

A Loved One Dies

Help in the first few weeks

Paul Beasley-Murray

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to the memory of my father, George Beasley-Murray, and my parents-in-law, Maelor and Mavis Griffiths

'Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.' (1 Corinthians 15.57)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Beasley Murray is married to Caroline, and together they have four married children and seven grandchildren.

An experienced Baptist minister, he is Chairman of the College of Baptist Ministers. Over the years as a pastor he has taken hundreds of funerals, helping many through the demanding process of grief.

Paul is a prolific writer. One of Paul's latest books is *Living Out the Call* (Amazon Books, 2nd edition 2016) has been described as 'the most comprehensive practical introduction to ministry currently available' (Derek Tidball). It is in four volumes:

1. *Living to God's Glory*; 2. *Leading God's Church*; 3. *Reaching God's World*; 4. *Serving God's Church*.

Since the autumn of 2011 he has published a weekly 'blog', *Church Matters*, which now has a world-wide following. It appears on his web-site at www.paulbeasleymurray.com and is also available as a weekly e-mail for those who register on his web-site.

He is also the General Editor of *Ministry Today UK 1994-2018*, a unique pastoral resource consisting of some 520 articles published in eight hard-backed volumes. For further details see page 47.

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOKLET

The Lord's unfailing love and mercy still continue, fresh as the morning, as sure as the sunrise. The Lord is all I have and so I put my hope in him. (Lamentations 3.22–24)

There is nothing harder than losing someone you love. If only it were not so. However, when we have loved deeply, we hurt deeply when the object of our love is no longer with us. We ache for the presence of our loved one. Our sense of loss is almost unbearable. Neither kind words from friends nor sleeping pills from the doctor seem to make much difference. Grief is something which we have to work through for ourselves.

It is at this hardest of times, when we have to summon up all our energies just to cope with living, that we find ourselves called upon to make all kinds of decisions relating to the funeral of our loved one. Although we differ from many other countries where the funeral normally takes place within 24 hours of the death, it still feels as if we are given little time to make those decisions. To compound matters, we find ourselves perhaps surrounded by well-meaning relatives and friends offering contradictory advice. It is not easy to deal with all these pressures when we ourselves are feeling so fragile.

At such a time we need help. We need help not just in our decision-making, but also in our coping with the first few weeks of our bereavement. This booklet sets out to supplement the help that will be given by your minister and others. It is divided into six 'chapters':

The immediate tasks

Understanding what is happening to me

God gives strength

Planning the funeral

Celebrating a life

There is hope

Designed to be a work-book as well as a guide, some pages include space for the reader to write down his or her own reflections.

THE IMMEDIATE TASKS

God is our shelter and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. So we will be not afraid. (Psalm 46.1,2)

The first few days following a death are always exceedingly busy—there is so much to do. The death needs to be registered, a funeral director needs to be contacted, friends and relatives need to be informed, and the funeral needs to be planned. In some ways those first few days pass quickly. Our very busyness helps us with our grief. Once, however, all the practicalities have been seen to, the next few days can seem to be an eternity as we wait for the funeral to take place. It is a difficult ‘limbo’ period when nothing seems to happen. Somehow it is not until the funeral is over that we can begin to come to terms with the death which has taken place.

Registering the death

Before a death can be registered, a certificate has to be obtained showing the cause of death. In the case of an expected death the doctor will sign the Medical Certificate. However, where the death has been unexpected, the doctor may need to refer the death to the Coroner, who may then have to be the person certifying the cause of death. Further details on ‘what do to after a death in England and Wales’ may be found on the government web-site (gov.uk), where information is given on such matters as post-mortems and referrals to the Coroner, and also matters such as funeral payments for those on benefits, probate and property. It is normally available from the Registrar.

Before going to the Registrar, it is wise to phone ahead and arrange an appointment. In England and Wales deaths have to be registered within 5 days, and in Scotland within 8 days. It is helpful to ask what certification and documents you will be

required to take with you. The Registrar will give a Certificate of Registration ('death certificate') and a Certificate of Disposal. It is often a good idea to obtain several copies of the death certificate, since photocopies are not normally accepted by banks, building societies and insurance companies.

Contacting a funeral director

If you are uncertain about which funeral director to contact, your minister will normally be able to give you advice. Whatever, you would be well advised to choose a funeral director who is a member of the National Association of Funeral Directors. Many funeral directors will be willing to come to the house to talk things through. Alternatively, one can simply go to the office of the funeral director. The funeral director will need to be given the Certificate of Disposal.

Funeral costs vary greatly and depend on how elaborate the funeral arrangements are. Coffins, for instance, range enormously in price. If finances are limited, then it is important to inform the undertaker right at the very beginning of the limitations involved. Undertakers can be very understanding when they are made aware that the family is operating on a tight budget. However, even where money is not an issue, one might well question the apparent need to honour the dead by buying the most expensive coffin. Other matters which have a bearing on price include the number of cars. It is, of course, possible to have no cars and use simply the hearse for the coffin.

Help with the cost of the funeral

Funerals are expensive. It is important therefore to check whether the deceased person contributed to schemes to pay for the funeral. Even though their bank account will be frozen (unless it is a joint account), it is possible to have part of their savings released to pay for the funeral.

