

Whitney thankful for healing

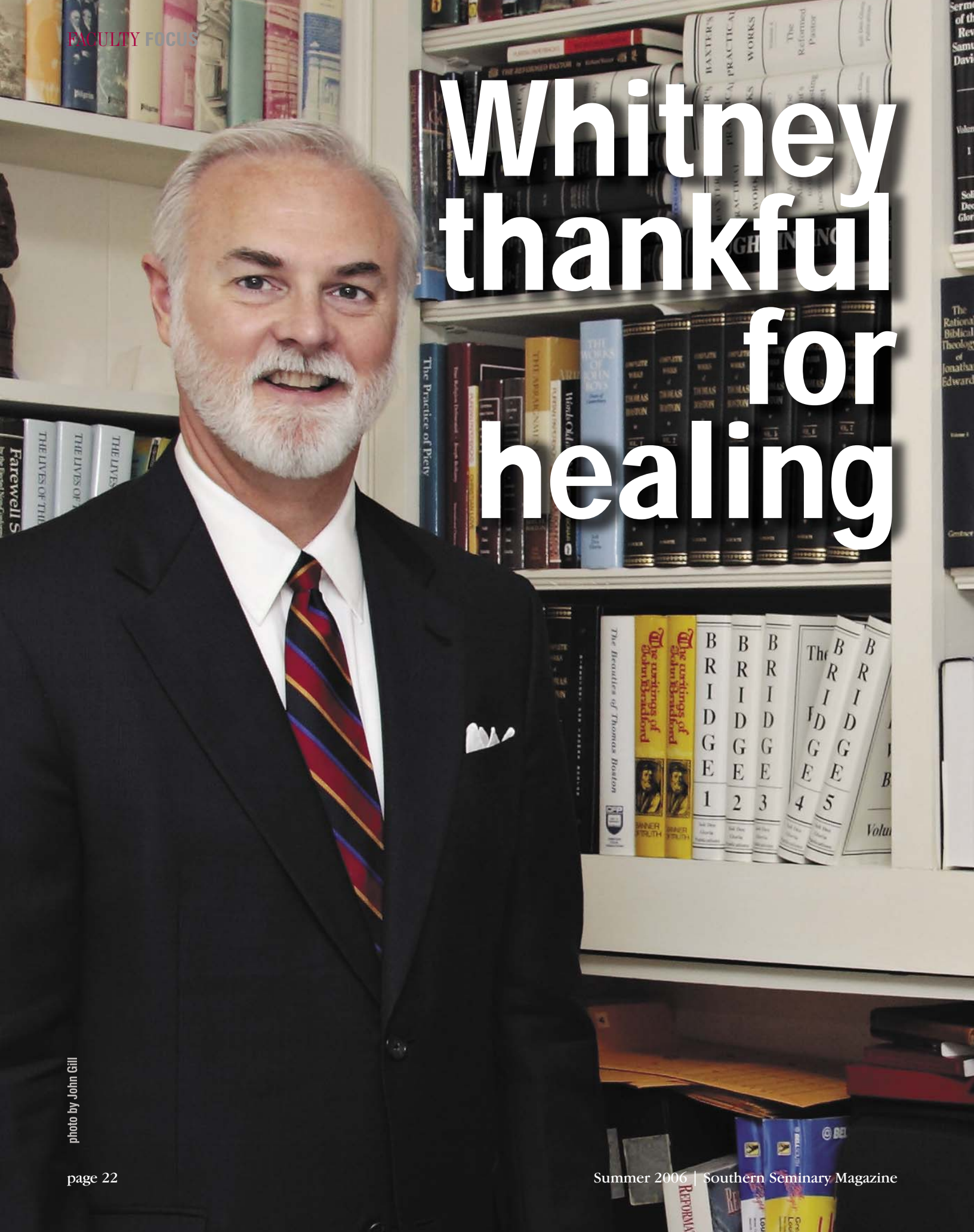


photo by John Gill

Just 11 days before Christmas last year, Don Whitney received three words from his doctor that no one wants to hear: “You have cancer.”

Whitney, who serves as associate professor of biblical spirituality and director of applied ministry at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was stunned at such a diagnosis.

There were no signs that anything was amiss in his body. There was no pain, no bleeding, no mysterious lumps, nothing. He felt perfectly healthy.

The news came as a result of a routine medical checkup that included a colonoscopy.

