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Facing Childhood Death in British Protestant Spirituality

If a religion is, as it should be, conceived as a practical framework for the living of human lives rather than an abstract philosophical system, then there are few harsher or more urgent tests of its value and its power than childhood death. In the eras in which most parents might expect to lose children, most children might expect to lose children, and all children had to learn that they themselves might well die before adulthood, we should expect that these terrible truths would often be framed in religious terms (although not exclusively so). Religions might offer answers, comfort or simply spine-stiffening rigour, but a religion with nothing to offer in such a situation is hardly worthy of the name.

The Reformed Protestantism ('Calvinism') which was the orthodoxy of pre-Civil War Britain, and which remained central to its religious culture thereafter, was not the most obvious source of comfort. Some of its modern critics no longer look very credible.¹ In particular, as I have argued elsewhere, the accusation of emotional coldness is hard to sustain against a religious tradition which made such rich and self-aware use of the feelings and affections.² However, it is inescapable that Reformed Protestantism had a narrower range of resources on which to draw in face of childhood death than did its main competitors. If the claim that this was an iconophobic religion has been discredited, it was certainly a ritual-averse tradition. Not that it avoided rituals, a feat no group of humans has yet managed, but rather that it often suspected them, usually saw little value in them and never explicitly and deliberately deployed them as means of spiritual consolation. This essay asks: what, then, in what was plainly an age of rising childhood mortality,³ did this religion do for its believers in the face of childhood death? And what did facing childhood death do to this religion?

We may begin with Nehemiah Wallington, a London woodturner unknown in his own time who has since become a historical celebrity:⁴ thanks not simply to the volume of writing he left behind in his copious notebooks (although only a fraction of his total corpus survives) but also to the sense of his humanity which comes across from them. Much of the attention has gathered around his own youthful spiritual crises, in which he despaired of his sins and repeatedly contemplated suicide. But by the 1620s, Wallington (born in 1598) was settling down, married, with a growing family. He and his wife Grace would eventually have five children: she also miscarried at least twice. Yet four of the five would die in infancy or childhood between 1625 and 1632. The fifth, their daughter Sarah, outlived her father, and before his death bore him three grandchildren – but of those the eldest two also died, aged one and three, further hammer-blows to the old man. The impact of that series of deaths can hardly be imagined. Wallington's account of his two-year-old son John's death in April 1626 has a raw pathos that has made it justly famous:

The night before he died hee lay crying all the night mame O Johns hand: O Johns foote: for hee was strocke cold all one side of his body and about three a clocke in the morning: Mistris Trotter that watch with him wakened my wife and I and tolde us hee was a departing now[.] And my wife started up and looked upon him hee then

¹ See, for example, the useful discussion in Ralph Houlbrooke, 'Death in childhood: the practice of the "good death" in James Janeway's *A Token for Children*' in Anthony Fletcher and Stephen Hussey (eds), *Childhood in Question: Children, Parents and the State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 37-56 at p. 51.

² Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), esp. part I.

³ See, for example, the recent findings outlined in Bennjamin J. Penny-Mason and Rebecca L. Gowland, 'The Children of the Reformation: Childhood Palaeoepidemiology in Britain, AD 1000–1700' in *Medieval Archaeology* vol. 58 (2014), 162-194.

⁴ Chiefly due to Paul Seaver's *Wallington's World: a puritan artisan in seventeenth-century London* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985). Cf. the invaluable selection from Wallington's writings edited by David Booy: *The Notebooks of Nehemiah Wallington, 1618-1654: A Selection* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

being aware of his Mother he sayd mame John fall down opaday: mame John foll downe opaday and the next day hee had too or three feetes that wee thought hee would have died at that time and at eleven a clocke at night ... he sayd opaday, these are the last words that my sweete sonne John speake: and so ended this miserable life.⁵

This was, as Wallington already knew, a humdrum, everyday tragedy. He had himself lost two sisters, as well as his mother, as a child; and six months his new family had suffered its first bereavement, when his daughter Elizabeth died during the plague of 1625. It was that first death that struck her father like a battering-ram. And being the man he was, Nehemiah Wallington's trauma was in part a religious one. 'The greefe for this childe,' he wrote, 'was so greate that I forgoote myselfe so much that I deed offend God in it For I brooke all my purposes: promises and covenantes with my God: For I was much disstrackted in my mind.'⁶

The most obvious point to note here – which will recur – is that Wallington's sense of being alienated from God by his grief compounded his anguish. As we shall see, in this religious culture grief itself was sometimes felt to be culpable, which could compound but, perhaps, also relieve the sufferings of the bereaved. Yet Wallington's account suggests two more subtle points. First, although he was a man always ready intricately to dissect his own faults, his worst sin in this paroxysm of grief was to forget himself and become distracted. He did not mention any temptation to be angry with God, or to curse or rail against him. And indeed, that instinctive lashing out – which is certainly common in more modern believers, and which might seem only natural – is striking by its absence in sources from this period. Perhaps good Reformed Protestants did not dare admit that they felt such a thing, but given how enthusiastic they generally were to sound out (and indeed to exaggerate) the foulest depths of their own sins, that seems *prima facie* unlikely.⁷ We are better guessing that this religious culture simply did not lend itself to that way of thinking.

