

Finishing Well
A conversation about living for Jesus on the back nine of life

Conversation Nine: Death – The Last Thing We Want to Talk or Think About

“...yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.” (16th Century Orthodox Hymn)

“Death is real, but it is not final.” – John Eaves, *Finishing Well*, p. 119

Prepare your heart for your departure. If you are wise, you will expect it every hour.... And when the time of departure comes, go joyfully to meet it, saying, ‘Come in peace. I knew you would come, and I have not neglected anything that could help me on the journey.’

—St. Isaac the Syrian, *Meditation on Death*



A few questions to start the conversation

- Why do you think death is a subject that most of us avoid talking or thinking about?
- There’s a tradition in Christianity called the “good death.” Heard of it? What do you think it means?
- When in your life did you first experience the death of someone close to you? What was it like?
- What did you tell your children about death? At what age did you begin to talk to your children about death?

1. Key Scripture

Psalm 116:15 (NIV) Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.

Luke 23:39-43 (NIV) One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

John 3:16 (NIV) For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

John 6:39-40 (NIV) And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. ⁴⁰ For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

John 14:1-4 (NIV) Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. ² In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going.

1 Corinthians 15:54-58 (NIV) When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." ⁵⁵ "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸ Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

2 Corinthians 5:8-9 (NIV) We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.

Revelation 21:1-4 (NIV) Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

2. A 1999 Letter from Jerry White, then International President of The Navigators



*To know Christ, make Him known,
and help others do the same™*

Jerry sent this letter to Navigator staff around the world after being at the funeral for the son of a Navigator family who was killed in a car accident...

Dear Navigator Family,

Once again I have been caused to reflect on the brevity and the preciousness of life. On Saturday, 10 April, 21-year-old Shawn H. was struck and instantly killed by an out-of-control automobile. Shawn had stopped to put snow chains on his car in the mountains of California when another car spun out on the icy road. Shawn is the son of Sam and Shirley H., long-time Navigator staff.

As Mary and I attended the memorial service, with about 40 Navigator staff and over 600 friends, I was struck by the reality that we truly do not know what a day may bring forth (Prov 27:1). I also thought of how fleeting our life is, yet how precious—both our own and that of our loved ones.

None of us wants to die. We want to live, even when life itself is troubled and difficult. And we certainly do not want our loved ones to die. We would rather die in their place, especially in place of our children. Though we know that *to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord*, we supremely value our life here, for it is the only life we have experienced.

The death of a loved one is one way God causes us to think about His love and His promise of eternal life in heaven—where there are no more tears. It makes us touch the edge of eternity. But it is still a boundary we cross only once, not to return. We shrink from death, as the unknown. And death remains a mystery, even though it is addressed in the Scriptures.

James 4:14 (NIV) Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

1 Peter 1:24 (NIV) All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall....

Psalms 39:4-6 (NIV) Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life. ⁵ You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man's life is but a breath. Selah ⁶ Man is a mere phantom as he goes to and fro: He bustles about, but only in vain; he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it.

Psalms 89:48 (NIV) What man can live and not see death, or save himself from the power of the grave? Selah

Philippians 1:21-23 (NIV) For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far....

Death is the mark of sin, Satan's last hope of victory. Yet for those in Christ, death loses its power. Thus, we need not be shackled with regrets for the past or fear of the future.

1 Corinthians 15:26 (NIV) The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

1 Corinthians 15:54-57 (NIV) When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." ⁵⁵

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

As I spoke to a group of military men and women at an Easter sunrise service, I was deeply impressed with the significance of Christ's Resurrection.

John 11:24-25 (NIV) Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies....

John 14:19 (NIV) Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.

1 Corinthians 15:14-18 (NIV) And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵ More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.

So, what is my response to the realization of the sorrows of my life and the death of friends and loved ones? It is to live life to the fullest—to value every hour God gives and to live to the glory of God, it is to see that I am here for a purpose.

