



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Loving Our Last Enemy
(*Death*, pp. 78-86)

Suggested Article:

📖 What My Students Teach
Me about Death
(*Death*, pp. 69-73)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

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Loving Our Last Enemy

Unaided human reason may teach us to face death fearlessly, but it can do no more. To make peace with death—to embrace our end—we need more by way of wisdom. More by way of wisdom is part of what the Church claims to have in Christ.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:19-26

Reflection

Plato's most poignant dialogue, *Phaedo*, reports that on the eve of his execution Socrates discussed the philosopher's attitude toward death. He assured his friends that a person who loves wisdom (this is the meaning of "philosopher") will be fearless in the process of dying. Todd Buras summarizes Socrates's reasoning: "No one has any wisdom. So no one knows our ultimate end. So no one knows our end is dreadful. So no one has reason to fear." And this, Buras thinks, is as far as unaided human reason can take us: we can see the value of wisdom—"an integration of all the things we know into a coherent view of ourselves and the world"—and seek it with all our hearts, but it remains elusively beyond our grasp. Our lack is most obvious in the face of death.

Remarkably the early Christians identified Jesus Christ as the *Logos* or Word, another name for the philosopher's goal of wisdom. "The riveting suggestion here is not that, by faith, Christians have answers. Given the failure of human reason to settle the wisdom questions, and the inevitability of answering them, everyone accepts answers by faith," Buras notes. "The riveting claim is that God acted in Christ to alleviate the profound ignorance at the center of human life. God has filled the gaping hole at the apex of human understanding by the person and work of Christ." The claim that we have attained a share in the divine wisdom through Christ leads to a reassessment of death. "Fearlessness is still part of the story, to be sure. But the basis of Christian fearlessness [in Christ's resurrection] grounds hope as well."

Interpreting death in the light of Christ's resurrection is a double project. For the dying, the question is how to die in faith, hope, and love. For those who remain, the issue is how to bear the loss as one who expects the resurrection of the dead. Buras draws these insights from recent Christian reflections on death.

- ▶ *As we are dying, we may befriend our own death.* "Although I do not know what to expect in the afterlife, I do know that just as God has called me to serve him to the best of my abilities throughout my life on earth, he is now calling me home," Cardinal Bernadin writes while dying of pancreatic cancer in 1996. "I will have to deal with difficult moments, [but] I can say in all sincerity that I am at peace. I consider this God's special gift to me at this moment in my life." This considerable step beyond fearlessness to hospitable welcome of death as a gateway to eternal life is what Bernadin, following Henri Nouwen, calls "befriending death." Nouwen compares this stance toward death to trapeze artists entrusting themselves to their catcher: the graceful flyers depend completely on the skill and loving attention of the one who catches them. In the process of dying, we depend totally on the God who raised Christ as the "first fruits" of the resurrection.



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Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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► *As we remain, we may grieve deeply, but as one who has hope.* Both C. S. Lewis and Nicholas Wolterstorff “identify the loss of an irreplaceable good *in this life* as the heart their grief” as their loved ones died, and they “shudder at the finality of the loss. Even the glories of life in the world to come do not change the fact that our days on this earth are marked by separation and absence from goods beyond measure.” Though they cannot understand why God allows us to be savagely robbed of the companionship of loved ones, they continue to trust God. “Neither expects to comprehend completely God’s answer to our questions in Christ. There is more to the wisdom of God than anyone has yet been able to put into words.”

Given the terrible loss of relationships that we suffer in death, does talk of “befriending” seem odd? Buras concludes, “Seen through the eyes of faith, death does not become a good thing; nor do the goods of this life become bad things, unworthy of genuine attachment. The goods of this life remain a blessing, and death is a thief that robs us of them. But in Christ even enemies may be embraced, even thieves befriended.”

Study Questions

1. In relation to your thinking about death, what is the significance of claiming Jesus Christ is the *Logos* or Word?
2. What do Cardinal Bernadin and Henri Nouwen mean by “befriending” death? What would this look like in practice?
3. Why, for C. S. Lewis and Nicholas Wolterstorff, should thoughts of God’s love, the resurrection of the dead, and the life to come not stop us from grieving the death of loved ones? How, then, does Christian hope focus and transform our grieving?
4. History professor Glenn Sanders discusses with his college students the Christian practice of dying well. Consider his insight: “The rawness of my students’ experiences reminds me that *it is the unremitting, mysterious reality of death that helps us, not some superficial comprehension of it.* I need this lesson, because death can seem like a commonplace.”

Departing Hymn: “When Life Well Lived Is at an End” (verses 1, 2, and 4)

When life well lived is at an end and human powers cease,
the God who gave us life and breath will be our rest and peace.
If we believe that Jesus died and that he rose again,
we know that we shall also rise a new life to begin.

As men and women of the past bore witness to the Light,
they passed from life into a world of comfort and delight.
Their faithfulness in life and death declares unto our day
that we, like them, may have a faith that will not pass away.

All glory to the Father be, all glory to the Son,
and to the Spirit, one in three, and also three in one;
through seasons of eternity that are and that have been,
and in the ages yet to come, world without end. Amen.

