



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
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Study Guides for

Death

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to explore from a Christian perspective how we can provide better care for the dying, remember the dead rightly, and prepare for our own deaths. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

- How the Tomb Becomes a Womb 2
By baptism “you died and were born,” a fourth century catechism teaches. “The saving water was your tomb and at the same time a womb.” When we are born to new life in those ‘maternal waters,’ we celebrate and receive grace that shapes how we live and die.
- Defending Life by Embracing Death 4
In a Christian equipoise between death-seeking and death-avoidance, we would not be especially disposed to postpone our deaths; neither would we be disposed to seek them. We would want to continue to give our lives away as we have received them, as sheer gift. But can we be disposed to equipoise in an immortalist culture?
- The Virtues of Dying Well 6
We can learn a great deal from the *Ars Moriendi* literature of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. Focusing on the paradigmatic significance of the death of Jesus, it emphasized the importance of faith, hope, patient love, humility, serenity, and courage as we commend our lives and our deaths into the hands of a living God.
- Loving Our Last Enemy 8
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.
- Remembering the Dead Rightly 10
We can over-identify with powerful emotions that accompany grieving, make an idol of the deceased, or harbor the poison of estranged or hostile relationships with them. Remembering the dead rightly – with love that is undistorted by our passions – is a difficult spiritual discipline.



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Focus Article:

📖 How the Tomb Becomes a Womb
(*Death*, pp. 11-18)

Suggested Article:

📖 Rebekah's Scheme
(*Death*, pp. 87-93)

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How the Tomb Becomes a Womb

When we are born to new life in the 'maternal waters' of baptism, we celebrate and receive God's grace that shapes both how we live and how we die.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Romans 6:3-11

Meditation¹

[When you were baptized,] you died and were born in one and the same moment. This saving water was both tomb and womb. It is a strange thing, quite out of the ordinary.

For indeed, at the moment of Baptism we are not actually dead, we have not really been placed in the tomb, we are not actually brought back from the dead: by these ceremonies we seek to represent Christ's Passion.

Yet we are truly given new life.

Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 387)

Reflection

We rarely think of baptismal grace in the way Cyril of Jerusalem suggests – as announcing our deaths and preparing us for death by reorienting us to life as a gift from God. Perhaps, Eric Howell suggests, this is because we “construct walls around the baptismal moment, separating it from the rest of the Christian life that follows.” Instead, he recommends that we see within the act of baptism the shape of the whole Christian life.

“The Christian tradition variously describes baptism as a *sacrament* to highlight the mysterious work that God does through its practice, as an *ordinance* to emphasize our obedience to Jesus' command to perform it, and as a *sign* to indicate the symbolic nature of the lowering and raising of the candidate,” Howell explains. “Perhaps we should also describe baptism as an *augury*, for it is an omen of what will happen in the future. ... [In baptism] we can see the death and resurrection of Christ and our own death and resurrection.”

The grace of God that we receive, signify, and celebrate in baptism sustains us through our lives. “Life in the spirit means gradually becoming aware of 'baptismal grace,' and this awareness transforms the whole person,” Olivier Clement has written. “Each present moment has to become baptismal: a moment of anguish and death if I seek to cling to it and so experience its non-existence, but a moment of resurrection if I accept it humbly as 'present' in both senses of the word. ... We come finally to the moment of agony when we are overwhelmed by the waters of death. Through our baptism, according to the measure of our faith, they will be transformed into the womb of eternity.”²

Howell commends two practices that can suffuse our lives with awareness of this baptismal grace:

- ▶ *Remember our death daily.* It is ancient Christian wisdom that “we most fully experience life when we are most mindful of our deaths,” he notes. “We most fully experience baptismal grace when we contemplate the reality of death...because the grace that we will receive for resurrection upon our deaths is so richly augured in baptism.”



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- Continue to tell the 'story' of baptism in Christian funerals. "In the baptismal service the person is lowered into and then raised from the waters. In the funeral service the person is lowered into death to be raised to new life. Even as we trust that a baptized person will be raised from the water, so we trust that the person we lower into the ground will rise again," he writes. The power of Christ's resurrection, which is symbolized and experienced in the waters of baptism, is the basis of our hope for eternity. Howell concludes, "By God's grace may we come to receive both the watery grave and the earthen grave as blessed, as auguries of new life in Christ, and therefore as occasions for rejoicing in hope."

Study Questions

1. In his memoir of dying from cancer, *Chasing Delight*, Eugene O'Kelly wonders what life would have been like if his key insight—that life can become filled with the awareness of gift—had come to him years before his diagnosis, rather than weeks before his death. What would you say to him? How does remembering your baptism *deepen* and *strengthen* your understanding of life as a divine gift?
2. How does the communal practice of baptism shape our understanding of death and give meaning to it?
3. Tom Long has observed, "When a Christian dies, the church gathers to act out the story of what this death means in the light of the gospel, but it is a story that began long before the person died. It is a story that began at baptism." What themes from the baptismal service should be echoed in a Christian funeral?
4. In baptism, Cyril of Jerusalem notes, we are not literally buried, but we are raised to new life. How is his insight captured in the baptismal hymn, "Jesus, Our Lord and King"?

