

Foreword by John Ortberg

# Everlasting Life

How God Answers

Our Questions

About Grief, Loss,

and the Promise

of Heaven

David D.  
**SWANSON**

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**BakerBooks**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Books  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-0-8010-1446-8

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### **Dedication**

To my mother, Nancy Swanson, who faithfully endured the loss of her father on Christmas Day, 1957, and who encouraged my yearning for heaven through the manner in which she grieved in the hope of Christ.

### **In Memoriam**

In their living and dying, God used the lives of these faithful people to shape my understanding of his faithfulness in this life—and the next.

Delmar and Sabina Mock

Barrett Burchak

Don and Viola Swanson

Frank Lindrum

Dorothy Cooper

Bob Hewitt

Dick Bywaters

Ruff Robinson

Mallory Blake

Lane Newsom Drennan

Calvin Baird

Fred Ryan



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## Foreword

Two statements in Scripture stand like the north and south poles of the vast mystery that is our nature. One comes from the prophet Isaiah: “All flesh is as the grass” (Isa. 40:6 NKJV). We are that way. The grass is here today and gone tomorrow. That is the way of all things earthly: the trees that outlast us and the flowers that are outlasted by us; the pets we nurture; the people whom we brush up against each day; our parents and children and spouses. From early on, when the hints of mortality begin to make our skin sag and our muscles ache, we know it is true. All flesh is as the grass.

The other statement is also ancient, from the Teacher in Ecclesiastes: “He [God] has also set eternity in the human heart” (Eccl. 3:11). We may be mortal as the grass, but inside is a longing that the mere recitation of the immutable laws of nature cannot still. As a friend of mine says, we want *more*. No matter how good our lives or beautiful the earth or long our years or happy our families—we want more.

Death is both the inevitable ending of our existence and the hint that *more* has not yet played out. We fear it, hide from it, ignore it, and pretend that our technology can overcome it, yet there it stands. We have a thousand nicknames for the Grim Reaper, but none say it better than the apostle Paul: death is our enemy (1 Cor. 15:26).

And yet it is to be overcome. And yet it *has been* overcome.

David Swanson speaks with wisdom, grace, and honesty about the ultimate subject of existence. It is a matter he has thought much about; I remember him saying once that a salesman had described him as someone who has already bought his last mattress. (I'm not sure people who are not on their last mattress should be allowed to write about death anyway.)

There is much to help you in these pages. There is good theology. There is sage guidance on how to be with people who suffer from illness, people who fear death, people who have lost someone they love.

But most of all, there is *hope*. It is not a vague hope, not an elusive shot in the dark. Here you will discover a hope beyond optimism, a hope beyond doctors' diagnoses, a hope built on the one man who has looked death square in the eye. Jesus went into the tomb and came out the other side and told us that death is not the end, that all flesh may be as grass but eternity is already in session.

So read on, about life and death and life beyond death.

Read on and hope.

John Ortberg

## Acknowledgments

God's timing is always perfect. I know that and I trust that, but I don't always understand it. When I first agreed to write this book, I had no idea what events would unfold as I did the actual work of writing it. Without question, the past eighteen months have been the most challenging in my twenty-one years of ministry, made all the more so by trying to write a book on grief, death, and heaven in the midst of the challenges. On more than one occasion, feeling battered by events, I sat down to write without much energy or interest in doing so, only to have the Holy Spirit meet me in that place and minister to my soul as I reflected on God's promises about this world—and the next. While I felt the burden of having to meet deadlines for my writing, I discovered that God was actually ministering to me in the process. Writing this book became a lifeline—a touchstone—in the midst of all that was happening around me.

First Presbyterian Church, Orlando, which I am privileged to pastor, went through the long and arduous process of being dismissed from the Presbyterian Church (USA) so that we could join the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. It was an experience that I would not trade, but it is not one that I want to go through again. God was faithful to us in so many ways, and our body inspired

me daily as I watched their consistent, unwavering witness to the lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of God's Word. There were two Sundays during the process when God's Spirit arrived in a way that I had never known, and I attribute that to the faithful prayers of this great congregation. God honored their courage even as they sought to honor him.

Through the process there were many people who took on significant roles, people who removed enormous burdens from my shoulders, creating enough space for me to actually serve and minister—and write. Dianna Morgan, one of our elders, was indispensable. Her humble, wise, and faithful manner reflected her deep love for God and her service to this church, and she honored the Lord beautifully. Sam Knight, an associate pastor at the time and now interim senior pastor at Grace Presbyterian Church in Houston, Texas, served with unflagging energy and commitment. His knowledge of polity and governance, as well as his poised demeanor, facilitated our process beyond anything I could have done.

Our Task Force on Dismissal, a committee of our Session charged with shepherding our body through the process of dismissal, served Christ beautifully. We met together more times than any of us care to remember, but I am deeply indebted to each of them: Christy Wilson, Kevin Taylor, Erica Saunders, and Craig Clayton. In addition to those four, Greg McNeill joined us toward the end and provided focused legal counsel. Greg is a dear friend and regular golf companion, but more importantly, he is one of the smartest people I know, always calm and steady in the storm. His efforts on behalf of our Session and congregation were tremendous gifts for which I will always be indebted.

My senior leadership team at First Presbyterian Church were wonderful, caring colleagues as well. Without their constant presence and gifted ministry, I would not have been able to survive. Along with Sam Knight, they are Rebecca Bedell, Donna McClellan, Case Thorp, and John Watts.

My assistant, Grace Whitlow, was also an enormous part of this process as she kept my office humming peacefully even in the face of so many issues and needs. Her unflappable, calm nature

was something I marveled at often, and she helped keep me calm even as things appeared to be spinning wildly. What a gift she is to me and to our church.

My secret editor on this project was Paula Lindrum, who also serves as my assistant for The Well, my online media ministry ([www.drinkfromthewell.com](http://www.drinkfromthewell.com)). As one who was walking freshly in her own grief following the death of her husband, Frank, she was the first one to read each completed chapter. Her insightful, Spirit-led comments helped bring clarity to many ideas and concepts, and her eye for grammar and misspelled words proved a necessary gift.

Finally, I owe much to my wife, Leigh. She read every chapter and honestly shared her thoughts and feelings. She loves me enough to gently tell me the truth—an art often lost in our culture today. Through it all, she loved me—unconditionally, freely, tenderly, graciously she loved me. She is the joy in my journey.

And my children, John David, Alex, and Kaylee, are God's great gifts to me. No matter the stress I was facing or the issues gnawing at my heart, the pure joy of being their father always brought me needed perspective, laughter, hope, escape, and sheer delight. I love you and thank you for enriching my life beyond measure.



