

FINDING GRACE

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IN THE FACE OF

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DEMENTIA



John Dunlop MD

“This book offers needed help and hope for those who have a loved one experiencing dementia. John Dunlop’s training as a medical doctor, along with his understanding of what the Bible teaches us about our bodies and our souls, gives him a unique perspective from which to address this crucial issue.”

**Dennis Rainey**, president, FamilyLife

“Finding this book is like discovering a wonderful treasure. John Dunlop has mined decades of experience as geriatrician, son of a mother with dementia, bioethics expert, and active church member to help the rest of us make sense of a condition that seems to rob people of every shred of dignity. Drawing on the glorious biblical truth of every person’s creation in the image of God, Dunlop shows that dignity cannot be lost even in the face of dementia. People entering or anticipating the experience of dementia, as well as their family, friends, and caregivers—in other words, nearly everyone—will find in this book the grace they need to cope with its challenges.”

**John Kilner**, professor of bioethics and contemporary culture,  
Trinity International University; author, *Why People Matter* and  
*Dignity and Destiny*

“Almost thirty years ago, my mother died of complications springing from nine years of Alzheimer’s Disease. During those nine years I read several helpful books that described the stages of the disease, what to expect, and how to respond. Nowadays similar resources are found on the web. But there is nothing quite like John Dunlop’s book on dementia. Decades of experience as a geriatrician and a devout Christian combine to help other believers think through dementia—what it means, how to trust God when you see its onset (in yourself or in friends and relatives), and, yes, how God glorifies himself and brings strength to his people precisely in the midst of such horrendous, ravaging illness. This book will help you become a better caregiver; more importantly, it will help you become a more mature and thoughtful Christian. It may even help you become a better patient.”

**D. A. Carson**, research professor of New Testament, Trinity  
Evangelical Divinity School; cofounder, The Gospel Coalition

“My father-in-law resided with us through his eight-year journey with Alzheimer’s. As a physician, I had taken care of patients with dementia, but then I lived with the disease. The best way to help a friend or family member dealing with this illness is to give them a copy of this book. It is an invaluable resource.”

**David Stevens**, chief executive officer, Christian Medical & Dental  
Associations

“*Finding Grace in the Face of Dementia* is a remarkably helpful book on the increasingly common phenomenon of dementia. Growing out of his medical practice as a geriatric physician and his experience as a caregiver for his parents, both of whom suffered from dementia, John Dunlop writes for those who struggle with this disease, for caregivers, and for members of the body of Christ eager to lean in and love well in these difficult circumstances. This book ably and understandably covers the waterfront medically, theologically, practically, and experientially. Combining compassionate kindness, sober realism, appropriate anguish and lament, and ultimate confidence in God’s love and grace, Dunlop both encourages and fortifies those who suffer and those who give care. This book rings true to my own experience with my mother, who suffered from dementia for twenty years. May this much-needed resource be used widely and mightily in the days ahead.”

**Steven C. Roy**, associate professor of pastoral theology, Trinity  
Evangelical Divinity School

“Dementia may well be the most feared diagnosis in the Western world, and this book is a timely contribution to a community in need of education and encouragement. Dunlop does not gloss over the challenges that dementia can bring but takes us by the hand and leads us sympathetically through the various aspects of the illness. Dunlop’s extensive experience allows him to contribute rich practical and spiritual wisdom for those walking this path. I highly recommend it as a guide.”

**Megan Best**, palliative care practitioner; bioethicist

*Finding Grace in the Face of Dementia*



# Finding Grace in the Face of Dementia

John Dunlop, MD

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To those who  
seek to love and care  
for people with dementia  
in ways that honor God





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# Introduction

Dementia, dignity, and honoring God—you must be kidding! Chances are you have never seen those three thoughts in the same sentence. How can such a tragedy as dementia be dignified, and how in the world can God be honored through it?

As followers of Jesus, we should desire God to be honored in all things, so that includes our approach to the tragedies of life, even dementia. A number of years ago, when I started questioning these issues, I was talking to a friend about a paper I wanted to write on how dementia can bring honor to God. I recall telling my friend that I did not know what I was going to say but that it was going to be very short. Well, the more I got into it, the more I realized there are many ways in which God can graciously use the tragedy of dementia to honor himself. That short paper has become this book.

