

Bible readings for
special times



Facing Death

Rachel Boulding

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Foreword

As a priest, I have encountered death many times: in dimly lit hospital wards; in the ravaged faces of parents mourning the loss of a child; in the shock of diagnosis and the subsequent maze of consultations and operations, with its dead ends and dizzying turns... the place is reached where a person can no longer be accompanied and must travel on alone.

Every death is unique, every journey towards it an individual exploration of the light and dark that make up our lives, but they all bear resemblances to each other, which it can be helpful to discover and identify. Rachel Boulding's reflections on her journey spring from her personal situation, but they have relevance to us all, as she shares with us her struggles—the challenge of processing the diagnosis and the complexity of medical terminology, the tragedy of witnessing its effect on those who love her, the potentially terrifying nature of the end time.

Rachel gives us words to say when we wish to draw back and say nothing, and she shows how to offer our support to those we love. More precious, however, are the wonderful glimpses she gives us of the faith that sustains her in the most difficult of times. We marvel at her courage as she gives thanks for her awareness of her situation, which gives her time to prepare herself and those she loves. And above all, we can learn from her example, making the most of the opportunities that are offered to us and determining to experience God's redemptive love as fully as possible, sharing it with others and reminding ourselves daily of his grace. Let us, like Rachel, be prepared to accept the dangers and delights of the journey, open to every day's adventure.

As we, in our turn, grow near the end of our earthly pilgrimage, let us hope that we face it with the courage and hope that Rachel shows in these reflections. Let us trust also in the assurance of a constant travelling companion, who not only walks alongside us, but comes to meet us, as we approach our journey's end, ready to embrace us and lead us home: 'And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am' (John 14:3, NIV).

Sally Welch, editor of *New Daylight* Bible reading notes

Introduction

When I suggested writing something about my situation of having terminal cancer, the kind editors at BRF encouraged me, saying that it would be useful to hear from someone going through the middle of a particular experience—rather than having what others might think about it from the outside. So many of us Christians are so eager to chip in with ideas about what others ought to be doing or feeling, or what we think the Bible says about a subject, that sometimes the heart of what it feels like gets lost. There can be something valuable in hearing about the experience from the inside, right now as it is happening.

Often, big events in life, such as bereavement or serious illness, are hard to imagine beforehand. They can feel very different from what we had expected, as well as being varied in people's varied circumstances. So I have tried to be as honest as I can, even when it involves bewilderment and uncertainty.

For some people, I realise, these big experiences lead to serious questioning of their beliefs or even a loss of faith. While I would always try to respect what they are going through, that has not been the case for me. Through no effort or merit of my own, I have found this to be an oddly unexpected time of blessing. Perhaps I am being naive, but I really am trying to be true to what is happening and how it has struck me, not just write what decent Christians might expect or wish to hear.

So I have tried to go through some of the various aspects of facing a life-limiting illness, as they have occurred to me, in terms of what such things can mean, both for the person who is dying and for those around him or her. This is not a linear progression with tightly defined stages, but a matter of varied facets coming into view at particular times, then fading away, only to return—often in a slightly different way. In some respects, this is similar to the experience of bereavement.

Most of the material in this booklet began life as daily Bible-reading notes, which explains the format of reflections on a passage, with a tight word-count to fit on to a single page. I could have bled on at greater length. But, of course, you don't need to stick to reading one page a day, and you can go through the pieces in as many sittings as you like. The separate pages of Bible verses and prayers are designed for reflection; they can form opportunities to pause and ponder what you make of what you are reading.

These are only short reflections. I feel as if I am barely scratching the surface of the subject. But whatever you think about death, I hope that you will feel encouraged to talk about it with those closest to you. This will be uncomfortable, but even a quick word about your hopes, plans and fears might be able to reassure them, and help lay to rest some anxieties. So many people have said to me, heavy with regret: ‘We never had that conversation. I’ll never know what he really thought.’ You might have a chance to help lift such burdens, from yourself and others.

