

Answers without questions

by [Rachel Billings](#) in the [September 28, 2016](#) issue

In Review

JOY IN THE JOURNEY

Finding Abundance in the Shadow of Death



Joy in the Journey

By Steve Hayner and Sharol Hayner
InterVarsity Press

Three years ago, nine months before his 40th birthday, my husband Todd received one of those alarming you-need-to-see-the-doctor-*now* calls after a routine blood test. That urgent conversation with his doctor led to further tests, which showed that

he had multiple myeloma, a chronic cancer that can often be pushed into remission but eventually proves fatal for many. At the time we had two children under the age of four. For the next nine months we conducted an intensive battle with the disease, spending countless hours in doctors' offices and hospitals.

Because of our experience, the story of fellow cancer couple Steve and Sharol Hayner piqued my interest. At the time of his diagnosis with pancreatic cancer, Steve served as president of Columbia Seminary. Previously he had been the president of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and had worked in a variety of pastoral and academic positions across the United States. His wife Sharol worked alongside him in his various ministries, as well as using her own gifts in children's music. Until Steve's illness the Hayners had lived the life of an active older Christian couple, successful and well loved in their chosen careers, and Steve was particularly known for his joyful outlook. Together they had lived into their sixties and had enjoyed the gift of multiple children and grandchildren. A good life.

Partly because of this starting point, the book evoked conflicting feelings in me. The first sentence of the preface reads: "What follows is a journey of two people who never imagined that in their sixties they would face what they thought would be reserved for their eighties or nineties." *Tell me about it*, I thought. *Except take it back another 20 or 30 years*. Without meaning to, I found myself taking on the role of Job's Adversary, speculating about how the Hayners might have responded if, God forbid, cancer had struck one of their children or grandchildren. Would their journey still have been so joyous?

In truth, though, that's not a fair question. Because of course the Hayners were not on some other journey, but on their own. They truly had no less right to be surprised and pained at cancer's interruption of their shared life in their sixties than we did at earlier ages. After all, death and decay deserve our indignation wherever and whenever they occur; neither of these intrusions belongs in the good world God made. At times, though, that experience gap made it difficult for me to engage with the book emotionally. It struck me more as the parting wisdom of a patriarch and matriarch than as a story of shared adversity that touches upon my own.

Strikingly, many readers touched by the Hayners' story laud it precisely as "honest" and "searing," speaking with "remarkable candor" about end-of-life matters. Certainly, the couple's account is honest and direct as it describes Steve's tiredness, nausea, and weakness and their shared sense of uncertainty and helplessness. But

much of what the Hayners have to say seems mainly to rely on idealized notions of Christian life rather than Christian dying. For example, Steve writes about how cancer has recentered his concept of blessing and identity: “The fact is, I’m blessed because I belong to God—in life, in death and in everything in between—not because my circumstances are always the way I want them to be.” An important truth, but it doesn’t give us much insight into how one might sense this “blessing” or even this “belonging” in the midst of suffering.

Sharol admits to the questions that plague her in the face of Steve’s cancer: “I often feel like a little girl who keeps asking, Where are we going? How long will it take to get there? What will it be like? I know that allowing these questions to remain unanswered is what trust and faith are all about.”

I found myself wishing that the Hayners had pushed their questions further, as Jerry Sitser does in *When God Doesn’t Answer Your Prayers*. Readers who find themselves in the midst of a real mess might wonder, as I did, what monsters the Hayners dare not name that may lurk beneath the relatively mild waves of their story. Their answers to the challenge of cancer truly testify to their faith in the God whom they have always embraced and who continues to embrace them. Perhaps their questions, though, could faithfully venture out further, and thus bring readers deeper into the presence of a God who ventures even into the shadow of death.