



Arwen Mallay (2007-2022) loved Jesus—so much so that, after she was diagnosed with cancer, she asked her parents for the privilege of finishing her life on the mission field in Togo. Now, as the Mallay family continues to serve, their faith is anything but finished.

# The Mallay Family: Faithfulness in the Face of Death

BY HANNAH STRAYER

“How can you take your children to such a dangerous place?”

Seth and Rebecca Mallay heard the question from skeptics often as they raised support as missionaries to Togo in 2017.

The thirty-somethings considered the critique. Togo was, after all, home to a variety of diseases, dangers, and discomforts. As a medical doctor, Seth was certainly aware of his young family's physical needs. Yet he and Rebecca, determined as they were, always answered the question the same way.

“As much as we love our children, they are not ours. We are to shepherd them temporarily, and they aren't more important than the kingdom.”

But it wasn't any danger native to the African soil that threatened the family. It was something lurking inside of their eldest daughter.

Arwen, the radiant 10-year-old who captured everyone with her infectious smile and joyful outlook, had often seemed to

be a bit weak, even from early childhood. In Togo, she seemed healthy—until a routine checkup revealed a mass in her abdomen. After only a year in Togo, the Mallay family returned to the US to seek answers.

Arwen was diagnosed with stage-four neuroblastoma, a cancer that begins in the nerve cells. It had already spread into her bones.

“I felt really disappointed, because I thought we would only be in the US a month and then go back to Togo” Arwen wrote in 2018. “Then my parents told me that this cancer is very serious, and even with all the treatments, I still

might not get better. I was very sad, and I could tell my parents were also very sad. But I believe in Jesus, and I know if I die, I will go to heaven. So, I told them, “God will heal me either way. Either here, or in heaven, I will be healed.”

**“As sorrowful, yet always  
rejoicing, as poor, yet making  
many rich; as having nothing,  
yet possessing everything.”**

2 Corinthians 6:10 ESV

**Back ‘Home’**

Home in the US, the treatments began. Chemotherapy, immunotherapy, surgeries, internal radiation, even experimental trials. Each treatment took its toll. From some, Arwen bounced back quickly. Others depleted her. Still others made her scared and came with intense pain. None worked.

Meanwhile, hundreds of supporters around the world mobilized to pray for Arwen.

Seth and Rebecca were also driven to prayer in a whole new way—a painfully straightforward way.

“In the nitty gritty, prayer can become very simple—‘Lord help us,’ ‘Be with us,’ ‘Jesus,’” Seth recounted.

While in the US, the Mallays’ other children, totaling four at the time, remarked how much they missed “home”—not rural Vestaburg, Michigan, but tropical Tsiko, Togo. The field was where they belonged; life in the US was an interruption.

Arwen agreed, and continually asked her family to return home. Her wish, she explained, was to be a light in Togo while her parents served the Lord.

Like her elvish namesake from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, Arwen embraced the “gift of men”—mortality—out of love for her King.

If she was to die, it would have to be in Togo, as a testimony to Christ—and from there, she’d go to her true home.

**‘Our Daughter Is Dying’**

Back in the West African tropics, Arwen’s condition remained stable for a season. But in late 2021, she became fatigued and her pain increased. She began to deteriorate.

“Our daughter is dying,” Seth shared in a December Facebook post. The next month, a similarly stark update followed: “Arwen is suffering tonight . . . her prayer this evening has been, ‘Lord, just take me’ which is hard for us to hear.”

Yet for the teammates and neighbors who observed the family, the Mallay bunch seemed anything but dour. Laughter could be heard from outside their house on the mission campus. Friends visited to play games, swap stories, draw pictures, and tell jokes. On good days, Arwen could get out—to attend, for example, the team’s New Year’s Eve party.

That same month, Seth and Rebecca scheduled a family photoshoot, knowing time was short. The band of eight took

turns hopping on and off a couch positioned outside on the red Togolese clay in bright sunlight, posing for portraits and grabbing a few candid shots along the way. Arwen, who had been exhausted leading up to the shoot, refreshed everyone else with her natural energy.

The Lord had been kind. And even so, Seth and Rebecca knew what would come.

“Death cannot ruin Christmas because Christmas has already ruined death,” Seth wrote over the holidays.

He continued: “[W]e find peace and assurance in praying, ‘Your will rather than our will be done’ to the One in whom we know we can trust. His will is good because he is good. Always good.”

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**Safely Home**

February 1, 2022 was Arwen’s last day fully awake and alert. Then, a week later, Seth and Rebecca shared another update with their ministry partners:

“Arwen is safely home . . . Arwen’s light and momentary affliction is over forever, and I trust that it already pales in

comparison to the glory that she can see with new eyes opened for the first time as her faith is made sight. Eternal glory. If Arwen had recovered from cancer, we would have praised the Lord. Yet we praise him in all things. Praise the Lord! He is good. Always good.”

Seth and Rebecca had been at Arwen’s side that morning listening to hymns and praying. It was during a playing of “Blessed Assurance” that Arwen took her last breath on earth and entered the presence of her Lord.

That weekend, the family held two funeral services for both French and English-speaking friends. In Togolese culture, a child’s funeral is rarely large or well-attended. Yet mourners in the hundreds gathered for the two-hour French service in Arwen’s honor.

