

# Death in the History of Redemption

Gilbert Meilaender

**I**N FELIX SALTEN'S *Bambi*, a book that happens to be a favorite of mine, there is a chapter which consists entirely of a conversation between two leaves that are clinging precariously to a tree. Here is a part of their exchange.

They were silent for a while. Then the first leaf said quietly to herself,

“Why must we fall...?”

The second leaf asked,

“What happens to us when we have fallen?”

“We sink down....”

“What is under us?”

The first leaf answered,

“I don't know, some say one thing, some another, but nobody knows.”

The second leaf asked,

“Do we feel anything, do we know anything about ourselves when we're down there?”

The first leaf answered,

“Who knows? Not one of all those down there has ever come back to tell us about it.... Let's remember how beautiful it was, how wonderful, when the sun came out and shone so warmly that we thought we'd burst with life. Do you remember? And the morning dew, and the mild and splendid nights....”

A moist wind blew, cold and hostile, through the tree-tops.

“Ah, now,” said the second leaf, “I....” Then her voice broke off.

She was torn from her place and spun down.

Winter had come.<sup>1</sup>

If that is where we human beings also find ourselves when thinking about death—as a mystery beyond our ken—it should be no surprise that many in our

culture have concluded that we should try to master it. And so, we want to live for as long as we can, with as much health and vigor as we can—enjoying that warm sunshine, morning dew, and splendid nights. To be healthy octogenarians (or better!) is fine with us. What we do not want is decline and frailty; we do not want to find ourselves clinging weakly to the tree of life. Our ideal is to live with health and strength for as long as we can—and then one day just fall off the cliff.

Since, however, our future may be more like one of those leaves clinging to the tree, blown by a cold and hostile wind, many among us seek a way to control our ending. We begin to think that perhaps we should propel ourselves over the cliff or find a friend who will give us a gentle push. And so, our culture—and, indeed, much of Western culture more generally—has begun to look with favor on suicide, assisted suicide, and euthanasia as choice-worthy ways to meet our end. And if not one of those down there has ever come back to tell us about it, there may be nothing foolish about such an attitude.

But there are also some of us who believe that one has come back to tell us about death and that in Jesus we see the true master of death. To enter into his story is to begin to see our life and death differently—to see it within the history of redemption. All things were made through him, John’s Gospel says. The long, slow story of God’s election of Israel moves toward him, the faithful and obedient Israelite. And he promises to be with us—in all his mastery of death—even to the end of the age. To come to terms with dying, therefore, to think about what holy dying might mean, we must, as Karl Barth put it, “accompany this history of God and man from creation to reconciliation and redemption, indicating the mystery of the encounter at each point on the path according to its own distinctive character.”<sup>22</sup>

We have, then, three angles of vision from which to ponder the meaning of our dying. Because we are God’s creatures, there must be some account of life that accepts, honors, and celebrates the limits of our finitude and the time we are allotted. Because we are sinners whom God has in Jesus acted to reconcile, our life moves toward death and is disordered in countless ways that come under God’s judgment. And because we are heirs of the redeemed future God has promised in the risen Jesus, because he knows us by name, we are promised that one day we will come to share in the life eternal that Father, Son, and Spirit live. I want to think about our dying within these three angles of vision afforded us by the history of redemption, prefacing each of the three with a stanza from a hymn by a 19th century Norwegian pastor, Magnus Landstad—the hymn “I Know of a Sleep in Jesus’ Name.”<sup>23</sup>

## Created Life

I know of a peaceful eventide;  
And when I am faint and weary,  
At times with the journey sorely tried,  
Thro' hours that are long and dreary.  
Then often I yearn to lay me down  
And sink into blissful slumber.

WE ARE NOT MEANT to live this created life forever—and that for two reasons. The first has to do with understanding and honoring the finite character of our life.

Even when things go well for us, the life we live has a natural trajectory that begins in growth and development but moves, eventually, toward decline and death. No doubt this saddens us, but, when death does not come prematurely due to illness or injury, it is not simply an evil. For, after all, it is the nature of finite, organic life. Generally—and quite properly—we refer to created life as a gift from God. But it is also a task. Staying alive is work, the work we call metabolism. In a complicated chemical process, our bodies take in nutrients and convert them into the energy we need to live and function. And this task will finally defeat each of us.

A living human being is not just a thing, not an inanimate object. We are living organisms, bodies animated by soul. We do not exist the way a rock does, “simply and fixedly what it is, identical with itself over time, and with no need to maintain that identity by anything else it does.”<sup>4</sup> Rather, constantly hovering between being and non-being, we experience life as a fragile gift, difficult to sustain, filled with beauties that do not last. And when a day comes that we can no longer carry out the work metabolism involves, we become things—the inanimate objects we call corpses. It seems right to me, therefore, that the last words of my paternal grandfather were simply, “*Ich kann nicht mehr.*” “I can’t any longer.”