In what I have written, I have tried to frame everything in the context of all life being a gift from God, to be celebrated in the light of his love for each of us. Our purpose on this earth is to love, and to reflect God’s amazing lovingkindness among others, within ourselves, and with God himself. He first loved us, and he lives in us now; it is he who works deep within us, not any feeble efforts of our own. We have our being in him, delighting in his wonderful grace.

This means that we can trust God with our future. Whatever lies before us, we can be assured of his care. All of us have natural human fears about dying, but there is a sense in which we really need not be afraid. God has given doctors skill in healing, so that they can allieviate much of our physical pain, and hospices—many of them, as with the whole modern hospice movement, founded by Christians—can offer great comfort. Whatever we think about our future life, we are going to be with God, in his nearer presence. He loves us, and we can rejoice in him, for ever.

Rachel Boulding

Disbelief and denial

Lord, let me know mine end, and the number of my days: that I may be certified how long I have to live. Behold, thou hast made my days as it were a span long: and mine age is even as nothing in respect of thee; and verily every man living is altogether vanity. For man walketh in a vain shadow, and disquieteth himself in vain: he heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them. And now, Lord, what is my hope: truly my hope is even in thee.

‘I can’t believe this is happening.’ A diagnosis of cancer—or any life-threatening disease—often seems inherently unbelievable. If I am the person who is ill, I cannot get my head round it, and nor can those around me. They struggle to make sense of what is being said and cannot believe that they have heard correctly.

Some people try to block it out—‘This absolutely cannot be happening. I’m too young and I don’t even feel unwell’ or ‘The doctors must be wrong: she looks fine and has a healthy lifestyle.’ It seems as if something in human nature, especially in modern Western society, simply cannot grasp the idea of terminal illness as a personal experience. It might be an event in films or books, something that happens to other people, but not to me or those I love.

Why should it not happen to me, though? I know that people do die of diseases before they reach the average span of 80-something, so why not me? OK, I am not a smoker, and not obese, but all sorts of people get cancer.

When I was first diagnosed with secondary breast cancer—a return of the disease, which has now spread to various parts of my body—the idea of dying early played around in my head, coming round and back in a way that was like the experience of grief. Sometimes now, too, I can accept that it is happening, but often it seems like a bad dream from which I hope to wake.

Loving Father, draw me towards you and the truth of your complete knowledge of me. I exist in you, and my life is hidden in yours, however long it might be. Amen.

Processing the information

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Part of the process of facing up to life-threatening illness is the difficulty of absorbing a great deal of information in a relatively short time. Much of the news is technical—medical, even financial—and emotional. It would be hard to take in if I was studying it in an abstract sense or had time to take it all in, but the huge fact is that it is happening to me, right now.

There are so many different and new ideas that I do not understand, especially about treatments. I am neither a doctor nor a psychologist. It is just too much to take in, especially when I am not feeling 100% and am full of anxiety about the future. I cannot grasp what any of this might mean for me.

In some ways, this is an extension of the seemingly endless circles of denial that I wrote about yesterday. It is too complicated, so it cannot be happening. I think it is important not to pretend that this bafflement is anything but hard going and enduring. It will not be shaken off with a bright suggestion of ‘You’ve got to be positive.’ Yes, it can be offered up in prayer—this is something we can all try, even when we feel alone—and God understands pain, confusion and abandonment from the inside, having suffered on the cross.

None of this is going to be easy. We need to dig deep into our trust in God and our knowledge of his blessings. Then we might have a fuller sense of his grace, which will more thoroughly equip us to face the current confusion and look to the future with hope.

Heavenly Father, I cannot believe what is happening or take in what it means. Plant in me a mustard seed of faith in you, even in the deepest darkness, which may grow to a fuller understanding of your constant love for me. Amen.

Anger and envy—and trust

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.

The denial and dazed bewilderment of life-threatening illness never seem to go away completely, churning round in circles of variations on a theme, but other thoughts often sneak up on me, too. If I do not watch out, I find myself wondering what I have done to deserve this. The sense of ‘Why not me?’—the knowledge that I have no more merit than anyone else, whether others are obese smokers or not—can get lost.