Second, Wallington goes on to tell us how he was recalled to his senses. His chief comfort came from his wife Grace, presumably no less devastated than he but – in her husband's eyes, at least – a more resilient person. She consoled him with the trouble and sorrow Elizabeth was now spared: 'doe but consider it is your daughters weading day and will you grive to see your daughter goe home to her Husband Christ Jesus?' He asked her, astonished, if she did not grieve. She answered, 'no truly Husband if you will beleeeve mee I doe as freely give it againe unto God: as I did reseved it of him.' In 1628 they suffered a third bereavement, when their son Nehemiah – named for his father – died. Grace comforted her distraught husband much as she had before. Imagine, she said, that they had sent a child to a wetnurse to be raised. One day they would summon him home again, and the nurse could hardly complain. Likewise, God had given them a child to care for for a short time, but now the time had come for him to call the boy home. Whether she was as truly at ease as her husband claims to have believed, we may wonder. There is still a raw edge to these thoughts: her argument was that they have no right or grounds to feel grief, and we might expect that grief is not so readily argued away. The same ragged quality can be sensed, I think, in the father's own meditation on little Nehemiah's death. He found comfort in the Gospel image that where our heart is, there also will our treasure be. 'Now that our childe is gone to heaven our heart will be there.'⁸ That strikes an authentically Reformed Protestant note. It makes no

⁵ Booy (ed.), *Notebooks*, p. 61.

⁶ Booy (ed.), *Notebooks*, p. 59.

⁷ Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, pp. 49-62.

⁸ Booy (ed.), *Notebooks*, pp. 59, 64.

attempt to dull, deny, minimise or even ease the pain of loss. Instead, it attempts to make use of that pain to good spiritual purpose.

Wallington is sometimes taken as an exemplar of pathological Calvinism, and certainly his religion could be unbalanced and unbalancing at times. In this case, however, his religion seems to have been a source of rigorous, wholesome and clear-sighted comfort to both him and his wife: a resource which (of course) did not heal the wound, but which did prevent it from going septic.

What makes Wallington's accounts particularly valuable is their raw, unmediated quality, rarely found in seventeenth-century accounts of childhood death. The best-known collection of such accounts could hardly be more different. James Janeway's two-volume compilation *A Token for Children*, first published in 1672-3, all but suffocates the lives and deaths it narrates under a blanket of conventional pieties.⁹ In three of the cases Janeway narrates, we can compare his account with earlier published versions of the same stories, and so observe the vigour with which he has smoothed out their idiosyncrasies, edited out details which seemed to him extraneous, and whipped them into a theologically tidy line.¹⁰ Even so, both the remaining details which can be observed despite that blanket, and the blanket itself, are able to deepen and extend our view of how childhood death and early modern Protestantism interacted.

For example, Janeway's accounts corroborate Grace Wallington's surprising emphasis on the need to restrain mourning. It appears that this was, at least, a pious orthodoxy. He records, as exemplary, a godly four-year old asking her mother why she wept for the death of her husband, the girl's father. The mother supposedly replied that 'she had cause enough to weep', only to be told by her daughter: 'No, dear Mother ... you have no cause to weep so much, for God is a good God still to you.' This is a note of comfort, but also of reproof: Christians not only need not, but as a matter of duty and faith ought not to mourn as those who have no hope.¹¹ That double-edged rejection of mourning recurs in Janeway's accounts. An eleven-year-old boy, John Harvy, supposedly said on his deathbed that 'an Angel by me, that told me, I should quickly be in glory', whereupon his mother burst into fresh tears. First the boy comforted her: 'O Mother, ... did you but know what joy I see, you would not weep, but rejoyce.' But her grief only grew keener as he weakened, and in the end he reproached her more sharply. 'asked her, what she meant, thus to offend God; know you not, that it is the hand of the Almighty'.¹² A slightly older and preternaturally pious child, Susanna Bicks, likewise first assured her parents 'that if the Lord shalbe pleased to take me out of this lamendtable wofull world, it shalbe well with me', before warning them that if they could not be content with her death, 'we then should murmure against God'. She at least – in the longer version of her story which Janeway then edited – recognised that this was an

⁹ The first, 1672 edition of part I survives in a single copy whose location is currently unknown: this essay uses James Janeway, *A Token for Children: Being an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives, and Joyful Deaths, of several young Children* (Wing J478. London: Dorman Newman, 1676); and James Janeway, *A Token for Children. The Second Part. Being A farther Account of the Conversion, Holy and exemplary Lives, and Joyful Deaths of several other young Children, not published in The First Part* (Wing J480aA. London: Dorman Newman, 1673). Later editions published the two volumes together.

