

Foreword by Russell Moore

Remember Death

The Surprising Path to Living Hope



Matthew McCullough

“Matt McCullough’s meditation on death is haunting, profound, and stirring, reminding us of our identity and our destiny apart from Jesus Christ. Death casts a shadow over our lives, showing us, as McCullough points out, that we aren’t the center of the universe. Those who live rightly and those who live forever often think of death, but at the same time they live with hope since Jesus is the resurrection and the life. This book reminds us why we die and teaches us how to live.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This is a brilliant book. Rightly advocating ‘death awareness’ but not ‘death acceptance,’ McCullough powerfully demonstrates that in order to remember Christ well, we need to learn to remember death well. This book shines with scriptural truth, pouring forth the light of Christ upon our fleeting, fear-filled lives.”

Matthew Levering, James N. and Mary D. Perry, Jr. Chair of Theology, Mundelein Seminary; author, *Dying and the Virtues*

“This is a profoundly helpful book. With a preacher’s turn of phrase and illustrative eye, with a pastor’s care for precious people and their greatest fears, and with a theologian’s grasp of the Bible’s big picture and the heart of the gospel, Matthew McCullough writes to overcome our detachment from death and deepen our attachment to the Lord Jesus Christ. These pages will repay careful thought and meditative reflection on their surprising riches.”

David Gibson, Minister, Trinity Church, Aberdeen, Scotland; author, *Living Life Backward*; coeditor, *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*

“Can we face death and find hope? According to Matt McCullough, yes. *Remember Death* rightly reorients us to the impermanence of this world and the brevity of our lives, witnessing to the paradox that grief is necessary for faith. Richly informed by Scripture and a feast of other sources, this book vitally forms our longings for the world to come. I can’t wait to recommend it.”

Jen Pollock Michel, author, *Teach Us to Want* and *Keeping Place*

“Through the lens of Scripture, McCullough looks death squarely in the eye and reminds us that it is nothing to be afraid of. For the Christian, it has truly lost its sting. *Remember Death* is a welcome conversation in a culture that doesn’t know how to think about mortality.”

Andrew Peterson, singer/songwriter; author, The Wingfeather Saga series; Founder, The Rabbit Room

Remember
Death

Other Gospel Coalition Books

- 15 Things Seminary Couldn't Teach Me*, edited by Collin Hansen and Jeff Robinson Sr.
- Coming Home: Essays on the New Heaven and New Earth*, edited by D. A. Carson and Jeff Robinson Sr.
- Don't Call It a Comeback: The Old Faith for a New Day*, edited by Kevin DeYoung
- Entrusted with the Gospel: Pastoral Expositions of 2 Timothy*, edited by D. A. Carson
- Glory in the Ordinary: Why Your Work in the Home Matters to God*, by Courtney Reissig
- God's Love Compels Us: Taking the Gospel to the World*, edited by D. A. Carson and Kathleen B. Nielson
- God's Word, Our Story: Learning from the Book of Nehemiah*, edited by D. A. Carson and Kathleen B. Nielson
- The Gospel as Center: Renewing Our Faith and Reforming Our Ministry Practices*, edited by D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller
- Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry: A Practical Guide*, edited by Cameron Cole and Jon Nielson
- Here Is Our God: God's Revelation of Himself in Scripture*, edited by Kathleen B. Nielson and D. A. Carson
- His Mission: Jesus in the Gospel of Luke*, edited by D. A. Carson and Kathleen B. Nielson
- The New City Catechism: 52 Questions and Answers for Our Hearts and Minds*
- The New City Catechism Devotional: God's Truth for Our Hearts and Minds*
- The Pastor as Scholar and the Scholar as Pastor: Reflections on Life and Ministry*, by John Piper and D. A. Carson, edited by David Mathis and Owen Strachan
- Praying Together: The Priority and Privilege of Prayer: In Our Homes, Communities, and Churches*, by Megan Hill
- Pursuing Health in an Anxious Age*, by Bob Cutillo
- Remember Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope*, by Matthew McCullough
- The Scriptures Testify about Me: Jesus and the Gospel in the Old Testament*, edited by D. A. Carson
- Seasons of Waiting: Walking by Faith When Dreams Are Delayed*, by Betsy Childs Howard
- Word-Filled Women's Ministry: Loving and Serving the Church*, edited by Gloria Furman and Kathleen B. Nielson

Remember Death

The Surprising Path to Living Hope

Matthew McCullough

Foreword by Russell Moore

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Remember Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope

Copyright © 2018 by Matthew McCullough

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover design: Josh Dennis

First printing 2018

Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-4335-6053-8

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-6056-9

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-6054-5

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-6055-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: McCullough, Matthew, author.

