

# Loving Our Last Enemy

BY TODD BURAS

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. This is part of what the Church claims to have in Christ.

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Plato reports that on the eve of his execution Socrates consoled his followers by discussing the philosopher's attitude toward death.<sup>1</sup> The topic emerged not only because of the hemlock lurking ominously in the offing, but also because of the equanimity with which Socrates accepted his fate—a fate brought upon him by the practice of philosophy itself.

Plato's narration is poignant and unusually informative. For the most part, Plato's *Dialogues* attribute very little by way of positive teaching to Socrates. Socrates typically plays the critic, tenaciously debunking intellectual pretensions without revealing his own views. But death has a way of drawing us out. The teachings that Socrates reveals in his confrontation with death are more consistent with his characteristic professions of ignorance than it may appear. They also cast in sharp relief the recent Christian reflections on death that I survey in this essay.

Philosophy has come down to us from Socrates as a certain sort of inquiry that, as its name suggests, aims at wisdom (*philosophia* means "love of wisdom"). Wisdom is more than knowledge. Knowledge is our best guess at the truth in some domain given our most rigorous methods of inquiry, but wisdom is an integration of all the things we know into a coherent view of ourselves and the world. The key wisdom question is, How ought we live in light of all we know? A compelling answer requires convincing responses to a litany of other 'big questions': Where did we come from? Why are we here? What is it for us to flourish? Our answers to these questions orient us in death as well as life, for the question of how best to live and how to be prepared for death are flip-sides of the same coin. For this reason, Socrates says that "the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death" (p. 107).

We prize knowledge for the power it gives us to achieve our ends. We prize wisdom for the way it allows us to make reasoned judgments about the ends worth pursuing in the first place. Given the overarching character of wisdom questions, Hebrew sages prized wisdom above all other intellectual goods: "Wisdom is the principal thing" (Proverbs 4:7a, ASV), they teach, and "She [wisdom] is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her" (Proverbs 3:15; cf. 8:11). Socrates's public defense of philosophy memorably echoes this assessment:

So long as I draw breath and have my faculties, I shall never stop practicing philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for everyone I meet. I shall go on saying, in my usual way, "My very good friend, you are an Athenian and belong to a city which is the greatest and most famous in the world for its wisdom and strength. Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honor, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul?" (p. 61)

Socrates and the Hebrew sages also agree that, apart from divine revelation, wisdom is vanishingly rare. In an irony for the ages, human intellectual life is oriented toward a goal that lies beyond the reach of our abilities. The writer of Proverbs thus urges those who seek wisdom to "not rely on your own insight"; rather, "In all your ways acknowledge [the LORD], and he will make straight your paths" (3:5-6). We are reminded that "the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding" (2:6); and "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (9:10). Socrates concurs that "real wisdom is the property of God" (p. 52). Human wisdom, he explained, consists in the recognition of what we do not know (p. 49). Indeed, it was his penchant for drawing attention to the dearth of human wisdom that brought him into conflict with fellow Athenians in the first place, and earned him the epithet "gadfly of Athens."

Given the connection between wisdom and the proper attitude toward death, one might expect our lack of wisdom to ramify into confusion and uncertainty about death. But we do not find Socrates teaching that no one can say how best to think of death. Rather, we find him parlaying ignorance into fearlessness.

[L]et me tell you, gentlemen, that to be afraid of death is only another form of thinking that one is wise when one is not; it is to think that one knows what one does not know. No one knows with regard to death whether it is not really the greatest blessing that can happen to a man; but people dread it as though they were certain that it is the greatest evil; and this ignorance, which thinks that it knows what it does not, must surely be ignorance most culpable. (p. 60)

Socrates's teachings about the philosopher's attitude toward death involve much more than leveraging of human ignorance.<sup>2</sup> But for present purposes,

the important point is that the most human wisdom can do to reconcile us to death is to ground fearlessness. 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.

