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*What Remains of Our Lament?  
Exploring the Relationship between Death,  
Memory, and Grief in the Christian Life and  
in Recent Cultural Texts*

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“I think we’ve been surrounded by death for so long that we’ve just gotten used to it. What kind of family finishes building the cemetery before building the house?”<sup>1</sup>

“So strange that we go to such lengths to bury death, something so very ordinary, inevitable. It’s as if we conspire to hide death, because we have no answer for it.”<sup>2</sup>

“How is it that the clouds still hang on you?”<sup>3</sup>

“Until death, mourning and cheerfulness.”<sup>4</sup>

### Introduction

Consider three scenarios to orient our study:

On Saturday evening, I finish playing a video game where everyone dies. One of the main themes of the story is death, it speaks directly of death, it makes me think about death, and it forces me to consider the death of others. And yet, by the end of the game, I have also considered the meaning of life, the memory of family members who have died, and have revisited moments of my own personal grief.

<sup>1</sup>Edith Finch in *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017).

<sup>2</sup>Senua in *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2018).

<sup>3</sup>King Claudius to Hamlet in *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Act I, Scene II.

<sup>4</sup>Paul Ricouer, *Living up to Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3.

These words were found on a file that Ricouer used to store notes for a study he was working on that included his reflections on death around the time his wife died.

On Sunday morning, I'm in a corporate Christian setting where two deaths are announced. One is due to old age and the other is more tragic in nature. However, if I had not been familiar with the particular set of euphemisms that Christians often use when speaking about death, I would not immediately understand that anything bad has happened. This person is with Jesus now. They are in a better place. We rejoice that they are no longer suffering. We will celebrate their life later this week. In fact, my daughter beside me senses a bit of tension in the room and asks me about it, and I simply bend down and whisper, "Someone has died." "Oh," she says, "that makes me sad."

On Monday, I see a discussion on social media where a pastor is asking a group of prominent leaders whether or not it is theologically permissible to sing songs of lament in the corporate worship gathering. After all, he reasons, we believe in the gospel and the hope of resurrection, so is it really appropriate to sing about death in the church? The group of pastors respond by making the positive case for singing songs of lament in the church, but the bevy of ensuing back-and-forth responses illustrates the considerable difference of opinion on this topic within the contemporary Christian community.

In what follows, I explore the way the themes of death, memory, and grief are treated in some recent cultural texts and bring these themes into dialogue with the function that lament plays in the Christian life.<sup>5</sup> In particular, I consider the form and message of the video games *What Remains of Edith Finch*, *That Dragon, Cancer*, and the biblical genre of lament.

This study seeks to be substantive but also preliminary. In other words, each of the areas covered here has been discussed to varying degrees elsewhere, but not often in the way they are connected here. What follows is an attempt to open up lines of inquiry and provide some initial thoughtful reflection. Further, this brief study participates in the broader field of examining the relationship between theology and popular culture.

The study of video games, the stories they tell, and the experiences they invoke share a family resemblance to theological engagement with movies, television, and other cultural texts. However, there are also aspects of games in general and video games in particular that require unique consideration. Player involvement and participation being at the center of

<sup>5</sup>On the definition of a "cultural text," see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, et al (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 15–59. Vanhoozer argues that a cultural text is "a *work* of meaning because someone or some group has produced it," and also "a *world* of meaning because its work is precisely to provide form and shape to our world" (44). Accordingly, cultural texts are "communicative acts that achieve diverse aims through a variety of means" and are a form of "cultural discourse" (44).

these considerations. Though there is a wide-ranging scholarly discussion about the nature of video games and their relative value for academic study (or for actually playing them for that matter), I will simply note that for the purpose of this study, I am assuming that certain games in particular bear qualities and depth that make them capable of careful analysis.<sup>6</sup>

### **Only Death Remains? The Theological Themes of Death, Grief and Memory**

As an entry point to this discussion, I will briefly note that the themes of death and the memory of death are present in biblical literature, throughout church history, and in recent cultural texts.

#### **The Memory of Death as a Theme in Biblical Literature**

These themes are present in biblical literature. Further, statements about death, expressions of suffering, and the memory of death are often present in the same literary context. Though this collection of themes could be approached in different ways, poetic images utilized by biblical authors connect death, grief, and memory.

In Psalm 39, the psalmist provides an extended reflection on the limited nature of human existence in the context of guarding himself from sin and thinking rightly about God's character.<sup>7</sup> The psalmist declares, "O Lord, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days" (39:4). Drawing out the implication of this request, he continues, "let me know how fleeting I am!" (39:4). The psalmist then connects this prayer to an articulation of God's revealed truth about the human condition. "Behold," he says, "you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you" (39:5). Because of this reality, "all mankind stands as a mere breath!" and humans live their lives "as a shadow!" (39:5–6). Later in the psalm, the

<sup>6</sup>As Millsap argues, "video games are a narrative medium deserving of theological engagement." He explains, "Because video games have progressed from electronic playthings to cultural texts capable of vibrant storytelling, they should be thoroughly examined and critiqued theologically, thus creating a beneficial dialogue between theology and video games on par with what already exists between theology and other artistic, narrative media such as literature and film." See Matthew C. Millsap, "Playing with God: A Theoludological Framework for Dialogue with Video Games" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 5. He also clarifies: "By 'dialogue,' I mean a conversation between theology and video games which allows for input from both sides, yet still allows for theological primacy" (5n12). See also Millsap's extended argument for viewing video games as "cultural texts" alongside artistic works such as film and literature (58–89). Similarly, note Kevin Schut's discussion of these issues in Kevin Schut, *Games & God: A Christian Exploration of Video Games* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013), 1–49. Moreover, for an introduction to the academic study of "serious games," see Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 229–54.

<sup>7</sup>Note the language that emphasizes extended reflection in 39:1–3 ("I said," indicating a personal reflection, v. 1; "I was mute and silent," "I held my peace to no avail," and "my heart became hot within me," indicating a process of contemplation, vv. 2–3; and "As I mused," indicating his words in 39:4ff result from his sustained reflection).

psalmist exclaims again, “Surely all mankind is a mere breath!” (39:11). Undergirding his plea for the Lord’s mercy is that, in contrast to the Lord’s permanence, the psalmist is “a sojourner” with the Lord and “a guest” like the rest of humanity (39:12). As the psalmist strives to persevere and contemplate his temporary life, his departure remains in view.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, in Psalm 90, the psalmist contemplates the nature of God who is “from everlasting to everlasting” and compares him to humanity who will inevitably hear the Lord say, “return, O children of men” to the dust of the earth (Ps 90:3). After noting the relatively limited timespan of even lengthy lives, the psalmist writes, “So teach us to number our days, that we may present to you a heart of wisdom.” Within the flow of this psalm, the phrase “teach us to number our days” is found in a section designed to invite readers to contemplate their mortality and consider that death is assuredly on its way.<sup>9</sup>

By speaking in this manner, these psalmists locate the reader within the textual world of the Bible. The creation narrative that begins the biblical storyline grounds human reflection on the nature of humanity. From the dust of the earth, God formed human life (Gen 1–2). Subsequent reflections on returning to the dust draw upon this narrative portrayal of God’s creative activity. This allusion to dust as a way to demonstrate the inevitable and finality of death is a powerful intertextual image. If this connection is true, there is no escape from death or the dust.