For people on state benefits or tax credits, limited help is available from the state in the form of a Social Fund Funeral Payment. The local social security office will provide details and a claim form.

Certain life assurance policies may provide lump sum payments. Similar payments may also be available where the deceased was a member of a trade union or of a professional body or provident club.

Other avenues of help are benevolent funds set up for former employees: e.g. the Civil Service Benevolent Fund. Former members of HM Forces also have access to such funds.

Viewing the body

The body of the deceased will normally lie in the chapel of rest at the funeral director's until the day of the funeral. For many it is a great help to see the body of the person who has just died. It is a way of saying 'good-bye'. It is also a way of facing up to the reality of death. Viewing the body is not 'ghoulish'—it can be psychologically healthy.

Some may feel that it is not necessary to go to the chapel of rest if they have already seen the body in the hospital or in the home. Others may be a little fearful, especially if disease has ravaged the body of their loved one or perhaps an accident has mutilated the body. However, it can be a re-assuring experience to see the body again. It is surprising how at peace the loved one can look after the funeral director has had the opportunity to see to the body.

Friends and relatives

A death is rarely a private affair. It often affects a wide circle of friends and relatives. John Donne had humanity in general in mind when he wrote: 'No man is an island, entire of itself ... any

man's death diminishes me'; but what is true generally, is even more true where a friend or loved one is concerned. Therefore an opportunity should be given for everybody to share in marking the passing of the deceased. Even in the case of a still-birth friends will want to come and express their love and support for the couple concerned. Sometimes the bereaved family may prefer the actual service of committal to be private. But there should also be a public opportunity for others to give thanks to God for the life of their friend—whether it be at the funeral service on the day or at a later memorial service.

One of the first tasks of the bereaved is therefore to ring around close friends and relatives and inform them of the death. As for the wider circle of friends and relatives, even if the names are not known, then often an address book or a Christmas card list belonging to the deceased will indicate the names of those who should be informed, perhaps by letter or by email.

Once the time and day of the funeral is known, then announcements, if required, may be made in local or national newspapers. Be warned, however: the announcements in national newspapers can be very costly.

As soon as the death has been announced, cards, letters, and emails of sympathy, will begin to arrive. Although a reply is not required or expected, often the bereaved will feel the need eventually to write a note of thanks. Particularly in the case of a well-known person, this can be an onerous task. On the other hand, it can be a therapeutic task. One possibility is to produce a standard letter, with space for it to be 'topped and tailed' appropriately.

Children

Children are also affected by the death of a loved one. Care should be taken in the way in which the news of the death is shared with them. Some people prefer to shield children from the reality of death, as if children find it more difficult than

older people to cope with. Yet often children cope with death much better than adults. There is no need to be over-protective. Children, in fact, can eventually feel quite resentful if they are excluded.

Children need to be properly informed of the death. They need to be consulted as to whether or not they wish to view the body. Most children will wish to attend the funeral service. However, in so far as this is likely to be their first experience of such a service, it is important that a simple explanation of what is going to happen is given beforehand.

Children, like adults, need to be given an opportunity to work through their grief. They need to be able to talk through their feelings. In some circumstances it might be appropriate for them to join a specialist children's bereavement group.

Where there is a death of a close relative, the school should be informed so that support and understanding is available from teachers. If there is a clash between the date of a funeral and the date of an external exam, arrangements can sometimes be made to change the time of the exam.

Personal Notes

Time of appointment with Registrar

Name, address, email address and 'phone number of funeral director

Cars?

Time of appointment to view body

Wording of announcement in newspaper

Friends and relatives to be informed

UNDERSTANDING WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ME

Lord, you have examined me and you know me. You know everything I do; from far away you understand all my thoughts. You are all round me on every side; you protect me with your power. Your knowledge of me is too deep; it is beyond my understanding. (Psalm 139.1-2, 5-6)

Grieving is normal

Grief is part of the cost of loving, and is the normal response to the loss of a significant person in our lives. There would be something wrong in our relationship if we did not shed copious tears when a loved one dies. I find it significant that Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus (John 11.35). If Jesus felt free to cry, so too should we.

If we don't express our grief, then all kinds of psychological complications can arise. In the words of the Turkish proverb: 'He that conceals his grief finds no remedy for it'. Crying is in fact good for us. As a result, one of my first questions when I visit a home where there has been a death is to ask the relatives: 'Have you felt able to cry?' However, there is no need to feel guilty if tears do not come immediately. Tears come at different times for different people.

Unfortunately, some Christians encourage the bereaved to rejoice in the new life which their loved ones now enjoy, as if crying for the loss of a loved one is wrong and is a sign of lack of faith. But this refusal to face up to the pain of death and to own our own loss is a nonsense. Life for our loved ones, now free of their earthly limitations, may now be much better, but we may well be the poorer for our loss. True, we may not grieve as do

those who have no hope (see 1 Thessalonians 4.14), but this does not mean that we do not grieve.

