THE DAILY BREAD

The Creed of the Apostles



The Last Things

How to Die Well

A FORMATION BOOK BY

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The Everyday Apostle

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Death, Judgment, and How to Die Well

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A Daily Bread Formation Book

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INTRODUCTION

The One Appointment No Man Misses

Every man alive is going to die, and almost no man lives as though he believes it. This is the strangest fact about the modern man, and the most dangerous. He will plan for his retirement, insure his house, service his car, and prepare for a hundred lesser contingencies that may never come, while making no preparation at all for the one event that is absolutely certain to come for him. He has, somewhere, quietly agreed with his culture to not think about it, as though not thinking about death could keep it at a distance. It cannot. The appointment stands, and it is the one appointment no man has ever missed.

The Church has never flinched from this the way the world does, and her honesty here is one of her great gifts. She insists that a man look squarely at his own death and at what lies beyond it, not to frighten him or to spoil his life, but to do exactly the opposite: to clarify it. For a man who has truly faced his own death, and known what comes after, lives differently, and better, than a man who spends his days pretending it will not happen. The things that enslave other men lose their grip on him. The fears that drive them do not drive him. He has looked at the end, and it has set him free.

It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment. — Hebrews 9:27

This is the final doctrinal station, and it is placed last on purpose, because it gives weight to everything before it. The traditional name for its subject is the Four Last Things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell, to which the Church adds the mercy of purgatory and the promise of the resurrection of the body. These are not morbid curiosities. They are the destination that gives the whole journey its meaning, and a man who keeps them in view will find that they do not darken his ordinary Monday but light it up, because they reveal what his ordinary choices are actually for. We will look, without flinching, at death and at what follows it, and then at how the sure knowledge of the end changes the way a man lives the middle.

CHAPTER ONE

The Passage, Not the End

Facing Death Like a Christian

Begin with death itself, the thing the whole culture is organized to help a man avoid thinking about. We have made death invisible in a way no previous age did. It happens in hospitals and care homes, out of sight; the dead are quickly handled by professionals; the very words are softened into passing away and lost. A man can reach middle age having scarcely seen a dead body, and he carries a deep, unexamined dread of the subject that he manages mostly by refusing to look at it. This denial does not serve him. A fear unexamined is a fear that rules from the shadows, and a man cannot prepare for what he will not face.

What Death Actually Is

The Christian faith tells the truth about death in both of its aspects, and a man needs both. On one side, death is an enemy and an intruder. It was not part of God's original design for man; it entered the world through sin, as the wage and the wound of humanity's fall from grace, and something in a man is right to recoil from it, right to feel that it is wrong, that he was made for life and not for the grave. The faith does not ask a man to pretend death is natural and fine. It agrees that death is an outrage. But on the other side, and this is the Gospel, Christ has transformed the thing from the inside. By dying himself and rising, he turned death from a dead end into a doorway, from the end of the road into the passage home. For the man who dies in Christ, death is still an enemy, but a defeated one, and it has become the gate through which he finally comes to God.

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. — Philippians 1:21

This double truth keeps a man from two errors that tempt the grieving and the dying. The first is the despair that sees only the enemy, that regards death as sheer annihilation and the grave as the end of everything, a darkness with nothing beyond it; against this the Christian sets the empty tomb, the fact that one Man has already gone through death and come out the other side alive, and promised to bring his own through after him. The second error is the false comfort that denies death is anything at all, the sentimental notion that a loved one has merely slipped into the next room and nothing real has happened; against this the Christian honors the genuine wound of death, weeps real tears as Christ wept at the grave of his friend, and does not pretend. A man can hold a funeral in the Christian way precisely because he holds both: real grief at a real evil, and real hope in a real victory over it.

The Grace of a Holy Death

Because death is a passage, the whole question becomes how a man makes the crossing, and the Church has always taught that there is such a thing as a holy death and that a man should prepare for it all his life. A holy death is simply to die in the state of grace, in friendship with God, with one's soul turned toward him; and since no man knows the day or the hour, the only way to be sure of dying well is to be always ready, to live in such a way that death, whenever it comes, would find him facing the right direction. This is why the saints prepared for death not on their deathbeds but daily, across their whole lives, treating each confession as if it might be their last and each Communion as viaticum, food for the journey. The old litanies even beg to be spared a sudden and unprepared death, precisely so that a man might have the grace of meeting it awake and ready.

