

“For if the warhorn gives an indistinct sound, who will prepare for battle?”

1 Corinthians 14:8

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Portraits of DEATH

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From an Editor

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Nathan Alberson



Not long ago, I read a modern translation of *The Arabian Nights*. The front cover said it was the first fully “unexpurgated” translation ever produced, which I found pretty exciting, inasmuch as it gave me a chance to look up the meaning of the word “unexpurgated.” To *expurgate*, it turns out, is to remove objectionable content. Anyway, it didn’t take me long to figure out why so many goodly translators of yore had done so much expurgating, and it’s the ruthlessly expurgated versions that I commend to you, The Innocent Reader. Anyway, the most puzzling thing about young Scheherazade’s tales was the way she chose to end them. With the wicked *jinn* or vizier defeated, you’d expect the heroic street urchin and alluring slave girl to live happily ever after. But in more than one of the tales, the author feels the need to insert something like this: “And so they lived happily for many days, until they were overtaken by the Breaker of Ties and the Destroyer of Delights.”

In other words, *They were happy for awhile and then they died and rotted in the ground.*

This might appeal to you if you’re one of those young hip Christian dudes that thinks everything has to be all dark and real and broken. But I protest. When I was a child, I read or heard just about every fairy tale there is, the happy ones and the sad ones and the sweet ones, and the scary ones and the gruesome ones, too. I know that not every fairy tale has to end happily. But when they do end happily, the proper phrase is: “And they lived happily ever after.” That’s Fairy Tale 101. If you want to put a cap on it, “And they lived happily ever after to the end of their days” is acceptable. That accounts for the finiteness of life without being a bummer about it.

Where did the phrase *happily ever after* originate? Nobody knows (i.e., I couldn’t find it in two minutes on Google). But I’ll wager it was a Christian who came up with it. After all, the best that the mystic orient could give us was the slickly formulated fatalism of “They lived happily until they were

overtaken by the Breaker of Ties and Destroyer of Delights.” Only a Christian knows that while Death is the final enemy and the great devourer of many things, there are some ties that cannot be broken, and some delights that cannot be destroyed. These are the ties and the delights that matter in the end.

I’m stating that emphatically at the top, because death is nothing if not sloppy, and you won’t find a lot of grand, well-ordered musings here in our issue on the subject. What we do have is three recollections of ordinary people on the deaths of loved ones—what happened and how it felt and what they thought and what God did.

We do want you to feel something of the weight of death. Oftentimes, the Devil is the first one to offer us a sponge to erase our fears and doubts. He knows they are the wounds inflicted on us to drive us to the Great Physician. In that sense, then, the following stories are about how death really is terrible, and awful, and huge, and the Breaker of Ties, etc. This issue is a journey into the house of mourning. So let these portraits of death sober you, and pull your heart back from the 1001 vain things that distract you from thinking about sin and hell and the judgment to come.

But, of course, it is also about the comfort you can take through faith in Him who is the inventor of *happily ever after*.

Two final notes: If you need help processing death further, get yourself a copy of Joe Bayly’s *The View from a Hearse*. Don’t worry about the money, just send us enough to cover shipping. And if you’re a pastor and you want help ministering to those in your congregation preparing for death or mourning the death of a loved one, visit us this February for our pastors conference on the subject.

Nathan Alberson is editor-not-in-chief of *The Warhorn*. Editor-in-chief Jake Mentzel was busy working on top secret Clearnote awesomeness, so Nathan wrote this introduction. All errors should be attributed solely to Jake though, not Nathan. That’s one of the nice things about being editor-NOT-in-chief.

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GRANDPA LON

Jody Killingsworth

Of all the godly and loving things Grandpa did for us, the best was taking such a long time to die.

Not that it was easy on any of us. The night before my grandpa's death I woke up in the middle of the night, gripped with fear, disturbed by thoughts of my own unreadiness. Was my heart right with God? How could I know? The usual answers weren't a comfort to me anymore. I would have to wrestle through it.

I thought about Grandpa. He had been a pastor. My pastor. He served the same rural church for over forty years. I grew up under his ministry and heard hundreds of his sermons. And though there were many things impressed upon me by him from the pulpit, by far the profoundest sermon I ever heard him preach had been over the last few days—from his deathbed.