At several junctures, Socrates reaches for more, suggesting that there are grounds for hope. In his public defense, for example, he says that a good man—a man who does his best to do his duty as he sees it—may expect post-mortem blessing (pp. 73-76). For death is either a “dreamless sleep” or a “migration” of the soul into another life. Socrates is inexplicably willing to call a dreamless sleep a sort of blessing. Even more inexplicably, he is confident that migration is a promising prospect. His reason is that “the fortunes of a good man are not a matter of indifference to the gods” (p. 76). Given his disavowals of wisdom, this optimism has no clear justification. Socrates is either reposing blind faith in the goodness of the world order, or resting on the truth of some undisclosed divine revelation. 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. The identification of Jesus Christ with the *Logos* or Word—another term for the goal of philosophical inquiry—is by one modest estimate “the single most remarkable thing to have happened in Western intellectual history.”<sup>3</sup> The remarkable

identification positions the Christian proclamation as the answer to our wisdom questions. 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. 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. 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).<sup>4</sup>

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Given the connection Socrates established between attaining wisdom and preparing for death, the Christian claim to have attained a share of divine wisdom in Christ leads inevitably to a reassessment of death. 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. This essay surveys relatively recent contributions to the genre. But the basic themes are established by Scripture, and they do indeed go far beyond fearlessness grounded on ignorance.

Fearlessness is still part of the story, to be sure. But the basis of Christian fearlessness grounds hope as well. For Christian fearlessness is based on faith that, in Christ, God submitted himself to death and rose again victorious (Philippians 2:5-11). This means nothing – not even the grave – can separate us from the God who is love (Romans 8:35). Christians can say, literally: “if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there” (Psalm 139:8); and “even in the valley of the shadow of death...you are with me” (Psalm 23:4). That God is with us in death grounds fearlessness; hence, “I will fear no evil” (Psalm 23:4). That God is perfect love grounds our hope. For in love God raised Jesus from the dead, and made us joint heirs of the glory to which he was raised, a glory that engulfs the sufferings of this present life (Romans 8:10-11, 18; 1 Corinthians 15).

Where Christ’s death and resurrection grounds Christian fearlessness and hopefulness, his teachings go further still. For Jesus taught his followers to love their enemies (Matthew 5:43), and, according to Scripture, death is our last enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). We are “more than conquerors through [Christ] who loved us” (Romans 8:37). Christ not only gives us the victory over death (1 Corinthians 15:57), but he calls us to embrace even our own demise in love, and in this way to be “like him in his death” (Philippians 3:10-11). 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.



The wisdom of God revealed in Christ is thus better news than pagan philosophers dreamt, and also more challenging. Both points are brought home powerfully by two popular Christian reflections on death: Joseph Cardinal Bernardin’s *The Gift of Peace: Personal Reflections* (New York: Image Books, 1998, 176 pp., \$13.95) and Henri Nouwen’s *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring* (New York: HarperOne, 2009 [1994], 128 pp., \$11.99).

Cardinal Bernardin’s reflection is written in the throes of a battle with pancreatic cancer, which he lost finally in 1996. The narrative also recounts a battle against false charges of sexual abuse, which he ultimately won in 1994. The two struggles were both very public, and the memoir characterizes the first as preparation for the last. When accused of misconduct, the Cardinal

held firmly to the great good of his reputation and the integrity of the communion he led; and he did so in trust that the truth would prevail. But he did more. He reached out to his accuser to bless the one who was persecuting him. Even as the case against him unraveled, the Cardinal and his accuser met and were joyfully reconciled.

This pattern of reaching out in love even to one's enemies characterized the Cardinal's battle with cancer as well. Even while he held firmly to the good gifts of this life – reconnecting with family and ministering to his church – he was able to embrace his death fearlessly and hopefully. “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” (p. 152). By faith he managed to adopt the sort of attitude Socrates could only grope for: “While I know that, humanly speaking, I will have to deal with difficult moments, 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” (p. 134).

