

As He Lay Dying

Notes

In *Devotions*, John Donne calls God to task. "I have not the righteousness of Job, but I have the desire of Job: I would speak to the Almighty, and I would reason with God." Sometimes he taunts God, sometimes he grovels and pleads for forgiveness, sometimes he argues fiercely. Not once, though, does Donne leave God out of the process. The invisible stage manager looms like a shadow behind every thought, every sentence. (p. 211)

Not once does Donne leave God out of the process. Reflect and discuss.

Donne asked the question every sufferer asks: "Why me?" Calvinism was still new then, with its emphasis on God's absolute sovereignty, and Donne pondered the notion of plagues and wars as "God's angels." He soon recoiled: "Surely it is not thou, it is not thy hand. The devouring sword, the consuming fire, the winds from the wilderness, the diseases of the body, all that afflicted Job, were from the hands of Satan; it is not thou." Yet he never felt certain, and the not knowing caused much inner torment. Guilt from his spotted past lurked nearby, like a leering demon. Perhaps he was indeed suffering as a result of sin. And if so, was it better to be scarred by God or not visited at all? How could he worship, let alone love, such a God? (p. 212)

How do we approach God in love in our suffering and pain?

In his disputation with God, Donne has changed questions. He began with the question of *cause* – "Who caused this illness, this plague? And why?" – for which he found no answer. The meditations move ever so gradually toward the question of *response*, the defining issue that confronts every person who suffers. Will I trust God with my crisis, and the fear it provokes? Or will I turn away from God in bitterness and anger? Donne decided that in the most important sense it did not matter whether his sickness was a chastening or merely a natural occurrence. In either case he would trust God, for in the end trust represents the proper fear of the Lord. (p. 213f.)

From *cause* to *response*: what are the questions we are asking?

Viktor Frankl, survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, expressed well the second great crisis faced by people who suffer: the crisis of

meaning. “Despair,” he said, “is suffering without meaning.” He had observed that fellow inmates could endure severe suffering if only they had some hope in its redemptive value. In a very different society such as ours, saturated with comfort, what possible meaning can we give to the great intruder, pain? (p. 215)

**What possible meaning can we give to the great intruder, pain?
Physical pain? Mental pain? Spiritual pain?**

Trials had purged sin and developed character; poverty had taught him dependence on God and cleansed him of greed; failure and public disgrace had helped cure pride and ambition. Perhaps God’s own hand had blocked his career – a devastating disappointment at the time – in order to prepare him for the ministry? A definite pattern emerged: pain could be transformed, even redeemed, and apparent evil sometimes results in actual good. Suffering not removed may serve as God’s tool. (p. 218)

What have been the tools God has used to shape us?

“A Hymn to God the Father”

*Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do run still: though still I do deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For, I have more.*

*Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won
Others to sin? and, made my sin their door?
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun
A year, or two: but wallowed in, a score?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.*

*I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by thy self, that at my death thy son
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, thou hast done,
I fear no more.*

The word-play on the poet’s name (“thou hast *done*”) reveals a kind of acceptance at last: not an acceptance of death as a natural end, but a

willingness to trust God with the future, no matter what. “That voice, that I must die now, is not the voice of a judge that speaks by way of condemnation, but of a physician that presents health.” (p. 220f.)

When thou hast done, thou hast not done, for I have more.

There is *always* more. What do we learn about the Grace of God in this observation?

Izaak Walton contrasted the image of John Donne in those final days – his body gaunt and wasted but his spirit at rest – with a portrait he had seen of Donne at age eighteen, as a dashing young cavalier, bedecked in finery, brandishing a sword. Its inscription, notes Walton, had proved ironically prophetic of Donne's difficult life: “How much shall I be changed before I am changed!” (p. 223)

How do we embrace change in our faith journey? In the Church?

Having braced himself to wrestle with God, he instead found himself in the arms of a merciful, Physician, who tenderly guided him through the crisis *so that he could emerge to give comfort and hope to others.* (p. 224)

Who have been the beneficiaries of our crisis?