

REJOICING *in* LAMENT

*Wrestling with Incurable
Cancer & Life in Christ*

J. TODD BILLINGS



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To those who cry out to the Lord amidst the fog

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Preface

Before my blood cancer diagnosis in September 2012, I never anticipated that I would write a book like this. This book was written during various stages of my cancer treatment process; that process has not ended but continues with chemotherapy as I write this preface now. Some sections of the book were written in the hospital. Other parts were written while I was in quarantine from public places because of a compromised immune system after a stem cell transplant. All of it was written amid the physical and emotional turmoil derived from both my cancer treatments and my new prospects as someone diagnosed with an incurable cancer at the age of thirty-nine.

In the first chapter, I describe the basic structure and format of the book and the way in which I intertwine my cancer story with the exploration of a much weightier story—the story of God’s saving action in and through Jesus Christ. I intend for that chapter to be the introduction to the book. But by way of preface, I would like to add a few comments about the background, genre, and intended audience of the book.

After my diagnosis, I prayerfully immersed myself in Scripture, especially the Psalms. New biblical and theological questions were becoming urgent. Since my diagnosis took place in the middle of a sabbatical semester of research and writing, I had the time and space to turn my attention to biblical and theological works that pursue these questions as I began chemotherapy. I was able to temporarily set aside some of

my earlier plans for the sabbatical in order to do this. Quite naturally, some of my new reflections made their way onto my medical blog on CarePages.com.¹ And eventually, as chapter 1 narrates, I heeded the advice of those around me to expand my reflections into a book. I wrote the book not only for others but also as a part of my own process of coming before the presence of God in my new life after the diagnosis. I decided to honestly take on the tough theological and existential questions rather than dodge them. They are the questions that I live with. And frequently, they are the questions that other Christians who have experienced loss live with as well. There is an urgency underlying this book that is analogous to one that many viewers experienced in the 2013 movie *Gravity*. Dr. Ryan Stone, in desperate conditions, says it this way: “I know, we’re all gonna die. But I’m gonna die today.” I do not have the burden of an expectation of imminent death. But I do have an urgency to cut through to the most pressing questions with a different sort of expectation—a medical expectation that my death is likely to come much sooner than previously expected, that my hopes toward the future cannot be what they used to be. This is a loss not just for me but for my family, for my friends, for my community of faith. How does this sudden loss, which sinks in gradually, relate to the abundant life that we enjoy in Christ? Does Scripture give us the “answer” to our pressing questions about *why* this is happening, or does God give us something different—even better—than that through Scripture? How do the psalms of lament, the book of Job, and the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ and life in him testify to the loving power of the Triune God? The most potent questions, when one pushes deeply enough, are ultimately not about our experience but about the story of God made known in Jesus Christ.

While I explored these questions as a scholar in my reading and later in my writing, I knew from the outset of my writing that this book would not be a scholarly monograph. Instead, I sought to give a window into my life as a newly diagnosed cancer patient as a step along a larger path of faith seeking understanding, a disciple joining with others to follow Jesus Christ. I do develop a set of biblical and theological arguments

Preface

related to praying the Psalms, providence, and life in Christ as chapter builds on chapter in the book. But I do so in a way that relates my cancer story to the story of God's promise and ongoing action in Christ, by the Spirit. For scholars, students, and pastors, the endnotes might be helpful in hinting at some of the larger academic issues that I have had in mind while writing this book.² But they are just hints.

Rather than writing just for an academic audience, I have sought to embrace a genre in this book that can speak to a broad range of Christians—including caretakers, counselors, and those experiencing cancer or some other loss themselves. The genre is not “easy reading,” for honestly bringing our laments as mortals before the face of God is never “easy.” Nevertheless, I have sought to make the book broadly accessible to inquiring Christians who struggle with questions about how the Triune God's story in Scripture could possibly relate to their calamities of cancer or other trials that seem to leave us in a fog, in lament, and in confusion about God's deliverance.

JTB
Holland, Michigan
January 2015

Acknowledgments

The first and last word of the Christian life is one of gratitude. With regard to this book, I am grateful above all to our covenant Lord and his unrelenting love made known in Jesus Christ. This love is strong and steady and redemptive as we come before the throne of grace with our toughest questions, laments, confusion, and tears.