# Introduction

That life only really begins when it ends here on earth, that all that is here is only the prologue before the curtain goes up—that is for young and old alike to think about.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

1 Corinthians 15:54

Sitting in a waiting room was about the last thing I wanted to be doing at that moment. For heaven’s sake, it was the middle of summer and I hadn’t had any time off since Christmas. I was tired and cranky and ready for some relaxation, but there I was nonetheless.

My wife and I had flown with our three children to Dallas where most of our extended family lives, including my oldest sister, Susan, a physician in that area. Susan is a wonderful person who has a persistent way of keeping an eye on my personal health. Knowing

I have a rather high-stress job and that I was approaching fifty, she insisted that while we were in Dallas I go see a friend of hers for a complete *executive* physical. I didn't want to be there but knew I needed to be.

That morning I discovered she had not signed me up for your average run-of-the-mill physical. Oh no, this thing lasted six hours. I had every test you can imagine. By the time I finished, I felt like a human pincushion. I had a treadmill stress test. I had blood drawn. I had a body fat analysis. I had a CT scan of my lungs. I had pictures taken of my throat and vocal chords. I had an echocardiogram of my heart. I filled out a forty-page questionnaire about my physical exercise and dietary routines as well as questions about my mental and emotional health. To say that it was a thorough exam would be the understatement of the decade.

When I finally finished, I met with the doctor for thirty minutes to go over the preliminary findings, and while he indicated I was in reasonably good shape, his comments were hardly unequivocal. He told me that after a few more test results came in, he would mail me a detailed report, including recommendations I would need to follow to maximize my personal health.

Sure enough, three weeks later the packet arrived. I opened it, expecting to find a letter that said something to the effect of, "Dr. Swanson, after an extensive review of all your tests, I am thoroughly impressed by your good health and find that you have the physical stature of a man half your age. Well done!" Instead, the letter informed me that while I was in reasonably good health, there were twelve things—*twelve*—I needed to focus on if I wanted to improve my health and eliminate some potential risk factors for future disease.

I was stunned. I knew my diet was not as healthy as it should be. I knew I needed to watch my sugar intake and exercise more, but for crying out loud, come on—*twelve things*—really? As I sat there scanning the exhaustive list, I realized I had a choice to make. The doctor was essentially telling me that if I wanted to live for as long as possible—if I wanted to do all I could to fend off death until the last possible moment—then I needed to change some of

my behavior patterns. The question was obvious: Was I willing to make those changes? Was I willing to change my behavior to live as long as I possibly could?

As I contemplated what I was willing and not willing to do, I started thinking about the notion of eternal life. As a Christian, I believe in heaven, the afterlife, and immortality. And that's when it all hit me right between the eyes: How should my behavior change in light of the fact that I will *never* die? Gulp. I know it sounds like I've lost my mind, but think about it. If you believe what the Bible says about eternity and heaven, then physically we may die, but spiritually we never die. The essence of who we are goes on, albeit in a different form. So if that's true, and I stake my life on it, then the question becomes: How should my view, my perspective, of life in this world change in light of my faith in Christ, which tells me I am going to live forever?

*The question rattled me.* Yes, I needed to work on changing some of my personal habits for better physical health, but I was gripped by a totally different reality: through our faith in Christ, we are actually *immortal*. Wrap your brain around that for a second. Our being, as created by God, never dies. This is not a pleasant-sounding myth or manmade psychological crutch; it is a promised reality. Scripture reminds us of this over and over again. In Christ, *we are immortal* "through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim. 1:10). That's not a reference to the immortality of Christ, but instead it is the declaration of *our* immortality through the gospel of Jesus Christ. What is the gospel? It is the Good News of God revealed in Christ, the Good News that Christ has opened the door to our salvation by his death and resurrection.

Perhaps more famously, Paul, while discussing the absolute certainty of the resurrection, writes in 1 Corinthians 15:52–54:

In a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. . . . The trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the

imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

Paul declares that there will be a day when our greatest enemy, death, will be swallowed up in the victory of Jesus, and we will be immortal. We will enter into the glorious hope of our everlasting life. Our being, as God made us, never dies. If we are in Christ, we live forever. It may well be the most hope-inducing truth in all of Scripture, given our fear of death. It is the hope of everlasting life.

As you try to grasp the magnitude of that, let me ask you a question: If this is true, then shouldn't that also shape an enormous part of how we think and behave in this life? Shouldn't it give us a completely different lens through which we view life on this planet? Think about it. Our culture today invests enormous resources, not to mention huge amounts of time and energy, in health care, medicine, and fitness. It's almost impossible *not* to think about our physical health and all that we need to do to prolong our earthly life. But comparatively, do we spend any time considering the alternate reality that we will never die spiritually?

At the core of our investment in health and fitness is our deep desire to fend off physical death. Yet at some point we must acknowledge we will never succeed. Eventually our number comes up. Therefore, if we are going to be spiritually and emotionally healthy people, we need to consider what happens beyond this life. We need to spend some time wrestling with those questions instead of just the questions motivated by our physical existence. We need to face the prospect of our demise and all that is associated with it; thus, my purpose in this book is to help you do just that. I want to help you bring the subject to the surface and walk around it, see it, touch it, and feel it, and in so doing, grow comfortable in the truths that God has revealed about our physical lives and our spiritual immortality through Christ. I believe those truths can have life-changing consequences for both this life and the next.

## Acknowledging the Inevitable

In spite of the cultural emphasis on this physical life, the specter of our death and what may lie beyond it is always there. Sometimes quiet, sometimes roaring, sometimes lurking just beyond the grasp of conscious thought—death waits.

Still, most people do everything they can to avoid it. In my twenty-three years as a pastor, I have spent innumerable days immersed in matters of life and death. I have prayed at the beds of the dying, held the hands of family members as they coped with crushing loss, visited funeral homes with grieving spouses to help them pick out caskets and burial plots, anointed foreheads, wiped tears, written eulogies, and watched many take their last breath. Even so, as I move and minister among my congregation and in our community, I find this odd reluctance to talk about death and dying, at least among those not readily facing it. When's the last time you were at a social gathering and heard someone say, "Well, I've really been giving some thought to the end of my life, and here's what I think . . ."? It just never happens, does it?

At times, however, we do hear people at social gatherings muster the courage to share a recent loss. Someone will say, "Yeah, I've been out of town for a few weeks taking care of my mother. She finally died last Tuesday." In spite of the enormous vulnerability that person most surely feels, what happens? Eyes immediately drop to the floor. No one quite knows what to do next. "I'm so sorry," we say. Uncomfortable shuffling of feet follows. All involved are trying to think of a deft way to change the subject. It's awkward because no one wants to go there. It puts a huge damper on the conversation. The subject of death is a big wet blanket, smothering people with feelings and thoughts they would much rather avoid. We are more comfortable keeping death in the shadows. I'm not saying that's right or wrong. It's value-neutral. I think it's just a very basic part of our human nature.