¹⁰ The cases of Susanna and Jacob Bicks are narrated more fully in *An edifieing wonder, of two children dyeing 100 yeares old or A short account of the last houres of Susanna Bickes (in the 14 yeare of her age) before her death. Septemb. 1. 1664. Also of Jacob Bickes her brother of 7. yeares old. Aug. 6. 1664.* (Wing S3807A. 1666), and that of Charles Bridgman in Isaac Ambrose, *Ultima, The last things, in reference to the First and Middle things: or Certain Meditations on Life, Death, Judgement, Hell, Right Purgatory, and Heaven* (Wing A2970. London: J. A., 1650), pp. 37-40.

¹¹ Janeway, *A Token*, p. 29; I Thess. 4:13.

¹² Janeway, *A Token ... The Second Part*, pp. 85-6.

unrealistic ideal. ‘What shall I say: with weeping I came into ye world, and with weeping must I goe out of it.’¹³

This rejection of grief had several grounds. There was the simple utilitarian argument: earthly life is full of pain, and an early ascent to heaven is cause for rejoicing, not lament. Along with that, usually unspoken, went an argument about public witness: Christians who profess to believe in eternal life should, by their dry eyes, testify to that belief before their unbelieving neighbours. But there was also a more specifically Calvinist theological argument, to do with submission to God’s providence and to his eternal decree of predestination. Predestination was one of the most distinctive, visible and (at times) controversial doctrines taught by Reformed Protestants in this period. A good deal of scholarship has focused on the doctrine’s pastoral effects, especially in relation to those who suspected or were convinced that they were irrevocably damned. Wallington himself was famously troubled with such fears.¹⁴ We might expect that this doctrine – so arbitrarily unjust, to most modern and to many contemporary eyes – would have cruelly sharpened the pain of childhood death. In fact, the reality seems to have been slightly different.

Reformed Protestants did not claim that all deceased children would be saved. They did, however, generally have a sunny view of the question. They took some pride in their insistence that unbaptised babies could be saved, as against the Catholic view – depicted as heartless – that the unbaptised must of necessity be consigned to Hell, even if only to its most agreeable region, Limbo. Martin Luther had famously argued that even the unborn could have true, saving faith, since faith is a matter of the heart and not the intellect: he cited the example of John the Baptist, who leaped in his mother’s womb when he heard the Virgin Mary’s voice. For the Reformed, in particular, there was comfort in the notion of the Church as God’s covenanted people. A child of the covenant could be and was presumed to be saved. Predestination had a communal as well as an individual dimension to it. So for all of Wallington’s fears for his own salvation, he apparently did not have a ghost of doubt that his dead children and grandchildren would be and were saved, numbered among the elect. This was not, or not necessarily, a matter of sentimentality or of a belief in the innocence of infants. William Prid’s populist, unsophisticated and bestselling book of prayers for everyday use concluded with a prayer for sick children too young or too poorly to pray for themselves. It bluntly acknowledges that the child carries the image of sinful Adam and so is justly judged, but then proceeds in simple, moving terms to beg for mercy.¹⁵

That was what the parents of sick or dead children were told. Healthy children and their parents were given a rather different message: children are dreadfully sunk in sin, firebrands of Hell in desperate need of saving faith. ‘A corrupt nature,’ Janeway warned, ‘is a rugged knotty piece to hew’; he wrote and, as he tells us, prayed over his book largely to exhort children and their parents to that task. Childhood death is simply the fact which gives his call to repentance its urgency: children ‘are not too little to dye, they are not too little to go to Hell’. His preface, addressed directly to his hoped-for child readers, is bloodcurdling stuff:

Did you never hear of a little Child that died? ... How do you know but that you may be the next Child that may die? and where are you then, if you be not God’s Child? Wilt thou tarry any longer, my dear Child, before thou run into thy chamber, and beg of God to give thee a Christ for thy Soul?

¹³ *An edifying wonder*, pp. 12-13; cf. Janeway, *A Token ... The Second Part*, pp. 32-3.

¹⁴ Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, pp. 27-32.

¹⁵ William Prid (ed.), *The Glasse of Vaine-glorie ... With sundry Christian Praiers added thereunto* (RSTC 931. London: John Windet, 1600), sigs I8v-9v (seven editions 1585-1611, although this passage first appears in this, the fifth edition).