This use of the language of gift was homage to Nouwen. The two were friends, and Nouwen visited the Cardinal as his battle with cancer took a turn for the worse. Nouwen himself died suddenly just months before his friend. But Nouwen's words animated the Cardinal's last days. Nouwen's book is more therapeutic in orientation than Bernadin's memoir. His question is how we can get beyond merely facing death fearlessly and actually befriend it (p. xiii), and how we can minister to the dying by helping them do the same (p. 51).

The question is animated by deeply Christian convictions. Who else would seek to befriend one's own death? But the actual advice is, for the most part, something even a pagan philosopher could admire. He recommends seeing life as lived from one mode of dependence to another (p. 14), recognizing the unity of the human family in death

(p. 26), and embracing our role as parent to future generations (p. 41). The resurrection plays little role in Nouwen's thinking – as he notes in his concluding remarks (pp. 105-111). The reason seems to be that believing we will live again in Christ primarily grounds fearlessness and hopefulness in death. The resurrection “is God's way of revealing that nothing that belongs to God will ever go to waste,” which is indeed heartening (p. 109). But the

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question is how we can embrace our ultimate enemy, even as it robs us of every earthly good (p. 108).

Buried in the midst of his answer is a wonderful story about a conversation with—curiously enough—the leader of a troupe of trapeze artists named Rodleigh. The secret to the relationship between the catcher and flyer, Rodleigh explains, is that the flyer does nothing except trust the catcher. The more cleanly the flyer lets go, and the more passively he awaits rescue, the better things go. This becomes a powerful metaphor in Nouwen’s hands, and goes some way toward depicting how life’s final steps can be taken with gusto and delight. Dying well “is trusting the catcher,” as Jesus did when he said, “Father into your hands I commend my Spirit.” “He will be there when you make your long jump,” Nouwen urges, “just stretch out your arms and hands and trust, trust, trust” (p. 67).



Death is always a double test of faith. For those succumbing, the challenge is to do so in faith, hope, and love. For those who remain, the test is to bear loss as one who expects the resurrection of the dead and life in the world to come. Until death is finally “swallowed up in victory,” its “sting” is still very real (1 Corinthians 15:54-55), especially for those left behind. Understanding all things in light of the wisdom revealed in Christ means understanding human grief as well as human mortality. Paul tells us that we are not to “grieve as others do who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). But what does it look like to grieve death in a way that befits a Christian?

This is the question addressed by a second pair of late twentieth-century reflections on death written by insightful Christian thinkers in the wake of profound personal loss. C. S. Lewis penned *A Grief Observed* (New York: HarperOne, 2009 [1961], 76 pp., \$12.99) after cancer took his wife of four years, Joy Davidman. Nicholas Wolterstorff composed *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987, 111 pp., \$12.00) after the loss of his son Eric in a mountain-climbing accident. Both share their personal struggle to grieve faithfully in hope of helping others who, as Wolterstorff says, “sit beside us on the mourning bench” (p. 5).

Neither thinker is easily comforted. Lewis chafes at the thought that death is of no consequence (p. 28) and spurns popular images of family reunions “on the further shore” (p. 37). Wolterstorff patiently identifies the inadequacy of the many kind words offered by friends (e.g., pp. 34-35), but has no patience for books on grief that turn attention away from the reality of loss (54). Neither thinker finds any consolation in the hope for life in the world to come. “Don’t come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don’t understand,” says Lewis (p. 37). Similarly Wolterstorff says, “If I had forgotten that hope, then it would indeed have brought life into my life to be reminded of it. But I did not think of death as a bottomless pit. I did not grieve as one who has no hope” (p. 31).

Both identify the loss of an irreplaceable good in this life as the heart of their grief. It is no comfort to know that a loved one is with God, Lewis explains, when what you are grieving is the fact that they are not with you (pp. 35-37). "There is a hole in the world now," Wolterstorff says. "In the place where he was, there's now just nothing" (p. 33). Both writers also 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. Wolterstorff: "It's the *neverness* that is so painful. *Never* again to be here with us.... All the rest of our lives we must live without him" (p. 15). Lewis: "the thing I want is exactly the thing I can never get" (p. 37).