Catherine Marshall, who lost her minister-husband Peter, aged only 46, has some instructive words about not trying to hide our emotions:

Trying to force oneself to be brave will not heal the heart. This is hard for men who are trained to believe that tears are the sign of weakness. But it is forever true that when the storms of life are savage, it is the tree that bends with the wind that survives. Tensing up, walling up the heart, damning up the tears, will inevitably mean trouble later on, perhaps years later. There is emotional release in letting the tears flow. (*A Man Called Peter*)

It is important that we realise that grieving takes time. Grieving cannot be restricted to the time between the death and the funeral. We do not get over the loss of a loved one that quickly. It is generally reckoned that the grieving process can take anywhere between two to five years, and in some cases even longer. Clearly the later part of the grieving process will not be as acute as the first few months. But, thank God, time does heal. Although we never forget our loved one, the pain of parting does ease, as we learn to cope with our loss.

Grieving has a pattern

Grieving is a complex process and is different for each one of us. Nonetheless, there is a pattern to normal grieving, even if the pattern varies from person to person. An awareness of this pattern can be helpful to understand ourselves and our feelings. Otherwise there may be times when we may question our sanity and wonder whether we will ever pull through. The fact is that we will.

The grieving process normally takes the following pattern:

In the first two weeks or so after the death of a loved one we experience a phase of numbness and shock, when everything seems unreal and difficult to take in, with the result that we can deny the reality of what has happened.

This period of denial eventually gives way to a phase of yearning, with an urge to recover what has been lost. At this stage we no longer deny our loss, but seek to find our loved one as we visit familiar places or look through old photographs. It is not unusual for people to hallucinate and think they have seen or heard their loved one.

Then there is the phase of disorganisation, despair and gradual coming to terms with the reality of the loss. We perhaps become unnaturally forgetful, or feel we cannot cope. This phase is often marked by anger, depression, and guilt. The anger tends to be expressed in 'why' questions and may be vented against the deceased ('Why have you abandoned me?'), or against the doctors ('Why did you not do more?'), or against God ('Why did you let my loved one die?'). The depression may express itself in copious tears, or may simply take the form of a deep inner sadness. The guilt tends to express itself in 'if only' questions: 'If only I had done more'; 'If only I had visited the hospital more often'; 'If only I had not said this or that'.

Finally, we move into a phase of 're-organisation and resolution', when we begin to accept the loss of our loved one. Normally there is no single cut-off point when grieving stops, as it were, overnight. But, gradually healing comes, tears stop flowing, and we find that we begin to start making plans for the future.

Grieving is more than a matter of feelings. It also affects our physical reactions. Loss of appetite and changes in sleep patterns are common. Furthermore, grieving is an exhausting business and can leave us feeling very tired.

Grieving takes us unawares

Grieving is not a straight-forward process. Time and again we will think that we have got over a particular stage of the grieving process, but then suddenly we find all the old feelings over-whelming us again. C. S. Lewis, after the death of his beloved Joy, described this experience well when he wrote:

Tonight all the hells of young grief have opened again; the mad words, the bitter resentment, the fluttering in the stomach, the nightmare unreality, the wallowed-in tears. For in grief, nothing 'stays put'. One keeps on emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round. Everything repeats. Am I going in circles, or dare I hope I am on a spiral? But if a spiral, am I going up or down it?
(A Grief Observed)

Anything can spark off this spiral of grief, not least anniversaries—whether it be the anniversary of the death, or a birthday or wedding anniversary or some other special occasions. Thankfully, this tends to lessen with the passing of the years.

Some people find it helpful to keep a 'journal' in which they chronicle some of their feelings and emotions in the first few weeks of grief. One advantage of writing down our thoughts is that it ensures we do not repress our feelings—instead we give expression to how we feel. In turn this giving expression can help us to move through the grief process.

Personal Notes: My feelings at this time

Denial? Yearning? Despair? Depression? Anger? Guilt?
Resolution?

GOD GIVES STRENGTH

Don't you know? Haven't you heard? The Lord is the everlasting God; he created all the world. He never grows tired or weary. No one understands his thoughts. He strengthens those who are weak and tired. Even those who are young can grow weak; young men can fall exhausted. But those who trust in the Lord for help will find their strength renewed. They will rise on wings like eagles; they will run and not get weary; they will walk and not grow weak. (Isaiah 40.28–31)

God did not simply set the world in motion and then withdraw from the scene. He does not live in some ivory tower, remote from the concerns of those whom he has made. He loves us as a father loves his children. He listens to our prayers and comes to our aid when we call out to him.

It is important that we remember that sometimes God answers our prayers in ways other than we expect and hope. This is not because he does not love us, but because he sees the 'big picture' denied to us. His plans are always for our ultimate good.

Relevant Bible Readings

The following is a selection of passages from the Bible which speak of the difference God can make to our lives. Don't try to get through all of them at one sitting; instead select just one passage at a time, and reading through it slowly, reflect what each phrase might hold for you. In other words, allow God to speak to you through his Word. You will be surprised at the help and strength you will gain.

In planning the funeral, you may find it helpful to incorporate one or two of these passages into the order of service.

David reminds us that God can be likened to a shepherd who cares for each one of us sheep.

The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need. He lets me rest in fields of green grass and leads me to quiet pools of fresh water. He gives me new strength. He guides me in the right paths, as he has promised. Even if I go through the deepest darkness, I will not be afraid, Lord, for you are with me. Your shepherd's rod and staff protect me ... I know that your goodness and love will be with me all my life; and your house will be my home as long as I live. (Psalm 23.1,4,6)

The Psalmist looks forward with longing to arriving in God's house.