Departing Hymn: "Jesus, Our Lord and King" (verses 1, 2, and 4)

Jesus, our Lord and King,
to you our praises rise;
to you our bodies we present,
a living sacrifice.

As dead indeed to sin,
we rise to walk anew,
henceforth, as not our own, but yours,
we follow only you.

Baptized into your death,
with you again we rise,
to newness of a life of faith,
to new and endless joys.

Anonymous
Tune: ST. MICHAEL

1 *A New Beginning: Cyril of Jerusalem, Augustine, Tertullian* (Trowbridge, UK: Redwood Books, 1998), 47-48.

2 Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary* (New York: New City Press, 1993), 106.



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Focus Article:

📖 Defending Life by Embracing Death
(*Death*, pp. 19-25)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Grim Reaper
(*Death*, pp. 46-48)

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Defending Life by Embracing Death

In a Christian equipoise between death-avoidance and death-seeking, we would neither be especially disposed to postpone our deaths, nor disposed to seek them. We would want to continue to give our lives away as we have received them, as sheer gift. But can we be disposed to equipoise in an immortalist culture?

Prayer

Eternal God, neither death nor life can separate us from your love. Grant that we may serve you faithfully here on earth and that we may rejoice with all your saints who proclaim your glory with unending praise.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Romans 8:35-39

Meditation†

If the apostle Paul is correct in his assertion that nothing can separate us from the love of God, then the central theological question that should guide Christian approaches to end-of-life care...is this: How can the faithful who are dying (and those who care for them) be enabled to love God and to hold on to the reality that God is love even in the midst of their suffering?

John Swinton and Richard Payne

Reflection

Should we ever embrace death as a friend? The answer, Paul Griffiths suggests, is both yes and no. No, because death is a result of the Fall, a reward for sin, and a sign that things are not the way they are supposed to be. Indeed, Christ pleaded with the Father that he might avoid his imminent and painful death. "On this understanding, death is a horror and an offence, something we do and should make efforts to postpone in both our own case and that of others, and something we do and should lament when it comes to others." But also yes, since "death marks a transition to a new condition that we hope will be immeasurably better than the agony of this life"; in other words, death is "the gateway to eternal life." Also, accepting death for a righteous cause can be a way to witness to the truth and to imitate Christ.

This ambivalence is a good thing. "To overlook that death is a horror to be lamented easily leads to support for suicide, euthanasia, or the refusal of medical treatment to those who might benefit from it. To overlook the view that death is a friend to be welcomed suggests a blindness to life eternal and a fixation on postponing death at all costs and for as long as possible."

He outlines the "grammar" of a Christian equipoise between death-avoidance and death-seeking. First, "your death's inevitability and apparent imminence are always matters for simultaneous rejoicing and lament." Second, when your death seems imminent, you must discern (with other believers) whether to stave it off, welcome it, or something in between, because "for Christians there is no default response to this gamut." Third, "the length of your life has no great or final significance." What matters is that you live and die faithfully and well: "Your life was received by you as gift, unasked; and the principal purpose of the gift, given you by the Lord, is that you should hand it on and over to others, as Jesus Christ handed his over for us all."



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This Christian stance runs against the grain of our “immortalist” culture in which health care focuses on staving off or delaying death as much as possible and funerary practices isolate us from the dead. To resist these cultural trends and become disposed to Christian equipoise, Griffiths recommends that we:

- ▶ *allow death and the processes of dying to be more visible,*
- ▶ *let “symbols of death, so visible in premodern Christian art and architecture, ... be an ordinary part of every Christian life,”*
- ▶ *use funerary practices that “reflect and encourage not only deep lament but also celebration,”* and
- ▶ *adopt “ascetical moderation with respect to the rhetoric of immortalism, and especially with respect to the language of battle against death-producing illness. Such talk is not Christian, being neither the language of celebration nor that of lament. And because it immediately stereotypes all illness as inimical and labels it as a foe, it prevents proper discernment.”*

These practices, Griffiths observes, must extend over time: “it is much too late to reconfigure your attitude to your own death when you have strong reason to believe that you have only weeks or months to live. Your life needs to be a preparation for death—which is, you may hope, the precursor to eternal life.”

Study Questions

1. What trends in our culture are “immortalist,” disposing us to stave off or delay death in every instance? How can they lead us to undervalue human life and dignity?
2. According to Paul Griffiths, what are the biblical and theological grounds for equipoise toward our impending death?
3. Discuss how each practice that Griffiths recommends resists trends in the immortalist culture and encourages Christian equipoise. How can your congregation implement them?
4. Consider Gustav Klimt’s famous painting *Death and Life*. What stance toward death does it encourage?

Departing Hymn: “The Lord My Shepherd Is” (verses 1, 4, and 6)

The Lord my Shepherd is,
I shall be well supplied;
since he is mine and I am his,
what can I want beside?