James 1:2-4 (NIV) Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Psalms 23:4 (NIV) Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

1 Corinthians 6:20 (NIV) you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your body.

Psalms 118:24 (NIV) This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

We serve the future. We serve the purposes of God in our generation. We live by hope both in the present and in the life to come. We live knowing there is a lost world to reach with the message of hope in Christ. So, I would encourage us all to live in the present, rejoice in the Lord, live fully and live well.

Acts 13:36 (NIV) For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed.

Romans 5:3-4 (NIV) Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope.

1 Corinthians 15:58 (NIV) Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Co-laboring with you,

Jerry White

3. Dodging death and keeping it at a distance

Death is usually the last thing we want to think or talk about. Our culture encourages us to push death away, to push it into the background.

Quotes from Rob Moll, The Art of Dying – Living Fully Into the Life to Come (sections 3 & 4):

For Christians in most times and places, death has been a routine part of life. But during the last century, Americans have embraced an unprecedented denial of death, an unprecedented evasion of death. In general, we have removed death from our homes. People no longer die there; corpses no longer repose there before burial. We no longer allow people to say that they are dying—rather, they are ‘battling’ an illness. Far from encouraging the perilously ill to recognize the imminence of their death, we encourage the sick (and their doctors) to fight death—but not to prepare for it. (p.10)

Our culture simply doesn’t know what to think about death. Through medicine and science we know more about death and how to forestall it than ever before. Yet we know very little about caring for a dying person. (p.13)

All the things that once prepared us for death, regular experience with illness and death, public grief and mourning, a culture and philosophy of death, interaction with the elderly, as well as the visibility of our own aging—are virtually gone from our lives. (p.15, quoting Virginia Morris)

For most of the last century, death has moved steadily away from view. (p.15)

As the place of death moved to the hospital, people became less familiar with the sights and sounds of the very ill. Medical personnel took over the intimate care of the patient, often simply because their expertise was required. These changes allowed patients to survive—at least temporarily—diseases that would have killed them. But through those exchanges, we forgot what death looks like, and we lost something. We now keep death at a distance....

We have forgotten how to behave as caregivers or simply family and friends. We act clumsily and awkwardly around the grieving, often complicating their mourning. We’re clueless about what to say to a person on his deathbed. We ourselves are left feeling confused and uncertain about death’s meaning and its affect on our faith and lives. (p.16)

We avoid death or even fear it because death is an evil, the horrible rending of a person from her body, for loved ones, from the ability to be fully in God’s image.... Jesus wept at Lazarus’s death. The apostle Paul called death the last enemy. Death is indeed evil. (p.26)

4. The Christian tradition of the “good death” – What does it mean for a Christian to die well?

I was unsatisfied with Christian responses that either required the prolonging of life—no matter the physical, mental, relational or financial suffering involved—or that pinpointed what treatments might be appropriate under what circumstances. Instead, I wanted to find a Christian response to these issues that would be useful under any medical circumstance, that upheld the value of life and the dignity of the person.

What I discovered was the Christian tradition of the good death. While the particulars of medical technology in the twenty-first century are unique, every age has challenged Christians with difficult questions of how to die well. And every age, including our own, has wrestled with how to teach fellow Christians the meaning of death and the ways they could practice it faithfully. Each age recognized that how a culture approaches death precisely reflects what it believes and how it approaches life. While this is true for any culture, Christians must also reconcile their approach to death with Jesus, the Son of God, whose death and resurrection provides a very specific example of how to die and offers the hope of all Christians of a bodily resurrection in the last day. If we Christians really do enjoy the life of God, who is victorious over death, our life on earth is therefore cast in a very different light. (pp.20-21)

Century after century Christians rehearsed and applied their beliefs about death; throughout their lives they envisioned dying so that at the moment of death they would be prepared. They sought to die reconciled to God and their human brothers and sisters. They gave evidence of their faith in the life to come, either by professing it or by describing their deathbed vision of the heavenly places, often both. They offered comfort to surviving loved ones who desired to hear the last words of the dying who were so close to the eternal enjoyment of life with God.

