

Victory in Death



Containing an Account of the Deaths of Certain Christians, with encouragements to the reader to prepare for the future life, and the titles of certain books, which may be beneficial to that end.

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Introduction

Augustine was correct when he wrote, “He cannot die badly who lives well; and scarcely shall he die well who lives badly.” This short pamphlet gives abundant proof of that statement.

Many have argued that religion has no value; that it is an opium for the people, or a crutch for those who are too weak to go through life without it. But what if religion – specifically, the Christian religion – not only helped men throughout all of life, but also conquered death itself, and gave them hope in the hours of greatest torment?

Some time ago, I read this passage from Albert Barnes:

How much has the cause of religion been promoted by the patient deaths of Ignatius, Polycarp, and Latimer, and Ridley, and Huss, and Jerome of Prague, and the hosts of martyrs! What does not the world owe, and the cause of religion owe, to such scenes as occurred on the death-beds of Baxter, and Thomas Scott, and

Halyburton, and Payson! What an argument for the truth of religion, - what an illustration of its sustaining power, - what a source of comfort to those who are about to die, - to reflect that religion does not leave the believer when he most needs its support and consolation; that it can sustain us in the severest trial of our condition here; that it can illuminate what seems to us of all places most dark, cheerless, dismal, repulsive - "the valley of the shadow of death."

Soon the idea dawned on me, that I ought to compile these stories, for the encouragement of Christians and the exhortation of those who do not believe. Many of the stories that follow are pathetic and touching. Some of them are painful to read, but all of them demonstrate that true religion does not leave the believer in death, but triumphs over that enemy with victory.

A Narrative of the Deaths of Latimer and Ridley

Nicholas Ridley was a scholar, and bishop in the city of London, greatly loved by his congregation. Hugh Latimer was also a bishop, who urged his hearers to serve the Lord with a pure heart, and not only by hypocritical actions. These men lived through that turbulent period of the English nation, when the Roman Catholic Church was rejected in favor of the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

When 'bloody' Mary became queen, she determined to undo the work of the reformation, and arrested both men. They were condemned to death by fire at the stake.

The evening before the execution, imprisoned together in the formidable Tower of London, Dr. Ridley said, "Tomorrow I must be married," referring to when he would see the Lord Jesus. One of the ladies who stood near started to weep, but he encouraged her not to weep. "Though my breakfast shall be somewhat sharp and painful," he said, "yet I am sure my supper shall be more pleasant and sweet," as he knew that he would then be with his Lord.

His brother offered to stay with him during the night, but Ridley said, "No, no, that you shall not. For I mind [intend], God willing, to go to bed, and to sleep as quietly tonight, as ever I did in my life."

On the day of the execution they came to the place, and Dr. Ridley lifted up his hands to the heaven. When he saw Latimer, he ran to him, embraced him, and comforted him by saying, "Be of good heart, brother, for God will either assuage [soften] the fury of the flame or else strengthen us to abide it." Then they both went to the stake, kneeled, and prayed to God.

Both men were exhorted in a short sermon to join the Roman Catholic Church, but Ridley said, "So long as the breath is in my body, I will never deny my Lord Christ, and His known truth: God's will be done in me!" And Latimer agreed with him, saying "There is nothing hid but it shall be opened."

Then they prepared themselves for the fire, giving away their clothing to the crowd. Ridley said, "O heavenly Father, I give Thee most hearty thanks, for that Thou has called me to be a professor of Thee, even unto death."

They were both chained to the stake, and Ridley's brother gave them each a bag of gunpowder to put around their necks.

The fire was lit. Latimer said to his friend Ridley, "Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England as I trust shall never be put out."

As the fire approached, Ridley cried out, "Lord, Lord, receive my spirit," and Latimer prayed, "O Father of heaven, receive my soul!" So they both suffered and died, though Latimer died quickly, but Ridley, because the fire was not built well, suffered for some time in the tormenting flame, crying out, "Lord, have mercy upon me."

A Narrative of the Death of Richard Baxter

In the little hamlet of Kidderminster, in western England, lived a theologian who led many people to saving faith in the Lord Jesus; his name was Richard Baxter, and he lived during the turmoil of the seventeenth century, when England was in the throes of a civil war, and turmoil about religion.

Baxter followed the nonconformists, who advocated purity in life and simple worship of God, and argued that Christians must follow the Word of God rather than the teachings of men.

Baxter was not a man who waited for death to seize him; from the age of 21 to 23, he was very concerned that his death was imminent, and spent much time urging others to seek the way of salvation. He also prepared by writing *Directions for a Peaceful Death*, with eighteen different directions on how to prepare for death.