The book of Ecclesiastes begins with the preacher’s declaration, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Eccl 1:2). “What does man gain,” the preacher asks, “from all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” (1:3). The inevitability of death informs this question: “A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever” (1:4). At the end of the book, the preacher returns to this theme by urging, “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’” (12:1). After a poetic description of the aging process, the preacher concludes “the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (12:7). “Vanity of vanities,” the preacher repeats, “all is vanity” (12:8). Though the message of Ecclesiastes relates to the book’s final call to “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (12:13), these echoes of the Genesis creation

<sup>8</sup>The psalm ends with the psalmist’s somber request: “Look away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more!” (39:13).

<sup>9</sup>See also Ps 78:39, where the psalmist says of the Lord, “He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and comes not again.” Similarly, in Psalm 102, the psalmist exalts God’s eternity by way of comparison with humanity: “Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end” (102:25–27). In this psalm, the psalmist also characterizes an early death as a tragedy: “He has broken my strength in midcourse; he has shortened my days. ‘O my God,’ I say, ‘take me not away in the midst of my days—you whose years endure throughout all generations!’” (102:23–24).

accounts prompt a searching reflection on human mortality even for those who ultimately find meaning in obedience to God's will.

In his New Testament epistle, James also speaks about the inevitably brief human lifespan when considered in light of eternity. James writes, "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.' Yet you do not know that your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that'" (James 4:13–15). This poetic word picture communicates both presence and transience. The presence of the vapor is real but momentary, established but ephemeral, present but in the process of passing away. For James, an ongoing dependence on the Lord and perspective on life with the proper amount of humility is engendered by reflecting upon the uncertainty of the future, the inevitability of death, and the impermanence of human existence in relation to God's existence.

The exhortations in these biblical passages ("teach us") show that the theme of death is connected to the present function of the memory of death for the believer ("to number our days"). *Remembering* both the dust of your past and the dust of your future enables you to reorient the drawn breaths of your present.

Of course, in each of these contexts there is a broader discourse at work that connects these reminders of human mortality with broader theological purposes. However, the point here is that this theme is utilized directly by biblical writers and connected to theological reflection upon the human condition.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Memory of Death as a Theme in Church History**

This theme of remembering death surfaces directly at various points in the history of the church as well. There are many ways to highlight this topic, so we will focus here on a few ways that reflection on death appears in different times and in different mediums.

The phrase *memento mori* ("remember death") is sometimes used to describe this movement in artistic depictions of objects, like a skull, that were designed to remind the viewer of the ever-present reality of death. A complementary concept to *memento mori* is the *vanitas* theme in art in the seventeenth century and beyond. This theme draws upon the phrase "vanity of vanities" from Ecclesiastes and seeks to illustrate the transitory nature of life and also the meaninglessness of material possessions as an end in themselves. This theme can be seen in the still life portraits produced in Europe in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. These paintings included objects that visually reminded viewers of death (a skull), the inevitability of future

<sup>10</sup>See also, e.g., Eccl 3:2 ("A time to give birth and a time to die"); Isa 40:6–6/1 Pet 1:24–25 ("All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flowers of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever").

loss of life (a plucked flower), the pervasive presence of present loss (an extinguished candle), the inexorable passage of time (an hour-glass), or the fleeting nature of one's life (bubbles in the air).<sup>11</sup>

This emphasis can also be found in the writings of pastors and theologians. For example, among the Puritans, there was often an emphasis on remembering death as a means of developing in Christian maturity and the hope of the resurrection.<sup>12</sup> Related to the theme of "remembering death" (*memento mori*) is the notion of the "art of dying" or "dying well" (*ars moriendi*). This impulse showed up in tombstones, woodcuts, treatises, and sermons. For example, a tombstone in this period reads, "Death which came on man by the fall / cuts down father child and all."<sup>13</sup> A characteristic example of these exhortations can be seen in Cotton Mather's reminder that his readers will "die shortly." He therefore urges, "Let us look upon everything as a sort of Death's Head set before us, with a *memento mortis* written upon it."<sup>14</sup>

Depending on the theological outlook of the person discussing this topic, these works varied in what they focused on and what elements they viewed as central to the concept of death.<sup>15</sup> There is also some diversity and internal tension within the strong statements about the hope of the

<sup>11</sup>A famous example of this is by Philippe de Champaigne, a Belgium artist living in France, who produced "Still-life with a skull" (1671) which features a close-up of a simple table with three objects side-by-side: a skull in the center, a recently picked tulip in a vase on the left, and an emptying hour-glass on the right.

<sup>12</sup>For a critical historical overview of this emphasis, see David E. Stannard, "Death and Dying in Puritan New England," *The American Historical Review* 78.5 (1973): 1305–1330. Stannard observes that "the vision of death and the act of dying were to the Puritans profoundly religious matters" (1305). See also the many germane primary sources gathered in Dewey D. Wallace, *The Spirituality of the Later English Puritans: An Anthology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988).

<sup>13</sup>Cited in Stannard, "Death and Dying," 1313. Cf. Elisabeth Roark, *Artists of Colonial America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), who notes that "the most common inscriptions on Puritan gravestones prior to about 1710 are the Latin 'fugit hora' (time flies) and 'memento mori,' which translated means 'remember death' but also refers to the popular epitaph, 'As you are now, so once was I; as I am now you soon shall be. Remember death and follow me'" (60).

<sup>14</sup>Cotton Mather, *Death Made Easie & Happy* (London, 1701), 94. In another work, Mather urges, "Tis to *live* Daily under the power of such Impressions, as we shall have upon us, when we come to Dy ... Every Time the *Clock* Strikes, it may *Strike* upon our Hearts, to think, *thus I am one Hour nearer to my last!* But, O mark what I say; That *Hour* is probably *Nearer* to None than to such as *Least* Think of it" (*The Thoughts of a Dying Man* [Boston, 1697], 38–39).

