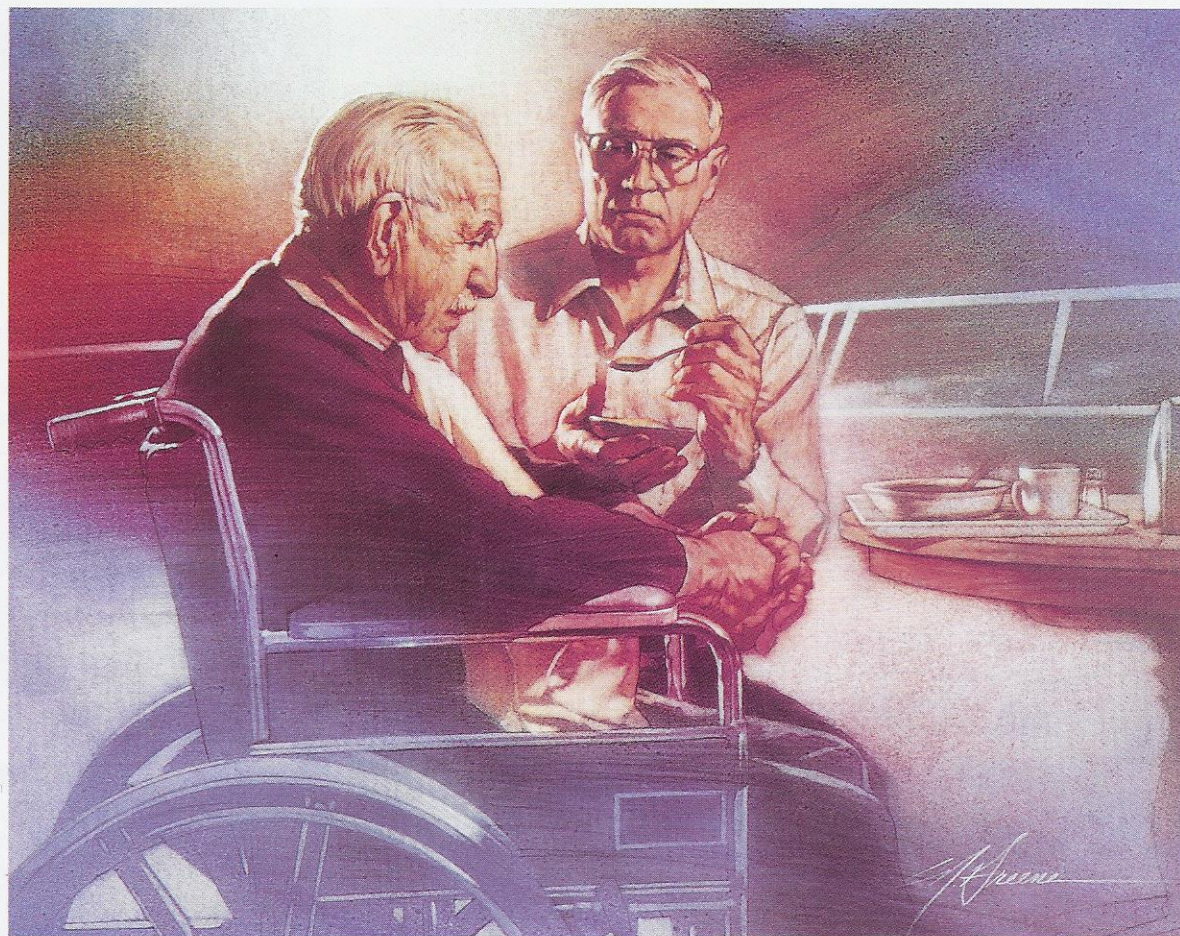


A grown son watches his father, ravaged by Parkinson's disease . . . and wonders,

# How Long, O Lord?



NATHAN GREENE

B Y D E A N M E R R I L L

**W**hen I tell you what I thought about my godly father, now 82 and wheelchair-bound in an Iowa nursing home, you'll be shocked. But when I tell you how God managed to straighten my head, you'll be relieved.

First, let me set the stage:

My father has bucked Parkinson's disease for more than 25 years, which has to be close to some kind of record. He's a fighter. Forced out of his life's work (the pastorate) at the age of 58 because his voice had become too weak for audiences to hear, he spent a long retirement trying to keep his limbs strong enough to hold him up. He succeeded longer than most.

His mind didn't always stay on track, though, and after a neighbor found him a mile from home on a frigid January night wandering coatless "looking for a church," we knew it was time for a nursing home. He fought it bitterly—he'd always been a pioneer, a man to take care of himself—but in the end, he gave in. My mother joined him there but lasted only 10 months before succumbing to a lung disease.

Today, Dad carries on alone. The crazy thing about Parkinson's is that it doesn't actually kill you: it just sabotages your brain and robs you of dignity. You mumble

your words, slobber through your meals (because the tongue and swallowing reflexes won't do what they're told) and don't get to the bathroom on time.

Meanwhile, you *think* you can do ambitious things from days gone by ("Son, let's go fix the transmission in that Chevy of yours") when in fact you can hardly move.

