

The Standard Bearer

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Special issue

“Since by man came death....”

Jesus' prayer for us to be with Him

Rev. Rodney Kleyn

Confronted by our mortality and our last enemy—death

Rev. Kenneth Koole

An honorable, Christian burial

Prof. Barrett Gritters

The ministry of sympathy

Rev. Jonathan Mahtani

Society's disdain for God-given life

Rev. John Marcus



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Editor's note

Death. The last enemy. When it comes, death tears apart body and soul, leaving behind sorrow, loss, and pain. In God's sovereign providence, death is very much on the minds of people all around the world as new counts of deaths caused by the coronavirus are reported daily in the news. When this issue was planned, we knew nothing of the scourge that was coming.

Death itself is painful. It is not natural, for it is God's punishment for man's sin.

The child of God does not have a *terror* of death, for our Lord went through death that He "might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime

subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:14, 15). By faith in that Lord, the believer *knows* that his death is not punishment for his sins, but rather "the abolishing of sin, and the passage into eternal life" (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 16).

But that does not mean that dying or losing a beloved one through death is painless. It hurts.

This special edition is devoted to issues that believers face related to dying, death, and our hope in Christ. We send it forth with the prayer that it will help those who mourn, those who are watching a loved one die, and those who are facing death personally. It will demonstrate that God's unchanging Word gives us as believers the instruction and comfort we need to face death by faith and in hope.



Meditation

Rev. Rodney Kleyn, pastor of Covenant of Grace Protestant Reformed Church in Spokane, Washington

Jesus' prayer for us to be with Him

Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.

John 17:24

Do you meditate on what Jesus is doing for us in heaven today?

At the beginning of this lengthy discourse (John chapters 14-17), He tells His disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you...that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:2, 3). At the end of the discourse He utters His high-priestly prayer, and concludes with this petition, "Father, I will that they also...be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory."

Today, Jesus prepares a place for us and He prays for us to be with Him there.

A beautiful petition, prayed for each one of His own, and answered, one by one as we depart this life, and perfectly when Father's house of many mansions is filled.

Certainly, this is also a petition we pray for ourselves. This is the desire of a suffering elderly believer: "having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ, which is far better" (Phil. 1:23). This is the cry of the struggling-with-sin believer: "O wretched man that I am! who

shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24). It is a prayer of great confidence: "We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord" (II Cor. 5:8). It is a prayer that expresses not only a future longing, but also the longing of every child of God as in this life we seek the Savior's presence in His Word and through prayer.

It is our petition, but we pray it because, first, this is the prayer of the Savior for us. He wants us to be with Him. He wants to be with us.

Marvelous thought for a sinner!

The heaven-enthroned King, the Lord of the universe, our Advocate with the Father, the ever-living Intercessor makes this prayer for *me*!

The Savior's request

The Savior's request has two parts.

First, "that they...be with me where I am."

These words describe the essence of heaven, and the joy that will be ours there. Heaven is not merely a place nor an empty mansion of many rooms, but "Father's house" in which we will be "present with the Lord."

That means a rich personal fellowship with the Savior. He will not be far off in the distance, and we mill-

ing around the edges hoping to catch a glimpse of Him or if possible to touch His garment. No, we will sit with Him, eat with Him, talk with Him, and enjoy Him face to face. Loved ones who have died in the Lord, who used to sit and talk with us, now sit and talk with Jesus.

It will also mean a fullness of understanding. Here we have so many unanswered questions, not merely about trivial pursuits, but about the big questions of life. The Scriptures certainly give us all we need to know for Christian living and for our salvation, but there are the hidden ways of God and the world unseen. “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (I Cor. 13:12).

Further, to be with Jesus will mean for us a complete deliverance and transformation. That will come first in the perfection of the soul, which will be “delivered from the body of this death” and “clothed upon with our house which is from heaven” (Rom. 7:24; II Cor. 5:2). The struggle with sin will be finished and sighing and tears will cease. How much anguish of soul do we not know in the present? “We that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened” (II Cor. 5:4). All those deep pains will be replaced: “In thy presence is fullness of joy” (Ps. 16:11). And, finally, when soul and body are reunited at His appearing, “We shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (I John 3:2).

The second part of the Savior’s petition is, “that they may behold my glory.”

To “behold” is much more than simply seeing. It is to stand still and be overwhelmed by what you see. We walk a mountain path and emerge from the trees to see a panorama of snow-covered peaks, and we stop to “behold” the scene, to take it in. We are overwhelmed. So much more will we be overwhelmed when suddenly we are brought into the glorious presence of Christ.

“Glory” is the radiance, the brilliance, of all God’s perfections—His justice, mercy, holiness, wisdom, grace. When Moses saw this, his face shone. This glory Christ possessed eternally (John 17:5), and glimpses of it were seen during His earthly ministry (John 1:14), but for the most part it was veiled. Now, in His exalted human nature He possesses and radiates all the unveiled glory of the Father.

When we behold this glory, we will fall down and worship Him as did John—“And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead” (Rev. 1:17). So overwhelming will His glory be that it will be the power that transforms us to reflect His glory. Heaven will not be about us and our glory, but His glory shining from us.

And when we see Him in His glory, we will be filled up.

When I in righteousness at last
Thy glorious face shall see,
When all the weary night is past,
And I awake with Thee
To view the glories that abide,
Then, then I shall be satisfied.

(Psalter #32, stanza 4)

The Savior’s confidence

For their comfort, Jesus uttered this petition in the hearing of His disciples. It is a petition that breaths with confidence. Not merely a wish or a hope, nor even simply a request, but really a pronouncement. This is an expression of His divine will, “I will....”

He addresses God with confidence. “Father,” He says. *Father!*

So He taught His disciples to pray with a child-like confidence, and now He approaches God with that confidence. But there is a difference, for He does not pray as an adopted child of God, but as the eternal Son, equal Himself in power and glory to the Father. He comes to God not as a beggar, but as one with the Father. There is here a trinitarian expression. “Father, let us bring them to be with us, to behold our glory.” That is the force of this petition.

That comes out in His word choice. “*I will* that they be with me to behold my glory.” This sounds more like a demand than a petition. Should our children come requesting something this way, they would be rebuked. Nowhere in Scripture do God’s people pray like this, and certainly we must not come to God like this. But for Jesus this is entirely appropriate, for He expresses the will of God triune, the eternal, unchanging will and desire of God. “And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day” (John 6:39).

The ground for such confidence is God’s eternal, electing love. Twice, in this verse, Jesus speaks of those whom the Father has given to Him. That “giving” refers to eternal election. In election God entrusted the elect and the work of their salvation to His Son. Closely connected to that giving, and logically preceding it, is God’s eternal love for the Son, for we are “chosen in him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). Jesus appeals to the Father’s eternal love, “For thou hast loved me from before the foundation of the world.” If the Father would not bring His elect to glory, that would be paramount to God breaking off His eternal love for the Son. “Father, you have given them to me, and you love me, so you must bring them to glory.”

It is as He goes to the cross that Jesus prays this prayer for His own. That too is the foundation for His confidence. The cross will pay the price of their redemption. Not one of them will perish because “having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end” (John 13:1). There was no wavering in the Savior’s resolve to bring many sons to glory through His atoning death. Next, He would pay the price which would secure their place with Him in glory.

A prayer answered

“Father, that they may be with me.”

A few hours later, from the cross, Jesus would tell a dying thief, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.”

When that thief died, God answered this petition of Jesus. What the thief saw, and his immediate experience upon death, our words fail to express. We know a little from this life of the joy of the Savior’s presence

and love as we walk with Him, but the fullness is yet to come.

Ever to be with the Lord, that will be our eternal privilege. To behold His glory, that will be the ongoing activity of heaven.

O, blessed day, not only when Christ shall come, but also when I shall go to be with Him.

“And every man that hath this hope purifieth himself, even as he is pure” (I John 3:3).

The hope of being like Christ, and of our being permitted to dwell with Him eternally, will lead the believer to an earnestness in holy living. The one who has pure desires for heaven will seek the things above where Christ dwells and not the things on this earth (Col. 3:1, 2).

“Having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.”

Is this your hope and longing?



Editorial

Rev. Kenneth Koole, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches

Confronted by our mortality and our last enemy—death

For in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely *die*.

Genesis 2:17

For the wages of sin is *death*....

Romans 6:23

Since by man came *death*.... As in Adam all *die*....
I Corinthians 15:21, 22

And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and the name that sat on him was *death*, and Hell followed with him....

Revelation 6:8

The last enemy that shall be destroyed is *death*.
I Corinthians 15:26

Death, death, death. It marches through Scripture like a seemingly invincible army and down through history invades life like a monster with an insatiable appetite. Once it fixes its gaze on one, there is no escape. You are its next prey.

Without Christ in the picture, a horrible and terrifying reality. Even with Christ in the picture, death can be a horrible reality. But however horrible and life crushing are its jaws, with Christ in the picture and the knowledge that the Angel of our Lord stands by us as it approaches, the terror is gone. The knowledge that this great Angel stood by the side of our loved one as death seized him/her removes the despair. He is the Angel of the Lord with the drawn sword, the same who stood before Balaam in his attempt to curse Israel, but who was warned not to, “lest this sword bite *you*.”

This same Angel contended with Satan over the body of Moses (Jude 9) saying “The Lord rebuke thee,” and with authority and power escorted Moses to heaven body and soul. Christ Himself, by His Angel, there to confront that last enemy, death, and lay claim to His own. “Fear not. It is I. Not only is death here, but I am here too. Your Lord, its Master.”

Yet, for all that, death is an awful and horrible reality. In Scripture it is often likened to a living creature, a cold-blooded reptile, a great python governed by its appetite and by that cruel appetite alone. In itself, no

mercy, no compassion. Awful power, life-extinguishing reality.

So it was meant to be. After all, it was loosed upon the world because of man's sin, and was and is the judgment of God on sin. Its terrible destructive power underscores just how seriously God takes sin, this ignoring the Almighty, thinking to banish Him from His own creation, defying His holy will.

