laughing
AT THE DAYS TO COME

laughing
AT THE DAYS TO COME

Facing Present Trials and
Future Uncertainties with Gospel Hope

Tessa Thompson

Reformation Heritage Books
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Reformation Heritage Books
2965 Leonard St. NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49525
616–977–0889
orders@heritagebooks.org
www.heritagebooks.org

Printed in the United States of America
19 20 21 22 23 24/10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Thompson, Tessa, author.
Title: Laughing at the days to come : facing present trials and future uncertainties with gospel hope / Tessa Thompson.
Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Reformation Heritage Books, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019041373 (print) | LCCN 2019041374 (ebook) | ISBN 9781601787217 (paperback) | ISBN 9781601787224 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Consolation. | Suffering—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Hope—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Neurofibromatosis—Patients—United States—Religious life. | Thompson, Tessa. | Neurofibromatosis—Patients—United States—Biography.
Classification: LCC BV4910 .T47 2019 (print) | LCC BV4910 (ebook) | DDC 248.8/6—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019041373
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019041374

For additional Reformed literature, request a free book list from Reformation Heritage Books at the above regular or email address.

To my husband, Nick, whose
fear of the Lord, selfless love, and zealous
pursuit of truth daily encourage me to press
on toward the heavenly prize

CONTENTS

Part 1. Laughter: Its Definition

Part 2. Laughter: Its Doctrine

Part 3. Laughter: Its Doing

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The desire to write *Laughing at the Days to Come* has been in my heart for a decade and a half. Several years ago, I started writing chapter 1. I'm thankful nothing came of it; the experience was there—the theology was not. As always, God's timing was better than mine. Not only did He give me a better understanding of His ways but He also gave me the gift of a sound and selfless husband to walk alongside me in the writing process. Thank you, Nicholas, for your persistent encouragement to start this project and the many, many times you cheerfully served me by giving me time to write. You listened patiently, prayed faithfully, and offered your thoughts with wisdom and graciousness. I am so thankful for you!

Thank you, Mom and Dad, for loving, supporting, and praying for me all these years and for showing me a marriage that endures through trial and loss.

Thank you, Dave and Julie, for the multiple weekends you loved on your grandsons and supported me and this project at the same time.

Thank you to the many friends and family members who prayed, spoke encouragement, asked questions, and served me in practical ways. Your love and kindness helped me persevere, and I am grateful for each of you.

Thank you, Pastor Mike Waters and Pastor Dale Van Dyke, for faithfully preaching God's word week after week. Your sound treatment of Scripture has been formative to my thinking about the truths in this book.

Thank you, Joel Beeke, Jay Collier, and Annette Gysen at Reformation Heritage Books, for the time and effort you put into bringing this project to fruition. It has been a joy to work with you, and I appreciate your shared desire to glorify God and build up His people through the written word.

Part 1

Laughter: Its Definition

Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.
—PROVERBS 31:25 ESV

One

HER TRIAL

He Gives and Takes Away

> In the day of prosperity be joyful,
> But in the day of adversity consider:
> Surely God has appointed the one as well as the other,
> So that man can find out nothing that will come
> after him.
>
> —Ecclesiastes 7:14

> The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away.
>
> —Job 1:21

I was sixteen years old, and my once-bright future now appeared bleak. Due to a rare neurological disease called Neurofibromatosis Type 2 (NF2), I had begun to lose my hearing, and the loss was progressing far more quickly than I had imagined when I received the diagnosis just months earlier. When I was around nine years old, my father was diagnosed with NF2, so I had already witnessed his devastating progression of hearing loss. At the time, I was entirely unaware of the extent to which this hereditary disease would eventually affect my family and me personally. I certainly felt a degree of sympathy toward my dad as I watched him begin to navigate the world of hearing aids and isolation, but in my own near-sighted world of sleepovers and softball games, I didn't have much of a grasp on what all this meant for the future. My dad was a grown man; he could handle this, and we were all going to be just fine.