How I love your Temple, Almighty God! How I want to be there! I long to be in the Lord's Temple. With my whole being I sing for joy to the living God ... How happy are those whose strength comes from you, who are eager to make the pilgrimage to Mount Zion. As they pass through the valley of Baca, it becomes a place of springs; the early rain fills it with pools. They grow stronger as they go; they will see the God of gods on Zion ... The Lord is our protector and glorious king ... He does not refuse any good thing to those who do what is right. Almighty God, how happy are those who trust in you. (Psalm 84.1–2,5–7,11–12)

God is the great 'insomniac', and is there to help even in the middle of the night.

I look to the mountains; where will my help come from? My help will come from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let you fall; your protector is always awake. The protector of Israel never dozes or sleeps. The Lord will guard you; he is by your side to protect you. The sun will not hurt you during the day, nor the moon during the night. The Lord will protect you

from all danger; he will keep you safe. He will protect you as you come and go, now and for ever. (Psalm 121)

Isaiah looks forward to the day when God will wipe away the tears from our faces.

Here on Mount Zion the Lord Almighty ... will suddenly remove the cloud of sorrow that has been hanging over all the nations. The Sovereign Lord will destroy death for ever! He will wipe away the tears from everyone's eyes and take away the disgrace his people have suffered throughout the world. The Lord himself has spoken! When it happens, everyone will say, 'He is our God! We have put our trust in him, and he has rescued us. He is the Lord! We have put our trust in him, and now we are happy and joyful because he has saved us.' (Isaiah 25.6–9)

'I will comfort you', says the Lord, 'as a mother comforts her child.' (Isaiah 66.13)

Jesus invites us to share our troubles with him.

Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light. (Matthew 11.28–30)

Jesus has a special love for children.

'Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you that whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it'. Then he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on each of them, and blessed them. (Mark 10.13–16)

If we want proof that God loves us, then we need only look at the Cross.

God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its saviour. (John 3.16,17)

Jesus offers life to us all.

I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and all those who live and believe in me will never die. (John 11.25,26)

Jesus calls us to place our hope in him.

Do not be worried and upset. Believe in God, and believe also in me. There are many rooms in my Father's house, and I am going to prepare a place for you ... I am the way; I am the truth; I am the life; no one goes to the Father except by me. (John 14.1,2,6)

The Apostle Paul draws upon his experience of life when he declares

Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble do it, or hardship or persecution or hunger or poverty or danger or death? ... No, in all these things we have complete victory through him who loved us. For I am certain that nothing can separate us from his love: neither death nor life ... nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8.35–39)

God has a wonderful plan for our future.

What no one ever saw or heard, what no one ever thought could happen, is the very thing God prepared for those who love him. (1 Corinthians 2.9)

Paul works out the implications of the resurrection of Jesus for us.

The truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised ... This is how it will be when the dead are raised to life. When the body is buried it is mortal; when raised it will be immortal. When buried it is ugly and weak; when raised it will be beautiful and strong. When buried it is a physical body; when raised it will be a spiritual body ... When what is mortal has been clothed with what is immortal, and when what will die has been clothed with what cannot die, then the scripture will come true: 'Death is destroyed; victory is complete'. Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Death, is your power to hurt? ... Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15.20,42–43,54–55,57)

Here are words of encouragement.

Our brothers and sisters, we want you to know the truth about those who have died, so that you will not be sad, as are those who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will take back with Jesus those who have died believing in him ... So then, encourage one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4.13,14,18)

Easter hope for today.

Let us give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Because of his great mercy he gave us new life by raising

Jesus Christ from death. This fills us with a living hope, and so we look forward to possessing the rich blessings that God keeps for his people. He keeps them for you in heaven, where they cannot decay or spoil or fade away (1 Peter 1.3–4)

John has a vision of life around the throne of God.

The Lamb, who is in the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of life-giving water. and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Revelation 7.17)

John develops his vision of heaven.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth ... I heard a loud voice saying: 'Now God's home is with human beings! He will live with them, and they shall be his people. God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared.' (Revelation 21.1,3,4)

Personal Notes:

Scripture passages which have special meaning for me

Helpful prayers

Praying to God is as natural as speaking to a friend. In prayer we open our heart to God and share with him our hopes and disappointments, our needs and our concerns. Such personal prayer does not normally involve reading the words of somebody else. However, in the weeks following on the death of a loved one some find it hard to pray. God seems to be distant and they do not know what to say. Maybe you might find it helpful to use some of these prayers which have been written for the use of the bereaved.

A prayer for the funeral day

Lord Jesus Christ, I come to you at the beginning of this day; in all my loneliness and uncertainty I come.

I thank you for all those who will be sharing the day with me, for the minister, relatives and friends, and all those who have been so helpful. Help me not to worry about the arrangements that have been made, about the visitors who will be coming, about my fear of emotion, about the service, the weather. I bring this day to you; help me in my weakness to prove your strength.

A prayer when everything seems so unreal

Lord Jesus Christ, in the darkness of my loss I come to you; I cannot believe what has happened and yet I know it is true; sorrow and anxiety fill my life, and it's hard to find rest. So I come to you Lord Jesus, I bring to you the burden in my heart—it is too heavy for me; please take the weight and bear it with me, Lord, and give me your peace.

A prayer for when we are feeling very low

Lord Jesus, I need you now. I reach out to you in despair.