While he affords his aid
I cannot yield to fear;
though I should walk through death’s dark shade,
my Shepherd’s with me there.

The bounties of your love
shall crown my following days;
nor from your house will I remove,
nor cease to speak your praise.

Isaac Watts (1719), alt.

Suggested Tunes: ST. THOMAS (Williams) or GOLDEN HILL

† “Introduction” in John Swinton and Richard Payne, eds., *Living Well and Dying Faithfully: Christian Practices for End-of-Life Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), xviii.



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Focus Article:

📖 The Virtues for Dying Well
(*Death*, pp. 26-33)

Suggested Article:

📖 Dying Well
(*Death*, pp. 74-78)

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The Virtues for Dying Well

We can learn a great deal from the *Ars Moriendi* literature of the 15th to 17th centuries. Focusing on the paradigmatic significance of the death of Jesus, it emphasized the importance of faith, hope, patient love, humility, serenity, and courage as we commend our lives and our deaths into the hands of a living God.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 2:10-18

Meditation†

Taking Jesus as a model, it is necessary for Christians to come to see their own dying as a venue where the possibility exists to find deepened self-understanding and to bear witness to God. In other words, dying must be made a part of living in the sense that one's efforts at discipleship persist through this stage of life. Dying is not a time or a task that is devoid of meaning, divorced from God's presence.

Christopher P. Vogt

Reflection

Interpreting death as not simply a medical event, but as "something that we can and should prepare for as part of a faithful life of discipleship," the *Ars Moriendi* ("art of dying") literature recommends specific virtues to resist the spiritual temptations we face in the process of dying, Brett McCarty and Alley Verhey explain. These virtues for dying well were exemplified in Jesus' preparation to die on the cross, and are encouraged today through the practices of his body, the Church.

- ▶ The first temptation in the pain and loneliness of dying is to stop trusting God. In response, the tradition commends *the virtue of faith*. McCarty and Verhey note, "Jesus is not just an example of faith; in our living and in our dying, Christians can have faith because of his faithfulness." On the cross Jesus faithfully uttered to God songs of both lament and trust (Psalm 22:1; 35:1); he did not welcome the agony of dying, but he valued God's cause more than extending his own life.
- ▶ As death threatens to shatter plans, sever relationships, and unravel the meaning of life, we are tempted to despair. Thus, *the second virtue is hope*. Here is the basis of Christian hope: "Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has given us grounds to hope that death will not have the last word in our world or upon our lives. Christians do not deny the awful reality of death, but they do insist that death will not have the last word, that the last word belongs to God, and it is not death but life, not suffering but *shalom*."
- ▶ Impatience is a third temptation we face in the process of dying. "The daily care received from doctors, nurses, and loved ones can be spurned, and this impatience in the face of death receives its most terrible expression in suicide." *Ars Moriendi* commends two virtues in response: *love* and *patience*. They object to the "escapist" way the tradition characterizes the virtue of love as detaching ourselves from earthly relations and focusing solely on God. Rather, they think, "by loving God and all else as it relates to God, we learn



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to properly love our bodies, our lives, and the innumerable relationships that define who we are. Because of this, there is room to lament when death threatens these loves." Jesus' patient love is our model: "he was willing to suffer unto death, but this display of love's patience is not a glorification of suffering."

- ▶ At some point we may be tempted to congratulate ourselves for developing (by our own efforts) the virtues of faith, hope, and patient love. To counter this prideful tendency, the tradition recommends cultivating *the virtue of humility* by focusing on the grace of God. "Attentive to God, we can acknowledge our neediness and no longer fear it. Attentive to the grace of God, we need not pretend that it is our little righteousness that makes us worthy of God's care (or anyone else's); we can learn to receive care graciously," McCarty and Verhey explain. "We need not anxiously hoard the little resources we think we have against our vulnerability to suffering and death; we can be a little less anxious, a little more carefree."
- ▶ This freedom from anxiety helps us to resist the temptation to avarice, which "manifests itself in an anxious, tightfisted grasping, a desperate and idolatrous clinging to life above all else." McCarty and Verhey variously name the corresponding virtue as *letting go*, *serenity*, and *generosity*. Following Jesus' example on the cross, we may trust ourselves into God's hand as we die. Also, "we may let go also of those we love and must leave behind, confident of God's care for them."

Together these virtues – faithfulness, hope, patient love, humility, and serenity – enable us to have *courage* in the face of death. "By remembering Jesus and his dying, we may find a paradigm for dying well and faithfully," McCarty and Verhey conclude. "We find and follow that paradigm, however, only in the light of the resurrection. ... The resurrection assures us that we will not finally be alienated from our flesh or from the community, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God."