Several years ago, John Cloud, a senior writer for *Time* magazine, wrote a marvelous piece for that publication entitled "A Kinder, Gentler Death." It appeared on the cover with the subhead,

“Dying on Our Own Terms.” It was a poignant examination of end-of-life issues in which he wrote:

Dying is one of the few events certain to occur in life and yet Americans as a whole have a hard time discussing it. Although many Americans legally designate someone else to make medical decisions after they are unable to, 30 percent of those designated do not know they have been picked.<sup>1</sup>

That statistic doesn't surprise me. They don't know they were designated because so many people don't want to bring up the subject. Most of us want to avoid it as much as we can, mainly because we view it as a one-dimensional conversation that's always about death, never about life, and that always contains seemingly unanswerable questions. Because we are not acquainted with the God-given answers available to us in Scripture, we don't want to bring up the questions. And if, by chance, the question does sneak into a conversation, we'll throw out a perfunctory comment and change the subject as quickly as we can, retreating into our psychological defenses that remind us, *I'm healthy. That's not going to happen to me, at least not for a long time.*

Another of our favorite defense mechanisms is to mock death, as though somehow by thumbing our nose at it, we can prevent it from touching us. I remember reading about an annual celebration in a tiny mountain community in Colorado that really caught me off guard. Since 2001 the town of Nederland has hosted Frozen Dead Guy Days. I know. Seems strange to me too, but I am not making this up. It started when Grandpa Bredo Morstoel died in 1989 in Norway, and a family member, hoping to start her own cryogenics business, brought his frozen body to Nederland, Colorado. When local authorities found out about it, the practice of storing bodies was outlawed, but Mr. Morstoel was grandfathered in and allowed to stay in town. The town, seeing its opportunity to laugh in the face of death, started the festival. There was a frozen dead guy in their town, so why not?

Today 20,000 people attend. There are coffin races and lots of beer, and for a mere \$150 you get a personal visit to the remains of

Mr. Morstoel. Festival director Amanda MacDonald says the goal is “to drink a convivial toast to the grim specter of death or to spit in death’s eye.”<sup>2</sup> This gleefully macabre weekend built around a frozen corpse—a frozen dead guy!—is yet another example of how we finite human beings try to cope with our pending physical demise.

Why do we avoid and mock death? Aside from the obvious reasons, I think its mystery is a large factor. I love it when the apostle Paul, beginning a discourse on our immortality, says, “Listen, I tell you a mystery” (1 Cor. 15:51). Before he launches into some of the specifics of what God wants to reveal about our journey from this life to the next, he says, “Hey, pay attention! Listen up! I am going to tell you some things about death and dying and the life that is to come. But the first point I need to make is this: it’s a *mystery*. You will never, in your finite minds, grasp this fully.”

Death is the great and vast unknown, and like it or not, things that are deeply mysterious or beyond our mental reach usually frighten us. Statistics from a 2003 national survey show that while 92 percent of Americans believe in God and 85 percent believe in heaven, their beliefs bring them little solace in regard to their fear of death.<sup>3</sup> The hope of our faith in Christ is somehow not getting through. Thus, in our fear, we deny its reality.

## **Finding the Answers to the Mystery**

Like most mysteries, death leaves us asking questions. While we’d like to figure it out, it is so unpleasant to us that we don’t make any real effort to find answers. As I said, we avoid it, at least until we realize it’s not going away. While this realization comes on us at different times and in different ways, at some point it does come. Anna Quindlen says death becomes “an enduring thing called loss.”<sup>4</sup> We do not get over it. The actual death may pass, but then we are left with something larger—an abyss called *loss* that endures. Emily Dickinson described our dance with death as “an awful leisure.”<sup>5</sup> It is awful, and it seems to be in no hurry. Death lingers in an almost leisurely way in spite of our best efforts

to elude it. Thus, if death endures and lingers long, then the only way we can hope to ever find relief from our fears and anxieties on this subject is to find answers. If it's not going away, then we need to find hope. Well, here's the good news: God *does* provide answers. God is not going to tell us everything, but he does give us insights and glimpses into the mystery of death such that we can find peace and security.

Here's the thing: when we have questions in this life and we go to God, God *wants* to answer. He delights in revealing himself to us. Throughout the Scriptures, God is not trying to remain hidden. He wants to be known.<sup>6</sup> That is most clearly seen in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. If God did not want to be known, then Jesus would never have come. God further affirms in Matthew 7:8, "The one who seeks finds." God tells us in James 1:5, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously." If we feel we lack understanding on something, God says *ask*. He's not trying to keep us in the dark, and my hope is that in this book you will discover the wonder of how God answers most of our questions on death and dying through himself. Ultimately, *God* is the answer.

This is never more evident than in the moments when Jesus faced death. In that awful, horrific scene, Matthew 27:46 reminds us that Jesus asked a question. It was not a question rising out of some gentle curiosity. It was a question that welled up from a place deep within him—a question that was literally shouted from the depths of his being. Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" As piercing as that moment is for us to consider, it should also bring us great freedom and confidence.

If as Jesus faced death and all its mysteries, he asked God a question, then we have been set free to do so as well. And we have been set free to ask God with all the emotion and earnestness that we may be feeling at any given time. We don't have to whimper the questions. If we are hurting and lost, we can cry out to the living God, and he promises to hear us—and to bring us his presence. In the agony of death, Jesus turned to the Father for answers and relief, and that should be our plan too. Answers to these questions are found nowhere else.

We should also remember that two others died along with Jesus that day, and one of them asked a question of Jesus. In Luke 23:39, one of the thieves asked, “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” I think it was mainly a rhetorical question, a command of sorts more than an honest question. The thief was essentially asking, “If you are God, then get me down from here and I’ll believe you!” The thief wanted Jesus to get him out of his current situation. But before Jesus could respond to the first thief, the second thief asked the first thief a question: “Don’t you fear God . . . since you are under the same sentence?” (Luke 23:40). The second thief seemed to suggest that, given his position, the first thief should probably not be making any demands. Then the second thief said to Jesus, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42).

The beauty of their exchange is this: while the first thief wanted Jesus in order to change his circumstances, the second thief accepted his circumstances—and death—as long as he could be with Jesus. As he was dying, the second thief realized that all his questions about the moment of his passing were held in the life of one man: Jesus Christ. He didn’t ask to get out of his circumstances; he just asked for Jesus. Therefore, like that second thief, we also come to Jesus. We come to him not so he can get us out of the physical reality of death, but rather so we can find the answers to our fears—and the hope of everlasting life—in *him*.