I am broken and lost. Help me to know that you are a God of love, to really believe you love ME.

A prayer for the new day

I lift my heart and mind to you, the living God of never failing love. Give me strength for this day, to weep when I should weep, to accept the comfort that memories bring, to face decisions with courage to meet people—

those who love me those who want to help me, those who want to comfort me but don't know what to say.

Thank you for them all.

O God, help me so that having your peace, I may be able to comfort others

A prayer for forgiveness

Lord Jesus—thank you for lovely memories to treasure.

But Lord, as I look back, there are things I wish I hadn't done and said. Now it's too late to put them right.

Lord, I'm feeling so guilty, please forgive me, and help me to receive the forgiveness you promise to give.

A prayer for when we are angry with God

O Lord—I keep asking why you allowed this to happen.

You know my anger against you.

I am confused, bitter and upset.

I cannot help it, I am blaming you.

Why should this have happened to me?

Yet—I need you now more than ever before. I need the comfort of knowing that even when I cannot understand you still care.

Lord—help me to trust in your love.

A prayer at a time of special anniversary

O Lord, the memory and the pain is especially hard today. It would have been such a special day. Thank you for the memories, for the good times we had together. Help me to find new happiness without in any way forgetting the past.

A prayer after the death of a baby

Loving Father, you have allowed me to share both joy and sorrow in your work of creating life. Take away my feeling of failure. Fill the emptiness with hope and trust. Heal the pain that comes with parting. And may the love that our child brought us live on in our hearts. Loving Father, I give this baby into your loving care.

Here is a selection of other prayers that you may find helpful

Father, we praise you for the comfort of the Gospel. For Jesus has broken the power of death—he has brought life and immortality to light. We thank you for all that you have done for us in him. We praise you for his Cross where our sins are forgiven; for his Resurrection, on which our hope of life is anchored. We bless you that through faith in him the sting of death has been drawn. *Paul Beaseley-Murray*

We give back to you, O God, those whom you gave to us. You did not lose them when you gave them to us, and we do not lose them by their return to you. Your Son has taught us that life is eternal and love cannot die. So death is only a horizon, and a horizon is only the limit of our sight. Open our eyes to see more clearly, and draw us closer to you, so that we may know we are nearer to our loved ones, who are with you. You have told us that you are preparing a place for us: prepare us, that where you

are we may be always, O dear Lord of life and death. *William Penn*

We remember, Lord, the slenderness of the thread which separates life from death, and the suddenness with which it can be broken. Help us also to remember that on both sides of that division we are surrounded by your love. Persuade our hearts that when our dear ones die neither we nor they are parted from you. In you may we find our peace and in you be united with them in the glorious body of Christ, who has burst the bonds of death and is alive for evermore, our Saviour and theirs for ever and ever. *Dick Williams*

God of the grieving, in the depths of distress, come as the One who understands; in the emptiness of despair come as the One who revives hopes; in the loneliness of long hours, come as the One who brings comfort; in the blankness of pain, come as the One who remembers and through the memories soothes our aching hearts.

Lord Jesus Christ, you comforted your disciples when you were going to die: now set our troubled hearts at rest and banish our fears. You are the only way to the Father: help us to follow you. You are the truth: help us to know you. You are the life: give us that life, to live with you now and forever.

God be in my head, and in my understanding;
God be in mine eyes, and in my looking;
God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;
God be in my heart, and in my thinking;
God be at mine end, and at my departing *Sarum Primer*

O God, give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
the courage to change the things I can;
and the wisdom to know the difference. *Reinhold Niebuhr*

Lord, make me a channel of your peace; where there is hatred may I bring love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Lover, grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. *St Francis of Assisi*

O Lord, support us all the day long of this troublous life, until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over and our work is done. Then, Lord, in thy mercy, grant us safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at least; through our Lord Jesus Christ. *John Henry Newman*

Bring us, O Lord our God, at our last awakening into the house and gate of heaven, to enter into that gate and dwell in that house, where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity; in the habitations of thy glory and dominion, world without end. Amen. *John Donne*

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead s not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
Now and for ever. Amen.

Personal Notes

Prayers I have found

My own prayers

PLANNING THE FUNERAL

Jesus said: *‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and all those who live and believe in me will never die.’* (John 11.25,26)

When the loved one has not made known their wishes, then the bereaved find themselves faced with a number of decisions to make.

Burial or cremation?

This can be a hard decision to make. Some do not like the thought of their loved one being burnt—burial seems more natural and allows more easily for a permanent memorial. But burial is not only more expensive, it also involves the ongoing need of caring for the grave. Most people today opt for cremation. Certainly, with the vagaries of the British weather cremation can be much more convenient.

If cremation is the chosen option, the question of the disposal of the ashes then arises. Some people prefer to entrust this task to the undertaker, while others prefer to scatter the ashes themselves. Another possibility is to bury the urn containing the ashes, and to accompany the burial with a brief service of committal.

A church service?

In our increasingly secular society, many funerals simply take place in a crematorium chapel. Where the mourners are few in number, the crematorium chapel may seem to be more intimate than some barn of a church. On the other hand, for Christians it is surely more natural to come to church to receive the comfort that God can give. Although God is not limited to particular

buildings, nonetheless there is something to be said for having a service in a building where down through the years God has made himself known to his people—and perhaps also where our loved one has worshipped God. One great advantage of a church service is that time need not be an issue: in some crematoria twenty minutes is the maximum length for a service. A church is also usually much more accessible to older mourners than a crematorium.