Over and over again I have seen God honored when others respect the inherent dignity of those afflicted with dementia. It happens because the dignity of everyone, including those with dementia, is rooted in nothing less than the fact that they were made in the image of God. Dementia is common today and will become increasingly so in the future. If we are to live faithful to our Lord, Jesus Christ, we need to learn how we can respect the dignity of those who suffer from it and in the process honor God.

At the outset we must have a common understanding of dignity, since the term has a wide variety of meanings. Some define

*dignity* as something intrinsic to being a person. Others think of it as an individual's reputation, while some look at it as people's ability to respect themselves and be in control of their lives. When used in connection with the end of life, many use the word *dignity* to refer to freedom from pain and dependence. None of these are what I have in mind. Scripture teaches that all human beings are made in the image of God, which makes them distinct from the rest of God's creation. Humans are loved by God to the extent that his Son died to allow those who believe in him to enjoy his presence forever. These two facts impart a dignity rooted not in who they are or in what they can accomplish but only in God himself. It is true of all persons, including those with the most severe dementia. Now, in addition to a God-given dignity common to all, there may be other sources of dignity that vary from person to person. Some may be more dignified in their character, and others acquire dignity through their accomplishments, but these sources of dignity are added to their inherent, God-given dignity.

As you read, you will notice that I never refer to those afflicted with dementia as "the demented." No! I always refer to them as "people with dementia." I never want to think of dementia as something that defines who they are. They are first and foremost people even though afflicted with the dreaded disease called "dementia."

### **The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly**

Dementia can be experienced in a wide variety of ways. Just to illustrate, I'll share with you three stories from my direct experience. You will see that they represent the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Jessie illustrates the good. At eighty-six, she was still the life of the party. After spending decades on the mission field, she developed dementia, became progressively confused, and was no longer able to live at home with her husband. When I visited her in the nursing home, she was invariably sitting with a group of friends animatedly telling stories of her life in Congo. She would get to

the punch line, slap her thigh, and laugh contagiously. Her friends, gathered around her, had a great time. Now, did it really matter that Jessie told the same three stories over and over? It didn't to her friends! They enjoyed them at the moment, even though they did not remember them. She was happy, she had a meaningful role in the lives of others, and she enjoyed talking about her Lord and the work she had seen him do. Unfortunately Jessie's story is not typical, nor is it even common, but it does show a "good" side to dementia.

The bad is seen in the experience of my mother. Mom was one of the kindest, most loving women I have ever known. She was widowed at eighty and continued to live independently in a senior-adult facility for many years. People regularly invited her to eat with them, as they loved her sweet spirit and happy demeanor. She had a real ministry to the dying and, in rotation with some other residents, would go sit with those who were dying in the nursing wing of the community and softly sing to them her favorite hymns. Slowly, however, she began to lose some of her abilities. She caused several small fires by forgetting to turn off the stove; and she would occasionally lose her way when returning to her apartment. The administration told us, her children, that it was time for her to move into the dementia section of the facility. After praying together, we met with her to discuss making a change. Though we had expected her to resist, we were thrilled when she graciously consented to the move. Over her year there, she became increasingly forgetful, confused, and at times agitated. One time she struck another resident, which was totally out of character for Mom. She was then moved to the nursing wing, where she became increasingly boisterous and at times combative. She was generally nice to us, but clearly her personality had changed. Eventually, she did not recognize us as her children, yet it seemed she knew we loved her. I feel sorry that I had to place Mom's story into the "bad" category, but she is far from unique, as most patients with dementia fall into this category at some point.

When I think of the “ugly,” my mind goes to James. He had been the executive of his family. Raised by a domineering father, he tragically followed that example well. Married fifty years, James and his wife had three daughters. They were his pride and joy, while they, in turn, loved him dearly. But James was in charge, and he left no question about that. In his mid-seventies he became increasingly forgetful and confused. He was unable to recognize that he was failing and still insisted on being the boss. He would wake up at 3:00 a.m. and insist that his disabled wife cook him his breakfast. Not being able to do so, she would call their daughter who lived nearby. She responded dutifully and cooked his eggs to his precise order, but then he’d go into a rage because he thought he had ordered her to make French toast. She was broken to tears. Such things began happening all too frequently until eventually the family, in desperation, had to make arrangements for James at a dementia-care facility. James’s case was “ugly” and, though somewhat less common, not rare.