Remember That You Will Die

The ancient Christians kept a practice the modern world would find ghoulish and that is in fact among the most clarifying disciplines a man can take up: memento mori, the deliberate remembrance of death. They kept skulls on their desks, not out of morbidity but to keep the one great certainty in view, because they understood that a man who remembers he will die makes very different choices than a man who lives as if he never will. To remember death is not to become gloomy; it is to become clear. The grudge a man is nursing, the sin he is clinging to, the thing he is anxious about, the ambition consuming him, all of them look different when held up against the fact that he will one day lie dying and none of them will matter then except as they bore on his soul. Memento mori is not the enemy of a full life. It is the condition of a well-ordered one.

CHAPTER TWO

The Moment You Stand Before God

The Particular Judgment

Immediately after death comes judgment. The Church teaches that at the instant of his death, each soul goes before God and receives its particular judgment, the definitive verdict on the life it has lived, and enters at once into its consequence, whether the joy of heaven, the purification that leads there, or the loss of God forever. There is no long sleep, no waiting room, no reincarnation or second life. A man dies, and in that same moment stands before the God who made him, with his entire life open and transparent.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body. — 2 Corinthians 5:10

The Whole Life, Open

What is judged is the whole of a man's life, laid bare at last with nothing hidden and nothing spun. Every man lives behind defenses, the explanations and justifications and carefully managed impressions by which he keeps even himself from seeing the whole truth about his own soul. In the particular judgment all of that falls away, and a man sees his life as God has seen it all along, in perfect and unanswerable clarity: the good he actually did and the good he only told himself he did, the hidden sins and the hidden kindnesses, the real direction of a heart that he himself was often the last to understand. It is, above all, love that is weighed, for the whole law is love, and the final question put to a life is not how impressive it was but how much it loved God and neighbor, in deed and not merely in word.

This should reframe how a man measures his own life right now, while it is still being lived. The world ranks lives by achievement, wealth, influence, and reputation, and a man can spend his years climbing a ladder the judgment will not even glance at. For none of the things the world counts will come up at that bar. What will come up is the love: the patience shown to a difficult parent, the honesty kept when dishonesty would have paid, the time given to a child, the mercy extended to someone who did not deserve it, the quiet fidelities no one ever saw. A man preparing for judgment therefore invests differently. He stops pouring the whole of himself into the record the world keeps and starts attending to the record God keeps, which is written not in accomplishments but in acts of love, and which is the only ledger that will be open on the day that counts.

A Man Largely Judges Himself

There is a mercy hidden in the doctrine of judgment that a man should not miss. The judgment of God is not the arbitrary verdict of a hard master looking for reasons to condemn; it is the truthful ratification of what a man has himself chosen and become. Across a lifetime of choices a man is slowly making himself into a particular kind of soul, one oriented toward God or away from him, and the judgment largely confirms the direction he has set. God does not force heaven on a man who has spent his life refusing it, nor shut out a man who has spent his life, however falteringly, turning toward him. This is sobering, because it means a man is writing the verdict now, in the small daily choices that are forming the soul that will one day stand there. And it is hopeful, because it means the outcome is not a lottery but the honest harvest of a life, and a man who spends his days turning toward God has nothing to dread in the One who has been drawing him home all along.

CHAPTER THREE

The Face of God

What Heaven Actually Is

Ask most men what heaven is and you will get the cartoon: clouds, harps, winged figures in white drifting through an eternity of pleasant boredom. It is no wonder the modern man is not moved by the promise of heaven, for the heaven he imagines is not worth wanting. But the cartoon is a slander on the reality, which is so far beyond it that the saints, trying to describe heaven, were reduced to saying what it is not, because no eye has seen and no ear has heard what God has prepared for those who love him.

Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man… He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. — Revelation 21:3-4

The Beatific Vision

At the heart of heaven is not a place or a set of pleasures but a Person, seen at last face to face. The Church calls it the Beatific Vision: to see God as he is, directly, no longer dimly through the veil of faith but in the full light of his presence, and in that seeing to be utterly and forever satisfied. Every man has spent his whole life wanting, reaching for one thing after another in the hope that it would finally fill him, and finding that nothing quite did, that even his best joys left a residue of longing. That restless wanting was never a defect. It was a homing signal. Every good thing a man ever loved, his wife, his children, beauty, truth, the mountains, the music, was a finite gleam of the infinite God who made them, a signpost pointing beyond itself to the source of all of it. Heaven is arriving at the source. It is the possession of the very thing every desire a man ever had was secretly reaching for, and it does not bore or fade, because it is infinite and he will spend eternity discovering more of it.

This answers the quiet fear many men carry but rarely admit, that heaven might actually be dull, an endless church service or a motionless eternity of rest that a restless, active man would find unbearable. The fear rests entirely on the cartoon. The reality is the opposite of boredom, because boredom comes from having exhausted a thing, and God cannot be exhausted. He is infinite, which means there is always more of him to discover, more of his beauty and truth and love to be drawn into, world without end. Heaven is not a static reward a man collects and then endures forever; it is an endless adventure deeper and deeper into an inexhaustible God, each moment more alive than the last. The most fully alive a man has ever felt on his best day, the peak of love or beauty or joy he has ever

touched, is the faintest foretaste of the ordinary condition of heaven, and it never diminishes.

A Communion, Not a Solitude

And heaven is not a solitary bliss, each soul alone with God in a private cell. It is a communion, the great gathering of all the redeemed into one family around God, what the Creed calls the communion of saints. A man who reaches heaven is not only united to God but reunited with everyone he has loved who died in grace, and joined to the whole company of the saints and angels, in a love without the shadows and failures that mar every earthly bond. The loneliness that haunts even the happiest human life is over there forever. This is why the Christian grieves his dead with real sorrow but not as one without hope, because for those who die in Christ the parting is not final; it is, as an old phrase has it, a see-you-soon and not a goodbye. Heaven is the family of God, finally and fully home, and a man was made for it in every fiber of his being.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Mercy Men Forget

Purgatory, the Final Purification

Between the particular judgment and the full joy of heaven, the Church teaches a truth that is widely misunderstood and quietly consoling: purgatory. It is among the most mocked and least understood of Catholic doctrines, often imagined as a kind of second hell or a cosmic waiting room. It is neither. Rightly understood, purgatory is one of the most merciful truths the Church holds, and a man who grasps it will both fear it rightly and be grateful for it.

Each one's work will become manifest… because it will be revealed by fire… If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. — 1 Corinthians 3:13-15

Not a Second Chance, but a Final Cleansing

The first thing to understand is that purgatory is entirely for the saved. Everyone in purgatory is going to heaven, with absolute certainty; not one soul there will be lost. It is not a second chance for those who died rejecting God, and it is not a middle destination for the morally average. It is the final purification of those who die in the grace and friendship of God but still carry the ordinary residue of a human life, the lingering

attachments to sin, the small faults never fully repented, the selfishness not yet burned away. Scripture says that nothing unclean can enter heaven, and the plain truth is that most of us, even dying in grace, die not yet fully clean. Purgatory is the mercy by which God finishes the work, purifying the soul of its last clinging imperfections so that it can bear the blazing purity of his presence.

A simple honesty about oneself makes the doctrine instantly credible. Consider an ordinary good man who dies in God's friendship, genuinely saved, yet still, on the day he died, carrying his impatience, his small vanities, his half-broken attachments to comfort and to self, the ten thousand little disorders that even a lifetime of grace had not quite finished burning away. Is he ready, exactly as he is, to be plunged into the undiluted presence of absolute Holiness? Not quite, and he would be the first to know it; the saints, who saw their own souls most clearly, longed for a purification before they could bear that light. Purgatory is simply the name for God completing in a soul after death the work of purification it did not finish in life. Far from being an insult to the mercy of God, it is that mercy carried through to the end, refusing to leave a saved soul forever short of the glory it was made for.