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Nicholas Byfield, *The Cure of the Fear of Death* (London, 1618); and English pastor Richard Baxter's *Dying Thoughts* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 2004), originally published in 1683. A recent example of a reflective work in this tradition is Matthew Levering, *Dying and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018). Cf. also Christopher P. Vogt's analysis in *Patience, Compassion, Hope, and the Christian Art of Dying Well* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); and Allen Verhey, *The Christian Art of Dying: Learning from Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). Both Vogt and Verhey reflect on possible contemporary practices but also survey the historical origin and development of *Memento Mori* and *Ars Moriendi* as a discrete area of emphasis (taking into account events like the "black death" that killed a large portion of Europe's population in the fourteenth century).

resurrection and the doubts provoked by suffering and the thought of dying. In this theological and emotional dynamic, these writers not only glory in the *answer* to death (the gospel), they also grapple with the *anguish* of death.<sup>16</sup> Whichever direction a given articulation takes, the pervasive presence of these works demonstrate the long history of literary and theological reflection on death and the function that a memory of death has for the meaning of life.

In many ways, the contemporary cultural mindset neglects or outright rejects this “reminder of death” as a valued component of everyday life. Much of our celebrity culture and current social context is designed to *mute* our sense of *mortality*, to make us less mindful about the looming specter of death, the inevitability of age, and the reality of our finitude.

An enduring strand of contemporary culture seeks to produce, market, and monetize products and approaches to life that fixate on making you look and feel young and project an image of the good life that does not include sober reflection on mortality.<sup>17</sup> Recognizing the inherent value of healthy living patterns, some of these approaches pursue these ends as a therapeutic tool to also engender a psychological well-being that seeks to slow the path to death at all costs and mask the appearance of age. Collectively, these orienting practices function as “some of the most important and powerful cultural myths of our day.”<sup>18</sup> In these cases, rituals of remembrance are replaced by a liturgy of forgetfulness.

Within the context of this particular social scenario, cultural texts that cut against this death-denying grain stand out all the more. Many current cultural texts display or address violence that involves death and killing;

<sup>16</sup>Cotton Mathers, for instance, writes, “Tis very certain that *at the Last*, when you are taking your leave of this *World*, you will be full of Disdainful Expressions concerning it, and Express yourselves to this purpose: *Vain World! False World! Oh! that I had minded this World Less, and my own Soul more, than I have done!*” He also observes that it is “no rare thing” when believers come to die to express, “*The Loss of Time, is a Thing, that now Sits heavy on this Poor Soul of mine!*” Ordinarily, Mathers reflects, dying people utter with tears, “How much time have I to repent of! And how little time to do it in!” (*Thoughts of a Dying Man*, 27–28).

<sup>17</sup>For a brief overview of some of the historical factors that have led to this scenario and an analysis of some of the possible effects of this cultural situation, see the orienting discussion in Matthew McCullough, *Remember Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 31–56.

<sup>18</sup>See Kevin J. Vanhoozer’s exploration of “the well-documented North American obsession with the health, fitness, and well-being of our physical bodies” in *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor’s Guide to Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019), 13–42. Vanhoozer uses the concept of “social imaginary” which refers to the “taken-for-granted story of the world assumed and passed on by a society’s characteristic language, pictures, and practices” (9). “To the extent,” he reflects, “that it has become an ideal picture that orients people’s hopes and lives and encourages self-help salvation, wellness has become an American idol, a false gospel” (20). Vanhoozer also considers the historical reasons why this shift in the cultural mindset has occurred (e.g., when people pursued fitness primarily “for an aesthetic or therapeutic purpose: to look or feel better” rather than only physical wellness, 33–35). Note also, for our purpose, Vanhoozer’s critical interaction with Barbara Ehrenreich’s work, *Natural Causes: An Epidemic of Wellness, the Certainty of Dying, and Killing Ourselves to Live Longer* (New York: Twelve, 2018).



however, the focus here are works that treat death and the memory of death as an object of serious reflective analysis.

### **The Memory of Death as a Theme in What Remains of Edith Finch**

The video game *What Remains of Edith Finch* is a single-player mystery adventure released in 2017. The player controls Edith Finch, a young woman who is the last living member of her family. The story begins when she returns to the house she grew up in and begins to explore. As the player progresses through the game, the life and death of each member of the Finch family is told.

The game has been well-received and has won several awards, including “Best Narrative” and “Innovative Narrative” and nominations in several other categories as well.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps most surprising, though, at the high-profile awards show hosted by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts, *What Remains of Edith Finch* won the coveted Best Game award for 2018 (beating the much bigger games *Super Mario Odyssey* and *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*). There are several characteristics of the game that help explain how it could win such a prestigious award and also lay the groundwork for a theological dialogue.

#### **1. The Quality of the Story.**

When you play *What Remains of Edith Finch*, you encounter a quality story. As the publishers describe, the game as a whole is a “collection of short stories about a cursed family in Washington State.”<sup>20</sup> The designers even signal this focus as the credits begin to roll as it characterizes the game simply as “a story by Giant Sparrow.”

There are several strategic narrative layers introduced into the structure of the game’s storyline that you encounter as you play. You begin by seeing a young child holding a journal and flowers on a ferry. The child opens the book and starts reading, prompting Edith’s dialogue. At this moment, you immediately transition to Edith’s point of view walking toward the house and the game begins. Later, once Edith herself eventually encounters a memory of one of the Finch family members, the player transitions further into that person’s past. Then you the player play out the final moments of that person’s life. At the climax of each shorter episode, the transition back to Edith’s point of view is typically to pan out to Edith holding the object that prompted the memory, her putting the object down, and then her making a sketched entry in her journal. With this device, we are able to see Edith fill out her family tree. As Edith makes these sketches, the player is also able to

<sup>19</sup>These include “best narrative” at the Game Awards in Los Angeles (2017) and “Innovative Narrative” at the South by Southwest Game Awards in Austin (2017). On the initial reception of the game, see Matt Peckham, “Review: What Remains of Edith Finch is a Powerful Elegiac Mystery,” *Time* (April 24, 2017); and Christopher Byrd, “What Remains of Edith Finch: A High-Water Mark of Narrative Video Game Design,” *Washington Post* (May 4, 2017).

<sup>20</sup>See <http://www.giantsparrow.com/games/finch/>

see how far they have progressed in the game and in the story.<sup>21</sup>

As Edith is recording each of her own stories in her journal, the player eventually and progressively realizes that what they have been playing and watching has been Edith's own entry in that same journal. Edith has been recounting and interpreting these stories in her journal; and it turns out, her own story is part of this short story collection.

You as a player realize that the narrator you've been following is part of the narration. Your interpreter, then, must now be interpreted. The small narrative arcs that you play through with Edith produce a creative tension that gives you a bit of forward momentum as you walk through the Finch house alone. This series of stories within a story set within a broader story setting gives the game a layered narrative richness.

## 2. The Depth of the Themes.

A second feature of the game is the depth of its themes. As the individual stories unfold and as the broader storyline plays out, several distinct thematic elements emerge. The most pervasive theme in the game is death. After all, each of the memories that Edith recounts and the episodes that you play through end in the death of the main characters.