This does not make our allotted time any less a gift; it simply characterizes the kind of gift it is. Not God’s timeless eternity, but a life fit for one who is creature, not Creator. This explains why we can hardly help but approve when Odysseus, offered the choice between an immortal life with the nymph Calypso and a return home to his wife Penelope, chooses to return. He chooses, that is, to be not a god but a man, accepting a life that is strictly on loan, always fragile, and moving inevitably toward death. That is the nature of our allotted time in which sooner or later we grow, as the hymn says, “faint and weary.”

But there is also a second reason we are not meant to live this created life forever. The very same metabolic exchanges that mark our finitude point to something else—to a freedom that transcends earthly life. For we do not simply persist unchangingly over

time the way an inanimate rock does. On the contrary, it is by undergoing constant change that we persist over time, and we somehow both are and are not the same person through all those changes. Drop me from the top of a fifty-story building, and something happens in my fall that is different from the fall of a rock. For I know myself as a falling object, which means that I can in some way distance myself from that object. I am that falling object, but I am also not simply equated with it.

Our being is ecstatic. That is to say, we have a kind of inner freedom from our own substance. In that freedom we reach out for something more, longing for what Augustine called “beauty so ancient and so new.”<sup>5</sup> It is, of course, possible to stifle—or try to stifle—this longing, as Augustine also well knew. Both Epicureans and Stoics, in their different ways, held that we need not fear death. For, as they said, if what awaits us is oblivion, there will be neither sensation nor misery to experience. But their argument ignores one thing: in oblivion the thirst Augustine believed characterizes our created life will never have been quenched; we will not have found that “beauty so ancient and so new.” This created life will turn out to have been a futile absurdity—marked by a longing that is never to be answered or satisfied.

The deepest desire of our hearts, a desire implanted in us at the creation, is not simply for quantitatively more of this life, lovely as it often is. Augustine had it right. We desire a beauty that is qualitatively different, not given in ordinary experience. To be sure, this created life is filled with sights and sounds of great beauty, and it is right that our hearts should be drawn to them. Desire for longer life and grief at the death of loved ones is surely not wrong—not even when we believe that the one whom we loved has arrived at a “peaceful eventide” and a “blissful slumber.” Nevertheless, as a character in Wallace Stegner’s novel, *The Spectator Bird*, says, “A reasonably endowed, reasonably well-intentioned man can walk through the world’s great kitchen from end to end and arrive at the back door hungry.”<sup>6</sup>

From two different angles, therefore, we might say that we are not meant to live this created life forever. As organisms, animated bodies, we discover that decline and death are built into the trajectory of our lives. As thirsty creatures, thirsting for God, we may come to see that more of this life could never satisfy our desire for something qualitatively different. Taking these two truths seriously can help us when we think about our dying. We have received this life as a gift; if we seek to master it by deliberately ending our life (with or without another’s help), we fail to honor the gift, and we may miss the way in which it calls us out of ourselves to the Giver. And we have received this life as a task; to live worthily is to take up that task for as many years as God gives us.

Still, we do not have to do everything in our power to stay alive, as if the longest life possible were always the one required of us. That is why we can admire the kind of soldiers described by J. Glenn Gray in his classic work, *The Warriors*—soldiers

who “do not desire to live forever, for they feel that this would be a sacrifice of quality to gain quantity.” In their willingness to lose their life in a good cause they are, he writes, “affirming human finiteness and limitation as a morally desirable fact.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, when each of us does battle with illness and suffering, we are not required to use whatever medical treatments offer the longest life. Sometimes for some of us, a life, which though shorter but is free of treatments that are of little benefit or are excessively burdensome, may well be the right choice. That is not an attempt at mastery; it is simply accepting the truth that the gift of this life, lovely as it can be, is not meant to satisfy the deepest desire of the human heart.

Eventually, therefore, unable to sustain the task earthly life sets before us, and reaching toward One whose beauty surpasses every created good, we will come “faint and weary” to “eventide,” yearning to “sink into blissful slumber.” That is the shape of our created life.

## Reconciled Life

O Jesus, draw near my dying bed  
And take me into Thy keeping  
And say when my spirit hence is fled,  
“This child is not dead, but sleeping.”  
And leave me not, Savior, till I rise  
To praise Thee in life eternal.