As the years passed, my naivety faded as I more fully grasped the weight of grief this uninvited hearing loss was on my father. Being born deaf has many of its own challenges; going deaf after living many years in a hearing world, however, is a completely different experience. It's impossible for the hearing person to comprehend how much the basic ability to communicate with others—whether in the intimate context of marriage or the informal grocery checkout line—affects every sphere of daily life, until that ability is taken away. One woman who went through gradual hearing loss described it well:

> The operative word for a degenerative hearing loss is always *less*, and the sounds of my world grew silent one by one. Keys stopped jingling, acorns no longer crunched underfoot, and even the footsteps themselves were finally hushed.... Conversation, even when I was included, focused on important information—never anything incidental, which wasn't worth the energy needed to comprehend it.... I considered most social events cruel and unusual punishment—not surprising when considering the effort required just to appear "normal." Even mundane occurrences such as an elevator's *ding*, bakery numbers being called, and casual comments by store clerks, flight attendants, or even toll collectors, were fraught with anxiety and dread when they couldn't be heard.[1]

As I witnessed these effects firsthand, this strange neurological disease was no longer just "something my dad was going through." Now it was something I was going through too—not so much because it was negatively affecting my relationship with my earthly father but because it was affecting my young and immature relationship with my heavenly Father. I knew that in one way or another God played a part in this suffering, and in my limited and deficient understanding of His character and ways, I wanted an explanation. Why exactly did He allow this to happen? Would He change and

---

[1] Arlene Romoff, *Listening Closely: A Journey to Bilateral Hearing* (Watertown, Mass.: Imagine! Publishing, 2011), 22–24.

govern things so that this loss wouldn't get the better of us? Should I start pleading in prayer for healing for my dad? What exactly was God's place and activity in this trial, and what must I conclude about His goodness and love toward my family?

I did not have all the answers to these questions, nor did I know how to go about finding those answers. Nevertheless, at various times God did bring a measure of comfort to my soul by allowing me to catch a glimpse of how He might be using my dad's NF2 for a purpose beyond what we were able to see. I remember one particular occasion when I went on a trip to Haiti with my youth group after my freshman year of high school. We were staying at a mission home, and nearby lived a deaf woman. My family had learned some sign language years earlier in an effort to make communication with my dad easier, so I was absolutely thrilled to be able to sit and communicate with this Haitian woman. It was the highlight of my trip, and on our return I joyfully testified to my church congregation of how the Lord had used that opportunity to show me that He *was* able to work good in the midst of grief and bring purpose to this undesirable pain. For one precious moment, my gaze had been lifted heavenward where a gracious, all-knowing God must surely have some great plan to use my dad's neurological disease for His glory and my family's good.

Reality Strikes

But just a few months later, my enthusiastic expectations were met with a harsh reality when my own hearing suddenly began to diminish in the middle of the school year. Around the same time I had gone to Haiti the summer before, a routine MRI had revealed a tumor on each of my auditory nerves, showing clearly that NF2 had indeed been passed down to me. Even though there had been small indications that my hearing had changed a bit (such as my friends often having to repeat themselves), I honestly didn't think much of it when we received the diagnosis. But I will never forget the car ride home from the doctor's office with my mom. As she cried and told me it was going to be okay, I thought to myself, *Why is she so upset?*

It's not like the tumors are really affecting me yet. We already knew there was a good chance this had been passed down. After all, it had already been confirmed that my older sister had the disease as well, and she was doing just fine. My dad hadn't started losing hearing until his early forties, so surely there wasn't much to worry about for now. We'd keep an eye on things, and normal life would go on.

Normal life did *not* go on. My sophomore year of high school had, so far, been everything a sixteen-year-old girl could have hoped for—growing popularity, a not-too-serious boyfriend, endless social obligations (and the driver's license I needed to fulfill them), and just enough charming wit to keep everyone interested. And then, more quickly than I had ever imagined, those small, invisible tumors began manifesting their presence, rudely invading the lovely little world I had come to enjoy.

The occasional "What did you say?" turned into a frequent strain to hear what was being said—in the backseat of my friend's car, in the church pew on Sunday morning, during group discussions in English class, and behind the meat counter as I waited on customers at my part-time job. My self-absorbed, teenaged heart clung to every morsel of normalcy I could manage to portray. But the truth was, life had abruptly announced a new normal, and I had little choice but to adjust accordingly. This "adjusting" brought with it a flood of emotions, struggles, and tears. Perhaps most frustrating was that the nature of the hearing loss was not a matter of volume, but of word discrimination. In other words, I could hear the noise of a conversation but could not make out all the actual words being said. Needless to say, conversation became strenuous, frustrating, and exhausting. Furthermore, the hearing loss brought with it a case of frequent tinnitus—ringing in the ears that later turned into multiple sounds at fluctuating volumes.

