

“A Christian’s Books” No. 12 Books to Die With
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As I conclude this series of short articles on a Christian’s books let me assure you that I fully understand there are many fine books I have not mentioned, and, sadder to say, a very great many excellent and valuable books that I have not read. In the words of the great humanist scholar Erasmus: “Too many books; too little time.” But what a gift God has given me in the books I have mentioned in these articles and in many more I have not had space to mention! What a world of wonderful things has been opened to me by reading books. I can remember my life in part – especially my earlier life – as a sequence of times and seasons each dominated by particular books: as a teenager thinking first about the ministry after reading Andrew Bonar’s memoir of McCheyne, as a young man coming to grips with the challenge of godliness reading John Owen’s great books on sin and temptation, as a young minister discovering the books of Alexander Whyte, and so on. I shudder to think what I would be, what I would know, how much more insensibly I would feel the shocks and enjoy the pleasures of life, were it not for all that good books, Christian books especially, have contributed to the life of my mind and the feelings of my heart. I hope your experience has been or will be as mine has been.

I remember distinctly the day I read a passage in Alexander Whyte on the books a Christian should have nearby as he or she came to the end of life. His list included some of those I want to be reading or have read to me if I should know that I was about to die and am given the opportunity to prepare for my passage. Some of Whyte’s books I wouldn’t find as helpful as he did. John Henry Newman’s *The Dream of Gerontius*, for example, would be spoiled for me by the fact that the destination is purgatory, not heaven! But through the years I have thought about what books would sit on my bedside table as I came to die, added books to my list or subtracted them, and then, in the providence of God, I had the opportunity to put my choices to use. When it became clear that my sister, Bronwyn, had only a short time left to live, I began calling her every morning. For half an hour or so I would read to her over the telephone. For three weeks we missed but one morning’s conversation; she was too weak to take the call. Those were precious times. I would read and then we would talk about what I had read. I began with a citation from Christina Rossetti on the exchange a believer receives in the world to come for the denial of this world and then read all the river-crossing scenes in *Pilgrim’s Progress* (parts I and II). I read her the account of the deathbed of the great Scottish theologian William Cunningham with the wonderful salutation of the dying man to his Christian friends who had come to say their farewells, “We shall meet at the Right Hand.” I read to her Thomas Boston’s extraordinary end-of-life self-examination from his never-enough-praised *Memoirs*, an astonishingly helpful piece of theological and spiritual reasoning. The next morning I read her John 14 and Andrew Bonar on the death of Robert Murray McCheyne. We talked about what it is like to be left behind when a loved one leaves for heaven. I read her the last canto of Dante’s *Paradiso* with its glorious lines describing the beatific vision:

“For in the presence of those radiant beams

One is so changed, that 'tis impossible
To turn from it to any other sight – ...
How powerless is speech – how weak, compared
To my conception, which itself is trifling
Beside the mighty vision that I saw!

I read on several mornings from the collection of beautiful short sermons that Adolphe Monod, the great French preacher of the 19th century, had delivered to friends gathered around his deathbed and which were later published as *Farewell*. I read the entire poem “The Sands of Time” by Anna Cousin (based on the words of Samuel Rutherford) and the last chapter of Philip Doddridge’s *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*. I read the first chapter of Richard Baxter’s *The Saints Everlasting Rest* and the third chapter of Baxter’s *Dying Thoughts* (which, as it happened, neither of us liked much). On several different mornings I read to her from Rutherford’s *Letters* (Nos. CCXLVII, XCII, and CXXVII in the Bonar edition). I read several sermons from Alexander Whyte’s collection *With Mercy and with Judgment*, among them “The Swelling of the Jordan,” which Bronwyn loved. I also read “The Thought of My Fast-coming Death,” from Whyte’s *Thomas Shepard* and “Practice the Presence of God,” from his *Thomas Goodwin on the Spiritual Life*. I read her John Newton’s “Christ All-sufficient,” from the collection of his letters entitled *The Cardiphonia* (“The Utterance of the Heart”).

She died on the Lord’s Day, September 29, 1996, the day after our final morning conversation. I will treasure for the rest of my life those hours we shared, she and I and great men (and two women) we both loved, all of us talking together about life and death and Jesus Christ.

Some of you will have seen *Invictus*, the movie recently released about the end of apartheid in South Africa. The title is taken from a poem – a piece of humanist blather – by the Victorian poet W.E. Henley, best known for the last of its four verses.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

If anything is the disproof of those last two lines of whistling in the dark it is the reality and inevitability of death. Henley himself died young – he was 53 years of age – and I suspect that when he wrote *Invictus*, he was hoping to live longer than he did. Apparently he wasn’t the master of his fate after all! In *The National Observer*, a journal edited by Henley, appeared in December 1894 a review of Alexander Whyte’s wonderful book *Samuel Rutherford and Some of his Correspondents*, a book that faces squarely the inevitability of death and includes some wonderful instruction on how a Christian ought to face the end of his or her life. “Forefancy your death-bed,” Whyte recommends. That is, fetch your last day to yourself and with the eyes of your imagination see yourself dying. Premeditate your death; it will help you very much to live as you should until that day when you will live no longer in this world and it will help you very much to face

death with faith and courage and Christian hope. Henley or his reviewer – was it Henley himself? – was unimpressed.

“No healthy man believes that he is going to die; when the inevitable sword falls upon him he bows his head with the best grace he can muster and says nothing about it.”

So much for being the “master of one’s fate”! It was not the first time and would certainly not be the last when an unbeliever wrote a check that was supposed to cover the cost of his unbelief only to find, at the last, that the check bounced for insufficient funds.

It is the glory of our faith that it offers us a sure and certain hope in the face of death. It is Christ’s great accomplishment that he conquered death on our behalf. Good books that remind us of that victory and prepare us to face death in the confidence of it are the best books of all.