Study Questions

1. Have you observed these temptations – loss of trust in God, despair, impatience, pride, and avarice – manifest in the dying process in specific ways? Are there other temptations?
2. Discuss how a congregation can form members' imagination and habits so they are prepared to die well and faithfully. Which church practices inculcate virtues for dying well?
3. Discuss Joel Shuman's qualification of the idea that there is an "art" to dying: "In spite of our best efforts to domesticate it, death remains wild and often untamable, and the best-lived lives sometimes end in less than desirable deaths. This is not a dismissal of the need for Christians to prepare for life's end, but a gentle reminder that our futures, including and perhaps especially our deaths, should be commended to the sovereignty of God, who remains faithful even when we lose faith in the midst of dying" (*Death*, 78).

Departing Hymn: "When Life Well Lived Is at an End" (verses 1, 3, and 4)

† Christopher P. Vogt, *Patience, Compassion, Hope, and the Christian Art of Dying Well* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 9.



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Focus Article:

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

Suggested Article:

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

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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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► *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



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Focus Articles:

- 📖 Remembering the Dead Rightly
(*Death*, pp. 34-41)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 All My Life is Vanity
(*Death*, pp. 42-45)

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Remembering the Dead Rightly

We can over-identify with powerful emotions that accompany grieving, make an idol of the deceased, or harbor the poison of estranged or hostile relationships with them. Remembering the dead rightly – with love that is undistorted by our passions – is a difficult spiritual discipline.

Unison Prayer

May God the Father, who remains faithful in life and death,
God's Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, whose own death and resurrection give us the promise of new life,
and the power of the Holy Spirit, whose daily presence transforms our world,
empower our journey towards sanctity and fill us with the hope of resurrection and new life. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Colossians 3:5-14

Reflection

"Grief is a natural, yet painful, response to our suffering the irrevocable loss of someone to death," Regina Easley-Young observes. "We are created to be in relationship with one another as the Creator is in relationship with the created. ... Because of this, when we love other persons we experience pain at their death."

Grief plays a productive role in remembering the dead when it "forces us to acknowledge hard, objective truths such as the wonderful gift that someone's life was to us and the demand that now we must give them up to death," she writes. It may lead us to abandon poor "responses to death, such as a prideful demand for intellectual answers, a desire to avoid any suffering, the illusion of control over death, and the false impression that we have life all figured out." For this we should be grateful.

But grief often distorts our remembering the dead, she warns, especially when it leads to despair or is "tinged with particular issues of estrangement, anger, guilt, or forgiveness toward the person who has died." Ancient Greek had a name for such distorting emotions: *pathos* or passions. Paul warns the Colossians to be rid of them (3:5). Rejecting passions in this negative sense, early Christians valued the emotional maturity of *apatheia*.

Thus, Isaiah the Solitary (c. 370-491) counsels, "Be attentive... guard your heart... so that nothing destructive can separate you from the love of God." Evagrius (345-399) teaches "Agape is the progeny of *apatheia*" and "in front of love [*agape*], passionlessness [*apatheia*] marches." Easley-Young explains their reasoning: "Our human love is immature and inadequate. It must be strengthened by mature love, or *agape* – the selfless and self-giving love that God has for us and that we, in turn, can learn to have for God and others. It is this mature love that allows us to remember the dead rightly. *Agape* can only grow within the context of *apatheia*," a spiritual stage "in which our thinking and loving are not controlled by our passions, including grief and despair."

Easley-Young identifies three grief-induced barriers to remembering the dead rightly. In the throes of grieving, we may:

- ▶ *over-identify with our feelings*, cherishing them in order to maintain a connection with the departed loved one. This often leads to despair. Easley-Young writes, "It would be much better if, in due course as



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our hearts stay open, this suffering should cast us onto the way of transformation. To remember God in our pain is one way to overcome this barrier and remember the dead rightly. St. Mark the Ascetic urges, 'Let all involuntary suffering teach you to remember God.'

- ▶ *idolize the deceased*, remembering only the good and ignoring the negative. In their absence, "we grow depressed and isolated, we live in the past, and we are unable to deal with the challenges of the present," she notes. "It would be much better if, in due course, this sentimental clutching the memory of the deceased should reveal to us the immaturity of our over-attachment to them. The illusion that we cannot live without the loved one might then be transcended, and we would free them from taking the place of God in our lives."
- ▶ *nurse anger toward the deceased*. "Perhaps while they were alive our relationships were damaged by divorce, the abandonment of children, (their or our) addiction or abuse, or other trauma. Even after their death, such relationships may continue to poison our spirits and limit our ability to love them and others. In order to maintain our equilibrium, we may not admit these unresolved relationships (to ourselves or others) or acknowledge our lingering anger and resentment. These deceptions are not right remembering either."

Study Questions

1. What barriers have you faced, or helped others to face, in remembering the dead rightly?
2. Easley-Young writes, "How do we know we are making progress toward [*apatheia* and *agape*]...especially in regard to transcending the powerful barriers to rightly remembering the dead? I think a harbinger of progress in most situations is the emotion of gratitude." Discuss her observation.
3. According to Easley-Young, how can congregations provide rituals that encourage right remembering of the dead?
4. How does David Bailly's painting *Vanitas* suggest that we remember the artist (and the dead, more generally) rightly?