I am also grateful to God for the gifts of many scholars, pastors, and laypeople who have read portions of the book and have contributed to its refinement. I am responsible for the book's final form, with all of its limitations, but I have received helpful input from several reading groups and individuals who read various parts of the manuscript at various stages. Special thanks go to Michael Allen, Khaled Anatolios, Carol Bechtel, Randy Blacketer, Jim Brownson, Ann Conklin, Robert Cosgrove, Chuck DeGroat, Michael Horton, Kelly Kapic, Brian Keepers, Dustyn Keepers, Matthew Levering, Rob Lister, Andrew McCoy, Suzanne McDonald, Brandon and Stephanie Smith, and Thomas Weinandy. Special thanks to the exceptionally hard work of research assistants who worked on this book at various stages of the process: Alberto LaRosa, Molly Mead, Stephen Shaffer, Kevin Slusher, and Brad Zwiers. Thanks also to Bob Hosack and the whole team at Brazos who have been enthusiastic supporters through the whole process of this book project.

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In gratitude, I offer this book as a gift to the church—may God use it for his glory.

Abbreviations

- CTS John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, trans. Calvin Translation Society, ed. John King, 22 vols. (1845–56; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981)
- Inst.* John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1559*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967)
- LW Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, vols. 1–30 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–86); vols. 31–55 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–86)
- OF *Our Faith: Ecumenical Creeds, Reformed Confessions, and Other Resources* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2013)

Some sections of this book were originally written on CarePages.com; they have undergone some minor editing, and they are marked in the book as CarePages postings.



1

Walking in the Fog

A Narrowed Future or a Spacious Place?

“Get well soon! Jesus loves you! God is bigger than cancer!”

My tears started to flow as I read these words. They were from a fifteen-year-old girl with Down syndrome in my congregation. Less than a week earlier, the doctor spoke the diagnosis to me, about which he had no doubt: a cancer of the bone marrow, multiple myeloma—an incurable cancer, a fatal disease. I had been in a fog ever since. How was I to face each day when my future—which had seemed wide open—had suddenly narrowed? My “world” seemed to be caving in on itself with fog in each direction I turned, so that no light could shine in.

While I had received many cards in the previous days, this one was different. “God is bigger than cancer!” Yes. She did not say, “God will cure you of this cancer,” or “God will suffer with you.” God is *bigger* than cancer. The fog is thick, but God is bigger. My cancer story was already developing its own sense of drama. The sky was closing in, enveloping my whole world so that nothing else could creep in. But God’s story, the drama of God’s action in the world, was bigger. The girl in my church wasn’t denying the fog or the loss but testifying to a God who was greater, the God made known in Jesus Christ, who shows us that

“the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5). In my tears, there was not only grief but also joy that in the body of Christ theological truths are not a commodity trafficked and controlled by professional theologians. God’s story in Christ is bigger than my cancer story, period.

This book explores the way in which God, and the drama of his revelation in Christ, is bigger than my cancer story. The first six chapters build on one another in their reflection on God’s story in relation to my cancer story. They do not give a sequential, month-by-month account, but offer different angles of vision into the reality of diagnosis and my first six months of chemotherapy. In chapters 7 and 8, I continue the story of my cancer chronologically with my theological reflections during nearly a month in the hospital receiving a stem cell transplant. The final two chapters complete my theological reflections on God’s story as I emerged from the transplant into a time of quarantine (because of a compromised immune system) and eventually returned to my “old” life, in a new way. This first chapter begins my telling of the cancer story and provides some initial biblical and theological reflections that will be explored further as the book moves into later chapters: how God’s story relates to my cancer story; the Psalms as companions in our Christian pilgrimage; the meaning of life in Christ and God’s final victory over death.

Living in the Fog: Sharing the Cancer Story and Moving into God’s Story

God is bigger than cancer. Yet, from those early days in the fall of 2012, I sensed that my unfolding cancer story was not to be denied or repressed because of God’s story, either. The news felt like a heavy burden. When I would see students and colleagues at the seminary where I work (Western Theological Seminary) and respond to their queries of “How are you?,” any response I gave felt like a lie. My wife and I decided to share the news publicly—with no “secrets”—within two days of receiving the diagnosis. An emergency faculty meeting was called. No dry eyes. An

announcement went out to the seminary community, the church, and friends on Facebook. For better or worse, my cancer journey was no longer just my own or that of my family. It was shared with our community.

