

WORSHIP SEEKING UNDERSTANDING

windows into christian practice

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A Division of Baker Book House Co
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49516

2003

tions as the churches of our own era. Still, the practical life of these Christians is a rich treasure chest that we can draw from as we try to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The witness of these Christians challenges us to go deeper in our experience of Easter, to go deeper than thinking of Easter as merely a celebration of the return of spring (a greater temptation to those of us in the Northern Hemisphere than to Christians in the southern half of the world), to go deeper than eggs and bunnies.

Recover the transforming news that Jesus' past resurrection dramatically transforms present and future reality. Delight in the knowledge that Jesus' death and resurrection are stamped on your personal spiritual biography. Relish the time warp when you sing, "Christ the Lord is risen today." Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us keep the festival!

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How Common Worship Forms Us for Our Encounter with Death

Facing Death Christianly

Death is humanity's ultimate riddle. We all live under a death sentence. Death is something we cannot elude. Yet unlike any other species, we can actually ponder our own death. We can choose how we will approach it.

And how we approach death is ultimately a deeply religious matter. Death awakens our hopes and fears for our ultimate destiny. Death challenges us to confront religious questions that we may never confront in the hustle and bustle of everyday life. The reality of death opens us up to wonder about the meaning and purpose of life, about reality itself, and ultimately about God.

Christianity is nothing if not a way of thinking about death. At the heart of the Christian religion is the history of a Jewish prophet from Nazareth who died and then, by the power of God's Spirit, conquered death. Everything in the Christian Scriptures either leads up to the account of this death and resurrection or reflects back on it. A good portion of the Christian Scriptures concerns the mystery that the death and resurrection of this Jewish prophet have everything to do with our own dying and living. The Christian tradition provides rich resources for facing death, for coming to understand what it might mean to "die well."

But dying well is not something that modern Christians easily discuss. We have quarantined death from our casual conversations. We do not speak of it easily at a dinner party (or even in church, for that matter). It is difficult to imagine waking up one morning and setting a goal of trying to do better at approaching our own death.

Even if we were to consider death more intentionally, few of us by our own resources or experiences could begin to know what it is to die well. But by listening to the voices of wise saints and the writers of Scripture, we can come to at least an approximate answer to this question. These voices suggest that our encounter with death is best when marked by candor, hope, and solidarity.

Dying well requires frank candor, with honest lament. Honesty demands that we acknowledge that death may be painful, fearsome, even violent, that it brings searing emotional pain. When life has been good, death brings a profound sense of loss. When life has been bad, death brings regret and remorse. Even when it seems a welcome end to months of suffering, death is still a decisive silence. Death is terrible business.

In its finality, death threatens to make life seem vain. "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity," says the ancient preacher (Eccles. 1:2 NRSV). The psalmist echoes, "Our years come to an end like a sigh" (Ps. 90:9 NRSV). Such finality tempts us to shrink back from this deep reality. We are inclined to deny it, euphemize it, or approach it with a resolute and heroic stoicism that pushes away its finality. We are inclined to rationalize our progress through the "stages of grief" rather than confront the finality of death itself.

In contrast, dying well involves lament—honest acknowledgment of the pain, fear, and broken relationships that death brings. In a gripping sermon offered just after he had completed an initial round of chemotherapy treatment for terminal cancer, Rev. James Van Tholen returned to the pulpit to speak these poignant words to his hushed congregation: "We can't ignore what has happened. We can rise above it; we can live through it; but we can't ignore it. If we ignore the threat of death as too terrible to talk about, then the threat wins. Then we are overwhelmed by it, and our faith doesn't apply to it. And if that happens, we lose hope."¹ Here is sober honesty in the face of death.

If honest lament is the first dimension in dying well, the second is its apparent opposite: resilient hope. Dying well, says Amy Plantinga Pauw, is dying with the assurance that death is not the final word.²

1. James Van Tholen, "Surprised by Death," *Christianity Today* (24 May 1999): 57–59.

2. Amy Plantinga Pauw, "Dying Well," in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 163.

The whole of the Christian religion turns on the decisive Easter claim that Jesus Christ conquered death. Dying well means dealing with death redemptively, knowing that we follow the One who has conquered death. For Jesus and for us, the journey through death is still a way of Life, even a way of life abundant.