Departing Hymn: "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds" (verses 3, 4, and 5)

O Jesus, shepherd, guardian, friend,
our Prophet, Priest, and King,
our Lord, our Life, our Way, our End,
accept the praise we bring.

How weak the effort of our hearts,
how cold our warmest thoughts,
but when we see you as you are,
we'll praise you as we ought.

Till then we would your love proclaim
with every fleeting breath;
and may the music of your name
refresh our hearts in death.

John Newton (1774), alt.

Suggested Tunes: ST. PETER (Reinagle) or DUNDEE

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

How the Tomb Becomes a Womb

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the grace we celebrate and receive in baptism is an augury of the whole Christian life, which prepares us not only for living, but also for dying.
2. To discuss practices that help us become aware of this baptismal grace in relation to death.
3. To explore the relationship between the baptismal service and the Christian funeral.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 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 “Jesus, Our Lord and King” locate the familiar tune ST. MICHAEL in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

In the prime of his life, with an adoring family, good friends, and meaningful work as CEO of one of the largest accounting firms in the world, Eugene O’Kelly was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor. In his memoir, *Chasing Delight*, he describes his diagnosis as a gift: “I was blessed. I was told I had three months to live.” He reports, “I’d attained a new level of awareness, one I didn’t possess the first 53 years of my life. It’s just about impossible for me to imagine going back to that other way of thinking, when this new way has enriched me so. I lost something precious, but I also gained something precious.”

In the shadow of death, O’Kelly experienced his life as a wonderful gift. On a human scale, perhaps, his insight is an analogue of the divine grace that we experience in baptism.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for the grace that we celebrate and receive in baptism.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Romans 6:3-11 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

“As believers in Christ we enter God’s family by dying and being born again in baptism,” Charles Christian notes in his review article, “Restoring the Christian Funeral.” This study explores the profound theology of death that is implicit in baptism: we participate in Christ’s death and resurrection, and this establishes the form of the entire Christian pilgrimage. Baptism is a sacrament, ordinance, sign, and (Eric Howell helpfully explains) augury of the fact that life before God is a gift, which is mediated to us through the body of Christ, the Church.

As we absorb the meaning of this “baptismal grace,” we learn not only how to live, but also how to die. As members reflect on the communal experience of baptism—their own and others’ they have celebrated—encourage them to consider the parallel ways in which they witness and proclaim God’s grace in the service of baptism and in the Christian funeral.

Study Questions

1. Eric Howell interprets Eugene O’Kelly’s insight as an analogy, on the human plane, of the awareness of life as a divine gift that we are granted in baptism. As we participate in Christ’s death in baptism, we are “raised...so that we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). Each time we remember our own or celebrate another’s baptism, we recall that Christ’s resurrection enables us to turn from sinful desires and habits, and to welcome God’s grace. We have not earned the wonderful life with God that we live through Christ’s body, the Church, but have received it as a gift. As we pattern our lives on this experience of baptismal grace—continually ‘dying’ to reliance on ourselves and trusting God’s gift of life—we develop habits of love that prepare us for trusting God in the process of our dying.
2. The *communal* nature of baptism reminds us that we are born for life with God within a community, and through the sacramental actions of that community, which is the body of Christ, the Church. Likewise, through every stage of the Christian journey, including the process of our dying, we are graced by God through the body of Christ. Further, the *obedient act* of baptism is our participation in the death of Jesus, so that we may also rise with him. Christ’s resurrection, for which baptismal immersion is a fitting *symbol*, is our promise that after death we will be raised, like him, to new life with God.
3. “The funeral service echoes the baptismal service,” Eric Howell writes. “In both cases the congregation celebrates and receives God’s grace for a person’s life shaped by dying and rising. In the baptismal service the person is lowered into and then raised from the waters. In the funeral service the person is lowered into death to be raised to new life. Even as we trust that a baptized person will be raised from the water, so we trust that the person we lower into the ground will rise again.”

In “Restoring the Christian Funeral” Charles Christian says a funeral service should trace how the deceased believer’s story became “intertwined with God’s redemptive story.” Like baptism, the funeral is a communal act that does not ignore, but rather honors the believer’s body. Christian writes, “the funeral of a believer revolves around telling two stories: the sad story of the severing of earthly bonds between the deceased brother or sister and the community, and the hope-filled story of Christ’s resurrection that allows the deceased brother or sister to be carried ‘to the arms of God.’”

Encourage members to discuss elements of funeral services that best exemplify the communal nature of the believer’s life in Christ, the grief that rightly accompanies severed relationships, and the hope which is grounded in Christ’s resurrection.