There are risks with that kind of sharing, as cancer patients know. Our culture often suggests that we are “entitled” to a long, fulfilling life, and if that doesn’t happen, there must be someone to sue, someone to blame. When the word “cancer” is spoken, looking to the future reveals only a fog of uncertainty. It brings to mind a life that is spent in the process of dying—a casket waiting to be filled, with no politician to blame for it. In this state of affairs, people often don’t know how to respond. Many simply said that I would be in their prayers. Some shared a Bible verse in encouragement. Some allowed the conversational habit of “free association” to hold sway, sharing about the last person they knew who died of cancer or of someone they knew who had a remarkable recovery from cancer. For the patient, the last approach tends to be the least helpful. And the more public the news is, the more frequently one will hear stories of others with the same cancer who died an early death, herbal remedies that one *must* try, or other less-than-helpful bits of advice.

Whether or not cancer patients intend to share their journey openly with others, they generally find that the cancer situation itself has put their lives into a fish bowl—for public viewing—whether they like it or not. “What were your most recent test results?” “What did the doctor say?” Those questions used to be for me and my family. Now, with a “terminal illness,” they are relevant questions for all who care about my family and me. My body—its test results, its symptoms—has become a public spectacle, something for public commentary. Some things are kept private. But much that was formerly private is no longer so.

Sharing the cancer story, however, can also open the door for many blessings to flow. One blessing is that I have been able to explore—and bear witness to—the ways in which God’s story intersects with the cancer story; how my cancer story is complicated and mysterious but not nearly as compelling as the mystery of God’s love made known in Jesus Christ. This opportunity came with the initial announcement of my diagnosis, where—in all of the various venues—I included the

following words from Question and Answer 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism: “What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own, but that I belong—in body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.”¹ Like the note from the fifteen-year-old girl in my church, it breaks through the fog of “terminal” and “incurable” and “cancer” by pointing us to the bedrock of what matters: that I belong, in life and in death, to Jesus Christ. My life is not my own.

This opportunity was soon amplified when I began to chronicle both stories on CarePages, a blog site for those who want to update family and friends as they struggle with illness. Within a week of my diagnosis, I started chemotherapy. There was a lot of medical information to be shared. The sharing of that information on an individual basis was laborious and intense. And overwhelming. I soon decided that starting a CarePages blog would be wise—to share the medical information to all who were interested, all who were praying. Moreover, it could be a forum for sharing the intersection of the two stories that I found myself in. In many ways, this book is an extension of that initial effort at sharing, exploring, and testifying to the way in which the drama of the Triune God intersects with my story of pain and disorientation due to cancer.

A Narrowed Future, a Spacious Place

Here is a section from my CarePages posted on October 11, 2012, which was about two weeks after the diagnosis. It gives a taste of the genuine lament and yet hope in and through Christ that later chapters will continue to explore.

Psalm 31:7–8:

“I will be glad and rejoice in your love, for you saw my affliction and knew the anguish of my soul. You have not given me into the hands of the enemy but have set my feet in a spacious place.” (NIV)

One thing about the experience of being diagnosed with cancer is that it feels like a narrowing, a tightening, rather than “a spacious place” to dwell. We all know, in theory, that we are mortal, but in day-to-day life many of us don’t live with the thought. As a father of a one- and three-year-old, I tended to think of the next few decades as an open expanse, assuming I would see Neti and Nathaniel grow and mature, graduate from high school, etc. And this may be the case, God willing—I am certainly not giving up hope for those things.

But in being diagnosed with a disease that makes the prospect of life in the coming decades more uncertain, there is a narrowing that takes place. It feels a bit like the lights in distant rooms are turning off or, rather, flickering. They were rooms that you were just assuming would be there for you to pass through in future years. The space starts to feel more constricted, narrowed.

Now, not all of this narrowing is bad. Some things that are, in the big picture of things, unimportant have not merited a second thought since the diagnosis. Other parts of my life, such as faith, family, friends, and vocation, are very significant. The “narrowing” can be a place where we prioritize what is most important. But even as we do so, it can still feel like a small, diminishing place that we occupy.

