

## Girolamo Savonarola

### 2. Opening of The Art of Dying Well (Sermon XXVIII)

All Souls' Day

Delivered 2 November 1496

*In omnibus operibus tuis memorare novissima tua, et in aeternum non peccabis.*<sup>1</sup> —Sir.  
(Ecclesiasticus) 7:40

Dearly beloved in Christ Jesus, it is not difficult to prove to man that he has to die, because, without need of any other argument, daily experience demonstrates this to us. But it is very difficult to induce man to meditate on death and to try to engage him so that he is always thinking about death. And the reason is this: that every inclination follows some sort of knowledge, but not always its own particular knowledge, because natural inclinations follow the extrinsic knowledge with which nature governs them; just so, the natural inclination of a rock, which inclines it to go toward the center, follows a knowledge not its own, because it has no other knowledge than that from which it derives that inclination. It is the same with all other natural things, but about such knowledge as this and such inclinations as this we will say nothing now, because it is not to our purpose; however, the animal or rational [obedient to reason] inclination follows sensible [derived from the senses] or intellectual knowledge, which is intrinsic to the animal or man.

It sometimes happens, then, that the cognitive power represents to the appetite some thing under a semblance of such great delectation that the appetite follows it with great vehemence; and at other times the appetite is so strongly attracted that the cognitive power makes it stay fixed on that thing so that, in a way, it does not know how to turn aside from it. For example, a man beholds a woman, and when he begins to think about her, appetite draws him so forcefully that, in a way, it makes him immovable from that matter, for all his thoughts and all his mental concentration are then ordered toward that end. It so happens also that when one is enamored of God, through the knowledge which one has of Him, that love wholly constrains him so that he is drawn entirely into God; all his mental concentration is ordered toward Him, and his every thought is engaged in pleasing only his Creator. To the point, then: I say that although the rational, animal appetite follows its own particular knowledge, nonetheless, because great violence has been done it, it holds firmly to that first consideration which was the cause of its love, and this afterward draws back to itself other knowledge and considerations and renders the man effectually unable to think of anything other than what he loves.

Now then, because the desire and appetite for existence is the most natural thing, and existence is more beloved by man than any other thing, so appetite for existence draws man so forcefully that it makes him remain fixed on this thought to such an extent that all his mental concentration and virtually all of his actions are ordered toward this will to be, and he does everything to sustain it. Likewise, just as the enamored never thinks of trying to separate himself from his love and, if he should try to think of it, would experience great difficulty, so it is difficult for man to separate himself from thoughts of and care for life and to think about death. As the

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<sup>1</sup> "In everything you do, remember your last hour, and you will never sin."

logicians say: *Sicut se habet oppositum in opposito, ita se habet propositum in proposito*;<sup>2</sup> therefore, just as man vehemently loves life, with equal vehemence he hates death and flees, as much as he can, everything which might be contrary to this existence and this life. And so, he flees meditation about death as a thing contrary and wholly unpleasant to him, for the very thought of it is odious to him.

Thus, it is a most difficult thing to make man turn aside and to make him think about death and to lift him up from his very natural concern for life and from his desire for existence, which is very delightful to him, while the thought of death is so very hateful to him. Therefore, the more easily a man yields to these concerns about life, the more difficult it is to lead him to think of death, because, as I have said, *sicut se habet oppositum in opposito, ita se habet propositum in proposito*. This difficulty is caused by the senses, to delight in which we are overmuch given, and the knowledge of the senses does not induce a man to think, except about present and delightful things. It is also caused by solicitude and anxiety about human affairs, in which men are much occupied, so that they cannot think about death as well.

This morning, then, since I want to speak of the art of dying well and, as I said yesterday morning, to give you a bit to chew on, we do not want to tire ourselves in proving that man has to die, because this would be superfluous, and you would say, "Father, you are wasting time; we know that we have to die," and so, I want to leave that aside and try to persuade you that man should seek to have this concern always fixed in his mind, that he has to die, and I will show that the man who thinks about death extracts great fruit therefrom and that certainly, if a man held to this thought continuously, he would be blessed. All the saintly men of the past have had this thoughtfulness about death, which made them live in this world with great rectitude, so much so that they are now in the beatitude of Paradise. So, the thought of death is a thing very useful to man, because, in the Christian religion, the beginning and the middle are of no use apart from the end. Therefore, it is necessary to think always about making a good end, and this is to think always about death.