“I think I was kind of numb at first,” he said. “I tried to ask some questions at first and I tried to write down his answers because I knew I wouldn’t remember. My hand was quivering as I tried to write down what he said.

“My mind was tumbling [with] a thousand things running through my head. I was trying to stay with the subject at hand and ask him questions [such as] ‘What’s next?’ and ‘How bad is this?’ At the same time I was a thousand miles away and was thinking ‘What about my family?’ I had just finished my first semester at the seminary and I was thinking ‘Am I going to die? Am I soon to stand before the Lord?’

“I thought about my little girl and my wife Caffy and my mother who is a widow and I am an only child. It was sobering. I mainly thought about family and future and what is this going to be like? I wondered if there would be chemotherapy and even if after the surgery they would just sew me up and say there was nothing they could do.”

Two surgeries, a painful recovery period and five months after the initial diagnosis, Whitney is cancer free and doctors have given him a healthy long-term prognosis. However, the type of cancer he had and early complications made the future somewhat dicey early on, Whitney says.

Whitney had colon cancer, a disease also known as the “silent killer” because it typically does not manifest any symptoms until it has reached an incurable stage.

“I had no problems, no pain, no symptoms,” he said. “I was absolutely shocked...The doctor said if I had put the colonoscopy off until May, he

wouldn’t have been able to save my life.”

It seemed that Whitney would face a grim waiting game in the beginning because surgery would be needed to determine how far the cancer had spread. However, it was near the end of the year and Whitney’s surgeon warned him that most, if not all, operating rooms in Louisville would be booked until January.

As the doctor called around city hospitals to try and find an open operating room, Whitney paced the floor in the doctor’s office and prayed. God’s hand of providence clearly trumped what seemed to be a negative set of logistical circumstances, Whitney said.

“We got the last operating room in the city of Louisville for 2005 and surgery was set for six days later,” Whitney said.

Still, Whitney faced a battery of tests and doctors said it would be difficult to impossible to get them completed within a week.

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“I had to have several tests before the surgery and the doctor said it was unlikely they could get me in by that time for the test,” he said.

“I needed several procedures and tests, including a CAT scan. Before I walked out of his office that afternoon, all of that was set up. I had a CAT scan two hours later to find out how deep the cancer had gone into the tissue, and the other big test was the day before my surgery.”

Whitney had surgery on Dec. 20 and spent 10 days, including the entire Christmas holiday in the hospital. He went home in late December but soon developed complications and faced a second surgery and another week in the hospital. A second difficult recovery followed.

Despite complications from the second surgery, Whitney began to heal and was able to participate in the annual collegiate conference at Southern. He continues to regain strength and has resumed his full

course load of teaching at Southern and speaking engagements for his ministry, The Center for Biblical Spirituality.

Colon cancer is the No. 2 killer among the types of cancer, and Whitney says he is grateful that he had a routine colonoscopy which led to the discovery of his cancer. He urges all men over 50 to have the procedure.

“Ninety percent of the people who die from colon cancer would not die from it if they had a colonoscopy,” he said. “Adrian Rogers [the late Southern Baptist pastor] died of colon cancer...One of the doctors told me a thousand people in Kentucky die every year from colon cancer and they wouldn’t have died from this disease if they had a colonoscopy.

“Everybody should have one when they are 50. If they have a relative who had colon cancer, they should get it at 40.”

Whitney says his cancer caused him to reflect more deeply on biblical truths regarding life and eternity. He credits a strong belief in the sovereignty of God and the prayers of fellow believers for strengthening him through the ordeal. Whitney and friend John Piper, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minn., exchanged emails to encourage each other after doctors discovered that Piper had cancer on the day of Whitney’s surgery.

“It makes you realize your life is a vapor,” Whitney said. “You always realize you are going to die, but when you realize that you may be at the borders of heaven, it makes you think. It has made me appreciate time with my family more, especially with my little girl.

“I have never sensed the prayers of God’s people more. There were times I was so medicated or in so much pain that all I could pray was ‘Lord hear the prayers of Your people.’ I knew people were praying for me. I couldn’t put two thoughts together. It was a reminder of Romans 8:26-27, ‘You do not know how to pray as you ought but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us in groans too deep for words’ and prays according to God’s will for us. I was just relying on the Holy Spirit’s prayers for this.

“It reaffirmed things. My belief in the sovereignty of God is one of the things that got me through. When I learned that I had cancer, it really comforted me to know that God was not surprised and that He was in control.”

By Jeff Robinsom