David W. Music (2013)
Tune: KINGSFOLD

Loving Our Last Enemy

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the import of the claim that Jesus Christ is the *Logos*, especially in regard to our preparation for the process of dying and the moment of death.
2. To discuss how we might “befriend” our own death in the light of Christ’s resurrection.
3. To consider how our grief over a loved one’s death is focused and transformed, but not eliminated by the hope that we are given in Christ’s resurrection.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Death (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “When Life Well Lived Is at an End” locate the familiar tune KINGSFOLD on pp. 50-51 of *Death*, in your church’s hymnal, or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

The Flying Rodleighs are trapeze artists in Germany with whom Henri Nouwen became good friends. “I will never forget how enraptured I became when I first saw the Rodleighs move through the air, flying and catching as elegant dancers,” Nouwen writes.

“One day, I was sitting with Rodleigh, the leader of the troupe, in his caravan, talking about flying. He said, ‘As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. . . . When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me and pull me safely over the apron behind the catchbar.’

“‘You do nothing!’ I said, surprised. ‘Nothing,’ Rodleigh repeated. . . . ‘A flyer must fly and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him.’

“When Rodleigh said this with so much conviction, the words of Jesus flashed through my mind: ‘Father into your hands I commend my Spirit.’ Dying is trusting in the catcher. To care for the dying is to say, ‘Don’t be afraid. Remember that you are the beloved child of God. He will be there when you make your long jump. Don’t try to grab him; he will grab you. Just stretch out your arms and hands and trust, trust, trust.’” [Henri Nouwen, *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring* (1994), 63-64.]

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to help members prepare to die faithfully and well.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Corinthians 15:19-26 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study and the previous one, “The Virtues for Dying Well,” focus on the Christian “art of dying.” In the previous study, Brett McCarty and Allen Verhey drew inspiration from the *Ars Moriendi* literature; in this

study, Todd Buras drafts further ideas for a contemporary art of dying from recent Christian reflections on death and dying. Joel Shuman's review, "Dying Well," points to additional contemporary Christian contributions to this theme. The process of our dying is something we (and our community of friends and loved ones) manage to some extent. These authors agree there is an "art" — a skill requiring lifelong cultivation — to managing the process of our dying well and faithfully, not by ourselves, but with the aid of a Christian community.

Study Questions

1. Todd Buras agrees with theologian William Placher's view that the identification of Jesus Christ with the *Logos* is "the single most remarkable thing to have happened in Western intellectual history." It is the claim that God has addressed our human weakness in the realm of knowledge. Buras notes, "This is how the Apostle Paul presents the gospel in his famous sermon at the heart of the ancient world. He proclaims to the Athenians that what they recognize as unknown has now been revealed in the one raised from the dead (Acts 17:16-34)."

Of course, this does not mean that we now understand everything about death or about what God intends for eternal life after we die. "The project of understanding human mortality in light of the revelation of God in Christ is as old as the faith itself, and is given new life by each painful confrontation with the grave." Yet, we can approach death with hope that is grounded in our trust in the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

2. Cardinal Bernadin speaks of receiving peace as a gift from God during the process of dying, because "just as God has called me to serve him to the best of my abilities throughout my life on earth, he is now calling me home." Henri Nouwen is heartened by Christ's resurrection, which "is God's way of revealing that nothing that belongs to God will ever go to waste." Thus, befriending death is welcoming it as something that God will overcome and use to good purpose. Buras explains that for Nouwen this involves "seeing life as lived from one mode of dependence to another, recognizing the unity of the human family in death, and embracing our role as parent to future generations."

Befriending death, our "last enemy," in this way is very difficult for even the most faithful Christian believers. Ask members to share their experiences with the dying and death of believers. What attitudes toward death would they emulate, and which would they resist?

3. Neither C. S. Lewis (in the loss of his wife) nor Nicholas Wolterstorff (in the death of his son) was easily comforted, Buras notes, because the death of their loved one was such a serious loss. It meant their "days on this earth [would be] marked by separation and absence from goods beyond measure." It is appropriate to grieve this loss and not be distracted from it. However, they do not grieve eternal loss, or the oblivion of their loved one. They do not grieve that God is a "Cosmic Sadist," though they cannot claim to understand God's purposes in allowing the separation of death. Notice that each thinker experiences the presence of God in their grief. For them, this took the form of something like a mystical experience, but for others people it might be mediated through the loving attention of fellow believers.

Encourage members to explore their experiences of grieving the death of a loved one. Did the words of Scripture, compassionate acts of others, or mystical experiences of God bring them comfort and insight? Did they resent certain uses of Scripture or actions of believers as misguided attempts to distract them from their grieving?

4. Glenn Sanders recalls "[a] student came up [after the class discussion of dying well] and said, 'My good friend recently had a child, but it died. She's beside herself. What should I do?' The next day another student came to me and said, 'My best friend just killed his mother. I was close to both of them. What should I do?' Confusion, pain, and sadness were clear on their faces." He suggests that the young experience "the mystery and immensity and banality" of death intensely because they lack "the ability of 'getting on' that they will gain later." In this sense they are not distracted from grieving the "sting" of death, and he admires this honesty.

Departing Hymn

'When Life Well Lived Is at an End' is on p. 49 of *Death*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.