A Doctrine of Mercy, Not Punishment

Seen this way, purgatory is not God's reluctance to let a man into heaven but his determination to get him all the way there. Think of a man who has labored up a mountain and arrived at the door of a great feast, filthy from the climb; purgatory is the washing at the threshold, not a penalty barring him from the feast but the last preparation to enter it clean. It is often described as a fire, and the fire is real, but it is the fire of God's love purifying what cannot yet endure his presence, painful as all real purification is, yet suffused with joy, because every soul in purgatory knows it is saved and is being made ready for a happiness beyond imagining. A man should fear purgatory enough to seek to be purified now, in this life, where it is easier, by growing in holiness and detachment from sin. But he should also thank God for it, as for a mercy that ensures no soul destined for heaven is turned away for being not quite ready.

Praying for the Dead

This doctrine also opens one of the most beautiful of Christian practices: praying for the dead. Because the souls in purgatory are still being purified and are part of the one family of the Church, the living can help them by their prayers, their sacrifices, and above all by having the Mass offered for them. This is why Catholics pray for their dead rather than simply assuming them canonized, and it is a profound act of love, a way of continuing to care for those who have gone before, to lighten and hasten their purification. A man

should have Masses said for his departed parents and friends, pray for them by name, and know that this bond of love reaches across death itself. And he should live so that others will one day pray for him, for the holy souls, once in heaven, do not forget those who helped them there.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Freedom to Refuse

The Reality of Hell

Now the hardest of the Last Things, the one the modern world is most certain the Church should abandon, and the one she cannot honestly abandon because Christ himself spoke of it more than almost anyone in Scripture. Hell is real. A man serious about the faith has to come to terms with it, neither explaining it away to soothe himself nor wielding it as a weapon to frighten others, but understanding what it actually is and why a God of love permits it.

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. — Matthew 7:13-14

What Hell Actually Is

Hell is not a torture chamber where a vengeful God consigns souls he is angry with. Its essence is something at once simpler and more terrible: the eternal separation from God, freely and finally chosen by the soul itself. God made man free, genuinely free, with the real capacity to love him or to refuse him, because love that cannot be refused is not love at all but mechanism. And a freedom that can say yes to God forever must, to be real, also be able to say no to him forever. Hell is what that final no actually is: a soul getting, eternally, exactly what it insisted on, which is life without God. Since God is the source of all joy, all love, all light, all being, to have him is heaven and to have definitively refused him is to be left with his absence, and that absence, chosen and made permanent, is hell. The chief suffering of hell is not flame but loss, the loss of the one thing the soul was made for.

The vivid images Scripture uses, the fire, the darkness, the worm that does not die, are attempts to convey in earthly pictures a reality worse than any of them, the way a man describes a grief as a weight on his chest though no scale could measure it. Whatever the images point to, the deepest horror of hell is relational, not physical: it is to be forever cut off from the Love for which one was made, to have made oneself finally incapable of the

only thing that could satisfy. And it is worth saying plainly why a loving God does not simply abolish it. He cannot, without abolishing the freedom that makes love possible, for a world in which no one could ever finally refuse God would be a world in which no one could ever truly choose him either. Hell is the terrible dignity of a creature who was made able to love, and therefore able to refuse, and whose refusal God will, in the end, reverence rather than override.

God Sends No One There

It is crucial to see, then, that God sends no one to hell. He wills the salvation of every person and died on the Cross to make it possible for every person; no soul is predestined to be lost. Hell is never God's choice for a man; it is only ever a man's final choice against God, ratified by God's refusal to override the freedom he gave. The damned are not there because God's mercy failed or ran short but because they definitively refused it, closing themselves against a love that never stopped being offered. This is why hell, far from contradicting God's love, is in a terrible way its shadow: the respect of a love so complete that it will not force itself on a soul that will not have it. God pursues every man to the very end. But he will not drag into the wedding feast a man determined not to come.