Title: Remember death : the surprising path to living hope / Matthew McCullough.

Description: Wheaton : Crossway, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017035953 (print) | LCCN 2018025011 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433560545 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433560552 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433560569 (epub) | ISBN 9781433560538 (hc)

Subjects: LCSH: Death—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BT825 (ebook) | LCC BT825 .M353 2018 (print) | DDC 236/.1—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017035953>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my sons,
Walter, Sam, and Benjamin

Let this be recorded for a generation to come,
so that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD:
that he looked down from his holy height;
from heaven the LORD looked at the earth,
to hear the groans of the prisoners,
to set free those who were doomed to die,
that they may declare in Zion the name of the LORD,
and in Jerusalem his praise,
when peoples gather together,
and kingdoms, to worship the LORD.

Psalm 102:18–22

Contents

Foreword <i>by Russell Moore</i>	11
Acknowledgments	15
Introduction	17
1 Where Is Thy Sting?:	31
2 The Problem of Identity and the Promise of Union with Christ	57
3 The Problem of Futility and the Promise of Purpose	85
4 The Problem of Loss and the Promise of Eternal Life	117
5 The Problems of Life and the Promise of Glory	149
6 Grieve in Hope	173
General Index	185
Scripture Index	189

Foreword

by Russell Moore

Years ago I was driving through a rural area of west Tennessee, on my way to a little cottage on the Pickwick Dam in north Mississippi, where I would take a couple of days away to write. Much was on my mind. I had large decisions in front of me—decisions that would shape the whole course of my future. My immediate problem was not the course of my future, but the course of my actual journey at the time. I was lost. Every turn I took seemed to get me farther out into the woods and farther away from any recognizable landmark. This was before the advent of global positioning technology, and even if it were now, such technology would have done me little good, since my phone could not access a signal. I turned into the first driveway I saw to tinker with my phone long enough to get a cell signal to call someone who might give me directions. It took a moment or two for me to realize that I was in a church graveyard, and my phone was still the deadest thing there.

Sometimes, not often enough, I feel a strong prompting to stop everything and pray. Sometimes, far too often, I ignore that prompting, and conclude that I'm too busy to stop. This time I had no choice but to stop. I had nowhere to go. I stopped and walked

around that graveyard, and churchyard, praying for God to grant me some wisdom and discernment about the large life decision I had in front of me. As I wandered in front of the little Baptist church building, I was still praying, but my eyes were lazily scanning the red brick in front of me. I stopped as I read the cornerstone, engraved sometime in the years before I was born. The date was there, and right beneath it: "Herman Russell Moore, pastor." I stopped praying, startled. Herman Russell Moore was the name of my paternal grandfather, who died when I was five years old. And my grandfather was a pastor, serving many churches in Mississippi and Tennessee. When my phone finally had cell service, my first call was not to my office, but to my grandmother. I gave her the name of the church and asked if she'd ever heard of it. "Of course," she said. "Your grandfather was pastor there."

I was stunned speechless, and just kept repeating to myself, "What are the odds?" But I did not want to waste the sign, whatever it was that in God's providence had directed me there. So I kept praying, walking around the graves. I wondered about the people there, in the ground beneath me. How many of them had heard my grandfather preach the gospel? How many found Jesus in the church behind me? How many had prayed with my grandfather to receive Christ, or at the funeral of a loved one, or maybe even, like I was then, as they were facing a major life decision. They were gone now.

But I then thought about who in the ground beneath me might have been a thorn in the flesh to my grandfather. How many had criticized his preaching or questioned whether he did hospital visits often enough? Maybe someone had even, as is sadly all-too-regular practice in some churches, started an anonymous letter campaign to oppose the building of that sanctuary. They were gone too.

