

## Suffering and Dying with a Purpose

Recently while walking down Bath House Row in Hot Springs, Arkansas with two friends of mine, nurses both, I found myself involved in a conversation regarding the matter of assisted suicide, personified by the recent case of Ms. Brittany Maynard, who elected to end her own life prematurely so as to avoid the suffering and perceived indignity that would come to her terminally ill body. In her final statement to the world, she stated that her reasons were motivated in equal parts from a desire to avoid the pain of further deterioration, and to spare her family and friends from remembering her in such a state of disrepair. As Wesley Smith points out in his article at [First Things](#), her decision to end her life was based entirely on the potentiality of living through the worst-case scenario.

The Brittany Maynard case, and indeed the entire euthanasia movement, disturbs me to my very soul, and I quite believe the reason it shakes so me is because it presupposes that life is only for those who can live it to the fullest, thereby rendering the quality of one's life subjective; no longer is the purpose of life to reflect God's glory onto a fallen world. It now becomes to earn money, take vacations, marry, have children, and so forth. These are all great things, and indeed comprise an overwhelming portion of what we are called to do in this life, but if one is rendered incapable of doing these things, can he no longer serve an edifying purpose for the Kingdom? It neglects the fact that a life spent in immense pain and suffering can serve a far greater purpose than the life spent on one's feet. The euthanasia movement denies the great dignity, and I would here say the greatest dignity one can know, that can only be experienced through suffering.

I cannot help but to wonder if anyone has ever seriously suggested that Jesus should have taken His own life rather than suffer the indignity of the death towards which He marched. After all, there is nothing dignified about dying naked and splayed on a tree, a crown of thorns digging into your brow, with the pain of your lungs collapsing, slowly, and the heat of the sun baking what remains of your torn and tattered flesh. More dignified would it be to die by one's own choosing, surely, in a comfortable place surrounded by loved ones.

And yet, Jesus chose His death. He chose it through not seeking another way, through allowing the will of the Father to be manifest. God the Father ordained this death, and Jesus knew full well that which awaited His brief odyssey in the flesh. While He certainly asked the Father for another, easier way out, he left that up to God to decide. "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done,"<sup>i</sup> he uttered in Gethsemane, and His prayer was answered. He was crucified because God was not willing to "remove this cup," for to do so would remove also Christ's purpose. God's will was done, and Jesus accepted it because He understood that it was the will of the Father, and therefore it was good. It is no insignificant point that Jesus references Psalm 22 when He cries out, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" – "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"<sup>ii</sup> So, too, does David lament in the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm, before declaring the goodness and the glory of the Lord.

He went to His death because He knew what we seem to be forgetting, namely that death, like life, has a purpose. It is not an isolated event that one must get through. It is not without meaning. In truth, it is a challenge to find a more meaningful event in one's life than one's death. As with one's birth, in one's final moments he is at his most vulnerable. In these moments, all

pretension vanishes and what is left is the person in his most basic and true form. In our dying breath we are found to be our most genuine and honest self. Without His death, the sinner is still crimson stained.

What's more, His death illustrates what it means to follow the Lord – it is not something that will always end well. If the lives of the Apostles are any indicator (and I believe that they are), then the life of a Christian is not meant to resemble a metaphorical walk through the garden. Jesus died when He could have lived. He died when He, as a third of the Trinity, could have just as easily found another way for salvation to be offered to man. He died because His death, and indeed all death, was and is the *natural* end to life. He died because God called Him to death.

If Christ endures a death under duress, why not we as well? Aren't we called to take up our Cross and follow the Christ, even unto death? To "die with dignity," which is the manner in which Ms. Maynard has been portrayed, seems to now exclude a natural death under less-than-beautiful conditions. It is, evidently, not considered dignified to allow God to determine when the man shall breath his last. It is not dignified to place one's trust in the Lord that one's suffering in life will be naught but a distant and unfamiliar memory when we reach the Ever-after. No, to die with dignity now seems to mean only that death which is chosen by the individual, a "designer death", if you will. The precedent this sets is dangerous, as the normalization of choosing how one's life shall end opens the door for all manner of rationalized suicide. How many depressives, for example, who have considered in their darkest moments taking their own life, would have done so had the option been legally and readily available to them?

The argument that death was for Ms. Maynard inevitable is null and void, for all humans will sooner or later die. To suggest that she was right to end her life due to the suffering she was and would continue to experience not only mocks all the saints who could have ended their life rather than suffer at the hands of men, but also throws mud in the face of all who have died a prolonged death from the natural perversions of cancer. To end one's own life is to suggest that God is not in control, that He is not with you and that you are left to take care of yourself.

I think about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who spent his final days in a series of Nazi prisons and concentration camps. He must have known that his fate had been sealed given the crimes for which he was accused, and yet he lived joyfully. The morning of his death, he is said to have led a sermon for his fellow condemned. Even in his final moments, naked on the gallows as our Lord was naked on the Cross, he is said to have been in prayer and unafraid.

I think of St. Stephen, who as he was being publically stoned to death in Jerusalem, "gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, "Behold, I see the heaven's opened, and the son of Man standing at the right hand of God."<sup>iii</sup> And then he fell asleep. To have one's body crushed by the weight and velocity of the stones seems most undignified, and yet in these horrible final moments, all Stephen could see or feel was the comfort of the Lord.

The scriptures tell us many times through that Jesus, had He so chosen, could have turned stones to bread, could have thrown himself from the top of the temple without worry, and that he could

have summoned legions of angels at his arrest to upend the evil done by Judas and the Pharisees, and yet Christ walked to His death. He did not do so joyfully, but the fact remains that Jesus turned His eyes towards the Cross and allowed it to happen.

The quality of one's death has nothing to do with the circumstances in which he finds himself, and has everything to do with the heart, and the manner in which he finds his rest.

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<sup>i</sup> Luke 22.42, ESV

<sup>ii</sup> Mark 15.34, ESV

<sup>iii</sup> Acts 7.55-6, ESV