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Death and Dying as Gain

[St. Ambrose of Milan, bishop](#)
[Early Church Father & Doctor of the Church](#)



This excerpt from a book on the death of his brother Satyrus (Lib 2, 40.41.46.47.132.133: CSEL 73, 270-274, 323-324) by St. Ambrose is used in the Roman Office of Readings for All Souls Day, November 2.

We see that death is gain, life is loss. Paul says: *For me life is Christ, and death a gain.* What does “Christ” mean but to die in the body, and receive the breath of life? Let us then die with Christ, to live with Christ. We should have a daily familiarity with death, a daily desire for death. By this kind of detachment our soul must learn to free itself from the desires of the body. It must soar above earthly lusts to a place where they cannot come near, to hold it fast. It must take on the likeness of death, to avoid the punishment of death. The law of our fallen nature is at war with the law of our reason and subjects the law of reason to the law of error. What is the remedy? *Who will set me free from this body of death? The grace of God, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.*

We have a doctor to heal us; let us use the remedy he prescribes. The remedy is the grace of Christ, the dead body our own. Let us then be exiles from our body, so as not to be exiles from Christ. Though we are still in the body, let us not give ourselves to the things of the body. We must not reject the natural rights of the body, but we must desire

before all else the gifts of grace.

What more need be said? It was by the death of one man that the world was redeemed. Christ did not need to die if he did not want to, but he did not look on death as something to be despised, something to be avoided, and he could have found no better means to save us than by dying. Thus his death is life for all. We are sealed with the sign of his death; when we pray we preach his death; when we offer sacrifice we proclaim his death. His death is victory; his death is a sacred sign; each year his death is celebrated with solemnity by the whole world.

What more should we say about his death since we use this divine example to prove that it was death alone that won freedom from death, and death itself was its own redeemer? Death is then no cause for mourning, for it is the cause of mankind’s salvation. Death is not something to be avoided, for the Son of God did not think it beneath his dignity, nor did he seek to escape it.

Death was not part of nature; it became part of nature. God did not decree death from the beginning; he prescribed it as a remedy. Human life was condemned because of sin to unremitting labor and unbearable sorrow and so began to experience the burden of

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wretchedness. There had to be a limit to its evils; death had to restore what life had forfeited. Without the assistance of grace, immortality is more of a burden than a blessing.

The soul has to turn away from the aimless paths of this life, from the defilement of an earthly body; it must reach out to those assemblies in heaven (though it is given only to the saints to be admitted to them) to sing the praises of God. We learn from Scripture how God's praise is sung to the music of the harp: *Great and wonderful are your deeds, Lord God Almighty; just and true are your ways, King of the nations. Who will not revere and glorify your nature? You alone are holy; all nations will come and worship before you.* The soul must also desire to witness your nuptials, Jesus, and to see your bride escorted from earthly to heavenly realities, as all rejoice and sing: All flesh will come before you. No longer will the bride be held in subjection to this passing world but will be made one with the spirit.

Above all else, holy David prayed that he might see and gaze on this: *One thing I have asked of the Lord, this I shall pray for: to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, and to see how gracious is the Lord.*

This writing from St. Ambrose is featured in the [Early Church Fathers](#) and [Virtues & Christian Character](#) sections of [The Crossroads initiative Library](#).

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