



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Dying Well  
(*Health*, pp. 35-43)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Austin Heights and AIDS  
(*Health*, pp. 70-73)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to  
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### Christian Reflection

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# Dying Well

How can we confront suffering and our fear of death? The words of the *Heidelberg Catechism* — “That I belong — body and soul, in life and in death — not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ” — ring in our ears. Dying well begins with our perspective on life and living well.

### Prayer

God of mercy, God of wholeness, we bow before you, bent, battered, bruised, and broken. Through the power of your spirit and through the power of your word, we pray that you would hear our prayers and receive our praise.

Help us, heal us, and hold us closer to you so that we may live.  
Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Psalm 139:7-12

### Reflection

Disease tragically destabilizes our closest relationships with family, friends, and God. As it undermines our strength, it alienates us from community and leads us to question God’s love and power. *Why*, we wonder, does God allow intense suffering and death? *How* can we possibly endure our unbearable suffering? And when others suffer, *what* can we do to relieve their distress?

Rather than begin with the deep puzzles of theodicy, we should turn to the practical questions of confronting our own suffering and helping others respond to their pain and grief, Abigail Rian Evans says. “Only if we learn to confront suffering and our fear of death can we die well,” she writes. “The first step, then, is to view our own suffering and dying through the prism of ‘how’ rather than ‘why.’” To *prepare* ourselves for suffering and death, she recommends that we *create deep wellsprings of spiritual strength and insight* through memorizing Scripture and *develop a support community* — an intimate friend, a group with whom we share ourselves, or a faith community.

Preparing for illness, loss, and death does not make us immune from them. When suffering occurs, we can *confront* it by:

- ▶ *trusting in God’s power*. The insight of Psalm 139, Evans writes, is “that God does not remove our suffering, but there is nowhere that we can go where God is not present.” When we know God is in control, we can “quit denying our neediness, and...manipulating and ‘fixing’ others’ weaknesses.”
- ▶ *communicating what we need and how we feel*. Like Job, we long to share our anger and grief with intimate friends. Writing a spiritual journal — our own Book of Job — can help us accept our feelings and learn from them. Pierre Wolf, a spiritual director, tells of a woman who raged at God when her son died in a senseless accident. “And all of a sudden I understood that she was for us a witness to the sorrow of God,” Wolf writes. “This was affirmed for me when I saw her engulfed in profound peace as I said to her, ‘Do not accuse the Lord.... Do not think you are against him; he is beside you, speaking through you. Our Father has also ‘lost’ a child.’”



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▶ *prayerfully reading the Bible and joining a Christian community for worship, study, fellowship, and service.* In the stories of Scripture we enter “the sufferings of God’s people, and these can be a source of encouragement, insight, and comfort to us.” As we share our suffering and fear within a faith community “characterized by *shalom*—wholeness, harmony, tranquility, well-being, and friendship,” we can experience true healing.

Turning to the “what” question—i.e., what we can do to help others in their suffering and dying—Evans proposes that we:

- ▶ *stand in solidarity with them.* Thus we can share in Christ’s death and suffering, and convey their power to others. The Apostle Paul writes, God “consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God” (2 Corinthians 1:4).
- ▶ *give voice to others’ stories.* “Extreme loss and grief eventually immobilize us if they are never addressed,” Evans observes. “As Christians, we can help people reframe and reinterpret their experiences instead.... In this new framework, grief and loss no longer have the same power over us.”

### Study Questions

1. What wellsprings of spiritual strength do you carry in your memory—Scripture passages, hymn texts, tunes, or images—that have helped you endure suffering or confront death?
2. What connections do you see between *how* we prepare for and confront our own suffering, and *what* we can do to help others in their suffering and dying?
3. Why, according to Abigail Rian Evans, is it important for us to share our anger and grief? Do you agree?
4. As Kyle Childress reports in “Austin Heights and AIDS,” a congregation can find renewed strength and purpose in reaching out to others in their suffering and dying. How did Austin Heights Baptist Church answer the “what” question?
5. Discuss how Evans’ main themes of trusting God and sharing our grief within a healing faith community are expressed in the hymn “Come, Ye Disconsolate”?

### Departing Hymn: “Come, Ye Disconsolate”

Come, ye disconsolate, where’er ye languish,  
come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel.  
Here bring your wounded hearts, here tell your anguish;  
Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.

Joy of the desolate, light of the straying,  
hope of the penitent, fadeless and pure!  
Here speaks the Comforter, tenderly saying,  
“Earth has no sorrow that Heaven cannot cure.”

Here see the bread of life, see waters flowing  
forth from the throne of God, pure from above.  
Come to the feast of love; come, ever knowing  
Earth has no sorrow but heaven can remove.