He spoke no words. He may not even have been conscious. Only labored breath after labored breath before a gathered congregation of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren in the little vaulted sunroom the church had given him and Grandma upon retirement.

Grandma attended Grandpa faithfully during this time (as she had done all their marriage), swabbing his cracked and withered lips every so often to try and keep him hydrated. She wouldn't leave her beloved's side. Not now. Not even to sleep.

Grandpa's chest would rise. His chest would fall. Over, and over, and over again, for days on end. The waiting was agony. What was he hanging on for? When would it stop? Resentment started to crowd into the little sunroom.

Grandpa, the very image of health and virility, had surprised us some twenty years previous by undergoing emergency quadruple bypass surgery. Cholesterol? What was that? Fried food and ice cream were all that we knew. That, and plenty of hard work. We even burned our own trash.

But then, in the middle of helping us build a new house, Grandpa started

forgetting things. Things he had done the day before. And so finally, after many pleas from his sons and against his better principles, doctors were consulted.

It was his heart.

After the surgery, Grandpa adopted a new way of life. No more late-night bowls of ice cream, and a vigorous two-mile walk every morning at six. Grandma joined him, and so did their kids and grandkids when we could pull ourselves out of bed. This new regimen kept Grandpa healthy and active for many years.

Then came the onset of Parkinson's. Medicines helped him control the disease for a considerable time. But after being hospitalized with a broken hip, the disease was accelerated and he declined sharply, never to recover. After the doctors had done all that they could, Grandpa was sent home to die in peace.

When I heard that death was near, I made the trip back to see him. As difficult as I knew it would be, I wanted to be there, if I could, at the end.

But then, the end dragged on, day after day. After every fall, Grandpa's chest would somehow manage to rise again.

As I struggled with all of this, the night before he died, I couldn't help but think of how many of the comments in the room had veered to the cynical.

"He's just so strong," somebody said.

"It's all that exercising he did."

"I'm going to stop walking every morning if this is what it gets you!"

I laughed but I shouldn't have. This attempt to lighten the mood belied our squeamishness under the ministry of Grandpa's last sermon. With every excruciating minute Grandpa was forcing before our eyes realities we had spent our lives avoiding. Every hard-earned breath, every ounce of fight Grandpa was exhibiting, testified palpably of the truth written on our hearts, that "it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment."

That's what I was struggling with that night. Grandpa, it seemed to me, knew exactly what he was up to, and was determined for the sermon to go on as long as it could.

God reminded me of these words of the Apostle Paul: "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." And like Paul, Grandpa seemed hard-pressed which to choose:

But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me;

and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. (Philippians 1:22–24)

More necessary for *our* sake? What on earth could Grandpa do for us *now*? He could continue to breathe, that's what. And with every breath he could prolong our stay in the house of mourning.

Grandpa was never one to goad. Letting things go, both in the family and the church, was something a fault of his, I think. But here he was now, with every bold and perturbing breath, forcing us all to stare the most uncomfortable realities in the face and to take stock of our lives. If at any moment Grandpa might stand and give an account of himself to God, what must that mean for all of us?

Was I ready to face almighty God? I certainly didn't *feel* ready. Far from it. So what was I to do? It was a long and uncomfortable night. But in the midst of the struggle God gave me peace. He allowed me to see with fresh eyes that, as it always had been for Grandpa, the precious blood of Jesus was more than sufficient for all my sin.

The next day, Grandpa's final sermon came to an end. I think if we were being honest, we all would have admitted that we were more than a little relieved.

Still, you know what I actually thought at the time? I thought that I should start exercising, so as to die late and slow for the good of my loved ones' souls. I felt it would be godly to aim to be as obnoxious as possible in death. Each dying breath Grandpa took was powerful good for my soul, and I was convinced God (and maybe also Grandpa) meant it to be. God help me, I want want to be used like that when it's my time to die.



Jody Killingsworth is pastor for worship and liturgy at Clearnote Church, Bloomington. He's also lead singer-songwriter for the Good Shepherd Band. Buy his albums and find charts, lead sheets, and more at clearnotesongbook.com.