Take It Seriously, and Hope

Two things must be held together here, and a man goes wrong if he drops either. The first is that he must take the possibility of hell with complete seriousness for himself. The way is narrow, Christ warned, and a man who presumes on his own salvation, living carelessly on the assumption that everyone goes to heaven in the end, has stopped listening to the Lord who spoke so often and so gravely of the alternative. Hell is a real possibility for any man, and that truth should make him sober, watchful, and quick to repent. The second thing is that, while taking it seriously for himself, a man may hope. The Church, who has named thousands of saints she declares with certainty to be in heaven, has never once declared that any particular human being is in hell, not Judas, not anyone. She leaves every individual soul to the mercy of God, whose judgments we cannot see and whose reach is longer than we know. So a man holds both: a trembling seriousness about his own soul, and a wide hope for every other, praying, as the Church teaches us to pray, that God would lead all souls to heaven, especially those in most need of his mercy.

CHAPTER SIX

Why Matter Matters to God

The Resurrection of the Body

There is one more article of the Creed that belongs to the Last Things, and it is the one Christians most often forget they believe. Every Sunday a man professes faith in the resurrection of the body, and the resurrection of the dead, and most who say it imagine their hope is simply that their soul will survive death and go to heaven. But the Christian hope is far larger and stranger than the survival of a disembodied soul. It is the raising of the whole person, body and all.

We shall all be changed… For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. — 1 Corinthians 15:51-53

More Than Immortal Souls

Many religions and philosophies have taught that the soul is immortal and survives the death of the body, and that is true as far as it goes; at death the soul does live on and goes to its judgment. But Christianity claims something no merely spiritual religion would invent: that the body is not a cast-off shell the soul is glad to escape, but an essential part of the human person, and that at the end of time the bodies of the dead will be raised, glorified and incorruptible, and reunited with their souls. A human being is not a soul imprisoned in flesh, as the pagans thought, but a union of body and soul, and heaven in its fullness is not ghosts drifting in a spiritual mist but whole persons, risen and embodied, as Christ rose with a real and glorified body that could be touched and that ate with his disciples. The grave is not the soul's prison break from the body. It is the body's temporary rest before its rising.

The resurrection of Christ is the proof and the pattern of all this, and it is why the Church has always insisted so fiercely that he rose bodily and not merely in spirit. The tomb was empty; the body was gone; the risen Lord was no ghost but could be handled, and showed his wounds, and ate fish on the shore with his friends, and yet his body was now glorified, able to pass through locked doors, no longer subject to death. What happened to Christ at Easter is the firstfruits of what will happen to all who belong to him. His resurrection is not a unique exception to be admired from a distance but the opening of a road that every one of his own will travel after him. Because he was raised bodily, we too will be raised bodily, and the same flesh that is sown in weakness and corruption at the grave will be raised in power and glory, remade and incorruptible, our very own and yet transformed.

Why This Dignifies Your Life Now

This doctrine has enormous consequences for how a man regards his body and the material world here and now. If the body is to be raised and share in eternity, then what a

man does in and with his body matters forever; it is not a disposable vehicle but part of the self that will rise. His labor, his chastity or its betrayal, the way he treats his own flesh and the flesh of others, all of it has eternal weight, because the body is not left behind but transformed and carried into glory. And the same hope extends to the whole of creation, for Scripture promises not the destruction of the material world but its renewal, a new heaven and a new earth, the entire cosmos healed and glorified. God is not going to throw away the world he made and called good. He is going to raise it, as he will raise our bodies, so that matter itself, redeemed, shares in the life of heaven. A faith that believes this can never despise the body or the earth. It reveres them as things destined for resurrection.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Why the End Makes Monday Matter

Living With Eternity in View

All of this would be mere speculation about the far future if it did not reach back and change the way a man lives his ordinary Monday, and it does, decisively. The whole purpose of looking hard at the Last Things is not to make a man heavenly-minded in some useless way, forever gazing at the clouds, but exactly the opposite: to make his present life weighty, urgent, and clear, because he now knows what it is for and where it is going.

> *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above… Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. — Colossians 3:1-2*

Eternity Puts Everything in Proportion

Nothing orders a man's priorities like the sure knowledge of the end. Held against the light of eternity, the things that consume most men shrink to their true size, and the things most men neglect swell to theirs. The promotion, the grudge, the anxiety over others' opinions, the endless accumulation, all the matters a man burns his one life on, are revealed as the small things they are the moment he measures them against where he is actually going. And the things that will matter forever, the state of his soul, the love he gave, the people he helped toward God, the faith he handed his children, stand out as the only investments that will survive the one certain event ahead. A man living with eternity in view is not distracted from his life; he is finally awake to what in it actually counts. He stops pouring himself out for what he cannot keep and begins laying up treasure where it lasts.