Death, Christians believed, was not just a medical battle to be fought, though they did use medicine for healing. Nor was death simply about the loss of precious relationships to be mourned. Instead, this was a spiritual event that required preparation. The dying performed it in public as evidence of their faith and to provide instructions to others. Rather than waiting for illness to overtake them, these Christians were actively involved in their own dying, in control—to the extent possible—of the dying process. Injured at the death of a fellow Christian, the church community then rallied together to grieve and to express once again their faith and knit themselves together in a new way. (pp.21-22)

While the question of when or whether to withdraw a feeding tube is still difficult to answer, there are at least certain values we can apply. As we assist others through the process of treating a terminal illness or as we contemplate our own answers to such questions, we can seek to perform these elements of the good death. Whatever the medical decisions made, under any circumstances we can express our faith in God, our love for one another, our hope in the resurrection. Having done this, we will have been faithful, in the eyes of fellow believers throughout history, to God and our neighbor. In the culmination of our lives, we will have said and done what was most important. (p.22)

A death that comes after heroic medical efforts does not allow for those things that Christians have traditionally sought in their own deaths and those of their loved ones. Throughout Christian history, Christians have sought to die well. A death that doesn't afford the opportunity of last words, for reconciliation, for repentance and for spiritual preparation for the next world is not a good death, according to traditional Christian teaching. (p.38)

For nineteen centuries Christians in different forms and different cultures understood that their attitude toward death should be infused with hope, for they worshiped a Lord who had defeated death. They died and cared for the dying differently than others in pre-Christian societies... The first Christians distinguished themselves in Roman society by remaining in the cities when epidemics struck, caring for the ill and burying the dead when the rest of society refused to touch anyone who was ill. (p.40)

Of all groups of people Christians should be able to face dying well. After all, at the heart of our confession is a Redeemer who died. (p.47, quoting C. Ben Mitchell)

For the dying person spiritual issues are paramount. And the spiritual preparation necessary for a good, faithful death accumulates slowly over a lifetime. A good death does not occur in a vacuum. Also necessary are a supportive family and caring spiritual community alongside a medical community able to provide quality care consistently with the goals of a patient. (pp. 47-48)

Since the beginning of the church Christians have cared for the dying and sought to practice their deaths in ways that express belief in Christ's death and his resurrection. These practices sought to honor the body as the image of God. If God became a human, and even he had to die, Christians recognized that to die is not something to fight against, though it was not a part of God's original design. And if Christ was raised from the dead, Christians believe that death does not hold any power over the faithful. (pp.54-44)

As anyone who has observed a good death can attest, it is in many ways a life-changing event for those watching. While tremendously sad and even horrible, a good death can also be beautiful and deeply moving. Such deaths were to be shared by members of the Christian community who were thereby encouraged in their faith. When death is public it is harder for the rest of us to become afraid of it. There is less mystery as we see how the physical body ceases to function. (p.64)

The Christian art of dying is not a denial of the awfulness of death. In fact, Christians recognize, as Paul did, that death is the last enemy.... The Christian death is an embodiment of a belief in a God who has defeated death and will give life to our own mortal bodies. As we care for the dying and make choices about our own last days, we stand positioned to regain a deeper understanding of this eternal triumph and the hope of Christ's resurrection. (p.68)

5. What do you tell your young children about death?

From Joey O'Connor, Heaven's Not a Crying Place:

Telling your children about life and death begins with teaching them the wonderful truths about heaven found in God's Word. Your goal is to fill their hearts with the hope promised by Jesus in the Gospels. The night before His own death, Jesus told His disciples not to let their heart be troubled, because He was going to prepare a place for them in heaven (John 14:1-4).

The apostle Paul, writing to the church in Thessalonica, said that though we may grieve the death of a loved one, we do not 'grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.'

The Christian distinctive is hope. As a parent, you have the privilege of modeling this hope to your children as you pay special attention to their questions, particularly when your family is experiencing the painful death of a loved one.