Now to the bittersweet visit:

It was Thanksgiving time, and I'd left my own family to fly 1,800 miles for a few days with Dad. I asked the nursing home cook to plan an extra food tray for me each meal, so I could stay right there beside him in the dining area, eating what he ate, helping him get the applesauce inside his mouth, watching his unsteady hands so they wouldn't tip over his milk.

I spent hour upon hour trying to converse. I couldn't understand a lot of what he said, but I was determined to keep trying to activate his mind.

"Dad, let me tell you about how well the kids are doing in school." I launched into a report on his grandchildren, one by one. He kept reaching over the right arm of his chair to finger the wheel apparatus. Was he even listening?

For the first time in my life, I found it necessary to forget about modesty and help clean him up after a bowel movement. My own father—I had always respected his privacy. Now it was either the nurse or me, and so I did what needed doing.

If you've never been in a nursing home on a Saturday evening right after dinner, you've missed a curious phenomenon: Every TV in the place pours forth the "Lawrence Welk Show." No matter which hallway you take, it's like multi-stereo. *Ah-one, ah-two*—and off they go, the familiar sounds of an earlier time.

My father's memory, however, was already sketchy enough that even the happy bandmaster couldn't capture his attention. I put him to bed, held his hand, said a short prayer and left for the night. "I'll be back in the morning, Dad," I assured him, although like most comments it probably didn't register.

That evening in the living room of the old family home, now unoccupied and deathly still, I slumped to my knees at the couch. "God," I blurted out as my eyes began to well up, "*what is the point?*" His life goes on day after day, week after week, month after month—with no purpose, no goal, no rewarding moments. It's grotesque. What he *was* and what he *is* are poles apart.

"He served You faithfully for so many years; now his work is obviously done.

The honest truth is, You could take care of him so much better than we can. Daryl [my older brother] and I both live so far away. The nursing home staff does a good job tending to his physical needs, keeping him comfortable, saying a cheery word now and then—but they don't have much time. . . .

"Meanwhile, all this is *expensive*, Lord. His Social Security check doesn't even come close to covering the monthly fee: the rest is Title XIX—tax money.

"Oh, God, *what is the point?* Why does he linger in this haze? Some people die much too soon, but others seem to die much too late. There is nothing Dad can do to serve You at this stage."

And then came the shocking but oddly rational thought: *A simple shot of morphine would solve so many problems, wouldn't it?*

*"Oh, God, what is the point? . . . The honest truth is, You could take care of him so much better than we can."*

Of course, it wasn't legal. I knew that. And I would never do anything desperate. Yet I went to bed troubled at the notion of Dad (and the rest of us) having to keep going, year after expensive year, through a wearisome, pointless existence merely to honor some abstract principle of respect for human life.

The next morning, Sunday, dawned cold and gray. Winter was coming soon. I showed up early at the nursing home for breakfast and then wheeled Dad back to his room. Once again my mind scavenged for some way, any way, to engage his brain.

"Dad, it's Sunday," I said in a cheery voice. "Let's watch a church service on TV." I turned on "Day of Discovery," where Richard DeHaan was teaching a series from 1 Timothy.

"Dad, pay attention now," I urged. "This is good preaching." He would look up at the screen for maybe 15 seconds. Then his whitened head would sag, and

his gaze would fall to the floor. He wasn't tracking.

Finally the program ended, and I shut off the TV in defeat. Maybe if I had him actually read the text, he'd follow along. After all, the Word of God was still alive and able to penetrate. I got out his giant-print Bible, opened it to 1 Timothy 1, positioned his glasses and said, "Here, why don't you read the passage the man was just preaching about? It'll be a good Sunday reading for us."

Slowly, hesitantly, he began in his soft, mumbling voice:

"The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have wandered away from these. . . ."

My mind went back to boyhood days, listening to him read Scripture from the pulpit, loud and strong. Now he was but a shadow of former times—but at least he could still proclaim the gospel, if soft and garbled.

" . . . We know that the law is good if a man uses it properly. We also know that law is made not for good men but for law-breakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious: *for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for . . . whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine.*"

I was stunned. His voice went on, oblivious to the impact he had just created. In fact, I almost choked in a cloud of surprise and emotion . . . my own father, inadvertently reminding me from God's eternal Word that life was special and priceless, beyond the purview of mere human beings to decide its endpoint.

If Ray Merrill's life was negotiable, we all were negotiable. I stared out the window at the grain bins across the yard and repented of my arrogance the night before. *Oh, God, You've really put me in my place, I silently admitted. I'll not try to usurp Your decisions anymore.*

He finished the passage, and I put my arm around his shoulder. "Dad, I love you," I said, with a catch in my voice. He didn't recognize anything unusual. We put the Bible back in the drawer and went on with our quiet, uneventful day. But I could not get over God's stern, swift timing.

He had not forgotten about our family's plight. He had spotlighted, in the most "coincidental" of ways, His all-wise principles and limits, in order that we might join together some celestial day with no regrets. □

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*Dean Merrill, vice president of periodicals for Focus on the Family, says his next visit to see his dad in Iowa is scheduled for this month.*