



FACING
the LAST
ENEMY

Death *and the* Christian

GUY PRENTISS WATERS

ENDORSEMENTS

“Death is often frightening, and talking about death can feel awkward. But death is real, and we must face it as an inevitable reality for ourselves and others until the Lord returns. Furthermore, believers in Christ have victory over death and need not dread it. Guy Waters has written a biblically faithful, personally helpful, and radiantly hopeful book about death so that, by God’s grace, we can be prepared to face death and to help others to do the same. Whether you are a pastor, counselor, caring friend, or just someone who wants to be ready to die with confident hope in the Lord, this book offers substantive answers to questions about our final destinies.”

—DR. JOEL R. BEEKE

President and professor of systematic theology and homiletics
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Mich.

“In these pages, Guy Prentiss Waters takes us gently, but securely, by the hand, and leads us through twelve chapters of biblically rich, pastorally reliable, spiritually wise, and deeply sensitive teaching to help us overcome death and the fears that accompany it. *Facing the Last Enemy* simultaneously answers our questions and reassures us that if we can say with Paul ‘to me to live is Christ’ then we can also be confident that ‘to die is gain.’ It is a classic of its kind and deserves a place in every home.”

—DR. SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON,

Teaching fellow
Ligonier Ministries

“As a society, we tend to avoid facing the reality of death, and as a result, we often find ourselves unprepared for it when it comes to us or to a loved one. Even Christians’ views of dying and what happens next may be fuzzy. But the Bible offers *so much* help and hope in the face of death. The reality of who God is, His overarching plan, and how Jesus’ resurrection transforms death for His people touches down in our lives with concrete hope that changes everything in the midst of heartbreak and loss. Waters has done a great service in

presenting a thorough account of biblical truth about death, dying, and grief as well as insights and advice that are both pastoral and practical. You will find this a very helpful resource.”

—MRS. ELIZABETH W.D. GROVES
Lecturer in biblical Hebrew
Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

“In short order, Dr. Waters has provided for us a theologically sound and practical book on the matter that faces us all: our death and what happens afterwards. Written with the eye of a New Testament scholar, but accessible to everyone, *Facing the Last Enemy* will provide invaluable help to those facing death and their next of kin. I know nothing that meets this important need as well as this book does, and I will be highly recommending it at the church at which I serve. Invaluable.”

—DR. DEREK W.H. THOMAS
Senior minister,
First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, S.C.

“Having reached my allotted three score years and ten, I have been realizing that I need to face up to the reality of death. This book has helped me to do so, not in a morbid or fearful way but in the assurance provided by the life-giving Word of God. In his thorough treatment of what the Bible teaches about death in all its nuances, Guy Waters has written a book that will be invaluable for pastors, for those who grieve, and for the dying, which all of us are. *Facing the Last Enemy* consistently shows the connection between our death and the death of Christ, and His resurrection and our resurrection.”

—DR. GENE EDWARD VEITH
Provost and professor emeritus
Patrick Henry College, Purcellville, Va.

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Death and the Christian

GUY PRENTISS WATERS



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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To
Will Thompson (1944–2021)
and
Becky Thompson

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FACING THE LAST ENEMY

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This book originated as a Sunday school series at the Second Presbyterian Church, Yazoo City, Miss., from November 2020 to April 2021. The congregation faithfully attended and offered thoughtful questions and insights, many of which have made their way into this book. Their love for the Word of God and devotion to Christ humble me and encourage me. It was my sheer privilege to open this portion of Scripture's teaching to them for those months.

The genesis of this project was a request from a friend and ruling elder at Second Presbyterian Church, Dr. William Puffer Thompson. Will wrote me in September 2020 as he was facing the end stages of cancer with a simple and powerful question: "How do I prepare to die?" The Sunday school series and this book were the fruits of that query. Will finished his earthly course and passed into glory on February 14, 2021, meeting face-to-face the Savior whom he had long loved and served. It is to him and to his faithful, godly widow, Rebecca (Becky) Allen Thompson, that this book is affectionately dedicated.

Part One

DEFINING DEATH

What Is Death?