What is striking about this appeal is that Janeway comes close to abandoning the Protestant doctrine of salvation. ‘Whither,’ he asks, ‘do you think those Children go, when they dye, that will not do what they are bid, but play the Truant, and Lye, and speak naughty words, and break the Sabbath? ... All that be wicked, and die so, must be turned into Hell’ – a statement which does not actually contradict Protestant views of works-righteousness, but hardly asserts them.¹⁶ Since Janeway’s own Calvinist orthodoxy and theological sophistication is not in doubt, we may ask why he here falls back into such a quasi-Pelagian mode?

He does not tell us, but there are clues in the narratives which he tells. On her deathbed, we read, young Sarah Howley gave her Bible to one of her brothers, urging him to ‘make use of time to get a Christ for your Souls; spend no time in running up and down and playing’. Another dying girl, named only as Mary A., would not accept an apology from her distraught mother for having been too harsh a disciplinarian. ‘O Mother, said she, speak not thus, I bless God, now I am dying, for your reproofs and corrections too; for it may be, I might have gone to Hell, if it had not been for your reproofs and corrections.’ A third child, John Sudlow, had his own first stirrings of faith at the age of four, when his baby brother died and he was struck by the fact that he too must die, and might do so soon. ‘From that time forward he was exceeding serious’ – and, indeed, he would die at the age of twelve. What unites all these comments is a belief in need for moral shock therapy. To turn a child from futile play (which is disparaged throughout Janeway’s accounts) and instead make them ‘exceeding serious’ takes reproof, a word from a dying sister, or even the sight of a baby brother’s body being ‘carried out of doors, and put into a pit-hole’.¹⁷ The point was not to exhort children to works-righteousness, but, in classic Protestant fashion, to confront them with their sinfulness and need for salvation. Janeway wrote his book because – in the face of some contemporary incredulity – he believed that even very young children were capable of heeding such lessons and of receiving saving faith, and he marshalled examples to make the point. He was arguing, in other words, not that children are sinners (which no one denied), but that they might even in childhood be sanctified.

Predestinarian theology, then, allowed these Protestants both to take comfort in the knowledge that their dead and dying children were children of the covenant and so would be saved; and also to believe that their living, healthy children were, in the main, sunk in sin and in need of a firm hand of correction. But what effect did that theology have during the crisis itself, when a sick child’s life hung in the balance – crises which, in some families, followed one another with scarcely a break? To see such a crisis in real time, we may look to Robert Woodford, a Northamptonshire lawyer of doughtily Puritan views whose diary survives in the archives of New College, Oxford. The diary describes a fraught existence, in which money worries, health scares and political fears continually tangled with one another. Woodford’s son John was born in August 1637, and had several brushes with danger in the first year of his life. When he was barely three weeks old, he spent two days with a fever, would not eat and scarcely woke. The diary records increasingly earnest prayer for him as those endless days went on. ‘I pray diverse times for my poor child,’ he wrote in a notably uneven hand at the end of the second day. The following morning, with joy, he recorded that little John had woken, the fever broken, and he had begun to feed. All was well for the next few months. On 17 December, however, Woodford wrote, ‘little Iohn is very ill w^t a Cold in his lounges & head. ... I and my deare wife have besought the Lord for him with earnestnes.’ Three days later, he could write, ‘my little sonne Iohn is very well recovered blessed be thy name oh Lord for hearing o^r poore prayers.’ The boy had another chest infection in the

¹⁶ Janeway, *A Token*, sigs. A3v-4r, A5r, A7v-8v

¹⁷ Janeway, *A Token*, pp. 13, 37; Janeway, *A Token ... The Second Part*, pp. 2-3.

following March, again much alarming his parents. Their elder son, Samuel, was by now of firmer health, but he too could send his parents rushing to their knees. In January 1638, he had a bout of vomiting which alarmed his father, but recovered quickly following his parents' prayers: Woodford marked the incident in his diary as a noteworthy answer to prayer.

It is no surprise that, in such moments of anxiety, parents would put their faith in the power of prayer, but it is worth noting the manner in which the Woodfords prayed for little John's life. During the December episode, once the baby had recovered, Woodford prayed in his diary 'that we may not sett our affections too much vpon him or any worldly thinge but graunt that we may love the creatures in thee & for thee'.¹⁸ On one level, that is merely orthodox: Christians' loves are supposed to be well-ordered. It could also be read as pre-emptive grief management: please, God, stop me from loving my son so much that I will be unable to bear it if you take him from me. But again, there is a sharper theological edge here. The words express a fear that if the Woodfords loved their son in an excessive or disorderly way, they would actually provoke God to take him from them. It is not that, as historians one supposed, they did not dare to love him for fear of his dying: it is plain that that ship had long since sailed. It is rather that they fear their love for him will be self-defeating.

