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Comfort

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Comfort

Abstract

"Death, the last enemy we face, is evil. God does not will evil things."

Posting about God's comfort from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/comfort/>

Keywords

In All Things, death, providence, Bible, confidence, grief

Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

Dennis Vander Plaats

On May 6, 2014, my wife, Gloria, had surgery to remove what appeared to be a cancerous growth on an ovary. What was supposed to be a short, laparoscopic procedure became a major seven-hour surgery. She was diagnosed with signet cell carcinoma, a rare but aggressive cancer of the appendix. The diagnosis and prognosis were devastating. Gloria's prayer was that she would be at peace with the diagnosis and prognosis and that her family and friends might find comfort as well. Less than six months later Gloria died at home and at peace. This article is a reflection on our search to find that peace and comfort.

We had just begun our retirement years. These were the years we had long been anticipating. The cancer seemed so unfair because it was robbing us of expected enjoyable years together. At first, we could not believe the prognosis that she would have less than a year to live, but Gloria was a nurse. She had long dealt with life-and-death issues. Although it was extremely difficult to face, she was realistic. We soon came to realize that each day we shared was a blessing that we would not take for granted. We would use our remaining time together to focus on important things that, until this crisis, were so easily put off to a later time.

Of course, we grieved. Gloria was acquainted with grief. In 1969, after only two years of marriage, she had lost her first husband while he was serving in the Navy during the Vietnam War. In 2005 we lost our four-year-old grandson, Breiton Ackerman, in a drowning accident. She had also lost two siblings, her youngest sister who died at age two and her younger brother at age 46. These grieving experiences allowed us to learn and grow together as we walked the Valley of the Shadow of Death and searched for the comfort that God promised.

Visits from friends and family were a true source of comfort. Knowing that so many were praying for and supporting us helped us to sense God's love through His people. Some visitors also tried to give words of comfort; but, from time to time, words intended to comfort troubled us instead. Gloria and I were raised in the Calvinist tradition. The doctrine of the providence of God is a comforting doctrine but can be complex and troubling as well. God's providence ensures that nothing happens by chance, but that He rules and governs all things. Understanding that nothing happens without His will, Gloria's cancer and devastating prognosis made us wonder what God was up to. If God is really in charge of everything, why was the timing of this cancer so out of joint? The Confession of Faith of the Christian Reformed Church even admits this tension as it states, "...as to what He does surpassing human understanding, we will not curiously inquire into farther than our capacity will admit of." (Article XIII) The doctrine of the Providence of God seemed more confusing to us than comforting.

Gloria was a Christian and clearly understood that the end of life on earth was to be the beginning of eternal joy. It might seem that one who identified as a Christian for her entire life would have had confidence in her salvation; but, when we stood on the brink of death, the questions came. What does the Bible really say about salvation? About death? About sin? About heaven? Why do we have so many questions about our Christianity? When our kids were still at home, formal devotions had been part of our rhythm of life. When the kids moved out, devotional times became sporadic. Should have we been more serious about devotions? Did we blow it? At one point she said, "I have so many regrets. If we could live our lives over again we would be a lot nicer to each other and to our kids." Our regrets (sins) caused us to question our Christianity. Did we really belong to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ?

We renewed our formal devotions. We followed no pattern. We would typically open the Bible to a Psalm or book of the New Testament, read for a while, stop to discuss what we had read, and continue. We were searching for answers. Gloria hungered for the confidence that what we believed was true. We needed comfort and peace from Scripture.

One evening we were reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians, a book that includes some complex theological arguments. As we read, Gloria asked, with panic in her voice, "What does that mean!?" After discussing it for a while, we wondered why it was important. Theological arguments were getting in the way of finding peace and comfort. Later that evening, we turned to Romans 8 and read the "More Than Conquerors" passage, Paul's statement of faith that God has us in His hands forever, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons... will be able to separate us from the love of God...." She immediately stated, "That's it!!"

That's it! Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not cancer, not death, not doubts, not regrets, not sporadic devotions, not theological doctrine, not our lack of understanding, not our misunderstandings, not anything. Cancer is evil. Death, the last enemy we face, is evil. God does not will evil things. God did not take Gloria from me, as though I owned her. We always belonged to Him. God is good. God makes all things right. God, in His providence, has redeemed Gloria from the evils of cancer and death for His glory. He also has redeemed my own personal grieving process for His glory. We belong to our faithful Savior forever. That is all the comfort we need.