At the English service two days later, team members from all across Togo gathered for singing, Scripture reading, testimonies, and prayer. Four teenage, MK pallbearers carried her casket to the grave performing a Ghanaian funeral dance—one of Arwen’s last wishes.

*Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee*, rang the refrain before the casket was lowered into the ground. Members of the Mallay family each shoveled a scoop of dirt into the grave.



Photos by Judy Bowen

In the weeks following Arwen's funeral, Seth and Rebecca reflected on how inglorious their first year of ministry back in Togo appeared on the outside. As he recounts, there were no stories of revival. There was nothing incredible to report. Seth had performed his duties as a father and a doctor; Rebecca, her duties as a mother. They had wanted to do more in ministry, but they had been at home spending the days and nights caring for their precious daughter.

Yet for Seth, "the point isn't to accomplish something glorious. The point is obedience," he explains. And obedience always comes with a sacrifice.

And it turns out that their sacrifice—as with William Carey, Hudson Taylor, and a long line of missionary saints who lost children in pursuit of a greater reward—was itself what sped the gospel forward.

"Arwen's life, diagnosis, hope, and testimony have dramatically changed the willingness of some people to give us and others their undivided attention," Seth said.

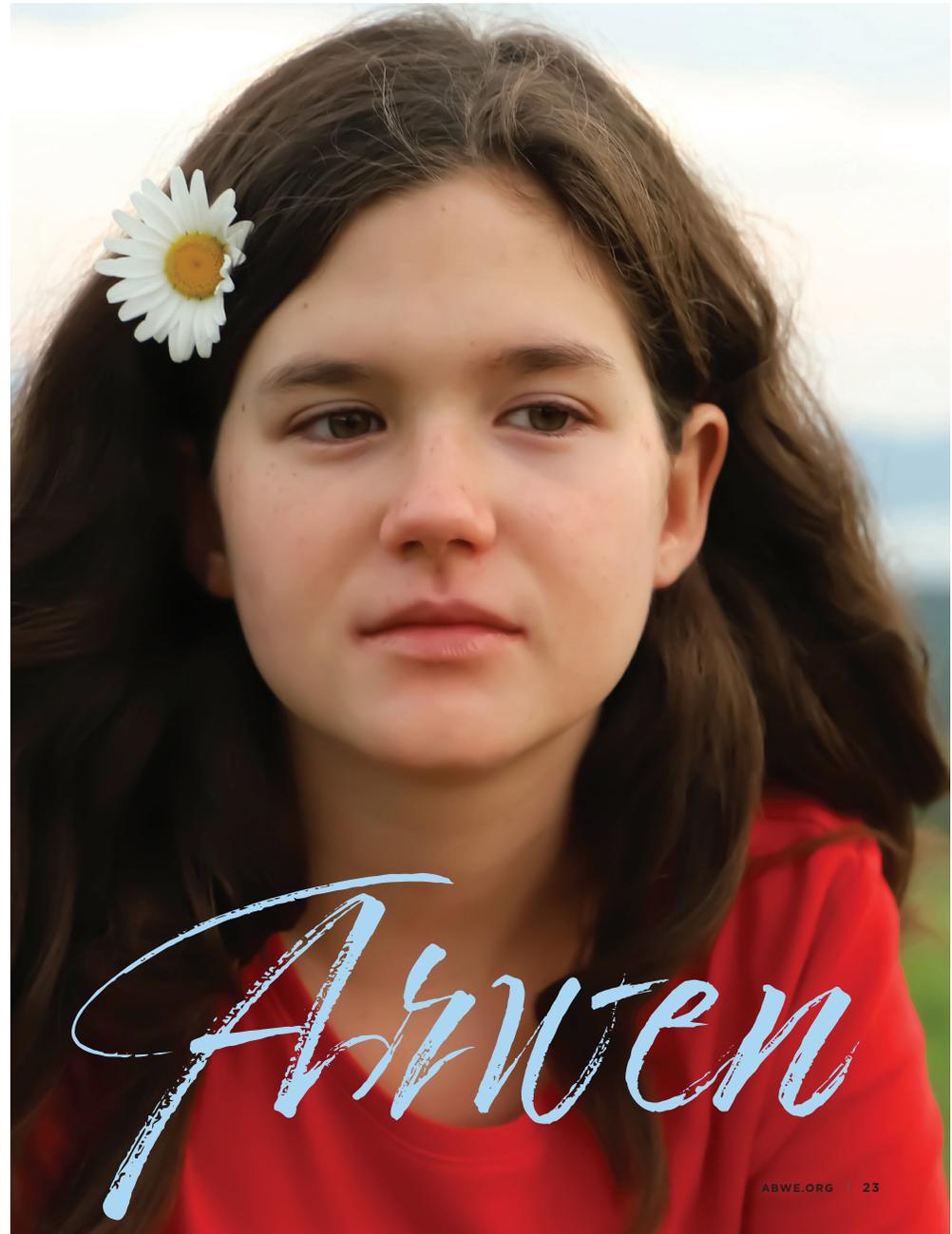
"People are paying attention very closely when they are shocked by the contrast between the way Arwen was entitled to act, or the way we are expected to behave, and the grace that God was working in her and us. This has been an open door for the gospel. This was true in the US and has held true here in Togo." ■

**"This has been an open door for the gospel."**



**"Dark is the Shadow, and yet my heart rejoices."**

— Arwen Undómiel,  
*The Lord of the Rings*



Arwen