Christians throughout the centuries have testified to the power of this conquest. The apostle Paul taunted death: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55). Third-century Christian leader Cyprian proclaimed, "Our brethren who have been freed from the world by the summons of the Lord should not be mourned, since we know that they are not lost but sent before; that in departing they lead the way."³ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, when asked if he feared death, replied, "Absolutely not. . . . It will just be a peaceful transition. As a Christian, I believe that there is life after death, and so I understand that this is not the end of life. The soul has a continuation, the soul lives on. Death is only a stage, some would even say a liberation. In any case, I have no fear of death."⁴ Likewise, while on his way to the gallows, Dietrich Bonhoeffer testified, "This is the end—for me the beginning of life."⁵ These are testimonies that the day of death is also a day of birth, a *dies natalis*, the day of birth to new life. Dying well, then, is realizing that death is more like a door than a wall. To die well is to claim that in life and in death, we belong to God.

This message is a difficult one for our modern world to understand. Dying well confronts the suspicions of our age about the improbability of life hereafter. Yet as Dallas Willard reminds us, "Those who think it is unrealistic or impossible are more short on imagination than long on logic. They should have a close look at the universe God has *already* brought into being before they decide he could not arrange for the future life of which the Bible speaks."⁶ Dying well is possible when we cultivate the imagination to sense the beauty and mystery of God's future. Dying well happens when a community faces death with hope—that combination of imagination and faith that turns our attention toward the future.⁷

Yet as with death's horror, so too with redemption's glory, we are tempted to pull back or turn away. Genuine hope, like the shining sun,

3. Cyprian, "Treatises: Mortality," in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 36 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1958), 215.

4. Quoted in David Remnick, "The Exile Returns," *New Yorker* (14 February 1994): 83.

5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letter and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 225.

6. Dallas Willard, *Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 85.

7. This theme is especially prominent in Lewis B. Smedes, *Keeping Hope Alive* (Nashville: Nelson, 2000).

may cause us to turn away, to shield ourselves from its luminous beauty and power. We prefer to focus instead on the trivialities of everyday life. Our lives remain centered on the mundane, the frivolous, the trifling. (And perhaps in some occasions, this is all that is possible.) Approaching death well, in contrast, involves focusing squarely on the ultimate reality of life beyond death.

So dying well is, in part, a matter of achieving an elusive alloy of sober honesty and resilient hope. The pairing of these virtues is lodged deep in the Scriptures of the Christian tradition. Psalm 103 reminds us that "as for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more" (vv. 15–16 NRSV) but then goes on to proclaim that "the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him" (v. 17 NRSV). In Romans 8, Paul quotes an ancient proverb: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered" (v. 36; cf. Ps. 44:22), but he nevertheless professes, "I am convinced that neither death nor life . . . will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vv. 38–39).

Remarkably, this alloy of honesty and hope is the source of great moral courage for many dying people. Dying well delivers us from insignificant worries, from cultivating peevishness, and from nursing grudges. A vivid awareness of impending death leads moral people to confess their sin, forgive their enemies, and seek forgiveness from those whom they have wronged. Dying well heightens our sense of what is most important; it helps us distinguish the important from the trivial. It carries with it a deep awareness, a profound knowing of both human failing and divine grace. It gives us wisdom "to count our days" (Psalm 90). A dying person can help us sort out what is really important. Knowing that we will die helps with this too. In the words of Anne Lamott, "My deepest belief is that to live as if we're dying can set us free. Dying people teach you to pay attention and to forgive and not to sweat the small things."⁸ And Willard suggests, "Jesus shows his apprentices how to live in the light of the fact that they will never stop living."⁹

Yet all of this may seem far too high-minded. How could anyone, even the best saint, achieve this moral triumph? Is dying well simply another massive moral achievement to which we must aspire?

Such questions bring us to the third necessary ingredient in the recipe for facing death well: solidarity. Dying well is not possible alone. "Dying well" is a verb that requires a plural subject. Dying is a social

8. Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 125.

9. Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 86.

act. In the Christian community, one never dies alone (or at least the Christian community should not let this happen). The Christian community together faces death. Only the Christian community, with the strength and encouragement of God's Spirit, can ever be said to have faced death well.

Not that community is easily achieved in the face of death. Death isolates us. As Nicholas Wolterstorff points out, "Even shared grief isolates the sharers from each other. Though united in that we are grieving, we grieve differently."¹⁰ Still, we grieve in isolation together. We learn that there is something far deeper that binds us together as a community. We are bound together as the sinews of the body of Christ.

In sum, the recipe for approaching death well includes three necessary ingredients: honest realism, resilient hope, stubborn solidarity. According to the Christian tradition, these three virtues have their ultimate source in the image of our solidarity or union with Jesus Christ. Among the richest of resources in the Christian tradition is the image that Christ's death and resurrection are intimately related to our own. Paul unfolds this mystery as he writes, "When you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him" (Col. 2:12–13 NRSV) and again, "For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ" (1 Cor. 15:21–22 NRSV). Dying well (or to say it another way, "dying Christianly") is to frame our death in terms of a going down and a coming up, a dying and a rising, just like Jesus' dying and rising. Like Christ, we will all die. But in Christ we will one day rise again.