After teaching your children about the hope found only in Christ, what do you say when they ask you about the D-word? First, explain death as a physical reality that happens to every living thing on Earth. Here are a few ideas:

- Death is not sleeping: Children are often told that dead people are sleeping, or they hear confusing terms like 'eternal slumber' or 'eternal rest.' A better explanation is that when a person dies, his body does not work anymore.
- Distinguish between physical and spiritual death: Young children often think that death is reversible, as in cartoons. From a biblical perspective, all physical death is permanent, but if we are spiritually alive in Christ we will live forever with God. Spiritual death means eternal separation from God.
- Death is not just for old people: It's easy for kids to think that just old people die. Why? They're often told, 'Grandpa died because he was old.' No, Grandpa died because he stopped breathing, and when a person stops breathing, his heart stops. People of all ages die. Babies. Children. Teenagers. Adults. And old people.
- Death is not just for plants, bugs and animals: Flowers die, bugs die, animals die and even people die. When we see dead plants, bugs and animals, these common experiences give us the opportunity to explain that all created things will someday die.
- Everyone one who is sick does not die: It's not uncommon for children to develop a fear of hospitals if a sick relative died in one. Explain to your kids that everyone who goes to hospitals does not die.

Next, avoid religious euphemisms that can confuse children about the nature of God and heaven. When a child hears that his mother 'went home to be with the Lord,' that may be theologically true. But we need to explain it in a sensitive way to make it clear that she did not choose to abandon her child and husband at home on Earth.

Last, funerals give you the opportunity to teach your child the importance of mourning and how to grieve in healthy ways. If a child wants to attend the funeral, prepare him ahead of time as to what he can expect to see and experience. Explain the language of funerals—for example, what's a casket, a grave, a hearse, a widow, etc. if a child doesn't want to attend, especially a small child, don't force him to go. Older children may want to be involved by reading a poem or saying a Scripture verse. Funerals provide a meaningful way for children to celebrate the life of someone they love and share their grief with the rest of their family.

By giving your children honest and clear answers to their questions about life and death, you build heaven in their hearts by instilling hope and faith in God during the difficult moments of their lives. Jesus promised we would have trouble in this world, but He also promised heaven's not a crying place. Your kids are counting on you. Every little conversation about life and death is a building block of faith, hope and love.

6. Talking about Death: the hardest conversation you will ever have with a loved one

From Rob Moll, The Art of Dying – Living Fully Into the Life to Come (sections 6 & 7):

Conversations about our values and those of our loved ones at the end of life are certainly not easy.... Even if we think that the time has come to have an end-of-life discussion, it can be nerve-wracking. We don't want people to think we are anticipating their deaths. And we don't want to force such an unpleasant subject on another person. Yet one of the most important things to do, in order to create an environment where a loved one can die well having complete relationships with family and friends, is to have this most difficult of conversations. (pp. 85-86)

...today we have no more rituals, no manners to guide our behavior, no expectations to ease the path into these conversations. It is harder now that we have to start from scratch but nevertheless essential that we try. And the sooner and more often we discuss our end-of-life wishes the better off we and our families will be. And the better our deaths will be. (p.87)

In such conversations, caregivers or potential caregivers should ask how someone would like to die. Hospital deaths and at-home deaths are different ways of dying, not just different locations. Someone who wants to have everything possible done to keep him alive will want to be where the most medical options are available, though it may limit time with family and spiritual activity. Someone whose ultimate wish is to die among family in a comfortable and familiar place will probably need to forgo some medical options. Learning this and other desires of parents, siblings and friends is often necessary for those who are terminally ill. It is a conversation between caregivers and patient, where each needs to be heard. (p.87)

But, Fisher (David Fisher a hospice doctor) says when patients understand that so-called heroic measures performed on the terminally ill rarely add value to a life even if they extend it, they'd typically rather have peace. (p.88)