4. “Jesus, Our Lord and King” is a prayer to Christ. Each verse borrows a phrase from the Apostle Paul to depict how believers “*represent* Christ’s Passion,” as Cyril says, in the act of baptism: “to you our bodies we present/a living sacrifice” (from Romans 12:1), we are “dead indeed to sin” (Romans 6:11), and we are “Baptized into your death” (Romans 6:3). Believers do not literally die, but they offer themselves to God as a *living* sacrifice (verse 1), become *dead...to sin* (verse 2), and are baptized into *your* (Christ’s) death (verse 3).

However, believers are literally raised to a new life. It is characterized by giving “praise” to Jesus as “our Lord and King” (verse 1), living “as not our own, but yours” as we “follow only you” (verse 2), and living “a life of faith” with changed concerns that result in “new and endless joys” (verse 3).

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Defending Life by Embracing Death

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how our culture takes an “immortalist” stance toward death, disposing us to do everything in our power to stave it off or delay it.
2. To outline the “grammar” of a Christian stance toward death—an equipoise between immortalism and self-annihilation.
3. To discuss practices by which your congregation can encourage this Christian equipoise.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 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 “The Lord my Shepherd Is” locate one of the tunes ST. THOMAS (Williams) or GOLDEN HILL in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Thought Experiment

“Let me ask you to perform a thought-experiment,” Paul Griffiths begins. “Imagine that you have a friend, that this person has been your friend for as long as you can remember—as long as you have had any sense of yourself as a person—and that this friendship has largely defined your character and the sense you have of what it is like to be yourself. Without this friend’s friendship, it seems to you, you would be a different person, and you find that person hard to imagine. But that’s not all. In addition to anticipating this friend’s visits exactly as the visits of a friend, you also dread them. Your anticipation of them causes trembling and sleepless nights, and you know that when they happen, when your friend is with you, you will lament and wail and rend your garments even as you rejoice in the friend’s presence. Lament and delight are inextricably bound together when you are with this friend. This is an unusual friendship. But it is a friendship we all have. It is a friendship with death. ...

Griffiths continues, “May Christians think about death as a good thing, even as a friend or lover, as my opening thought-experiment suggested? The answer is double, both yes and no.” In this study he explores how his complex attitude toward death leads Christians to an equipoise between death-seeking and death-avoidance.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking members to read aloud the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Romans 8:35-39 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

In the Christian tradition there is a certain sort of ambivalence between fighting death as a bitter enemy and embracing death as a friend. In this study Paul Griffiths develops the biblical and theological rationale for this Christian equipoise in the face of impending death, and shows how it points us toward more faithful health care and funerary practices. Perhaps it will help to draw a line representing the continuum of responses to death from immortalism (which sees death always as an enemy) on one extreme to self-annihilation (which sees it only as a friend) on the other. Our culture tends to the extreme of immortalism. The Christian position is not at any one point on the continuum, according to Griffiths; rather it requires discernment in each situation in order to determine how best to treat life as a gift from God that is to be given back to God in a way that blesses others.

Study Questions

1. Paul Griffiths identifies several immortalist trends in health care. First, patients request and physicians recommend many diagnostic tests for people, whether they are sick or not, if they promise to lower mortality-rates. "The thought here is that anything which reduces mortality is *ipso facto* good." Second, we often talk about battling illness, but rarely "talk about embracing what we shall succumb to as an ally...." Third, we spend vast amounts of money on products that deny or obscure the signs of aging and death's approach. Fourth, "a startlingly high proportion of what we spend, nationally, on health care is devoted to medical work done on patients in the last six months of their lives. Doctors appear to hew to a default position of administering treatment if it will extend life even for a few weeks." All of these raise the price of health care and redirect resources to the wealthy. Due to the latter practice, he notes, "The wealthy, because they can afford the treatment, are now approaching the unenviable situation of being able to die only if they are killed: once in the grip of a doctor determined not to let you die, it is not easy to escape even if you want to."
2. For the view that death is an enemy, Griffiths alludes to psalms of lament, to biblical teachings that death is a result of sin (e.g., Romans 5:12, 22; 6:10, 23; James 1:15), to Jesus praying in Gethsemane that he might avoid his imminent and painful death, and to Mary lamenting her son's death. For the view that death can be a friend, he mentions that Christians see death as "a gateway to eternal life," that saints are celebrated on their death-day (called *dies natalis*, or "day of birth"), and that Christ and the martyrs accepted death as a way of serving God and giving testimony to the truth. Encourage members to mention other evidence from Scripture and Church history for each of these perspectives on death. Griffiths concludes from this evidence that "For Christians there is no default response to this gamut [of perspectives on death] (as there is, say, to idolatry or lying or adultery); rather, the Christian seeks equipoise between immortalism and self-annihilation."
3. Assign four small groups the task of discussing one of the practices Griffiths recommends. How does the practice help us resist the immortalist trends of the culture? Evaluate how your congregation is implementing the practice, and discuss additional ways it could implement and encourage the practice. Notice that Griffiths believes these practices should involve members from a young age, and should continue over a lifetime.
4. In "The Grim Reaper," Heidi Hornik explains that Gustav Klimt considered *Death and Life* to be his most important figurative work. Even though the painting won first prize in the 1911 International Art Exhibition in Rome, the artist reworked it for some reason four years later "by changing the gold background to grey and adding ornaments and patterning to the figures of death and life," Hornik notes. "Perhaps he wanted to create a more somber overall tone and to increase the contrast between the figures." The image of death as the Grim Reaper holding a club and robed in crosses certainly suggests death is an enemy attacking his sleeping victims. However, Hornik believes Klimt's image "is as much about life as death. He gazes across the canvas toward a vibrant patterning of figure and color which symbolizes, perhaps, not only life but resurrection. At least three generations, from infant to grandmother, are depicted with their limbs intertwining and overlapping. It may be possible for death to take individuals from life, but life as a whole will escape and continue to survive." How do you interpret the living persons' calmness? Are they unaware of death or unafraid of it? Do they see it as a friend, sometimes to be welcomed? Consider whether Klimt represents the immortalist assumption, or the Christian equipoise in regard to death.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