## Shining Light on Death

I keep a flashlight by my bed. It’s one of those enormous Maglite flashlights that you can also use as a weapon if needed—but it’s mainly there for the light. Why? At times, the darkness scares me. I don’t know what’s there; however, if I light it up with my flashlight, it’s suddenly much less frightening. I can see what’s there. My fears abate.

The same is true in our dance with death. If death is an inevitable part of our life that seems to linger in the shadows, then we need to confront and shine the light of life on it. Avoiding it or

denying its reality leaves us in an unhealthy, fearful darkness that, if allowed to persist, can have negative consequences.

If we don't confront our fears and seek answers to our questions, we will live more to avoid death instead of embracing life. We will obsess over the health or activity of our loved ones. We will start to limit our own activities, whether consciously or unconsciously. No airplanes or white-water rafting. No mission trips to foreign countries. No unnecessary risks. We live as though we have to protect our life instead of living our life to the full as Jesus intended (John 10:10). What we need is some light, and that light is found in Jesus. Thus, you can think of this book as a big flashlight!

Over the course of my life and ministry, here's what I've found: while people may not want to talk about the shadowy mystery of death, *they know they need to*. They may feel uncomfortable, but at some level they recognize death's inevitability and the need to talk about it in some way. We need to shine God's light on death. We need to start to see death for what it is and begin to place it in its proper context. This is where a broader perspective becomes so important. Our reluctance to talk about death, with all its fears and anxieties, would be tempered if our perspective were not so limited by the things of this world. We think and act and respond based solely on our existence in this life. If just for a moment we could take our eyes off what is here and catch a glimpse of what is to come, wouldn't that perspective change how we view all that we endure on this planet?

Several years ago I announced to the congregation of First Presbyterian Church, Orlando, that I would be preaching a series on death and dying. Many thought I was trying to kill attendance (insert laugh track here). In all seriousness, the *Discussing the Inevitable* series became the most requested, most downloaded, most purchased sermon series I have ever preached. The overwhelming response reinforced what I already knew: people don't want to talk about it, but they know they need to. They need a grid—a framework—for making sense of this looming specter, and that grid must include the entire journey. For the Christian, death is

the shortest part of that journey, and if we are ever to learn to cope with physical loss, we need to grasp the larger reality of our journey toward immortality.

When we understand that, our perspective of death and dying becomes wholly different. That's what I mean when I say we need a new *grid* through which to see this. When we shine God's light on death, the promise of our everlasting life becomes a wonderfully transforming truth. Though death is definitely a mystery, not only do we need to bring up the subject, but we also need the tools to understand what God has revealed in his Word.

### **A Three-Part Journey**

I will spend the rest of this book examining the three elements of our journey from this life to the next, so let me briefly introduce you to each element as we find them revealed in 1 Corinthians 15.

#### ***Part 1: Up Close and Personal with Death***

The first part of our journey is the physical life we live now. In verse 39 Paul gives us a very *fleshy* review of how we have been made: "Not all flesh is the same: People have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another." He then goes on to say that these physical bodies are not permanent but perishable. He writes beginning in verses 42–44, "The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body."

During this part of the journey, we live a life that is perishable, described by Paul with two key words: *dishonor* and *weakness*. God has made it clear that we live in a fallen world marked by sin and death. Even those who love God deeply and follow him obediently are bound by this world's dishonor and weakness. I am reminded of a translation of Aeschylus, quoted by Robert F. Kennedy in his speech announcing Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination on April 4, 1968:

Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget  
falls drop by drop upon the heart  
until, in our own despair, against our will,  
comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.<sup>7</sup>

It is the nature of this life, and we must acknowledge its dishonor and pain, an acknowledgment that only serves to deepen our hunger for the life to come.

### ***Part 2: From Here to There***

The second leg of our journey is marked by movement, and this is where we enter into some of the more profound mysteries. Paul uses a series of words (1 Cor. 15:42, 53) that describe our movement from this life to the next:

from perishable to imperishable  
from dishonor to glory  
from weakness to power  
from natural to spiritual  
from mortal to immortality

Paul says that we are clearly moving from one life to the next, taking a journey from one form of existence into another. Jesus describes this movement in John 14:3, “I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

In the mystery of God, I’ll be the first to say I’m not totally sure how it all works. But from Scripture I do know that Jesus is the one who takes us on the journey. He is the one who helps us move from this life into the next.

In the spiritual realm, we depart this life and Jesus takes us to be with him where he lives. What joy there must be when we begin that second part of our journey! For that reason, the words of John Donne can ring true in our hearts:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so.<sup>8</sup>

We fear death, calling it mighty and proud, but it is not. By faith in Christ, physical death is only the end of the first part of our journey. The second part moves us out of the realm of death and into the realm of life, all in the arms of Jesus. So death, be not proud, for we are going home!

### ***Part 3: Everlasting Life***

The third and final part of this journey is when we come to our heart's true home, our eternal dwelling place in the heavenly realms of God. This journey is captured in the powerful words of Paul:

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye. . . . For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, . . . then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

1 Corinthians 15:51–54

Recently, Billy Graham released what will most likely be his final book. *Nearing Home: Life, Faith, and Finishing Well* is filled with his reflections on his failing physical strength, his anticipation of what is to come, and the importance of bearing witness to Christ even in one's final days.<sup>9</sup> Because of the stature of his life and the way he has lived it, Dr. Graham's reflections on his final days will no doubt draw others to consider how they are living as well. That kind of reflection always seems to happen to people at funerals or memorial services. The setting makes them contemplate their own lives. They usually hear about how someone lived and feel compelled to examine their own life by comparison.

Not long ago, one of the patriarchs of our church died after a long illness. Two days after the funeral, one of his sons came to my office and talked about his father's legacy, saying he wanted to grow to be the kind of leader and the kind of servant his father was. Taking in the fact that his father's life had ended produced an internal wrestling, a time of deep personal reflection for that young man. I am confident that his reflections on his father's death

will yield fruit for God's kingdom, both in the present and in the future. It is that kind of personal reflection we all need to engage in before we wind up sitting in a memorial service. Why wait until then to ask the questions and find the hope?

Yes, we need to talk about life lessons and the things of this world. But we also need moments and opportunities, like funerals or books or the beauty of deep personal conversation with a friend, to lead us into a richer exploration of this final part of our journey.