In that moment, I came to realize that maybe, as Tolkien put it, "not all who wander are lost." Perhaps I was there for just this

reason, to contemplate that whatever it was that had filled my grandfather with joy during his time here, and whatever had kept him up worrying at night, much of it was buried beneath me. The building, where the gospel was, I presumed, still preached, was still there. But even that would not be permanent, but would one day be swept aside by time, replaced by—who knows?—a restaurant chain or a Buddhist meditation clinic. All of that would also be swept away in the trillions of years of cosmic time stretching out ahead of us.

The decision I was mulling seemed so important to me at the moment. It seemed to be of existential importance. And yet, as I stood on cemetery grounds, I was reminded that I would die. I, like this church, and like my ancestor who served it, would pass away as a vapor (James 4:14), as a forgotten stalk of grass (Ps. 103:15–16). My decision seemed, on the one hand, even more important. After all, my grandfather’s ministry here was part of a chain of decisions, without which I would not even exist to contemplate that place. On the other hand, my decision seemed much less important. I was reminded, despite the fact that I was, at the time, a young man in the whirl of the prime of my career, that I was just a dying creature, who would one day be forgotten, along with all my big plans and my fears and anxieties. At that moment, the thought of my mortality did not leave me with a sense of futility or dread. The thought was strangely liberating, freeing me, if just for a second, to reflect on what really matters—to give thanks to God for giving me a gospel to believe and people to love.

That’s what I pray this book does for you. I pray that you come away from a book on mortality with a sense of clarity about what really matters—about *who* really matters. I pray that this book, as it leads you to reflect on your own coming demise, gives you a sense of joy, of gratitude, of longing to be part of that great cloud of witnesses in heaven. I pray that this book is useful to you, but

I pray more that this book turns out to be a waste of your time. I pray that you and I don't ever actually succumb to death, but that, instead, we are part of the generation that sees the eastern skies explode with the glory of the returning King of Israel, the Lord Jesus Christ. But, even if so, the lessons of this book will be worth your time, to call you away from seeing yourself as a messiah or as a devil, as a Caesar or as a Judas. Your life is worth living, precisely because it is not your life at all. Your life—at least in this moral frame—has a beginning and an end. But your life—your real life—is hidden with Christ (Col. 3:3). That then gives you the freedom to lose your life in sacrifice to others, in obedience to God, in order to save it.

I wish that I could say that my accidental visit to that church graveyard permanently changed my life. I wish I could write that I don't still grapple with an illusion of immortality or with worry about tomorrow. I can't say that. What I can say, though, is that sometimes God will let us get a little bit lost, so that we might look about and realize that we are not phoenixes rising from our own ashes but we are sheep, following the voice of a shepherd, even through the valley of the shadow of death. Maybe such a moment of clarity will come for you as you find yourself lost in the truths of this book. If so, you might realize that you are not as lost as you think, but that you are instead being led through the graveyard of your own fallen life, onward toward home.

Acknowledgments

I want to speak first to my fellow members at Trinity Church. There really is no other place to begin. Anything useful in this book flows out of our life together. Thank you, friends, for opening your lives to me. For working with me to see the relevance of Jesus to what you're facing. For being so patient with me as I've learned how to teach you the Bible. And for putting up with, arguably, more than your share of sermons on death and resurrection.

I owe a special thanks to the elders and staff who have shouldered the burden of leadership with me and given me the space to work on this book: Matt Givens, Lane Hamilton, Will Harvey, Bill Heerman, Dave Hunt, Seth Jones, Laura Magness, Shaka Mitchell, Justin Myers, Drew Raines, and Jason Tan. Thank you for giving me the joy of serving our church with you.

Collin Hansen is the reason this book has reached the light of day. For some reason he took interest when I barely had an idea. He's guided me step by step through uncharted territory ever since. Thank you, brother, for sharing wisdom, grace, and friendship with me. And for introducing me to Justin Taylor and the wonderful team at Crossway. It's been an honor to work with a publisher whose books have been such a blessing to me over the years.

I wrote most of a first draft on a sabbatical with my family at Tyndale House in Cambridge. That place is otherworldly, in a good way. Thank you to Peter Williams, the staff, and the fellows who made my time there so fruitful and enjoyable.

We couldn't have made the trip to Cambridge without the hospitality of Bobby and Kristin Jamieson, who gave us the use of their home while we were there. As if that weren't enough, Bobby was the first to read a rough draft, and his careful suggestions made a huge difference.