ONCE WE APPRECIATE THOSE TWO truths about created life, we might, of course, even while free of any Stoic desire for mastery, come to believe that death is no great evil for us. Certainly many sincere Christians have sometimes thought that way. Thus, for example, William Law, in his classic *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, places in the mouth of Penitens—an earnest believer near death—this sentiment: “For what is there miserable or dreadful in death, but the consequences of it? ... If I am now going into the joys of God, could there be any reason to grieve?”<sup>8</sup> If however we are drawn to such a view, we will have to find a way to come to terms with St. Paul, who characterizes death as both the wages of sin and the last enemy.<sup>9</sup> What would it mean to take him seriously?

We can make a beginning by returning to the truth that our being is ecstatic, that as self-transcending beings we have a kind of freedom from our own substance. In describing created life, I found in that self-transcendence a hint that our desire was for a Beauty never fully experienced in this life—and hence that earthly life is not meant to last forever. But perhaps the ecstatic quality of human beings can teach us another truth as well—namely, that each person’s death is not just an instance of the course of human life but is a unique occurrence.

For *my* death, or *your* death, is not only or merely a participation in something universal, something common to all created beings. My death is also unique, a one-time event—as is yours. There is no replacing us when we are gone. That is the point of one of Tolstoy’s most quoted passages in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Moving toward death, Ivan ponders the existential strangeness of the common syllogism: All men are mortal, Caius is a man; therefore Caius is mortal. This he reflects, “had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but by no means to himself. That man Caius represented man in the abstract, and so the reasoning was perfectly sound; but he was not Caius, not an abstract man.”<sup>10</sup> Thus what Ivan, without batting an eye, can serenely say of Caius—that he is not meant to live this earthly life forever—has an altogether different ring when he says it of himself. His life is not just an instance of the general shape of human life. No, he had a particular mother and father, particular childhood experiences, particular loves, a particular vocation—and most of all self-awareness, awareness of himself as the absolutely unrepeatable and non-interchangeable person: Ivan Ilyich.

“The point of a proper name,” Ralph McInerny once wrote

is that it [is] not common to many, and yet many people do bear identical names.... But even when two persons have the same proper name it does not become a common noun, like “man.” All the John Smiths that have been, are, and will be have nothing in common but the name; it does not name something common to them all. There is an inescapable nominalism here. God calls us all by our proper name, and He is unlikely to confuse one John Smith with another.<sup>11</sup>

It is hard then to experience my death, that one-time event, as merely an instance of a natural occurrence toward which all human lives move. Indeed I am almost tempted to say that we deceive ourselves if we try to experience it only in that way.

From this perspective it is not so much that I move toward death as that it moves toward me. It comes as judgment. We may say that one who dies has “passed” or “passed away,” but those perhaps comforting formulations do not uncover the full meaning of a person’s dying. One who dies has been summoned—summoned for judgment. Jaroslav Pelikan noted that Cyprian—Bishop of Carthage in the mid-third century—seems to have been the first Latin writer to use the word *arcessitio* (“summons”) to refer to death. “To Cyprian,” Pelikan writes, “the idea of the summons connotes the authority of the Supreme Judge to order a man into his presence and to demand an account from him of all that he has been and done.” This is no gentle “passing,” the kind of event that could hardly be said to call our very being into question. No, death so understood moves toward us as encounter, as “the irresistible call of the Summoner.”<sup>12</sup> If we have learned to hear in death the voice of the holy

God summoning us, might we not come to see the vanity of our attempts to master and control our dying?

Still more, must we not learn to pray, “O Jesus, draw near my dying bed, / And take me into thy keeping”? We can reconcile ourselves to the thought of being summoned for judgment only as we learn to look to the One whom Karl Barth so aptly characterized as “the judge judged in our place.”<sup>13</sup> If, as Ivan Ilyich came to realize, each of us dies a death that is uniquely his own, then each of us is, as Ralph McNerny observed, a non-interchangeable child of God whom God knows by name. Recalling his own brush with death, Richard John Neuhaus called to mind the Potter’s Field on Hart Island in New York City. In that field for roughly two centuries there have been buried, in simple numbered boxes, thousands of unclaimed corpses. And in the middle of the field stands a large stone inscribed with the words, “He Knows Them by Name.”<sup>14</sup>

This is especially important for us to underscore when we think of those who have died or will die prematurely—as we say from the perspective of our finite created life. Although they have not lived what we are pleased to call a full life, we dare not make that the basis for any judgment about the worth and meaning of their lives. That judgment is not ours to make. For in fact in every moment of life, short or long, we are equidistant from God.