For example, in his fourth direction he urges, "Look by faith to your dying, buried, risen, ascended, glorified Lord. Nothing will more powerfully overcome both the poison and the fears of death, than the believing thoughts of him that has triumphed over it. Is it terrible as it separates the soul from the body? So it did by our Lord, who yet overcame it. Is it terrible as it lays the body in the grave? So it did by our Saviour; though he saw not corruption, but quickly rose by the power of his Godhead. He died to teach us believingly and boldly to submit to death."

He was always diligent in the service of God; when he was so weak that he could hardly leave his room, he opened his doors in the morning and evening for all to join him in worship. When his health worsened, he was soon confined to bed. He spent his last hours preparing himself for death, and urging those around him to also be prepared.

He told his friends who visited, "You are come, I see, to learn to die; but, be assured, I am not the only person that must travel this road; and let me tell you, that whatever may be the length of your lives, you will find them short enough to complete your preparations for this important journey."

He warned them to "Guard yourselves against the snares and bewitching temptations of this vain, this deceitful, and transitory world. Make choice of God for your portion, his glory for your chief end, his word for the rule of your lives and conversation, and heaven for your everlasting home."

When he was asked about his spiritual condition in the face of death, he replied, "I bless God I have a well-grounded assurance of eternal happiness, and I have great peace and comfort within;

but flesh must perish, and we must feel the anguish of its dissolution; and though my judgment submits to the will of our heavenly Father, still sense compels me to groan.”

A Narrative of the Death of Polycarp

Polycarp was an old man in the year 155 AD. As the bishop of Smyrna in the Roman Empire, he had served Jesus Christ faithfully for many years. But the fires of persecution were raging, and many had already been delivered up to the teeth of wild beasts.

When this godly man heard that he was being hunted, he fled to a small house in the countryside, but soon his pursuers followed him and seized him. Since it was evening time, and Polycarp knew the owner of the house, he asked his host to prepare a meal for the Roman soldiers, and asked his captors to let him pray for an hour as they ate. They agreed to this, but as they listened to him praying fervently to his Lord, many of them felt ashamed to be arresting such a godly man.

They brought Polycarp back into the city, placing him in a chariot. As he neared the city, a Roman ruler met him and rode beside him on the chariot, urging him to worship Caesar; but finding that he could not persuade the prisoner, he threw him off the chariot, dislocating his leg.

Then the prisoner was brought into the stadium, before the consul, who questioned him, arguing that it was only logical to worship Caesar and spare his life.

But Polycarp would not do so; he said, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?”

Irritated, the proconsul threatened, “I have wild beasts at hand; I will cast you to these, unless you repent.”

But Polycarp replied, “Call them then, for we are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt that which is evil.”

Then the Roman threatened him again, “I will cause you to be consumed by fire, seeing you despise the wild beasts, if you will not repent.”

But Polycarp, his face filled with confidence and grace, only replied, “You threaten me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why do you tarry? Bring forth what you will.”

And so it was determined that Polycarp should be burnt alive for the crime of being a Christian. A great pyre of wood was gathered, and Polycarp was led to the stake. As they prepared to nail him to the wood, he said simply, “Leave me as I am; for He that gives me strength to endure the fire, will also enable me, without your securing me by nails, to remain without moving in the pile.”

Then Polycarp cried out to his Lord, “I give Thee thanks that Thou hast counted me worthy of this day and this hour, that I should have a part in the number of Thy martyrs, in the cup of Thy Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, through the incorruption imparted by the Holy Ghost.”

Soon the fire was lit, and though it burnt fiercely all around him, it did not come close enough to him to harm him. Seeing this, an executioner approached and pierced him, killing him. Some say, that he bled so much from this wound, that the fire was extinguished by his great hemorrhage of blood. Afterward, his body was placed in the middle of a great bonfire and consumed. And this is the way that the holy and pious Polycarp, whose only crime was to believe in Jesus, was martyred.

A Narrative of the Death of John Wesley

This famous pastor lived a long and glorious life preaching the Gospel; and when he came to die, he was prepared to meet his Lord. He had ministered throughout his long life, preaching the gospel to thousands in England and as he knew the time was near, he often ended his sermons with the lines, "Oh that, without a lingering groan, / I may the welcome word receive, / My body with my charge lay down, / And cease at once to work and live!"

He preached his last sermon on the text, "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found; call ye upon Him while He is near."