Protestants of this sort, after all, believe in special providence: God's will is utterly sovereign, and that nothing happens without his will or permission.¹⁹ Therefore it is possible – indeed, sometimes it is a Christian's duty – to read meanings into worldly events, and to ask what God's purpose is in permitting them. The interpretative framework used to answer this question was the assumption that each individual's predestined life forms a coherent narrative, whose overall meaning can in principle be discerned.²⁰ This means that the reading of events can be strikingly self-centred: individuals may describe public disasters, or other people's sufferings, as judgements on their own personal sins, as if other people are no more than walk-on players in a cosmic drama starring yourself. This self-centredness can appear selfish or narcissistic, but this is misleading: rather, an individual, narrative understanding of providence compels you to derive meanings for your own life from others' lives, including their misfortunes, without claiming that that interpretation exhausts the meanings of those lives and misfortunes. So, for example, the New England settler Thomas Shepard described the deaths of two of his children in infancy, diagnosed them as a consequence of his own sins and shortcomings, and wrote that it was 'no small affliction and heartbreaking to me that I should provoke the Lord to strike at my innocent children for my sake'. Shepard was not deciding what his children's deaths meant: only what they meant *to him*.²¹ Still, this is a nice distinction which could easily be lost in the intense stress of childhood illness. Not least because it raises a usefully practical possibility: if my behaviour is provoking God to strike my children with sickness and is threatening their lives, then surely if I have the power to save them?

Shepard's own experience suggested this was so. In 1635, shortly before his emigration to New England, his newborn son Thomas fell dangerously ill. His eldest son had already died. In the midst of the crisis, Shepard wrote, 'the Lord awakened me in the night and stirred me up to pray for him, and that with very much fervency, as I thought, and many arguments to press the Lord for his life came in'. He lists these arguments for us, the arguments which God gave him with which to petition for his son's life. The boy would live

¹⁸ New College, Oxford, MS 9502 (diary of Robert Woodford, 1637–41), sub. 22.viii.1637 recto, 17.xii.1637 recto, 20.xii.1637 verso-recto.

¹⁹ Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²⁰ Rylie, *Being Protestant*, pp. 409–27.

²¹ Michael McGiffert (ed.), *God's Plot: The Paradoxes of Puritan Piety, Being the Autobiography and Journal of Thomas Shepard* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), pp. 69–70.

to glorify God; his recovery would be a testimony to God's healing power; he would be a comfort to his parents. What is more:

although my sins might hinder him [God] from doing this, yet I told the Lord his mercy should be the more wonderful if in healing my child of his sickness he would withal heal me of my sins. And thus after a sad heavy night the Lord shined on me in the morning, for I found him [Thomas] suddenly and strangely amended.²²

This phenomenon of arguing with God in prayer – especially, arguing with God using arguments that God himself has provided – was widespread in the age, a paradoxical and very Protestant form of spirituality. The image of the patriarch Jacob wrestling with God was often used.²³ Shepard was a sophisticated enough theologian to keep the paradox under control, even under such extreme stress, but in other hands the outcome could be different. Take the case of John Scrimger, a Scots minister whose daughter was taken dangerously ill with an infection arising from her scrofula. During the crisis, Scrimger

went out ... to the fields in the night, being in great anxiety, and began to expostulat with God, in a fitt of great displeasure, and said, "Thou knowest, O Lord, I have been serving thee in the uprightness of mine heart, according to my measure, and thou seest I take pleasure in this child, and cannot obtain such a thing as that at thy hand;" with other such expressions, as I durst not again utter for all the world, for I was in great bitterness, and at last it was said to me, "I have heard thee at this time, but use not such boldness in time coming, for such particulars;" and when I came back, the child was sitting up in the bed fully healed, taking some meat.²⁴

Clearly Scrimger felt he had sailed close to the wind on this one, but nevertheless also felt that the very boldness of his prayers took some credit for the outcome. The moral was that, if you can argue with God in the approved way, that is an argument that you may be able to win. You don't need simply to plead for your child's life: you can bargain for it.

