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Abstract

"J. Todd Billings, in his book, helps us ponder how we might live well even though we live in the full knowledge that this life, as we know it, will inevitably end."

Posting about the book *The End of the Christian Life* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/memento-mori-a-review-of-the-end-of-the-christian-life/>

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Comments

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January 21, 2021

Memento Mori: A Review of *The End of the Christian Life*

Todd Zuidema

Title: *The End of the Christian Life: How Embracing Our Mortality Frees Us to Truly Live*

Author: J. Todd Billings

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Every Sunday, I wear a watch that belonged to my grandfather. It's a little gold-plated Bulova with a barrel case and a mechanical movement. I was told by the watchmaker who serviced it and got it running again after years tucked away in a dresser drawer that, back in the day, it would have roughly been sold at a price of a what a working man might spend on a new suit.

The watch's faithful ticking, the gouge in the acrylic crystal that won't quite buff out, the accordion watchband, and the patina on the dial are all reminders for me, and for brief a moment I picture my grandpa, someone I still miss some 25 years after his passing.

The Latin phrase, *memento mori*, or "remember that you die," is a saying that has been used within the Christian tradition to remind people of their mortality and the limits that come with that truth. My grandfather's watch is a token of remembrance for me, but also a *memento mori*. Life is fleeting and brief, even a long life as we might measure it.

In my own faith tradition, the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism asks, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” The first part of the answer is one that many have memorized and print on the folders that are passed out at funerals. It answers, “That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ...” We acknowledge our mortality, but in that mortality, we are not alone.

J. Todd Billings, in his book, *The End of the Christian Life: How Embracing Our Mortality Frees Us to Truly Live*, helps us ponder how we might live well even though we live in the full knowledge that this life, as we know it, will inevitably end. As for this life, we, too, are destined to remain for future generations only as memories—memories which come to mind in a treasured memento or a picture hanging on our wall. We are mortal, not yet clothed with immortality.

How do we live well, with the full knowledge that we are mortal and that we will die? There is an *ars moriendi*, as Billings puts it. Or, simply translated, there is an art to dying.

Confronting the stark reality of mortality is made even harder when living in a culture that denies or suppresses talk or consideration of death. Modern medicine tells the terminally ill patient in the last stages of the disease that there is “one more thing you can try.” The elderly and infirm are given the special care that they need, but they are often isolated in care centers with banal names like “Pleasant Acres” or “Happy Siesta.” On Sundays, we pray for those who are “shut in,” but, with the possible exception of family and friends, they are out of sight, absent from our every-day routines.

As Billings notes, we may not have a conscious desire to suppress death, but “we’ve come to generate and inhabit a culture that prizes and rewards death-denying habits.” (pg. 106)

What is the remedy and a healthy way to consider death and dying? As we try to answer this puzzling question, Billings provides direction by sharing his own story and experience. He was diagnosed in 2012 at age 39 with an incurable form of cancer. He subsequently submitted to chemotherapy and other procedures to extend his life, without a promise of a cure. He daily lives with the challenges and complications of the disease.

Yet, this book is more than a personal memoir. As a theologian and teacher, he shares with us careful theological and scriptural reflections.

Billings notes that as human beings, we live between Sheol, where there is profound suffering, and the temple, where the presence of God dwells. Sheol is a place where

God seems distant and silent. The temple is the opposite. It is a place where we find joy, rest, and peace. In different seasons of life, we join Job, Jonah, or the psalmist as they cry out to God from the belly of the fish or the pit of suffering. Other times, we are reminded that in Christ, we become part of the temple, experiencing the presence of God through the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit.

We also long for what has not yet fully been realized. We hope for the day when all is made new and we are fully brought into the presence of the Lord. We long to see as John sees in Revelation 21:22, "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple."

We join with Paul in being able to say, "To live is Christ and to die is gain." (Philippians 1:21), but also in the hope that the perishable will be clothed with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality. Death itself will be swallowed up in the victory of Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 15:53-54).

Billings is a trustworthy guide as he gently challenges us to leave the death-denying culture of our day. He disabuses us of the myths propagated by the prosperity gospel which tries to either deny death or ignore suffering. He ponders what we might experience after our deaths. While sharing helpful insights, Billings always leads us back to the One who has conquered sin and death.

We are reminded that death and dying is not a topic to be avoided but is, instead, healthy to be carefully considered and discussed. To discuss death and dying does not mean that one is fixated on morbid matters. In fact, it can be life-giving, helping us to gain a better appreciation of the life we do have, while giving us a renewed hope and anticipation of what is yet to come.

At the close of each chapter, Billings provides a set of questions for personal reflection, but also for discussion within a group. At the back of the book, after the notes, there is a helpful Scripture index listing the specific texts that he uses. This lends itself well to a small group setting.

Todd Billings has given us a gift. In a way, his book stands as a *memento mori* which reminds us of our mortality but provides us with useful insight as we craft our own *ars moriendi*, as we endeavor to die well. When we can acknowledge our mortality and give ourselves more and more daily to the sovereign care of God, we are truly freed to more fully live the life we have been given.