Mysteriously, the moment we sense our union with Christ, we sense that we are *already* dying and rising. We are dying to sin and rising to new life, dying to anger and fear, rising to hope and deep joy. Long before we encounter death, we have experiences that are analogous to death. Thus, this is a pattern of behavior that is not new at the time of death. It describes the entire Christian life.

Dying well is difficult business in contemporary North American culture. We isolate death from life in the institutional hallways of hospitals. We mark our journey with grief in neatly defined stages that measure our progress. We often approach our deathbed surrounded by more medical machinery than by family and close friends. We leave our death-marking rituals to entrepreneurs of the funeral indus-

10. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 56.

try rather than to spiritual shepherds. Before we can bury our loved ones and attend to our grieving, we need to make hundreds of choices as consumers to an aggressive funeral industry.

For all the negative things we might say about our culture, it does provide resources that help us: the ability to travel to faraway places to be with those we love in time of death, medical palliative care measures that help us minimize human suffering, and hospice care, which can re-humanize how we respond to death. What we yet lack, and what we must recover, are the deep resources of the Christian tradition that can help us see death for what it is: an end to life on this earth and the day of birth to a new life with Christ.

Weekly Worship as a Matter of Life and Death

Especially in modern North American culture, this alloy of honesty, hope, and solidarity requires an adjustment in our thinking about death. It requires that we cultivate habits that will support us when death takes away our ability to think straight.

Gathering with other believers for common worship is a central source for cultivating and nurturing the practice of dying well. Common worship provides both the message and the motivation to explore the richness of the practices of the Christian life. Public worship—gathering in Jesus' name for prayer, proclamation, and sacramental celebration—shapes us into the kind of people who (together) can face death well. Whether a church is quiet or noisy, formal or informal, old or young, it is important that its worship teaches the skills to face death Christianly. Consider the connections between worship and dying in some common ways of practicing the daily, weekly, and annual rhythms of worship in many Christian communities.

In daily prayer, we acknowledge the gift of life and the possibility of death. In both ancient and contemporary patterns for daily prayer, morning is a time of thanking for the gift of a new day of life. As morning breaks, our prayers thank the Giver of life for the new day. At night, we acknowledge our mortality; we declare that our help and hope is in the name of the Lord. Think of children who pray, "If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take," or generations of Christians who have sung, "Teach me to live, that I may dread the grave as little as my bed; teach me to die, that so I may rise glorious at the judgment day."

Weekly Practices

The same life and death message is central in our weekly patterns of worship. In weekly liturgies or services of Word and sacrament, we bear witness to the gospel that sustains us in dealing with death.

In public worship, we gather as the people of God, the body of Christ. Worship begins when we leave our individual residences and "process"—whether by foot or by car—to a common meeting place. By coming together we testify to the world that we stand together to face its strongest assaults. Christian worship forges the community that makes dying well possible. Corporate worship is a weekly testimony to our common calling in community.

In public worship, we offer praise and thanksgiving. In our praise, we testify that God's love is stronger than death. We praise the Lord, who has both endured and conquered death. We express gratitude for the gift of life itself.

In public worship, we celebrate baptism. In baptism, we celebrate that Jesus' death and resurrection make a difference for our living and dying. We celebrate that we, as baptized people, share in Christ's death and resurrection. We acknowledge that, according to St. Paul, "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection" (Rom. 6:4-5). We rehearse the truth that, in words frequently attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, "in baptism we have died the only death that matters."

In worship, we confess sin and hear words of divine grace. As we confess sin, we remind ourselves of our brokenness, our fallenness, our inevitable journey toward death. In honest penitence, we not only confess personal and corporate culpability but also lament brokenness in the world. We cultivate honest prayer before God's face in times of crisis. Then, as we hear divine words of grace or absolution, we are reminded of God's transformation of our journey toward death. We hear again the gospel news that grounds our hope. Confession of sin and words of divine grace, taken together, are a weekly way of cultivating both honesty and hope.

In worship, we hear God's Word read and proclaimed. We cultivate a habit that we will need on our deathbed—the habit of listening in faith to God's Word. A balanced diet of biblical readings offers us both honest assessments of life's limitations and thrilling and imaginative glimpses of God's grace. The biblical Psalms, which have long been at the heart of worship practices, volley between deep thanksgiving and bold and honest lament and provide for us a pattern that will sustain us as we deal with death. Gospel preaching cultivates our imagination to frame our own death in terms of Jesus' dying and rising.

In worship, we offer heartfelt intercessions. We pray for those facing death. We pray in thanksgiving for the lives of those who have gone before. We learn to pray familiar words, "Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be thy name," words that will help us pray in those days in the valley of the shadow of death when words fail us.