It could even be more nakedly manipulative than that. During young John Woodford's first and probably most dangerous bout of illness, his father prayed that if the boy recovered, 'I have promised that by the Lordes helpe it shall be a further ingagement to me to walke with the Lord; I shall receive him againe as given a new'.²⁵ An *engagement* meant a vow or covenant. Vow- and covenant-making were an almost routine part of the British Protestant response to illness in this period, at all ages, but the practice was particularly associated with childhood: most people learned vow-making as children.²⁶ Shepard recalled how, when he himself was ten years old, his father had fallen ill. He not only prayed 'very strongly and heartily' for his father to live, but also 'made some covenant, if God would do it, to serve him the better'. The bargain failed: his father died, and as an adult he recognised that the covenant was inappropriate.²⁷ But the practice was widespread, indeed assumed to be routine. Worried parents were, we may assume, regularly making vows over their children's sickbeds, although this was recognised by some – not all – Puritan thinkers as a problematic practice. Nehemiah Wallington was a great maker of vows in his youth: but he learned 'by wofull experiance that I am intangled and have laid to heavie a burden on myselfe', renounced the practice, and wrote that he would 'never perswade any

²² McGiffert, *God's Plot*, pp. 34-5.

²³ Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, pp. 247-56.

²⁴ W. K. Tweedie (ed), *Select Biographies Edited for the Wodrow Society, Chiefly from the Manuscripts in the Library of the Faculty of Advocates, vol. I* (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1845), p. 308.

²⁵ Woodford, 'Diary', 29-30.viii.1637 verso.

²⁶ Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, pp. 130-9.

²⁷ McGiffert, *God's Plot*, p. 39.

Christian to follow my example'.²⁸ But then, as a means of manipulating God in a crisis, vowing is particularly seductive. It is a form of buying providence on credit: mercy now, when it is needed, to be paid for across a long future. Deeply problematic: but for the same reason profoundly alluring.

This theologically questionable but emotionally appealing practice directs our attention to perhaps the most obvious feature of Reformed Protestant children's deathbeds: the desperate need which both parents and children felt for comfort, consolation and reassurance. In this particular religious context, that universal need was dealt with in particular ways. The pious deathbed in early modern England was a site governed by deeply-rooted conventions and expectations, conventions which structured the deaths of the young as well as the old.²⁹ So we routinely find in these narratives that parents are comforting their children with reassurances that 'the Lord wilbe neer unto thee, and us, under this heavie and sore tryel, and will not forsake us, although now he chasten us', or that 'God shall in his tender mercy strengthen you in your weakenesse': words which are not mere platitudes, for they play on the persistent theological use of paradox in Protestantism, as God disciplines those he loves and confounds strength with weakness.³⁰

More specifically, one of the most pervasive deathbed conventions is the final struggle with temptation and despair, which issues in securing assurance; and we find this as fully reflected in Janeway's narratives as in any deathbed account of the period. Janeway's very first exemplar, Sarah Howley, had lengthy struggles with despair, which, we are told, greatly distressed her parents. Her father, trying to comfort her as her illness worsened, 'bid her be of good cheer, because she was going to a better Father' – but this only sharpened her distress, for at those words 'she fell into a great passion, and said, but how do I know that? I am a poor sinner that wants assurance: O, for assurance!' She repeatedly asked her parents and all those who came to her to pray for assurance for her.³¹

We can well imagine that this while this crisis was at its peak, it may have redoubled her and her parents' distress, as both earthly and spiritual hope seemed to be vanishing. But the concentration on her spiritual troubles had this benefit at least: as the convention dictated, and as the doctrine of grace predicted, in that struggle at least she was victorious. She and her parents might no longer be able to hope for bodily health for her, but they could and did hope for spiritual renewal before the end: and when it came, she could die peacefully and leave them with the consolation that she had run her race and been victorious. By focusing on a battle which could be won, rather than the one which would certainly be lost, Reformed Protestantism could make the deathbed a site of hope and even of comfort.

For attention to be focused on this battle, however, did have one vital prerequisite: everyone concerned must accept that the child concerned is definitely dying. Since a sickbed only becomes a deathbed in retrospect, this is not easy. And indeed, one of the persistent features of Janeway's accounts is of children who achieve a serene, preternatural certainty that they are, in fact, in their final illness. Some, we are told, went so far as to predict the precise day of their deaths, and in one such case Janeway tells us 'he died punctually at that time which he had spoke of'. Such openly prophetic stories hardly even ask to be taken seriously, but they clearly serve a purpose. It is those who are certain of their impending deaths who can achieve assurance of grace: after all her struggles, this was Sarah Howley's experience, being 'exceeding desirous to die' and assuring her companions that 'if you had

²⁸ Booy (ed.), *Notebooks*, pp. 49, 270.

²⁹ Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, pp. 460-8.

³⁰ *An edifying wonder*, pp. 7, 11.