Yes, dementia comes in all shapes and sizes. But what actually do we mean by *dementia*? At its simplest, *dementia* is a compound word. The prefix *de-* signifies “removal of,” and *ment* comes from the same root as *mental*, so literally *dementia* means “less brain.” The term *dementia* is falling out of vogue. Now it is more correct to refer to *major neurocognitive impairment*. Since that is a mouthful and not widely understood, I will continue to use the word *dementia*.

There is often confusion between dementia and Alzheimer’s disease. Dementia is a larger category of which about 70 percent is Alzheimer’s. In this book I will usually speak of dementia rather than restricting my comments to Alzheimer’s. There are a number of other kinds of dementia, as well, as you will see in later chapters. I also comment that though this book focuses on the dementias typically associated with the later years of life, the principles I share are relevant to those with cognitive impairment at any stage of life, including those in their younger years who have intellectual

development disorders (formerly termed “mental retardation”) and those who have suffered brain injury.

## **The Challenges of Dementia**

Our older years can have many challenges. “Old age is not for cowards,” as one of my dementia patients told me at every appointment. Each time she said it, she laughed, thinking it was the first time she’d ever said it. The apostle Paul expressed it differently: “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). I often speak of the “four Ds” of our later years: depression, disease, dementia, and death. Any one of these can be difficult, but, for many, dementia is the greatest challenge. It can be a massive tragedy not only for the patient but, perhaps even more, for those who love and care for them. Dementia can progress over as many as twenty years before it finally leads to death, and even then it can leave horrible memories for the survivors. It is further tragic, as we will see, for while there are many ways to improve the quality of the life of those with dementia, there are currently no cures.

It bothers me how many people fear getting dementia, even more than they fear cancer or death. This fear comes from at least two reasons. First, many have had bad experiences with dementia sufferers, and they don’t want to succumb themselves. Second, and on a more fundamental level, dementia is a threat to the basic values of Western culture. Society values youth, wit, independence, and control. We are tempted to equate our individual value with our IQs and our ability to accomplish things. Dementia will likely threaten both. One lesson we can learn from those with dementia is that value can be found in something other than our cognitive abilities and usefulness. As we progress through this book, we will see that there is great value in the fact that people with dementia can still experience feelings and are capable of relationships. Of even greater value is the fact that they, being made in the image of God and loved by him, possess inherent dignity. The experience of



dementia can help teach us what our true value is, and embracing it may make the prospect of dementia less threatening and fearful.

Finally, dementia is a challenge because it is so common and will become more so. At the time of my writing, there are over six million Americans who suffer from dementia. Roughly speaking, 5 percent of Americans have dementia at age sixty-five, and this number will double roughly every seven years. Doing the math tells us that by age ninety, nearly half will have some form of dementia. Fortunately, the rate of increase begins to slow down by that stage of life. These numbers mean that one-third of seniors will die with some form of the disease, but not necessarily from it. In part this is the consequence of the wonderful life-prolonging technologies and healthier lifestyles we now have. It is certainly a bad result for a good reason. Dementia has a significant economic impact. Estimates are that the total cost of dementia to this country is approximately 220 billion dollars a year. That number is staggering, as it is almost half the total amount spent on public education. Dementia will become more and more of a problem for society as a whole but also for the church of Jesus Christ, which will need to assume a greater role in the care of those who suffer from it.

### **My Interest in Dementia**

This book flows out of many of my own passions. First is my trust in God and love for him and his Word, the Bible. There I learn that God is good, loving, and all-powerful. The difficult challenges of life do not come by accident. No! Our sovereign God brings them into our lives with purpose. Over the years as I have been confronted with dementia, I have failed to recognize any purpose for it, yet I believe it is my responsibility to search out what God's reason may be. This book is my attempt to explore God's possible purposes in allowing this horrible disease. But even when I do not fully understand, I have learned I can still trust him. My trust in God is not ultimately rooted in how well my life is going or how

comfortable and happy I am. God has already proven his love for me by coming into this evil world in the person of Jesus, dying on the cross, and demonstrating his power over life and death by rising from the dead. Surely a God who loved me to that extent can be trusted even through the challenges of dementia, whether I understand its purpose or not.