The Virtues for Dying Well

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To discuss the temptations that we face in the process of dying and the corresponding virtues for dying well that are identified in the *Ars Moriendi* literature.
2. To understand Jesus as our model for faithfulness in the process of dying.
3. To consider how your congregation can prepare members to die faithfully and well.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 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 Comment

The medicalization of the process of dying today often leads to lingering, lonely, and dehumanizing death, Brett McCarty and Allen Verhey note. “Ask typical Americans how they would prefer to die and they are likely to say quickly, painlessly, and in their sleep—that is, if they have even given much thought to their own death. For many, Christian or not, the thought of dying under the fluorescent lights of a sterile ICU, hooked up to countless machines, is the stuff of nightmares. ... So we try to avoid the process of dying altogether, preferring either an unconscious demise or, as some recent polls indicate, a quick and controlled death through physician-assisted suicide. If we are honest with ourselves, however, we recognize that this escapist impulse does not serve us very well. A good death, if any death can truly be called good, occurs when one dies at peace with others and with God, and this peace is hard to find in the modern ICU or in sudden deaths.”

For Christian insight on when and how we can prepare for death, McCarty and Verhey revisit the *Ars Moriendi* (“art of dying”) literature of the 15th to 17th centuries. While its authors were certainly familiar with lingering, dehumanizing death as the “Great Plague” or “Black Death” spread across Europe during their day, they did not turn to sudden death or suicide as a preferred option.

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 Hebrews 2:10-18 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study and the next, “Loving Our Last Enemy,” focus on the Christian “art of dying.” In this one, Brett McCarty and Allen Verhey draw inspiration from the *Ars Moriendi* literature; in the next 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. Assign five groups to brainstorm the specific manifestations of one of the temptations. Ask them to consider how the assigned temptation may be related to the other four. For instance, avaricious hording to ward off the indignities of the dying process (such as dependence on the care of others) may follow upon the temptations to not trust God, despair, or impatience.

Which temptation seems to be most common in our culture? Which one is most pressing to the group members? Does this depend on one’s age, proximity to death, the type of death one faces, and so on? It may seem odd that anyone would be tempted by pride during the process of dying, but the tradition is alive to the myriad ways that we can take inordinate personal credit for any accomplishment, including our spiritual preparation for death. For some people pride may manifest as thinking one is too good to receive care from other people of certain social status, ethnicities, or personal backgrounds.

Do members think there are other important temptations in the process of dying that do not fit well beneath one of these five headings?

2. You might ask the five groups to continue thinking about their assigned temptation, but now focus on church practices that inculcate the virtue(s) that respond to that temptation.

Brett McCarty and Allen Verhey suggest the “straightforward” practice of visiting the sick and dying can be a “political witness that disrupts the cruel collusion of the privatization of death and religious belief” in modern culture. “Gathering together as the body of Christ...both in the church building and around the bedside of the dying” reminds us that we depend upon God and one another. These practices counteract pride and induce serenity. Community practices of prayer, reading Scripture, confession, praise, petition, and lament form habits of faith, hope, and patient love. McCarty and Verhey mention other practices: “we continue to faithfully prepare to die through the practices of mourning and comforting, the practice of funerals, and the practice of remembering the saints. These gathered communities learn to proclaim Christ as Lord in all aspects of living and dying, and this may mean offering workshops at church about the writing of advanced directives for health care. This proclamation will certainly involve lifelong catechesis concerning death and dying, with continued moral discourse and communal discernment concerning the ways people die and care for the dying. In all these ways, we open ourselves up to the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit, who teaches us what it means to live and die faithfully as people claimed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

3. The term “art” might suggest that we can master the process of dying to make it a palatable and good thing, a production of ours for which we may be proud. Joel Shuman wants to correct this Pollyannaish view. Death is an evil that is ultimately beyond our control, and we are forced at some time to face it.

A better understanding of “art” in this context is that we must do some work – we must study, observe, and finally experience the process of dying – in order to hone the virtues that help us resist some of death’s spiritual damage. Yet ultimately the virtues for dying well are gracious gifts inculcated by God through the Church.