This was the transgression of our first parents, Adam and Eve. In the interest of satisfying their appetite with that one fruit forbidden them, a willingness to consider the serpent's suggestion that God, the God of truth and righteousness, was the great Deceiver!

Their Creator and Friend was not to be trusted but, rather, one who was withholding good from them so He could have it all for Himself—a selfish, self-serving God. What did Jehovah know about giving! Wanting to believe that about the God with whom they had walked in the garden, and doing so in order to justify feeding their appetites in disobedience, they were willing to declare Jehovah God a deceiver and not to be trusted.

The enormity of sin

As well, they were willing to have the whole creation, which had been entrusted to their care, suffer judgment for the satisfaction of their appetites, bringing violence and death. They were not going to deny their craving just to spare all those others!

Self-centered and self-serving to the extreme. Such is man in his sin.

The only just and righteous penalty? Death, and all that it entails.

Genesis makes plain, death of living souls, be they human or animal, is not the natural order of things. It is the visitation of God upon the enormity of man's self-centered, God-defaming choice and transgression.

The wages of sin is death. It is what sin earned and what we as sinners—defiant transgressors—deserve. The penalty for sin just and right.

Striking, as evidence of this, were the words that the crucified malefactor (that brutal highway man) spoke to his fellow malefactor when considering his own guilt and approaching death: “[W]e indeed justly: for we receive the due reward of our deeds” (Luke 23:41). Being sentenced to death was no more than they both deserved, as do we all. Only One born of woman was not deserving it: “...but this man hath done nothing amiss.”

Death is *covenantal* in character. For the wicked this is part of its horror; for the believer, its grief, sometimes of an overwhelming sort.

A covenantal penalty in character, first of all, be-

cause death was imposed not only upon the two who transgressed, but also upon their children—the sentence of death was visited upon their generations. Their first-born shows himself to be a murderer, slaying his brother by bludgeoning him to death. Grief added to grief.

And the same holds for the children we bring forth.

The life we give them is a dying life. As Scripture states, in Adam all *die*. Note, not simply, “*shall die*,” nor “have been *sentenced to die*,” but “all *die*”—present tense. They are dying as they live. And if outside Christ, a worse fate and reality awaits them at life's end.

Death imposed upon generations

And covenantal in character because death means the termination of the fellowship and friendships of life. Death takes that from one. The joy brought by a beloved spouse, or child, or parent is gone. The ability to converse and embrace done. Upon learning of the drowning of his college roommate, a young poet once wrote, “For the tender grace of a day that is dead, will never come back to me.”

For the believer whose loved one has been wrenched from this life there is a truth to that. A ripping has occurred, and one experiences a deep, running wound that goes to one's heart. Life will never be as it once was, not this side of the grave.

But for the ungodly the loss is *forever*. There will never be a mending. A loved one has entered the everlasting abyss. Gone forever. Hell is the termination of all relationships and joy. Loneliness without end. Just wrath and despair. That is all. One has been devoured by *death* and consumed. There will be no reunions in the everlasting abyss.

Faced by this reality and death's horror, man tries to reason it away.

There is no God says the fool (Ps. 14:1).

Because if there is no God, then no need to fear what follows death. No judgment, no wrath, no everlasting anguish. Whatever miseries and pains are in this life, at least death is not a door to even greater misery. Or is it?

Confronted by death, that is the best they can hope for.

But, as Scripture declares, it is a fool's hope and reasoning.

A fool is one who ignores what he knows to be reality, and then seeks to convince himself he can act contrary to it and yet escape the consequences.

The simple fact is, every man knows deep down that God *is*. There is the Creator to whom every man will give answer some day. It is how God has “wired” man. Man cannot escape this inner testimony. But in his folly he will suppress it, silence it, and continue

headlong in his sinful ways. This is why those who decide to deny God become angry when you say to them, “But you will have to answer someday to that very One whom you deny. Do not play the fool.” That is all you have to say. They know it to be true as they try their utmost to deny it. Do not think they will thank you for the reminder.

For the ungodly death is awful to contemplate, but what is to follow is even worse. It is what nightmares, not dreams, are made of. Their denial of God is as an apron of fig leaves, easily blown away.

No wonder their poets advise them: “Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light”([of life).

Or the philosophers try to dismiss death’s horror by arguing that really dying is just the normal order of things, the natural cycle of life. Like leaves and plants dying in the Fall to be recycled in nature, death is just part of the recycling process of life. Perhaps to be reincarnated in a tree or a tulip as the worms spread our remains?

My, what wonderful comfort!

To what foolish extremes mortal men go to escape being confronted by death as a life-sentence, to silence the sound of the tolling of the bells signaling the end of a life and of that second death that is sure to follow.

Indeed, to paraphrase what is written in I Corinthians 15:19: “If in this life only one has hope, he, like so many others, is most miserable.”

What death does to a person (be he a believing child of God) is not pretty. Its destructive power is awful to behold and then to contemplate. We bury it away. What it does to the dignity of a human being when it strikes is grievous. This I have witnessed with my own eyes. A ruined, vacant house.

And, as well, what death does to those left behind, especially when it comes with sudden violence, ripping a loved one from this life. Shattering, leaving only broken pieces behind. Who can withstand such death and its aftermath? It brings one to his knees.

Hope in God

But... *but*... is hope and gladness clean gone forever? Has God forgotten to be kind, that God whom we and our first parents have so highly offended? After all, *death* is His sentence and His “creature” set loose upon the human race and on creation itself. Is there no remedy? Just the sadness of farewell and the terror of what follows hereafter?

What can be said to the dying or to those struggling to cope with that empty spot due to a beloved family member taken and gone? What indeed.

Not this: this is evil. It is not God’s will or doing. It

is just the Devil’s mischief. God is too loving and kind to have willed this to happen.

Not so. For, if the calamity was not what God willed, He was, evidently, powerless to prevent it. And then, to what purpose is this death? Really, to no good purpose at all, except to magnify Satan’s power prevailing against God’s will. All comfort is gone. We cannot put our trust in or turn to God as the Almighty after all. Who can be sure whether death will not have the last word and mocking laughter after all!

Powerless to prevent it, powerless to overcome it.

Away with such nonsense!

To be sure, death is an awful power, and as far as we mortal men are concerned, invincible. But there is one mightier than death, and that is the Almighty One, who is Jehovah God.

And God be thanked, to those living in the midst of death in a creation under the sentence of death, this LORD God has given a Word, a Word that gives us mortal men words to withstand the horror of death. Words that give hope so real that the believer can stand at the lip of the grave and say “Oh death, where is thy sting? Oh grave, where is thy victory?” Words of defiance when nothing but a corpse remains and the grave is about to swallow our loved one.

How can this be?

It can only be because of who Jehovah God is. The almighty Creator God to be sure, but also God triune, who as such is a covenant-making and keeping God. And not only within Himself, but also regarding a people, a remnant of the human race He would call His own.

How God’s people dealing with the awful power of death need to hear this!

How pastors and preachers need to remember this!

When death visits a family of believers, they call for their pastor. And in the face of death, especially those of tragic proportions, we ask, what are we? Who am I? What can I say to minister to this grief? What can I say that can possibly comfort, as if there is some good in all this?

Of self, nothing. We are as useless as Job’s three friends.

But God gave the Word—concerning Himself.

And when death strikes, there are two truths that must be and—God be thanked—can be brought home. And then a third. Words that the Holy Spirit Himself will apply to grieving hearts.

First, Jehovah God is *sovereign*—meaning He is almighty, stronger even than death. There may be no power on earth to overcome death, but One in heaven can. A power to save a man’s soul and raise that body, that person as whole, again. And with that power, wis-

dom—wisdom so that there is purpose to that death as it affects others in the body of Christ, working the salvation of God’s whole church in the end.

And second, Jehovah is the God of the *everlasting covenant*, meaning He is the God of friendship and love. Being such, He will never forget nor forsake His children and friends.

He is the Father God, not allowing death to extinguish life, taking loved ones in Christ to glory. And not only that, but He will Himself minister to those bereft in grief. One passage in particular comes to mind. “He will swallow up death in victory; and the LORD God will wipe away tears from off all faces” (Is. 25:8). Both phrases are quoted in the New Testament. The second in Revelation 21:4.

Imagine, Jehovah God Himself stooping down and with His own napkin dabbing our tears and as a Father whispering, “Fear not. That loved one so close to your

heart is with Me. And I will keep those left behind. And good shall come of this evil. I will see it so. This farewell is not forever.”

And then, one more word—*Jesus*. By Jehovah’s wonderful grace, mother Eve’s gift to her posterity to counteract the evil she brought into the world. God’s Promised Seed, at last. Revelation of the promise, power, and Fatherly love of our great Jehovah.

“...so in Christ shall all be made alive” (I Cor. 15:22).

“I would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are *asleep*.” Asleep in Jesus.

The God whom we have offended has removed the curse.

Death be not proud. The mortal hath put on immortality.

Death swallowed up in victory.

A grand reunion awaits.

Lord, haste the day!



The comfort of the intermediate state

Rev. Ronald Hanko, minister emeritus in the Protestant Reformed Churches

Q. 86. What is the communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death?

A. The communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death is, in that their souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies, which even in death continue united to Christ, and rest in their graves as in their beds, till at the last day they be again united to their souls.

Westminster Larger Catechism, 86

Q. 57. What comfort doth the “resurrection of the body” afford thee?

A. That not only my soul after this life shall be immediately taken up to Christ its head; but also, that this my body, being raised by the power of Christ, shall be reunited with my soul, and made like unto the glorious body of Christ.

Heidelberg Catechism, 57

What happens to us when we die? The question demands an answer, even if it has already been answered in reading, in catechism, in sermons. When we stand at the graveside of someone dear to us, or when we lie on our own deathbed, the question persists. The Bible does not answer all our questions about death and dying, especially those asked idly and speculatively, but it answers this question sufficiently to give us comfort for body and soul, in death as well as in life, when that comfort is needed. It is the comfort of the soul’s “communion in glory with Christ”; of the soul’s being “taken up to Christ its head.”