Much of the imagery of the game also reminds the player of death and the memory of death. From the mini-memorials that Edith's grandmother sets up throughout the house, to the gravestones outside the house, to the sketches Edith makes in her notebook, the player is constantly prompted to contemplate mortality. While this may seem overly dour, each episode has a voice and character of its own. Sometimes the mood is light, sometimes dark; sometimes comic, sometimes tragic.<sup>22</sup> As varied as the lives and personalities of each of the Finches, so too are the accounts of their deaths. Through these diverse stories, the theme of death is deepened and developed.

Not only the theme of death itself, but also highlighted here is the ever diverse *responses* to these deaths by those around them. This particular aspect is an example of how a primary theme of the game branches off into several sub-themes. Death reaches into each corner of the Finch house, but that dark reality casts its shadow differently from room to room and from life to life.

Within this minor key, several subthemes contribute to the game's thematic orchestra: Family dynamics. Loneliness. Fear. Relationships. Addiction. Happiness. Abuse. Marriage. Divorce. Psychology. Religion. Doubt. Faith. Mystery. Blessing. Curse. Beauty. Grief. Guilt. Memory. Maybe even

<sup>21</sup>On this feature of the game's design and progression, see Ian Dallas's presentation "Weaving 13 Prototypes into 1 Game: Lessons from Edith Finch," at the Game Developer's Conference, San Francisco, CA, 2018. Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xVYVP0hxME>

<sup>22</sup>For example, one of the stories involves a hunting accident, one relates a young boy on the beach during a thunderstorm, one relates to a serious illness, and one relates to a criminal act. Depending on the person's character and the nature of their death, the tone of the episode varies.

Magic. These types of subthemes are interwoven into the brief but gripping stories of the Finch family as they experience and respond to the vagaries of life and death. The depth of these themes and subthemes give the game a strong reflective quality.

### 3. The Web of Inter-connections.

As you play through *What Remains of Edith Finch*, you also experience a web of inter-connections. Some of these are visual and literary interconnections between the scenes that you play through. Visually, there are connections between rooms or places on the property you have been. As mentioned above, though, each of these spaces and places are embedded with story and thematic content. A well-placed visual, thus, becomes a reminder not only of a different room but of an entire story and that story's overarching theme.

For example, an image you see straightaway on the path to the house is a large deer. You come upon this buck right in the middle of the path. The deer looks at you and then runs off into the woods. This visual encounter also introduces a major theme of animal life that runs throughout the game. Toward the middle of the game you play as Edith's grandfather Sam, on a hunting trip with Edith's mom, where the entire episode revolves around hunting a deer. Finally, one of the last sequences where Edith recounts the memory of her grandmother's vision, there is an image of the same buck that Edith sees on the path at the beginning of the game. By this point in the game, this image echoes both the memory of the grandfather's hunting trip and also the opening sequence of the game. This type of connection is direct and difficult to miss.<sup>23</sup>

The opening sequence of the game illustrates the web of interconnections that await you when you play the game. The first thing you see is the child holding Edith's journal with the flowers in his hand. This child and Edith represent two layers of the story and the gameplay. The child's hand and the cast on his hand represent one of the first visual connections between these two layers. As the player, one of your first actions will be to directly reach for the journal as the child, placing the hand in your direct field of vision. As Edith's point of view begins, you will walk toward the house and see a mailbox. One of your first actions in this part of the game will involve a prompt to open the mailbox, once again placing a hand in your direct field

<sup>23</sup>Some connections share a similar mechanism but are more subtle. For example, early in the game, you explore a brightly colored pink bathroom. One minor detail of this scene is a small rubber green frog sitting on the vanity beside the sink. If you have played through the rest of the stories, you know this foreshadows one of the most disturbing accounts in the entire game. The placement of this type of simple detail is one strand of the web of connections that makes the game feel rich and full. The first time I played the game I didn't even really notice this little hopper; on my second time through, it's something I immediately focused on when I walked into the room. Whereas before, all I heard was thin narration and awful interior design; With eyes that had seen the rest of the Finch home and heard that part of the Finch story, now, that little water closet was fraught with background and loaded down with emotional weight.

of vision. This time it's Edith's hand, and her right hand is covered by her sweater in a similar way that the child's hand is covered by a cast. This visual echo of physical detail and physical movement creates an interesting bit of resonance between the two scenes.

This subtle visual connection is echoed at the end of the game as the relationship between that child and Edith becomes paramount. The relationship between these two hands is no longer inferred by the player but directly asserted by the story. Furthermore, those flowers we saw the child's hands holding return at the end of the game, and now they are laid at the grave of Edith herself. So, right there at the beginning of the game, the first thing you see as a player are striking visual images that capture the core themes that the game will go on to explore at length: first, death, and second, the relationship between Edith and the family members that she can only communicate with through memory and the written word.

#### **4. The Blend of Gameplay with Story and Themes.**

Something that enhances the experience of playing this game is the way the story and the themes blend with the gameplay mechanics.<sup>24</sup> In each episode, you encounter different types of movements and gameplay elements that you have to figure out in order to move the game forward.

These aren't overly technical and none of the mechanics are difficult. However, they are different enough to make you concentrate. As a player, by the time you figure out what you're supposed to be doing with your controls to open a door, slide a hook, turn a crank, or grab a ladder or a tree branch, you're already moving on to the next bit of the story. Typically, once you have figured out a transition mechanism, you trigger the next part of Edith's voiceover narration.

In each story, you take the perspective of a different person at a different life stage. Sometimes you're an infant, sometimes a child, sometimes a teenager, sometimes an elderly woman, and in one case, a collection of animals. The quick shifts to new characters give freshness to the story but also keep you engaged as a player. Though you essentially are simply walking through the Finch house for the duration of the game, it *feels* like a varied and wide-ranging journey.

These transitions are interesting, but it's within the self-contained stories themselves that this feature truly comes into focus. In order for the story to continue, you as the player must set certain actions in motion. In each of the recollected vignettes, the unique gameplay element blends into the account that is being enacted.

<sup>24</sup>For an overview of the game's mechanics, see Alex Wiltshire, "Creating the 30 Different Control Schemes of *Edith Finch*," at *Gamasutra* (July 12, 2017). After discussing many technical details, Wiltshire remarks that the game "consistently proves over its three-hour running time that converging compelling stories, compelling game design, and controls that anyone can wordlessly grasp is a delicate art."