Fisher has learned a few things that he recommends to others who are having such a conversation, whether with someone who is very ill or quite healthy. 'I always try to frame my discussions around goals of care,' Fisher says. 'That helps people better frame their decisions. If their goal is to live as long as possible, trying every treatment available, then we'll do that. But if a patient's goal is to not be in pain, or not suffer, or stay at home, or see a grand-daughter graduate, then we can work toward that.' If possible, it is important to have these conversations outside the hospital. (p.89)

...I think a big thing that contributes to a good end of life is communication. (p.89, quoting Faith Zwirchitz, an intensive care nurse)

Unless a family knows they want something else, the direction of modern health care leans is toward more technology and intervention. Faith says, often simply for fear of a lawsuit. 'You can keep people alive for quite some time on machines,' Faith says. And once the technology has started, it's tough to remove it. (p.89)

In his essay, 'I Want to Burden My Loved Ones,' Gilbert Meilaender gently argues against the application of living wills or advance directives as the modern fix-all to the tendency of doctors to rely too heavily on medicine. We say we don't want to burden our families with making difficult choices when we cannot make medical decisions on our own, so we turn to legal documents that outline what we would and would not want should we ever be unable to tell a doctor ourselves.

But Meilaender... says that this appeal to a piece of paper overturns what families are supposed to do—carry each other's burdens. When we allow someone else to care for us, make decisions for us, Meilaender says, we most often discover that they are willing and eager to pick up our burdens.

'It is, therefore, essential,' Meilaender writes, 'that we structure the medical decision-making situation in such a way that conversation is forced among the doctor, the medical caregivers, the patient's family, and perhaps still others such as a pastor.'

Meilaender says that advance directives are not bad or wrong. But it is best when a range of people—family, doctors, pastors and someone appointed by the patient with legal authority to make decisions—are a part of the conversation about what medical care a patient desires. When an advance directive helps get these conversations started, it can go a long way toward directing a patient's medical care, because patients and families need to talk about these tough issues. (p.90)

Questions to ask doctors about terminal illness...

- What is the exact diagnosis? Learn all you can about the disease and how it will affect someone who suffers from it.
- What is the natural prognosis of the condition without treatment? If you were to allow the disease to advance, what would happen? Some diseases are less painful than others, some may allow life to continue normally for some time.
- What are the treatment options for the disease? What are the chances of success? Some treatments are more painful than others'; some may be worse than the actual disease.
- What are the potential complications of the treatment under consideration? Some treatments are more likely than others to put families in ethical dilemmas. (pp.91-92)

A patient's readiness to die translates into what care he or she wants. Because these values are very personal and can change as a patient feels that death approaches, families must be in conversation. Often family members have to implement a dying person's wishes. 'Living wills,' like the Five Wishes, simply give legal enforcement (and therefore a guarantee to the hospital that it will not be sued) to a patient's desires. However, they can always be changed or rejected entirely (simply by throwing it out).

But the point is not to pin down what doctors should or should not do in any unforeseeable circumstance. It is to provide an opportunity for families to discuss a patient's medical desires. Because our views may change, because we cannot know what medical options may be relevant, or what their ethical or relational implications may be, our conversations should simply reflect our values: this is what I want my last days to look like. (pp.92-93)

7. The Christian Funeral

Yet what we do after someone dies matters, and not only because the value we place on memorializing someone reflects our value of the person. Christian funerals, of course, may be joyous celebrations. But whether somber or celebratory, faithful believers must gather to remember and honor their deceased brothers and sisters. Through these rituals the injured community acknowledges its loss, instructs the living and begins the difficult process of rebuilding. A funeral begins the reintegration of a mourning believer into the community of Christians. It reinforces the belief that the deceased has gone to be with God, which is the same destiny for all Christians. And it offers hope that just as Christ rose from the grave, so will we rise again. A funeral service does all this in a way that worships God—whether by somber reflection or joyful, hand-clapping celebration—for his salvation and wisdom. In this way also the funeral instructs the community on the nature of death, an evil, God has defeated, and from which God can bring good. (p.67)