*Thomas Moore (1816), adapted by Thomas Hastings (1831)*

*Tune: CONSOLATOR*

# Dying Well

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To consider how we should prepare to confront our own suffering and death.
2. To discuss what we can do to help others in their suffering and dying.
3. To explore how a faithful congregation can enable us to endure suffering and die well.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Health (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Come, Ye Disconsolate,” locate the familiar tune CONSOLATOR in your church’s hymnal or on the web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a Story

“We are called to kneel, to listen, and to wait patiently with people in their suffering and death,” Abigail Rian Evans writes. “God will use us to help families and friends grieve the loss of their loved ones. God will use us to help people die well.”

At the Ridgecrest Retirement Center, our little group visited with residents who invited us into their rooms. We sang hymns they requested from the large-print songbooks. Two wonderful ladies beamed as they followed us, like groupies, down the hall in their wheelchairs. Just as we were leaving, a middle-aged man emerged from a room where the door had remained closed that afternoon. “Would you please sing for my mother?” he asked. “She is dying tonight. Sing any song, but her favorite is ‘Amazing Grace.’” So, for the man and his wife, and for the frail mother on the bed whose eyes remained closed, we sang all the verses: “When we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise, than when we’d first begun.”

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 139:7-12 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

When we (or our loved ones) endure suffering and face the prospect of death, we may question *why* a good God allows suffering, *how* we can prepare to confront suffering and death, and *what* we can do to help others. Abigail Rian Evans focuses on responding to the *how* and *what* questions. “Suffering tends to separate us from our friends and family members,” she notes. “The resulting isolation, loneliness, and alienation intensify our pain.” Thus, she highlights deepening our relationship with God and building friendships within a caring community. She encourages us to express our grief and pain to God and to share these honestly with our friends.

In “Austin Heights and AIDS,” Kyle Childress offers a wonderfully detailed example of helping others in their suffering and dying. Through its caring ministries, Austin Heights Baptist Church in Nacogdoches, Texas,

stands in solidarity with individuals whose lives had been touched by AIDS. In special worship services, it gives voice to their stories and helps them reframe and interpret their suffering within the Christian story.

You might extend your reflection on dying well by reading two articles in the *Suffering* issue of *Christian Reflection*. In "Power Made Perfect in Weakness," Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung discusses the virtue of courage in the face of suffering and death, and Waldemar Janzen explores the significance of suffering in the divine economy in "Suffering Servants." These articles and their associated study guides are available for free download in the Ethics Library at [www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws).

### **Study Questions**

1. Encourage members to share specific biblical stories, images, or passages; hymn texts or tunes; family or congregation memories. How have these been a source of spiritual strength during their suffering and grief? Have they had opportunity to share these with others who are enduring suffering or facing death? Discuss how these resources remind us of the larger community of God's people and invite us to reframe and interpret our experiences in the context of the Christian story.
2. To *prepare* for our own suffering, Evans suggests, we must both develop as persons (with "deep wellsprings of spiritual strength and insight") and develop an intimate support community. Later, when we *confront* suffering and death, these enable us to trust in God and to share our anger and sorrow openly with others.

Is it important for us first to gain these spiritual resources through our spiritual preparation and the grace of a community, before we attempt to minister to others who are suffering or confronting death?

3. Encourage members to discuss their experiences of sharing anger and grief. Evans says we can *reduce* our suffering "by sharing our burden, pain, and secrets with others in support groups, a close group of friends, or our church community." Friends help us overcome the isolation that accompanies grief. Also, as in the story told by Pierre Wolf, sharing our anger and grief may help us to glimpse God's sorrow and realize God's presence with us. Finally, it allows others to stand in solidarity with us and share Christ's death and resurrection.
4. As they responded to the AIDS sufferers' need for food, the congregation discovered the true extent of the suffering. "Before long delivering food to men with AIDS turned into visiting the men, which turned into the most basic forms of care: taking them to the doctor (when we could find one who would see HIV/AIDS patients), running errands, going to the pharmacy, and so on. All of this led to the discovery that not all persons with AIDS were men: we met and began helping support families in which the mother had received an IV during pregnancy and the baby was born with HIV. We also discovered families, especially older East Texas couples whose sons were diagnosed with AIDS, upon whom the toll of caring in an atmosphere of ostracism was overwhelming." The congregation also met needs for friendship, spiritual companionship, and worship.

Is it important that this congregation not only responded *as a community* but also *opened and shared their Christian community* with people whose lives had been touched by AIDS?

5. Members might read the hymn as an invitation to share our sorrow with God, who is the source of healing and forgiveness. In the second verse God, through the Holy Spirit ("the Comforter"), urges us to embrace Heaven's "cure." The third verse mixes images of the Lord's Supper ("bread of life" and "feast of love") with allusions to the life-giving river in the New Jerusalem, the restored Paradise on earth ("see waters flowing forth from the throne of God, pure from above," cf. Revelation 22:1-2). As we share Communion in the Body of Christ, we can glimpse the restoration of all life in the City of God.

### **Departing Hymn**

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.