This technique engages and draws you into the narrative as a player. This feature also showcases one of the ways that video games can tell stories that other mediums cannot: interactivity. You yourself are tasked with carrying the story along. Your movements have meaning, even if you are not changing the content of the story. The fact that you are participating in the forward momentum generates an effect and impacts the way you experience the story.<sup>25</sup>

Sometimes the movement is delightful, and you do not want it to end. Sometimes the movement is disturbing, and you don't want to have to do what you know you have to do to move the story along. Sometimes the movement is repetitive, and you are not sure where it will lead to next. Sometimes the movement is confusing, and you are not quite sure where to go. Sometimes the movement is mesmerizing and monotonous, and you find yourself getting pulled into another dimension entirely.

When the game succeeds (and it often does), the seemingly spontaneous feeling or experience provoked by this movement has been carefully curated and woven into the total gameplay and storytelling strategy. This feature allows you to experience the satisfaction of self-discovery alongside an appreciation for the recognized guidance of good design.

### **5. The Lingering Effect of the Gaming Experience.**

The final characteristic to note here is the lingering effect of the gaming experience. Part of “what remains” of this game is the meaningful effect it has on its players. If you read user reviews of this game, you will encounter anecdotes. In addition to people talking about the game itself, you'll also see people telling about themselves. Something about the story of this game prompts players to tell their own stories. First, they might tell about how they were playing the game and which parts impacted them the most. But, second, they might tell further stories about their own life. Something about playing through these stories evokes strong associations with the lives of the people playing the game.

Upon analysis of the design of the game, we can see that this particular effect is no accident. It is *through* the quality of the story, the depth of the themes, web of interconnections, and the blend of gameplay that pulled these elements together that created this type of experience.

This, of course, is the most subjective aspect of this whole discussion. Everyone experiences art and media differently. But, for many players, playing this game will be an experience that will linger with them. It may at

<sup>25</sup>On the crucial importance of the participatory element of video games (“player agency”), see Millsap, *Playing with God*, 80–89, 197–207. Millsap defines player agency as “the ability to perform intentional actions that result in meaningful changes within a game” (83). He also clarifies that “in all respects of video games being participatory narratives, there is both freedom and limitation: the player is free to act, yet he is bound by the authorial intent of the designers” (87). As Millsap argues throughout his work, player agency is one of the defining characteristics of video games that directly shape both the way they generate meaning and also meaningfully impact players.

first seem like this is the case only because these stories are personable and various people will connect with different stories in unique or special ways. Perhaps a particular story will resonate strongly with someone. They experienced something just like that, for example. While this is almost certainly true, again, I think that it is the carefully crafted story, the optimized gameplay mechanics, and the tightly interconnected pattern of themes that has achieved this effect for most players.

The game as a whole has a way of making these touchpoints with a wide variety of people but also drawing those experiences together into a shared experience for those who have played the game. *What Remains of Edith Finch* allows you to explore the stubborn beauty of life and the relentless mystery of death with Edith as she seeks to understand the curse that seems to rest upon the Finch family. In her pursuit of meaning, you as the player are pressured to join her on this quest. You imperceptibly begin to ask these same questions yourself as you invariably detect touchpoints with certain aspects of the characters you encounter. How has death touched you? How have you responded? How do you grapple with this reality?

The message of the game is not overly didactic. Edith does provide a voiced narration at the end of the game that gives her perspective on the deaths that she has recounted. And, throughout the stories, she has made comments that have sought to make sense of all that she is remembering. However, as mentioned before, there is a meta-structure that bookends Edith's point of view. The bulk of the gameplay and all of her voiced narration is itself one of the stories in her own journal. This leaves you the player at the end of the game standing over Edith's own gravestone, placing flowers at her grave, journal in hand. There you stand. The house, the graves, the story-world of the game in front of you.

In your hands is the journal that contains a narrative framework that "houses" the memories and stories that are represented by the stones and structures before you. Within the scope of the game, Edith's point of view has given you an interpretive framework for understanding death, life, sorrow, grief, and the nature of endurance in the face of inexplicable hardship.

The drama of the final moments of the game's narrative is this: "Will the child accept Edith's answer? What will he make of her story?" The genius of the game's design is that these questions linger with you the player as well. What will you decide?

So ends the flow of the game itself.<sup>26</sup>

### **What Remains of Our Lament? The Function of Lament in the Christian Life**

In Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*, the first time you meet Hamlet himself he is being asked a question by King Claudius. The king inquires, "How is it that the clouds still hang on you?" Hamlet is still grieving the death of his

<sup>26</sup>But not of the article! *Thank you, reader, but this article's conclusion is in a different castle.*

father who had died 2 months prior. The new king wants Hamlet to move on. In the play, this scenario is connected to all kinds of intrigue, but I have often thought of this question when contemplating the nature of grief. Does grief have an expiration date? If you have ever grieved in a community, you may have felt the pressure of these questions approach at some point (at first far off, but then increasingly closer): “How is it that the clouds still hang on you?” “Why is your soul still downcast?” “Isn’t it time to move on?”

Should we remember the dead? How often? In what way? What about death itself? Is it something we should be mindful of but not meditate on? Aside from specific loss, does talk of death have a place in the Christian community? When we do talk about death and the memory of death in the Christian community, what should guide us?

As noted in the overview, *Edith Finch* develops several theological themes that are worthy of further analysis. In particular, the game’s storyline homes in on the theme of death and the memory of death. Each short story in the collection combines this central thematic focus with the varied ways other family members grapple with the grief generated by a given death. Within the scope of the story, Edith’s journal represents her own quest to make meaning from the seemingly meaningless deaths of the entire family. From beginning to end, on a large scale and on a small scale, the game presents a sustained consideration of the theme of death and the memory of death.

A serious theological examination of a game like *What Remains of Edith Finch* can also prompt a dialogue about the role of lament in the Christian life.

The final message of *Edith Finch* is that death is a mystery, the threads of one’s life are connected, but death and suffering are ultimately inexplicable. This realization allows us to appreciate the life we do have; allowing us to live in the moment. The overarching message is that the memory of death is not always negative but has a constructive function in one’s life. This is true for the characters in the game as Edith slowly realizes this as she sketches in her journal.

An important moment in the game occurs around the half-way point. After going outside and looking at the gravestones, Edith considers the way her grandmother and her mother approached and responded to death in widely divergent ways. Mom, Edith reflects, was “always trying to move on, but for Edie, the past never went away.” The gravestones all include “memorials” and monuments. Edie turned each person’s room into a memorial to that person’s life and death. Edith’s Mom, in turn, eventually sealed each of these doors, cutting Edith off from any form of physical or mental exploration. This foregrounds dueling approaches to death, grief, and the memory of death: What is the relationship between the past and the present, the memory of death and the memory of life? As Edith walks the house, she contemplates these two positions on death, memory, and grief. “Move on,” or “memorialize”? What does the middle position look like? Edie’s position

was always easier for her to understand. As she has gotten older, her mom's position has made more sense.<sup>27</sup>

Edith seems to represent another approach that navigates the hidden, experienced, and revealed aspects of her family's history and the nature of life and death. Some of Edith's last words of dialogue to her own child are these: "If we lived forever, maybe we'd have time to understand things, But as it is, I think the best we can do is try to open our eyes, and appreciate how strange and brief all of this is ... It's a lot to ask, but I don't want you to be sad that I'm gone. I want you to be amazed that any of us ever had a chance to be here at all."