In worship, we celebrate the Lord's meal, a proclamation of the Lord's death and a foretaste of the heavenly feasting. This meal—which is so physical and tangible—is a sign that the spiritual food of the gospel is meant for embodied people. Proclaiming the Lord's death forms us to know and believe that his death conquered death. Yearning for that heavenly feast helps us face death with hope.

In public worship, we accomplish many of these actions by singing. We sing to praise, to offer thanks, to confess sin, to speak our petitions. As we sing, we learn the songs that we will hum to ourselves in moments of deep despair. One wise pastoral musician said that every week as she leads congregational singing, she is rehearsing the congregation for a future funeral. Our songs of lament and hope form us as people of faith and hope.

Annual Practices

In addition to these weekly patterns, our annual and occasional celebrations drive the point home all the more. The annual pattern of the Christian year provides moments that transform our weekly worship and surprise us with facets of the gospel we might be inclined to forget or ignore.

Our worship during Advent looks forward with anticipation to the day of Jesus' coming. In Advent, we identify with the ancient people of Israel who longed for the Messiah, and we express our longing for the coming of the fullness of God's kingdom, a day when death shall be no more.

At Christmas and Epiphany—at precisely the most difficult time of the year for families who have lost loved ones—we declare the good news of the birth of the Christ child in Bethlehem. We sing praise to the One who is "risen with healing in his wings," the One "born that we no more may die."

Ash Wednesday liturgies remind us that we are made of dust and will return to dust. Ash Wednesday is a bold, honest confrontation with human mortality. To outsiders, Ash Wednesday is the least comprehensible of Christian celebrations. Why have a service that centers on this depressing message? Yet Ash Wednesday is an observance with deep biblical wisdom. It is a day when we live out the injunction of the psalmist: "Teach us to count our days" (Ps. 90:12 NRSV). It is a day that reminds us that God is with us when our lives turn to ashes.

On Good Friday, we continue the theme, remembering and commemorating the death of Jesus Christ. On Good Friday, we enter into the terror of death, hearing Jesus' words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" On Good Friday, we see that God does not sit back

in splendid and distant isolation from death but enters into it, showing that dying will never have to be godless. In this commemoration of death, we sense the power and glory of life and sing, "What wondrous love is this, O my soul."

The annual cycle comes to a grand climax on Easter Sunday, the festival of resurrection. On that day we trumpet the good news that death has been conquered. Easter celebrations portray the life that invigorates all Christian living. We celebrate that we, like Jesus before us, will rise.

On Ascension Day, nearly forgotten in our culture, we celebrate that heaven is the place that can receive a human body, both Christ's and eventually ours. On this day, we celebrate that Jesus "goes to prepare a place for us" so that we will never again have to think of death as the last word.

On Pentecost, we recall the gift of God's Spirit, not only to the followers of Jesus but also to us. The same Spirit that breathed life into Jesus and raised him from the dead now breathes in us the breath of a life that will not end with physical death.

Then, in the darkening days of fall, All Saints' Day reminds us of those in the faith who have gone before us. We acknowledge that we stand united in one community, in the one body of Christ, with those who have died.

In these ways, our daily, weekly, and annual patterns bear witness to this blend of realism, hope, and solidarity that will help us face death. Occasionally, the routines of these patterns are broken open by experiences of life that are so spine-tingling, so extraordinary, so unforgettable that we are shocked or inspired into new and deeper ways of thinking Christianly about death. In one congregation, such a moment occurred when its pastor returned to preach after being stricken by inoperable cancer. In another, it occurred when a young child who was born with heart problems and who was expected to live for only a few months was presented for baptism. In another, it occurred when a very ill member of the congregation finally agreed to allow her priest to pray for her in public as one who was about to die.

Whether in these spine-tingling, once-in-a-lifetime moments of inspiration or in week-in, week-out liturgical routine, worship is a matter of life and death. It is a weekly rehearsal of honest realism and heavenly hope. Weekly worship is a disciplined and patterned piety that forms us as people of faith. Worship orients us to God. It straightens out our world again. It puts us in touch with God's redemptive activity. It connects us with Jesus Christ—his healing, his transforming power, his teaching, his guidance. Worship gives us an outlook, an attitude, a vantage point, a perspective, a lens through which to view the world that is rooted in Jesus' death and resurrection. Worship is an

arena in which something is done to us, a place where God's Spirit is at work. The weekly pattern of common worship has the power to shape us into people with the gift or charism of approaching death well. Christian worship holds the Christlike pattern of dying and rising before us. It trains us to be always dying and rising. Christian worship is all about putting death in its place.