That said, if you picked up this book thinking it was going to answer every question about death or what happens in the next life, you will be sorely disappointed. We are never going to know everything there is to know about this life or the next, about living or dying, about what we do in the next life or how we leave this one. There is too much mystery in it. God has not given us all the details, but he has given us the truth of his Word, and by examining it closely, we find a new perspective that brings security and hope.

I don't know about you, but that is perspective I need. I am emboldened and encouraged in this life when I realize—and internalize—that nothing in this life can defeat me. Not death. Not illness. Not grief. Not addiction. Not miscarriages and infertility. Not financial losses. Not unemployment. *Nothing* can defeat me. We celebrate what John declares in Revelation 21:4, “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” That's our future home. That's our final destination.

## Homesick

Over the past twenty-three years of ministry, God has put me in some very challenging places where lives have been tragically lost. Often, when these families have emerged from those depths, they will say something to me that generally goes like this: “I don't see how you do this all the time. You were with us when we went through one of the lowest points in our life, but once you finished with us, you had to deal with another family coping with another

loss. How do you survive all that and still maintain some sense of joy in life?”

My answer to that is this book. I have certainly had to learn the art of temporarily insulating myself from deep emotions in order to minister to those who grieve. I have been through a number of funerals where I have worked my way through the entire service and the reception and then stepped into my office, sat down, and sobbed. I am no spiritual giant or superman.

Even through my tears, however, I move forward in the joy and peace of Christ because of the truth God has revealed. This life is temporary. It's one part of our journey, but it's not the only part, and it's not even the most significant or longest part. It just happens to be the part we're in now.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “No one has yet believed in God and the kingdom of God, no one has yet heard about the realm of the resurrected, and not been homesick from that hour, waiting and looking forward joyfully to being released from bodily existence.”<sup>10</sup> I like his observation. In the end, I think I'm just homesick. We all are. We want to be set free from the bonds of this life to be reunited with the Father. And we will be. That day *will* come. Our journey goes on from here. When you understand your journey into everlasting life more deeply and more personally, you will not look at this life—with its losses, pains, and heartaches—in the same way again.

I'll spend the rest of this book illuminating our journey toward that life and immortality in the hope that fully grasping the truth that we will never die will change our behavior and our perspective in this life, transforming us by the peace and joy of our eternal life in Jesus Christ.



PART 1

# The Journey Begins

Up Close and Personal  
with Our Last Enemy



# 1

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## What's Going On Here?

### *Coming Face-to-Face with Our Old Foe*

The sting of death is sin.

1 Corinthians 15:56

I have a deep sense that if we could really befriend death we would be free people. Many people never seem to befriend death and die as if they were losing a hopeless battle. But we do not have to share that sad fate.

Henri J. M. Nouwen, *A Letter of Consolation*

Every single thing about it was wrong. It looked wrong. It smelled wrong. Physically and emotionally, it felt wrong. There was nothing right about it.

I was in my second week as a chaplain intern at a hospital in Austin, Texas, and during my first all-night shift I got my first “death call.” My pager went off, flashing the room number. I hurried upstairs. When I entered, the family was present, but the

patient was dead. I had never seen a deceased person before, and the sight so shocked me that I found it very difficult to collect my thoughts. I realized very quickly I was of no use to the family and left the room as soon as I could. Embarrassed, I discussed it with my supervisor the next morning. She assured me my reaction was completely natural and that she would help me try to process my thoughts and feelings over the next few days. She told me to take my time, slow down, and not try to process it all at once.

Later that afternoon she came to find me while I was making my rounds and asked me to come with her so I could take a look at something. We went up two flights of stairs and down a long hall of patient rooms until we came to one in particular. She pushed the door open and there in the bed was a deceased woman. She was in her late fifties or perhaps early sixties. She had short salt-and-pepper hair with barrettes holding back one side. Her eyes were mostly closed, her head was tipped back at an angle, and her mouth was wide open, almost as if she was trying to inhale one last breath. In case you didn't know, newly deceased people do not look like they do in funeral homes. Funeral homes try to make a dead person appear as much like a living person as they can. In hospitals, dead people are just dead.

My supervisor went over to the body and put her hand on the woman's arm. She began to describe what a body goes through at the time of death, what some of the possible reactions may be, and through her words, tried to disarm what was so foreign to me. At that point, I was still barely inside the doorway, staring. I felt myself beginning to sweat, and in spite of her calm demeanor, I immediately wanted to leave the room. Seeing my discomfort, she invited me to come closer: "Come here and stand next to the bed with me." Not one part of me wanted to do that, but I knew I needed to. I knew I needed to go over to this cold, deceased body that represented to me all the things I did not want to think about, and I needed to make peace with it. I needed to walk around it and look at it. I needed to linger there with myself and all those feelings, or I would be of no use to anyone as a chaplain in that hospital.

So I did. I walked over, and I looked. My supervisor took the woman's hand on the other side of the bed and said, "Take her hand, like this. It's okay. You can touch her." That next moment may have been one of the most meaningful and yet frightening moments of my life. I picked up and held the hand of a dead woman. It was cold, almost the way a piece of wet clay feels. And stiff. It did not move like a living hand. Part of me felt like I was in a grotesque horror movie.

But then quietly, just above a whisper, my supervisor began talking about the woman's life. She told me where she was from, what she did, where her family lived, and how she died. As I stood there holding her hand, a transformation happened. The dead woman became a person to me. She was not just a dead body; she was the remains of a human being who had lived and loved and laughed and learned—a woman who had been loved by God and who would be missed by many. In that moment I began to feel as though I was holding something holy, as if this whole experience had just entered a sacred space. My heart opened to the presence of God in a way I seldom knew. God was undeniably present.

And in that sacred space, I sensed God speaking this into my spirit: "David, this is why I came. Everything you see here—this loss, this death, the physical end of this person—this is what I came to defeat through my Son, Jesus." Suddenly the resurrection became vitally important to me. The phrase *coming back to life* took on new meaning. I began to feel what I can only describe as a rage against the death that had claimed this woman, incensed that death had left her cold, lifeless, and empty. I was overwhelmed by the feeling that everything I was taking in, everything I was seeing and experiencing was *wrong*. This could not be how God intended it. This couldn't really be his plan, could it?

The answer, of course, is no. Death is and always will be a corruption of the perfect plan and will of God. God's original plan was a good plan for the fullness of life in the eternal abundance of relationship with him. Think back to Genesis 1:31. God has spoken creation into existence, and then in one breathtaking moment, he beholds what he has made and declares it *good*. That is the original

plan, the plan before death and sin entered in, the plan as it was supposed to be. Fast-forward to Revelation 21. John sees “a new heaven and a new earth” (v. 1). He beholds the restoration of the original plan and declares, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (v. 4).

