatively sound spirits for what is to be his third surgery. He's aware that this time it's going to be quite different; the procedure is going to be much more aggressive with the removal of a portion of the roof of the mouth, two molars and a portion of the upper jaw bone, besides he still has not fully recovered from the first two surgeries. Nic is also aware that the healing process will take longer and will be more painful, but there are no alternatives. Before the surgery we ask to speak with Dr. Flannery alone. As we duck inside a small consultation room we kindly ask to pray with her that the Lord will guide her and that all will go well. She informs us that she had gone forward in church yesterday and had sought prayer for the very same thing.

Once again, we are in the family center surrounded by all the familiar strangers waiting for their loved ones. The outcome of Nic's surgery keeps running through our minds like an old movie that you never liked or perhaps even hated. The thought of permanent damage, knowing he will be altered in a somewhat unusual way for the rest of his life, wondering how the outcome will affect him in the future and how he'll overcome this. After the longest four hours Dr. Flannery appears, she looks tired but confident. She approaches with the smile we were looking for, "we got it". Finally Deb and I are able to take that deep breath of relief. We look at each other knowing the worst is behind Nic and the rest of us. "Thank you Lord for helping our son, for being there when we needed you, thank you....thank you....thank you.

Within the next few weeks we are at home trying our best to start the healing process once and for all. We give Nic all the support we know how, letting him know he will get beyond this and in the end all will be fine. Life in the faintest way seems to be nearing a return to normal. As each hour passes we're all able to breathe a little easier, still giving thanks to God.

It is about two o'clock in the afternoon and I am at the fire station, where it is getting to be somewhat like a refuge, then the phone rings. It's Dr. Flannery. "Mr. Yocco, once again I'm so sorry to have to tell you this but the lab has notified us that there are still remaining cancer cells along the base of the nose. We need to get Nic back in here. We're going to need to grind away at the bone in that area and we should be able to remove it without any damage to the face. We do need to put a stop to this before it reaches the brain. You're going to have to break the news to Nic and Debby and call us back, we would like to proceed as quickly as possible"..... All the fear and apprehensions came flooding back, along with that sick feeling that this is not going to end well, a feeling that there's no way out. I inform the lieutenant that I'm going home; somehow I'll have to break the news to the family.

When I walk in the door at home, automatically everyone knows something's up. I am not supposed to be home until the next morning, and the look on my face was a sure indication not all is well.

“Nic, the doctors have found more cancer and we need to go back in, they say they should be able to get it this time”. For the first time I can see a look of desperation on him. I know he’s heard “we should be able to get this” three other times to no avail why would this time be different. Nic quietly retreats to the living room where he’s lived life the last few days under the best care in the world from Dr. Mom. Nic appears truly dejected for the first time. Deb has a look of hopelessness, a look of *this can’t be happening to us*, and she begins to cry out of pure frustration.

I don’t remember the next few hours; it’s pretty much blank, what I do remember is Debby telling me it’s time for bed. I am tired but there’s no rest. I don’t think any of us have had a decent night’s sleep in the last three or four weeks. Sometimes we use sleep as an escape but from this nightmare sleep offers nothing. Debby insists that we go to bed, “let’s go to bed and pray” she says. “We can go to bed if you want but I’m done praying, either God hasn’t heard us or He doesn’t care to help, either way I’m through praying”. I lay in bed for what seemed to be hours, truly caught in between heaven and earth or heaven and hell. How can God turn his back on a 14 year old kid? For the first time in my life I’ve lost faith in the God I’ve always believed in. In fact, I have arrived at a place in life I never knew existed. The seconds tick away like hours and hours pass like weeks, I can’t sleep, I can’t pray, I can’t take it any longer. I scream out to God in one last prayer “Lord how can you sit there and do nothing? How can you just sit there and watch the doctors cut away at my son piece by piece, little by little and do nothing? How can you just sit there? And how come I have to beg you? How come I have to beg the God in heaven to take care of my son?” I lay there with tears running down my cheeks, “Please Lord don’t take my son away, I love him so much”. Breathless and exhausted I quietly lay there in complete silence when the Lord finally spoke to my heart. “*Aren’t you doing the same thing?*” I thought for a moment and immediately my mind raced back to all the times I should have witnessed for him. All the faces flooded back to my mind, pictures of people I should have spoken to but for some feeble reason I neglected to do so. I truly was guilty of the same thing I was accusing Him of. He continued “*there is not one person on this earth alive today, nor who has ever lived that I don’t love as much or more than you love your own son*”. I paused for another moment in total guilt, forced to admit all my short comings and failures. He was right, I lay there speechless. I know the sacrifice Jesus made for me, God sent his only Son to die on a cross in my place, and I let Him down. I had taken all He had done for me for granted, as if it were of little or no value. What a failure I was. I lay there silent and defenseless and then He spoke one last time, “*and I don’t want to have to beg you either*”. As I lay there reflecting on the truth; how powerful it is when the God in heaven speaks to you personally. With two brief questions He showed me what my life had amounted to. Yet there truly was no condemnation, instead an unexplainable love, a love deep and warm that drew me closer, closer to him than I’ve ever been. Yet I was guilty as charged. How could I sit in judgment of God? How could I have let myself doubt Him, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? I began to realize that God loves me more than I loved my own child; He gave his Son to die for me, something I could not do for

anyone. I fell asleep for the first time in weeks with a complete assurance that all would be well.

Nic underwent that fourth surgery and it still hurt Deb and I as parents to see him go through it, still never complaining. The doctors were successful, though they still monitor him to this day. Nic is 27 years old and has been cancer free for almost 12 years now. He wrestled in High school and played rugby in college. He currently plays guitar in church and for a gospel group called "In This Room." Nic has written one of their more popular songs "Victory" which is available on I-tunes, serves, and loves the Lord to this day.

As for me, I try not to miss any opportunity to witness for God but I know from time to time that I still do. I guess that's the human side of life as truthful and honest as it can be. I also know this, if you've never reached a point in life where only God can help, if life hasn't backed you into a corner where your only option is to cry out from the bottom of your heart, you're missing a dimension of life that's unexplainable to say the least. Truly, a life-changing event, as painful as it was. I pray that somehow this testimony is able to help someone who may be battling or questioning God. Trust me God is listening and hears your cries. If you have never asked Him into your heart as your personal savior I would encourage you to do so today, do not miss the richness and fullness God has to offer. All you have to do is ask.

Scott Yocco