At eleven o'clock on a Friday morning, he knew that death was approaching. He asked for a half hour alone in his room, and then he was helped to bed. He had a high fever, and the next day he hardly moved, but the day after he felt a little better. As he sat in his chair, he cheerfully said, "Till glad I lay this body down, / Thy servant, Lord, attend; / Ah, oh! My life of mercies crown / With a triumphant end!"

A few days later, still lingering, he was gasping for breath, when his friends helped him into his bed. After some friends prayed, he said to them, "Farewell, farewell." A little while later a friend came into the room, and he tried to speak, but no one could understand him. As he realized this, he mustered all the strength he had left and cried out, "The best of all is, God is with us." Then he lifted up his arms in a symbol of victory and cried out again, "The best of all is, God is with us."

Later he asked those in his room to join him in prayer, though his strength was rapidly leaving. During the night he tried often to quote the 46th Psalm, but did not have the strength. However, he was heard to say, time and again, "I'll praise... I'll praise..."

Finally, the next morning, as his friends knelt around his bed in prayer, they heard him say, "Farewell," and he departed for eternal bliss.

A Narrative of the Death of Ignatius of Antioch

Around the year 107 AD, the Roman emperor Trajan heard the case of a bishop by the name of Ignatius. This man lived in the city of Antioch, where he refused to worship the Roman gods. Rather than tremble in fear at the world-renowned emperor, he spoke to him –

"You are in error when you call the demons of the nations 'gods.' For there is but one God, who made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that are in them; and one Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, whose kingdom may I enjoy."

So Trajan asked him, "Do you mean Him who was crucified under Pontius Pilate?"

And Ignatius replied, "I mean Him who crucified my sin...and who has condemned all the deceit and malice of the devil under the feet of those who carry Him in their heart."

As it was clear that Ignatius would not renounce his allegiance to Jesus Christ, Trajan ordered, "We command that Ignatius...be carried to the great city Rome, there to be devoured by the beasts, for the gratification of the people."

So Ignatius was hurried away, and taken on a long voyage by boat to the city of Rome. The gladiatorial games were about to end, and as the soldiers wanted to be sure that he arrived in time for the games, they pressed forward as fast as possible.

On the day of his execution there was a particularly large crowd, all eager to see the bloody violence of the Colosseum. As they roared and shouted in excitement at the violence, Ignatius gathered with a few fellow Christians, and they kneeled together, asking God that the persecution would one day end, and that Christ's followers would remain faithful in their love to each other.

As soon as their prayer was ended, Ignatius was hurried away by the soldiers, and thrown into the Colosseum, where he was devoured by wild beasts, which left no remains except his bones.

Shortly before his death he wrote, "I am the wheat of God and am ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ."

A Narrative of the Death of a Young Lady

As the minister of a large church near New York City, Ichabod Spencer had visited many on their deathbeds. It was the middle of the nineteenth century, and through his efforts, many had been directed into the way of salvation. But regarding this young lady, Spencer called her "one of the most distressing instances of religious darkness and despondency, that I have ever been called to witness."

She was not even twenty years old, but her health was ruined. She had enjoyed religious instruction, had studied the Bible, but never yet obtained peace with God. When she realized that she was dying, she asked for her pastor to come, and began to plead again for mercy from God.

She seemed to be in continual despair, unable to find rest for her soul. She begged and pleaded with God for mercy, but still seemed hopeless.

Eventually she professed to believe all the revelation of God. She knew that she was guilty, she believed that God loved sinners and had sent his Son, Jesus, to save them, and she was certain that God was willing to also save her. She said that she hated sin with her whole heart, and longed to be holy. But she was still despondent, even though Spencer tried to encourage her.

Though she seemed to have the evidence of being a Christian, her pastor was saddened that she still seemed disappointed and gloomy. Her death was fast approaching, and one Sunday she asked to see him again, before she died.

When he came, she seemed the same as always, except that she now thought of herself less, and of God more. He said that he was about to preach the sermon, and as he knew that she could not live much longer, said farewell.

She asked him, “Will you come to see me at noon?” He doubted that she could survive that long, but agreed to come.

When he arrived, she was still alive. As he came into the room she said to him, “Oh, I am glad you have come, - I have been waiting for you. I wanted to see you once more, and tell you how happy I am. I have found out that a poor sinner has *nothing* to do – only to believe. I am not afraid of death now. I am willing to die. God has forgiven me, and I die happy, - I am very happy. I wanted to tell you this. I thought I should live long enough to tell you.”

