

Praying for Sarah: When death is a blessing

by [Jerry Gentry](#) in the [July 31, 2002](#) issue

Recently, I prayed for someone to die. She wasn't an enemy. She was the beloved teenage daughter of two exceptionally fine church friends. Sarah's frail body, once so vivacious and spry, was failing, fading away—sucked of its verve and substance by a fierce internal rapacious monster: Ewing's sarcoma, bone cancer.

However, her nervous system worked magnificently, delivering excruciating pain with every movement. The turn of her head, the embrace of her mom—all brought such extreme misery that Sarah gathered her family and asked their permission to end the yearlong fight. Heartbroken, already aching for the impending loss, they said their goodbyes to Sarah and committed their days and minutes to helping Sarah die with dignity.

All through the year of tests, diagnoses and treatments (also known by Sarah as "torture"), Sarah, along with her parents, had actively determined what would be done next. Not one to passively agree, she asked questions and made decisions. In life and death.

Sarah was smart, generous, friendly, athletic—a daughter about whom a parent beams. She was driven. While receiving chemotherapy and radiation last fall, she took a full, difficult load at school. And made A's. She took to school plastic bags so she could vomit on the spot but not leave a mess. She continued practicing the flute. She set goals and worked toward them.

Her father, Bill, regularly sent e-mails to the church's listserv, so we followed the harrowing journey from first diagnosis through treatment options, from hope through agony to the final sarcoma assault that no human-made chemical or technology could defeat or even slow down very much. Bill's missives were honest, sometimes blunt, always full of hope—though never unrealistic. In one e-mail, he disputed the saying, "Don't sweat the small stuff, and it's all small stuff." Some stuff is really big, he declared. In another, he urged everyone to find their children, of any age, and

hug them. “Do it now,” he demanded. He told us to pray for comfort, for strength and wisdom and, eventually, for a miracle. And we did.

Sarah herself continued to make remarkable statements, such as, “I’m the lucky one because my pain will be over soon, but my family will miss me for a long time.” But when she finally wished to die rather than live in pain or a semiconscious state from heavy pain-killing drugs, I prayed that she would.

How does one ask God to end a life? It felt incongruous. If God didn’t heal Sarah, why should I expect God to be stirred to action when Sarah wanted to be liberated from life? My heart and my head both said: it’s a little late to give God credit now, when all we want done is the easy part. So often religious people thank God for giving life; is it a failure to pray for God to end life? If so, whose failure is it? It is no wonder that theologians and ministers forever wrestle with theodicy, with the stark, unnerving reality that children die. Asking God for a particular favor, finally, seemed irrelevant.

By this time, Sarah was home, under hospice care, insulated from pain by narcotics and human love. On her last day alive, she was serenaded bedside by her favorite musicians, the Indigo Girls. Bill’s e-mail describing Sarah’s final hours, which took place later in the day, said maybe she was awaiting those songs before she released her spirit into the sky. Is that how God answered our prayers? By sending a hometown folk duo who had made good in the music business? So Sarah could say thanks and breathe her last?

I studied Christian ethics on the doctoral level; I learned bioethics from an excellent teacher, Paul Simmons. But while Sarah’s drama played out, I thought little about the issues I had grappled with in seminary, such as quality of life and euthanasia. Mainly, my heart ached for Bill and Donna, who would lose their precious daughter a year after she obtained her driver’s license.

At a prayer service for Sarah, a range of emotions was directed toward God, from gratitude to anger and bewilderment. By the time I prayed for Sarah’s wish for painlessness to come true, choosing specific words to speak to God felt awkward, like speaking a foreign language I had not mastered. The biblical phrase “sighs too deep for words” matched my thoughts for the first time in my life. My sighs were my thoughts, my prayers.

During this experience prayer became a communal feeling of closeness, not just a petition or request. Prayer involved knowing that many people were crying because a family was about to experience a loss that would never be filled. Prayer was sensing that many people were preparing to love this family, holding them up while they lived on without Sarah. Prayer became offers to provide meals, to run errands, to hug with lavish affection. My prayers were a wordless yearning for a world that does not exist and a desperate urge to hug my own child every moment.