

“You’ve got a brain disease,” she said.

Written by Bill Perkins

A couple months ago I got a call from a radiologist who had viewed an MRI of my brain. I expected her to say, “Good news. It’s there.” Instead she said, “I’ve got good news and bad news.” I always want the good news first. If I get the bad news first it spoils the good news so I don’t enjoy it for even a moment.

“The good news,” she said, “Is the issue your doctor was investigating came back healthy. No worries there.” I let the good news sink in. And I enjoyed it until she answered the follow-up question.

“And the bad news?” I asked.

Before answering she hesitated, like she didn’t want to tell me. When she finally spoke her voice sounded like she was comforting a child who had dropped his ice-cream cone on an ant-bed. She spoke the bad news quickly. Like, if she said it fast enough it wouldn’t matter. Or, if she said it super-fast I wouldn’t hear her.

“You’ve got small vessel brain disease (SVD). But don’t worry about it.”

Her words floated by without triggering a question.

Until after I hung up the phone. At the time of the doctor’s call Cindy was in DC visiting our youngest son and his family. So I processed the news alone.

Right away I wondered what I’m supposed to worry about since I’m not to worry about a brain disease inside my head. A disease I had never heard of. One thing I knew, if I made a list of the top ten ways I don’t want to die, dying after slowly losing my mind would sit on top of the list. But her advice was a relief.

If I don’t need to worry about brain disease then I don’t need to worry about heart disease or cancer. Nice. Of course, as far as I know I don’t have either heart disease or cancer. But If I got diagnosed with one or both of them, I wouldn’t need to worry because how could they be worse than brain disease?

However, since she’s a medical professional and delivered the message so clearly, I figured I’d take her advice and not worry.

That raised a question: how do I *not* worry? Right away I talked with God. And kept talking with him. But at the same time I knew to avoid worrying I’d need information. I wanted to understand the disease not fear it. I wanted to know how to reverse or slow it down. I wanted some good news.

Of course, the Lord could heal me. But I needed a backup plan in case he didn’t. The backup plan doesn’t prove I lack faith. But healing is a mystery and I have no idea why God heals some and not others. Just in case he doesn’t heal me, I’ve got a backup plan.

The Backup Plan

In order not to worry I need reasons not to worry. Therefore, I decided to take two days and learn all I could about SVD. I figured the more I knew the less I'd worry. So I spent two days scouring the Internet for information about SVD. After two days I had read a dozen or so articles and looked at countless MRI images.

Based on everything I had read I realized as the disease progressed it would kill off sections of my brain. This is because the microscopic vessels that bring blood to brain cells get clogged, starving the brain cells they nourish. Eventually, I'd be alone because all memories of friends and family would die off.

What I Learned About SVD

My family would visit a man whose body and face they would recognize but the relationships built on shared memories would be absent. Not like I had forgotten, but like the part of the hard drive that contained these memories had been irreversibly wiped clean. Here's what I learned about SVD

CAUSE: Unknown

CURE: None

TREATMENT: None

RESEARCH: Late starting but picking up steam. A number of good projects underway. But a treatment or cure is nowhere on the horizon.

PROGRESS OF DISEASE: As the disease advances more brain cells die. The end result is similar to late stage dementia or Alzheimer's.

I searched for articles or research on early-stage SVD. I looked for information about people with the disease who didn't get worse. I looked for the frequency of misdiagnosis. I couldn't find a single article.

Tell No One

All of this sobered me so I decided to tell no one. Why tell Cindy? It would change the dynamics of our relationship prematurely. I would wait until I didn't know her anymore and then tell her. I wouldn't tell our sons, either. If I did, every time I forgot a word or name they would see proof that their dad is losing his mind.

A Passage Came to Mind

Throughout those two days one passage came to mind. In the final week of his ministry Jesus said, "I am greatly distressed. And what should I say, 'Father save me from this time'? No! This is the very reason I have come to this time. Father, glorify your name!" At that moment a voice from heaven said, 'I have glorified it already, and will glorify it again' (John 12:28; *The Jesus Story* p. 229).

That promise assured me whatever I faced, the Lord will glorify his name. I liked this truth.

One Crucial Statistic

However, I did read one crucial statistic about SVD that gave me hope. Plus, I don't currently suffer from any symptoms of the disease. Next week, I'll tell you the rest of the story. The part about visiting my Internist a month later for an explanation and then visiting a neurologist (brain doctor) three weeks after that. No need to send me a comforting email or phone call until you've read the rest of the story.