“I thought God would not let me die, till I had seen you, and told you of my joy, so as not to have you discouraged when you meet with other persons who have such dark minds as mine was. Tell them to *seek* the Savior. Light will come some time, - it may be at the last hour. I prayed God to let me see you once more. He has granted my last prayer; and now – now I am ready.”

Then she was unable to speak, and her pastor knelt down by her bed, and prayer for her. Within five minutes after he arose, she had fallen asleep in the Lord.

A Narrative of the Death of John Huss

In the dark years of the middle ages, as kings and popes frittered their wealth, and the common peasants plowed their fields, God raised up a man named John Huss to shine the truth in Europe, in the modern Czech Republic.

Huss spent his early years preparing for ministry in the Roman Catholic Church, graduating with a doctorate, and eventually he began to preach in a large church in Prague. But he was also discovering the value of the Holy Bible, which he began to understand better.

He stirred up great controversy by his teachings, but the Holy Roman Emperor, who ruled much of modern Germany, urged him to come to a great council and defend his views. He was promised safety during his journey, and so he agreed, but when he arrived, he was arrested and imprisoned. His captors simply said, that no one had to keep a promise made to a heretic.

But what was his heresy? He opposed the pope selling indulgences (essentially, forgiveness for sins), denounced the ungodly living of many of the clergy, and said only Jesus Christ, and not the pope, is the head of the church. He denied that a pope or bishop had authority to set up any unbiblical doctrine.

For these ‘crimes,’ he was given no opportunity to explain his views, but only asked to recant. When he refused to do that, he was condemned to burn at the stake.

On the day of his execution, John was led to the cathedral, where he was dressed in his ministerial robes. Then they were ceremonially stripped off of him, one by one. His executioners had a crown made of paper, on which were painted three devils, about to seize a soul and tear it to pieces with their ferocious claws. They placed it on his head, saying, “We commit your soul to the devil!”

But he replied to them, “And I commit it to the most merciful Lord Jesus Christ, who, on account of me, a miserable wretch, bore a much heavier and harsher crown of thorns. Being innocent, he was deemed deserving of the most shameful death. Therefore I, a miserable wretch and sinner, will humbly bear this much lighter, even though vilifying crown for His name and truth.”

When he arrived at the place of his execution, he knelt down, lifted his hands to the heavens, and began to sing and pray with a joyful and peaceful look on his face.

When the executioner ordered him to rise, he said with a loud voice, "Lord Jesus Christ, I am willing to bear most patiently and humbly this dreadful, ignominious, and cruel death for Thy gospel and for the preaching of Thy Word."

He was tied to the stake, his hand behind his back, and a heavy chain around his neck. But he said, "The Lord Jesus Christ, my Redeemer and Savior, was bound by a harder and heavier chain. And I, a miserable wretch, am not ashamed to bear being bound for His name by this one."

The wood and straw were piled around his body, reaching to his chin. They lit the fire, and he began to sing, "Christ, Thou son of God, have mercy upon us," and shortly died. But his enemies, filled with such hatred, made sure that his entire body was charred, and then broke his bones with clubs.

A Narrative of the Death of Thomas Halyburton

When he was still young, Thomas Halyburton's family moved from Scotland in 1685 to avoid a bloody persecution, started by the British king, against all who did not attend the established church. These 'covenanters' were guilty of the 'crime' of worshipping the Lord in the open air, without an official church 'permit.'

As a young man, Thomas received a good education, back in his native Scotland, but wrestled for some time with the philosophy of Deism, the idea that God has left the world to take care of itself. Eventually he rejected this unbiblical view and returned to the Christian faith.

He was ordained to the ministry and taught as a professor of divinity in St. Andrews, Scotland, but God saw fit to take his servant to eternal joy sooner than most; when he was 37, he was seized with illness, and realized that his death was coming shortly.

Several of his friends came to visit him, and he exhorted them 'to faithfulness in the Lord's work. You will never repent this. He is a good master. I have always found him so. If I had a thousand lives, I should think all too little to be employed in his service.'

"O," he cried, "the thoughts of an incarnate God are sweet and ravishing! And, O! how do I wonder at myself, that I do not love him more! That I do not admire him more! O that I could honor him! What a wonder that I enjoy such composure under these pains, and in view of approaching death!"

He had no doubt what he was going to experience after death. "I shall see my Redeemer stand on the earth at the last day. But before then, I shall see the Lamb in the midst of the throne. O, it will be a glorious company, the spirits of just men made perfect, and Jesus the Mediator of the New Covenant! O, for grace! Grace to be patient to the end!"