Now there is death, but when the original plan is restored, there won't be any dying. And there won't be mourning or crying or pain. We are living in what will one day be the “old order.” There will be a new order. Even so, we must live now in the consequences of what our rebellion from God ushered in. Therefore, every time we encounter moments like I had in that hospital room, we feel it and sense it deep in our souls. Our hearts cry out, *This can't be right. This cannot be what the living, loving God intended my life to be!*

Perhaps you remember the first time you came face-to-face with those feelings. I felt them so strongly as I walked around that hospital bed, and yet the woman in the bed was not even a relative or close friend. Still I felt that something was distinctly and eternally wrong. When death impacts us personally, when the person in the bed is our loved one or our friend, the feelings are multiplied many times over. We cry out to the Lord. It's as if we know that he alone can correct whatever it is that has gone horribly wrong.

I have heard too many parents say, “Mothers are not supposed to bury their children.” I've heard too many spouses say, “I thought we would grow old together.” I've heard too many close friends say, “How could such an accident happen?” Maybe you've felt that way too. They're actually saying,

God wanted me to raise my child.

God wanted me to live to old age with my wife.

God didn't want my friend to be hit by a drunk driver.

This wasn't supposed to be the plan!

Still, we have to fight those feelings of rage and anger. In times of grief or loss, anger is one of the most acute, raw human emotions we feel. There in those moments, we start looking for answers

and ask the bigger, harder questions: Why did this have to happen? Why do I have to deal with this in the first place?

I know there are instances, especially in times of great pain or personal suffering, when death can be a relief; but most of the time, it's anything but. Most of the time, it just hurts. It's wrong. It's the reason we know, deep down, that death is our enemy. That is why we fear it. And yet if we are to conquer that fear and be encouraged by God's truth, we have to be willing to come near it. We have to walk around it, examine it, even touch it. We have to honestly encounter the reality of death and in so doing learn how to handle it so that our fears are tempered by the peace Christ and his resurrection promises.

## **The Beginning of Death**

As we begin to draw close to something we regularly avoid, we need to grasp where death came from in order to understand how we move from it to life and hope.

While we may express it in different ways—often through pain or anger—we want to know *why* we have to endure death. From the time we're very young, we learn to come to terms with the fact that life ends. A young boy who loses his dog turns to his mother in tears and asks, "Why did Winnie have to die?" Eventually, we all ask the *why* questions: If God is good and he loves us, why can't life just go on as it is? Why do we have to lose those we love?

One of my colleagues, Donna McClellan, went through a tremendously difficult time as she cared for her dying mother. The ordeal began with several trips from Orlando to the Seattle area where her mother lived. Donna helped to arrange nursing and then hospice care, but when her mother reached a critical stage, she decided to stay to be at her mother's bedside. Given the progression of her mother's illness, Donna thought it would only be a matter of days, but it took weeks. Her mother was in great discomfort. She hardly ate. It was agonizing for Donna to watch. It seemed to go on and on. At one point, totally exhausted, Donna called me,

and in a moment of pure honesty she said, “Why does this have to be so hard?” In essence, she was saying, “This is just wrong. Why does it have to be this way?”

Without a Christian worldview, it is hopeless to try to answer that question. It has no answers. But when we understand the question through the truth of God’s Word, we can at least reach a place of understanding—and hope. The answer lies in the nature of our sinful, fallen world. Paul mentions it in 1 Corinthians 15:21–22. As he tries to explain the wonder of our immortality through Christ, he considers first the origins of death. The bad news comes before the good news. Paul writes, “Since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” Paul is explaining to the Corinthian Christians how death came about in the beginning. Death, he says, came through a man. It is primarily an allusion to Adam, but all humankind is included.

Looking back at Genesis 1–3, we read that God is the Creator of the universe. Those chapters provide a brief but exhilarating description of the life-giving, creative power of God. He speaks and worlds are formed. Water and sky, sea and air, sun, moon, and stars—God creates, effortlessly, eternally. And his crowning achievement is humanity. Genesis 2:7 says, “The LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” No other creature God made is described in that way. Human beings alone are *living beings*. He breathed his *life* into us in a way that corresponds to his nature, and in so doing, he gave us a quality of life unique from everything else. It’s what makes us capable of being in relationship with God.

Once God created Adam, he was also quite clear about the parameters of his life, saying in Genesis 2:16–17, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.” This passage thoroughly contradicts the notion that God ever intended us to *have it all*. Have you ever noticed that? Many of us have adopted the false notion that a good life is

a life in which we deny ourselves nothing, a life in which we have everything we want. We sometimes mistakenly view God as the one who is supposed to give it to us.

Somehow, having it all becomes the goal. The reality is that no such thing was ever intended. God made it clear from the start that we could not have everything. We were not made to be our own gods, to have the knowledge of good and evil. Instead, we were created to be in relationship with God as his beloved sons and daughters. We are not capable of knowing what is truly good and what is truly evil. Who but God can honestly know the depths of these things? As finite human beings, such knowledge will destroy us.

Therefore, when we choose to deny that truth, death becomes a reality. Genesis 2:17 is the first mention of death. It's the consequence of our willful disobedience. You know the rest. Adam and Eve eat the fruit. They disobey God, and there are consequences to their disobedience. Their relationship with God fractures, and everything changes.

God created all things in a beautiful, holy way. Death had no part in it. But because man and woman chose to sin against a holy God, a price had to be paid. Part of God's holiness is justice. Disobedience has to be answered. God says,

Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, "You must not eat of it," cursed is the ground because of you. . . . By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.

Genesis 3:17, 19

God made the parameters painfully clear. We chose to go our own way, and we have been reaping the consequences of that choice ever since. The apostle Paul affirms this when he says, "For the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

The consequence of our sin is that we forfeit the life God gave us. Period. It's cut and dried. There's no wiggle room. Apart from God, there is no life. We know instinctively that somewhere along

the line something went horribly, irrevocably wrong. In his sermon “The Weight of Glory,” C. S. Lewis describes it as “our inconsolable secret”:

We should hardly dare to ask that any notice be taken of ourselves. But we pine. The sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality, is part of our inconsolable secret. And surely, from this point of view, the promise of glory, in the sense described, becomes highly relevant to our deep desire. For glory meant good report with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgment, and welcome into the heart of things. The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last.<sup>1</sup>

We have been knocking on the door all our life, trying to get in, trying to understand where this pain, death, and heartache came from. Our sin put us on the outside of that door. Our sin separated us from the life of the Father, and in the absence of the Father, there is no life. If God is the Author and Creator of life, then apart from him there is no life. God affirms that when he says through John that “in him [Jesus] was life, and that life was the light of all mankind” (John 1:4). If God is life and light, then when we choose to separate ourselves from God, the result is death and darkness. That is death’s origin.