³¹ Janeway, *A Token*, pp. 6-8.

but one taste of his [Christ's] sweetness, you would rather go to him a thousand times, than stay in this wicked world'.³² One recurrent feature of these accounts is the child who takes to reading martyr-stories, conceiving – as so many preachers urged – their own natural sufferings as a form of spiritual persecution, in which death might mark victory. The twelve-year-old Charles Bridgman, racked by the pains of his final illness, spoke of

that Martyr, who being in prison, the night before his burning put his finger in the candle, to know how he could endure the fire; *O* (said he [Bridgman]) *had I lived then, I would have runne through the fire to have gone to Christ.*³³

Those who had not been assured by special revelation that they would die could still, beset by pain and fear, find the notion appealing.

In practice, however, as we might expect, the question of whether and when to shift from fighting for life to expecting death was a fraught one. One obvious possibility is that some patients would be convinced of their impending deaths but would eventually be forced, red-faced, to admit that they are recovering. Death does not always come when called. We might imagine that such stories, which were not exactly edifying, would be quietly forgotten, but we do have an account of this kind from the young Scotsman Robert Blair, who would later be a minister with an unusually blunt approach to the miraculous.³⁴ 'From the twelfth year of mine age,' he wrote, 'I had very frequent meditations of death, whereupon it was settled in my breast that I would never see thirty years.' This persisted until his mid-twenties, when one night he fell ill with a violent fever and became convinced he would not live to see the dawn.

I began to rejoice greatly at the consideration that shortly I might be rid of sin and sorrow, and was fair before the wind to arrive where holiness and glory dwell, to enjoy God eternally. And though that scorching fever was burning my body, yet the love of God burning more fervently in my soul made me to feel no pain at all. It was not possible for my tongue then, nor my pen now, to express the great gladness and exulting of my spirit. I extolled my Lord and Saviour, yea, I sang to him, especially the 16th Psalm.

After spending some hours 'entertained in this banqueting house', he recorded, 'there burst out a great sweat', the fever broke and he realised he would live, 'which caused me to sigh many love sighs, and the vehemence of my rejoicing also abated'.³⁵ Clearly enough, what Blair describes is partly delirium, but not wholly so. His first-person witness suggests, albeit for a man a little way out of childhood, that the joys which others claimed the certainty of death could bring were, or could be, real: so much so that there was a spiritual incentive to conjure up such certainty whether or not it was well-grounded.

We might expect, however, that the opposite problem was more widespread: patients, and their carers, who continued to hope for a recovery which never came. Janeway did his best to expunge any such hopes from his accounts, but a brief exchange between Howley and her mother on how the girl would live 'if God should spare her life' was apparently too edifying to cut.³⁶ We can see that editorial hand at work if we compare his account of

³² Janeway, *A Token*, pp. 14, 16, 36, 71.

³³ Ambrose, *Ultima*, p. 39 (also Janeway, *A Token*, p. 47); the martyr in question was Thomas Bilney. Cf. Janeway, *A Token ... The Second Part*, p. 4; Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, pp. 422-7.

³⁴ Alec Ryrie, 'Hearing God's Voice in the English and Scottish Reformations' in *Reformation* 17 (2012), 49-74.

³⁵ Thomas M'Crie (ed.), *The Life of Mr Robert Blair, Minister of St. Andrews* (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1848), pp. 17-18.

³⁶ Janeway, *A Token*, p. 9.

Susanna Bicks, a thirteen-year-old who died from the plague in 1665, with the fuller one published some years earlier. At one point, Bicks' father asked if his daughter if he should call a physician, and she demurred. In Janeway's version, she said, 'by no means, for I am now beyond the help of Doctors'. When her father pointed out the Protestant truism that believers should use the 'ordinary means' provided by God to deal with life's troubles, including medicine, she replied, 'give me the heavenly Physician he is the only helper'.³⁷ This message of abandoning worldly hope for heavenly assurance is rather less clear in the source text. Here she rejects physic on the basis that 'the Doctor shall doe me nothing, nor can he help me, but I hope abundantly that my heavenly Father shall help me' – implying a very sensible despair (and likely also fear) of 17th-century medicine, but not of life. And when her father presses her to use the 'ordinary means', her reply is that 'the heavenly Physician is the true helper: he shall help, he can help both soul and body'.³⁸ And as that last phrase makes plain, this account shows both Bicks and her parents holding onto the hope of life until close to the end. She and they speak of the possibility that she might die, a possibility which could hardly be escaped in a plague-struck house which had lost another child only weeks earlier; but until the very end these comments regularly consider what will befall 'if the Lord shalbe pleased to take me'.³⁹ Indeed, she also recalled how her three-year old sister, so recently dead, had said on her sickbed that 'if it be Gods will, I will goe to my litle brother if the Lord will. Or I will also stay with my Mother, if it be his wil.' Even at the end, when she had almost lost the power of speech, Susanna said, 'so long as my life is in this body, there is hope', and spoke of how she would live 'if it should pleas the Lord to recover me to life and health'. Janeway, who generally airbrushed out her hopes for life, let that one stand, but gratuitously added the claim that she only said this 'fearing least she should dishearten her mother'.⁴⁰