To his little daughter he said, "Mady, my dear, the Lord bless you; the God of your father, and of my father, bless you; the God that fed me all my life; the angel that redeemed me from all evil, bless you, and the rest, and be your portion; that is a good heritage, better than if I had crowns and scepters to leave you. My child, I received you from him, and I will give you to him again."

He urged his apothecary, "Study religion in youth; when you come to be as I am, you will find no comfort without it."

Someone had urged him to be quiet and rest, but he said, "How should a man bestow his last breath, but in commending the Lord Jesus Christ, God clothed in our nature, dying for our sins!"

He noticed that his eyes were dimming, and there was sweat on his face. "This growing weakness of my eyes," he said, "is a sign of a change approaching...But I shall behold him in righteousness, and when I awake, I shall be satisfied with his likeness!"

"Here is a demonstration of religion," he said, "that I, a poor, weak, timorous man, once as much afraid of death as any, I that have been many years under the terror of death, come now, in the mercy of God and by the power of his grace, composedly and with joy to look death in the face. I have seen it in its paleness, and in all its circumstances of horror."

How touchingly and tenderly he spoke to his wife: "O my sweet bird, are you there? I am no more yours. I am the Lord's. I remember on the day I took you by the hand, I thought on parting with you. But I knew not how to get my heart off you again: yet now I have got it done. Will you not give me to the Lord, my dear?"

He noticed that she was very sad, and he said, "My dear, do not weep: you should rather rejoice: rejoice with me, and let us exalt his name together. I shall be in the same family with you: but you must stay a little behind, and take care of God's children."

Later he encouraged her again, "O, wait upon him; for he is a God to all that serve him. He never takes anything from them, but he gives them as good or better back again. My dear, we have had many a sweet day together: we must part for a while, but we shall meet again, and shall have on work, the praises of God, and the praises of the Lamb!"

"I could not believe that I could have borne, and borne cheerfully this rod so long. This is a miracle, pain without pain. Blessed be God that ever I was born. I have a father, a mother, and ten brothers and sisters in heaven, and I shall be the eleventh."

Finally, in his last hours, a friend said to him, "Now you are putting your seal to that truth, that godliness is great gain." And then, 'about seven in the morning, he went to the land, where the weary are at rest.'

A Narrative of the Death of an Irishman

A certain Irishman was a complete agnostic, who believed only in materialism; he was a lawyer, but now he knew that he would die. His aunt, a Christian, had asked for Spencer, the minister who visited the young lady in the former *Narrative*, to come and talk with him.

They had many interesting visits, discussing in detail questions of knowledge, certainty, and whether or not there was a God. Though the lawyer had been convinced of his beliefs, he was surprised to find a minister who could challenge some of his views, and as they talked through every aspect of his beliefs, he found that the evidence in favor of God was overwhelming.

About the time that he was reaching this conclusion, in one of their discussions, Spencer said that he would leave him for a while, so that he could rest, since he evidently needed it. But he said,

“Another time! Another time! You astonish me, sir! I am a dying man! I stand on the verge of time now! I feel that the grave-digger is at the side of me! You may talk of time...But if I should be talking of time, Death would laugh at me, and call me fool and liar!”

Then he asked, “Tell me what to do to be ready to die.”

Spencer asked if he believed in God, who is infinite, eternal, and spiritual. He said that he did. Did he pray? He said that he did, and would continue. Was he a sinner? He knew that he was. “Then repent, and trust in Christ for pardon,” Spencer said.

“Will repentance save me,” the man asked.

“No,” Spencer replied. “Christ Jesus saves sinners. You must not trust to your repentance and faith to save you. That would be self-righteousness. Trust only in the crucified Son of God, your proposed Surety.”

Then the man asked him, “What must be done first, *before* I trust in him?”

“Nothing,” Spencer answered. “Nothing.”

The man asked how that could be. Was there no preparation to make? “No,” Spencer said, “none at all.” Holiness? That results from faith in Christ.

So the two men knelt in prayer, and then Spencer left. He came back the next day, but the man’s friends said he was too weak to have another visitor.

Shortly afterward he heard that the man had died. But those who knew him at the end said that he had completely renounced his infidelity, he believed the Bible was from God, and the atonement of Jesus Christ was all that a dying sinner needed. He talked of these things and prayed until he fainted from exhaustion.

He was told, that the man had died in peace, with praises for the atonement of Jesus Christ on his lips.