The committal before the church service?

Traditionally the committal has taken place after the church service. However, there is a lot to be said for the increasingly common custom of preceding the service with the committal. The fact is that the committal marks the darkest moment of the day. There is something extremely stark about the curtains being drawn or the coffin being lowered into the ground. How much better if, after the committal, we can all go back to church and receive there the comfort which God can give. Furthermore, after the service it is then possible to serve light refreshments to everybody who has attended, and in this way make it possible for the family to have a word with everybody.

One possibility, particularly where a large family is involved, is to have a private service of committal in the morning, and then to have a break for lunch followed by a public service of thanksgiving in the afternoon. The service of committal is the place for the expression of grief and tears. A private lunch then gives an opportunity for family members to meet up with one another and to catch up on one another's news, before having to face the wider world at the public service of thanksgiving. After the service there is then a tea for everybody, where friends can meet up with the family and express their sympathy.

Even if the above suggestion is not appropriate, there is a lot to be said for the immediate family and close friends getting together for a drink or a meal. Inevitably this would be an

occasion for catching up on the news of others; but, hopefully, it will also be an occasion for the sharing of memories of the deceased. Such a sharing can be very therapeutic.

The shape of the committal

However difficult it may be to see the curtains pulled round the coffin or the coffin lowered into the grave, the service of committal is an essential part of the funeral and should not be done away with by the immediate family and friends. It helps us to face up to the reality of death, and to acknowledge the separation which has taken place

The committal is always exceedingly brief. At its heart are the words:

Thankful for the life of *N* and for every precious memory of him/her, we now commit his/her body to be buried/cremated, confident of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Together with a few readings and prayers, if the service of committal is held in a crematorium chapel, it is also possible to sing a hymn. Most services of committal do not last more than five or six minutes.

The shape of the service of thanksgiving

The shape of the service is determined in part by the preferences of the minister and in part by the wishes of the bereaved family. The precise way in which the service is ordered will therefore vary from funeral to funeral. However, the following basic pattern indicates the kind of content a funeral service might contain.

A call to worship containing a positive affirmation of Christian faith: e.g. 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die'. (John 11.25) or 'I am

certain that ... there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord'. (Romans 8.39)

A hymn of praise

A prayer in which we ask God's help for the service

A selection of appropriate Bible readings:

e.g. Psalm 23 ('The Lord is my shepherd'); John 14.1–2,6 ('Do not be worried and upset ... There are many rooms in my Father's house'); 1 Corinthians 15.20,42–43,54–57 ('Where death is your victory?')

A hymn?

Tribute(s) or memories

A hymn?

The address

Prayers with a threefold focus:

We thank God for the difference Jesus makes

We thank God for the life of our loved one

We pray for those who mourn

A hymn

A benediction e.g. May the peace of God, which is beyond our utmost understanding and of far more worth than human reasoning, keep guard over your hearts and thoughts, through Christ Jesus our Lord. (Philippians 4.7)

It is always a great help to the minister when the family is willing to suggest hymns and Scripture readings. In this way the service can become much more personal. The hymn, for instance, might have been a favourite of the deceased or might have been sung at the wedding of the deceased. A favourite Scripture passage might come to light by looking at any markings made in the deceased's Bible. For other suggestions see the list of Scripture passages in the preceding section.

The place of the address

A funeral is an occasion for speaking well of the dead. The word sometimes used, 'eulogy', literally means 'speaking well'. A eulogy will normally contain an outline of the deceased's life, listing achievements and describing traits of character. Eulogies need to be honest. Nobody is perfect. There is a place for mentioning some of the foibles of our loved one, as well as the virtues.

However, there is more to a Christian funeral than speaking well of the dead. There needs to be an opportunity for the congregation to hear of the grace of God and of the difference that God makes to our living and to our dying.

Traditionally the address has combined both eulogy and Gospel. An alternative is to give friends or relatives an opportunity to offer their own tributes within the service, leaving the minister to speak about the difference that Jesus makes to living and to dying.

With the advent of new technology it is now possible to screen pictures of the loved one—either during the tribute, or before the service. In this way memories of happier times are able to be recalled.

Hymns

Sometimes people leave instructions about the hymns or songs they wish to be sung at their funeral. If no instructions have been left or favourite hymns cannot be recalled, the following is a list of hymns which are often chosen for a funeral. In making the choice, it is important that one considers how familiar the words and tunes are to those who will be present. It is not a good idea to leave the minister to sing a solo!

Abide with me
Alleluia, alleluia, give thanks to the risen Lord
Amazing grace
Dear Lord and Father of mankind
Fairest Lord Jesus
For all the saints, who from their labours rest
Great is your faithfulness
How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
I love you, O Lord, you alone
Immortal, invisible, God only wise
In heavenly love abiding
I will sing the wondrous story
Jesus, lover of my soul
Just as I am, without one plea
Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy
Lord of our growing years
Love divine, all loves excelling
Now thank we all our God
O God our help in ages past
O love that will not let me go
Praise my soul
The day you gave us
The King of love my shepherd is
The Lord's my Shepherd
There is a Redeemer
To God be the glory

What a friend we have in Jesus
When I survey the wondrous cross
Who would true valour see
Yours be the glory

Other music

It may well be that you are happy to leave the choice of music to the minister. However, people often specify particular music to be played before or after the service. Sometimes the music may be a medley of favourite hymn or song tunes, sometimes a favourite piece of music. An alternative is to provide a CD with a song or some other music which was particularly liked by the deceased.