Besides Collin and Bobby, several other friends offered well-timed advice on the manuscript at one stage or another. I'm especially grateful to Drew D'Agostino, Jonathan Leeman, Drew Raines (again), Amy Tan, and Adrian Taylor. All of you sharpened the final product and, in more than a couple places, saved me from myself.

My father, Mark, also offered precious feedback in the early stages. But far more than that, he was the first to model the perspective at the heart of this book. Thank you, Dad, for teaching me to love the good things of life, to recognize that they're passing away, and to prioritize what lasts. No son has had a more faithful "forward scout in the wilderness of time."

I am grateful most of all to my wife and children. Lindsey, ever since we were kids, I've been amazed that God would give me such a friend. There are no words. Thank you for sharing these days under the sun with me. And for doing more than anyone else to prepare me for the endless day to come. I love you.

Walter, Sam, and Benjamin, you have brought unimaginable joy to our lives. Watching you grow has done more than anything to break my heart over the passing of time, and to make me long for when all things are only and always new. I wrote this book thinking of you guys. It's dedicated to you, with the prayer I will offer as long as I live: that you will hold fast to the only comfort in life and in death, Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Introduction

I don't know of anyone who survived more near-death experiences than WWII airman Louis Zamperini. After volunteering for the Army Air Forces, Zamperini survived months of flight training when thousands of others did not. He survived bombing missions under heavy fire, one of which left nearly six hundred bullet holes in the fuselage of his B-24. After mechanical failure sent his plane plunging into the Pacific Ocean, he survived the crash. And that's when his survival story really began.

He lived for weeks on a small inflatable raft, baked by the sun and tossed by violent storms. He had nothing to drink but whatever rainwater he could collect. He had nothing to eat but the fish and birds he caught with his hands and ate raw. He fought off swarms of sharks that constantly followed his raft and often lunged to pull him in. He dodged the bullets of a Japanese plane he had hoped would be his rescuer.

Zamperini spent forty-seven days on this raft, longer than anyone else had ever survived adrift at sea. Then, when he finally reached land, he was captured immediately. He spent the next two years as a prisoner of war, transferred from one horrific camp to another, suffering relentlessly under forced labor, starvation, disease, and merciless torture. When his camp was finally liberated, he was skin and bones, barely clinging to life. More than

one in three of his fellow American prisoners had died. Yet still, somehow, he survived.¹

It isn't difficult to see why Zamperini's biography, *Unbroken*, has sold millions of copies. It is a captivating story very well told. And in a way, it makes sense that the book's subtitle calls it a "story of survival." It is. Or, rather, it was.

Nearly seventy years after his return from war, Zamperini faced what his family called the greatest challenge of his life—a forty-day battle with pneumonia. According to those who stood beside him, "his indomitable courage and fighting spirit were never more apparent." But at ninety-seven years old, his body was a far cry from the specimen that competed in the 1936 Olympic Games. Worn down by time, the man who fought off starvation and shark attacks and deadly dysentery and sadistic prison guards finally entered a battle he could not survive. On July 2, 2014, Louis Zamperini died.²

Lauren Hillenbrand's account of Zamperini's life works as a survival story because the book concludes in 2008. At one level, calling Zamperini's or anyone else's story a survival story is like describing a fall from a thirty-story building a survival story because it ends before the subject hits the ground.

Perhaps my point is a little cliché, but I hope at least it's clear: it may not be the fall that kills you, but something always does. No one gets out of life alive. Zoomed out a bit more, there's no such thing as a survival story.

Still, I wonder: when is the last time you thought of the fact that you will die? When did you last have a conversation with someone on the subject of death? Have you ever seen anyone

1. Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* (New York: Random House, 2010).

2. For these details, see the obituary published by Aleksandra Gjorgievska, "Olympian and World War II Hero Louis Zamperini Dies at 97," *Time*, July 3, 2014, <http://time.com/2953878/louis-zamperini-obituary/>.

die? Ever had someone die in your home? When did you last walk through a cemetery or attend a funeral? Have you read any book, watched any movie, even listened to any sermon that deals with the problem of death? I'm not talking about death by violence or death by accident or death by rare and virulent disease. I'm talking about death as a basic human experience—as basic as birth, eating, and sleeping.