In light of all of this, it is important to remember a distinctive entryway that Christians have into this Psalm—that through God’s victory, our feet have been placed in “a spacious place.” Ultimately, to be and to dwell in Christ is to dwell in the most “spacious place” imaginable. In our culture, to focus one’s trust and affection on one hope—Jesus Christ—strikes many as narrow or risky. But because of who Jesus Christ is, to dwell in him is to occupy a wide, expansive place. In Revelation 21:6, the risen Christ declares, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.” Colossians 1:16–17 declares that “in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He

himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” What could be more wide and capacious than this—to dwell in Christ, the Alpha and Omega, the one through whom all things were made, and in whom all things hold together? What could be more broad and expansive than to share in his life by the Holy Spirit? What could be more spacious than that? In Christ, God has truly given us a “spacious place” to dwell that overcomes death and sin, so we have good reason to “be glad and rejoice” in the love of the Lord.

In the months following, I would return to these themes again and again: a genuine lament and a genuine rejoicing in God’s promises—promises that, as expressed in the Psalms, are the basis for praise, trust, and also complaint and lament; promises that find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ, and life in him by the Spirit. But this life in Christ, while abundant, cannot be measured by a life span.

A Shortened Life Span? The Ways of Cancer and of God

A week after the post above, I continued my CarePages reflections after attending a conference in Detroit focused on my cancer, multiple myeloma. The conference raised medical and theological questions: What will this cancer mean for how I view the future? Does God owe me a long life? What would it mean to say that abundant life in Christ cannot be constricted by the length of a life span?

We had a good weekend in Detroit at the conference. “Good.” Well, maybe not the best descriptor, but the time together over the weekend was enjoyable and filled with grace, and the conference was very informative. It included presentations on prognosis, chemo and side effects, stem cell transplant, treatment after the disease returns after remission, and so on. It was encouraging at points and

sobering at points. Sometimes it was encouraging and sobering at the same moment.

Just to give a snapshot of how it could be both, at one point a presenter spoke about the many new treatments that have come out for multiple myeloma in the last fifteen years, and then cited that the median life span after diagnosis has doubled in the last ten years. Doubled. That's good! The group broke into applause. But it is all a matter of perception. If I would have walked in the room two months ago (before any bad signs from my blood tests) and would have been told that the [new] median life span applied to my condition, I would have been extremely distressed. But nevertheless I do thank God for the many cancer researchers who have been making genuine progress with this disease, and there are encouraging signs, with many drugs in clinical trials right now.

In terms of how many years of life one has after diagnosis, that is something that patients generally want to know, but doctors are much more cautious about estimating with multiple myeloma. For me, I could look at the overall "median" life span, but that could be misleading, as I'd have to keep in mind that the "median" diagnosis age is between sixty-five and seventy, and I am thirty-nine. There are a few tests that can be done to find out a bit more about how aggressive the particular disease is (because that varies from patient to patient). We will ask about those. But all of this information and speculation takes place under the overall, flashing red sign that says "We don't know!" about how long a multiple myeloma patient (or anyone else!) will live.

This place of not knowing is one that sometimes feels like a thick fog for me right now. I could have five years, ten years, or decades. Who knows? Not me. We belong to God—the Alpha and the Omega, who holds time in his hands—but we are not God. We are mortal, and we don't know when we will die. There is a fog for all of us, whether we realize it or not, that as creatures we do not live in the world as individuals who own it but as temporary stewards of God's good gifts.

Rejoicing in Lament

Right now, I am a steward of God's wonderful gifts of being a spouse to Rachel, a father of Neti and Nathaniel; the lovely, centering gift of friends and other family; the incredible privilege of work and vocation in training seminarians and writing for the church and the academy. Each day comes to us from the gracious hand of God—it is a gift, whether it is our last or one of many more years.

But living into the reality that each day is a gift also involves coming to recognize a stark, biblical truth that is deeply countercultural: that God is not our debtor. God's reply to Job's attempt to make his case before God displays this. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know!" (Job 38:4–5). God is God and we are not. The penitent Job responds not by repenting for his lament (for God's people can and should lament) but by a recognition that God is God, and God is not our debtor. "I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer—twice, but I will say no more" (Job 40:4–5 NIV).

