The Last Days of Socrates

Plato · *c. 399–347 BC* · *Benjamin Jowett translation*

Four of Plato's works tell one story: the trial and death of Socrates in Athens in 399 BC. Socrates waits to answer a charge of impiety and of corrupting the young, defends himself before a jury, refuses to escape from prison, and on his last day talks with friends about the soul before drinking the hemlock. Read in order, the Euthyphro, Apology, Crito and Phaedo show how a philosopher lives and dies by what he believes.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How should a good man face an unjust charge, an unjust sentence, and death?

Socrates will not buy his life with wrongdoing. He will not stop questioning, will not beg the jury, and will not break the laws of the city that raised him. He faces death with calm, because he believes that no evil can come to a good man and that the soul may live on. The four works ask the reader to judge whether he was right.

KEY CHARACTERS

Socrates
The philosopher on trial, in prison, and at his death.

Euthyphro
A religious expert prosecuting his own father.

Meletus
The chief accuser at the trial.

Crito
An old friend who offers a way to escape.

The Laws of Athens
Speakers in the Crito who argue against flight.

Phaedo
The friend who tells the story of the last day.

Echecrates
The listener at Phlius.

Simmias and Cebes
Friends who press hard questions about the soul.

Xanthippe
Socrates' wife, who grieves on the last morning.

The servant of the Eleven
The prison officer who brings the hemlock.

Grades 9–12

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01

Outside the Court

EUTHYPHRO

Socrates meets Euthyphro at the porch of the King Archon. Socrates is there to answer a charge brought by Meletus. Euthyphro is there to prosecute his own father for the death of a laborer.

- Euthyphro is sure he knows what piety is.
- Each of his definitions fails under questions.
- Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or pious because it is loved?
- The talk ends without an answer, and Euthyphro hurries away.

02

The Defence

APOLOGY, FIRST SPEECH

Socrates speaks to the jury. He says his name for wisdom began with the oracle at Delphi, and he tells how he tested politicians, poets and craftsmen.

- The oracle said no one was wiser than Socrates.
- He found that those who seemed wise did not know what they thought they knew.
- He calls himself a gadfly stinging a sluggish horse.
- He questions his accuser Meletus and speaks of his divine sign.

03

Verdict and Sentence

APOLOGY, LATER SPEECHES

The jury finds him guilty. He proposes free meals at the town hall as his due, then a fine, and the jury votes for death. He speaks to those who condemned him and to those who acquitted him.

- He will not beg or bring his children to move the jury.
- He says the unexamined life is not worth living.
- Death is either a dreamless sleep or a journey to meet the dead.
- No evil can come to a good man.

04

The Prison at Dawn

CRITO

Execution waits for the return of the sacred ship from Delos. Crito comes before dawn with a plan of escape and money to carry it out.

- Crito worries about what people will say of his friends.
- Socrates asks whether anyone should return wrong for wrong.
- The Laws of Athens speak to him as parents and teachers would.
- He chooses to stay and obey the sentence.

05

The Last Day

PHAEDO, FIRST PART

Friends gather in the prison. Xanthippe is sent home weeping. Socrates says a philosopher should not fear death, since philosophy is practice for dying.

- Phaedo tells the story long afterward to Echecrates.
- Soul and body are set against each other.
- Arguments from opposites and from recollection.
- Simmias and Cebes raise honest objections.

06

The Hemlock

PHAEDO, CLOSE

Socrates answers the objections, speaks of the Forms and tells a myth of the true earth. Then he bathes, takes leave of his family, and drinks the hemlock.

- He tells his friends to be of good cheer.
- The servant of the Eleven weeps as he brings the cup.
- Numbness rises from his feet toward his heart.
- His last words ask Crito to pay a debt to Asclepius.

Piety · Justice · Obedience to Law · Courage · The Soul · Wisdom

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. Notice how Euthyphro and Socrates each stand at a courthouse for opposite reasons.
2. In the Apology, listen for what Socrates will not do to win his life.
3. In the Crito, ask why the Laws speak as parents.
4. In the Phaedo, ask whether the arguments for the soul convince Simmias and Cebes, and whether they convince you.
5. Look at how calmly the last scene is told.

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