And so, the sage in Ecclesiasticus states the theme we have proposed: *In omnibus operibus tuis memorare novissima tua, et in aeternum non peccabis*, that is, "in all your works, O man, remember your last days," that is, your end. Remember, man, that you have to die and, having this remembrance always fixed [in your mind], *in aeternum non peccabis*, that is, "you will not commit any sin." Now, dearly beloved, we will speak about death and give everyone a prescription for dying well. First, I will speak of those who are healthy, who ought to think that at any hour they may grow sick and die. Then we will speak about those who have already begun to sicken, how they ought to think of death. Third, we will speak about those who are gravely ill and are confined to bed, virtually in extremis, what they also ought to do. God give us grace to speak of this death in such a way that it will be strongly impressed in your brains so that you might bring forth fruit from this preaching.

If I had told you, [my] people, that I want to prove to you through reason, authority, and example that man has to die, you would say that this was foolishness. Similarly, it seems foolishness to me that man, although he knows he has to die, does not want to think about death, but rather, all his concern seems to be thinking about how to stay here and build beautiful palaces and amass possessions and so to become rich. On such as this, it seems, man would

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<sup>2</sup> "Just as opposites are held in opposition, so like purposes are held alike."

expend all his thought, but about death and the next life, it seems he thinks not at all, as though the hereafter were of no account. Oh, what foolishness is this, to think only of the here and now! You seem unaware that you have to die one way or the other and leave everything here, I say, whether you would or not, and you know not the time nor the manner, when and how you have to die. Solomon says in the Proverbs, in the thirtieth chapter, that some animals are wiser than man: *Quattuor, inquit, sunt minima terrae, et ipsa sunt sapientiora sapientibus: Formica, populus infirmus, quae praeparat in messe cibum suum; lepusculus, plebs invalida, qui collocat in petra cubile suum; regem locusta non habet, et egreditur universa per turmas suas; stellio nititur manibus et moratur in aedibus regum*<sup>3</sup> [Prov. 30:24–28]; “four animals are wiser than the wise: first the ants, a weak population, who gather [the fruits of] summer for the winter; the second is the hare, which makes its nest in rock, so that it might be more secure; the third is the locusts, that is, crickets, who have no king but always go leaping here and there in ordered rank upon rank; the fourth is the lizard [*lo stellio*], that is, the gecko, which walks on its hands and lives always in the house of the king.”

These four creatures, says Solomon, are wiser than the wise. Anyone who seeks to be wise orders all his affairs toward an end, *quia sapientis est ordinare*.<sup>4</sup> But note that there are many [kinds of] ends. Some are particular: for example, the end of the builder is the form of the house, and so he orders every aspect of his building to that end. Similarly, the end of a captain of the army is victory, and he orders the whole of the army toward that end, and so it is with the ends of other particular matters. But the philosophers say that men who order all their affairs to ends such as these are seeking wisdom *secundum quid, et non simpliciter*,<sup>5</sup> that is, they are called wise with respect to that pursuit [in which they are engaged] and not wise absolutely.

Anyone who seeks to be absolutely wise considers the ultimate end of man and of human life and orders all his affairs and his life toward it. The ultimate end of man is God, and anyone who ponders well upon this end is truly wise. But these sages of worldly wisdom, who do not consider well this ultimate end, cannot truly be called wise. Rather, one would find more wisdom than theirs, first, among the ants, which, as Solomon says, are a weak population. For me, the ant signifies good little women, who are of the weak and fragile sex, but are devout and have ordered the whole of their lives toward God, and they go about always accumulating merits before God through their good works so that they might rejoice in the next life. These women, then, signified by the ants, are wiser than wise merchants who go scouring all the earth and all the sea in order to collect possessions which they know they have to lose anyway, that is, [they will have] to leave them here. But the simple woman, who has all her attention directed toward God, gathers a treasure here in order to take possession of it in Paradise, where she will never lose it. The hare is also wiser than the wise. The hare to me figures certain good men of utter simplicity, given wholly to God, who think continually of death; they make their bed on rock, that

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<sup>3</sup> “There are four things which are the least on earth, and these same are wiser than the wise: the ants, a weak people, which prepare food for themselves at the harvest; the hares, a powerless class, which lodges its nest in rock; the locusts have no king, but all go about in squadrons; the stellion moves about on its hands, but dwells in the apartments of kings.”

<sup>4</sup> “For it belongs to wisdom to put things in order.”

<sup>5</sup> “For some purpose and not simply for itself.”

is, they have entrusted their end and their peace to Christ: *Petra autem erat Christus*<sup>6</sup> [1 Cor. 10:4].

