



Preparing for a Funeral

Some Guiding Pastoral Thoughts¹

First, we understand that this topic is not one that most of us desire to confront before we have to, but because burial is an act of Christian faithfulness, and with all the confusion that often comes during this process, we want to offer some biblical and pastoral guidance to prepare you for when it does happen.

Funeral planning comes during some of the most difficult moments of our lives. When our loved ones die, we grieve, mourn, and often don't think straight for a while. The Bible helps us in these moments providing reminders that God is with us in these hard times (Ps. 46:1), that He is near to us when we are brokenhearted (Ps. 34:18), and He gives us the ultimate reminder that because of Jesus, earthly death is an already defeated enemy (1 Cor. 15)!

But death is still hard and it brings about a dizzying season of life where so many decisions confront us very quickly and often without warning; decisions that, many times, we have not thought about. Decisions such as burial arrangements, life insurance payments, the closing of accounts, acquiring death certificates, planning the funeral service, and more. We are confronted with these major decisions, often very quickly and with little preparation.

Our hope in this paper is to provide you with practical and biblical guidance on how to prepare for the funeral of a loved one; on how to navigate the process of caring for the body, dealing with the funeral home, planning the funeral service, and choosing a burial site. We will not be able to answer every question here, and we welcome discussion on issues we have and have not addressed.

Things to Think About when Planning a Funeral

- I. Funeral Costs.
- II. Choosing a Burial Site.
- III. Planning the Visitation and Funeral Service.

¹ Note, the laws and regulations referenced here are for the State of North Carolina. <https://ncbfs.org/laws/>

I. Funeral Cost.

The average cost of a funeral now ranges between ~~\$5000.00-10,000.00~~ depending on the details. Most funeral homes charge what is called a “Non-declinable Service Fee” anytime you ask them to be involved. This fee typically covers the expenses of bodily transport, meeting with the family to arrange details, ordering death certificates, communicating with the cemetery, and any other overhead costs. For most funeral homes, this charge ranges between \$2,000.00-3,000.00, and does not include the processing and care of the body.

We must keep in mind that the Bible instructs us on how to think about death and burial, and we want to be as biblically faithful as we can in the way to bury our dead, knowing that burial is an act of faith. Therefore, we encourage you, when faced with caring for the body of a loved one who has passed away, to commit their body into the ground without embalming, without cremation, and without costly burial implements.²

Additional costs that come with the use of a Funeral Home include:

Types of Bodily Preparation and Burial

****North Carolina State Law does not require a Casket or Cremation for burial. Most cemeteries, however, will have some requirements.** See section II below.**

Cremation: The average cost of cremation in North Carolina ranges between \$1500-2000.00 and does not include the cost of an urn.

- Per North Carolina State Law, a casket is not required for cremation.³

“Federal law requires a funeral home or crematory to inform you that you may use an alternative container, and to make such containers available to you. An alternative container may be made of unfinished wood, pressed wood, fiberboard, or cardboard.”⁴

- Cremation Urn’s range in price from around \$50.00 up to several hundred dollars. Urns can be purchased from the Funeral home,⁵ but there are also many affordable options available online.
- Many people choose cremation thinking it is the most cost-effective way to handle the body for burial, but this is not the case. In fact, North Carolina Law stipulates that bodies may be buried without the use of cremation, embalming, or caskets.

² In the event that money for burial is not available, we encourage you to reach out to the church for assistance. A proper burial is of special importance and carries meaningful Christian significance, and should, therefore, be treated with dignity and respect.

³ North Carolina Crematory Act. (1989 (Reg. Sess., 1990), c. 988, s. 1; 2003-420, s. 2.) “No crematory licensee shall make or enforce any rules requiring that any human remains be placed in a casket before cremation or that human remains be cremated in a casket, nor shall any crematory licensee refuse to accept human remains for cremation for the reason that they are not in a casket.”

https://www.ncleg.gov/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/PDF/ByArticle/Chapter_90/Article_13F.pdf

⁴ Burial and Cremation Laws in North Carolina,

<https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/burial-cremation-laws-north-carolina.html>

⁵ There is also a growing market for preserving cremains in jewelry and other keepsake items, but this is not recommended given the biblical teaching of committing the body into the ground.

- And while cremation is not sinful, it is not the most biblically faithful way to handle the body after death.

Caskets: Caskets are big business these days and you will find there are an overwhelming number of options available. The price of caskets range from \$1000.00 on the low end to well over \$10,000.00. There are steel and wooden options with all sorts of extras like designer mattresses, inner lining material, exterior artwork, and more.