This is also the message of the game as a whole, which has you as a player considering these themes directly as you play as Edith. In interviews, creative director for the game Ian Dallas sometimes describes what he hoped to accomplish for the game. He typically responds that he wanted to remind players of a "sense of their own mortality" and also to give players a "sense of wonder" about the world around them.<sup>28</sup> Dallas seeks to prompt the question in players, "What does it feel like to come up against a universe that is stranger than I imagine?"<sup>29</sup>

If we were to evaluate this aim and the final message of these themes in *Edith Finch* from a theological perspective, what might we say?

The Christian response must say *more* than this, but I think I want to submit that it should not say *less* than this. In other words, a game like *Edith Finch* embodies the notion of *memento mori* (remember death). It allows a player to explore the way that death reaches every corner of life, is constantly around us, and is inescapable. The playing of the game itself provides a kind of conceptual space in order to process thought, memories, and emotions that may have lain dormant.

As mentioned above, the contemporary avoidance of reflection on death is sometimes shared by Christian communities. Certainly, this is in part because of the influence of a general cultural milieu that avoids talk of death. However, within the Christian community, often a focus on the reality of death and suffering is eclipsed by an understandable focus on the hope of the gospel, future glory, and the believer's pursuit of faith-filled trust in

<sup>27</sup>There are several indications throughout the game that Edith's mother did in fact want her to eventually discover and contemplate this part of her life's story. As Edith notes, "There are so many questions I wish I could ask her ... Part of me thinks this is what she wanted ... For me to come back some day and find everything out for myself." After all, Edith's mom was the one who gave her the key to the house and instructed her to return to the house.

<sup>28</sup>For example, in an interview with Drew Dixon, GameChurch, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVkzKM-eaRg>). The game is also dedicated to Dallas' mother, who died of cancer during the production of the game. End game credits begin: "for Shirley Dallas (1948–2013)."

<sup>29</sup>See, for instance, Dallas's interview found here: Bryant Francis, "Why *What Remains of Edith Finch* doesn't give player all the answer," *Gamasutra* (May 4, 2017). Dallas elaborates by reflecting, "We are incapable of understanding the universe fully, and the best we can do is try to make peace with that, and have a relationship with the universe, but we can't solve it." See also the lengthy discussion in Dallas, "Lessons from Edith Finch," GDC (2018).



the Lord. These two features, though, sometimes create a church culture that leaves only a limited amount of “space” for the memory of death, the articulation of grief, and the vagaries of lived-out suffering over long periods of time.

This leads many in the churches to ask directly: Is an awareness of death (*memento mori*) in general and lament more specifically appropriate in the Christian life and as a feature of corporate worship?

My contention is that the churches need to find ways to “embed” space for grieving believers and unbelievers in their midst. One of the reasons for this is because this process is a necessary element of the human condition. A deeper reason is because within the context of the Scriptures and the Christian community, there are already deeply integrated resources that can guide and govern the task of remembering death and practicing lament in personal, corporate, and public life.<sup>30</sup>

### What Lament Requires: Time, Space, and Training

Here we’re shifting into thinking about the practical or applied realm of reflection. What would it take in order to remember death and practice lament in personal and corporate Christian settings?

Three components seem to be necessary: Physical time, conceptual space, and theological training. A quick word about each: Physical time is necessary in order for this type of reflection to take place. This is this type of reflection that requires *time* to process. However, second, this extended period of reflection requires the conceptual *space* in order to explore death, actually experience grief in its full-bodied expression, and then be able to connect it to the nature of life and the hope of the gospel. But also third, *theological training* is necessary that allows a believer the freedom to explore both the horror of human pain and the hope of the gospel in that same conceptual space.

In practice, sometimes the Christian community has offered counsel or encouragement to grieving people without the time or space required in order to process grief and the memory of death. This sometimes manifests as hastily spoken cultural clichés (like, “time heals all wounds”) or well-intentioned biblical phrases that stand-in for meta-explanations for all pain and this pain in particular (“all things happen for a reason,” “All things work together for good”). While phrases spoken in these moments have varying levels of helpfulness (and truthfulness in some cases), in light of our discussion here, what oftentimes renders these sentiments ineffective (and perhaps offensive in some instances) is that they are delivered apart from a conceptual

<sup>30</sup>For some recent evangelical reflections on the strategic role of lament, see J. Todd Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer & Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015); and Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019). Vroegop defines lament as “a prayer in pain that leads to trust” (28). See also the wide-ranging collection of substantive essays in *Finding Lost Words: The Church’s Right to Lament*, ed. G. Geoffrey Harper and Kit Barker (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017). These essays cover the history, theology, exegesis, practice, and demonstration of lament.

space that also affirms the full-bodied affirmation and validation of their feeling of loss.

They only put a band-aid on our brokenness. We may need to shift the metaphors: Something is not only slightly out of place; something is gone. A limb has been lost. It's helpful sometimes to rush to a new situation with ways to stop the bleeding. But after the bleeding stops, you have to learn how to walk again without that limb. While they serve a temporary purpose, theological band-aids are not capable of helping heal wounds that last a lifetime.

Here is a touchpoint with our earlier discussion of cultural texts that have the ability to communicate both complex meaning and engage a range of human emotions. One of the reasons that *What Remains of Edith Finch* is able to communicate its strong collection of themes and sub-themes is due to its genre. The game is a First-Person Interactive game, sometimes called a "walking simulator." Part of what this type of game does is intentionally subvert the power fantasy that is at work in some other types of games. Consequently, this genre is particularly suited to conveying coherent messages capable of genuine theological reflection.

In large scale action games like the recent *Spiderman* or *God of War*, first person shooters like *Call of Duty*, *Halo* or even *Fortnite*, the game is designed to enable the player to fly or be a God-like figure or conquer a field of fierce and challenging foes, constantly leveling up to higher levels of power, and gaining the feeling of being larger than life while playing. This is certainly not the only feature of these games, and titles like the most recent *Spiderman* and at least the most recent *God of War* combine action packed sequences with compelling narratives. However, the "power fantasy" is typically a component of both large-scale action/adventure games and first person shooters.

First person interactives, by contrast, force the player to walk, to investigate mysteries, to find hidden objectives, and to listen to voiced narration. In direct contrast to the *power* fantasy, the player in these games voluntarily chooses to imagine themselves *weak*, slow, even vulnerable to outside forces. The end game in this genre is often *discovery* rather than *domination*; *exploration* rather than *exploitation*; To "win" is often *to wander* and then *to wonder*. If games are a communicative medium, this genre has a potential impact that far outweighs its relative size or length (which is typically short).