Though mourning can begin when a death is foreseen, it only anticipates the actual event. The funeral is when a mourner is for the first time among society as a different person. Between a death and the funeral, families are often caught in the chaos of death. The funeral begins to give shape to grief as the community expresses its faith and ties the swirling emotions following death into the larger story of humanity's fall into sin, redemption and the re-creation of the world. The funeral is an essential element in the mourning process and a chance for the church to, first, begin reintegrating mourners into the community, and second, to publicly express the church's and the deceased's faith and hope. (pp.118–119)

After centuries of Christian tradition, in the last 150 years funerals have slowly lost their Christian emphasis. They became memorial ceremonies calculated simply to soothe the grief of the bereaved rather than being worship services in which a community journeyed to the final resting place of the deceased....

Christians, along with the rest of society, had ceased to see the process of the funeral as a religiously significant event. (p.110)

In this set of funeral rituals—the visitation, procession, funeral and burial—the grieving congregation enacted the stories of the Bible, texts at the heart of the community of faith. Like Mary and the apostle John, who stood at the foot of the cross, Christians attended the dying. Like the woman with the flask of ointment who anointed Jesus and washed his feet with her hair, they prepared the body for burial. They imitated the grieving Christ who mourned at Lazarus’s grave and the children of Jacob who interred their father’s bones with his ancestors. These physical actions embodied their grief and pointed them, in hope, to the day their beloved dead would rise again. (p.121)

A Christian funeral is more than a memorial. The service, of course, does indeed remember the person who has died. This is an important piece of the funeral. It honors the loved one and allows the bereaved to publicly express that person’s significance in their lives and in the life of the community. We make a big deal of something that is a big deal....

But a Christian funeral does more than that. One funeral director I worked with said he served families best, allowing them to mourn and grieve in the most healthy way, when he was able to bring together all the traditional elements of a visitation and funeral. This allows grieving people to accomplish two things: 1. Worship God, who—contrary to our immediate experience of mourning a dead loved one—has defeated death, and 2. Reknit a community that has been fractured. (pp.125–126)

In some ways a funeral is simply an excuse to publicly get together. Gathering around food, at a funeral home or cemetery, or at home visitations is an end in itself. A healthy community and the recovering bereaved simply need to be together. Funerals can be done both well and inexpensively, but the purpose is not to get it done cheaply. Singing hymns, reading Scripture and hearing God’s Word preached—all with an ear toward the purpose of a funeral—is how the church displays its hope. By doing so the congregation not only gives witness to the rest of the world, but it also serves to reaffirm our resurrection hope. (p.126)

8. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord

“Far Better”, from Jerry Bridges’ blog, “The Navigator Holiness Day by Day” (March 10, 2019):

Psalm 16:11 “In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

The period between our death and the still-future resurrection of our bodies is usually called the intermediate state. The Bible actually tells us little about this period, but what it does say is very encouraging. In 2 Corinthians 5:8 Paul said that he “would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (NIV), and in Philippians 1:23 he said, ‘My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.’

Taking Paul’s statements along with Hebrews 12:22-24, we can say that in the intermediate state we’ll be with Christ; we’ll be in the presence of thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly (perhaps still hearing those seraphs of Isaiah 6:1-3 who call out antiphonally, ‘holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty’); we’ll be with all believers of all ages; we’ll be perfectly conformed to Christ in our spirits; and we’ll be in a state that is far better than anything we can imagine.

It’s difficult for us to visualize an existence in heaven without the benefit of our physical senses; or, for that matter, a physical brain. Yet we need to remember that God has existed eternally without a physical body. And even the angels apparently exist only in spirit (though some have assumed a physical body at times for specific purposes). Though we cannot understand how these things will be, we need to submit our minds to the teaching of Scripture and look forward to the time when we also will be with Christ, when our spirits will be made perfect, and then we’ll be in a state that’s far better than our best conditions on earth.

