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# Suffering and Hope in *Still Alice*

Anna Hurt and Melissa Brown

**S** *till Alice*, a novel by Lisa Genova, follows Alice Howland throughout her journey with early-onset Alzheimer's disease. The reader is introduced to Alice at the apex of her career as a linguistics expert and cognitive psychology professor at Harvard University. Known for her impressive ability to understand language and memory, Alice begins to experience lapses in memory that continue to escalate after her 50th<sup>th</sup> birthday. Alice notably keeps her diagnosis a secret from her husband John and three adult children, Anna, Tom, and Lydia. Each family member copes differently with Alice's diagnosis. As a cancer cell biologist, John struggles to accept the finality of Alice's diagnosis and spends his time seeking a cure for Alice while in the lab. The reader will conclude that John sacrificed quality time with Alice to obtain quantity of time with Alice.

The reader walks with Alice throughout multiple stages of her disease process: onset of symptoms, diagnosis, disclosure of diagnosis to family, and finally on to later stages when she no longer recognizes her family. There are prominent themes within the book which prompt the reader to reflect on their own sources of hope and endurance.

## Suffering

Like many who are faced with a chronic illness, Alice asks the question "Why" many times. Like Alice, many struggle to reconcile physical suffering with God's goodness. How can any good come from a disease like Alzheimer's? What is the purpose of suffering? The book accurately reflects

feelings of despair associated with the pain of human suffering but comes short of offering long-lasting hope or an understanding of the purpose of suffering.

As she hides her disease from her family, Alice is forced to reckon with the question “Why are we called to suffer?” Throughout the course of the book, Alice comes to accept her diagnosis and prognosis. She makes a speech on what it is like living with a terminal disease, one that will change her permanently. Alice’s ability to reframe her suffering and see it as something that can be used to stimulate education and compassion, is similar to Christian teaching about the role of suffering. The ability to see suffering as a mechanism to make the Christian more like Christ is the ultimate motivator to remain steadfast in times of trial.

## Identity

One of the most significant losses Alice faces is her inability to continue teaching at Harvard. Alice poured much of her time, energy, and effort into her career, often at the expense of relationships with her family members. Alice recognizes that she will soon be unable to teach, write articles, learn new things, or be called upon as a reliable source of information. Alice faces a major identity crisis as she learns that many aspects of her identity will soon no longer be true of her. This concept is in direct contrast to the truths about identity that are discussed in scripture (Genesis 1:27, Ephesians 1, Isaiah 64:8), which indicate that our value comes from being made in the image of God as opposed to our contribution to society.

Alice, as an unbeliever, does not have the ability to rest in the truth that she is made in God’s image and is therefore valuable regardless of her accomplishments or contribution to society. During the early days of her diagnosis, Alice is given an Activities of Daily Living questionnaire for her husband to fill out. Alice describes the questions on the list that represent further progression of the disease as “humiliating,” including needing to be fed, being home or hospital bound, and having no control over bowel or bladder. Alice does not see any value in a life without her mind and makes plans to commit suicide once she reaches a certain level of cognitive decline.

Alice struggles to accept the untimely decline of her health, which is a fear all readers can relate to. This crisis of identity that Alice experiences causes the reader to question: What gives a person value? Without accomplishments, talents, or contributions, what does a person have left? While the Lord seeks to use our abilities to glorify Himself, they are not what determines how much a person is worth. Our worth is found in the person of Christ, who values us based on who we are, not on what we are able to do (Gen 1:27-28).

### Relationships

Throughout the course of the book, Alice's relationships change substantially. Perhaps the most surprising change is between Alice and John. At the beginning of the book, Alice appears to view John as her strongest support. However, by the end of the book, John is the most withdrawn and the least involved of all family members. He is unable to cope with Alice's physical decline and ultimately moves to Minnesota, accepting another job, and leaving Alice in the care of their daughter, Lydia.

The most significant change in relationship occurs between Alice and Lydia. At the beginning of the book, the reader can quickly identify the tension between them, largely due to Lydia's decision to delay her college education. As a college professor, Alice highly values continuing education and is not able to understand how a gap year would benefit Lydia. However, as Alice's health declines, Alice's primary support person withdraws by moving to Minnesota while Alice's daughter, who was previously emotionally distant, moves in with Alice and becomes her primary caregiver. The reader is confronted with the question: "If we withdraw from someone, physically and emotionally, during a time of crisis, were we ever close to begin with?"

### Hope

Like Alice, the reader is confronted with the question: "When something unexpected happens, how will I respond? What gives me hope?" Throughout the course of the book, the reader will discover a variety of messages about hope: hope in finding a cure for Alzheimer's Disease, hope in dis-

covering an Alzheimer's gene, hope in the suffering coming to an end. But is this true hope? For the Christian, cure for disease and reduction in human suffering is always a positive gain. However, hope found on this earth is often temporary and will ultimately lead to disappointment. While a cure for disease could be an answer to prayer, it does not prevent death from ever occurring. The Christian can remain hopeful during immense trials and uncertainty because of the promise that trials are never wasted. True hope is found in the promise that our earthly pain is preparing us for eternity with Christ (Romans 5:1-5).