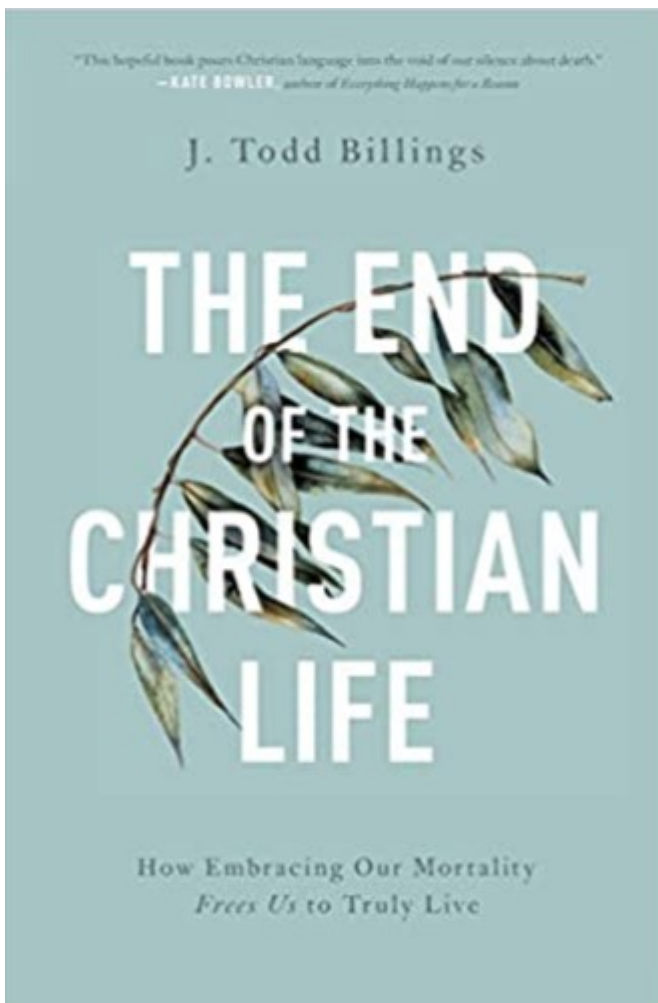


The solution to the fear of death is to live as dying creatures

Theologian Todd Billings grapples with scripture, philosophy, and his own incurable cancer.

by [LaVonne Neff](#) in the [January 27, 2021](#) issue

In Review



The End of the Christian Life

How Embracing Our Mortality Frees Us to Truly Live

By J. Todd Billings

Brazos

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To J. Todd Billings, questions about death are personal and pressing: he was only 39 years old when he was diagnosed with an incurable form of cancer. Though chemotherapy and a stem cell transplant have kept him alive for eight years and counting, death is never far from his thoughts. “Each day as I worked on this book,” he writes, “I dealt with physical pain and heavy fatigue, both of which will likely continue for the rest of my life.” He does not expect to live to see his children graduate from high school. *The End of the Christian Life* would make excellent Lenten reading, especially during a pandemic.

Like Paul Kalanithi, the late author of *When Breath Becomes Air*, Billings refuses to sugarcoat the experience of dying. Like Kate Bowler in *Everything Happens for a Reason*, he shows how the inadequate theology of the pervasive prosperity gospel gives Christians false hope. Like Atul Gawande in *Being Mortal*, he argues against modern medicine’s fixation on life extension. Those best sellers are on Billings’s extensive list of resources, and their clear-eyed views about human values coincide with his.

But unlike those authors, Billings, who teaches Reformed theology at Western Theological Seminary, takes a primarily intellectual approach to his inner turmoil. As “new biblical and theological questions were becoming urgent,” he wrote in his 2015 book, *Rejoicing in Lament*, “I prayerfully immersed myself in Scripture, especially the Psalms. . . . I decided to honestly take on the tough theological and existential questions rather than dodge them.”

Similarly, in his new book he draws heavily on passages from 33 of the Bible’s 66 books as well as on a host of writings by church fathers, Protestant reformers, and contemporary philosophers, sociologists, and theologians. Reading the book is like listening to a particularly well-read, well-organized classroom lecturer—one who not only knows his stuff but also knows how to communicate it effectively, even if the topic is not one that most of his students are eager to study.

Though his book is no memoir, Billings openly describes his anguish as death approaches. His first chapter is called “Welcome to Sheol,” a state he describes as “a deep, miry pit, far away from light . . . a place of darkness, a prison for those who

are silenced, cut off from life.” Lament is an appropriate and necessary response to Sheol. Death is an enemy, for “every cell in our bodies aches to survive.”

What is dangerous isn't grieving our mortality; it's refusing to acknowledge it. Billings devotes most of one chapter to discussing Ernest Becker's 1973 classic *The Denial of Death*. Fear of death can lead people to support authoritarian regimes, Becker posits, fixing their hopes on the presumed corporate immortality of a Third Reich or Red Star. “Not only is Christian culture *not* immune to the hero culture that elevates a nation [or] leader . . . to the level of God,” Billings writes, “Christian culture often becomes the catalyst that propels these idolatries forward.”

Fear can also drive people to act as if illness and aging are optional and death is the ultimate failure, whether of the health-care system or of personal faith. This refusal to accept natural limits is both medically and theologically futile, Billings argues, and yet a major study by the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute found that Christians “were more than three times as likely as other patients to opt for extreme measures”—apparently, according to one of the researchers, “to give God every opportunity to grant them a miracle and save them.”

Counterintuitively, as Billings insists in every chapter, the only way to deal with the fear of death is to learn to live as dying creatures. He writes:

When we honestly name the wounds, the withered branches, the ways in which we are undone, we vaccinate ourselves against the overpowering fear of death. We give death its space, let its wounds breathe without fabricating explanations about how it makes sense or works for the best. Otherwise, the fear of death actually enters our bloodstream.

Like the Bible, the book has a happy ending: the journey that began in Sheol will end in resurrection and a renewed cosmos. Billings is careful, however, not to define the afterlife according to popular tropes. Death, he says, is “a cliff with a steep drop-off to a destination we cannot see.” The time between death and resurrection is shrouded in mystery. All that can be confidently affirmed is that, according to the historic Christian tradition, the time will come when “heaven and earth are reunited and the Lord dwells with his creatures as in a temple.”

Death is a difficult topic, and *The End of the Christian Life*, though competently written, is a challenging read. It is nevertheless a rich quarry for individual reflection and group discussion. And the book is about much more than dying. Here is

Billings's perceptive advice for living: "Delight in what is beautiful, be grateful for each day, and expect trouble."