A Narrative of the Death of Edward Payson

In the year 1827, in the quiet American town of Portland, Maine, a minister knew that he was dying. His name was Edward Payson, and for twenty years he had labored patiently in ministry at his church. He was known as ‘praying Payson,’ and one biographer notes that he “studied theology on his knees. Much of his time he spent literally prostrated, with the Bible open before him, pleading the promises.”

In his last months, he suffered many torments. He was unable to move his right arm, or the left side of his body, but inwardly, he felt as if a stream of liquid fire was being poured through his bones.

One morning, suffering as he was, he said, “Last night I had a full, clear view of Death, as the king of terrors; now he comes and crowds the poor sinner to the very verge of the precipice of destruction, and then pushes him down headlong! But I felt that I had nothing to do with this; and I loved to sit like an infant at the feet of Christ, who saved *me* from this fate. I felt that death

was disarmed of all its terrors; all he could do would be to touch me, and let my soul loose to go to my Savior.”

To one young friend he said, “Christians might avoid much trouble and inconvenience, if they would only believe what they profess – that God is able to make them happy without anything else. They imagine that if such a dear friend were to die, or such and such blessings to be removed, they should be miserable; whereas God can make them a thousand times happier without them. To mention my own case – God has been depriving me of one blessing after another; but, as everyone was removed, He has come in and filled up its place; and now, when I am a cripple, and not able to move, I am happier than ever I was in my life before, or ever expected to be; and, if I had believed this twenty years ago, I might have been spared much anxiety.”

“It makes my blood run cold,” he said, “to think how inexpressibly miserable I should now be without religion. To lie here, and see myself tottering on the verge of destruction! Oh, I should be distracted! And when I see my fellow creatures liable every moment to be reduced to this situation, I am in an agony for them, that they may escape their danger before it be too late.”

Several young men came to see him, and he told them, “You will all one day be obliged to embark on the same voyage on which I am just embarking; and as it has been my especial employment, during my past life, to recommend to you a Pilot to guide you through this voyage, I wished to tell you what a precious Pilot He is, that you may be induced to choose Him for yours. I felt desirous that you might see that the religion I have preached can support me in death.”

“You know that I have many ties which bind me to earth – a family to whom I am strongly attached, and a people whom I love almost as well – but the other world acts like a much stronger magnet, and draws my heart away from this.”

“Death comes every night, and stands by my bedside in the form of terrible convulsions, every one of which threatens to separate the soul from the body. These continue to grow worse and worse, until every bone is almost dislocated with pain, leaving me with the certainty that I shall have it all to endure again the next night. Yet, while my body is thus tortured, the soul is perfectly, perfectly happy and peaceful – more happy than I can possibly express to you. I lie here, and feel these convulsions extending higher and higher; but my soul is filled with joy unspeakable.”

“I seem to swim in a flood of glory which God pours down upon me. And I know, I *know*, that my happiness is but begun; I cannot doubt that it will last forever. And now is this all a delusion? Is it a delusion, that can fill the soul to overflowing with joy in such circumstances? If so, it is surely a delusion better than any reality. But not, it is not a delusion; I feel that it is not. I do now merely know that I *shall* enjoy all this – *I enjoy it now.*”

In his final, dying torments he said, “Peace! Peace! Victory! Victory!” And as he looked on his wife and children, he said, “I am going, but God will surely be with you.” Finally, with his final breaths, he whispered, “Faith and patience hold out.”

A Few Short Narratives of Other Remarkable Deaths

Bullinger of Zurich

This Christian minister, who taught the people of Zurich, Switzerland in the time of the Reformation, said on his deathbed, "If Socrates was glad when dying to go to Homer, Hesiod, and other learned men, how much more should I be who will soon see my Savior Jesus Christ, as also the saints, patriarchs, and apostles."

John Lambert

This man died as an English martyr in the time of the Reformation, simply because he denied that Jesus was physically present in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. When he was told that the hour of his execution had arrived, he sat down to breakfast with several gentlemen, without any appearance of sorrow or fear.

His suffered terribly in his death, being burnt in a very small fire, which his enemies kept from killing him quickly. After a long time, he was pierced with pikes, but lifting up his hands, his fingers flaming with fire, he cried out, "None but Christ, none but Christ," and then fell into the fire and died.

Mr. Venn

We are told that a certain Mr. Venn, felt so triumphant as he lay dying, that he cried out to a friend, "See how Christ in me is spoiling principalities and making a show of them openly."