The fact is that illnesses happen in this world and can take anyone away before what they might think is their rightful span. Yes, we can contribute to our risk of dying, such as by binge drinking or driving dangerously, but mostly it is more a matter of ‘Stuff happens.’

Still, I find myself looking enviously at the over-60s when I realise I will never see that decade for myself. People may be elderly and frail, but at least they are alive. There is another way of looking at this, too. Why are we all not more concerned about helping older people face death? Why should people feel so sorry for me and wonder how I am going to cope with dying in my 50s, when there are so many more people going through something similar in their later decades? Surely we should be doing much, much more to think about something that we all have to go through.

In a way (and I have to be careful how I put this, to avoid seeming to revel in the shock factor and goriness of it all), it is a privilege to have a chance to contemplate such matters with an earlier end in sight. It concentrates the mind and helps to undermine some of the inevitable denial, so that I can focus on what really counts.

Lord God of the universe, lead me into your ways and away from the twisted paths of self-righteousness and envy. Amen

In the context of God's grace

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!... Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?... Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

At such points of feeling battered by the maelstrom of emotions, fear, confusing information and bewilderment, it is easy to lose sight of what really matters and the true state of the universe. The fact is that God has created the world and each one of us, and we exist to love him and reflect his love to others. He invites every individual to share abundant life in him and it is up to us how we respond.

Whether I have decades of life ahead or only a few weeks, months or years, there are things I can do, right now, to say 'Yes' to what he offers and bask in the warmth of his grace. It is about making the most of what I have.

Yes, there is a time to grieve for a future I might not have and the loss of experiences I might be looking forward to, but there is so much that I can do now, whatever might happen. I can enjoy God's gifts, right here. As Denise Inge, the Christian scholar, wrote when she knew she was dying in her early 50s, 'The cancer has not made life more precious—that would make it seem like something fragile to lock away in the cupboard. No, it has made it more delicious' (*A Tour of Bones*, Continuum, 2014, p. 7).

This is not a case of pretending that the grief and anxiety have gone away; it is more a case of needing to realise they are not the whole picture. Sometimes, it is useful to remind myself of this, perhaps with deep breaths and words such as the Jesus Prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

Loving Father, guide me to see beyond my immediate fears and to know that you are alongside me, whether or not I sense you. Amen

Psalm 139:1–6 (NRSV)

OLORD, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Most holy and eternal God, lord and sovereign of all the creatures, I humbly present to thy divine majesty, myself, my soul and body, my thoughts and my words, my actions and intentions, my passions and my sufferings, to be disposed by thee to thy glory; to be blessed by thy providence; to be guided by thy counsel; to be sanctified by thy Spirit; and afterwards that my body and soul may be received into glory; for nothing can perish which is under thy custody, and the enemy of souls cannot devour what is thy portion, nor take it out of thy hands. This day, O Lord, and all the days of my life, I dedicate to thy honour, and the actions of my calling to the uses of grace, and the religion of all my days to be united to the merits and intercession of my holy Saviour, Jesus; that, in him and for him, I may be pardoned and accepted.

Jeremy Taylor (1613–67)





This collection of 18 undated reflections draws encouragement and comfort from the Bible and from the author's own experience for those going through life-limiting illness and for their family and carers. With moving vulnerability and without denying the difficult reality of the situation, Rachel Boulding suggests a way to confront terminal illness with faith and hope in a loving God.

Rachel Boulding is Deputy Editor of the *Church Times*. She was previously Senior Liturgy Editor at Church House Publishing. She is a contributor to *New Daylight* and lives in Dorset with her husband and son—and, during school terms, more than 70 teenage boys.

Rachel Boulding's honesty, courage, humour and candour are truly outstanding.

Rachel Boulding often seems to hit the mark where I happen to be.

You have talked honestly from 'the inside'.

