

WITNESS TO LIFE AFTER LIFE

A Christian Approach to Funerals

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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SCRIPTURE

13 Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. 14 We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. 15 According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words (1Thessalonians 4:13-18 TNIV).

INTRODUCTION

American culture has such a peculiar attitude toward death. Death is a certainty but we often live in denial of this.

Two attorneys, Cary Babcock and Gordon Lee, took a safari vacation in the African backcountry. One day, they stopped for a rest, removed their packs, and leaned their rifles against a tree. They were startled when a large, hungry-looking lion emerged from the jungle and began eyeing them with anticipation.

It was clear that the attorneys' rifles were too far away to do them any good. Babcock began to remove his shoes, and Lee asked him why he was doing that. Babcock replied, "Because I can run faster without them." Lee declared, "I don't care how fast you can run. You'll never out race that lion." Babcock replied, "I don't have to outrun the lion. I just have to outrun you."

But sooner or later the jaws of death sink their teeth into all of us. Then our survivors are faced with the task of arranging our funeral. How they go about this will depend a great deal on their view of death. Christians view death differently than non-Christians. So what is the Christian approach to funerals?

1. APPROACHES TO A CHRISTIAN FUNERAL

In reality, Christians approach funerals in a variety of ways. A Christian funeral in Japan is

different from a Christian funeral in Egypt. Even within the same nation there can be differences. A Christian funeral for a Navajo from Arizona would be different from a service for an Irish Catholic from Boston.

Historically, Christians have followed the funeral practices of the particular culture in which they live except when such practices contradict the teachings of the Gospel. In the early years of the Church, Roman culture was dominant. It was Roman custom to bury the remains of the dead, usually in a plot of land set aside for this purpose (cemetery), and to put a marker on the spot. Christians living in the Roman Empire followed these same customs. But Roman funerals were also marked by loud wailing and weeping, and the mourners dressed in black garments to express hopelessness and despair. In contrast, the Christians of the era replaced loud wailing with singing and dressed in lighter colored or even white clothing (Rev 7:9 *et al*) to express their hope in the resurrection to eternal life.

Today, a Christian funeral may be long or short, involve one or several ceremonies, and take place in a home, a church or a funeral parlor. The remains may be buried or cremated, interred above or below ground, set in a columbarium or the ashes scattered in the wind. In other words, there is no “one-size-fits-all” Christian funeral.

2. ESSENTIALS TO A CHRISTIAN FUNERAL

However, there are three essential components. Every Christian funeral needs to:

- 1) Communicate Christ’s victory over death;
- 2) Comfort the survivors; and
- 3) Commend the deceased to God’s mercy.

If one or more of these is missing, it begs the question as to what kind of funeral it really is.

Some of the first Christians to wrestle with the meaning of death were the new disciples from the Macedonian city of Thessalonica. Paul and his companions planted a church there in the summer of A.D. 50 but were forced out by the civil authorities before they could provide the Thessalonian Christians the basic teaching they needed.

A while after Paul left, some of the new Christians died, and this caused confusion and turmoil in the church. There were those who misunderstood Paul and thought that he said Christians never die. Others thought that those who died would miss out on Christ’s return. Paul wrote a letter to them (1 Thessalonians) to comfort them and clarify the hope of the Gospel. He says:

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep (1 Thess 4:13).

“Sleep” was a euphemism for death used by Christians and non-Christians alike. It is also the basis for having cemeteries. The word “cemetery” comes from the Greek word for a place to sleep.

But for non-Christians the reality behind the sleep of death was one of despair. Catullus wrote, "When once our brief light sets, there is one perpetual night through which we must sleep." Some ancient Greeks believed in life after death but this was shadowy and ill-defined. F. F. Bruce quotes Theocritus as writing, “Hopes are for the living; the dead are without hope.”

The Romans also felt hopeless in the face of death. Archaeologists have uncovered correspondence from families of the era. Whenever death is mentioned there is a gloom that follows and covers everything. When a loved one died they did not know what to say. They felt utterly unable to provide comfort because death was the last word.

But for the early Christians, sleep was used to describe the reality of death because death was only temporary; a transition to a better life. Christians are unique in that we do not look to speculation, rely on sentimentality, follow the occult or give in to cynicism to talk about what happens after death. Rather we look to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ's resurrection guarantees the resurrection of believers. His second coming will bring it about (see 1 Thess 4:13-17).

There is a much mystery here, but the New Testament does give us some idea of what this will mean (1 Cor 15:35ff). Our resurrected bodies will be different from our present physical bodies but will have continuity with our present bodies. We will have individual identities and we will be able to recognize each other. And because, as Christians, we will be resurrected with new bodies, we need not have any fears in connection with our earthly remains. The remains of a Christian who has died can be buried, cremated or donated to medical science and such a believer will be resurrected with a new body that is complete, imperishable, glorified, powerful and so lovely that if we were to see a person today with such a body we would be tempted to fall down and worship this person!

Christians recognize with all of humanity the inevitability of death but even in the face of death we can witness to our faith that God in Jesus Christ has conquered sin and death and raises his children to everlasting life. Our hope is grounded on the promise that someday Christ will return to raise us up.