*What Remains of Edith Finch's* main themes are death, grief, and the role that a memory of death has for the meaning of life. The intensity of these themes, the density of the gameplay itself, and the relatively short length of the game has the dynamic feature of both forcing you to gradually and progressively explore each of these themes but also abruptly conclude the exploration. This jolting dynamic, too, is part of the design of the genre and one of the aspects of the game that *Edith Finch* does well. The story concludes in a way that naturally invites further reflection. Does the player accept the way the game has both surfaced and juxtaposed the themes of death, grief, and memory?

### Slaying that dragon, cancer—playing *That Dragon, Cancer*

Another game that functions in a similar way but from an explicitly Christian standpoint is *That Dragon, Cancer*, a first-person interactive that follows the story of Joel, a young child's diagnosis and death from cancer.<sup>31</sup> Like *Edith Finch*, death is central to this game, but in this case it is the approach of a single character's death and its immediacy within the context of a family that prompts the internal contemplation for the characters in the game and the player as the game progresses. Obviously, this game's narrative is emotionally charged and so understandably has impacted players.<sup>32</sup> However, the overtly Christian themes create a further dynamic to consider for those who choose to play. While there are many facets to explore with this game, I will focus on a few aspects that resonate with our current discussion.

The game has been widely received by believers and unbelievers.<sup>33</sup> Part of the way it has achieved this reception and had this outsized effect is through allowing the player to consider the same event and the same tragic scenario from multiple viewpoints. For instance, a pivotal moment in the game is when the family receives Joel's final diagnosis ("I'm Sorry Guys, It's Not Good"). The setting for this scene is a small room and the diagnosis conversation is repeated several times from different vantage points: the perspective of the child himself, and then from each of the doctors, then from the father, and then from the mother. As the mother finishes her thoughts, the doctor's office begins to fill with water even as the dialogue continues, symbolizing the sense of the family drowning in wake of this diagnosis. The

<sup>31</sup>*That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016). The depth of the game's message and design has been noted from a variety of viewpoints. For example, see Chris Casberg, "That Dragon, Cancer: A Video Game on Death, Grief, and Our Living Hope" (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/that-dragon-cancer>); Keith Stuart, "That Dragon, Cancer and the Weird Complexities of Grief," *The Guardian* (January 14, 2016); Gavin Craig, "Terrible Fascination | That Dragon, Cancer," *Heterotopias* (November 2017); Timothy Haase, "That Dragon, Cancer and the Limits of Catharsis," *Eidolon* (June 2016); John W. Auxier, "That Dragon, Cancer Goes to Seminary: Using a Serious Video Game in Pastoral Training," *Christian Education Journal* 15.1 (2018): 105–17.

<sup>32</sup>For example, the framing of many reviews of the game (from both Christian and secular viewpoints) highlight this emotional response: Chris Suellentrop, "This Video Game Will Break Your Heart," *The New York Times* (February 5, 2016); Richard Clark, "Playing with Empathy: How Video Games with a Christian Twist are making their way into the Industry," *Christianity Today* 59.4 (May 2015): 62–63; and Tom Hoggin, "That Dragon, Cancer review: A remarkable piece of work that challenges everything I thought I knew about grief, hope and faith," *The Telegraph* (January 15, 2016). Further illustrating this function are the studies that suggest this game can be used to teach doctors in medical school to consider the strategic importance of empathy. For example, see the research and argument to this effect in Andrew Chen, et al, "Teaching Empathy: The Implementation of a Video Game into a Psychiatry Clerkship Curriculum," *Academic Psychiatry* 42.3 (June 2018): 362–65; and Sean F. Timpane, "New Media: That Dragon, Cancer—An Interactive Video Game," *Journal of Palliative Medicine* 20.3 (2017): 308.

<sup>33</sup>The awards the game has won include "Best Emotional Indie Game" (2016), "Most Innovative" at the Games for Change Awards (2016), "Games for Impact" at The Game Awards (2016), "Cultural Innovation Award" at SXSW Gaming Awards (2017), and "Game Innovation" at BAFTA (2017).

water imagery never goes away for the rest of the game. This creates a dynamic that is also explored throughout the duration of the narrative.

The game's storyline provides a framework within which the player hears and must consider multiple ways of understanding the way the Christian hope relates to an affirmation of human suffering. As Joel's death approaches, you experience life events of the father and mother but also hear their thoughts and listen to their explanations and their exasperated frustrations. They speak to one another and they speak to God. You see flashes of the mother floating in a boat on the surface of the water (she believes it is God's will that Joel will be healed), while you see flashes of the father sinking deep beneath the surface of the water (he does not believe Joel will be healed). The game progresses in creative ways and there is emotional development for both the mother and the father.<sup>34</sup>

Toward the end of Joel's journey toward death, there is a scene where the mother and father find themselves on the same bench. In some ways, this setting implies that they are now "on the same page." However, even while they sit close to one another, the father says, "he hopes," but he does not "know" that Joel will be healed (a contrast with the mother's continued insistence that Joel *will* be healed).

The game's ultimate message affirms several Christian truths about the reality of God's existence and the certainty of life after death; however, the game also forces the player to consider the *relationship* that *future* hope has to *present* suffering in the life of a believer.

All of the explicitly stated language about the meaning of life, death, and God's role in both is spoken by figures in the game. The effect of this dynamic within the scope of the gameplay is that the player is now forced to consider the relationship between these truth claims and also between these complementary and sometimes competing perspectives on life, death, and the role of lament in the Christian community. This particular feature of the game's design has enhanced its impact in both Christian and non-Christian contexts.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup>One of the central ways the game communicates its message is through its vibrant and gripping imagery/settings. As Haase notes, the "game's dazzling symbolic imagery" is a "combination of fantasy and menace" ("Limits of Catharsis"). Along these lines, Craig notes that the game is oriented around "the spaces in which we encounter the holy" ("Terrible Fascination"). Craig showcases the way the space of the hospital (low ceilings and horizontal lines, where the family descends into a hellish darkness) contrast directly with the final scenes in the chapel sanctuary (high ceilings and vertical lines, where the family lifts prayers toward heavenly light). Craig also argues that there is "a tension between space and story in *That Dragon, Cancer* because there is a tension between the story the Greens want to be able to tell themselves and the experience they are forced to inhabit."