Surely God is not capricious or untrustworthy. God has disclosed himself as gracious in his dealings with creation, with Israel, and in Jesus Christ. The Triune God binds himself to covenant promises that include, envelop, and hold us in a communion that sin and death cannot break. God is faithful to these promises, fulfilled in Jesus Christ. But this does not mean that things will look "fair" or that we are shielded from all of the present consequences of sin and death. God is not our debtor. He does not "owe" us a certain number of requisite years of life; Christ promises us that he will not leave us orphaned (John 14:18) but not that each of us will live the American dream, comfortably retire, and soak in all of what we think of as "normal" life stages. Each day is a gift. Each year is a gift. Each decade, for each of us, is a gift that comes gratuitously from God's hand, not from our entitlement to live a "normal" life or life span. The "abundant life" that Christ brings (John 10:10) is not measured or contained by years or a life span.

This CarePages entry represents a kind of “first brush” with the existential and theological issues raised by the mixed blessing of a medical prognosis. In the prognosis process, it’s hard not to be paralyzed by numbers. About fifteen years ago, the median life span for someone diagnosed with multiple myeloma was two to three years. Now, it is about double that. But what numbers apply to me, as an unusually young patient? It’s really hard to tell. One doctor examined my medical results and sought to encourage me by suggesting that I had a good possibility of living longer than some other patients—I had a 50 percent chance of living ten years, he said. What does that mean? I’m either alive or dead. I can’t be 50 percent alive, just as a woman cannot be 50 percent pregnant. How am I to think about or process such a number? (Later, another doctor thought that number was too pessimistic for my prognosis.)

My main oncologist tended to leave it more open ended. He would say, “Some patients live decades with multiple myeloma.” No promises. But a possible hope. And my life span prospects depend, in his view, largely on the ongoing progress in research and treatment.

In seeking to find out more about the world of cancer, I read the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Emperor of All Maladies* by Siddhartha Mukherjee in the months following diagnosis. I found his assessment of multiple myeloma to be quite balanced and illuminating. On the one hand, “in the 1980s, multiple myeloma was treated by high doses of standard chemotherapy—old, hard-bitten drugs that typically decimated patients about as quickly as they decimated the cancer.”²² These chemo drugs had not been developed specifically for myeloma, and the expected life spans were short. But improved treatments, through drugs developed specifically for the disease, have made a big difference. While “myeloma is still a fatal disease,” the improvements have been substantial: “In 1971, about half of those diagnosed with multiple myeloma died within 24 months of diagnosis; the other half died by the tenth year.”²³ Yet “in 2008, about half of all Myeloma patients treated with the shifting armamentarium of new drugs will still be alive at five years. If the survival trends continue, the other half will continue to be alive well beyond ten years.”²⁴

But what do these numbers mean? Even if I do live decades, the myeloma may still be chopping decades off of the life that I might have had without cancer. Of course, I never knew that I could or would live until my seventies or older; but often such an assumption is simply present in white, middle-class Western culture, and I had soaked it in. I found myself thinking about these numbers when playing with Neti—my beautiful three-year-old daughter adopted from Ethiopia. Would I see her into middle school? If I listen to the 50-percent-for-ten-years estimate, then that means I have a 50 percent chance to see her live to be thirteen. Wow. What would be my “chances” to see her graduate from high school? And what does “chance” have to do with it, anyway? Why, God, oh why, would you allow this for little Neti and her younger brother, Nathaniel? Rachel and I desired and prayed for children—and both Neti and Nathaniel came as incredible gifts, answers to prayer. Why would you take away their dad during their childhoods?

Lament and the Victory of God over Death

While I seek to affirm the biblical truth that God is not my debtor and does not owe me a long life, my sense of lament becomes acute when I consider my young children in particular. My death would not just be a loss for me and for my wife, Rachel. It would be a tremendous loss for my young children.

Scripture does not say God owes us a long life. But paradoxically, this does not mean that we accept suffering and death with a stoic fatalism. Instead, God’s people lament. In the Old Testament, not just the prospect of death but a death in the “middle” of one’s years is seen as a particular cause for lament. Biblical scholars have long noted that the belief in a resurrection after death—explicit in passages of a late date such as Daniel 12—was gradual in its development in the Old Testament. Yet Jon Levenson has recently argued that passages like Daniel 12 have deep roots and resonance with many other, earlier parts of the Old Testament: for death—particularly premature or early death—is in tension with the fact that “God promises, offers, and prefers life and