In Westwood Cemetery of Oberlin, Ohio, in an area of the cemetery known as Missionary Rest, a marker at the gravesite of one of the children of an Oberlin missionary reads:

Dear Jesus  
You know that I love you  
Take me to yourself.

That gets it exactly right. The days or weeks of a child who dies soon after (or even before) birth are not only days of a life tragically cut short, though of course they are that from the perspective of the normal trajectory of created life. They are also the days or weeks of a God-aimed spirit, whose every moment is lived before One for whom a thousand years are but as yesterday when it is past. Surely Jesus, the Child of Mary, will draw near their dying bed as he will ours.

The One who summons each of us as death moves toward us, the One who summons us for judgment, is the One with the power and authority to say, “This child is not dead, but sleeping.” To be sure, as the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, it is “a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”<sup>15</sup> But when that living God is the judge judged in our place, then as Barth says, we “fall into *His* hands and not the hands of another.”<sup>16</sup>

## Redeemed Life

I know of a morning bright and fair  
When tidings of joy shall wake us,  
When songs from on high shall fill the air  
And God to his glory take us.  
When Jesus shall bid us rise from sleep,  
How joyous that hour of waking.

WHEN WE TURN NOW to think about the meaning of our dying in relation to the redeemed life we are promised, we are of course pretty much on our own. As C.S. Lewis once put it in a passage often quoted, “Our present outlook might be like that of a small boy who, on being told that the sexual act was the highest bodily pleasure, should immediately ask whether you ate chocolates at the same time.... The boy knows chocolate: he does not know the positive thing that excludes it.”<sup>17</sup>

One thing we can say with some assurance is that the promised life of the redeemed creation begins to mark us even now, as we live toward our death. “If any one is in Christ, he is [present tense] a new creation,” St. Paul writes, enunciating in his own idiom the Johannine teaching that to know Jesus is life eternal.<sup>18</sup> Therefore in his *Small Catechism* Luther describes baptism as signifying “that the old Adam in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new man is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”<sup>19</sup> Hence, the death toward which we move—or which moves toward us—is the last gasp of a life the Holy Spirit has been putting to death in us since our baptism, and the redeemed life that will one day be fully realized in us is already present in our life here and now.

When that last dying gasp comes, it will not come as a fulfillment or even just as a natural development of the life that has preceded it. It will come as the advent of God’s promised future. As Moltmann observed, it will arrive not as *futurum*, a development that draws out potential already present, but as *adventus*, which comes to us as something new.<sup>20</sup> Moltmann makes the point nicely with reference to Revelation 1:4, which reads: “Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come.” We might, Moltmann notes, expect a slightly different formula: “him who is and who was and who will be.” But the verse speaks not of the one who “will be” as he has been in the past but of the one who “is to come.”<sup>21</sup> And if that is the right way to think about the coming of the promised redeemed creation, we see from yet another angle what folly it would be to suppose that we should try to control or master our dying. Instead, we want to learn to live in hope, a virtue that specifically excludes mastery.



To be sure, if the creation is to be redeemed, the promised future for which we hope must in some way be a restoration of the world we have corrupted. So when that promised future breaks into our world at Easter, we are on the one hand helped to honor “the beauty and order of the life that was the creator’s gift to his creation and is restored there.” But on the other hand, we are also turned “from the empty tomb” to live toward “a new moment of participation in God’s work and being.”<sup>22</sup>

For what exactly then do we hope? This is by no means an easy question to answer. Surely, we hope to rest in the peace of Jesus, to be taken into an ever-deepening participation in the life of love that is the Triune God. But what can that mean? I have already said that we are pretty much on our own when it comes to being more precise here. Pretty much, but not entirely. For after all, one *has* come back to tell us about it. This must at least mean that we hope not for an escape from the body, but for a renewed and transformed life in the body.

To be sure, it comes rather naturally to us to think simply in terms of a continued existence of the soul apart from the body. Contrasting an inner and outer self does capture something true to our lived experience. For as surely as I know that the component parts of my body are being constantly replaced throughout life, I also have a sense that in, with, and under that constant change *I* somehow persist. Nevertheless, if a human person is the *union* of soul and body, the prospect of a dissolution of the body while the soul lives on untouched could hardly be comforting. For that would mean that our death was essentially “the *threat* of a bodiless life,” and it would make almost inexplicable Christian hope for the resurrection of the body.<sup>23</sup> What we can and should say, however, is that although those who have died in Christ may be “away from the body,” as St. Paul says, they are “at home with the Lord.”<sup>24</sup> And because the Lord with whom they are at home is the resurrected Christ, the Living One, they too must somehow live in him. Quite rightly therefore, even now as we live in hope, we offer our praise week after week in the Eucharist “with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven.”