They are always thinking that they have to die, and so they remain fixed on Christ, Who can save them after death. These little hares are wiser than princes and great masters and prelates who have not placed their nest on rock, but wear themselves out in preserving their position, which they have to lose in any event. The locust, that is, the cricket, is also wiser than these wise men. Crickets signify for me certain good peasants, who get on well together; these are like the crickets, who have no king; similarly, these peasants have no one to rule over them or to teach them; they do not have so much in the way of preaching or laws or learning as we do, but they have arranged their life once and for all and ordered it toward God; they observe God's commandments simply, without learning, and they go leaping about in an orderly way and elevating themselves above earth as much as they can; they are united in charity, thinking always about death. These are wiser than the wise theologians, philosophers, legists, orators, and poets, who spend their time in thinking up arguments and subtleties and sophistries, but do not think of God nor of death.

The lizard, that is, the gecko, is also, as Solomon says, wiser than the wise; this creature, he says, walks on its hands and dwells in the king's house. This lizard signifies certain serious men who have no particular genius, but have good works; they do not know how to speculate, but they know how to do good, and so, he says they walk on their hands, as if to say, "He does not fly; he walks on his feet, and yet he ascends on high"; thus, they engage in such good work that many times they mount up to the heights of contemplation; hence, they are of a certain simple goodness, which is of avail where the wisdom of these wise men avails not. Such as these, I say, dwell in the house of the king, that is, through their simplicity they dwell with the saints, who are all kings and are in the presence of the first King, that is, with God. Note well, then, you who want to live uprightly: learn to be wise like the ant, the hare, the cricket, and the gecko; think about death and about what will come after death. And if you will learn from them, you will live uprightly and be wiser than these sages. But let me rest a bit, and I will show you that true wisdom consists in thinking about death.

St. Jerome says that in the circle of Plato, this adage was in vogue: *Vera philosophia est meditatio mortis*<sup>7</sup>, that is, "true philosophy is thinking about death." "Philosophy" means love of wisdom. True wisdom, then, is thinking about death, and anyone who seeks to be truly wise is always thinking that he has to die and that the end of human life is not here. And so, he disposes all his affairs in such a way that, whenever death should come, he is prepared to die well, in order to go to that ultimate end to which he has been ordered by God. This statement of Plato's then, that is, that true philosophy and true wisdom consists in thinking about death, was well said. But we Christians understand it better than did he. Let's go a bit further. Sometimes you are in doubt about the faith. If you were to think and meditate frequently within yourself about death, you would have no doubts about the faith; rather, you would be confirmed in it.

Take this, then, as rule number one: think sometimes of death within yourself and say, "I must die in any event"; consider your flesh and your hands also sometimes and say, "These hands and this flesh must become dust and ashes; soon they will stink wretchedly; everyone has

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<sup>6</sup> "And the rock was Christ."

<sup>7</sup> "True philosophy consists in meditation on death."

to die—that great master, that youth, the rich, the handsome, the strong. One minute they were alive, the next they are dead; they are all stink and ashes. I also will perhaps die soon; in a single breath everything to do with this life will have passed away.” Then think more closely about and enter a bit more deeply into the profundity of this consideration of death and say, “What is to come after our death? Where does man go after he dies? He is seen no longer. What shall we say has become of him? Man is surely the most noble creature on earth. What is the end of man?” “The contemplation of God,” the philosophers have said; so consider this and say, “Is the contemplation of God the end of man? The end of every thing is the place where it rests content and at peace. We see that in this world man is not at peace; on the contrary, he is always distressed by numerous passions. It seems, then, that the end of man is not here.” Aristotle thought so and went to a great deal of trouble to prove this point, although he did not understand that the contemplation of God was the end of man, whether in this life or afterward.

But you, Christian, if you want to arrive at this conclusion, you will say thus: “God governs the world and makes provision for it and for every least little thing; He also has a more special providence for man than for any other thing in the world because man is the most noble creature; if this is so, God, being just, must repay the good with good. But we see that in this world the good are always in distress and undergoing tribulation; therefore, the end of man is not here,” and so you will profess that God, just and wise provider that He is, has prepared another life after this. To whom, then, will this peace be given in the hereafter? Certainly, you will say, “To the good.” Indeed, it is true that there is no better person in the world than the Christian because the Christian life is the best life one can possibly imagine. You will say, then, that the true Christian, who lives our faith, will possess that beatific life hereafter, which God has prepared for all His beloved; considering this, you will reaffirm that the faith is true, for, if our faith were not true, it would follow from this that no other faith could be true, and that man is the most unhappy creature living; however, since the faith is true, you will have to think about Hell and Paradise, and consider that, if you should go to Hell, you must stay there not a hundred years, nor a thousand, nor a hundred thousand, nor a hundred million, but for ever and ever to infinity.