saves his people from annihilation.”⁵ Thus, while the psalmist does not assume an afterlife when he says, “The dead do not praise the LORD, nor do any that go down into silence” (115:17), nevertheless an early death is grounds for protest and lament: “He [the Lord] has broken my strength in midcourse; he has shortened my days. ‘O my God,’ I say, ‘do not take me away at the midpoint of my life, you whose years endure throughout all generations’” (Ps. 102:23–24). The psalmist adds to this plea by noting that God has many years—implicitly suggesting he could spare some more for his servant. “Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you endure; they will all wear out like a garment. You change them like clothing, and they pass away; but you are the same, and your years have no end” (102:25–27). This is praise to the eternal, but also a lament, from one who faces death “at the midpoint of my life.”

One finds a similar lament and protest in the book of Isaiah, when Hezekiah—ill to the point of death—“wept bitterly” (38:3) and lamented to the Lord that “in the middle of my days I must depart” (38:10 ESV). There was an offense, a cause for lament and complaint, in being taken from life in the “middle” of one’s days.

In the unfolding of God’s revelation through Scripture, death itself comes to be seen as God’s enemy—contrary to God’s desire and promise of life for his people. In the Old Testament, this is apparent in Daniel 12, in which God’s people will be “delivered” when they “awake” from their “sleep in the dust of the earth” (vv. 1–2). In the New Testament, this testimony to God’s victory over death is widespread and emphatic in light of Jesus Christ. In his marvelous chapter on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul speaks about how Christ’s death and resurrection brings victory over death, for Christ’s resurrection is the “first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ” (v. 23). For at “the end,” the Triune God’s rule over “every authority and power” (v. 24) will be complete. “For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (vv. 25–26).

Thus, in the testimony of Daniel and the apostle Paul, it is not just “premature death” but death itself—as that which would limit the life

God shares with his people—that will be defeated. It is the final enemy. But in the meantime, here in a land in which war, poverty, cancer, and disease take the lives of mortals like you and me, death is still a present enemy. It doesn't seem to make much sense when it comes. At times, death comes to a child from cancer; at times, death comes to those who seem to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, as with those who perished from the Boston Marathon bombing (April 2013); at times, death comes to a ninety-five-year-old whose spouse has passed on after struggling with illness for years. In this final case, for the family, it may feel like death itself is a kind of grace—after a long life, when each breath becomes a burden, a struggle. But still, even then, death is an enemy. It must be overcome if we are to experience the life with God that God himself desires for his people. As John's vision of the heavenly Jerusalem indicates, God's repeated promise that "I will be their God and they will be my people" needs to overcome death in order to have its ultimate fulfillment. For then "He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them" (Rev. 21:3). For "to the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life" (v. 6).

Embracing the Psalms as Companions for the Journey

God has not promised to spare us from earthly death. But he has conquered it in Christ—death does not have the power to separate us from his love. In the meantime, death's power and its limited reign are causes for lament, for complaint, for protest to the God of life. I don't know whether we will sing psalms of lament in the new Jerusalem, but until that day, the book of Psalms—with its praise, petition, and lament—will continue to be the prayer book of God's people. As I hope to show in various chapters in this book, the Psalms themselves need to be our companions in our current sojourn to the heavenly city. And there are more psalms of lament than any other genre of psalm.⁶ We cannot leave them behind.

In taking this approach, I will not try to read the Psalms apart from the rest of the biblical canon or apart from Christ. Together with the

New Testament writers and Christians since the early church, I see God's promises in the Psalms as fulfilled in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, I will not approach the Psalms as simply treatises on Christian doctrine or anticipations of abstract teachings that we receive more clearly in the New Testament. No. The Psalms are God's Word to us—a place God has given us to dwell, to pray, to live; they are given for our healing, our growth into our identity as God's people. Ultimately, like all of Scripture, the Psalms present to us the Word of the Spirit that conforms us into the image of Christ so that we may find our place as adopted sons and daughters of the Father, serving God and neighbor as God's children.

From the early centuries of the church, the Psalms were memorized and used regularly in Christian worship.⁷ Fourth-century bishop Athanasius spoke eloquently about how they are God's medicine for humans in all different circumstances: "Whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you not merely hear and pass on, but learn the way to remedy your ill."⁸ Whether in St. Benedict's monasteries or John Calvin's Geneva, a wide range of Christians have experienced the Psalms—in good times and bad—through meditating, praying, and singing. They are ideal for corporate worship as well as personal devotion. And after my diagnosis in September 2012, they took on an especially important role.