In theology the answer to this question is part of the doctrine of the intermediate state, the state of the soul between death and the resurrection of the body: part of that doctrine because the Bible also speaks of the souls of those who die outside of Christ. There is, though, no comfort for such as die in unbelief. Their soul’s state is no different after death than before death comes. To be apart from Christ is death in its entirety and in all its unconquered horrors, whether in life or in death.

Nor is there any comfort in speculative theories and false doctrines, such as the notions of soul sleep, purga-

tory, limbo, the annihilation of the soul, or temporary death of both soul and body. The comfort of the intermediate state for believers is that they are in heaven in the presence of God, without suffering, consciously enjoying the blessedness of heavenly glory with Christ. To be unconscious, still suffering, or not yet delivered from death, is comfortless, and the thought of bringing such a message to the dying or receiving it oneself on a deathbed is horrifying.

The first comfort of believers, then, in facing death is that they go to heaven and are delivered from this world and its troubles. In heaven, every tear is wiped away and death is banished forever; but for them it is homecoming as well. Having lived in the world as spiritual strangers on a life-long pilgrimage that began the day of their salvation, they finally come home, and that is “joy unspeakable.” It is home, and even more, it is “Immanuel’s land”:¹

I’ve wrestled on toward heaven
 ’Gainst storm and wind and tide;
 Now, like a weary traveler
 That leaneth on his guide.
 Amid the shades of evening,
 While sinks life’s lingering sand,
 I hail the glory dawning
 From Immanuel’s land.

That believers are without suffering and without sin after death should go without saying, and the idea that they, after death, must still be delivered from torment in purgatory is a “doctrine of devils.” Christ having died for His own and having risen again is the assurance that only glory awaits and that there can be no more suffering:

Oh, I am my Beloved’s,
 And my Beloved is mine!
 He brings a poor vile sinner
 Into His “house of wine.”
 I stand upon His merit,
 I know no safer stand,
 Not e’en where glory dwelleth
 In Immanuel’s land.

They are “perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory” (WLC, 86).

That believers are conscious of their blessedness is the clear teaching of the Bible. Jesus would not have spoken of “paradise” and “paradise today” to the thief who died with Him, nor would He have promised to receive us unto Himself (John 14:3) if the error of soul sleep were the truth. Calvin says:

One of the most fatal blows to the dogma of these men is the answer which was given to the thief who implored mercy. He prayed, “Lord, remember me when thou comest to thy kingdom”; and he hears the reply, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 22:42). He who is everywhere, promises that he will be present with the thief. And he promises paradise, because he who thus enjoys God has fulness of delight.²

In Calvin’s tract (“Psychopannychia” means “soul sleep,” which doctrine Calvin rejects) he goes through the teaching of the Bible from Genesis 15:1, “Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward,” to I John 3:2, “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is”; and shows how believers do enjoy conscious glory with Christ immediately after death.

Striking is Calvin’s use of the same passage that Jesus used to prove the resurrection of the body to the Sadducees: “What! are they [those who believe in soul sleep, RH] not overawed by the words of the Lord when, calling himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he says, he is ‘God not of the dead but of the living?’” (Matt. 22:32).

Even Luther, who is often charged with teaching soul sleep, says:

...there is a difference between the sleep or rest of this life and that of the future life. For toward night a person who has become exhausted by his daily labor in this life enters into his chamber in peace, as it were, to sleep there; and during this night he enjoys rest and has no knowledge whatever of any evil caused either by fire or by murder. But the soul does not sleep in the same manner. It is awake. It experiences visions and the discourses of the angels and of God.³

But what about the passages that speak of the death of believers as sleep (II Sam. 7:12; Job 14:12; Ps. 13:3; Dan. 12:2; John 11:11; Acts 13:36; I Cor. 15:51; I Thess. 4:14; 5:10)? Calvin prefers the word “rest” and says:

First, we give the name of “rest” to that which our opponents call “sleep.” We have no aversion, indeed, to the term *sleep*, were it not corrupted and almost polluted by their falsehoods. *Secondly*, by “rest” we understand, not sloth, or lethargy, or anything like the drowsiness of ebriety which they attribute to the soul; but tranquility of conscience and security, which always accompanies faith, but is never complete in all its parts till after death.⁴

2 Calvin, “Psychopannychia,” in *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, vol. 3, tr. H. Beveridge, ed. T.F. Torrance, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmann, 1958), 446-47.

3 *Lectures on Genesis, 25:7-10 in Luther’s Works*, vol. 4, ed. J. Pelikan (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1964), 313.

4 “Psychopannychia,” 432.

1 This verse and the verses that follow are from Samuel Rutherford’s poem, “In Immanuel’s Land.”

The Bible speaks of sleep to assure us that our death as believers is no more to be feared than falling asleep each night.

The heavenly glory of believers after death is part of the resurrection of the dead, as the Heidelberg Catechism reminds us in Q&A 57. Our resurrection from the dead begins with our regeneration (John 5:24, 25) when the heavenly and undying life of Christ is given us. Our resurrection continues when our souls fly away from this world to the next, and is completed with the resurrection of our bodies in the great day of Christ.

As part of the resurrection, the intermediate state is part of a miracle, and there is no surprise that many questions about it remain unanswered, especially the question: How is it possible for the soul without the body to enjoy the blessedness of heaven? To that question there is now no answer, though II Corinthians 5:1-4 show us that God makes some provision for us: we are not found naked but are clothed upon with our house which is from heaven. This happens, verse 1 says, when our earthly house of this tabernacle is dissolved. What God does for us the Bible does not say exactly, but here, too, it suggests glory and blessedness when it compares our present state to a tabernacle and what follows to a building constructed by God.

So we are comforted not only when death comes, but when we grow older and experience what II Corinthians 4:16 describes, the perishing or decaying of the outward man: when strength fails, the mind wanders, desire ceases, and the senses no longer keep us in contact with this world as they once did—when pain and weakness seem to be our lot and when the things that once charmed us no longer satisfy. Then, being absent from the body and being present with the Lord seems wonderful indeed, and death loses its terrors in the hope of something “far better.”

Far better, indeed, and the real glory and comfort of the intermediate state is the glory of being in God’s presence and with Christ, which, Paul means, “is better than anything else.” Being there is not—not first—the comfort of being *without*, but the comfort of being *with*: not the comfort of being *without* suffering or even without sin, but of being *with* the Son of God. There, too, is the reason why those in unbelief and iniquity have no comfort in dying. Having lived apart from Christ in this life, unbelieving sinners do not find Him in the life to come; but for believers the day of death is the “today” of being with Him in Paradise.

The intermediate state is described as the bosom of Abraham (Luke 16:22, 23) for this reason. In dying we go to be with him, our spiritual father, Abraham, who believed the promises, saw Christ’s

day and rejoiced in it, and fell asleep in Jesus:

This, then, is the bosom of Abraham: for it was he himself who, with ready mind, embraced the promises made to his own seed, never doubting that the word of God was efficacious and true: and as if God had actually performed what he had promised, he waited for that blessed seed with no less assurance than if he had had it in his hands, and perceived it with all his senses. Accordingly, our Lord bore this testimony to him, that “he saw his day and was glad” (John 8:56).⁵

Heaven is not about our freedom from trouble and guilt—not first—but about God’s glory: “the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads” (Rev. 22:3, 4). “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God” (Rev. 21:3). “In thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore” (Ps. 16:11). “As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness” (Ps. 17:15).

We, through faith in Christ, catch a glimpse of the comfort of the intermediate state in a beautiful sunrise, in the most glorious of spring days, in an endlessly beautiful summer day, but the Word is at the heart of our comfort, pointing us to Christ and to all that we have in Him. He is and always will be our comfort, our hope, our joy, our peace, our blessedness, our life, our everything.

The King there in His beauty
Without a veil is seen:
It were a well spent journey,
Though seven deaths lay between.
The Lamb, with His fair army,
Doth on Mount Zion stand,
And glory, glory dwelleth
In Immanuel’s land....

The bride eyes not her garment,
But her dear bridegroom’s face:
I will not gaze at glory,
But on the King of Grace;
Not at the crown He giveth,
But on His pierced hand.
The Lamb is all the glory
Of Immanuel’s land.

What happens to me when I die? I go to be with Jesus, who loved me and gave Himself for me and whose face I have long desired to see. That is comfort indeed, and there is no other. So, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” and “I am in a strait betwixt two...” (Phil. 1:21, 23). Come quickly, Lord Jesus!

⁵ Calvin, “Psychopannychia,” 433-34.



Pastoral reflections on a proper funeral

Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma, pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

A loved one has died. The spouse left behind is overwhelmed with grief. Parents who have lost a child or children who have lost a parent are crushed beneath the heavy burden of their loss. Death has left them dazed, disconcerted, and numb. It is all like a bad dream. But death does not allow them time to remain inactive in their grief. The body must be buried. A funeral service must be planned. Unless the family has had opportunity to plan the funeral before their loved one dies, the family can be so overwhelmed it is hard even to think of what must be done to let go.

Because of the vulnerability of the family at this time, others might immediately take control of the circumstances and plan the funeral for the family. The funeral director is more than willing to take care of all the arrangements of the funeral service. To plan a funeral that will meet the spiritual needs of a believing family it is important, therefore, first to find a funeral home that does not dictate the funeral itself but is willing to assist the family in planning their own funeral. During the time of the Reformation, Reformed churches in the Netherlands chose to depart from the custom of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), which officially assumed control of the funeral service. Already in 1572 our Reformed fathers deemed it necessary to discontinue sermons at funerals. In 1914 it was decided to add this article (64) to the Church Order of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands: “Funeral sermons and funeral services shall not be introduced.” This original article forbids the church institute from officially preaching funeral sermons as well as controlling the content of the funeral services. The reason for discontinuing the official function of the church in funerals was the many superstitions surrounding the funeral in the RCC—praying for the dead and the mass, among others. The implication of this article is that the church must leave the funeral entirely to the discretion of individual families. This was clarified in the Protestant Reformed Churches when in 2000 the old article of the Church Order was replaced with the one we have now: “Funerals are not ecclesiastical, but family affairs, and should be conducted accordingly” (Art. 65). Funerals are not a part of the official work of the church, therefore. The family decides for itself what is to be included in the funeral service. VanDellen and Monsma

comment on this particular article in their *Church Order Commentary*,

The Consistories are not in charge of these funerals but the relatives are. If our homes were large enough, or if funeral homes were large enough, we would not, and should not, resort to the church building at all. At funerals, moreover, the minister does not preach a sermon; he does not administer the Word of God officially and to the congregation of God.... Many ministers give their remarks the form of a sermon. This should not be done” (p. 269).

