

O LOVE
THAT WILL NOT
LET ME GO

*Facing Death with
Courageous Confidence in God*

EDITED BY
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O Love That Will Not Let Me Go: Facing Death with Courageous Confidence in God

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I fondly dedicate this book to my sister in Christ, Marion Williams Kelley (1929–2009). I had the privilege of sharing the first few chapters of this book with Marion in her final days on this earth. Her joy in these truths, her determination to die well, and her courageous confidence in God's promises, was a living demonstration of the aim of this book, and an inspiration to me as I worked on it.

I am not afraid to look the king of terrors in the face,
For I know I shall be drawn, not driven,
out of the world.

Until then let me continually glow and burn out for thee,
And when the last great change shall come,
let me awake in thy likeness.

THE VALLEY OF VISION

Contents

Preface	11
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Part One

A REALITY THAT WILL NOT BE DENIED

1	Only When You Know How to Die Can You Know You Know How to Live <i>J. I. Packer</i>	17
2	Death's Sting Is Removed but Its Bite Remains <i>Michael Horton</i>	00
3	He Called Death Sweet Names <i>John Piper</i>	00
4	Not of This World <i>Martyn Lloyd-Jones</i>	00
5	Is Christ Our Sickness-Bearer? <i>B. B. Warfield</i>	00
6	Our Faith Is in God, Not in Healing <i>Joseph Bayly</i>	00

Part Two

AN AIM THAT KEEPS ME PRESSING ON

7	Finishing with Few Regrets <i>Randy Alcorn</i>	00
8	My Father Taught Me How to Die <i>R. C. Sproul</i>	00
9	Spiritual Light Shining from Your Deathbed <i>Abraham Kuyper</i>	00
10	A Witness in the Way We Die <i>John Eaves</i>	00
11	Sickness: The Soul's Undressing <i>Jeremy Taylor</i>	00

Part Three

A HOPE THAT SAVES ME FROM DESPAIR

12	Rubbing Hope into the Reality of Death	00
	<i>Timothy Keller</i>	
13	Hope Is a Glorious Grace	00
	<i>John Owen</i>	
14	Directions for a Peaceful Departure	00
	<i>Richard Baxter</i>	
15	What More Should God Do to Persuade You to Accept Death Willingly?	00
	<i>Martin Luther</i>	
16	Comfort against Fears of the Dying Hour	00
	<i>Thomas Boston</i>	

Part Four

A FUTURE THAT WILL NOT DISAPPOINT

17	Suffering Hurries the Heart toward Heaven	00
	<i>Joni Eareckson Tada</i>	
18	To Despise This Present Life	00
	<i>John Calvin</i>	
19	The Day of a Godly Man's Death	00
	<i>Jonathan Edwards</i>	
20	Let Us Say in Dying, "Lord Jesus, Receive My Spirit"	00
	<i>R. L. Dabney</i>	
21	Those Who Die Daily Die Easily	00
	<i>Charles Spurgeon</i>	
22	God Reserves the Best for the Last	00
	<i>Richard Sibbes</i>	
	Notes	00
	Scripture Index	00

Preface

I remember when it hit me. I had been pregnant with my son, Matt, for what seemed like forever. There was so much I actually enjoyed about being pregnant, and so much I looked forward to in having a son. But one day the reality dawned on me that to have that son, I was going to have to give birth. I remember thinking that no one simply stays pregnant forever, putting off the inevitable, and I had little control as to when that time came. I looked at my growing belly and thought, “This baby is going to have to come out one way or another,” and it scared me. Pregnancy—good. Baby—good. The process of labor and delivery—I was not so sure.

We sometimes have a similar thought process about death. Life—good. Life after death with God—good. It’s that process of labor and delivery into the next life we’re not so sure about. In fact, we’d really rather not talk about it or even think about it. Yet I’m convinced that there is a real freedom, and even joy, in thinking it through, and that exploring death in light of the Scriptures can actually soothe our fears and infuse our thoughts about death with hope and peace.

But I also realize that some people might think reading a whole book on the topic of facing death would be a real bummer. Some may think it a bit morbid. And some people, though they might be loathe to admit it, are a bit superstitious about discussing death—afraid that if they have a conversation about it, or give consideration to it, that it might somehow come a little sooner.

There are others for whom death is so relegated to the realm of the fall, that there is no place in their thinking or theology for

Preface

exploring what it means to face death in a way that pleases and honors God. They have given little to no thought about what it means to anticipate and prepare for death in a way that evidences a solid, God-glorifying confidence in his goodness, his sovereignty, and his promises.

That is what the brief chapters in the book will help us to do. They will help us to turn away from the pervasive denial about death in our culture, and to face squarely the reality of death through the more beautiful and ultimate reality of Christ. It is Christ, and only Christ, who makes facing death bearable. Christ infuses the most painful and perplexing aspects of the end of this life with hope and peace.

I don't mean to imply or suggest that death for the believer is always sweet rapture. In spite of its universal nature, it's still not natural; and it never will be. God has not promised his children an easy death or deathbed visions of glory (although sometimes he is good to give them). He does, however, promise his presence with us. He will be our Shepherd as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. And he will be waiting to welcome us on the other side.