And yet in that same Genesis passage, something rather amazing happens. Yes, we see God’s holiness, but we also see the depth of his tenderness and love—the first glimpse that although death has entered, ultimately it will not prevail. Genesis 3:21 says, “The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.”

It is startling in its content. God declared death as the penalty for Adam and Eve’s actions. After the chilling pronouncements of being buried in the earth and returning to dust, you expect that doom is certain. You expect God to come and blast them from the earth, but he doesn’t. Instead, he gives us a picture of utter tenderness and love. This great God, this vast, limitless God who

has just stretched out his hands to create the universe, now takes those same hands and makes clothes for Adam and Eve. The picture of the infinite God crafting two sets of tiny little garments is striking. It is an enormous symbol. Think about it. At that time, the only protection from the elements was what was on them—their clothing. Up until that point, until creation fell, protection wasn't needed. In essence, with this simple action God is saying, "I know you deserve death, but I am going to allow you to live—and I want to give you something that will protect you from the painful elements of this life." It is the first act of grace. They deserve death. Instead, God graciously gives them life.

Interestingly, it is also the first act of sacrifice. God had to take the life of a living animal, remove its skin, and craft it into something that could cover and protect his children. As his plan continued to unfold, animals were sacrificed and their blood became a *covering* for the sins of Israel. Think about the Passover and how the angel of death passed over any homes with door frames marked by blood. Ultimately, Jesus sacrificed his life, covering us with his blood and restoring us to right relationship with the Father. I find the unity of Scripture amazing, and here, in this one small sentence in Genesis, we see a foreshadowing of all the grace and sacrifice that is to come as God works out his plan for the world.

Christ came, he suffered real death, and yet he rose again. Thus, when we start to walk around the specter of death and face it in all its complexity, we must grasp its origins because they reveal the holiness of God's nature, the consequences of our sin, and yet God's ultimate plan to defeat it. From that truth, we find hope. In Christ, death never wins. Ever.

## The Sting

Still, our hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ does not take away death's hard reality. No matter how much we love the Lord or how deep our faith may be, death hurts. It stings. There is no getting around that. Yet somehow we've picked up this notion that

if our faith is deep enough, death won't affect us in the same way. It won't wound as deeply or cut as sharply. Faith, we think, will immunize us against the poison of death's sting. We falsely believe that if we focus hard enough on the resurrection of our loved one through Christ, somehow we'll avoid the pain. No question, our reflection on the resurrection helps us. It encourages us, but it does not take away the fact that our loved one is gone. And that hurts.

In 1 Corinthians 15:55–56, Paul writes: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin.” Let's examine this passage. While Paul is declaring Christ's ultimate victory over death, his metaphorical use of the word *sting* draws on other scriptural references to the painful nature of death. The Greek word for *sting* is *kentron*, which is primarily used as a reference to the sting of insects and scorpions. Paul is clearly referencing that idea in these verses.<sup>2</sup> Understanding its full biblical meaning brings us closer to how deeply the sting of death can penetrate our life. Take note of how the *sting* is described in Revelation:

And out of the smoke locusts came down on the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were not allowed to kill them but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes. During those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them. . . . They [locusts] had tails with stingers like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people.

Revelation 9:3–6, 10

It's difficult to read—a gruesome word picture. And yet it's important that we appreciate the depth of its meaning. The *kentron*—the sting—was so painful that people sought death. That's the power of the word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 15. The sting of death wounds us deeply. It can cause pain so vast that we no longer want to live. This is not the prick of an insect bite. This is a devastating, torturous wound. It is the *sting* of death.

Notice the intimate link between 1 Corinthians 15 and Revelation 9. Unlike the 1 Corinthians passage, Revelation 9 is not metaphorical. It's a description of actual pain and suffering, a future time when a painful reign of locusts and scorpions will come.<sup>3</sup> While I do not believe we are living in the time Revelation 9 describes, this passage is a sobering reminder that there are those living today who "seek death." Because of painful circumstances—medical issues, broken families, personal failures, crushing loneliness—people reach a point where they may actually *choose* death through suicide. Yet death is not to be sought, not because it won't provide some relief to the pain (indeed, it may very well do so), but because death has been conquered. We are immortal. Coping with the *sting* of death requires that we seek the balm Christ provides through his death and resurrection.

In all of Scripture, *kentron* is never used in a positive sense. It is always painful. To some degree, it always *tortures*. Death stings deeply and pervasively regardless of how it happens. My grandmother was a significant person to me who deeply impacted my childhood. During those formative years, she lived only four blocks away, allowing me almost unfettered access to this loving, giving person. She died two days after her ninetieth birthday when she went into her bathroom, picked up her toothbrush, and had a massive heart attack. The doctors told us she never knew what hit her. She was gone in an instant and felt no pain.

Compare that to my father-in-law, Dick Bywaters, who died at sixty-seven from a malignancy. My wife, Leigh, cared for him in his last week. It was slow and agonizing and painful and difficult. His death occurred in a completely different way than my grandmother's, but I can tell you that the sting was no different. Standing with my family at my grandmother's cemetery service, I'll never forget my mother's tear-streaked face as she said, "You are never ready to lose your mother." Though my grandmother's death was later in life, at what people consider a more *acceptable* age, and though she died quickly, that did not make her loss any less painful to me and my family than the sting of my father-in-law's death. It doesn't matter when or how it happens: death hurts. It's not helpful

to suggest to someone that because his or her loved one died at an expected time or in an expected way that the sting is somehow dulled. It's not. That's not to say that losing a nine-year-old feels the same as losing someone who is ninety. The experience of grief is different, but both wound us nonetheless.

People need permission to acknowledge the sting of death and live into that pain. Here's where I think we miss it: sometimes faithful Christian men and women feel as though bearing faithful witness in grief means they must tell people, "I'm really doing fine. I know my loved one is in heaven, and it's really okay." It's as though we don't think it's okay to say, "This really hurts." The pressure to bear the appropriate witness makes us feel that if we cry, we will somehow disappoint God in how we handle our grief. No! Death hurts. It stings in a most torturous way. We need permission to say it and to feel it. When I walked around that woman's bed in the hospital that day, I needed my supervisor gently telling me, "It's okay to feel the feelings." Everything in me wanted to scream, "This is not right!" and I didn't even know the woman. Imagine how much more we want to scream in pain when we lose those we love.