The consistory may not call the congregation to worship at a funeral service. It does not have oversight of the Word spoken at a funeral. A funeral is not an official function of the church. It is a family affair. This is why I also gave the title I did to this article: “Pastoral Reflections on a Proper Funeral.” As a minister of the gospel, I may not officially dictate to the families of my church what they *must* include in a funeral service. I may merely point Reformed, believing families to what I believe is important for a proper funeral service.

This article of the Reformed Church Order does not mean, however, that the church abandons the bereaved family to fend for itself after the death of a loved one. The church is an organism, a body of believers. Families belong to the organic life that transpires within the church. If a family *lives* within the fold of the church, it also means a member of that family *dies* within the fold of that church. Is it not true what we read in I Corinthians 12:26, “And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it”? The first place those who have lost a loved one will need to turn is to the church, her officebearers, and fellow saints for help in this time of need. Especially the pastor whom Christ has appointed to care for the needs of His people with pastoral advice and comfort ought to be sought out. In fact, a good pastor will unhesitatingly respond to the death of one of his members by being with the family if possible before, during, and after the loss of a loved one. The pastor, the elders of the church, or close friends in the church will certainly be of great help in the planning of the funeral service as well, if need be. Certainly, the church ought to be involved from an organic point of view giving direction, advice, and comfort.

In order to make good judgments regarding what ought to be included in (or excluded from) a proper funeral service, we ought to understand the purpose of a funeral. An increasing amount of people in our unchurched society no longer see any need for a funeral service. They maintain that funerals are based on the illusion of a life hereafter which, in their mind, does more harm than good. A new trend in funerals is a “celebration of life.” The idea of death is avoided, replaced by stories and laughter about the life of the person who has departed. Again, such funerals are based on the idea that this life is all there is. To the mind of many, to think on death only brings heartache and pain. It is much better to recall the good times we may have shared with the individual who has died. The purpose of a funeral, then, is to give one last ‘hurrah’ before that person will soon be forgotten in the grave.

The purpose of a funeral service for the believer is substantially different from that of an unbeliever. In the first place, it is our final farewell. It is a time of closure. It is true that already before the funeral the family has come to the grim understanding that their loved one is no longer with them. Already the reality that the “silver cord is loosed or the golden bowl is broken” (Eccl. 12:5-7), has hit them like a punch to the stomach. It does not take the funeral service for them to experience that the bond they shared with that person has been severed. But the funeral service is a time when the family together with fellow saints come to say their final goodbyes. Thomas Long and David Lynch in their book, *The Good Funeral* (p. 218) write, “A funeral moves from embrace to release, a sign that to be human we must learn to hold the living in love and to let go of the dead in hope.” A funeral service is held in order for those who mourn to understand in their grief that their loved one is no longer with them here on earth. He or she has passed from the church militant on earth to the church triumphant in heaven, and we must let go in order to find comfort in the hope of eternal life. After all, for the believer who dies in the Lord, death is but a doorway from this life to the life to come. It is the end but also the beginning; and in that beginning we can actually find joy and peace. This is why the apostle Paul speaks of the truth that believers who mourn do so in hope (I Thess. 4:13).

In the second place, the purpose of a funeral service for a believing family is to remind those who are present of the transience of life. We sing together a versification of Psalm 90, “O teach thou us to count our days and set our hearts on wisdom’s ways” (Psalter #246). Funeral services remind those who attend that “it is appointed to every man once to die, but after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27). By saying our farewell to the one we love,

everyone is faced with the reality that he or she has gone the way of *all* flesh. A funeral service serves to be a hard reminder that everyone is going to stand before the judgment seat of God. The purpose of a funeral service is to place before everyone present the question: what is your relationship with Christ?

But this leads the believing family to the third purpose of the funeral service: to be comforted with the blessed truth that in life *and death* the believer belongs to his faithful Savior Jesus Christ. This is the greatest reason for the funeral service, to lead God’s people to the cross of Christ where we discover what it is to live and die happily. It is in Him, after all, that we find the hope of eternal life. On the basis of Christ’s work God promises the grieving family that in the worst of hardships in life He will never leave or forsake them. He will sit with them in the darkness and walk with them in their pain and sorrow. With His strong right hand He will continue to hold them up each step of the way, giving them the strength each day to carry on. That, too, is the purpose of the funeral service—for those who believe.

Keeping in mind the purpose of a funeral service, we can also ascertain what ought to be included in the funeral service. Again, this will vary from family to family. It is not an official worship service of the church. Neither I nor the church may dictate what *must* be included in a funeral service. But what is it that should be included in order that 1) we might say a proper farewell; 2) we can learn of the transience of life; and 3) we might find the necessary comfort while letting go? Certainly, wisdom must be exercised in choosing what makes up a proper funeral service.

Where do believers go when faced with important events in our lives? What alone truly satisfies us when we are confronted with sorrow and hurt? Without a question, we desire the pure milk of God’s Word. For that reason, we ask that the pastor be involved in our funerals, even if this is not a requirement. I suppose that someone else who is capable of speaking words of edification to his family and friends could speak. But we know that the minister of the gospel (who has been with the family through it all) is qualified to bring us the Word of God in order to assist us in saying our farewells to our loved one in hope. This means that Scripture, first of all, needs to be read. The pastor must bear in mind that God’s Word addresses death and the grave as well as the resurrection from the dead. Many different passages explain to us the wonder work of Jesus Christ in delivering God’s children from the power and sting of death. Passages should be read that inspire peace and contentment even when there is sorrow and grief.

Sermons may not be preached in the official sense of the word, but certainly the Word of God should be

explained and applied. VanDellen and Monsma may advise that a funeral speech ought not to be given in the way of a sermon. I suppose this is true in a strictly formal sense. Funeral sermons need not explain detailed exegesis or extend to the normal length of a sermon. But surely the Word of God must be proclaimed. It alone can comfort. There are many different causes of death that may arise. Death may come to an old saint, but death at times robs us of an infant, a young child, or a teenager. Death may come suddenly without warning. It may come after months of suffering. Death may come by a person's own hands. It may come by means of an accident. But God's Word addresses all of these. There are passages of God's Word that can be applied to every circumstance and manner of death.

The pastor needs to bring the Word of God in such a way that the family is comforted and those who are disobedient are warned. There is always a need to call to faith and repentance. Funerals are no exception. There is also the important need to be applicatory when speaking at a funeral. A *theological treatise* on death and the resurrection is uncalled for. God's Word needs to address the particular need and circumstances of the family that is mourning. The pastor must speak personally of the person who has died and to the family left behind. May he bring up circumstances out of the life of that one who is departed: a godly example, the expression of his or her faith? Of course! But what always must stand on the foreground is the fact that the departed one was a sinner saved by grace! Attention, as always, ought to be drawn to what Christ has done for us and the one taken to glory. That in itself serves as a warning to those who are not in Christ Jesus and that alone gives strength and comfort to those who believe.

A funeral service ought not be spent eulogizing a person. A funeral is not a 'celebration of life.' Those who overly spend time relating the achievements and endearing traits of that loved one whom God has taken forget

that there were also sins and not-so-endearing instances in that person's life too. Our joy is not found in the accomplishments of the deceased but in the fact that he or she belonged to Christ. The funeral, therefore, is a celebration of our hope in the resurrection and life everlasting. Again, how much time is spent eulogizing our loved one is up to the family, but we ought not to forget that it is important for our comfort to look to the things that are above and not the things that are below. Our thoughts ought to be drawn heavenward where our Savior receives us to Himself in our Father's house of many mansions.

One last element should be included in a proper funeral service: singing.

We learn in Scripture that God's people sing when they are happy. They raise praises to God. But God's people sing when they are overwhelmed with grief too. We find this throughout the Psalms, the inspired song book of the Scriptures. Singing is a window into one's soul. Songs lift the spirit when we are down. They can bring tears to our eyes when we mourn, but they also lift us in joy to the place of our desires. A special number or two is not out of place at a funeral. But what beauty when God's people join their voices together in supplication to God! In Psalm 17 (Psalter #32) we sing, "When I in righteousness at last Thy glorious face shall see, when all the weary night is past and I awake with Thee to view the glories that abide, then, then I shall be satisfied!" How many of God's people have been comforted when singing that Psalm!

May other elements properly be added to a funeral service? That is up to the family. But for a funeral service to achieve its desired end, that of comfort, it should be kept simple and focused on what *God* says to His people who mourn. The ties that bind have been severed by death. Now we commend the soul of our loved one into the hands of an ever-merciful Father where there is joy unspeakable and full of glory.



An honorable, Christian burial

Prof. Barrett Gritters, professor of Practical Theology in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary

It is probably not too strong to say that a Christian ceremony for *burial* at the cemetery is as significant as a Christian *funeral* at the church. But there are less Christians attending funerals today than in the past (the

funeral directors I have contact with indicate that), and there are probably even fewer who go to the graveside for burial.

In the past it was different. Long funeral proces-

sions from the church to the cemetery were common. When my best friend died suddenly during a high school soccer game, the line of cars from the church stretched what seemed like endlessly, requiring help from the local police to block intersection after intersection. Most older folks learned in driver's training to give way to funeral processions. Today, processions are rare—at least in my area of our country. Long ones even rarer. Graveside services often have very few in attendance. Sometimes families opt to have none.