Simon Peter

According to tradition, when Peter was living in Rome, he determined to flee Nero's persecution. But as he left the city, he saw Jesus again. He asked where his Lord was going – 'Domine Quo Vadis?' – and Jesus responded, "I go to be crucified afresh." Peter returned to Rome with joyful contentment. When his day of execution arrived – possibly the same day that Paul was executed – tradition says he encouraged his wife to martyrdom with the words, "Remember, dear, our Lord." He then asked to be crucified upside down, stating that he was unworthy to die as his Lord did.

Mr. Bruce

Another, Mr. Bruce, had breakfast with his children, but began to feel that death was very close. He asked that a Bible would be brought to him, and then asked for someone to place his fingers on the last two verses of Romans 8 – "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When he had been told that his fingers were on the verse, he said, "Now God be with you, my children. I have breakfasted with you this morning, and shall sup with my Lord Jesus Christ this night."

A Narrative of the Death of a Poor Woman

The same pastor Spencer, who had visited the young lady and the Irishman that we heard of in former *narratives*, heard of a sick woman who lived in a boardinghouse with strangers. She had asked that he would come, and he found that she was very poor indeed.

When he entered her room, she was “emaciated, pale, tormented with a hollow cough, unable to speak but in a whisper, and her cheek was flushed with that round spot of peculiar red...the fatal sign.”

He talked with her for a little while and then asked her, “Have you much pain?”

“Yes sir,” she said, “I am in great pain now, the most of the time.”

Then he asked her, “Are you afraid to die?”

“Oh no, sir,” and she smiled at him. “Jesus is my hope. He *will* save me.”

He talked with her a little more, and then left, but came back later in the day when she asked for him. She was evidently doing worse, but said to him,

“I bless my God for all my pain, for the disappointments of my past life, and the strange, strange way in which he has led me on. I have had trials – many trials...But my trials have done me good...I used to think, when I first made a profession of religion, trials would overcome me, but God makes me happy in them. I find if one is not worldly, trials are easy to bear; and if we look towards God and heaven, they are nothing at all but mercies.”

When he asked if her husband was pious, she said to him, “He is not religious, and that is the trouble of my heart.” Then she burst out weeping for a time, and then continued again, “...Oh, it seems to me as if the careless, who neglect salvation, have never read God’s promises. If they had, and knew what they meant, they could not help trusting them. I am happier now than ever I was before. It is sweet to suffer this pain when Christ puts such delights into my soul.”

She was still alive the next day when he went to see her, but he knew that she would not live through the night. He prayed for her, and said farewell. She was weeping as he said this, but she said to him,

“Do not think I weep because I am sorry. I weep because I am overcome with joy. Delights fill my happy soul. This is the dawn of heaven. My heaven is begun. Dying is sweet to me. I go to my blessed Lord. I thank you for coming to me. Farewell, farewell.”

A Short Note

It is true that there are some who are irreligious and seem unconcerned about death. They may be on the very verge of death, but they seem as cheerful as ever. They do not believe in Jesus Christ, they have never fled to him for mercy, but they seem as confident as ever.

Is this victorious death? No; such people are simply gamblers who are taking the greatest imaginable risk. That is not victory, for victory is not uncertain; a victor is one who has conquered.

There is great wisdom in thinking on death; Solomon wrote that “It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting; for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart. Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.”

Death is the last enemy, the great and final opponent which every man must face. Have you prepared for this enemy? Could you speak of the astonishing peace and joy that these *Narratives* described? Or are you disturbed by the thought of death, and filled with a dark fear of uncertainty after death?

The only certain preparation for death is the gospel of Jesus Christ. But what is the Gospel?

God – The first four words of the Bible are “in the beginning, God...” God isn’t a social construct, an idea that people came up with, or a concrete way of thinking about the ultimate reality. God is real, and he exists *alone*. There is no one like him, no one who rivals him. He is unlike anything else, possessing infinite power, knowledge, wisdom, and existence.

The Bible says that God *created the heavens and the earth*. Everything that exists is ultimately the creation of God. When we look up at the sun, moon, and stars, and ponder galaxies a billion light-years away, we are looking at God’s handiwork. When we examine microscopic cells and chemical reactions, we see God’s handiwork. All the variety, the order, and the beauty point to the character of God – God is revealing something about himself in the world that he created. All this evidence leads to the rock-solid conclusion that *God really does exist*.

Ultimately, the Bible is the pre-eminent source for information on God. It tells us not only that he is great and glorious, orderly and beautiful, but also just and merciful. He delights in showing mercy, and giving undeserved kindness to those who don’t deserve it.