Death is a fundamental human experience, uniting all humans across time and space, race and class. But in our time and place, death isn't something we think about very often, if at all. In chapter 1 I'll get into the reasons for this avoidance—both how we're able to avoid the subject and why we'd want to. But, in short, the remarkable achievements of modern medicine have pushed death further and further back in the average Western person's life span. We enjoy better disease prevention, better pharmaceutical treatments, and better emergency care than any other society in history. That's a wonderful blessing, no question. But it comes with a major side effect: many of us can afford to live most of our lives as if death isn't our problem.

Death is no less inevitable than it's ever been, but many of us don't have to see it or even think about it as a daily presence in our lives. When people die, it is more likely than not in a medical facility, cordoned off from where we live, a sanitized, carefully managed, even industrial process that occurs when professionals decide to stop giving care. Death is still inevitable, but it has become bizarre.

Death has also become a taboo of sorts, not to be discussed in polite company. We label such talk as "morbid." It's a pejorative term applied to words or ideas that are unusually dark—distortions of the truth as we wish to see it. To bring up the subject of death is too often awkward at best, shameful at worst.

But try as we might to avoid the subject, every one of us experiences death's shadow every day. It shows up in our insecurities about who we are and why we matter. It shows up in our dissatisfaction with the things we believe should make us happy. And it shows up in our pain over the loss of every good thing that doesn't last long enough. We can't avoid death and its effects. We shouldn't avoid talking about it either.

Our detachment from death puts us out of line with the perspective of the Bible. Throughout its pages, whether law or history or poetry or prophecy or gospel or letter, death is a fixation far more common than in our lives today. For biblical authors an awareness of death and its implications for life is crucial for a life of wisdom.

Consider, for example, the prayer of Psalm 90: "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom" (v. 12). That's a euphemistic way of saying "teach us to recognize our death." The prayer comes as a sort of hinge between the two parts of the psalm. The first part focuses on human limitations compared with the vastness of God. For God time is nothing. "From everlasting to everlasting you are God" (90:2). "For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night" (90:4). But for us humans, under sin and judgment, time destroys everything. Our lives are "like a dream." Our lives are like the grass: "in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers" (90:5-6). At best, "the years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away" (90:10). The psalmist's prayer for remembrance of death is a prayer for a life of humility, a perspective that understands our limits and the insurmountable difference between God and us.

But this prayer sets up another theme in the second part of the psalm. Immediately after praying that God would teach us

to number our days, the psalmist prays that God would make us glad all our days with the richness of his love: “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (Ps. 90:14).

I believe those two prayers go hand in hand: teach me to live with the reality of my death so that I can live in the gladness of your love. Before I can be astounded by God’s love—before I will see the beauty of his love more clearly than the problems of my life—I must see my desperate need of it and my thorough unworthiness of it. When God teaches us to number our days, he protects us from prideful self-deception and enables us to live with genuine, realistic gladness.

This is a book about death because wisdom comes from honesty about the world as it is. I want to help us number our days—to remember death—as a form of spiritual discipline. I want to show from the Bible the illuminating power of death-awareness for the lives we’re living now.³

I am not writing primarily to those facing imminent death or to those grieving the loss of a loved one, though I hope my observations would encourage them.⁴ I’m writing to convince those living like immortals that they’re not actually immortal—to help

3. I will often use “death-awareness” as a shorthand description of the perspective I advocate in this book. I first noticed the term in Julian Barnes, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (New York: Vintage, 2008).

4. There is a branch of Christian tradition known as the *ars moriendi*—the “art of dying.” In the ancient church, teaching on how to achieve a good death was common, and manuals on best practices offered formulas that shaped the deaths of the faithful for centuries. For background information, see Philippe Aries, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). For a contemporary book offering advice on preparing well for death, see Rob Moll, *The Art of Dying: Living Fully into the Life to Come* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010). For personal memoirs on facing death as a Christian, see Todd Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2015); Russ Ramsey, *Struck: One Christian’s Reflections on Encountering Death* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017). For recent helpful books on how to grieve in hope, see Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Dutton, 2013); Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014). For modern classics see these works by C. S. Lewis: *The Problem of Pain: How Human Suffering Raises Almost Intolerable Intellectual Problems* (New York: Macmillan, 1962); *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam, 1976).

them gain the realistic perspective that the grieving or terminally ill already have.⁵

I'm writing to those for whom death feels remote and unreal—something that happens to other people—to help them see how a present acquaintance with death is important for the lives they're living now.