I recognize that there may be some awkwardness in giving this book, or receiving this book from someone else. You need to know that if someone has given this book to you, it's not necessarily that they expect "the worst." You should, instead, assume they want to stand beside you, and open their arms with you, to welcome "the best"—whenever that should come. Solomon wrote, "The day you die is better than the day you are born" (Eccles. 7:1). Paul described departing this life to be with Christ as "better by far." If someone gave this book to you, they want to believe this with you. Giving this book to someone you care about does not say, "I think you are going to die soon." It says, "Since we are all going to die soon, let's live now like we believe the gospel is true."

Preface

Joseph Bayly once wrote, “Christians claim to believe that heaven—being present with God—is so wonderful, and yet act as if going there were the greatest tragedy.”¹ The problem is with our perspective, which is so oriented to life here and now. But I believe that taking in and chewing on the truths expressed in this collection of writing by great preachers and theologians of the past and present can radically change how we think and feel about the unavoidable reality of death. Death, for the believer, is no tragedy. And for the believer to die well—to live and die aiming to glorify God, confident that God will make good on all of his promises—this is a thing of great beauty.

I invite you to join me in pursuit of a life and death that befits our belief in the gospel. May the truths in this book equip and embolden us to live and die well to the glory of God.

Nancy Guthrie

Part One

A REALITY
THAT WILL NOT
BE DENIED

Only When You Know How to Die Can You Know How to Live

J. I. PACKER

In today's world death is the great unmentionable, just as physical sex was a hundred years ago. Apart from cynical paradiings of a sense of life's triviality (the Grateful Dead, "he who dies with the most toys wins") and egoistic expressions of belief in reincarnation (the New Age, Shirley MacLaine), death is not ordinarily spoken of outside of medical circles. To invite discussion of it, even in the church, is felt to be bad form.

It has become conventional to think as if we are all going to live in this world forever and to view every case of bereavement as a reason for doubting the goodness of God. We must all know deep down that this is ridiculous, but we do it all the same. And in doing it, we part company with the Bible, with historic Christianity, and with a basic principle of right living, namely, that only when you know how to die can you know how to live.

There is a great contrast here between past and present. In every century until our own, Christians saw this life as preparation for eternity. Medievals, Puritans, and later evangelicals thought and wrote much about the art of dying well, and they urged that all of life should be seen as preparation for leaving it behind. This was not

A REALITY THAT WILL NOT BE DENIED

otiose morbidity, but realistic wisdom, since death really is the one certain fact of life. Acting the ostrich with regard to it is folly to the highest degree.

Why has modern Protestantism so largely lost its grip on this biblical otherworldliness? Several factors have combined to produce the effect.

First, death is no longer our constant companion. Until the twentieth century most children died before they were ten, and adults died at home with the family around them. But nowadays deaths in the family are rarer, and as often as not happen in hospitals, so that we can easily forget the certainty of our own death for years together.

Second, modern materialism, with its corollary that this life is the only life for enjoying anything, has infected Christian minds, producing the feeling that it is a cosmic outrage for anyone to have to leave this world before he or she has tasted all that it has to offer.

Third, Marxist mockery of the Christian hope (“Pie in the sky when you die”) and the accusation that having a hope of heaven destroys one’s zeal for ending evil on earth have given Christians a false conscience that inhibits them about being heavenly minded.

“Dying well is one of the good works to which
Christians are called.”

Fourth, modern Christians are rightly troubled at the cultural barrenness, social unconcern, and seemingly shrunken humanity that have sometimes accompanied professed longings for heaven. We have come to suspect that such longings are escapist and unhealthy.

Fifth, man's natural sense of being made for an eternal destiny, the awareness formerly expressed by the phrase "the greatness of the soul," has largely atrophied amid the hectic artificialities of Western urban life.

How then should Christians think about death—their own death, to start with?

1. Physical death is the outward sign of that eternal separation from God that is the Creator's judgment on sin. That separation will only become deeper and more painful through the milestone event of dying, unless saving grace intervenes. Unconverted people do well, therefore, to fear death. It is in truth fearsome.
2. For Christians, death's sting is withdrawn. Grace has intervened, and now their death day becomes an appointment with their Savior, who will be there to take them to the rest prepared for them. Though they will be temporarily bodiless, which is not really good, they will be closer to Christ than ever before, "which is better by far" (Philippians 1:23).
3. Since believers do not know when Christ will come for them, readiness to leave this world at any time is vital Christian wisdom. Each day should find us like children looking forward to their holidays, who get packed up and ready to go a long time in advance.
4. The formula for readiness is: "Live each day as if thy last" (Thomas Ken). In other words, "Keep short accounts with God." I once heard Fred Mitchell, Overseas Missionary Fellowship director, enforce this thought shortly before his own instantaneous home-calling when the plane in which he was traveling disintegrated in midair. Mitchell lived what he taught, and his biography was justly given as its title the last message radioed by the pilot of the doomed aircraft—*Climbing on Track*. I hope I never forget his words.
5. Dying well is one of the good works to which Christians are called, and Christ will enable us who serve him to die well, however gruesome the physical process itself. And dying thus, in Christ,

A REALITY THAT WILL NOT BE DENIED

through Christ, and with Christ, will be a spiritual blossoming. As being born into the temporal world was our initial birthday, and as being born into God's spiritual kingdom was our second birthday, being born through physical death into the eternal world will be our third birthday.

Dag Hammarskjöld was thinking Christianly when he wrote that no philosophy that cannot make sense of death can make sense of life either. No one's living will be right until these truths about death are anchored in his or her heart.

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James Innell Packer serves as the Board of Governors' Professor of Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia.

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