- It is important to keep in mind that while we certainly seek to properly honor the bodies of our loved ones, it is not necessary, and is often sinful to spend exorbitant amounts of money on elegant caskets that are buried in the ground. The casket, after all, is meant to fade into the earth. And money spent on expensive, sealed caskets often slows/prevents the natural process of decay.
- “No law requires a casket for burial. However, you should check with the cemetery; it may have rules requiring a certain type of container.”⁶

Embalming: Embalming is not required by any State,⁷ and is utilized primarily to briefly preserve the body for viewing at a funeral. We recommend that you do not embalm the body for several reasons. First, it’s not the natural course that God has designated for our bodies to take after death. Second, it does not actually preserve the body, and what it does cause is not what God intends for our bodies after we die. Third, embalming often adds a significant and unnecessary expense to the family. The typical cost to embalm ranges between \$500.00-1000.00.

Burial Vault: A burial vault is used to prevent gravesite sinking. Over time, the casket naturally disintegrates into the earth which causes sinking. This is a natural process. In most established cemeteries, vaults or liners are required to prevent sinking due to the use of machinery and other maintenance vehicles that operate in the cemetery.

- Funeral homes offer a wide variety of vaults, and typically market them as protection for the very expensive caskets purchased. But, an expensive vault is unnecessary. Vaults range in cost from \$1000.00 on the low end to well over \$10,000.00. Modern vaults are constructed of various materials such as steel, bronze, and copper and have lots of unnecessary add-on options.⁸ But, keep in mind that a vault will be placed in the ground and is only used to prevent ground erosion. Sealed vaults will also prevent the natural process of the earth absorbing the body.
- Grave-liners⁹ serve the same purpose and are often far less costly and allow for natural processes to occur.

Headstone/Footstone: Most funeral homes or cemeteries can help you secure an appropriate gravemarker. Granite headstones can run anywhere from \$1000-3000.00, and footstones are usually \$400.00 and up. Bronze markers are usually around \$1000.00 and up. You should check the regulations of

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Some funeral homes will inform you that embalming is optional while some may not, which may lead you to assume that it is required. It is not required.

⁸ “The most significant factors that impact the cost of a burial vault are the type and quality of materials used, the level of protection provided, any added customization or personalization, as well as the supply chain which includes the distance between the manufacturer, distributor, and consumer.” Ethan Darby, “How Much Does a Burial Vault Cost?” October 13, 2019, <https://www.trigard.com/blog/burial-vault-cost/>

⁹ <https://www.funeralbasics.org/grave-liners-burial-vaults-whats-the-difference/>

the cemetery where your loved one is to be buried as they often have limits and restrictions on the types of stones/markers that can be placed.

Funeral Home Vehicles/Facilities: Most funeral homes offer the use of their facilities and multiple vehicles, but they come at a financial cost. The use of these spaces and vehicles is entirely optional, but some are convenient. The use of the hearse is a helpful way to transport the casket to the burial site as the car is specially fitted for the purpose.

- Where practicable, it is far more cost-effective and religiously appropriate to have the funeral service at your local Church.

II. Choosing a Burial Site.

Burial in North Carolina can take place in a family cemetery on private property, or in an established cemetery at a Church or Community site.

- North Carolina does not require a casket, vault, or cremation for burial, but established cemeteries often do.

“Most bodies are buried in established cemeteries, but there are no state laws in North Carolina that prohibit burial on private property. Local governments may have rules governing private burials, however. Before conducting a home burial, check with the town or county clerk and local health department for any rules you must follow. If you do bury a body on private land, you should draw a map of the property showing the burial ground and file it with the property deed so the location will be clear to others in the future.”¹⁰

- Typically, Church and Community cemeteries will have significant rules and regulations for burial, so you will want to investigate those requirements in advance if possible. Regulations will include casket and vault requirements, maintenance and decoration of the gravesite, and the types of headstones and footstones that are permitted.
- Vaults or liners, while not required by State law, are usually required by most cemeteries to prevent sinking after burial. Some cemeteries allow grave-liners instead of vaults, which are usually quite a bit cheaper and serve the same function.

There are a growing number of cemeteries where loved ones can be buried without the use of vaults or even caskets. And many of these cemeteries also do not allow embalmed bodies due to the use of chemicals.¹¹

Mausoleums: These buildings are constructed for the purposes of above-ground burial. The deceased is placed in an above ground vault of sorts. This is not recommended because, as the Bible teaches (Gen. 3:19), God has created the earth to absorb our bodies upon our deaths, and the most faithful way to handle the body is to place it into the ground, not above it.

¹⁰ Burial and Cremation Laws of NC.