Barriers

But perhaps this high-minded rhetoric makes you skeptical. Can you remember when worship did something like that? Why is this power so rarely present in worship? Isn't this all saying too much for the power of worship? Doesn't the routine of worship dull us to its power? Even if worship is so powerful, how many worshippers are attentive to this death-defying message in worship's patterns?

These questions hint at two barriers that Christian communities must identify and combat. First, often worship services do not live up to their rich potential. We water them down. We make worship appealing or fun rather than an honest, hopeful approach to matters of death and life. For worship to have a life-changing message, that message has to be clear and apparent. The words spoken and sung, the gestures, and the space in which we gather actually have to make this possible.

This news that worship can prepare a community for approaching death well comes as a stern, prophetic warning to those who aspire to be priests and prophets in the Christian community. Plan and lead the liturgy in your community as if your life and death depended on it. The services you plan and lead have, by the Spirit's power, the ability to form in people the kind of realism, hope, and solidarity necessary to approach death well. We give our people the most satisfying spiritual food not when we withhold the depth of the gospel but when we deliver it. No saccharine substitute will suffice. The practice of dying well is corrupted and inhibited by sentimental worship that fails to be honest about life.

Second, even when worship is sufficiently honest, deep, and full of hope, worshippers often shrink back from its power. Our habit of shrinking back from both lament and hope is perpetuated by our pulling back from deep participation in worship. When honest words, gestures, and space are all in place, when they actually do set out to put death in its place, then participants must enter into their depth and power. We need to participate fully, consciously, actively. The power of worship to shape us into people who die well depends on our deep participation in worship. If singing hymns of praise about divine grace is to shape us, then we need to experience those songs not simply as nice songs but as luminous hymns of praise for the divine conquest of

death. We can have perfect liturgy and imperfect worship. We can get the mechanics of worship right but miss its deep meaning and purpose. Worshippers need to be called not simply to participate in the mechanics of worship but to enter deeply into its purposes and meaning.

For this to happen, worship-oriented reflection and training need to be an enriching part of congregational life. In fact, one of the primary goals of a church education program should be to prepare us for honest and deep participation in worship. Without it, our worship can often become mundane or ritualistic. We need a language to awaken our imaginations so that we can enter into worship more fully.

When congregations do combat these tendencies—when our liturgies *are* honest and filled with Christ-centered hope and when we *do* participate in them fully, consciously, actively—then worship is a tremendous resource for enabling and inspiring us to approach death well. Dying well requires a vivid, biblically shaped imagination about the coming kingdom of God. Worship inspires and shapes that imagination. Dying well requires a community to nourish and sustain it. Worship forms that community. Dying well requires song to comfort and sustain it. Worship rehearses those songs. Dying well requires hope. Worship inspires it. Dying well requires honesty. Worship demands it. If we allow ourselves to slip into hyperbole, we might say that weekly worship is worthwhile if for no other reason than to help us prepare for death. Worship teaches us the rhythms of prayer that will help us to know what to do at the time of our death.

The Valley of the Shadow of Death

All of this happens in the ebb and flow of normal life. But what about our up close experience with death itself? What is worship's role in the valley of the shadow of death?

Here, too, Christian worship is a rich resource for forming us more deeply as people of faith, for helping us to experience the abundant life that is in Christ. Common worship can be the spiritual anchor that expresses our lament and hope during days of crisis, trauma, and our direct encounter with death.

Worship will inevitably have a different role in nearly every death, for no two deaths are alike. Some die after an extended battle with cancer, others after a sudden heart attack, senseless murder, or tragic accident. Some die as prominent members of a community, others in complete anonymity. Some die when another takes their life, others because they take their own. Some die as victims of warfare or terrorism, others at the hands of the death penalty. Some die in ripe old age, others in birth or infancy. Some die as strong Christian believers, others with great doubts and fears. Some die in families and communi-

ties of strong belief, others in families or communities with none. Some die in communities with rich and strong worship habits, some in communities with only weak worship habits.

In many and varied circumstances, both contemporary Christian communities and ancient Christian traditions provide beautiful examples of a host of practices that reflect and shape the faith of those facing death. These examples suggest the rich diversity of ways in which worship sustains and nurtures our faith in our encounter with death.