But an honorable Christian burial may be considered as important as a good Christian funeral. A funeral is important. It is our recognition, not only of the sober reality that this life comes to an end, but also of the glorious reality that death is overcome. Death is a homecoming! The graveside service, on the other hand, recognizes that the homecoming is only *partial*: the body remains here and awaits the resurrection. Which is one of the reasons why it really is not too strong to say that having a funeral service without a burial ceremony is only half of what Christians should do at the death of their loved one.

Let us encourage attendance at the graveside of loved ones, in order to make one of the most powerful testimonies Christians can make: “We believe the resurrection of the dead!”

What a graveside service is

A graveside service is a sacred *act*, full of meaning, of Christian hands depositing the precious body of their loved one into the earth. From the dust our bodies came, and to the dust we return them, in the sure and certain hope of the *resurrection* of the body.

A graveside service is to place our loved one's body in the ground, with the agonizingly painful acknowledgement that we will *never* see them again on this side of eternity. At the same time, the careful and tender placement of the body in the grave is an expression of our faith that we *will* see them on the other side.

A graveside service is a visible and vocal witness of that faith-conviction. As the family gathers round the casket and peers into the dark hole opened to receive our loved one's body, the gospel preacher prays and then briefly explains and pointedly applies the Word regarding the resurrection of the body. They sing a comforting Psalm: “Because on Him my trust is stayed, My flesh in hope shall rest.... I know that I shall not be left forgotten in the grave...” and recite the church's ancient Apostles' Creed, which comes to a wonderful crescendo in phrases that could not be more appropriate: “I believe...the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting!” It would not be unseemly to *shout* through our tears: *The! res-*

urrection! of the body! We could wish the gravedigger, politely waiting at a distance, would be startled out of his tedium by our extraordinarily bold confession of a tried, but unshakable faith.

An honorable, Christian burial ceremony can be beautiful. Painful beyond imagination for most. But beautiful. If I have to bury my wife some day, I pray that I have the grace to practice what (here) I ‘preach.’

What God thinks about our bodies

God loves His people not only in their souls but also in their bodies.

It is not proper to devalue our bodies, even though we may be tempted to do so when we see their weaknesses, feel death working in them, and realize that soon they will be returning to the dust whence they came. We are embarrassed by their imperfections and often find nothing attractive about them. Believers sigh over a sense of their corruption, desiring to be delivered from this body of death (Belgic Confession, Art. 16; Canons of Dordt, I, Art. 16). But God loves us *in our bodies*.

Based on Scripture, the Reformed confessions are emphatic about this.

I belong to Jesus Christ not only in my soul but in my body (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 1). Christ redeemed my body (LD 13, 15). God promises to resurrect my body so that, in the end, I will live with God not only in my soul but also in my body. *This* body. “This my body, being raised by the power of Christ, shall be reunited with my soul” (LD 22). Transformed body, indeed, but it will be *this body*! The punishment of the wicked includes bodily misery (LD 4); and the salvation of the believer includes bodily life! Father's provision for me includes provision for my body (LD 9). Our body and soul are temples of the Holy Ghost (LD 41).

This is why Christ suffered—not only unspeakable anguish in His soul, but also in His body. His “body was offered and broken on the cross for me” (LD 28). This is why the Son of God had to take to Himself a human body and become a real man. “For since the soul was lost as well as the body, it was necessary that He should take both upon Him, to save both” (Belgic Confession, Art. 18). “Our salvation and resurrection... depend on the reality of His *body*” (Art. 22). And since faith unites the believer to Christ, our head, our bodies in the end will be “made like unto the glorious body of Jesus Christ” (LD 22).

The consummation of the covenant itself awaits the final resurrection of the *bodies* of believers!

For this reason, we not only may but must love our own bodies and the bodies of our loved ones. Not, of course, that we are proudly attracted to them, even wor-

ship them; but that (according to the biblical idea of love) we take care of them, protect them. Humans love their bodies, nourishing and cherishing them. No one ever hated his own flesh (Eph. 5:28, 29).

We give to our believing loved ones honorable, Christian burials.

Scripture teaches the importance of burials

God's comfort to Abram was that he would be "*buried* in a good old age" (Gen. 15:15), and his alienated sons Isaac and Ishmael momentarily reunited to do that (Gen. 25:9). Rachel was buried; Isaac was buried; Joshua was buried. Burial was so important that the patriarchs even gave that honor to their servants, and thus Jacob and family buried Deborah, Rebekah's nurse (Gen. 35:8). When Joseph died, he bound his children with an oath to return his bones to the promised land so that he could be buried there. God's own hands laid His servant Moses in the earth (Deut. 34:5, 6). Scripture records that the Judges were buried, Samuel was buried, and Israel's kings were buried. The disciples of John the Baptist took his decapitated body and buried it. Our Lord commended Mary for anointing His body as preparation for His own burial (Matt 26:12). In love for their Lord, His disciples buried Him (Matt. 27:59, 60).

To underscore the blessing of an honorable burial, God's dreadful judgments on the wicked included that they would *not* be buried, but instead cast as dung on the earth and carrion for the fowls (Jer. 8:2; 16:4). No one wants to imagine a body lying in the hot sun, torn by vultures and scavenged by coyotes. But God's testimony must be imagined, if only momentarily. Honorable burials are precious.

The powerful Christian tradition, as well as the clear scriptural testimony about our bodies and about burial, are a compelling call to believers about how to behave when their loved ones die.

Emphasizing the importance of honorable burials does not take away from the truth that God is able to raise the bodies of believers who have been cremated, burned at the stake, eaten by wild animals, lost at sea, or destroyed by a bomb. He knows His own and keeps them in His hand, even then. And when His voice calls us to come forth from the graves, also these bodies will miraculously appear. *We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed...* (I Cor. 15:51-52).

Why such hope for Christians? How can going to the graveside be a hopeful act rather than merely unspeakable

pain and sorrow? Because our Lord Jesus Christ went to the grave too. He was made flesh, like us; suffered in the body, like we suffer; and died in the body, like we die. His friends gently laid His body in the dark, cold ground. But He went there as conqueror of death and became for us victor over the grave, the first begotten of the dead. And all those *in* Christ are sure of victory for themselves and their believing loved ones.

Why is death "swallowed up in victory"? How can we shout, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" Because "the sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory *through our Lord Jesus Christ*." He has transformed the cemetery from a bleak place to a garden of hope.

What to do at the graveside

Avoiding all superstitions and unbiblical notions, let us comfort one another about this biblical truth and emphasize at the graveside what the Bible teaches: the one reality of the resurrection of the body, in two striking ways.

First, Scripture says that when we lay our loved one in the ground we must imagine we are putting them down for a short nap, as it were. From God's perspective, which perspective must become ours, our loved one as to the *body* is only 'sleeping' (I Cor. 15:18, 51; I Thess. 4:14, 5:10). That is, their body will be raised from the grave as certainly as we will awake at the end of a night's rest, or a child from an afternoon's nap. Who imagines that a nap does not end in waking? We should not imagine that a burial will not end in resurrection.

For this reason graveyards are called 'cemeteries,' which in Latin is similar to the word 'dormitory.' We know a dormitory as a place for college students to sleep so that when the new day begins they can awake renewed to engage in their studies. Also the cemetery is a place of rest for the bodies of our loved ones. Someday very soon Jesus' powerful words will wake them from their sleep. "Come forth!" Jesus will say. And they will arise, refreshed, to engage in an eternal study of the beauty of their Lord and God.

Second, Scripture says that when we lay our loved one in the ground, we must imagine that we are planting a seed. A seed, watered by the rain and warmed by the sun, will soon burst forth as, for example, a beautiful flower. God's perspective, which must become ours, is that burying our loved ones is like planting a seed (I Cor. 15:35-38). Who doubts that a seed, properly planted in good soil, will soon appear as a beautiful new life? Nor should we doubt that the 'planting' of

our loved one will end in the dramatic appearance of a beautiful new life, a resurrected body made like unto the body of our Lord Jesus Christ!

For this reason, some Christians have called graveyards ‘God’s gardens.’ In these ‘gardens of God’ are planted all the ‘seeds’ of those who have died. These ‘seeds’ await God’s miraculous bringing of them to life again. *The hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation* (John 5:28,29).

So, when we give an honorable Christian burial to our loved ones, or visit the grave in the days following, we may go with hope, thinking clearly: “Christ will appear! The trumpet will sound! The graves will burst

open! The dead in Christ will rise and lead the way to meet our Lord in the air! And so shall we ever be with the Lord!” Faith—clear-thinking faith—sustains us in the darkest of hours.

In the beginning God said to Adam, “In the sweat of thy face thou shalt eat bread, till thou return to the ground; for out of it thou wast taken; for dust thou art, and unto the dust thou shalt return.” The New Testament allows us to add to that and say:

“Out of dust art thou come,
Unto dust shalt thou return,
From the dust thou shalt rise again.”
An honorable, Christian burial.

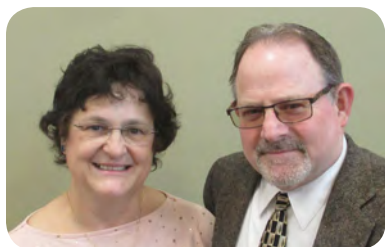
At the editors’ request, Mr. Mike Langeland, member of our Georgetown PRC in Hudsonville, MI, and fifth-generation funeral director, wrote a few thoughts to us for the readers of the *Standard Bearer*.

From the brother’s note to us:

- “Families suffering from loss must walk through the journey of a death, but they need not walk alone. Being supported and loved by God, family, and God’s people carries them through that journey.... When I carry the body of my loved one to the grave, place a flower on their casket, engage my emotions while seeing the

deceased body of my loved one, I do the necessary work for my own loss journey.”

