

BE STILL, MY SOUL

Embracing God's Purpose & Provision in Suffering

*25 Classic & Contemporary Readings
on the Problem of Pain*

Edited by
NANCY GUTHRIE

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Be Still, My Soul: Embracing God's Purpose and Provision in Suffering

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Dying Well

D. A. CARSON

You return man to dust
and say, "Return, O children of man!"
For a thousand years in your sight
are but as yesterday when it is past,
or as a watch in the night. . . .

For all our days pass away under your wrath;
we bring our years to an end like a sigh.

The years of our life are seventy,
or even by reason of strength eighty;
yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.

Who considers the power of your anger,
and your wrath according to the fear of you?

So teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom. *Psalm 90:3–4, 9–12*

There was a time when Christians were known as people who knew how to die well. It was part of Christian concern to be known as people who know how to die well. But today, if I start talking about death everyone becomes very nervous.

Not long ago in my church, a woman I'll call Mary experienced

a recurrence of cancer. Within a few months it had spread throughout her body, and despite treatment, she was very ill. The people in our church gathered for prayer. And although this is not a church from a charismatic tradition, the prayers throughout the day became more and more enthusiastic.

“Lord, you’ve said you will answer if two or three are in agreement. We have 287 in agreement, and we want you to heal her!”

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. We want you to show that you are still the Great Physician!”

“Lord, will you not have mercy on her husband and her children?”

Finally it was my wife’s turn to pray (she who had almost lost her life to cancer twice) and she prayed, “Heavenly Father, we would love it if you would heal Mary. But if it is not your will to heal her, teach her to die well. She is going to die anyway, and so if the time is now, teach her to die well. Give her a joy of the Lord. Give her a heritage of godly faith, with one foot firmly planted in heaven, so that her husband and children will be stamped by it, and will look to Christ. We don’t ask that she have an easy time, but ask that she be so full grace, people will see Christ in her.”

Well, you could have cut the air with a knife. No longer were there 287 people agreeing in prayer. My wife’s prayer seemed to create a break in the chain. She was letting down her side. We found out afterward that some of Mary’s relatives rather wished my wife would go to heaven first so she would know whereof she was praying!

A few months later, Mary’s husband called me, and was desperate to talk. Mary’s health was going down and down despite every treatment conceivable. The church was wonderful, bringing in food, reminding them, “We’re praying for you . . . the Lord is faithful.” But he wanted permission to talk about his wife’s impending death. The heated atmosphere had made it impossible

for them to talk in those terms, as if it would no longer be walking by faith. Mary couldn't focus on eternity or talk about it, because there were so many Christians around her telling her she was going to be healed.

Well-intentioned, but poorly informed brothers and sisters who try to deflect people from thinking about death, or who hold out the constant hope of healing, keep them so occupied with matters in this world that they have neither the time nor the energy to think about the next world. They succeed only in robbing their loved ones of the enormous comforts of the gospel as they step into eternity.

Whatever the church does, it should prepare its members to face death and meet God. You cannot live faithfully in this life unless you are ready for the next. You can't preserve morality or spirituality or doctrinal purity or faithfulness unless you are living in light of eternity.

One day we will stand in the presence of the King with resurrection bodies and see everything from a different angle than we can see now. We'll see everything through the triumphs of Christ—even the cancer that took us, or the persecution—all these things will look very different fifty billion years into eternity.

In September 1542, Magdalene, one of the daughters of Martin Luther, lay dying, her father weeping at her side. He asked her, "Magdalene, my dear little daughter, would you like to stay here with your father, or would you willingly go to your Father yonder?"

Magdalene answered, "Darling father, as God wills." Luther wept, holding his daughter in his arms, praying that God might free her; and she died.

As she was laid in her coffin, Martin Luther declared, "Darling Lena, you will rise and shine like a star, yea like the sun . . . I am happy in spirit, but the flesh is sorrowful and will not be content, the parting grieves me beyond measure . . . I have sent a saint to heaven."

GOD'S PURPOSE IN SUFFERING

Is not some of the pain and sorrow in this life used in God's providential hand to make us homesick for heaven, to detach us from this world, to prepare us for heaven, to draw our attention to himself, and away from the world of merely physical things?

Is not some of the pain and sorrow in this life used in God's providential hand to make us homesick for heaven?

In Psalm 90 we see that as Moses stares at death, he thinks through its relation to life, to sin, to God, and strives to understand what death means. And then he asks for wisdom to live his life in light of that death. He would have utterly scorned the modern mood that wants to live life as if death were not there waiting for us at the end. Moses wants us "to number our days," that is, to recognize the limit that is imposed on us, and to live with that limit in full view. Only in this way can we "gain a heart of wisdom."


Now let us suppose that your spouse comes home from a medical checkup with fearful news: there are signs that a vicious melanoma has taken hold. The hospital runs emergency tests during the next few days and the news comes back all bad: the prognosis is three months' survival at best, and all that modern medicine can do is mitigate the pain.

I do not want to minimize the staggering blow such news can administer to any family. There are many forms of practical comfort and support that thoughtful people can show. But it must be said that if you are a Christian who has thought about these things in advance, you will recognize that this sentence of death is no different in kind from what you and your spouse have lived under all your life;

that you have been preparing for this day since your conversion; that you have already laid up treasure in heaven, and your heart is there.

We are all under sentence of death; we are all terminal cases. The only additional factor is that in this case the sentence, barring a miracle, will certainly be carried out sooner than you had anticipated. I am not pretending that this bare truth is immensely comforting. Our comfort turns on other factors. But full acceptance of this truth can remove a fair bit of unnecessary shock and rebellion; for we will have escaped the modern Western mind-set that refuses to look at death, to plan for death, to live in the light of death, to expect death.

For the believer, the time of death becomes far less daunting a factor when seen in the light of eternity. Although death remains an enemy, an outrage, a sign of judgment, a reminder of sin, and a formidable opponent, it is, from another perspective, the portal through which we pass to consummated life. We pass through death, and death dies. And the more a Christian lives in the consciousness of God's presence here, the easier it is to anticipate the unqualified delight that will be experienced in God's presence there.

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Donald Alan Carson is Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.