In the second half of the school year, we took the neurologist's suggestion to go through with a weeklong radiation treatment in hope of stopping one of the tumors from growing and preventing more hearing loss. Ironically, one of the risks of the radiation was actually increased hearing loss. Nevertheless, a growing tumor on the auditory nerve can do a lot more damage than just hearing loss (as we would later find out), so in my parents' best judgment it was the right thing to do. Little did we know that just weeks later, my hearing would become noticeably worse. Gradual hearing loss can be hard to monitor. To this day I'm not even certain of the exact month or even year my hearing was completely gone. There were times of sudden decrease that were painfully obvious, however, and our spring break trip to the beach that year was one of those times. When the week was over and we returned home, a very discouraging reality stared me in the face: *this unfortunate circumstance was not going to get better, but worse.*

The rest of the school year was an agonizing attempt to stay above the water. How do you explain to people—especially the world of self-absorbed, boy-crazy, teenaged girls—that suddenly, *I need you to slow down, look me in the eye, and say it again; and can you please turn the music down because I can't hear anything above it; and can you please repeat the teacher's instructions to me because I didn't catch everything; and can you please not call me on the phone anymore; and can you please not laugh when I have to ask you to repeat yourself three times?*

I was embarrassed. Social gatherings were no longer an opportunity to flex my popularity muscles and keep up my approval ratings with quick wit and humorous side comments. Instead, communication was now one big opportunity to feel socially awkward and say something stupid. (*Am I talking way too loudly? Did I just misunderstand what she said and give a completely irrelevant answer?*) All my brain's energy was now channeled toward the difficult task of deciphering what was being said, which affected my ability to respond quickly and thoughtfully and eventually left me feeling as though I had to relearn the art of basic social interaction. I learned how to smile and nod and sometimes laugh along when I had no idea why people were laughing.

I was angry. My sixteen-year-old friends were in a world of their own and didn't understand what I was going through. So I sat in the backseat of the car, unsure of what everyone else was happily chatting about and annoyed by the music that was turned up too loud for me to decipher anything.

I was bored. Group settings turned into hours of sitting silently, surrounded by people and yet feeling entirely alone. I was no longer a participator, but a keen observer. Everything I "heard" was in condensed form, and jokes were relayed only after everyone had already laughed. I longed to be in on why so-and-so broke up or the hilarious thing that happened in yesterday's math class. And yet it wasn't just the lack of important information that created a void, but even more so the lack of countless casual and spontaneous comments that make up the complex science of everyday communication: all the little things heard (or overheard) and the accompanying responses that weave an intricate web of human interaction in which we not only come to know but are known—a tone of voice, a quick-witted sarcasm, a distinct vocabulary, a hilarious-sounding laughter.

I was embarrassed, angry, and bored, but as time went on, I also grew fearful. Perhaps worse than these present life changes was the painful reality that things were only going to get worse. Making it through high school was one thing—but what about marriage? What about motherhood? What about all the things I wanted to do that would be hindered by deafness? I remember one afternoon very clearly when I was seventeen years old. The hearing loss wasn't new to me anymore, and I was becoming more settled in that new life. But I was completely caught off guard that day when my thoughts excitedly drifted to the days to come. For a few optimistic moments I began to dream up a plan for my future, envisioning a particular ministry I wanted to start in a far-off country overseas. And then it hit me: *you'll need to be able to hear if you want to do that*. As my discouragement and worry escalated, the threat of lifelong hearing loss (or worse, complete deafness) became the lens through which I looked at the future. And to my young, imaginative self, it wasn't a pretty sight.

The trials of life make the present painful, but they often bring with them an inescapable factor that adds the weight of a thousand bricks to what already feels unbearable, and that is the factor of uncertainty—namely, *How bad is this going to get?* A previously veiled adversity suddenly materializes—the diagnosis is made, the hidden sin is confessed, the job is lost, the tragic betrayal is revealed. The crisis we never saw coming quickly becomes a part of the daily grind, and there are new and hard questions to be answered. We do our best to make it through the days and weeks, but then we begin to realize this might only be the beginning. Things could get worse, much worse. And the uncertainty of it all begs our weary minds to crumble and cower as we begin to imagine all the possibilities of what is to come.