AUNT ELAINE

Michal Crum

For the first several years of her time in our home, Aunt Elaine was just independent enough to get herself into trouble. She would answer the phone and not be able to hear the caller. She would make herself lunch at the gas stove, not realizing that the gas was running but the flame wasn't lit. But most of the time she was posted like a sentinel in the corner of the sofa, sometimes humming a hymn, sometimes reading the Bible, sometimes dozing. There was a wardrobe with a mirror against the wall opposite her, so even though her back was to the front door, she could always see who was coming and going.

Aunt Elaine came to live with us when she was eighty-five and stayed for the six years leading up to her death. It must have been quite a transition for her—she had never married and had lived alone for most of her life. But in our house, there was always something going on.

She was extremely hard of hearing, and she had a terrible memory so we had to repeat things constantly. She also tended to remember the names of her favorite people, while forgetting the names of the not-so-favorites, even those who lived with her and helped care for her (*abem*). She would also switch people's names. She called my mother, Mary Lee, by my grandmother's name, Mary Lou, until the day that she died. I'll never forget the day that she called my father by the name of his recently deceased brother. "Nathan," she said, looking at him. Just to tease her, Dad whipped around to look behind him and yelled, "Where?!"

During the last couple years of her life, she gradually lost mobility. First she had to be helped up and down the three stairs to her bedroom, then she had to be helped to walk anywhere. She had to be taken to the bathroom, helped at the toilet, dressed for bed, and lifted out of bed in the morning. Most of this care fell on my mother, who had hardly known Aunt Elaine before she came to stay with us. Mom was very limited in what she was able to do during those years. She had to plan carefully if she wanted to be gone

for three days, or even one. Since Aunt Elaine was not able to get around by herself, she couldn't be left home alone. Old age truly is a second childhood. But Aunt Elaine embraced this new stage of life with humility. Her other option would have been to grow resentful as she approached death. But she did not.

Now, she did fret a fair bit. When we helped her walk, she would say, "Oh, oh, oh!" as she was being led along, eyeing each stair with suspicion, anticipating each transition from carpet to tile with apprehension. Mostly we reassured her with, "It's okay, I've got you." But sometimes it was all we could do to keep from yelling, "Would you please just trust me?" How thankful we all were, though, that she was not a bitter presence in our home. She never resented the teeming humanity all around her. Only very occasionally would she greet a visitor with, "Oh, not you again."

A young man from our church named Jon was over quite a bit in those days. Jon was one of Aunt Elaine's favorite people, but she still called him by the wrong name occasionally. Whenever she did, he responded immediately by calling her Marge. Instead of correcting her or politely ignoring her mistake, he turned it into a joke for the two of them. It's for that very reason that Jon was her favorite. He joked with her, and she joked right back. She insulted him, and he insulted her. They seemed to understand each other perfectly. In fact, Aunt Elaine sometimes affectionately called him her "boyfriend."

Aunt Elaine didn't just like Jon. She loved him, and she trusted him. One day, she got herself very worked up as I tried to help her from the living room to her bedroom. The more nervous she became, the more shaky she became. Aunt Elaine hated to be carried, but she was so panicky that I decided to present that as an option. Jon was over for the evening and I told her, "Aunt Elaine, I can either walk you down to your bedroom, or Jon can carry you. Which would you like?" I was sure she wouldn't allow herself to be carried, but I was wrong. She immediately looked at Jon and said, "You can carry me."

When I observe the death of a believer, I always think of Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress* getting ready to cross the river into the Celestial City. He is so close he can see the gates, but he is too terrified to wade through those dark waters. As Aunt Elaine approached her death and her entrance into Heaven, it was difficult to watch her deteriorate. Some days she was nearly frantic, feeling there were loose ends she needed to tie up before her final day. She talked about taking care of her little brother Glen, getting the contractor's papers ready, and mostly, about her will and her funeral arrangements. I didn't know whether she felt like she was running out of time to take care of everything, or she thought her day would never come unless she made sure everything was prepared.

Much of the time, she was simply waiting. Aunt Elaine insisted on having her pocketbook nearby, saying, "I need my pocket book so I'll be ready to go when they get here." Over and over she asked my mom, "Are they coming for me today? Are my papers ready?" One day when my mother told her she didn't think today was the day, Aunt Elaine responded sharply, "Well, what's the holdup?" She had grown too weak to read her Bible, but she spent each day praying, singing hymns, and dozing. After a month of this waiting, Aunt Elaine could no longer leave her bed. She was unable to eat, and at times, unable to speak. My mom said to her one day, "Whenever you're ready, you can go. Jesus is waiting for you in Heaven."

