

My Death Is Not My Own

By Chrystie Cole

“It’s my body and no one has a right to tell me what I can or can’t do with it.” This is the foundational argument behind many of today’s most heated topics such as abortion, suicide, and death with dignity (the right to die when and how you choose). *We want life and death on our own terms.* Overwhelmingly as a culture we function as practical atheists – believing there is no higher authority than oneself when it comes to your own body. Any governance or restriction upon this personal liberty is seen as oppressive and intrusive. We want to exercise authority and control over our lives in a way that maximizes our own comfort and avoids unpleasant circumstances or suffering. Within the framework of society, this argument seems legitimate and perfectly rational. However, when you examine it in light of Scripture, it begins to quickly unravel and threaten our assertion of personal freedom.

At the root of this argument for autonomy is the idea of ownership. However, Scripture is clear that we do not belong to ourselves. The Lord says that the world and everything in it is his – all the animals of the forest, all the animals of the field, all the birds on the mountain, the cattle on a thousand hills – all of it belongs to the Lord (Psalm 50:9-12). Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper, understanding the Lord’s ownership over all creation, once declared, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine!’” The truth is that here is nothing about our life or our death over which we can proclaim, “Mine!” And this is the fundamental biblical principle that must inform our understanding of aging, death, and suffering.

We were created *by* God. He formed and fashioned each of us in our mother’s womb (Psalm 139), bringing life to all people and giving breath to all things (Acts 17:25). We were also created *for* God. The apostle Paul says *all* things were created by God and for God (Colossians 1:16). This includes our bodies, which Paul says were, “made for the Lord, and he cares about our bodies” (1 Corinthians 6:13b NLT). The book of Isaiah provides additional insight when God declares, “Bring all who claim me as their God, *for I have made them for my glory*” (Isaiah 43:7, NLT). Furthermore, in the New Testament the Apostle Paul declares that we were created *to be instruments for God’s special purposes and to do the good works he planned for us* long ago (2 Timothy 2:21, Ephesians 2:10).

We were created by God, for God, to be instruments for his purposes, to do the work he prepared for us, for his glory. Our lives belong to him. Following Jesus and growing as a mature disciple begins by acknowledging the truth of his ownership over your body, over your life. But Scripture also has something to say about our death. In 1 Samuel 2, Hannah praises the God who “gives both death and life,” the one who “brings some down to the grave but raises others up” (v.6). And in Deuteronomy 32, the Lord himself declares, “There is no other god but me! I am the one who kills and gives life; I am the one who wounds and heals; no one can be rescued from my powerful hand” (v.39).

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The truth of Scripture is clear: My life and my death both belong to God. If my life is not my own and my death is not my own, then there are implications I must consider, both spiritually and physically, regarding what it means to follow Jesus both in life and in death. Do I have the right to choose, to exercise personal freedom, to do whatever I want in life and in death? Or does this right belong to God alone?

It was failure to acknowledge this exact truth of God’s ownership over us that ushered in the sin, suffering, and death we now so desperately try to avoid. Adam and Eve committed the ultimate treason against God, using the same body God entrusted to them to rebel against him. They wanted life on their own terms. But their pursuit of life on their own terms ushered in the sin, suffering, and death we now know (Romans 5:12–17). Paul says that, as a result of this, all of creation groans, longing for the day when it will be freed from its subjection to death and decay. And we also groan as we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering once and for all (Romans 8:18–23).

Though God could have left us to suffer the consequences of our rebellion, allowing us to remain in the grips of suffering and death for all eternity, he did not allow it to end there. In his great mercy, God sent Jesus Christ in human form— *in a body that would also know suffering and death* – to atone or pay for the sins of humanity. Through his blood shed on the cross, Jesus purchased us from our slavery to sin and death.

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Jesus, though he was fully God, did not assert personal freedom over his life or over his death. Instead, he laid aside his rights and surrendered himself to the will of God for the glory of God, even though the path was wrought with suffering. Christ had an eternal vision that transcended the temporary pleasures and the temporary sufferings of this life. He endured the cross for the joy that was set before him (Hebrews 12:2). He never lost sight of the fact that he was sent by God, to do the will of God, for the glory of God. So he accepted both groaning and glory with an open hand, entrusting himself to the Father. It is because Jesus forfeited autonomy and endured the groaning of Gethsemane that we are able to bask in the glory of Calvary.

There is no doubt that there is much suffering in this life. Many men and women grapple with debilitating disease, chronic pain brought on by aging, or mental and emotional anguish that threatens to consume them. In the grips of suffering, death may seem like a welcome reprieve. But our suffering is not meaningless; it is doing a work in us that is of eternal value. To choose to forego suffering through asserting our right to choose the circumstances of our death short-circuits the work the Lord is doing in us and in others through us, and thereby robs God of the glory due him in our life, in our suffering, and even in our death.

Paul reminds us that we can rejoice even in our suffering because *suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope* (Romans 5:3–4). Contrary to the hope we place in autonomy over our life and death, the hope produced through suffering will not lead to disappointment (Romans 5:5 NLT). This is the groaning and glory we experience as we follow Jesus with our bodies – honoring him in life as well as in death.

