

Death and Dying: A Christian Perspective

Social & Lifestyle Series



tributes that are most helpful are those that are informative, sensitive and honest. Many find meaning in having family and friends share either during the service or after a simple meal following the interment. Songs of faith bring comfort and strength to the family. Bible readings point to our Lord. In lieu of flowers, some families may choose to invite donations to be made to a Christian charity in memory of their departed loved one.

The graveside service underlines the fact that we are people of hope. The grave is not the last word. Together with those who left us, we look forward to the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, whose builder is God (Revelation 21:1-4).

Ministry to the Grieving Continues

The ministry to the grieving must continue after the funeral. A recognized authority on death and dying notes five stages a grieving person experiences: (1) denial and isolation, (2) anger, (3) bargaining, (4) depression and (5) acceptance. It is healthy to grieve when a loved one is lost through death. People need to be encouraged to grieve. It is all right for a person to weep because of the loss of a spouse, child or someone else held dear. One-third of the Psalms have been classified as laments, as for example, Psalms 13 and 22. Reading the Psalms can help us in (1) squarely facing our loss and even complaining to God, (2) offering prayer, (3) recalling divine assurances and (4) eventually reaching for praise. After hearing of the death of his son Absalom, King David showed his grief in loud cries of deep sorrow. We read in 2 Samuel 18:33: "The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: 'O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead you—O Absalom, my son, my son!'"

Although grieving often takes longer than we expect, the ultimate hope of one day being in the presence of Christ, who told us that he is preparing a place for us, should make us homesick for the future when God shall wipe away all tears.

In his famous sermon, "The Weight of Glory," C.S. Lewis noted that we are on the outside of the glory awaiting us: "We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so.... The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last."

Rites of passage at the end of our earthly journey should reflect our faith in the risen and returning Christ. Through Christ, the sting of death has been removed (1 Corinthians 15:50-58). Let us face death realistically and talk about it long before we die. Doing so will help those who are left to plan our funerals and to mourn our departure. ■

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Faith and Life

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The writer of the Time magazine article “On Death As a Constant Companion” was correct when he observed that facing our mortality is a constant challenge for us all. How do we cope when a fatal illness strikes a member of the family? How can life go on after a spouse dies? How does one prepare for the end of life’s journey?

Christians have a living hope that does not end with death but continues into an eternity with Jesus Christ our Lord. This hope is not wishful thinking; it is based on clear biblical teaching. After Lazarus had died, Jesus told Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die” (John 11:25-26). When Christ rose from the dead, this living hope was clearly demonstrated and firmly established. Indeed, the resurrection of the crucified and buried Jesus is the foundation of the gospel and it was a constant theme of early preaching as recorded in the book of Acts. (See 1 Corinthians 15:12-58.)

The Living Hope at the End of the Journey

The apostle Paul’s perspective of death can serve as a good model. Writing to the Philippians (1:21-26), he expressed the desire to die and be at home with Christ, but then added that he was also willing to continue his ministry and wait until the Lord would call him into his eternal home. Some

of the converts in the Thessalonian church were afraid that those who had died already would be neglected at the time of the Lord’s coming. Paul assured them that those who had died in Christ would rise first, and then those still alive at the Lord’s return would be caught up together with the believers of the past and be with Jesus forever (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). That was a comforting message.

The Christian hope of the resurrection is unique. Since death is an ever-present reality, we will have many opportunities to talk about the hope we have. And so we should. Our living hope helps us feel safe and secure. There is comfort in reminding ourselves often that because Jesus lives we too shall live.

Connecting with the Community of Faith

Sharing suffering and grief makes it more bearable. The church family, the community of faith, is called upon to weep with the weeping (Romans 12:15). A warm greeting, an expression of sympathy, assurance of prayer support, a short visit, a hot meal, practical assistance, and a sympathy card are all ways to ease the pain of the bereaved. After the funeral, one frequently hears grieving people say, “We did not know that we had so many friends.” For the community of faith to come alongside a grieving person is a noble endeavour.

Preparations for the End of the Journey

Families need to talk about the kind of care and treatment a dying person should receive. Should the terminally ill be subjected to heroic measures or be allowed to die naturally and peacefully? A family is greatly helped when the dying family member clearly expresses personal preferences about dying long before death actually occurs. Some palliative care institutions explain up front

that no heroic measures will be taken to keep a patient of theirs alive.

Preparations for the end of life here on earth include making a will to specify how one’s personal assets are to be distributed after death. In addition, a so-called Living Will may be used to indicate whether a person is willing to donate organs after death for the benefit of those needing organ transplants. Forms are available from funeral homes. When preparing for the end of life’s journey, it’s also good to write personal life and faith stories. Not only will this help the grieving family in planning the funeral service and the obituary, it will provide a positive message for family members and friends as a permanent memorial.

The funeral director seeks to serve the bereaved family by having a list of decisions to be made: whether the venue for the funeral shall be a church or a funeral chapel, whether the family wants a casket or cremation, a funeral service with the body present or a memorial service with the body absent, viewing for the family and relatives or viewing for all, flowers, guest registers, funeral bulletins, newspaper notices, limousine(s) and choice of cemetery.

When making preparations, the Christian family should be guided in their planning by their theology of death and by stewardship considerations. The family should be motivated to seek the glory of God in all things. A church building is a natural setting for a funeral service. Extravagant funerals may give impressions that do not glorify God. Caskets are available in a wide range of prices and accents. High expenditures may bring a little added comfort to the bereaved,

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but they do not change anything for the deceased.

Pastoral Responsibilities

When death comes, the church seeks to help. It is the family’s responsibility to inform the pastor of the death. A pastor will meet with the bereaved family as soon as possible and will guide the family in making preparations for the service. Although a funeral is often uncharted territory for the bereaved, it is not that for the pastor. Also, there are usually congregational caregivers on whom the pastor may call to serve a fellowship meal or refreshments. People, by just being there and caring, have a great impact on the grieving. Bereaved family members and friends need special grace in cases of a sudden death, an accidental death, a chosen death or a criminal death. To come alongside the grieving then is especially important. The caregivers must dispense grace and leave all the unanswered questions in the hands of God. In some unclear cases, to say “We do not know” is honest and wholesome when questions of eternal destiny are asked (John 3:36).

The Funeral/Memorial Service

Funeral/memorial services are important ministry occasions for the church. Visitors at funerals are in a reflective mood. Many will be confronted with their own mortality, and some may yearn for answers. The pastor has an opportunity to share the good news of the living hope in Christ.

At the service the family will want to find ways to honour the loved one. Photographs and symbols of life and work may be displayed. Spoken