9. What would you do if only 10 days of life remained?

From Carl Boender, *CBMC Magazine* (Summer 1999), p.15:

Awhile back someone asked me a very direct question: 'If you had 10 days to live, what would you do differently from what you are doing now?'

I thought about this for a few moments and replied I probably would not change much if anything. I felt my relationship with my wife, Annette, was right. I didn't know of anything I needed to straighten out with our children. And I felt I was walking closely with the Lord.

Yes, I concluded, I believed I was okay. I didn't want to die, but if I only had days, I felt I was okay.

As we talked, however, an idea started to form in my mind. Finally I stopped our conversation and said, 'I have something!' Yes, I would get very intentional with my Christian brothers. In fact, I might even become obnoxious. Obnoxious about what?

Their walk with Jesus. Not the ministry of CBMC, not Sunday school, the church board, the feeding of the poor, visiting the sick, or any of a dozen other ministries we could be involved in. Just their walk with Jesus.

In 1 Corinthians 1:9, we are called into fellowship with Jesus Christ, our Lord, not into service. Oswald Chambers, in his classic devotional book, *My Utmost for His Highest*, says in his January 18 entry, 'The greatest competitor of devotion to Jesus is service to Him.'

My greatest struggle is keeping my eyes on Jesus, not on the things I am doing for Him. I believe this is true as well for most, if not all, men in CBMC.

I would urge—even push—each CBMC group to stop, analyze what they are doing, and make the necessary adjustments to focus on the bottom line; not their activities, but their personal lives and walk with the Lord.

Just how well do you know Jesus? (There is a great difference between really knowing Him and knowing about Him.) If He were to speak to you today, would you hear Him, or is life too fast and noisy for you to hear His sweet, still voice? Is your life so busy that time alone with Him seems just about impossible? Is planning the next sales meeting, office call, achieving a larger quota, or a building expansion crowding out your time with Him?

If someone were to give you just 10 more days to live, what would your #1 priority be? It probably wouldn't be your business or work. Most of us would not even bother to show up for work! What would the top priority be? One last vacation? A family get-together? A second honey-moon? Deciding what to have inscribed on your headstone?

By the way, this is the first day of the next 10 days, or however long God gives us to live, to get our priorities in line.

I would suggest we start with Matthew 22:37-40, then move to Luke 14:26. Matthew calls us to love Jesus with all we have, and Luke calls us to such a high level that anything else we might like would look like hate in comparison to how we love Jesus.

One more thing: Desire without performance doesn't count!

Matthew 22:37-40 (NIV) Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Luke 14:26 (NIV) If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters--yes, even his own life--he cannot be my disciple.

10. Keep your fork

There was a woman who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and had been given three months to live. So, as she was getting her things 'in order,' she contacted her pastor and had him come to her house to discuss certain aspects of her final wishes.

She told him which songs she wanted sung at the service, what scriptures she would like read, and what outfit she wanted to be buried in. The woman also requested to be buried with her favorite Bible. Everything was in and the pastor was preparing to leave when the woman suddenly remembered something very important to her.

"There's one more thing,' she said excitedly.

"What's that?" came the pastor's reply.

"This is very important,' the woman continued, "I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand."

The pastor stood looking at the woman, not knowing quite what to say.

"That surprises you, doesn't it? the woman asked.

"Well to be honest, I'm puzzled by the request," said the pastor.

The woman explained. "In all my years of attending church socials and potluck dinners, I always remember that when the dishes of the main course were being cleared, someone would inevitably lean over and say, 'Keep your fork.' It was my favorite part because I knew that something better was coming... like velvety chocolate cake or deep-dish apple pie. Something wonderful, and with substance! So, I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand and I want them to wonder, 'What's with the fork?' Then I want you to tell them: 'Keep your fork. The best is yet to come.'

The pastor's eyes welled up with tears of joy as he hugged the woman good-bye. He knew this would be one of the last times he would see her before her death. But he also knew that the woman had a better grasp of heaven than he did. She knew that something better was coming.

– Author Unknown