The question of why God would see fit to deprive us of the great goods he once bestowed, to sever the bonds of love that so enrich our lives, heightens the anguish of loss for both writers. "My wound," says Wolterstorff, "is an unanswered question" (p. 68). "I cannot fit it all together by saying, 'He did it,' but neither can I do so by saying, 'There was nothing he could do about it.' I cannot fit it together at all. I can only, with Job, endure" (p. 67). Lewis reasons that "if they [i.e., the torments of death and loss] are unnecessary, then there is no God or a bad one. If there is a good God, then these tortures are necessary. For no even moderately good Being could possibly inflict or permit them if they weren't" (pp. 55-56). But when it comes to seeing why the torments are necessary, he confesses, "I get no answer. But a rather special sort of 'No answer.' It is not the locked door. It is more like a silent...gaze. As though He shook His head not in refusal but waiving the question. Like, 'Peace, child, you don't understand'" (p. 81).

Though neither Lewis nor Wolterstorff purports to understand God's reasons for allowing humanity to be so savagely robbed of the goods bestowed on them, both are prepared to reject some answers. Wolterstorff roundly rejects the suggestion

that God shook the mountain under Eric's feet. He can see death in no other way than as demonic, having no role to play in God's normal dealings with humanity (p. 66-67). When God's peace reigns, he reminds us, death will be no more (p. 63). Lewis, too, rejects the picture of God as Cosmic Sadist, a deity with no real concern for our well-being (p. 43). But he adds "the terrible thing is that a perfectly good God is in this matter hardly less formidable

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than a Cosmic Sadist. The more we believe that God hurts only to heal, the less we can believe there is any use in begging for tenderness" (p. 55).

Despite their lack of answers, grief tempts neither thinker to abandon faith. For neither expects the wisdom of God in Christ to answer all our questions; or, rather, 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. In the end both writers are held fast more by mystical insight than clear understanding. Lewis describes an experience like hearing a friendly chuckle in the dark, a disarmingly simply reassurance that all is well (p. 83). Wolterstorff aimed to "look at the world through tears" in hopes of seeing something that "dry-eyed I could not see" (p. 26). What he sees, in the end, is a vision of "God himself scraped and torn" (p. 80). "Instead of explaining our suffering," Wolterstorff says, "God shares it" (p. 81). "Through our tears we see the tears of God" (p. 80).

These visions assure both thinkers that whatever it is that makes the sufferings of this present life necessary – Lewis calls it God's "grand enterprise" (p. 85) – is something very good indeed. It is something so good, Lewis thinks, that it will not reconcile all our contradictory thoughts, but "knock them from under our feet" (p. 83). It is something good enough, Wolterstorff emphasizes, not only for God to impose suffering on humanity, but also to share it with them (p. 80). Even though we have only dim, poetic intimations of what awaits when the glory of the Lord is revealed (Isaiah 25:6-8, Revelations 21:1-5), there is a modicum of comfort here. In life and in death we belong to one who bears our sorrows (Isaiah 53:4) and is "making all things new" (Revelations 21:5).<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

1 Plato depicts Socrates's death in the dialogue *Phaedo*. In the text I will give page references to the English translation by Hugh Tredennick in Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates: Euthyphro, The Apology, Crito, Phaedo* (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), 97-199.

2 The *Phaedo* also features a good deal of hostility toward the body (e.g., 109), and famously flawed arguments for the immortality of the soul (116-131).

3 William C. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1983), 55.

4 Ephesians 3:8-10 and 1 Corinthians 1:21-24 also describe Christ "the wisdom of God."

5 For Ali, Monica, and Elise, whose losses confronted me with the questions addressed in this essay; and in memory of John W. and Irene Kesner, and Susan E. Colon, whose example helped me find something to say.



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