<sup>35</sup>On the game's treatment of death as an embodied theme, see Schott Gareth, "That Dragon, Cancer: Contemplating Life and Death in a Medium that has Frequently Trivialized Both," *Proceedings of the 2017 DIGRA International Conference* 14.1 (2017): 1–10. See also Simon Parkin's interaction with the game's depiction of death in *Death by Video Game: Danger, Pleasure, and Obsession on the Virtual Frontline* (Mellville House, 2016), 215–36. Parkin observes that "many video games are power fantasies" while this game is a "puzzle without a

### Exploring the Biblical Genre of Lament

This issue of genre is another possible path of dialogue with the theological concept of lament. From a theological perspective, by examining and combining the themes of death, grief, and memory, games like *What Remains of Edith Finch* and *That Dragon, Cancer* function in a similar way to the biblical genre of lament. In particular, these cultural texts set these theological themes within a narrative framework where guided exploration of the dark mysteries of death and grief are connected to the possibility of an enduring hope of life. The combination, though, of the theological themes mentioned here is particularly significant.

One of the distinctive features of biblical literature is the mixed and varied genres that a reader encounters within the canonical collection.

Lament in biblical literature is predominantly found in poetic form. One of the effects of poetry is that it is designed to slow readers down and force them to consider the relationship between sentences, lines, words, images, and metaphors. Further, most biblical poetry is either found within collections of poetry or embedded within larger narratives. In both of these canonical contexts, readers are asked to make sense of lament in light of a broader assortment of theological and textual realities. As a reader of the Psalter, for instance, you will read Psalm 23's "the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want" alongside of Psalm 22's "My God, My God, Why have you Forsaken me?"

If we take the arrangement of the Psalter seriously and seek to accept its interpretive guidance as we read and re-read it as a complex compositional whole, one of the questions that will continually confront us is this: How do soaring expressions of praise and worship relate to sinking articulations of sorrow? What about when they stand side by side in the Psalter? What about when they stand side by side within the same psalm? What about when they reside side by side within the same reader of those psalms?

Another example is the phrase "His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning" which is often utilized in times of suffering. Consider, though, its textual location in the book of Lamentations as a whole and its canonical location within the Writings of the Hebrew Bible. Lamentations 3:21–42 is indeed a soaringly beautiful and deeply comforting passage of Scripture. However, it is set within a book-length lament that begins in chapter 1, "How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she who was great among the nations! ... She weeps bitterly in the night with tears on her cheeks," and ends in chapter 5 with phrases like, "The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned

solution" and in many ways a "disempowerment fantasy" (215). Several reviews of the game have the title "a game you can't win" referring both to some of the designed "fail states" but also the game's focus on a terminal disease. For a secular perspective that rejects the confessional stance of the game's message but nevertheless notes the clear effect of the story's narrative progression, see Emily Short, "Wanting to Believe: Faith in *That Dragon, Cancer*," *Gamasutra* (February 2, 2016).

to mourning. ... Why do you forget us forever; why do you forsake us for so many days?" The final words of the book are a plea, "Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old—unless you have utterly rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us" (5:21–22).

The textual location of the phrase, "his mercies never come to an end," then, force the reader of the book of Lamentations to consider the relationship between articulations of pain and grief from loss of life and sorrow over acknowledged sin and the hope of enduring mercy from the Lord. The genre of lament provides both physical time (the actual reading of a book and the processing of poetic images) and conceptual space for a reader (both types of theological affirmations being present).

Consider also the relationship between narrative and poetry in the book of Samuel. One of the textual strategies of the book as a whole seems to be the strategic placement of three poetic sections of poetry at the beginning, middle, and end of the book. At the beginning of the book, Hannah's song comes within the context of her barrenness. At the center of the book, capturing one of the main themes of the rise of David and the fall of Saul, David laments for Saul and Jonathan. "Oh how the mighty have fallen." At the end of the book, David's last words reflect on the Lord's promises to him and his house, praise for the work of God's provision, but occur within the context of some of David's final sins and their consequences for the nation at the end of his life. In each of these textual locations, there is a poetic reflection that involves acknowledgment of human emotion and pain, the presence of hope in the form of promise, and also a connection between these two concepts (at the very least, they are connected at broad level, by the narrative shape of the book as a whole).

In some of Paul's letters, the relationship between death and life are at the center of his discussion of persevering through suffering. For example, in 2 Corinthians 4, he speaks of having the treasure of the gospel in "earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves" (4:7). He continues with a string of unexpected juxtapositions: "we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body" (4:8–9). These statements are obviously connected to the argument Paul is making in this section of his letter, but the point here is that Paul seems to be homing in on this dynamic of the continual presence of some form of suffering, the given of human frailty, and simultaneously the ongoing certainty of gospel truth.

Life is finite. The body is decaying. Death is coming. But God's life is infinite. Salvation in Christ is real and connects us to that hope even now. To our point here, Paul extends this dynamic through to the next chapter's discussion of "the earthly tent" which will be torn down and in which we currently groan (2 Cor 5:1–10). He seems to be describing not only a temporary state of affairs but rather an element of the human condition that any

articulation of hope must take into account. In a similar vein in Romans 8, Paul declares that nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ and immediately connects this assertion to the statement that “we are being put to death all day long” (8:36).

Finally, the biblical storyline as a whole that is envisioned at the end of Isaiah and the end of the Revelation, seem to draw together both a vision of paradise restored but also a sober acknowledgement of the suffering that always marks life on earth between Eden and the New Jerusalem (Isa 65–66; Rev 21–22). As the voice from heaven says in Revelation 21, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no *longer* be any *death*; there will no *longer* be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away” (21:5). On that day, tears will be wiped away. On this day, they continue to flow forth.

These are just a few examples of the way biblical texts oftentimes closely draw together full acknowledgements of human suffering with certain conviction of gospel hope. We could add more, and there is certainly more to say about these passages. However, these illustrate the theme at hand.

My goal here is to suggest that these textual and canonical features are important resources in creating time and space for lament in the Christian community. The biblical-theological themes of the certainty of death and the certainty of hope sit side by side within these textual locations. This seems to be an intended dynamic rather than a rearrangeable conception. Further, because biblical lament *contains* and *connects* both of these themes, we should continue to consider new ways to allow lament to guide and govern our response to a world teeming with both life and death.

In other words, the Christian community rightly emphasizes that believers grieve, but not as those without hope. Sometimes, though, we might need to be reminded that until he comes, we hope, but not as those without grief.

### Conclusion

Because we have covered several wide-ranging areas in this discussion, I will sum up the main lines of development by way of conclusion:

1. Games like *What Remains of Edith Finch* and *That Dragon, Cancer* are substantive cultural texts worth engaging both on their own terms and from a theological perspective.
2. Responses to these cultural texts by some players highlight the human need for processing grief and remembering death.
3. These responses also highlight the absence of this type of space and place sometimes available in the Christian community for an exploration of death and the grieving process.

4. This dialogue on the whole, can prompt reflection on the resources that the Christian community already possesses that would enable this type of meaningful exploration of death, grief, and memory in personal, corporate, and public life.