People taking part

The more a service can be personalised, the better. Ministers are therefore always happy to involve other people in the service, whether in giving a tribute or in doing a reading or leading the congregation in prayer or perhaps performing a special piece of music. Thought, however, needs to be given to the fact that for close family and friends, the service can be a deeply emotional occasion—not everybody, therefore, would feel happy in doing something in public. One possibility is for the family to write their memories which someone else or the minister may read.

An order of service

In so far as funeral services can vary greatly in content, it is often helpful for the congregation to be given an order of service. Although some families may want the order to be professionally printed, a good photocopy can be equally acceptable.

On the front of the order it is usual to give the name of the deceased in full with the dates of birth and death, together with the date and time of the funeral and the place where the funeral is taking place, as also possibly the name of the minister, the organist and other musicians.

Sometimes the order of service will also include a picture of the loved one—although unless one goes to a good deal of expense the quality of the reproduction can often leave much to be desired.

An alternative is to have a statement of intent printed on the front cover: e.g.

We are here to do honour to our friend ... who has died. We are here because in one way or another this death affects us all. We are here to listen again to some of the great words of the Christian faith: to consider, to remember, and in quiet gratitude to give thanks for his/her life and our own continuing lives. We are here to renew our trust in God who has said: 'I will not fail you or desert you'.

It is always a good idea to have spare copies of the order of service. These can then be sent to friends and relatives who for one reason or another could not be present at the service.

Flowers

Flowers at a Christian funeral seem very appropriate and help to lift the sadness. Yet the spending of vast sums of money can seem wrong, when such money can so easily be given in memory of a loved one to a special project or some other good cause.

So the question needs to be asked: will floral tributes be welcome or will it be family flowers only? If the latter, then to what charity should gifts in memory of the loved one be given? The beneficiaries of such gifts might be the church or a missionary society, or alternatively the local hospice or a

medical charity. If gifts are invited, then it is important for people to know to whom cheques should be made out and to whom cheques should be given: e.g. c/o undertaker and church. Often a retiring collection is taken for those who would like to give then and there rather than rather than send a cheque at some future date.

I like the idea of people being asked to bring a single flower of their choice or one that symbolises the deceased person, and that being laid on the coffin or the communion table.

A list of mourners

Precisely because at a funeral service the thoughts of the immediate family and friends are focused on their loved one rather than the congregation, there is much to be said for ensuring that the names of all those attending the service are collected. There are a variety of ways in which this can be done. Sometimes the funeral director has a member of staff asking people for their names as they come into the church or the chapel at the crematorium; sometimes cards are given out for people to fill in; sometimes there is a book at the door to sign.

An alternative is to have a special memorial book for people not only to sign, but also to put down their comments and reflections on the life of the deceased.

Dress

Traditionally black has been the colour of death. In the past people have therefore to come to the funeral wearing black ties, black suits, black coats etc. In our less formal age customs are changing and people come to the service in a variety of colours.

But what should the chief mourners wear? One answer is that they should wear whatever their loved one would have wanted them to wear! Another answer is to come in bright clothes

symbolising the Christian hope that is ours. In this regard Gertrude Knevels wrote:

Shall I wear mourning for my soldier dead,
I—a believer? Give me red.
Or give me purple for the King
at whose high court my love is visiting.
Dress me in green for growth, for life made new,
for skies his dear feet march, dress me in blue,
in white for his white soul; robe me in gold
for all the pride that his new rank shall hold.
In earth's dim gardens blooms no hue too bright
to dress me for my love who walks in light!

CELEBRATING A LIFE

We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him. (Romans 8.28)

Unless we are dealing with a still-birth, a funeral involves inevitably a celebration of a life. A funeral is an occasion for looking back and thanking God for all the memories we have of our loved one.

If a tribute is not being given by a family member or friend, then as a minister, I often ask the bereaved to write out on one sheet of paper a synopsis of the life of their loved one. This summary can be of great help to me in the preparation of my address. The details I find helpful include:

Date and place of birth

Family: e.g. grand-parents, parents, names of brothers and sisters

Education

Occupation and places of work

Date and place of marriage

Name of spouse or partner

Names of children and grand-children

Work undertaken in the community

Interests, hobbies, achievements

Church connections

Date and place of baptism?

Work undertaken in the church

Good times

Tough times

Personality

When I think of *N* I think of ...

I am grateful to *N* above all for ...

I smile when I remember ...

I shall miss most ...

It is not only the minister who benefits from this potted biography. The family—and not least the younger generation—find it an intensely interesting and absorbing exercise to discover more about their loved one. Indeed, the very act of recalling memories can become a form of therapy for the bereaved.

So let me encourage you to gather together the relevant 'bio-data' and perhaps at the same time write down some of your memories. Draw perhaps a life-time graph, indicating the significant points in your loved one's life, showing the highs and the lows of their life.