In a CarePages entry on October 28, 2012, I wrote,

The Psalms have been my daily companion for years, but since the diagnosis, they have taken on special power. They give moments of orientation—to the promises of our Great God, our rock and our fortress. And they also cry out to God in disorientation—in pain, in confusion, in distress—as well as in joy. The cancer journey so far has already had a lot of ups and downs. And the Psalms are meeting me in those different places—or rather, God is meeting me through the Psalms.

John Calvin has a wonderful way of expressing this: he calls the Psalms "an anatomy of all the parts of the soul." In his preface to

his Psalms commentary, he says, “There is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.”⁹ All of this is brought before the face of God—all of our fear, anger, joy, and wonder. In a way similar to the point of my first posting about being seen by God, praying the Psalms allows every part of us to come before the Triune God, to be seen by him as his adopted son or daughter—to praise, complain, and even vent before the Almighty. God can handle our laments and our petitions. Our laments pivot on God’s promises.

In the last few weeks, my most acute laments have come in thinking and praying about Neti and Nathaniel. Some of it relates to the near future—thinking about how they will respond if the chemo works, and I then go to the hospital for the transplant. Some of the laments relate to the longer-term future, and they’re too young to comprehend how what is happening now may relate to that. My kids are such precious gifts. I can’t put into words my gratitude to God for them, my love for them. So lamenting for them, for their sake, comes pretty naturally as I sit with the psalmist.

But I also rejoice with the psalmist in God’s mighty and faithful acts and promises. . . .

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. (Ps. 107:1).

Praying the Psalms in Christ

Whether you are in a season of rejoicing or lament, praying all of the Psalms should be the practice of Christ followers everywhere. For through the Psalms, God shows us how to pray. God uses the words of the Psalms to reshape our desires and affections. God meets us in the midst of our prayer with and through the Psalms. And we do not

pray the Psalms alone. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer points out, it is “David” and others in Israel who pray the Psalms; it is also “the church” that prays the Psalms; and it is also “I myself” who prays the Psalms. But this is made possible because *Jesus Christ* prayed and prays the Psalms. Because Jesus Christ prays the Psalms, those who belong to him (the church as God’s people and as individuals) can pray insofar as he or she “participates in Christ.”¹⁰ In the words of Bonhoeffer,

How is it possible for a man and Jesus Christ to pray the Psalter together? It is the incarnate Son of God, who has borne every human weakness in his own flesh, who here pours out the heart of all humanity before God and who stands in our place and prays for us. He has known torment and pain, guilt and death more deeply than we. Therefore it is the prayer of our human nature assumed by him which comes here before God. It is really our prayer, but since he knows us better than we know ourselves and since he himself was true man for our sakes, it is also really his prayer, and it can become our prayer only because it was his prayer.¹¹

In and through and by Jesus Christ, with whom Christians have been united by the Holy Spirit, we can praise, lament, petition, and discover that the story of our loss is not the only, or most important, story that encloses our lives. We discover that this spacious place—of living in Christ—is wide and deep enough for us to petition, rejoice, and also join our laments to those of Jesus Christ, who intercedes on our behalf (see Rom. 8:24). Jesus is no stranger to lament. Indeed, Jesus teaches, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matt. 5:4); Jesus laments over the death of Lazarus (John 20:11); he weeps over the unbelief of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41–44); in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was “deeply grieved, even to death,” and cries out in lament and petition to the Father (Mark 14:34; see also Matt. 26:36–46; Luke 22:39–46); and Jesus cries out with the psalmist on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1; see also Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). In later chapters, we will further explore what it means to join the psalmist in lament and praise as one is united to the Lord Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. Our lives are not

our own, and our stories have been incorporated into the great drama of God's gracious work in the world in Jesus Christ through the Spirit. As we come to sense our role in this drama, we find that it is a path of lament and rejoicing, protest and praise, rooted in trust in the Triune God, the central actor; we can walk on this path even while the fog is thick. For God is bigger than cancer. God is bigger than death. The God of Jesus Christ is the God of life, whose loving promises will be shown as true in the end. Until that time, we wait with the psalmist for the Lord and hope in his Word.

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning. (Ps. 130:5–6)