We see this truth in the story of Lazarus in John 11. Mary and Martha send word to Jesus that their brother, Lazarus, is gravely ill. They ask him to come quickly. But by the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus is already dead. I love Mary's reaction to Jesus when he gets there. She responds in the same way many of us do when we pray over a loved one and that prayer goes unanswered. She says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:32). It was a nice way of saying, "Where in the world were you? Why didn't you get here faster? Why didn't you do something? If you had just done what you're capable of doing, none of this would have happened."

John 11:33 continues the story: "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled." And then in John 11:35, we find the tears of God: "Jesus wept." He was "deeply moved" (v. 33), which is another way of saying that Jesus felt the sting of

death as well. He looked at those he loved, Mary and Martha, and he saw how death had stung them too. The pain drew forth God's tears.

Here's what I find amazing: Jesus absolutely knew what he was about to do. He knew that in mere moments he would bring Lazarus back from death. He knew that, at least in that one moment, he was going to defeat death for that family, and yet he still felt the sting. He still knew death's pain. And so do we. We can know all about the promise of Easter. We can know every detail about the glory of heaven, but this side of that heaven, we still know death's sting. If Jesus knew it and he wept, then it's okay for us to know it too. We don't need to make a wooden affirmation that death does not wound us. You have God's permission to acknowledge the sting of death and the pain it creates in your life.

## **The Last Enemy**

When I was in the seventh grade, I had the misfortune of getting on the wrong side of another boy in my class named Gordon. To be honest, I don't know the first thing about Gordon other than that he was in my class that year and he did not like me. I don't remember why he didn't like me, but for many weeks he waited for me after school and tried to beat me up. As much as I knew how to define it at the time, he was my enemy. Every day I had to create some strategy to deal with him because I knew he was going to be there. Barring some act of God, he was not going away.

Rest assured, I did all I could to avoid him. I cried to my parents. I tried to get them to let me stay home. I feigned being sick a few times. I wanted to run away from it, but deep down I knew that if I did that, I would actually be hurting myself. I was altering what I wanted to do—not taking part in the things that brought me joy—simply because an enemy lurked about. The only way I was ever going to get on with my life was to face my enemy. I had to acknowledge his presence. I had to accept the fact that he wanted to cause me pain in some way, and I had to deal with it.

I'm sure you're waiting for some great ending to this story. I wish I had one. I faced Gordon one day after school, and not only did he beat me up, but he also beat up one of my friends who came to defend me. In an odd sort of way, however, once we had faced him, he wasn't that scary anymore. I knew what he was. I felt his sting. Others became more aware of it and supported me in dealing with it. I learned a few things in the process. He was still my enemy, but I was better able to live my life without fear of his interference. Once he realized that he didn't scare me that much anymore, he started leaving me alone. He slowly faded because of one simple act: I faced him. I dealt with it.

Death is our enemy, and part of learning to live in this world where death still reigns and has the power to hurt us is to acknowledge that our enemy is real. We need not run from it. The only way we ever get back to the business of living is when we have honestly acknowledged and faced the enemy. When we do, the enemy does not seem so powerful anymore. The enemy is still there, but he fades somewhat in our consciousness. The enemy no longer dominates. Or perhaps we learn to live in its presence with more confidence. The quote from Henri Nouwen at the beginning of this chapter suggests that we can "befriend" death. I don't believe that Nouwen is suggesting friendship with death, as though we could somehow derive blessing from it. I think he means that in some small way, we can learn to face the enemy and make peace with his presence. It's not going away. Barring the return of Christ in our lifetime, we'll have to deal with it, so we lean into it. We face it.

Ever since my children were born, I have been writing them letters. I have a spiral notebook for each child, and every year on Christmas and their birthdays, I write them a letter. The plan is to give them their book of letters on their twenty-first birthday. I write to them about life, about things we have shared together in that particular time, about qualities or gifts that I observe in them, and about how I think God can use them. I write about the plan I see God unfolding for their lives, about funny moments we had together or vacations that were particularly special, about my own human frailties and the places where I have made mistakes. Mainly,

though, it's my way of telling them over and over again that I love them, that I always have, and that I always will.

I will admit to you my great fear in writing those letters over the years. Every time I sit down with pen in hand, I think about the prospect that perhaps I will not get to finish the book. I fear that either they will not be here for their twenty-first birthday or I will not be here to place the book in their hands. Perhaps somewhere in the back of my mind, the letters are a hedge against my untimely death. Perhaps I started them because in the event of my sudden demise, they would still have something of me to remember, something of my words, counsel, and love. On several occasions while writing these letters, I have shed tears on the pages. Words fail me in describing the emotional nature of what those letters mean to me and what I hope they will mean to my children. But here's the thing: the thought that I may not be the one to give them the letters or that they may not ever receive them did not stop me from writing them. Yes, that last enemy is out there. I know where it comes from and why it exists. I know its sting. But through Christ, I choose to live. While I never know when or how I may be brought close to that enemy, I do not live in denial of its reality, nor do I allow its presence to overshadow the life I live.

On August 9, 2008, in the wake of several deaths she had experienced, Ellen Goodman wrote a column for the *Boston Globe* entitled "Nothing Is Forever." She describes the perilous nature of life and our attempts to hold on to it, like a vine that grows near her home:

I wage war with bittersweet the way the old island farmers waged war with stones. When I temporarily beat back the enemy, I too declare victory—"There, done!"—then smile at my own arrogance. As if it were ever done. We create lives. Then nature, in its benign indifference, takes over, upending the illusion of power and permanence.<sup>4</sup>

Permanence is an illusion. We cannot keep back the tide. Goodman captures the reality we all must face, but that's not all there is. Death is real, but I live in the hope of Jesus Christ. I live in the

hope of the empty tomb. I live in the security of a God who tenderly and graciously loves me, who empowers me to live between what is now and what is yet to come, and who has guaranteed my immortality with him in heaven. Like many things in life, there is tension between those realities. Death exists. It's not going away. That's real, and it's at the heart of the first part of our journey toward everlasting life, but I hold that in tension with the fact that Christ defeated death. Therefore, death will not ultimately defeat me. I am deeply and hopelessly darkened by sin, and there are consequences with that. Even so, I hold that in tension with the fact that I am more treasured and loved by God than I ever thought possible—a love demonstrated on the cross of Calvary. I'm not sure I can ever reach Nouwen's idea of "befriending death," but in Christ I have come to understand death in a new light. Death is a portal of sorts, that enemy I must encounter to move on to the glory that awaits me. If that is what is required, then I can make peace with that in the knowledge of Christ's resurrection, and in that truth, my perspective changes.

When we take the time to walk around death, we do not remove its existence, but we do gain an understanding that allows us to find the path of life. It allows us to keep living in the manner we have been called to live through Christ, not denying the pain of its sting, but resting in the arms of the one who eternally removed that sting and gave us victory.