Second, I enjoy both the science of medicine as well as the wonderful relationships I have had throughout my career as a geriatrician. Helping patients who suffer from dementia and their families has been a large part of that practice. The work isn't always joyful, because I regularly observe their frustration and anger. I have tried my best to keep up with the findings of dementia research and apply that knowledge to my treatment of patients, including prescribing the newest medicines, even though I am frustrated with how little benefit they have. Many think that apart from these medications, little can be done to lessen the suffering. Yet this is not true. I, along with other professionals, have come to realize that there is something more important than dispensing medications to deal with dementia, and that is treating its victims with respect and dignity. For that reason, one of my goals is to help caretakers know how to honor God as they relate to the afflicted.

The third reason is personal. I have a strong genetic predisposition to dementia and may well be its victim someday. Recently I have joked with my friends, saying that I want to get this book written soon before it becomes an autobiography.

### **Is There a Christian Approach to Dementia?**

Jesus set us a wonderful example of how to truly love others. In addition, the Bible contains many helpful principles for dementia care. Does this mean that there is a distinctively Christian approach to dealing with dementia? Most certainly not! But there are right ways, and there are wrong ways. I find it remarkable how frequently the right way is consistent with traditional Judeo-Christian values as revealed in the Scriptures and illustrated by

Jesus. I know wonderful caregivers, both professionals and laypersons, who are doing an awesome job yet have little knowledge of Jesus. Most experts in the field who give profoundly sage advice do not claim to be Christian or provide any biblical basis for their approach.

Even though there may not always be a significant difference between the approaches of Christian and non-Christian caregivers, there may be a huge difference in why they follow those approaches and in the resources they have to draw on to do it well. Distinctively Christian care should spring from an unselfish love for those in need, not from a sense of obligation or the desire to receive recognition. One of my frequent prayers is that I will serve my patients out of the fullness that comes from knowing how much God loves me and has given to me. I dread the thought of trying to please people so that I can feel good about myself or receive appreciation and praise.

Christians also have unique resources to help them, including the wisdom and love of God that comes through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, the ability to pray for God's comfort and help, and a church body willing to pitch in and assist. Perhaps above all else, caregivers who rely on God can appreciate the fact that they, too, have a caregiver in heaven, the Lord Jesus.

### *About Finding Grace in the Face of Dementia*

In thinking about how God can be honored in and even through dementia, several key questions arise, and the answers to those are intertwined through this book. These include:

- Do we view people with dementia as whole persons, or does their personhood diminish with their cognitive ability?
- How can a good and powerful God allow such a tragedy? Is dementia meaningless, and if not, what are God's purposes?
- What is it like to experience dementia?

- What strategies can allow us to honor God as we navigate the challenges of dementia?

Throughout the book I will be sharing stories largely taken from my personal experience (though all the names have been changed). Throughout is woven the story of one couple I know well, whom I call Dave and Denise, although I have modified several aspects of their experience to better illustrate my points. As you will see, they have found grace to deal with dementia in a way that honors God.

The approach I start with is to view dementia in the context of the storyline of the Bible—creation, fall, redemption, and future hope. Then I develop some background information to allow us to understand what it must be like to experience dementia. The next part of the book is dedicated to those who care for people with dementia. We need to understand that while the job is really tough, it is associated with certain rewards. The book will conclude with an explanation of a number of ways in which God can be honored through dementia.

My purpose in writing this book is to provide a theological lens through which we can view dementia and then give a number of practical ways in which it can be applied. I trust it will be useful for those who are developing the disease as well as those who care for people at any stage of it. I also hope that many professional caregivers, whether doctors, nurses, chaplains, or social workers, will benefit from this read. In addition, I believe it will be useful for pastors, other church leaders, and members of ethics committees. I suspect that most readers will be followers of Jesus, but I truly hope that the book will be read by non-Christians as well. I am impressed by how many who do not embrace the Christian faith nevertheless hold the life and teachings of Jesus in high regard. My desire is that they will profit from a deeper consideration of how Jesus would respond to dementia.