- “Funerals do not need to be large or small, private or public, modest or extravagant. A good funeral is where the right people are in the right place at the right time.”
- Recommended books: *The Good Funeral*, by Dr. Thomas Long and Thomas Lynch; *Accompany Them with Singing* by Dr. Thomas Long.
- Mr. Langeland is willing to correspond with you about death and funerals, especially in light of the Covid-19 outbreak. You may write to him at mike@langelandsterenberg.com



Daniel’s Death

It was the late morning of November 2, 2004. We will never forget that day. We had just voted in the presidential election and had returned to the parsonage of Southwest Protestant Reformed Church. Out of the kitchen window we saw a police cruiser coming up our driveway. We went out to meet the policeman and find out the reason for his stop. He asked us who we were. And then he told us, “Your son has been in a serious car accident.” Those words changed our lives from that moment on. As we rushed to the hospital, we held hands and prayed aloud, over and over, “Please, Lord,

Mourning our son

Prof. Ronald Cammenga, professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, and his wife Rhonda

spare Daniel’s life. Please, Lord, spare his life.” When we arrived at the hospital, we were escorted to a waiting area in the emergency ward. Finally, a woman came to us. “Is he alive? Is he alive?” Daniel was alive, but his condition was very serious. Then she took us to his room in the ICU.

There were several doctors and nurses attending to Daniel. He was hooked up to all kinds of machines and there were tubes everywhere. They let us come to him and hold his hands. Over and over we assured him that we loved him and that the Lord will take care of him. We were told that a specialist would be coming in

momentarily to evaluate Daniel's condition. He did and after looking him over briefly, he simply shook his head at the attending physician and walked out of the room. It was at that point that we knew that our son was going to die. Before shutting off the machines, the staff told us that they would give us all the time we needed to say our goodbyes. All we could say was, "Daniel, we love you so much. But now you are going to heaven to live with Jesus. We love you and one day we will join you." By this time many of our children had made their way to Daniel's room.

When we finally told the nurses that we were ready, they came in and started turning off the life support machines. Together we recited Psalm 23 and other familiar Scripture passages. We also sang Psalter numbers. And then it was over. He was gone from us. By now many of the area PRC ministers were gathered in the ICU waiting room. They embraced us, comforted us, read Scripture to us, and prayed with us.

We never thought before this that a person could die from a broken heart. Now we knew the truth of that possibility. We never imagined that we could endure so much pain and still live. In the days that followed, the days of the viewings and the funeral, we were in a daze. We still thought that Daniel might come walking through the front door and tell us that it was all a dream. He was alive and back with us. But, of course, that did not happen. Many people came to the house and many more came to the funeral home for the viewings. We felt that we were upheld by the prayers and support of God's people. And we found that God's grace was sufficient and His promises more real than ever before. Rev. Koole's funeral message on Deuteronomy 33:27 brought us the blessed assurance that underneath us were God's everlasting arms. Although we were still very much in shock and in pain, we will never forget his words of comfort that Saturday afternoon. Throughout the years, we have often reflected on it—often!

The days immediately following the funeral we were surrounded by our children and grandchildren. In fact, we had a new grandson, whose birth we will never forget. He was born a few weeks early after his mother went into labor at Daniel's funeral. She could not be at the graveside service because she and her husband were on their way to the hospital. Very likely the early labor was brought on by the stress surrounding her brother's death. We were invited to the hospital that evening to share in the birth of Aiden Daniel, named after the uncle whom he would never see and whom we had buried earlier in the day. What a day it had been! Death and birth, one life ended and another begun, a goodbye and a welcome, tears of sadness and tears of joy.

Coping

But now we had to go on. In the first days and weeks, we were grateful just to get through each day. Many days, more than once during the day, we broke down. And we still do. But by God's grace we were able to get through the days. By supper time, we were exhausted. We never realized that grieving is so exhausting! It saps your energy and leaves you drained by day's end. From our point of view, we barely got through the days. Frequently we asked each other, "How do unbelievers cope with the loss of a child?" We could not imagine that they could. And they cannot—not really. They have no comfort that their child is with the Lord in heaven. The strain of their grief affects their marriages. The divorce rate among spouses who have lost a child is very high. They become angry at the Lord, bitter against Him because of His way with them. Or they despair and are overcome by depression. Often they attempt to drown out their sorrows by losing themselves in their work. Or they turn to alcohol and drugs to ease their pain and become abusers and addicts. Some even take their own lives.

It is important to recognize the strain that the death of a child puts on a marriage. Various factors contribute to this stress. One of the spouses may blame the other for their child's death. Or, because no two people grieve in the same way, and because men grieve differently than women, a wife may think that her husband is not grieving the child whom they have lost. Or, the demands of raising their other children, when there are still other siblings at home, may cause tension in the marriage.

We have learned that spouses must give each other "their space" to grieve. They must recognize that whereas something triggers renewed grief in them, it is often something else that triggers their spouse's grief. This difference in grieving showed itself when we went to the cemetery. Although I have gone to the cemetery often, even after nearly 16 years, I cannot go to Daniel's grave without crying. It hurts so much to think of my son in the ground and I miss him so much. My wife does not weep at the grave usually. She tends to the flowers and the headstone and feels like she is still doing something for her son. Mostly we go to the cemetery separately now because it pains her to see me breaking down. And truthfully, I would rather be alone in the cemetery in my grief. Some people cannot go to their child's grave regularly because it hurts them so much. It is not that they do not care; it is just the opposite. We can understand that.

As we struggled to cope, occasionally hurtful remarks of friends or family made coping more difficult.

Our family is large; we have eleven children and thirty-eight grandchildren. And, by the way, when someone asks about our family, we always say that we have eleven children, though one is in glory. Our large family has been a special blessing as we cope with our grief. Our children and grandchildren have been an amazing source of support for us. Some well-intentioned but unthinking people have made comments along the lines that in some way our grief must have been lessened because we had other children besides Daniel. That is hurtful because, as we all know, each of our children has their own unique place in our covenant families. But it certainly is true that our extended family has been a unique blessing in our grief.

People frequently say to us, “But you would never want him back again.” We know what they mean, of course. But there are times when we want to respond, “We would give anything, all that we owned and everything that is of value to us just to see his face one more time, to hear his voice once more, to embrace him just once.” We know that is not the will of God. And we also know that Daniel is far better off; we do not doubt that for a moment. But we are so earthy and our faith is so weak.

At times in the months following Daniel’s death it was obvious in remarks that people made that they felt that we should be over our grieving and should be moving on. Others have testified of this same experience. Although it was true that we did move on and our grief was not the paralyzing grief that it was initially, we will never get over our sorrow. Every day—every single day—we think of Daniel. And although we can carry out the day-to-day demands of our earthly callings, we know that we will never get over our grief in this life—never completely. Because we loved him so much, we will carry our grief with us until we die. That does not mean that there are no joys in our lives. There certainly are. There are the joys of the birth of a new grandbaby, or a confession of faith of one of our grandchildren, or the marriages of children and grandchildren. But there is always a dark cloud overshadowing these joyful occasions. Even our greatest joys are tinged by the sorrow that Daniel is not with us and cannot share in the moment.

Over the years, there have been a couple of Daniel’s closest friends who have stayed in touch with us. In the first couple of years, they would stop over frequently to check on us and to visit with us. We have so much appreciated their thoughtfulness. They have been a great encouragement to us. At the same time, it is painful to see all the milestones in their lives and wonder about how Daniel would have experienced these milestones: graduation from high school, confession of faith, choice of vo-

cation, dating, marriage, the birth of children, and more. Into what kind of a young man would he have developed? What sort of husband and father might he have been? We cannot help but wonder from time to time.

Supporting others

One thing that we have come to see over the years is that the Lord has brought about these painful circumstances in our lives so that we can reach out to others in similar circumstances and be a help to them. This is not something that we embraced eagerly at first. It was easy before Daniel died to preach on the first Q&A of the Heidelberg Catechism and use II Corinthians 1 to support the teaching concerning our only comfort in life and death. I always made a point of applying verse 4, “Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them who are in any trouble, by the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted of God.” God’s comfort of us does not end in our own comfort, but has as a higher purpose that we may be able to comfort others also. It was much more difficult to apply that to ourselves after Daniel died. We understood the calling that we had to reach out to others who had lost a child, but at times we could hardly cope ourselves and now was it really true that in taking Daniel, God was preparing us to be able to comfort other grieving parents? There were times when we were resentful of this calling and felt it to be more than ought to be expected of us. How could we comfort others when we were struggling ourselves? Thankfully, God has been pleased to use us, and over the years we have grown to see our calling to comfort others “by the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted of God.” And certainly we may say that God has used this for our own greater comfort.

God has led us, along with a younger couple who experienced the death of their young son, to begin a support group in the Grand Rapids area for grieving parents. We call our group LOCKs, which stands for Loss of Child Kinship. We were amazed at how many PRC couples have experienced the death of a child, whether more recently or many years ago. Just in the Grand Rapids area there are over 50 couples in this situation. There are many parents who have buried children, and a few have brought more than one child to the cemetery. We meet only a few times a year, but it has been a great encouragement to meet with other parents who know what it is to lose a son or a daughter.

It is especially hard for us, when we hear of another couple whose child has died. Recently a couple in Iowa lost their youngest son in a car crash. We reached out to them, but it pains us to think of all the “firsts” that

they will have to experience in the first year after the death of their son. All those “anniversaries” that are so difficult: the first Thanksgiving Day without him, the first Christmas without him, his first birthday not celebrated after he died, the first anniversary of his death, and so many more “anniversaries.” Whenever there is a family celebration, there is always one empty place at the table, one voice that is absent from the conversation, one laugh never again heard.

One of the greatest fears of grieving parents is that their child will be forgotten. Or, that if they are not forgotten, people avoid mentioning their name, for fear of causing a painful memory. But grieving parents want siblings, family members, and friends to talk about their departed child. We have Daniel’s picture displayed with the pictures of the other members of our family. And various pictures of him on a shelf in our living room. I have a quite amazing sketch of Daniel that was drawn in the days immediately after his death by one of his classmates at Covenant Christian High School. Sadly, he and his wife have since lost a baby daughter and are themselves part of our regular LOCKs meetings. We want the grandchildren to know about their uncle Daniel, to know something of who he was and how much he meant to us. To friends and family members, we would say talk freely about the child who has died. Keeping alive their memory is important to grieving parents.