If there are children, ensure that they too are involved in the task of celebrating the life of your loved one. Let them write down their memories. Let them draw a picture—even write a poem

Personal Notes; A 'history' of my loved one

THERE IS HOPE

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15.57)

In a world which can seem very bleak, not least when a loved one dies, there is hope – for the Christian faith is by definition a resurrection faith. Death is not the end: there is a life beyond death; there is a world to come.

Hope in Jesus

Most Christian funeral services begin with those wonderfully reassuring words of Jesus: ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die; and all those who live and believe in me will never die’. (John 11.25). Here we have a reminder that our hope of life after death is not based in any belief in the so-called ‘immortality of the soul’, but rather is anchored in the resurrection of Jesus. It is because Jesus lives that we may live. The risen Lord Jesus, wrote the Apostle Paul, is ‘the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised’. (1 Corinthians 15.22) In other words, the resurrection of Jesus does not show that it is possible for a person to rise from the dead—rather it opens up the way to life for us all. For the Scriptures teach that in rising from the dead Jesus has blazed a trail through the valley of the shadow of death down which those who have put their trust in him may also follow.

Hope in the resurrection of the body

Christians have expressed their hope of life after death in terms of the resurrection of the body. In the words of the Apostle Paul ‘This is how it will be when the dead are raised to life. When the

body is buried, it is mortal; when raised it will be immortal. When buried, it is ugly and weak; when raised, it will be beautiful and strong. When buried, it is a physical body; when raised, it will be a spiritual body'. (1 Corinthians 15.42–44) Clearly bodily resurrection is not the same as physical 'resuscitation'—ours will be an improved 'spiritual' body.

This concept of the resurrection of the body expresses continuity. It implies that along with change there will be continuity. Our bodies experience change already in this life. Biochemists inform us that during a seven year cycle the molecular composition of our bodies is completely changed. In this sense there is no relationship between our bodies as children and our bodies as young people, let alone our bodies as old people. and yet there is continuity. This continuity is expressed through personality. At death, however, our bodies undergo far more radical change. And yet the new life God gives has a relationship with the old. In spite of all the changes it is still the same person. Just as a message is the same, whether spoken in words or transmitted by e-mail or flashed in Morse Code, so we shall be the same persons whatever the 'material form' in which our personalities are expressed.

The resurrection of the body also expresses community, for the body is the way in which we communicate with others. If life in the world to come were to be just a solitary existence, then maybe a 'soul' would have been sufficient. But life in the world to come is life together. True, it will be a new way of living together. Relationships will not be exclusive as we know them (see Luke 20.27–38), but relationships there will be. Being reunited with our loved ones is part of our hope, but our relationships will be transformed in God.

The resurrection of the body is a wonderful hope and is something to be looked forward to. Something of the spirit of the resurrection is expressed by this epitaph on an old tombstone: 'The body of B. Franklin, printer, like the cover of an old book its contents turned out and stripped of its lettering and gilding, lies

here, food for worms. But the work shall not be lost; for it will, as he believed, appear once more in a new and more elegant edition, corrected and improved by the Author’.

Hope of heaven

Whatever else heaven is, it is a place where God is. There is much that we do not know about heaven. Speculations about the furniture of heaven, as indeed about the temperature of hell, are futile. But there is one thing we do know. Heaven is where Jesus is. It is this one thing we can say with certainty about our loved ones: they are with Jesus, and they will be with him for ever. ‘Let not your hearts be troubled’.

Christians believe that death is not the end, but rather marks the beginning of a new life free from ‘grief or crying or pain’ (Revelation 21.4). What a wonderful hope is ours!

Hope for all?

Will everybody go to heaven? Is there hope for all? What about loved ones who did not go to church, who apparently never put their trust in Jesus as their Saviour and their Lord? For Christians whose relative or friend was not a Christian, this can be a real issue.

The truth is that the Bible speaks as much as about hell as it speaks about heaven. As Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, there are two ways—one which leads to hell and one which leads to life (Matthew 7.13,14). The Bible does not teach that all will be saved. There is an alternative to heaven.

Furthermore, the Bible clearly teaches that Jesus is the only way to God. Indeed, Jesus himself said: ‘I am the way, the truth and the life. No one goes to the Father except by me’. (John 14.6) ‘Salvation’, said Peter, ‘is to be found through Jesus alone’. (Acts 4.12)

But the Bible also teaches that God does not wish to exclude anybody from his heaven. ‘God our Saviour’, said Paul, ‘wants everybody to be saved and to come to know the truth. (1 Timothy 2.4) Where people consciously choose to reject God’s gift of life in Jesus, then sadly that choice will be respected. However, as Abraham discovered, ‘the judge of all the earth has to act justly’. (Genesis 18.25) The Bible makes clear that where people have never heard of Jesus, or never really understood what Jesus has done for them, or who have rejected Jesus because perhaps of the unloving or hypocritical actions of his followers, then God will judge them according to the light which they have received (Acts 17.27; Romans 2.12–16). So there is hope, even when a loved one was perhaps not a committed Christian. In the words of F. W. Faber’s great hymn

There’s a wideness in God’s mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
There’s a kindness in his justice
Which is more than liberty.

For the love of God is broader
Than the measures of our mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.

There is hope for all—precisely because of the love of God which we see demonstrated so clearly in his Son Jesus Christ.

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