A Christian funeral needs to communicate Christ's victory over death. A Christian funeral also needs to comfort the survivors. After all, the funeral is for the living and not the dead. Paul says:

“Do not grieve like the rest, who have no hope” (1 Thess 4:13).

Paul does not tell us to forsake all grief only hopeless grief. Grieving is natural and necessary. Even Jesus wept at the death of his friend, Lazarus. John Stott says:

“However firm our Christian faith may be, the loss of a close relative or friend causes a profound emotional shock. To lose a loved one is to lose a part of oneself. It calls for radical and painful adjustments, which may take many months” or even years.

A funeral is a set of rituals. Rituals are a universal human phenomenon. A primary function of rituals is to reduce or manage anxiety. And let's face it, death tends to promote anxiety. We can all relate to Woody Allen when he said, “I am not afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens.” So a funeral can provide comfort by helping to reduce and manage anxiety. This is true for Christians and non-Christians alike. A loved one who leaves instructions to the effect, “I don't want a funeral when I die” does a great disservice to their family and friends.

A Christian funeral not only offers a measure of peace for the bereaving and a healthy means for expressing their sorrow, but also a ministry of love and hope through the Holy Spirit:

In the face of death Christians affirm with tears and joy the hope of the gospel. Christians do not bear bereavement in isolation but are sustained by the power of the Spirit and the community of faith (W-4.10001).

A Christian funeral needs to communicate Christ's victory over death and comfort the survivors. A Christian funeral also needs to commend the deceased to God's mercy. Paul writes:

“We believe that Jesus died and was raised to life. We also believe that when God brings Jesus back again, he will bring with him all who had faith in Jesus before they died.” (1 Th 4:14 CEV).

We tend to judge by outward appearances and circumstances. God sees into the heart. He knows his own. He is more just than humans can even imagine. We can commend to God's care those who die, trusting that by his grace all who believe in him shall be raised from death to life eternal.

Commending a person to God is not the same as a eulogy. There are basically two kinds of eulogies. There is a kind of eulogy that is a substantial tribute in praise of the deceased, commonly heard at secular or civic services. These tributes are generally highly polished speeches that tend to ignore or even contradict matters of faith. They can also be a challenge for the honest speaker.

There were two brothers who lived in a small town. Both were greedy, grasping men suspected of being involved in a number of illegal activities. One day, the older brother died. The younger one tried to arrange for a funeral but couldn't find a pastor willing to say anything nice about his brother. Finally, he approached a Presbyterian minister and offered to donate \$25,000 to the church if the minister would tell the people at the funeral that his brother was a saint. The minister agreed. The day came for the funeral. The minister stood up and said of the deceased, "This man was an ungodly sinner, wicked to the core. He was unfaithful to his wife, hot-tempered with his children, and ruthless in his business ... but compared to his brother, he was a saint!"

The other kind of eulogy is not really a eulogy as much as it an authentic remembrance. Precious memories are shared and a lifetime thankfully acknowledged. And these stories are offered within the greater context of God is who is the creator and giver of all life.

In summary, the three essential components to a Christian funeral are: 1) Communicate Christ's victory over death; 2) Comfort the survivors; and 3) Commend the deceased to God's mercy.

3. SUGGESTIONS FOR A CHRISTIAN FUNERAL

In addition to these essentials, let me offer a few suggestions:

1) Talk about end-of-life issues before the end of your life. Because it is difficult under emotional stress to plan wisely, I encourage you to discuss and plan in advance the arrangements which will be necessary at the time of your death. A book like Margie Jenkins' *You Only Die Once; Preparing for the End of Life with Grace and Gusto*, along with the companion *Personal Planner*, can be quite helpful. However, my second suggestion is that you...

2) Do not plan your funeral service. Funerals are for the benefit of those left behind. The most helpful funeral services emerge out of joint planning between the pastor, the family, and others involved in the service. Do, however, write down suggestions you may have for songs, Scripture passages, and personal remarks such as a testimony of faith. But detailed plans and directions may not match the needs, desires and changing circumstances of those who survive you.

3) Consider a memorial service. This is a service that takes place after burial or cremation. It has a number of advantages. A memorial service does not depend on cemetery schedules or funeral director availability but can be set for any day or time that is convenient for those involved. It keeps the committal, which is often the most difficult for the family, from being the last stage of the process. The whole communal aspect of grief closes in faith, worship and supportive fellowship. A shared meal can be offered immediately following the service without clock-watching anxieties. Memorial services used to be the norm for

Presbyterian Christians and there are recent signs of renewed interest in this approach.

I realize that a memorial service does not work for every situation, but if it is an option, then I recommend you at least consider it.

4) If you do not know what a committal service is or you cannot tell the difference between a funeral pall and a pallbearer or you would just like to know more about this topic, then join me this Wednesday night at Highpoint for the follow-up to “Witness to Life after Life A Christian Approach to Funerals.”

CONCLUSION

Julia Ann Upton makes this observation:

The American way of death, about which so many sociologists have written, is often a denial of death's ultimacy, where corpses are turned into mannequins, reposed in a tableau of pretense. The Christian way of death needs to witness to the belief that death is not endless sweet repose, but the doorway through which the Christian passes into new life.