(Part 1)

We all have questions about death. “What is death? Why do we die? Why do we all die? Why is death so scary? Why did Christ die? Why do Christians have to die? How can I face the death of someone I love? How can I prepare for death? How can I help others prepare for death? What happens after death?”

To answer these questions, we need to go to Scripture and see what God has to say to us there. The Bible is God’s Word and is completely reliable and true. If the Bible tells us something about death, then we can stake our lives on it.

We also have a lot of help. Our spiritual ancestors thought deeply and practically about death. Throughout church history, pastors and teachers have sought to help God’s people face death in light of the riches of biblical truth. With the Protestant Reformation five centuries ago, the church recovered the gospel in its full biblical integrity. Martin Luther, John Calvin, the British Puritans, and their spiritual heirs have left us rich reflections on suffering, death, and heaven in light of the gospel.

But we don’t live in the halls of church history. We live in the twenty-first century. Every generation faces its own particular challenges in thinking seriously and biblically about death and dying. The challenges of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are not always our own. To begin, we need to think about where we are. Why does modern Western culture—and, sadly, sometimes even the church—make it so hard for us to think about death?

Challenges from Our Culture

What are some obstacles that our culture raises to thinking properly about death and dying? There are at least two. The first is that we live in a *culture of distraction*. Think about it. We have year-round access to sports—live and televised events, both domestic and international, including football, baseball, basketball, hockey, and soccer. We have cable networks, talk shows, call-in shows—all devoted to sports. We have television and movie streaming—Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, Disney+, Apple TV, for starters. In 2019, 532 original scripted television series were broadcast in the United States, up from 495 in 2018 and 210 in 2009.¹ And then there are the twenty-four-hour news channels. You couldn't begin to watch all that's on offer. There is music streaming—Spotify, Pandora, Apple Music, Amazon Music. For a few dollars a month, you can stream or download hundreds or thousands of songs. And although social media is a relative newcomer, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok entice users to spend hours on their devices.

The point is not that sports, television, music, and social media are bad. They are not. I enjoy each of them. The problem is that our culture overwhelms us with entertainments and diversions. This multibillion-dollar industry entices us not to think about serious things—life, death, and eternity. Of course, diversion from serious things is not unique to our culture. It is part of our fallen bent as sinners to distract ourselves from the truth. Why do we do this? Blaise Pascal put it well nearly four hundred years ago: “Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things”² and “It is easier to bear death when one is not thinking about it than the idea of death when there is no danger.”³

Therefore, our culture has not done something brand-new in its pursuit of distraction. What is new is that we have taken distraction to new heights. The thought of death is so overwhelming that we would prefer not to think about it at all. Our modern industry of distraction helps us to do just that. We invest billions of dollars annually *not* to think about the unthinkable.

A second and related obstacle that our culture has raised to thinking seriously about death and dying is that we live in a *culture of distancing and denial*. We have all sorts of ways to try to keep death at arm's length. Few young people, for instance, have had direct experience with death. They see dramatizations of death on TV and in movies, often in shocking and gory detail.⁴