Perhaps Shuman is also giving us a gentle warning that we should not “press” those who are dying to also worry about being virtuous examples for us.

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.

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.

Remembering the Dead Rightly

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2 or 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To see how grief plays two roles in remembering the dead—a positive role of promoting the realization of loss and a negative role of distorting emotions, which can lead to despair.
2. To identify some common barriers we face in remembering the dead rightly.
3. To discuss how your congregation can encourage remembering the dead rightly.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 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 “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds” locate one of the familiar tunes ST. PETER (Reinagle) or DUNDEE in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Regina Easley-Young, who served as a hospice chaplain for many years, recalls how differently people remember those who have died. She writes, “Catherine and Robert were married for fifty-eight years. Though terribly sad after Catherine’s death, Robert found himself filled with gratitude for their life together. After her husband Joe’s funeral, Linda had nothing but resentment about his never having time for her and their children.

“Jerry and Susan found their twenty-two-year-old son dead in his bedroom. While admitting their continuing doubts about God’s love and providence, after three years they have glimpses of peace from time to time. Their neighbor’s teenage daughter died in a car accident, and after three years the parents cannot seem to move past their bitterness over this tragedy.

“Karen’s alcoholic father had been abusive. After his death, over time, she eventually came to terms with the kind of life he had lived. Janice, from a similar family, could never be honest enough, even with herself, to admit to the kind of man her father had been.

“As these contrasting stories show, remembering those who have died is rarely easy and straightforward. Indeed, remembering them rightly is a difficult spiritual discipline.”

Unison Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading aloud the unison prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Colossians 3:5-14 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In this study we shift from preparing for our own death to remembering rightly those who have died. Following early Christian usage, Regina Easley-Young identifies the barriers to proper remembering as “passions,” or disordered emotional responses that distort love. Thus, the solution of *apatheia* (literally, “without passion”) that allows the growth of *agape* is not a denigration of emotion *per se*, but a studied resistance to distorting emotions. She points out that one of the Church rituals that can instruct and enable us to remember the dead rightly is worship on All Saints Day. Eric Mathis’s liturgy (*Death*, pp. 52-62) for this Church feast leads us to rightly remember the deceased members, or saints, in our congregations along with historic saints.

Study Questions

1. Regina Easley-Young identifies two barriers that ‘inflate’ our memory of the deceased and often lead to despair over our loss (over-identifying with powerful emotions that accompany grieving, and making an idol of the deceased) and one barrier that ‘lowers’ our memory of the deceased and leads to bitterness (harboring the poison of estranged or hostile relationships with them). With sensitivity, encourage members to discuss their struggles with these disordered emotional responses. Have they experienced other barriers to remembering the dead rightly?
2. Easley-Young summarizes John Claypool’s experience of grieving his daughter’s death as recorded in *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*. “Claypool describes three paths available to grievers. Some travel the ‘road of unquestioning resignation’ which counsels ‘We must not question God.’ Others follow the ‘road of total intellectual understanding,’ which is ‘the way of explaining everything completely or tying up all loose ends in a tidy answer.’ Claypool tried each of those paths, but found they were ‘dead ends.’ Only the third ‘road of gratitude’ held promise for leading him out of the darkness of grief.” In this third way, he saw his daughter as “a gift, pure and simple, something I neither earned nor deserved nor had a right to. And when I remember that the response to a gift, even when it is taken away, is gratitude, then I am better able to try and thank God that I was ever given her in the first place.”

Discuss how seeing the deceased as a gift from a gracious God (though, perhaps, one that has been defaced by circumstances or the person’s sin) may set our memory of them aright.

3. In addition to the special services of the church year that focus on remembering our own death (Ash Wednesday) and those who have died (All Saints Day), she describes more local rituals that help people remember the dead rightly. For example, in her congregation a group of church friends accompanied a mother to the gravesite of her deceased teenage son on his birthday and listened as she remembered and told stories of his life. Others formed a support group for young parents who experienced miscarriage and infant loss. At a Service of Light and Darkness held during Advent the names of the deceased are read aloud and grieving persons light a candle in their memory. Consider how these rituals might address the barriers to right remembering of the dead.
4. Heidi Hornik explains how the details of *Vanitas: Self-portrait of the Artist, Still Life* (1651) “suggest that Bailly is not depicting a transitory moment in his life, but is reviewing the artistic works completed through his lifetime. This is how the artist wanted to be remembered after his death.” For instance, he cleverly depicts the whole course of his life – as a young man holding his middle-aged portrait and facing his own death (in the form of a skull). Though we might think of his self-portrait (or of any artist’s self-portrait) as an attempt to preserve the artist’s life through his painting, he has wisely presented both his youthful and middle-aged selves as elements in a nature morte (literally “nature dead,” or still life).

Bailly seems to depict his life and artistic accomplishments in an appropriate way – neither sentimentally transcending the human condition of morality, nor collapsing in despair in the face of death.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.