This purpose places my book within a stream of time-honored Christian reflection called *memento mori*. Roughly translated, it's the title for this book: remember death. The focus of this tradition is on recognizing death—thinking about what it means for us and where we experience its effects—in order to live a true, faithful, joyful life in the meantime.

I was first struck by this practice in graduate school, training as a church historian, when for a time I studied the ministries of the Puritans in England and America.⁶ It was difficult to miss the disjunction. What was central to them is mostly absent from Western culture now, and from my experience of American Christianity.

Then in my first years as a pastor, preaching verse by verse through books of the Bible, I came to recognize in a new way just how often the Bible speaks of death. I knew of its focus on the

5. In other words, this is not a book about how to die well, though reflection on facing the end of life in faith is a wonderful part of the Christian tradition. Nor is this a book on how to grieve the loss of a loved one, though I pray it will offer useful perspective for those who want to mourn in hope. These two branches of reflection—how to die in faith and how to grieve in hope—are crucial for all of us who believe. They address experiences all of us will share. These books must be written. I'm just not the man to write one of them.

Full disclosure: I am in the first years of my life as a pastor. I pastor a church of mostly young people who are preparing for lives that are mostly in front of them. I've had my share of opportunities to help my friends face suffering with the promises of the gospel. But I have not guided anyone through the final days of life. And I haven't preached a funeral service for a member who has died. I expect those days are coming. But I don't yet have the experience to write a book full of practical advice on how to face death as a Christian.

6. There is a good example of this emphasis in Richard Baxter's influential guide to pastoral ministry, *The Reformed Pastor* (1656; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974). "O sirs, surely if you had all conversed with neighbor Death as oft as I have done, and as often received the sentence in yourselves, you would have an unquiet conscience, if not a reformed life, as to your ministerial diligence and fidelity" (204).

problem of sin and the problem of eternal judgment. What struck me was its focus on physical death—the fact that our lives in this world come to an end. The problem of death is surely connected to the problem of sin and the problem of judgment, as part of the effects of human rebellion on this broken world. But death is an aspect of the human condition worthy of its own attention, especially in a culture that wants to deny its grip.

All that said, this isn't really a book about death. It's a book about Jesus and, therefore, a book about hope. I have come to see, as the pastor of young up-and-comers, how important death-awareness can be for confronting a problem I believe goes hand in hand with the avoidance of death. When the reality of death is far from our minds, the promises of Jesus often seem detached from our lives. These promises seem abstract, belonging to another world from the one I'm living in, disconnected from the problems that dominate my field of view.

Contrast that to what Peter says about the relevance of Jesus in 1 Peter 1. Peter describes Christians as those who are “born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:3). Peter assumes that the resurrection of Jesus means *living hope* for those who trust in him. This hope is not distant or otherworldly but broadcast in and for this life. But look at what he says about the object of that hope: “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you” (1:4).

Perhaps your eyes glaze over when you read words like that. Perhaps these words even stir some anger. Imperishable? Undefiled? Unfading? Why should I care? I don't need an inheritance kept in heaven. I need help now, in this world. Perhaps you feel this way about many of Jesus's promises. What good is blood sacrifice or justification when you're facing an uncertain job market or worried you'll never find a spouse? How can

I care about an immortal body when I'm ashamed of the one I have now? And why does Jesus talk so much about eternal life? I don't just need a path to glory land. I need to know how to cope with hard things today.

If you feel this way about the promises of Jesus, I believe it is because you don't think nearly enough about death. Consider the way Peter wraps up his great chapter on hope. At the end of the first chapter, returning again to language like "born again" and "imperishable," Peter quotes from Isaiah 40:

"All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.
The grass withers,
and the flower falls,
but the word of the Lord remains forever."

And this word is the good news that was preached to you.
(1 Pet. 1:24–25)

Do you see what Peter is doing? To bring the imperishable hope his readers have in Christ down to earth, into their everyday, he's pointing them to why they need it so badly. Imperishable. Undeified. Unfading. These are relative terms. They are defined by what they're not. They only make sense when compared with what they negate. Perishable. Deified. Fading. That's why Peter ends the chapter with a reminder that everything around them is perishing, like newly sprouted grass in the dry summer heat. Nothing lasts, good or bad. Except for one thing: the Word of the Lord. The gospel preached to you. Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected.