I have chosen to conclude each chapter with a prayer. I encour-

## *Introduction*

age you to pray along with me, for I am fully aware that without God's speaking to you through this book, my time to write it and your time reading it will be wasted. It is also true, when we face tragedies such as dementia, that we do not always know what to pray for. I offer my prayers as one potential model, but fundamentally it will be the Holy Spirit who will lead you to pray aright.

So now let's launch into this very challenging discussion.

## **Prayer**

*Dear Father, I need to know more about dementia. It is all too common and all too devastating. I am intrigued with the thought that you may actually have some purpose in this terrible disease. As I think further about this, my prayer is that you, by your Holy Spirit working through your Word, will be my teacher. I pray that you will be honored both in my own spirit and in others as I relate to them. I pray this for my good and for your honor. Amen.*

## God and Dementia

I hate dementia. When I saw it developing in both of my parents, it was hard to see these beautiful, loving people incapacitated by the changes in their minds, even though their dementias were not the worst cases I have known—not by far. But even while I lament this tragedy, I am still totally convinced that God is both good and strong and that dementia was in his plan for them. One of my favorite psalms puts it like this: “Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, and that to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love” (Ps. 62:11–12).

In his love God was able to prevent their dementias but chose not to. How am I to respond? Is he really not as good or loving as I had thought? Is he not strong enough to control dementia? I know these are valid questions to ponder; perhaps you are asking them yourself. When I confront such challenges, I have learned that I have to go back to the very basics of my faith and begin to see my struggles in the full light of Scripture. Granted, we will not find in the Bible any mention of dementia, but we do find some enduring principles that help us understand this disease and allow us to respond to it in God-honoring ways.

## **God Has Purpose in All Things**

One of those principles is that God has a purpose in all that happens. He never makes mistakes. As we face dementia in ourselves or loved ones, we can identify with the psalmist who wrote, “I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me” (Ps. 57:2). Even while recognizing that God had a purpose in what he did, the psalmist still cried out to God in his need. The more we get to know God, the more we can trust him, even when we may not understand why he does what he does. I love what Paul says: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom. 11:33). Once we recognize that in his infinite wisdom he has a purpose in dementia, there is no problem affirming his love and power.

## **Life Is Not about Us but about God**

The second underlying principle we must take from Scripture is that fundamentally our lives are not all about us but about God. “In the beginning, God . . .” (Gen. 1:1). That is where we have to start. Before anything else, God was there. He alone exists simply because he exists. He was primary; everything else was secondary. He was Creator; everything else was created. He introduced himself to Moses as “I AM” (Ex. 3:14). He gave no explanation but in a sense simply said, “Here I am—just accept me.” The apostle Paul expressed it clearly: “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36). Our universe came from him, it is daily sustained by him, and its ultimate purpose will be fulfilled in his being glorified.

This means our lives should focus on God. One of the challenges is that he allows us to enjoy so much in this life that it is easy to think that our reason for existence is to live comfortably and find happiness in every way we can. We must never discount the many blessings God pours into our earthly lives and be grateful for them. But when we focus only on the gifts and not on the giver,

we are grievously wrong. Life is fundamentally about coming to know him personally and finding fulfillment and joy in nothing other than God himself. He alone can satisfy our deepest longings. If we are settling for the pleasure we get only in ourselves and in this world, we are accepting something second-rate. Adopting this God-centered view of life is critical to rightly viewing dementia. It is not simply about dementia disrupting our comfort and happiness; this disease becomes a tool that God uses to accomplish his ultimate purpose: his honor, his glory.

### **Dementia Was Not Part of God's Good Creation**

Seven times in Genesis 1 we are told that the world God made was good, meaning it conformed perfectly to God's character. It was filled with love, beauty, joy, righteousness, and satisfying work for our first parents. There was no human death, no disease, no pain or suffering. Most important, for our present purposes, there was no dementia.

### **All Humans Are Made in God's Image and Are His by Right of Creation**

The high point of God's creation was humans. He created us, and so by right we all belong to him. The psalmist caught the significance of this when he wrote, "The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1). Applying this truth to dementia victims means that they, too, belong to God just as much as anyone else, and we must treat them accordingly.