As we live toward our dying, or await its summons to claim us, we must therefore honor with Christian burial the bodies of those who have died in the faith. Unless we are among those still living when the risen Lord returns in glory, we must all make our way to that day through death. And it is in the funeral service, the rite of Christian burial, that we honor to the end the gift of created life, a life the incarnate Son of God has shared with us and has promised to redeem. The meaning of that service is, however, increasingly obscured in our world. Simply put, Christians should do what the title of Thomas Long’s book-length discussion of the Christian funeral urges: *Accompany Them with Singing*.<sup>25</sup>

A Christian funeral is not a memorial service, not a celebration of life, not an occasion for eulogizing the deceased—any and all of which can be and often are done without the presence of a dead body. In the words of Thomas Lynch, the mortician-essayist: “A good funeral transports the newly deceased and the newly bereaved to the borders of a changed reality. The dead are disposed of in a way that says they mattered to us, and the living are brought to the edge of a life they will lead without the one who has died. We deal with death by dealing with the dead, not just the idea but also the sad and actual fact of the matter—the dead body.”<sup>26</sup> After all, the entire Christian life is a pilgrimage, a journey that begins in baptism and moves toward the new creation which the risen Christ now lives and promises will be ours. We who have accompanied a newly deceased person along this way, and certainly those of us who have been loved ones and fellow believers, ought not cut the journey short. The funeral gives expression not to our mastery of death but to our hope for the promised redemption.

There are, moreover, reasons to think that although cremation of the dead body is not in itself wrong, burial in the ground is likely to capture better the Christian significance of death. The absence of a corpse may easily suggest that the body is not the place of the person’s presence—not the kernel, but simply a dispensable husk. Yet as St. Paul writes, the dead body “is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.”<sup>27</sup> And so we place the bodies of our dead in the ground in the hope that God in his own time will give them new life.

For now then we need not try to master death, for we know that it has been mastered. Until the day comes when others must lay us in the ground, we give thanks for the beauties of created life, we try to prepare ourselves for the summons that must one day come, and we wait in hope for the promised day of resurrection. If we, like so many before us, die before that day comes, we will rest in the peace of Jesus, trusting that on “a morning bright and fair” he will “bid us rise from sleep” to share with all who hope in him that joyous “hour of waking.”

**Gilbert Meilaender** is Senior Research Professor at Valparaiso University. He has taught at the University of Virginia (1975-78), Oberlin College (1978-96), and Valparaiso University (1996-2014) where he held the Duesenberg Chair in Christian Ethics. He holds the M.Div. from Concordia Seminary (St. Louis, 1972) and the Ph.D. from Princeton University (1976). Professor Meilaender served on the President’s Council on Bioethics (2002-2009) and is author of many books and articles in the field of Christian ethics.

An earlier version of this article was previously published as “On Dying” in Victor Lee Austin & Joel C. Daniels, eds. *What’s The Good of Humanity?* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021), 70-82. Used by permission of Wipf and Stock Publishers, [www.wipfandstock.com](http://www.wipfandstock.com).

## Notes

1. Felix Salten, *Bambi* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1929), 11-15 passim.
2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 26.
3. I will use the translation of this hymn from *The Lutheran Hymnal* of 1941.
4. Hans Jonas, "The Burden and Blessing of Mortality," *Hastings Center Report*, 22:1 (1992), 35.
5. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. Translated by Rex Warner (New York: Signet Classics, 2001), 10.27.
6. Wallace Stegner, *The Spectator Bird* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 69.
7. J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (New York, Evanston and London: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), 122.
8. William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life: The Spirit of Love*. The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1978), 70.
9. Romans 6:23; I Corinthians 15:26.
10. Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 79.
11. Ralph McInerny, *I Alone Have Escaped to Tell You: My Life and Pastimes* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 162.
12. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Shape of Death: Life, Death, and Immortality in the Early Fathers* (New York: Abingdon, 1961), 69.
13. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 211-283 passim.
14. Richard John Neuhaus, *As I Lay Dying: Meditations upon Returning* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 60.
15. Hebrews 10:31.
16. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 609.
17. C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 153.
18. II Corinthians 5:17; John 17:3.
19. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds.), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 360. Translation slightly revised.
20. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 25.
21. Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 23.
22. Oliver O'Donovan, *Self, World, and Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 92.
23. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, 352. Emphasis added.
24. II Corinthians 5:9.
25. Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing—The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).
26. Thomas Lynch, "Good Grief," *Christian Century*, 120 (July 26, 2003), 20.
27. I Corinthians 15:43-44.