Before you long for a life that is imperishable, you must accept that you are perishing along with everyone you care about. You must recognize that anything you might accomplish or acquire in this world is already fading away. Only then will you crave the

unfading glory of what Jesus has accomplished and acquired for you. And you need to recognize you are going to lose everything you love in this world before you will hope in an inheritance kept in heaven for you.

Even if your life plays out in precisely the way you imagine for yourself in your wildest dreams, death will steal away everything you have and destroy everything you accomplish. As long as we're consumed by the quest for more out of this life, Jesus's promises will always seem otherworldly to us. He doesn't offer more of what death will only steal from us in the end. He offers us righteousness, adoption, God-honoring purpose, eternal life—things that taste sweet to us only when death is a regular companion.

If we want to see the beauty of Jesus, we must first look carefully and honestly at death. I appreciate the way Walter Wangerin captured this connection in a wonderful book on death and joy written more than twenty-five years ago:

If the gospel seems irrelevant to our daily lives, that is our fault, not the gospel's. For if death is not a daily reality, then Christ's triumph over death is neither daily nor real. Worship and proclamation and even faith itself take on a dream-like, unreal air, and Jesus is reduced to something like a long-term insurance policy, filed and forgotten—whereas he can be our necessary ally, an immediate, continuing friend, the holy destroyer of death and the devil, my own beautiful savior.⁷

By avoiding the truth about death, we're avoiding the truth about Jesus. Jesus didn't promise us so many of the things we want most out of life. He promised us victory over death. So we must learn to see the shadow of death behind the problems of life before we can recognize the powerful relevance of Jesus to every

⁷ Walter Wangerin, *Mourning into Dancing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 29–30.

obstacle we face. This is a book about death because it is a book about Jesus.

There's one more layer to my subject. As hope comes alive, as it spreads through the ins and outs and twists and turns of your life, the fruit that it bears is joy—joy that's resilient and realistic, that doesn't have to sweep the hard things under the rug in order to survive (1 Pet. 1:6–8). The ironic claim at the heart of this book is that the best way to enjoy your life is to get honest about your death.

When the reality of death fades to the background of our consciousness, other joy-stealing problems are quick to rise up and fill the void. French philosopher Blaise Pascal put his finger on this problem four hundred years ago. He noticed the way most people seemed indifferent to “the loss of their being” but intensely concerned about everything else: “They fear the most trifling things, foresee and feel them; and the same man who spends so many days and nights in fury and despair at losing some office or at some imaginary affront to his honor is the very one who knows that he is going to lose everything through death but feels neither anxiety nor emotion. It is a monstrous thing to see one and the same heart at once so sensitive to minor things and so strangely insensitive to the greatest.”⁸

Pascal's insight is perhaps even more important today: when death is pushed out of our thinking, it isn't replaced by warmth and peace and happiness. It is replaced by others of death's many faces. We fixate instead on the comparatively trivial symptoms of our deeper problem. We are still anxious, still defensive, still insecure, still angry and even despairing. We detach ourselves from death so we can focus our time and energy on pursuing happiness. But that detachment hasn't changed the fact of our mortality, and it hasn't ultimately made us happier.

8. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1966), 159.

To know Jesus should be to know joy. Yet isn't it true that our joy in life is often checked by pride, fear, envy, futility, dissatisfaction, and a host of other cares? I argue that an honest awareness of death puts these enemies of joy in their proper place, so that in turn the victory of Jesus can shine in its proper light. In other words, if we want to live with resilient joy—a joy that's tethered not to shifting circumstances but to the rock-solid accomplishments of Jesus—we must look honestly at the problem of death. That may be ironic, but it's biblical, and it's true.

The Plan of the Book

If we are to channel death-awareness into deeper love for the promises of the gospel, many of us must first grow reacquainted with the problem of death. We need to consider what sort of problem death is, and we need to learn how to recognize its shadow in places we may not have noticed before. Once we've learned to see the shadow, we'll be able to apply the light of Christ.

This is why I've chosen to treat the problem of death on its own, apart from the Bible's teaching about eternal judgment after death. Given what the Bible says about hell, the end of our lives in this world is almost nothing compared with the prospect of an eternal, tormented separation from God. But the problem of death has its own devastating effects on our present lives. It's a problem to which we've paid far too little attention. And it's a problem that shows up in the lives of all people, Christian or not. My hope is to describe this problem in a way that's recognizable for you no matter your religious background, so that whether you believe or not, you want the message of Jesus to be true.