God made all of us with both minds and bodies, and who we are is an essential unity of these; both are equally important to our identity. There is no such thing as a half person. We cannot afford to discredit the importance of our physical bodies and emphasize our minds or do the opposite. Our bodies may get sick and not function well, but we are still persons. Our minds may get sick and not function well, but we are still persons. We will see that dementia



may devastate some of our brain's abilities, such as memory and rationality, but we still have feelings and are able to enjoy human relationships. We are still whole persons who belong to God.

That each of us is God's creation and belongs to him is reason enough to treat everyone with respect. But there is an even more significant basis for doing so: each of us has been made in the image and likeness of God.<sup>1</sup> That we are made in God's image is the first thing God declared about humankind and so distinguished us from all the rest of creation. Scripture doesn't say we are the exact image of God but rather that we are made in, or according to, God's image. Only Jesus is the exact image of God (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). Being made in God's image conveys a special dignity to all men and women, and this dignity does not depend on how closely our character resembles God, how smart we are, or what wonderful things we do. The fact of human dignity is equally as true of the Nobel Laureate as of the most severe dementia sufferer who is totally dependent on others.

### **Sin Led to Dementia but Did Not Diminish God's Image**

Our first parents were not content to live in loving relationship with their Creator and decided that merely reflecting his image was not enough for them. They wanted to be even more like God. So they disobeyed the one command God had given them. In that single act of rebellion, sin entered the human race. God's good creation began to unravel in almost every way. As a result of man's disobedience, death came alongside life, and alongside goodness came evil, alongside love came hate, and alongside health came disease, including dementia.

But even as sin disrupted so much of God's good creation, one thing it did not destroy was the image of God in all human beings. This is a key concept and worth belaboring, for it means that even those severely afflicted with dementia share equally with all of humanity in the image of God with its inherent dignity. We see this here: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be

shed, for God made man in his own image” (Gen. 9:6). After the flagrant sin that led to the flood, God placed a special protection on mankind because they were “in his own image.”

We get another fascinating glimpse from the New Testament, where James writes, concerning our tongues, “With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness [image] of God” (James 3:9). Even when people are such scoundrels that we want to curse them, they still bear the image of God. Sin did not destroy the image of God nor do we get any indication in Scripture that it diminished it any more than damaging a building alters its blueprint. Martin Luther King understood the significance of this when he said, “There are no gradations in the image of God.”<sup>2</sup>

However, sin did damage our ability to reflect the image of God, and it did so in profound ways. Further, when sin entered the world, it compromised our ability to enjoy our lives on earth. This is seen in countless ways, but one of them is dementia and the way it wreaks havoc in the lives of its sufferers and those who love and care for them. We are right to be frustrated and even angry at dementia, leading us to cry out to God, lament the tragedy, and look for God’s help to respond to it rightly.

### **God Uses Bad to Accomplish Good**

One of the striking things the Bible teaches us about God is how he takes some of the most difficult circumstances of life and transforms them for his own purposes. We see that dramatically in the case of sin itself. God’s glory is certainly seen in the marvels of his beautiful creation. But we see even more of his glory in the way he dealt with sin. In spite of our turning our backs on God, he loved us to the extent that he sent his Son to suffer and die to bring us back into relationship with him. Similarly, God takes many of the most difficult challenges of life and turns them around, enabling us to appreciate how great he is. His purpose may not be our immediate comfort but our long-term ability to find our greatest joy

in him. Joni Eareckson Tada, who is quadriplegic, is well known for saying of God, “Always permitting what he hates to accomplish something he loves.”<sup>3</sup> Pastor Tim Keller explains it clearly: “The evils of life can be justified if we recognize that the world was primarily created to be a place where people find God and grow spiritually into all they were designed to be.”<sup>4</sup> One of those things that God may hate, one of those evils of life, is dementia. Yet, as we will see, God can use dementia to allow us to know more of his goodness and to honor him.

### **We Will Be Like Him**

God is in the process of calling out from mankind a group of people as his own. He gives them the ability to trust him by faith and makes them his children. He chooses them not according to how good they are, for no one is good enough to merit what he gives. Instead, he chooses them to show how good he is. Then he begins the slow process of restoring them fully to his image, which they were made in. Paul writes, “Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. . . . And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:29–30). Now, here is the key point. All those he has chosen will increasingly conform to his image, and in the end all will enter into his glory.<sup>5</sup> This transformation is based not on their abilities or IQ but on God’s choice and plan. The apostle John put it simply: “We shall be like him” (1 John 3:2).