One common fear among those who have lost a child

is that they are going to lose another child, or maybe a grandchild. It has happened. Job buried ten children. Martin and Katie Luther buried two daughters. I have a great-grandmother who buried four of her fourteen children, all between the ages of two and eight. Two of them died of whooping cough five days apart. How can parents bring four small children to the cemetery? In fear, we become overly protective and easily overcome by excessive worry. It could happen again, after all. How could I ever go through this kind of pain again? It is important to address this fear, to see it for what it is: a lack of trust in the Lord. He knows how much we can endure and He has promised that His grace will always be sufficient.

And so we carry on. Yes, there are some hard days—some very hard days. Yes, indeed, we will carry this pain with us all our life long, until we go to the grave ourselves. But we have hope. Our hope is in a risen Savior, who has conquered death and the grave. Our hope is in the Prince of Life, the one who holds the key of death and the grave, the one who has promised in John 11:26 that whoever lives and believes in Him shall never die.

My soul in death’s dark pit shall not be left by Thee;
Corruption Thou wilt not permit Thy holy one to see.
Life’s pathway Thou wilt show,
To Thy right hand wilt guide,
Where streams of pleasure ever flow,
And boundless joys abide. (Psalter #29, stanza 3)



The ministry of sympathy

Rev. Jon Mahtani, a minister of the Word in the Protestant Reformed Churches

On behalf of many other godly pastors, I make a plea: Help us! We need your help in ministering to the grieving. Our prayers with the bereaved, our words at the funeral, and our care at the grave need to be complemented by *your* ministry. Our human limitations and inexcusable weaknesses even as we seek to comfort the brokenhearted necessitate *your* ministry. Your membership in the church, united to sorrowing members of Christ’s body, demands *your* ministry. “Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do” (I Thess. 5:11).

But how do we go about doing this without com-

pounding the sorrow of those we attempt to comfort? One of the greatest hindrances to adequate care of the mourning is fear.¹ We are afraid that we might elicit a response like Job’s: “Miserable comforters are ye all!” (Job 16:2). In order to alleviate such anxiety, the following is some advice for the body of Christ.

Be quietly present

After Job lost his ten children, his friends did one thing

¹ If we have a different hindrance like laziness or selfishness (which often exposes itself with the excuse of “I’m too busy”), then let us repent.

right: “They sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great” (Job 2:13). They soon ruined this good beginning, but nonetheless this was a good start. Sensing the greatness of his grief, they paused their busy lives. They traveled to be physically present, and they quietly listened.

Let us practice this simple yet necessary and initial step. Place a hold on your busy life. If at all possible, go to the side of the grieving and stick around for a while. As you make appropriate physical contact (for example, a gentle handshake, a touch of the shoulder or elbow, or a hug) you are saying with such a gesture, “I am here for you.” Since death brings about painful separation, simply accompany him who walks in that lonely valley of shadows by making yourself present.² Be “swift to hear, slow to speak” (James 1:19). Especially immediately after death, let us not be quick to drop the words, “It was God’s will.” Though undoubtedly true, this often minimizes grief when spoken too soon or too lightly. The grieving heart immediately needs not our quick fixes but our quiet presence.

Show compassion

When Job’s friends came, they wept with him, tore their clothing, threw dirt upon themselves, and sat on the ground. When godly people of Bible times grieved, their friends and community joined in with sackcloth and ashes, and even with the hiring of professional mourners. To our westernized ears, this sounds strange, but there is a good explanation. The word “sympathy” should be more than a spoken or written word. Sympathy literally means passion *with* another. Romans 12:15 explains sympathy this way: “Weep with them that weep.”

Putting aside our cold stoicism, our fake manliness, and our mistaken ideas of spirituality, let us swallow our pride and express genuine feeling. Although we should not sorrow as those who have no hope (I Thess. 4:13), we should weep as Jesus did (John 11:35). His sinless human acquaintance with our sorrows is supposed to be of comfort to us (Heb. 4:15). When we allow ourselves to grieve with the grieving, we not only acknowledge the hurt and rightly condone their tears, but we reflect the compassion of our understanding High Priest.

Minister the Word

Paul exhorts us, “Comfort one another with these words” (I Thess. 4:18). With what words? Not with

mindless clichés but with the inspired words of Scripture. While the pastor more lengthily explains God’s Word, let God’s people briefly quote a timely text. At death, God makes the hearts of His grieving people desperately desirous for His Word. Thus at death, God gives us a wondrous opportunity to witness of our living Savior.

Before going to visit the grieving, search the Scriptures for an appropriate text. Choose one that God has used in the past to comfort you (see II Cor. 1:4). Memorize it word for word. Meditate on how you might succinctly and meekly insert it in your conversation with the grieving. Pray that the Comforter might use you as His mouthpiece. Then go and speak the truth in love. The Spirit speaks powerful comfort with His inspired Word. Do not be deterred by the possibility that the bereaved has already heard the same words repeated by others. If everyone imagined that someone else was quoting Scripture, no one would end up speaking that effectual Word. Remember also that repetition is the Spirit’s way of impressing His Word upon the mind.

Minister the word by speaking *and writing*. When the prophets and apostles sought to edify God’s people, they often did so by writing. Ink on parchment was the Spirit’s method of engraving His truth upon the table of the heart. It still is. In our digital age, this has become a lost art. We have resorted to the more efficient manner of pushing buttons on our keyboard or phone. An email, text, or some sort of social media mode has become the norm even in addressing the most sensitive and profound topics of the Christian’s comfort in life and death. Is it wrong to use technology? No. But has not God given us a far better method? Taking the time and effort to pen words on a card or paper is one of the most meaningful means of communicating comfort.

Provide long-term care

Immediately after death, God’s people often care well for the distressed. The number of visits, calls, meals, and gifts may even at times overwhelm the burdened heart...and then the church moves on. A month and a half or so later when things die down, the lonely realities of life hit home. Who cares then? Does anyone else remember the day of his birth, the day of her death, their anniversary, or that lonely special holiday? We must learn to extend the length of our ministry.

This long-term care in reality begins even *before* a family faces death. God’s people need to be proactive in cultivating good relationships with others in the church and especially those on the fringe with fewer friends. Sooner rather than later, this last enemy will touch every family closely. Caring for those relationships before death leads to more effective care afterward. With our

² Ponder the Holy Spirit’s work as Comforter in John 14:16-18 and 16:7. The Comforter’s personal presence is comforting. As instruments of this Comforter, our presence is important.

hearts already knit with theirs, we will remember to pray for them and with them. We will remember those special dates. And when we forget, our hurting friends will dare to remind us as they seek out our care. There is no quick fix to grief (or most trials for that matter). Death's burden gets lighter over time, but it remains a burden we carry till we ourselves die or Jesus returns. Until then, let us learn to "bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2).

While not comprehensive, these are four pieces of advice to all whom God gives the opportunity to minister to the grieving. Those in the office of believer engage in this ministry far differently than the world. To cope without hope, the unbeliever distracts rather than deals with the pain. With surface chit-chat, jokes and euphemisms, and fun anecdotes of the deceased, there is every attempt in our day to renovate the house of mourning into a house of fake frivolity. Such diversion from the reality of death is like taking medicine to mask the symptoms instead of dealing with the problem. The

church is tempted to do the same. We feel like ignoring the dead, minimizing the grief, and sidetracking the conversation to something else. But a true comforter does not help avoid the problem; rather, he strengthens the sorrowful to face the problem.

Face up to the finality of death and all its misery. Remember that death has come as a result of sin. Stand respectfully beside that open casket and gravesite, allowing the waves of sorrows to flow over your own mortal heart. Let them see in your eyes and hear in your voice that sorrow tempered by the sure hope we have in Christ who has conquered that sin and its punishment of death for us. Apply the soothing gospel of the risen Savior to your heart and to theirs. Then continue to support them, staying committed to their long-term care.

Those who truly believe this gospel are "able to comfort them which are in trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God" (II Cor. 2:4b). Thus, when God sovereignly allows death to visit, let us confidently care for the grieving as those already equipped with comfort both in life and in death.



Society's disdain for God-given life

Rev. John Marcus, a minister of the Word in the Protestant Reformed Churches

We live in a modern society that disdains God's gift of life. Of course, it is generally not the case that human beings have such contempt for life that they have no desire whatsoever to live. Most people want to remain alive and healthy, and would extend their lives if they were able (so long as life goes according to certain criteria). Nevertheless, society at large has contempt for life *as a gift from God*. That is because, as soon as one admits that God has given him life, he would also have to admit that such a God must be served (cf. Rom. 1:20). But, society refuses to serve God, and therefore professes, "It's my life to live as I please!" In contrast, by God's grace we confess: "That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ." Our life is not ours to determine how we live and die; we belong to God, who created us and redeemed us with the precious blood of His only-begotten Son.

Society's disdain for life as God's gift manifests itself

in a multitude of ways. It is true that the entirety of an unbeliever's life is rebellion against God. But, this rebellion becomes especially evident when people reject God's will and decide for themselves to end either their own life or the lives of others. All life is given by God, and therefore is owed to Him and is to be used in His service; murder and suicide rebel against this principle.

Society's disdain for life as God's gift is manifested, firstly, in its murder of children in the womb. We confess that God has given us life, knitting us together in the womb. The psalmist says, "My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth" (Ps. 139:15). Already in the womb, there was an "I" being made in secret, a human being with a personality. Just because that personality is not expressed as vividly as when he or she matures, or just because a child in the womb is not able to care for himself/herself does not take away from the fact that he/she is a person. What a horror, then, that society would deem that children in the womb may

be killed by abortion. The World Health Organization estimates that worldwide there are 56 million abortions per year (35 abortions each year for every 1,000 women aged 15 to 44).¹ By the numbers, the horror of abortion in modern society goes beyond many pandemics.