That last may have been Janeway's invention, but it did strike one authentic note. As scholars have already noted and as we have already observed, one of the most striking, and moving, features of children's deathbed narratives is that it is not only the healthy who comfort the sick, or the living the dying.⁴¹ Some dying children, we are told, were if anything more concerned to comfort their distraught parents than the other way around. Perhaps this is no more than we should expect of a these little pious exemplars, but it is not implausible. Few things are more frightening for children than to see their parents dislocated by raw, violent emotions. When Sarah Howley's mother asked her, 'how shall I bear parting with thee, when I have scarce dried my eyes for thy Brother?', what was the girl to do but to offer words of comfort? 'The God of love support and comfort you; it is but a little while, and we shall meet in Glory, I hope.'⁴² Again, Susanna Bicks' case shows us this role-reversal to the fullest extent. Like Howley, she apparently wished to know that her parents would not linger in grief once she had gone, and urged them to follow the Biblical example of David, who had wept and fasted while his baby son was dying, but who had dried his eyes and composed himself once the boy was dead and so beyond the reach of prayer. 'So ought ye to comfort yourself also, after my death, and say, our childe is wel; for we know that they who trusted in God, are well.' And she urged them, with the authority of the deathbed: 'Ye shall both of you promis me, that yee will comfort one another.' After all, she added a little later, how much worse would it be if they had died instead of she and her siblings, leaving them as orphans?

³⁷ Janeway, *A Token ... The Second Part*, p. 36.

³⁸ *An edifying wonder*, p. 14.

³⁹ *An edifying wonder*, p. 12 (my emphasis), and cf. pp. 7, 8, 14, 19.

⁴⁰ *An edifying wonder*, pp. 19, 25; Janeway, *A Token ... The Second Part*, p. 42.

⁴¹ Houlbrooke, 'Death in childhood', p. 44.

⁴² Janeway, *A Token*, pp. 9-10.

The question was not a theoretical one: when plague entered a house, it was not easily sated.⁴³

This was all cold enough comfort, but once again, the theological resources of Reformed Protestantism could add a little warmth. It is not simply that Bicks could quote apposite scriptures urging her sorrowing parents to ‘cast all your care and sorrow upon the Lord who shall make all things goe well that concerne you’. More, the very fact of her own assurance in the face of death could be used to spread the same consolation to them, for although assurance was experienced as a subjective, emotional event, it was understood to be reliable testimony to a profound reality. At one stage in her illness, we read, her mother told her that ‘I have had noe small comfort from the Lord in thee, and the fruits of his grace in thee, whereby thow hast been so much exercised unto godliness’: a comfort which was not susceptible to the ravages of plague. Likewise, a few days later, when she woke from a brief doze:

her Father asked how she did, and exprest somewhat of the great satisfaction and contentment he had in her reading, and wryting, and her religious profiting.

To comfort him by regaining her health was beyond her power. But to comfort him by her godliness in these last days was possible. She replied that his care throughout her life to inculcate these virtues was the greatest gift he could have given her, a remark which may also have been one of the greatest gifts she could have given him.⁴⁴

It will not do to be too idealistic about this. The treacly pieties of Janeway’s narratives are all too plainly written to model ideal behaviours rather than honestly to describe realities, and the fact that some other narratives are less patently stylised should not fool us into believing them to be unvarnished truth. The harsh realities of childhood illness periodically break through the surface – as, for example, when Susanna Bicks embraced her six-month-old sister to bid her farewell, and her father, conscious that he was already losing one daughter to the plague, urgently told one of those in attendance to ‘take from her that poore lambkin, from the hazard of that fierie sicknesse’. Yet ideals do shape realities, perhaps especially for children. We may disagree with Susanna’s riposte that God had once before saved children who were thrown into a fiery furnace, but we can well believe that she said it.⁴⁵ There is enough evidence to suggest that these narratives are not mere invention. In the face of bereavement, of inexorable death, or of fear that was still mixed with hope, Reformed Protestantism did have something genuine to offer its adherents. Its rigorous, disciplined hope was none too easy to lay hold of, and this sometimes certainly accentuated the distress of a child’s deathbed, beset with spiritual as well as worldly terrors. But that same rigour meant that once hope had been grasped, it could be felt firmly in the hands; and that those who had been plunged into the world’s deepest grief could find rock beneath their feet, and learn, again, to stand.

⁴³ *An edifying wonder*, pp. 17, 20; II Samuel 12:15-23.

⁴⁴ *An edifying wonder*, pp. 7, 8, 16.

⁴⁵ *An edifying wonder*, p. 23; cf. Daniel 3.