The Lord gave, and the Lord took away. But what if He takes more? And if He does, is He the Father I thought He was?

God in My Trial

It is times like these, when our hearts are fragile, our circumstances grim, and our futures uncertain, that the enemy of our souls loves to come and plant seeds of destruction in the soil of our hearts. And unless we are vigilantly working to keep the soil pure, the remaining sin within us will jump at the chance to water those seeds. Though the Scriptures I claimed to love and believe spoke otherwise, I began to entertain the idea that God was an unkind taker and I was His target. The well-known declaration of suffering Job, humbly affirming in Job 1:21, “The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” was not an assertion my downcast soul could confidently echo. Oh, the Lord had indeed taken away—but if I was going to bless His name for it, I needed to know more about His character and, particularly, His countenance. Was He sympathetically looking down on me as a father who longs to comfort his injured child? Was He angry with me, and taking delight in my suffering? Was He indifferent, turning His face away because He had other things to attend to? As James Buchanan wrote, “The heart desires something more than the knowledge that it is not chance or fate that determine events, but an infinitely wise God. What is His character? We want to know. How is He disposed towards us? The heart bleeding under the stroke of affliction, or stunned by bereavement, wants to know the moral character of the Most High."[2]

What is the countenance of this God who has taken away? What truth about His character could bring calm and hope when thoughts of the future bring panic and sorrow? Of this, I was uncertain. And instead of pleading with God to help me believe whatever His word told me, even if it didn't "feel" true, I nursed many sinful thoughts and feelings toward God. This failure to know and believe who God is in the midst of my suffering neither comforted me in my present darkness nor calmed my fearful considerations of a very uncertain future.

When I think back to those first years of hearing loss as a teenager, there is one memory that will likely always remain with me. In my junior year of high school, I befriended a group of seniors who showed me much kindness. Despite my hearing loss, they accepted me and were even enthusiastic about learning sign language so they could communicate with me better. Those friendships were a sort of "stream in the desert" that year—a sweet balm of companionship that made the difficulty of hearing loss a little easier to walk through. But the loss was still there, and I'll always remember how frustrated I was that night when it proved once again to be a very real obstacle.

It was Friday night, and one girl in the group was hosting a bonfire. I had never been to her house before, and by the time I was on my way the sky was dark and it was getting hard to see the numbers on the mailboxes. I was on the right street, but I could not find the right house. I had a cell phone for emergencies, but my hearing was too bad to use it for a normal conversation. I couldn't call someone who was already there and ask for help. This was before the days of text messaging, so that wasn't an option either. I just wanted to get to the party. Even if communication would be somewhat challenging there, I knew I would have a good time with my friends. I loved feeling accepted by them. They invited me to football games, welcomed me to their table in the cafeteria, and simply made life a little more normal for a seventeen-year-old.

---

[2] James Buchanan, *Comfort in Affliction* (Glasgow: Bell and Bain, 1989), 9.

After driving slowly down the road a second time, I finally decided my only option was to drive all the way home and get help from my mom. Hot tears trickled down my face as I drove. *This is not what Friday nights are supposed to be like.* Thankfully, my mom was able to call the girl hosting the party and find out exactly where her house was. Armed with clearer directions and the comfort of a mother's compassion, I got back in my car and drove to the party, this time arriving safely at my destination.

Trials can have a way of making us feel like we are driving around in the dark, uncertain of how to get to our desired destination of relief—uncertain as to whether the destination even exists. I had the right address, but there was more I needed to know. I hadn't known that the house was not visible from the road. I hadn't known to look for a stake by the gravel driveway with a light-reflecting house number on it. Once I had that information, however, I was much more confident that I would arrive at the correct house.

She who does not know God has no hope of relief in her suffering. She drives around in the dark, unable to make any sense of her pain, unable to overcome the fear as she anxiously looks ahead to a future of uncertainties. There is no one to call for help, and she is unable to find her way. But she who does know Him, even when she is in the dark, is able to run to a compassionate Father and with the psalmist cry, "Show me Your ways, O LORD; teach me Your paths" (Ps. 25:4) and "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105). As she comes expectantly to the light of His word, He shows her not a path free of pain, but a path full of promise. And with a gaze fixed straight ahead, she drives on, a smile of childlike trust glowing in her eyes.