The next day, she died. I think Aunt Elaine looked over the river Jordan and saw Someone coming to bring her home, and when she knew she was ready she only said, "You can carry me."

□

Michal Crum grew up in a home with one father, one mother, two brothers, two sisters, and a zany cast of colorful supporting characters. Now she has a home of her own, with one husband, three sons, and recurring guest roles for much of the same zany supporting cast as before.





NICAEA

Michael Foster

Where is her heartbeat? That question changed everything.

We were only two weeks away from our daughter's due date. All three of our sons had come a week or two early. Anticipation was high. Any day now our first girl, Nicaea, would be snuggled in our arms.

Everything was ready for our home birth. We were old pros. Each of our sons were born at home in a pool specially designed for water births. All the needed materials and equipment were organized neatly in the corner of the room. All the boxes were ticked on our checklist except one.

We still had one last routine checkup with our midwife, Gay. My wife, Emily, had already seen our back-up doctor a few days before. He had said everything looked good. We expected to hear the same from Gay.

Emily raced home from the grocery for the checkup. We were trying to squeeze it in before heading over to the Monroe County Fair. I had only a few hours before I needed to be at work. Time was of the essence if we were going to eat elephant ears and ride the tilt-a-whirl.

Our house was like a busy intersection. Shirtless boys zipped around searching for their shoes. I quickly put away the groceries and made salami sandwiches. All the while Gay kept moving her doppler around my wife's plump belly.

Her face increasingly wore a concerned look. Emily's began to look the same way.

I asked, "Is something wrong?"

"Yes," Gay said. "I can't find the heartbeat."

Everything stopped. It was quiet. I was still. The boys were still. Emily's face was empty with shock.

My oldest son's voice broke the silence.

"Is Nicaea okay?"

I told him she was fine. I had just felt her kick the night before. The doppler must be broken.

Nonetheless, we packed everyone in the minivan and went straight to the doctor's office. The boys sat in the waiting room with Gay's assistant. I accompanied my wife into the ultrasound room. Minutes later it was confirmed that Gay's doppler wasn't broken. There was no heartbeat.

Nicaea's life was gone. She was dead.

I held my wife as she cried. My denial was melting away. This was really happening. We had lost a child.

The doctor told us that we could either wait for labor to begin naturally or induce. We thought inducing labor would be the wisest course of action. An appointment was set for later that night at Bloomington Hospital.

The boys needed to be situated. I left Emily with Gay and walked outside. I kept my composure as I passed through the waiting room. I smiled at the boys. They needed to be shielded from this for the time being.

I walked a few yards from the exterior door of the doctor's office. All my emotions started to fire like the revving of a race car engine. Pain, anger, and confusion shot through me and exploded with a loud scream. What started as a standing howl ended with me sobbing on my knees.

People stared. I didn't care. I only cared about my family.

I gathered myself. I asked God for strength. And I went to work.

I made all the necessary calls. Our pastors, parents, and closest friends were informed. Some good friends came and picked up the boys. Gay left so

she could prepare our hospital appointment later that night. It was just me and Emily.

We stopped at McDonald's on the way home. It was going to be a long difficult night. It was difficult to eat but we needed to have food.

I remember the sky was pure blue that day. It seemed all wrong. Shouldn't it be raining?

Neither of us talked much as we drove. We were both stunned. There were no warning signs. Both Emily and Nicaea appeared to be totally fine at the obstetrician's checkup the previous week. Our life had suddenly taken an unexpected turn. Our shock numbed us enough to be operational.

We were greeted at home by our pastors Max and Stephen. They prayed over us and read Scripture with us. They didn't offer any special insight. They just loved us and encouraged us to trust God. It helped prepare us for what was to come.

We checked in to the hospital. As we walked to the elevator, the woman at the registration desk said, "Congratulations!" It stung. She didn't know, so I didn't say anything. I just politely nodded my head.

At the labor and delivery desk, I purposely told the woman that my wife was here for a stillbirth. One congratulations was enough. They put us in a spacious delivery room. It had a television, a couch, and a special hospital bed. We watched *Barter Kings*.