Robert Davis, a pastor who experienced dementia, reflected on his final destiny and wrote, “How can I stand to look at this disaster [referring to his dementia] that medical science predicts will most probably overtake me? If I were not a Christian, I do not know how I could stand it. However, since I am a Christian, I can stand it by looking beyond it—looking beyond and considering the glories of heaven where each one of these things will be gone forever and be replaced by perfection, glory, and joy.”<sup>6</sup>

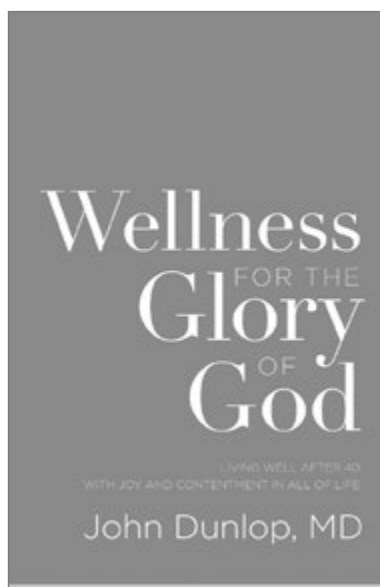
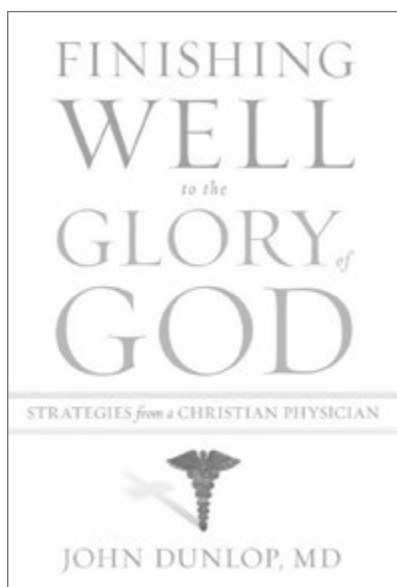
As Christians we can confront dementia with confidence that God will accomplish his purpose and his glory. In that we can find joy and hope. We know in the future all believers, including those with dementia, will stand in his presence as whole people reflecting more of his image. Such is the destiny of those suffering from dementia, including the most severe forms of it. They will be completely restored as whole people, body and soul together, fully able to enjoy the richness of God through all eternity. That destiny is a further source of the dignity they possess even in the compromised state they live in today.

But in the meantime, one way we can be helped to honor God through the experience of dementia is by understanding more about it, which is what we'll consider next.

### **Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, dementia is scary. The very thought of it terrifies me. I confess it is difficult to believe you are loving and strong while at the same time you allow this tragedy. Help me believe you have a purpose in all that you do. I want to trust you, but it will be easier if I can get a glimpse of the purpose you intend through dementia. By your Spirit, guide my thinking and my emotional responses. I pray this for my good and for your honor. Amen.*

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John Dunlop



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# THERE IS HOPE . . .

When people are diagnosed with dementia, it impacts everyone around them. It can be devastating to watch loved ones lose the independence, personality, and abilities that once defined them, knowing there is no cure. How should Christians respond?

Experienced geriatrician Dr. John Dunlop wants to transform the way we view dementia—showing us how God can be honored through such a tragedy as we respect the inherent dignity of all humans made in the image of God. Sharing stories from decades of experience working with dementia patients, Dunlop provides readers, particularly caregivers, with a biblical lens through which to understand the experience and challenge of this life-altering condition. *Finding Grace in the Face of Dementia* will help us see the purposes of God as we love and care for those with this disease.

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“The best way to help a friend or family member dealing with this illness is to give them a copy of this book. It is an invaluable resource.”

DAVID STEVENS, chief executive officer, Christian Medical & Dental Associations

“Dunlop’s training as a medical doctor along with his understanding of what the Bible teaches us about our bodies and our souls gives him a unique perspective from which to address this crucial issue.”

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“There is nothing quite like Dunlop’s book on dementia. Decades of experience as a geriatrician and as a devout Christian combine to help other believers think through dementia.”

D. A. CARSON, research professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; cofounder, The Gospel Coalition

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COUNSELING / DEMENTIA