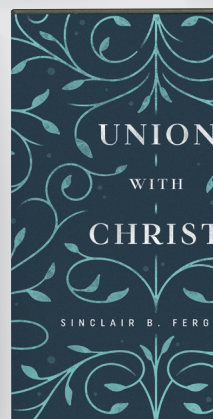
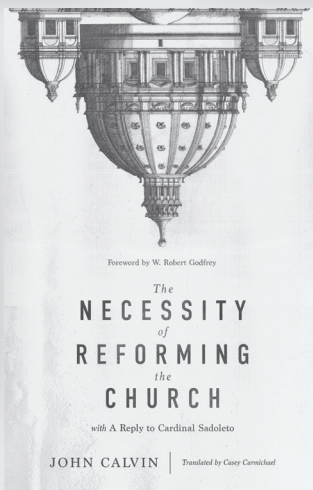
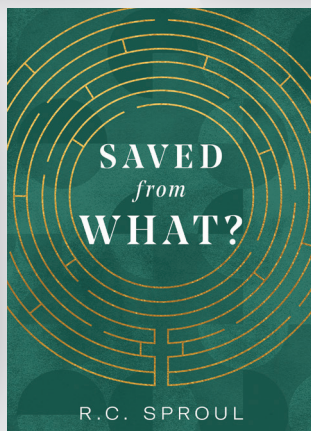
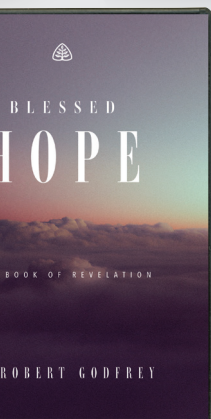
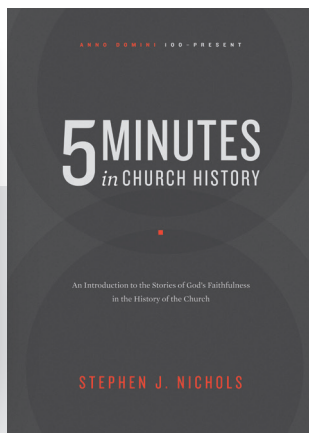
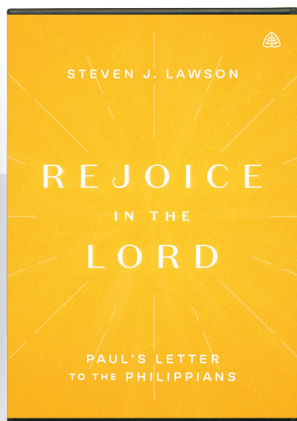
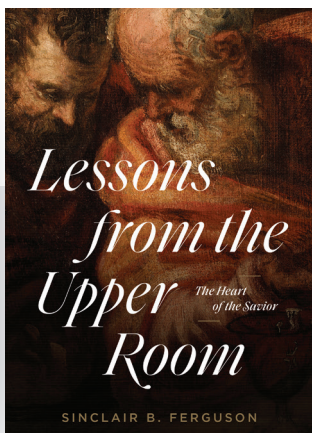
But many have never been to a funeral or memorial service, and even fewer have ever seen a dead body. It used to be that most people died at home. Now, most people die in institutions—hospitals and nursing homes, for instance.⁵ This is not a bad thing, of course, since these institutions are routinely staffed by skilled people who ensure that our friends and family members receive care and comfort in their last days. But this also means that families are often not with their loved ones in their last hours. Further, a once-common experience of death in families has been mercifully stemmed—infant mortality. Parents, of course, continue to experience the tragic heartache of the loss of a child, but this is far less frequent than it used to be.⁶ The eighteenth-century Scottish pastor Thomas Boston buried six children before they reached the age of two. The English Puritan John Owen had eleven children, but only one survived to adulthood. No one would want to return to the days when infant mortality was an expected, if not inevitable, part of family life. But that also means that fewer families today know what it is to experience death firsthand in the home.

We have also witnessed a revolution in the way that people mourn in our culture. Increasingly, funerals are called *celebrations of life*. This way of speaking serves to distance both the service and the mourners from the reality of death. One survey from 2019 found that the three most popular songs performed at funerals in the United Kingdom were Frank Sinatra’s “My Way,” Andrea Bocelli’s “Time to Say Goodbye,” and Eva Cassidy’s recording of “Over the Rainbow.”⁷ It is revealing that these songs equip us to respond to death with sloppy sentimentality (“Time to Say Goodbye,” “Over the Rainbow”) or with bald defiance (“My Way”). The survey’s authors commented that “surprisingly no classical hymns made it on to the most popular top ten list.” Is this a surprise, though? Good hymns capture deep, substantive, biblical truths to bring gospel comfort to mourners. By and large, that is simply not what we want in the West today as we encounter death.

Challenges from the Church

The culture is not the only place where we find obstacles to thinking seriously and substantively about death and dying. Sadly, the evangelical church has added its own set of obstacles. We may briefly reflect on three in particular. First, the church has embraced *consumerism*. The church too often

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