We slowly amassed an army of friends and family.

My father-in-law had dropped everything the moment I called him and made a three-hour drive in two and a half hours. I watched him love on his daughter. It was a bittersweet sight. I wanted to love on a daughter someday.

Elders from our church came and prayed over us. My little brother brought me some Mountain Dew. My senior pastor, Tim, had turned around midway on his vacation to be by our side. Gay was there. We needed every one of them.

The Pitocin drip was doing its job. It wouldn't be long now. Everyone left besides the hospital staff and Gay. We'd soon be face to face with our daughter.

I had been there for the birth of all my children. I wasn't about to leave Emily alone. The anticipation was weird. I dreaded seeing Nicaea. Would she be deformed?

I'm no stranger to death.

I once watched a man die from a heart attack. His whole family was around him crying. It looked like a family reunion. The EMTs tried to push

life into him. It didn't work.

My Uncle Roberto, who was more of a brother to me than an uncle, died barely over thirty.

My Cousin Greg died unexpectedly at seventeen.

Several of my friends died in car accidents.

I'm no stranger to death, but nothing could prepare me for the birth of my daughter.

When she came out it was worse than I ever imagined. I gasped and almost fell over when I saw her.

She was a little version of her mom. She was beautiful. There were no deformities. But neither was there any life. Her soul was gone.

We were so close.

Why did this happen? Medically speaking, we don't know and probably never will know this side of the resurrection. It's hard not knowing what caused this. But the medical questions really aren't the most difficult ones. There are much bigger questions.

Why did God cause this to happen? He is in control of everything. He opens and closes the womb. So...why? Why, Father?

There are answers to some of these questions. Many of them bring a good deal of comfort. But it wasn't answers that sustained us.

What sustained us were truths regarding our God. He is a good God. He works good through horrible things. He is a loving Father. He cares for His children in a way that a human father is unable to. He gives and He takes away. And He does everything for His glory and our good.

C. H. Spurgeon said it well: "It is a wondrous joy to be the father of those who, day and night, wait upon God in heaven, and see his face, and serve him evermore; so be not sad or downcast if that is your case."

My daughter still lives. Just not here.

○

Michael Foster graduated from Clearnote Pastors College in June. He has a beautiful wife named Emily, three strapping young sons named Hudson, Athanasius, and Caedmon, and one lovely daughter named Galilee, all of whom are here with us, and another daughter named Nicaea who is with Jesus.

Who We Are

Clearnote Fellowship is a small, likeminded body of reformed and evangelical churches dedicated to building God's Kingdom. We plant churches, train pastors, and provide local churches with biblically sound and culturally astute resources like those featured in this issue of *The Warhorn*.

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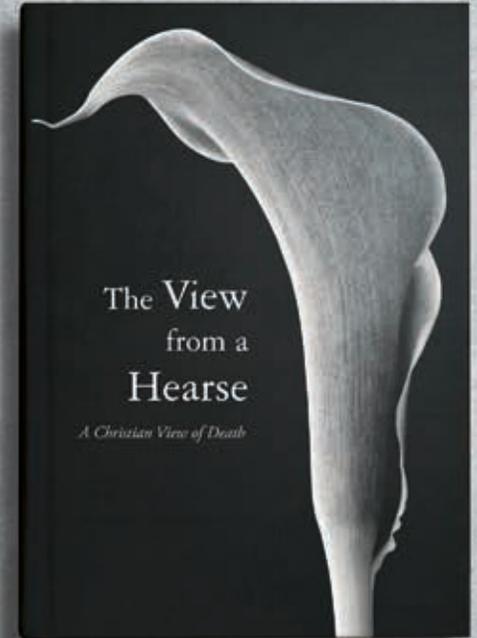
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Our Gift to You

Receive a free copy of *The View from a Hearse* (Clearnote Press, 2014) with a tax-deductible donation of any amount.*

Joseph Bayly (1920–1986) was an editor, columnist, novelist, and poet. Joe and his wife Mary Lou lost three of their seven children to death at young ages. Joe's *The View from a Hearse* is a simple, humble, and helpful meditation on death and grieving, written by a man who was intimately acquainted with the Final Enemy, and even more intimately acquainted with the One who conquered that enemy forever.



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