

THE WORLDLINESS, DEATH, AND SALVATION OF IVAN ILYICH

by Monte Jay Knetter, Baldwin Christian School

“There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.” –Proverbs 14:12.

Blinded by sin and selfishness, many men tragically fail to recognize this truth. Death is mankind’s great curse, the just penalty for his rebellion against God. Yet God’s redemptive power is greater than sin. Consider mankind’s greatest sin: deicide. The maker and sustainer of the universe entered His creation. God deserved honor and worship, but the pinnacle of His creation, that which He made and formed to bear His image, murdered Him. God took this unimaginably wicked sin and used it to undo the curse, to free man from sin and the clutches of the devil, and to bring mankind into a place of new life. This proved once and for all that God’s redemption is greater than even humanity’s greatest sin.

Yet God does not just redeem sins; in His power He is capable of redeeming the just consequences of man’s disobedience. In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Leo Tolstoy showed how God can use death, the penalty of sin, to bring life and free a foolish and worldly man from the clutches of sin.

“Ivan Ilyich’s life had been most simple and commonplace—and most horrifying.”¹ Ivan is like most men and most men are worldly, self-indulgent, selfish, and sinful. To live a commonplace life in our fallen world is to live a life apart from Christ, a life that can only end in death and damnation. It is to live, in a

word, a horrifying life.

Throughout his life Ivan pursues ease and pleasure. This keeps him from developing meaningful relationships with others. For example, he diminishes his wife to a cook, housecleaner, and partner in bed.² She, being a living and breathing woman, is both unwilling and incapable of being reduced to this role. As a human being with free volition she interferes with his pleasant life. For this reason he makes his job the center of his life. At work Ivan attempts to abstract himself from himself and live his life passively. He does this by focusing on the tasks at hand while ignoring their significance and the people that his decisions affect.

Ivan also seeks solace in mindless entertainment. This selfish and shallow approach to life is best embodied in his love of cards. Whist is his central pursuit and consumes the majority of his free time. Why does Ivan love it so much? It is pleasant and it requires nothing of him.

The faults of Ivan are obvious to most readers, but Ivan is completely blind to them. Why is this? Everything Ivan does is approved of by those in his society. Given this he has no reason to doubt their morality. Ivan is attracted to his fellow man’s approval like a moth to light.³ This is a startling image for when a moth attains its object and reaches the flame it loses its life. In the same way, attaining a worldly society’s approval can only come at the cost of losing one’s soul. This is the situation

Monte Knetter is the headmaster at Baldwin Christian School, an ACCS-member school in Baldwin, Wisconsin. The school’s website is found at <http://www.baldwinchristianschool.org>.



Tolstoy in his study, 1908.¹

that Ivan is in when his health begins to deteriorate: he has gained the world, but has forfeited his soul.

While Ivan is healthy it is easy for him to ignore the fact that he is in a state of sin and damnation. But illness soon makes him confront his mortality and the way he has lived his life. While he was healthy, cards were his greatest care and pleasure. This changes as his illness progresses. At one point during his illness Ivan misplays a trick and loses a hand. This would have been bad enough, but Ivan soon realizes that this doesn't even bother him. After all, what is one lost trick when one is confronting death? This apprehension terrifies him.⁴

Before his illness, Ivan was able to abstract himself from his job and his family. However, as his illness progresses Ivan is forced to contemplate his death. This leads Ivan to the recognition that he is more than an abstraction. Contemplating the logical proof "Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal" Ivan agrees that it is a valid syllogism, but also sees at once that he himself is more than a mere syllogism. He is a man with a past, a man with hopes, a man who has

experienced both pain and joy, a man that has loved and been loved—surely his existence cannot be reduced to this cold, hard fact of logic!⁵ In order to maximize his tranquility, Ivan had been striving to abstract himself from his life. In contemplating his death, Ivan comes to realize that he is more than a mere abstraction.

The growing physical pain that Ivan experiences begins to lead him to question more aspects of his life, but the approval of his fellow man prevents him from discovering the truth. " 'Perhaps I did not live as I should have,' it suddenly occurred to him. 'But how could that be when I did everything one is supposed to?' he

replied and immediately dismissed the one solution to the whole enigma of life and death, considering it utterly impossible."⁶ Ivan's failure to admit his faults keeps him from entering new life. He cannot discover the real purpose of life before admitting that he has been chasing a false purpose; he cannot have forgiveness without first admitting that he is wrong.

On the last day of his life Ivan finally admits that he has not lived how he ought to have lived. For a while this fills him with fear—he has lived a false and wicked life and there is now no time to make amends and live as he ought to live! This despair is graciously short lived. As Ivan seeks truth he quickly finds it. "Yes, all of it was simply *not the real thing*. But no matter. I can still make it *the real thing*—I can."⁷

What is the real thing? It is not found in religious observation. When Ivan receives last rites he immediately declares this is "*not the real thing*."⁸ He has a vague sense that the "real thing" has to do with following his conscience and that it was wrong to have suppressed the natural goodness that he used to have. This is no

solution to this dilemma but rather begs the question: how can he retrieve what he has lost?⁹

It is only when his son kisses his hand that Ivan finds the “real thing.” What is the “real thing”? It is love—specifically, gracious love given to a sinner in spite of his sin. Receiving this unmerited love transforms and regenerates Ivan. He goes from hating his wife to pitying and forgiving her. Instead of clinging to his life for his sake he seeks to die for the sake of others. But what of his fear of death? “What death? There was no fear because there was no death. Instead of death there was light.”¹⁰

Death, that which brings an end to life, is used by God to bring life to Ivan. Facing his death forces Ivan to reevaluate his life and admit that his life was not true or good. After he concedes this he is able to enter into everlasting life by means of his death.

In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* we see the mystery of redemption and the power of God to redeem the worst of things and the most foolish of men. This work should challenge us to see ourselves in Ivan and examine the unexamined parts of our life. It is appointed unto every man to die. Any fool can see this in the face of death; a wise man will contemplate it when he is brimming over with health. Am I living as I ought to live? On what basis do I even answer that question? Am I basing my righteousness on that of Jesus Christ or the applause of my peers? Have I repented of my vain and sinful pursuits? Life is waiting for us, but we can only enter it by dying to ourselves. Reading this novella should lead us to seek our life in Christ now and not wait until it is too late.

NOTES

1. Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 49.
2. Ibid, 58.
3. Ibid, 50.
4. Ibid, 82.
5. Ibid, 93.
6. Ibid, 120.
7. Ibid, 132.
8. Ibid, 128.
9. Ibid, 126-127.
10. Ibid, 133.

PHOTO

1. CREATED/PUBLISHED: [1908 May]; CREATOR: Prokudin-Gorskii, Sergei Mikhailovich, 1863–1944, photographer. REPOSITORY: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Leo_Tolstoi_v_kabinetie.05.1908.ws.jpg)