This is not a call to neglect a man's ordinary duties but to transfigure them. The man with eternity in view does not quit his job, abandon his family, and retreat to a cave; he does his work, loves his wife, and raises his children with more seriousness than before, not less, because he now sees the eternal weight hidden inside these ordinary things. The way he does his job becomes a matter of integrity that will be weighed; the love he gives his family becomes the very stuff of his salvation and theirs; the patience he shows a difficult neighbor becomes treasure laid up in heaven. Eternity does not empty the present of meaning; it fills it, charging every ordinary Monday with a significance the man without faith can never see in it. The dishes, the commute, the meeting, the bedtime story, all of it becomes the raw material of an eternal destiny, which is why the saints could find holiness in the most ordinary lives. They had seen the end, and it had made the middle shine.

The Man Death Can No Longer Frighten

And there is a freedom here that nothing else in the world can give. The deepest fear under all a man's other fears is the fear of death, and almost every lesser fear and compromise draws its power from it. Men betray their consciences, abandon their convictions, and spend their lives in quiet servitude largely because, at bottom, they are afraid to die and will do almost anything to feel safe. But a man who has genuinely made his peace with death, who has looked at it through the Cross and knows it is a defeated passage to his true home, has had the ground cut out from under every tyranny. He cannot be bought with the promise of safety or cowed by the threat of loss, because the worst the world can finally do to him is kill him, and that is the one thing he has stopped fearing. A man unafraid of death is the freest man alive, and the most dangerous to every falsehood, because there is no longer any threat that can make him bow.

The Bridge to the Mission

This is why the Last Things are the gateway to the Mission, and why this station closes the doctrinal road by opening the apostolic one. The Mission of the Apostles will send a man out into a hostile and indifferent world to witness to Christ, to lead, to suffer for the faith, and to spend himself for the salvation of others, and such a sending requires a particular kind of man: one who is not afraid. A man still ruled by the fear of death will always, in the end, play it safe, protect himself, and keep his faith quiet when it becomes costly. But a man who has looked eternity full in the face and been set free from that fear is exactly the apostle the world cannot stop, because it has nothing left to threaten him with. He knows where he is going, he knows what his brief life is for, and he knows that the one thing worth doing with it is to spend it getting himself and as many others as he can safely home. The doctrine is finished. What remains is to be sent.

CONCLUSION

Begin With the End

A wise man has always known the secret this station teaches: to live well, begin with the end. The builder begins with the finished house in mind, the traveler with the destination, and the man who would live a whole and well-ordered life begins with a clear view of where that life is going. You have now looked, without flinching, at the end: that you will die, and soon by the measure of eternity; that you will stand before God and your whole life will be weighed; that heaven is the face of God and the fulfillment of every longing you have ever had; that his love will purify what still clings to sin; that it is possible, by a final refusal, to lose him forever, and so the matter is deadly serious; and that in the end even your body will be raised and the whole creation made new.

None of this is meant to cast a shadow over your days. It is meant to flood them with light and weight and urgency. The man who keeps the Last Things in view is not the gloomy one; he is the free one, the clear one, the one no longer enslaved by the fears and trifles that rule everyone else, the one who knows exactly what his one short life is for and refuses to waste it. He lives each ordinary Monday as what it truly is: another stretch of the one road home, another day to turn toward God and to help others turn, another chance to lay up the only treasure that will survive the grave.

This completes the foundation. You have been given the Creed to stand on, the Son to know, the Spirit to live by, the Church to belong to, the truth about your own wounded and redeemable nature, the enemy of sin to fight, the virtues to build, the conscience to form, the sacraments to live by, and now the Last Things to keep the whole of it in view. The hearth is built, and the fire is lit, and it is warm. But a fire is not lit to be admired. It is lit to be carried. You know now what you believe, and why, and where it is all going. The only thing left is to go and give it away. The Mission is calling. Go.

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The Last Things: Death, Judgment, and How to Die Well is part of The Daily Bread Library.