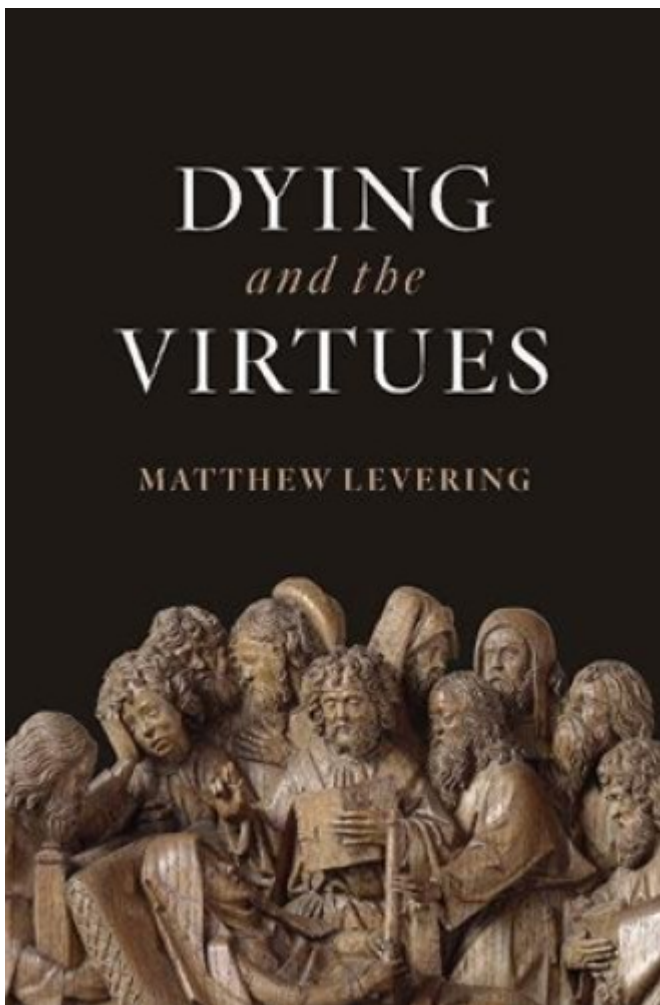


The Christian virtues and the art of dying

9 values that can shape the end of life in a cruciform way

by [Aaron Klink](#) in the [April 24, 2019](#) issue

In Review



Dying and the Virtues

By Matthew Levering
Eerdmans

As the capacities of biomedicine multiply, so does the market for books—both secular and religious—on dying well. Some Christian authors are returning to medieval *ars moriendi* texts to reclaim the power of practices in the arts of dying. Matthew Levering, who teaches theology at Mundelein Seminary in Illinois, makes a slightly different move. He turns his knowledge of scripture and Catholic tradition toward a rich exploration of how Christian virtues form our attitudes and experiences around dying.

Levering positions his book as a work of Roman Catholic theology, but he engages with biblical texts as deeply as with technical thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, Karl Rahner, and Benedict XVI. As he considers how the virtues fostered by Christian belief and practice shape people's approaches to the meaning of their own death and the deaths of others, Levering displays an exceptional balance of theological depth and pastoral insight.

Each chapter focuses on one of the traditional Christian virtues, and Levering begins with love. Perhaps surprisingly, Levering filters his discussion of love and dying through the book of Job.

Job's arguments with God, Levering shows, are really about the scope of God's love. Is it fitting for a loving God to subject a creature who loves and is loved by God to total and final annihilation? This question faces all humans as death approaches, and the circumstances of Job's suffering place it in sharp relief: "The book of Job confronts the unbearable darkness of death for a person made for love, and challenges God to defend his love." In Levering's reading, God affirms Job's protest against the absurdity of death as annihilation. "God does not unveil the mystery of human death, but God gives Job enough hope to reassure him that death does not negate love."

Reflecting on the virtue of hope, Levering argues that belief in the resurrection of the body is significant for those who are dying and their loved ones. He notes, quoting historian Carlos Eire, that when the Protestant reformers abolished prayers for souls in purgatory, concerns about death and an afterlife became increasingly insignificant in the Christian imagination. Levering laments this trend. He acknowledges, however, that Christian hope—and even our specific hope about heaven—encompasses more than the afterlife. The way we shape our lives in the present is also influenced by our hope. Our lives are formed not only by our fear of

damnation but also by our belief in a God who wants to give us eternal life in communion with God.

In a chapter on faith, Levering contrasts two books on death and dying—Kathleen Dowling Singh's *The Grace in Dying* and David Kuhl's *What Dying People Want*—with Christian claims and practices. Levering makes the case that faith in Jesus' promises positively influences the attitudes of those who are dying. Christian accounts of death, he argues, include not only general images of divine love and accounts of "going toward the light," but also the truth of divine judgment. Citing 1 Timothy 6:12, Levering writes, "The living God revealed in Jesus Christ redeems us from sin, but he also requires us to repent of sin 'and fight the good fight of the faith' so as to 'take hold of eternal life.'" Non-Christian accounts of the afterlife may have greater continuity with the goods of this life than Christian faith envisions. Jesus promises a radical transformation of our being.

To explore the relationship between gratitude and dying, Levering pairs the work of a Yale surgeon who writes from an atheist perspective with St. Gregory of Nyssa's *The Life of Saint Macrina*. Examining Sherwin Nuland's *How We Die*, Levering finds resonances with some Christian claims. Nuland, who professes a lack of religious faith, argues that dying individuals will benefit most from a posture of gratitude as they surrender their lives to the universe while being attentive to their relationships. Similarly, Gregory, in his account of his sister's death, shows how she attends to those with whom she is in community even at the end of her life. But Macrina commends her life to the Triune God whose love and presence she trusts, rather than casting herself to an impersonal and indifferent universe. Like Macrina, Levering suggests, in our dying we can surrender ourselves in faith to the God who has created us, thankful for the blessings that we have been given.

In addition to faith, hope, love, and gratitude, Levering writes about penitence, solidarity, humility, surrender, and courage. Together, these nine "virtues of dying"—which are "offered to the church by Christ through his Spirit"—shape the Christian's experience in a cruciform way. Levering does not romanticize the process of dying, but he finds hope in it. "We know that our lives in Christ, as members of his body the church, prepare us for the final completion of our Passover, which involves not the glorification of death but its conquest in and through the agony of dying."

In my work as a hospice chaplain, I've observed how a lifetime of Christian faith and practice can profoundly shape the ways individuals and communities approach dying. Levering reminds us that this has been the case since the death of Jesus, and

it can be with our faithful dying as well.