I felt I couldn't pray. My ability to pray left me that day I heard my diagnosis. Yet I knew that my community of faith was praying for me. When my prayers failed, theirs came through. I listened to recordings of worship services in our congregation. As I heard the Psalms being sung, as I heard my name mentioned in the intercessions, I became profoundly grateful for the privilege of being a part of the Christian community.¹¹

Dying well does not mean that we rely on the strength of our own prayers. Many fear dying more than death—the uncertainty, the suffering, the loss of control, the fear of being a burden to others, the loneliness. Christian worship, done together, is an act of protest against the loneliness that inhabits the chemotherapy room, the radiation chamber, the AIDS care facility. Those who bring comfort and encouragement and become a community of prayer are Christ's hands, Christ's feet, and Christ's heart made present to those who grieve. This ministry of encouragement and prayer happens in myriad ways, in pastoral visits by ordained clergy, in informal times of prayer with fellow Christians, in formal prayers in public worship for those who are facing death, and in quiet conversations with hospital chaplains. In each case, it is prayer and worship, offered together, that provide strength and encouragement for the sick and dying and for their families and friends.

For our family, the grace to face death came from an unexpected gift. The doorbell rang. When we answered, we found no one there—only a gift basket, a gift given for dying and mourning people. Mom was dying of cancer, and the stranger who came left a gift whose simplicity would have blinded the unsuspecting to its power. The gift was a simple loaf of bread and a bottle of wine. The stranger was our pastor. And the gift was the bearer of God's grace. Our eating and drinking of that gift was not a sacrament in the strict sense. There was no formal liturgy, no large gathered community, no solemn words. But we ate and drank with a

11. This example is adapted from a response to a class discussion about this topic.

deep sacramental imagination. We tasted those gifts while sitting around the fireplace late one evening. Stories poured forth about our life with Mom. The piano resounded with hymns—old and new—that sang Mom's faith. Our feasting in this moment of life and death was an echo of the same songs, the same eating and drinking that we shared in our congregation—even as the church's feasting is an echo of another heavenly feast (Revelation 19). Without knowing it, regular participation in the church's sacrament prepared us for this evening of sacramental sharing. Our pastor was a wise caregiver.¹²

Not every mourning family would find such meaning in everyday bread and wine, of course. But many families of faithful Christian people would. They have been prepared for their encounter with death through faithful participation in communities of worship. If such meaning is not found in the form of bread and wine, then perhaps it is found in the regular use of the Lord's Prayer, a hymn of faith, a Scripture reading, or one of worship's symbols. These tangible human cultural products, made holy by their use in worship, shape our imaginations in our encounter with death. They help us see death through the lens of the Christian faith. They anchor us in a tradition of faith that is stronger than any individual, sturdier than any individual congregation.

A few years ago I stood with my wife and her family at the bedside of her dying father in a nursing home. He had suffered a massive stroke and was now slowly sinking toward death. While his labored breathing grew shallower and more infrequent, we waited, almost silent, for death to come. As is usually the case in such situations, death arrived on silent feet, with no fanfare. One moment there was a barely alive person, the next, a lifeless body. The moment was not less awesome for its near imperceptibility. After a few moments of silence, tears and hugs, and a prayer, we notified the nurse and began to make some preliminary preparations. We were informed that the funeral director would not arrive for an hour or two. As we waited, our brother-in-law, who is Russian Orthodox, suggested that we follow his tradition, which prescribes that at the moment of death a continuous reading of the Psalms commence. So someone picked up Dad's tattered Bible and began to read Psalm 1. And we continued to read one psalm after another, passing the Bible around the group. At first I assumed that this was merely a pious way of passing the time. But very soon we were all powerfully drawn into the words of the psalms as they began to reflect on Dad's life, his faith, his struggles, his destiny. It was almost uncanny how each new psalm led us through the memories and emotions that we needed to explore as we began that long process of grieving. I think we made it to Psalm 40 or so by the

12. Ibid.

time the funeral director finally arrived, and we left off the reading with some reluctance.¹³

For all the resources in Christian prayer books and devotional guides, much of what happens in the face of death is improvised. Perhaps the improvised rituals will include prayer, perhaps the singing of hymns, perhaps the reading of Scripture, perhaps informal eulogies and remembrances. Perhaps the service will be a death vigil in a hospice care facility, a hospital, or a rest home—an action that will humanize and warm these institutions of care. Perhaps the ritual will be a time of prayer in a funeral home prior to a time of visitation with family and friends. Perhaps it will come in the workplace, at home, at a school. Perhaps it will occur with the full awareness (or even participation) of the one who is dying. Perhaps it will occur several hours after death has visited. In these times, we together claim God's promises on behalf of both the dying and the mourning—even if the dying or many of the grieving cannot express these prayers or accept the peace that comes with praying them.

Such improvised practices have a long history in the Christian tradition. In the early church, liturgical handbooks and church orders called for common prayer in the hours that led to death and in the time that intervened between death and burial, as well as at the burial itself. Christians today who long for rich and honest patterns of prayer can find deep resources in the practices of the earliest Christians.