At the same time, God calls himself a judge, and he is interested in justice. Anyone who fails to attain the standard of perfection – that standard that God himself has set – must be condemned. Time and again, God reveals his detestation of evil by judging it harshly. It isn’t that God is punitive and judgmental – rather, God is interested in preserving purity and punishing what is disgustingly depraved.

Man – Man, of course, living in the world, is part of God’s creation. Man is not some highly evolved prehistoric ape, neither is he a random collection of chemicals that happens to possess the characteristic of rational thought. Man is created by God, in His image, with a living soul that continues forever.

Because man was created by God, for God, man is never satisfied without God. Even though people try to satisfy themselves with possessions, relationships, and activities, they fail to find contentment without God.

The Bible teaches that man was created perfect, but Adam and Eve chose to disobey their Maker by eating the forbidden fruit. Suddenly their perfect nature was sullied – indeed, they became *spiritually dead*. No longer able to obey God from a perfect heart, people – the descendants of Adam and Eve, who continue in their disobedient ways – carry out the disobedient (sinful)

desires of their body and mind, working out the passions of their flesh. The mind, created for the highest and noblest thoughts, has become perverted by depravity.

This means that humanity falls under the judgment of God. God is not responsible for man's evil, but he is responsible to punish man. In fact, God couldn't claim to be righteous and just if he overlooked humanity's evil. In response, he cursed both Adam and Eve, and promised them that they would surely die – not just a temporary, physical death, but even an eternal and spiritual death.

Christ – There is a difficulty – if God is just, he must punish sin. But how could he show mercy and kindness, while maintaining his justice? Desiring to show the riches of his mercy, God sent his Son, Jesus (who is divine) to show his kindness to humanity.

Jesus lived for about thirty-three years on earth, loving other people and loving his Father, God. He showed the kindness of God by healing people, ministering to them, and teaching them. At the same time, he served his heavenly Father by obeying him and devoting himself fully.

The pinnacle of God's kindness is when Jesus (who is known as the *Christ*, because he was promised by God) laid down his life, suffering humiliation and death at the hands of Jewish mobs and Roman soldiers when he was crucified on the tree. This death, while a striking example of surrender to God's will, was far more than just a good example for humanity.

Instead, the Bible teaches that Jesus actually became accursed on the cross, taking on himself the sins of the world, and suffering on the behalf of those who would believe on him. In this way, God maintains his character of justice, but also shows his kindness to humanity.

After Jesus died on the cross, he was buried in a tomb – but he didn't stay there! Three days later he resurrected, demonstrating the power of God, and he continued to live on earth for forty days. Finally, he ascended into heaven, promising that one day he will return, judging those who refuse to submit to God, and completing the rescue of those who believe on him.

Response – All of this information is good and true, but the Bible never leaves people to rest content knowing it. Instead, this whole message is meant to move people, to engage their hearts, to humble their pride, and to surrender their lives to the kindness and mercy of God. In particular, the Bible outlines two ways that people must respond to this message.

First, we are commanded to repent. Repentance is not only a feeling of sorrow or shame – it is an actual change in life! Repentance is like a U-turn – one goes in the opposite direction that they have been travelling in. When someone repents, they forsake their false ideas about God, and they forsake their lifestyle of disobedience. Instead, they follow in the pattern of Jesus, a pattern of obedience to God.

Second, we are commanded to believe. The gospel is not just facts – it is actual truth. Like a medicine in a cupboard, it does nothing as long as it stays on the shelf. It must be used! Belief implies entire surrender to God's way, and acceptance of all of God's message. It becomes the foundation for life and the anchor for everything. It also implies obedience to all that God commands – including baptism, the symbol of a new life lived in obedience to Jesus Christ.

Address of the Dying Christian to His Soul

Alexander Pope

Vital spark of heavenly flame,
Quit, Oh quit, this mortal frame;
Trembling, hoping, lingering, flying-
Oh, the pain, the bliss of dying;
Cease, fond Nature, cease thy strife,
And let me languish into life.

Hark! they whisper; angels say,
Sister spirit, come away.
What is this absorbs me quite,
Steals my senses, shuts my sight?
Drowns my spirit, draws my breath;
Tell me, my soul, can this be death?

The world recedes; it disappears;
Heaven opens on my eyes; my ears
With sounds seraphic ring;
Lend, lend your wings! I mount! I fly!
O grave! where is thy victory?
O death! where is thy sting?

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Resources

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(Available free through Google Books)

The Afflicted Man's Companion, by John Willison

(Available free through Google Books)

Directions for a peaceful death, by Richard Baxter

(Available free online)