¹¹ <https://www.greenburialproject.org/resources/green-burial-grounds-nc>

III. Planning the Visitation and Funeral Service.

Visitation is a time when family and friends come to pay their respects and visit with the family. It is often an exhausting time for the family, so you will want to make preparations beforehand.

- Perhaps plan to have some snacks and drinks on hand for family, and chairs for those who may not be able to stand the entire time. Your church is often able and willing to help with this.
- Some families prefer to have the visitation directly before the funeral, some prefer it after, and some choose to do it the night before. There is no right or wrong time, nor is a visitation required.

Should I have a Bodily Viewing/Open Casket?

This can be a challenging question. In American culture, primarily in the 20th century, the practice of embalming has given rise to open-casket viewings of the deceased.

- And this is now the primary purpose of embalming; to preserve the body for a few days in order to display it for the funeral.
- And when we say it like that it sounds a bit strange. Death is not supposed to be easy or fancied up. Death is a reminder of the consequences of our sin. But the hope we have in death is not a well preserved, good looking corpse, it is the living Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Who promises new life to that dead body.

So, while it is not wrong to have an open casket, given the biblical teaching on death and care of the body, and the unnecessary expense of embalming, it is our recommendation that you choose not to have an open casket at the funeral.

How quickly Should we have the Service after the Death?

Being that we suggest avoiding embalming, this means several things for the timing of a funeral service. The best practice would be to have the service as soon as you can after the death has occurred, within 1-3 days.

- If having the funeral service that quickly is not an option, funeral homes and hospitals can now preserve a body through freezing for a short time, allowing the funeral to take place within 4-5 days of the death, which is usually the typical amount of time.
- If the funeral needs to take place at a later time, 5+ days after the death has occurred, we recommend that the body go ahead and be buried under the care of your pastor, and then the funeral can take place when it is most convenient for the family.

There is no biblical rule for how quickly a funeral must take place, but the Bible does give us some guidance on how to think through the burial of the body.

- The biblical pattern seems to be that the body was buried soon after death with a funeral and visitation to follow.
- We see this with the death of our Lord Jesus, His body was laid in the tomb on the day of His death, and afterwards, family and friends came to visit (Matt 27:57-61).
- This same pattern also takes place with Lazarus, Mary, and Martha (John 11:1-44).

Planning the Funeral Service

Your pastors are available and willing to walk with you through this entire process, but especially with planning the service. Here are some things to keep in mind as you plan a service to comfort your family and remember your loved one.

- Funerals typically last 20-40 minutes.
- Elements to include in the service:
 - **Scripture**
 - **Prayer**
 - **Eulogy/Remembrances** - This is often done by the Pastor, but is sometimes done by a family member.
 - **Hymns/Songs** - The songs chosen should be biblically appropriate and remind the family of the hope we have in Jesus. Sometimes, families include songs that were important to the deceased, but these, too, should only be used if they are appropriate.
 - Most services include 2-3 songs (see appendix).
 - A **Message from Scripture** shared by your Pastor.

A typical Order of Service might look something like this:

- The Family Enters and is Seated
- Pastor reads Scripture and offers a Prayer
- Song
- Eulogy
- Song
- The Pastor brings a Message from Scripture
- Song/ Or Closing prayer
- Dismissal

Conclusion

Our hope in this paper is to provide an overview of the often overwhelming and challenging process that comes when a loved one dies. Oftentimes, we don't face these decisions until we have to, and then they all come at us at once. When we are emotional and distraught, we usually do not make the best nor the most biblical decisions.

Our hope and prayer is that this guide serves you and your family now and in the future for God's glory, the good of His Church, and for your own good.

In Christ,

Your Pastor-Shepherds

Appendix: Hymns/Songs appropriate for use during a Funeral

Songs are often very important aspects of a funeral service. God has made music to touch our emotions in ways that not many other things can. Funeral songs, in particular, should be chosen for two reasons:

- They should remind us of our hope in Jesus Christ and His triumph over death and the grave.
- Our songs should be a public confession of what we believe, even in these dark moments.

Appropriate Types of Song

Amazing Grace

It is Well with My Soul

There is a Fountain Filled with Blood

Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing

Great is Thy Faithfulness

In Christ Alone

I Need Thee Every Hour

Blessed Assurance

Abide with Me

Rock of Ages

Christ is Mine Forevermore

Sweet By and By

Jesus Paid it All

Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus

Be Thou My Vision

I'll Fly Away

How Great Thou Art

The Old Rugged Cross

Nearer My God to Thee

What a Friend We Have in Jesus

Precious Lord, Take My Hand

Amazing Grace, My Chains are Gone

What A Day that Will Be

It's Not Death to Die