These improvised rituals may well be the occasions of rich experiences of God's grace. Perhaps formerly estranged family members will reconcile. Perhaps a parent or grandparent will comfort a young child. Perhaps family members will find deep meaning in helping to plan the improvised liturgy or to choose hymns for the funeral. Perhaps the occasion will evoke memories that help everyone sense the giftedness of life, the ways in which the dying one was, however imperfectly, an image bearer of God.

But not every death will present opportunities for such prayer. For many, there is neither the pain nor the opportunity of these last moments. Deaths that are premature, sudden, or accidental deprive us of opportunities to say good-bye and also deprive the living and the dying of the opportunity to worship together. In these circumstances, worship's role is more dramatic.

13. Leonard VanderZee, *In Life and in Death* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1992), 11.

I dreaded the prospect, but the funeral gave rest to my soul. It did not console me for Eric's absence. Instead it sank deep into me the realization that my son's death is not all there is. . . . It was a liturgy which both thanked God for the presence of Eric among us and expressed our grief upon his no longer being present. It sang of the hope of resurrection. . . . It was a liturgy in which not only words, but also actions and symbols, spoke. . . . We celebrated the Eucharist, that sacrament of God's participation in our brokenness.¹⁴

Funerals help us, even force us, to mark death *together*. Even for those who are inclined to grieve in solitary silence, the funeral is a social act. In one large city, a quiet and retiring convenience store worker died unexpectedly. Her coworkers came to her funeral, fearing that they would be the only ones there. They were surprised when dozens of people arrived, all members of her church community. They had never imagined that people from so many different walks of life would love one another enough to interrupt their busy schedules to attend a funeral. In this urban world of individual survival, this expression of Christian solidarity was a bold witness to the power of the gospel. For Christian congregations, this sense of solidarity is even stronger when services are held in the normal place for worship rather than in a funeral home or care facility.

At their best, funerals create space for honest lament. They refuse to allow us to deny or neglect death. They refuse to allow us to quell our grief in favor of stoic indifference. They name death as the alien enemy it is. At their best, funerals do not pretend to quiet grief—only the death of those who mourn will end the grieving.¹⁵ But funerals can begin the long process of offering this grief to God. They reinforce the important pattern of bringing all our needs, hopes, and fears to God in prayer.

Funerals also solemnize death—or rather, they solemnize *life*, the life of an image bearer of God. Funerals are events that signal the gravity and significance of the life that was lived. Eulogies provide opportunities to remember the deceased with honesty and thanksgiving. Liturgical planning by the family offers ways of taking ownership of and personalizing the service, giving it a strong sense of identity.

Funerals also give occasion for expressing deep Christian joy and hope. Rites that are sober can still be joyful. The best funerals are not obsessed with divine judgment (as were so many rites in the Middle Ages) or saccharine sentimentality (as are many contemporary North American funerals). Rather, funerals help us tell the difference between surface happiness and deep joy—proving that one can be simul-

14. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 38.

15. *Ibid.*, 15.

taneously full of sorrow and full of deep joy. At their best, funerals live up to their name in many recent prayer books as a "service of witness to the resurrection." They are central occasions for proclaiming the heart of the Christian gospel and for offering that good news to all who are present.

Several Christian practices—each practiced by some though not all Christian communities—bear witness to the resurrection. A baptismal pall (cloth covering of the casket) reminds the community that the one who has died lies in union with Christ in baptism. The Lord's Supper may be celebrated as a witness to the resurrection. Scripture is prominent. Sermons or spoken meditations center on the promises of the gospel of Jesus Christ. A candle may be lit as a sign of Christ's light in a world without light. The music may include not only psalms of lament but also hymns of Easter praise. In these ways, funerals draw on resources from deep within the Christian tradition. The earliest Christians announced the hope of the resurrection with every detail of their observance. The deceased was dressed in white, not black. The funeral processions were held during the day, not at night. Music included not only dour lamentations but also joyful alleluias.

In sum, funerals are the place where we can be most intentional about re-framing death, about naming death as dying and rising with Christ. To accomplish this, funerals involve multiple tasks. As we gather, we thank God for life, we remember the life of the one who has died, we remember and proclaim the gospel of Christ—the foundation of our hope—we pray for the grieving, we begin to heal the broken spirits of those who have gathered, we announce the good news of the gospel and invite all who have gathered to drink from the living water of Christ, and we experience the profound solidarity of being united as members of Christ's body. Just as a woven tapestry is enriched by the presence of multiple strands, so too a funeral is enriched when each of these tasks is highlighted and experienced.