Not only is society's disdain for God's gift of life manifested in its attitude toward its youngest members in the womb; the fact that many contemplate, attempt, and carry out suicide shows the same disdain for life. The World Health Organization estimates that some 800 thousand people die from suicide every year,² and many more contemplate and attempt it. Although we may not realize it, many of us reading this article have friends or acquaintances who have contemplated suicide.

As believers, we confess with the inspired apostle Paul that God is the giver of life: "he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things" (Acts 17:26). Of course, God not only gives life and preserves it; He also takes it away at His appointed time. When God took all ten of Job's children in one day, Job confessed, "...the LORD hath taken away" (Job 1:21). The psalmist understood this also: "thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust" (Ps. 104:29).

Although the authority to give life and take it away is ultimately God's, it is becoming more and more acceptable in our society actively to end one's life. It was once considered a horrible sin to attempt or commit suicide; more recently, it is seen only as a sign of mental illness. The point is not that mental illness plays no role in suicides, but that the rebellion of sin is minimized.

Not surprisingly, such disdain for life as God's gift has also come into the realm of the aged and infirmed. Many who face life-long debilitation or the prospect of a slow and painful death (for example, terminal cancer) believe they have the right to end life on their own terms with physician-assisted suicide. Some call it "aid in dying" or "death with dignity," but, whatever the name, assisted or not, suicide is condemned by God. The sixth commandment requires that I not "dishonor, hate, wound, or kill my neighbor" and also that I "hurt not myself, nor willfully expose myself to any danger."³ The sixth commandment clearly includes a prohibition of suicide. Not that suicide is unforgivable; but, like all murder, it is a dreadful sin.

Why this disdain for life? Ultimately, this is a matter of selfishness. But, a large part of this selfishness comes

down to 'quality of life' concerns. For many, their decision to end life (either the life of an unborn child, or their own) comes down to what they perceive about their 'quality of life.' Different people and cultures have different expectations regarding what they consider a good or acceptable quality of life. 'Quality of life' becomes the idol that rules their lives.

As regards abortion, a couple might not hate their unborn baby in the sense that we normally think about hatred. But, they view their unwanted child in economic terms: "If we have to care for this child, we won't be able to pursue our desired careers and have the standard of living we want."

Similarly, much has been written about quality-of-life issues with respect to suicide and assisted suicide (not to mention involuntary euthanasia). Some define quality of life by their physical, or emotional, or mental health. If they should experience excruciating pain, they might imagine they have the right to end their lives, even though palliative care would be effective in mitigating their suffering. Understandably, people often refer to terminal cancer and Alzheimer's in these discussions. Some have declared they would not want to continue living once their Alzheimer's resulted in no longer being able to interact meaningfully with their family. Others (young and old) measure their quality of life by their friendships; if they become lonely, they deem their life not worth living. In short, if people's expectations for quality of life are not met within certain limits, they have little or no desire to continue living.

'Quality of life' thus becomes the determining factor as to whether people will be happy or not. Never do the wicked ask, "What has God ordained for me?" or "How will God have me submit to this circumstance?" The wicked want nothing to do with submission to the will of God; they will determine for themselves what standard has to be met in order for them to be happy. Indeed, when one reads the literature concerning assisted suicide, "death with dignity" is largely about autonomy. People want to determine for themselves what quality of life is acceptable and then how, when, and where they die when their standard is not met.⁴ The 'quality of life' idol thus takes God's place in the minds of those who desire to take their lives. Their concern is not God's government over body and soul, life and death; rather, their concern is with their own 'right' to govern life and death. In many ways, (assisted) suicide is one last fist in God's face that says, "Not Your way; my way! I belong to myself."

1 www.who.int/reproductivehealth/news/abortion-rates/en.

2 www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide.

3 Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 40.

4 See for example, the book *A Dignified Ending* by Lewis M. Cohen.

In contrast, the Christian approach to life and death is the truth “that I with body and soul, both in life and death, am *not* my own, but *belong* unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” What a wonderful truth for the living and dying saint to meditate upon!

Knowing that we do not belong to ourselves, we submit to God’s will of decree and His will of command, “willing and ready henceforth to live unto Him.” Living unto Him, involves the whole of our lives, up until the time that God takes us out of this world. Living unto Him, we will acknowledge that God determines our calling to love Him and our neighbor.

That we are not our own means we do not have the authority to determine for ourselves how we live, or how and when we die. God, in His providence, might fill our bodies with painful and debilitating cancer. He might afflict us with Alzheimer’s so that fellowship with family seems impossible. We might feel like a burden to our families. But, we are not our own when it comes to deciding what quality of life is acceptable. In all these circumstances, we continue to belong to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who so preserves us that without the will of our heavenly Father, not so much as a hair can fall from our head. Indeed, all things that afflict us are subservient to our salvation.

Although different saints in Scripture struggled with questions of life and death (for example, Job and Jeremiah),⁵ especially the apostle Paul exemplifies a right attitude toward life and death. Through his many

God-given trials, he learned to be content in whatsoever state he found himself (Phil. 4:11). As he contemplated life and death, the Holy Spirit put this confession in his mouth: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). What a lovely confession in whatever circumstance we find ourselves. On the one hand, we confess that to remain in this life is for the glorious purpose of knowing, and serving, and enjoying Christ. On the other hand, death is gain; it is “an abolishing of sin and a passage into eternal life” (Lord’s Day 16).

The apostle struggled with both the desire to depart from this life and to remain: “For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you” (Phil. 1:23-24). This reminds us that until God takes us out of this world, it is more needful for us to remain. A disabled saint or an elderly saint might consider themselves to be a burden to family and church. But, God keeps them in this world for the time being because it is more needful. Their continuing presence in this world serves the good of the church and the glory of God. It does that, for example, by giving them opportunity to speak to others about their hope in God. Similarly, it gives opportunity for others to be blessed as we minister to them. God will determine when it is best for us to depart out of this life and when to remain is more needful.

Exactly because we belong to God, we do not disdain life or seek to end it. Rather, we value life as a gift from God. Glory be to Him for the life He has given us now and the glory that awaits us!

⁵ See Job 3:3; Jeremiah 20:14.

Announcements

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of Georgetown PRC express their sincere sympathy to Marilyn Wassink in the death of her husband, **Gordon Wassink**. We also express our sympathies to our fellow officebearer, Deane Wassink, who was Gordon’s son. It is our prayer that the entire Wassink family (26 grandchildren and 86 great grandchildren) may receive comfort from the Holy Spirit in Psalm 121:1 “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth.”

Rev. Carl Haak, President
Mike Moelker, Clerk

Resolution of sympathy

The Council and congregation of Loveland PRC, Loveland, Colorado extend our sympathies to Marvin and Esther Schwarz in the death of Esther’s mother, **Elizabeth (Betty) DeJong**, a member of Peace PRC in Dyer, IN, who was taken to glory March 30, at the age of 99. Our sympathies are also extended to the grandchildren and great-grandchildren in our congregation: Jon and Aryn Schwarz and family, Karl and Hilary Schwarz, Martin and Karmin DeJong and Sadie, Jeremy, and Brittany DeJong and family, Joel and Dana DeJong and Wesley, and Ben DeJong. “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints” (Psalm 116:15).

Rev. Steven Key, President
Erick Solanyk, Clerk

Announcements continued

Resolution of sympathy

After an earthly pilgrimage of 99 years, the Lord has called **Mrs. Elizabeth (Betty) DeJong** to her eternal home. The Council and congregation of Peace PRC, Dyer, IN express Christian sympathy to the families of Ken and Marilyn DeJong, Bill and Pat DeJong, Jim and Becky Hanemaayer, Matt and Stacy DeJong, Stephan and Jennifer DeJong, Michael and Janelle DeJong, Nathan and Brenda Dykstra, Michael and Beth Vermeer, Case and Emily DeJong, and Kathleen DeJong in the death of their mother, grandmother, and great grandmother. We pray that they may receive comfort from the Word of God in II Timothy 4:7, 8: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."

Rev. Ryan Barnhill, President
Joel Houck, Clerk

Call to Synod!!

Synod 2019 appointed Trinity Protestant Reformed Church, Hudsonville, MI the calling church for the 2020 Synod.

The Consistory hereby notifies our churches that the 2020 Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America will convene, the Lord willing, on Tuesday, June 9, 2020 at 8:00 A.M., in the Trinity Protestant Reformed Church, Hudsonville, MI.

The pre-synodical service will be held on Monday evening, June 8, at 7:30 P.M. Rev. G. Eriks, president of the 2019 Synod, will preach the sermon. Synodical delegates are requested to meet with the consistory before the service.

Delegates in need of lodging should contact Mr. Terry Dykstra, 7543 Brewer Dr., Hudsonville, MI. Phone: (616) 797-9734.

Consistory of Trinity PRC
Terry Dykstra, Clerk

Wedding anniversary

With thanksgiving to our heavenly Father, we celebrate the 50th wedding anniversary of our parents and grandparents, **Ronald and Katherine Huizenga** on May 9, 2020. We are thankful for God's providential care of them and pray that He continue to uphold them and bless them as they reach this milestone. We also pray that in His grace and mercy our Lord grant His richest blessings upon them in all their remaining years together. "It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22, 23).

Jennie and Dave Braaksma
David, Hannah, Kimberly
Wendy and Joe Mancusi
Ellen, Mary, Bethany and Emmet Langerak,
Nathan, Jane, Mike, Claire, Bill, Doug, Brian
Carrie and Adam Bosman
Adelle, Neil, Laura
Tedd Huizenga
Samantha
Robin Huizenga
Carly
Randolph, Wisconsin

Reformed Witness Hour reformedwitnesshour.org

Rev. R. Kleyn

- May 3—"Encouraged to Persevere"
Hebrews 10:23
May 10—"Considering and Provoking One Another"
Hebrews 10:24
May 17—"The Praiseworthy Woman"
Proverbs 30:10-31
May 24—"Why Go to Church?"
Hebrews 10:25
May 31—"The Necessity of Church Membership"
Hebrews 10:25