In each of chapters 2–4, I begin with one of three major dimensions of death and explain where it shows up in our experience.

Then in each chapter I pair that dimension of death with the promises of Jesus that shine brighter against its dark backdrop.

In chapter 2 I discuss death and the problem of identity—what death says about who we are. By nature, we can't imagine the world without us in it. That's partly because we carry a built-in narcissism. We see ourselves as the lead characters in the story of the world, and everything else is defined by how it relates to us. But it's also because we rightly perceive that human lives have dignity that other animals don't have. Every person has a unique, irreplaceable identity that is precious and worthwhile. But death confronts our notions of human significance head-on.

Death makes a statement about who we are: we are not too important to die. We will die, like all those who've gone before us, and the world will keep on moving just as it always has. No one is indispensable. It's a harsh, even terrifying statement.

When we've allowed this statement to land on us and sink in, we're prepared for awe at the message of the gospel. It's another statement of identity. If death tells us we're not too important to die, the gospel tells us we're so important that Christ died for us. And not because death's message about us is wrong. It isn't. On our own, we are dispensable. But joined to Christ, through our union with him, we are righteous, we are children of God, and God will not let us die any more than he left Jesus in the grave.

In chapter 3 I focus on death and the problem of futility—what death does to anything we accomplish. We look for happiness and purpose in the next pleasurable experience, in the money and possessions we try to pile up, and in what we build for ourselves through our work. But have you ever felt satisfied with your life? Like you've done enough?

Futility is something we'll continue to feel because underneath our drive to pleasure, wealth, and success is a drive to overcome the reality of death. These things will never bear that weight.

But what if Christ has taken on death for us? What if, in fact, he is raised, in triumph over our last enemy? Then what we do with our lives, though futile as a defense against death, is not in vain after all. When we don't have to defeat death for ourselves, we're set free to enjoy what we do and to aim it at the glory of the One who has conquered for us.

In chapter 4 the subject is death and the problem of loss—what death does to everything we love. Loss isn't something that happens sometimes to unfortunate people who happened to be in the wrong place or have the wrong genetic codes. The truth is that nothing lasts, that you can never go back, and that therefore everyone loses everything to death.

How can you enjoy anything about life if you know that, in the end, the more you love something the more it will hurt when you lose it? That joy comes only if Jesus can deliver on his promise of eternal life—not an angelic, bodiless realm among the clouds, but a new world in which the things we love don't pass away. If Jesus can deliver on that promise, we're set free to enjoy the transient pleasures of this life—or to do without them—knowing they are appetizers for the endless, all-satisfying feast he has prepared for his own.

In the fifth chapter, I try to illustrate the practical effect of remembering death—how to leverage death-awareness in the fight for hopeful joy. I use several examples of common joy-stealing experiences—things like discontent, envy, and anxiety—to show how processing these things in light of death helps us process them in the light of Christ.

But first, an important step toward recovery of healthy death-awareness is deeper self-awareness. Many of us need to see how we participate in a culture that has suppressed the truth about death more than any other time and place in history.



THE GOSPEL COALITION

The Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

We desire to champion the gospel with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy—gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines. We yearn to work with all who, in addition to embracing our confession and theological vision for ministry, seek the lordship of Christ over the whole of life with unabashed hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform individuals, communities, and cultures.

Join the cause and visit TGC.org for fresh resources that will equip you to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

TGC.org

“McCullough’s meditation on death is haunting, profound, and stirring. This book reminds us why we die and teaches us how to live.”

THOMAS R. SCHREINER, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This is a brilliant book. McCullough powerfully demonstrates that in order to remember Christ well, we need to learn to remember death well.”

MATTHEW LEVERING, James N. and Mary D. Perry, Jr. Chair of Theology, Mundelein Seminary; author, *Dying and the Virtues*

“With a preacher’s turn of phrase and illustrative eye, with a pastor’s care for precious people and their greatest fears, and with a theologian’s grasp of the Bible’s big picture and the heart of the gospel, McCullough writes to overcome our detachment from death and deepen our attachment to the Lord Jesus Christ.”

DAVID GIBSON, Minister, Trinity Church, Aberdeen, Scotland; author, *Living Life Backward*

CHRISTIAN LIFE / GENERAL