Here again, these observations challenge all who plan and lead funeral services to attend to the rich opportunities for pastoral care in their work. Pastors, chaplains, musicians, artists, and other leaders give the Christian community their greatest gifts when they help us pray honestly and hopefully in the face of death. The Christian community has the duty to insist, "Do not give us sentimental words. Do not obscure the gospel of Jesus Christ. Do not simplify the gospel message. Do not minimize the life of this image bearer of God. Do not carry out your work without care." Worship in the face of death cannot transform us if it shrinks back from honesty—or from honest hope. Wise pastoral leaders might also provide death education in the midst of normal congregational life, suggesting guidelines for funeral services that will help families enhance rather than obscure the gos-

pel-proclaiming character of Christian funerals as they make the many decisions necessary in times of death. No doubt, this is formidable work. What comforts some may unnerve or unsettle others. Yet without thoughtful leadership, it is quite possible for a given Christian community to cultivate, by neglect, an uncaring, callous approach that denies the gospel.

This important pastoral work is an opportunity to strengthen not just the family and close friends of those who grieve but also the entire Christian community. If a community prays thoughtfully at the occasion of death, all of its members are given resources for living with honesty and hope in their own confrontation with death. These occasions build up the spiritual muscle that communities will need to face death again. For the living, there is no better antidote to arrogant, sloppy living than intentional visits to a funeral home, a walk through a cemetery, or attendance at a funeral. Rule number one for thoughtful living: Do not miss a funeral.

For me, the strength to carry on came from the strength of week-in, week-out worship services in the months following the funeral. Every week, I came into worship with death on my mind. Worship showed me the larger picture. In quiet moments over the next year, worship surprised me with new ways of approaching my deep, deep grief. I saw the Lord's Supper as a feast shared with all God's children both now and those who have gone before.¹⁶

The funeral does not mark the end of grieving. Nor does it mark the end of the relationship between public worship and the practice of dying well. Worship remains crucial for sustaining the life of those who grieve. Soon after the funeral, liturgies are filed away, and the community returns to its routine patterns of worship. Those who grieve may experience in this routine—in the gathering, confessing, hearing, eating, dispersing—new and powerful signs of grace. For some, it may be the singing of a favorite hymn. For others, it may be hearing a text that was read at a funeral service of a loved one. For another, it may be the tasting of the cup and bread, signs of Christ's brokenness and divine grace. Thoughtful worship leaders enhance this potential by regularly praying for those who mourn and by deliberately looking for ways to link worship practices with the experience of mourning and the ministry of consolation.

Special practices may enhance this. In one congregation, it may be naming and remembering during an All Saints' Day service or a ser-

16. This example is adapted from a student's response to a class discussion about this topic.

vice based on Hebrews 11–12 those who have died. In another, it may be remembering the anniversaries of death with prayer. In another, it may be prayer during the holiday season for those who are grieving. In another, it may be “Homecoming Sunday,” in which a community gathers to renew friendships and remember those in the community who have died. Each of these small practices cultivates the gift of remembrance that dignifies the lives of those who have gone before us and expresses our gratitude for their presence among us.

In contrast, others who grieve may experience worship as arid and empty—perhaps for a season, perhaps for years. This is especially true if worship fails to address matters of life and death, if it fails to express honest lament, if it fails to give rise to genuine Christ-centered hope. But if worship faces squarely the truth and joy of the gospel, if it rehearses the life-changing events of God’s history of the world revealed in Christ, if it assumes that the ultimate power of worship is not in the creativity or genius of the worship leaders but rather in the Spirit of God, then God’s people may rest assured that worship is an arena in which God’s Spirit moves to draw people closer, to lift their hearts, to provide comfort and encouragement.

In all these ways and in all these varied circumstances, common worship provides resources to enable people to approach death Christianly. At its best, worship is immersed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in our union with Christ in that death and resurrection. Left to our own devices, we are inclined to experience death as the final word, to set our sights on the immediate challenges of living in the wake of death. Public worship in the face of death “sets our sights on things above.” It puts us in touch with the divine pattern of dying and rising.

In this age of self-improvement, we may be tempted to ask, “How can I die well?” Dying well, after all, could be depicted as the ultimate human achievement. It is true that dying well requires every ounce of emotional, physical, and spiritual strength we can muster. But finally, it requires more than we can offer. Even the most saintly people can cover in the face of death. Dying well requires divine grace. We praise God that this task of dying well has already been done for us—when Jesus died our death. Dying well is less an accomplishment we achieve than a gift we receive. It is a Pentecost virtue, a gift of the Spirit, and so, something for which we should pray. And one way in which the Spirit helps us prepare (together) to die well is by gracing us with power and beauty in common worship. If our liturgical patterns constantly remind us of dying and rising with Christ, then when we come to the day of death, we will know what to do; we will be well rehearsed. That is, in part, how death loses its sting.

Other Worship-Related Writings by John D. Witvliet

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