



When Your Time Comes

Few people get around to considering their own funeral. It seems grim and depressing. But really, why should that be? We all treasure photos of deceased family and friends. We enjoy telling stories about them, and we prize the things and accomplishments they left behind. We'll all be joining their ranks someday, so we might as well do a little planning. While you don't want to be a control freak, for every ounce of preparation you do now, you'll save your loved ones ten pounds of hassle and anxiety, easing the stress of decision-making at a painful time.

How you plan a memorial service or funeral is up to you and your family. Scripture makes absolutely no demands as far as format or venue, despite what some of my well-meaning colleagues in the clergy may suggest. But here are a few things to think about for your own memorial service or that of a loved one.

- Consider talking to friends and family about your memorial. Get thoughts down on paper or incorporate your wishes in your will. What kind of music would you like? What photos or videos? Do you have any farewell wisdom you would like to pass on in a written message or video? You'll probably never have a better captive audience.

- Consider providing for expenses in a special account or insurance policy—even paying a funeral home ahead of time.

- Who would you like to officiate? Christ-centered, grace-based clergy should be aware of their audience, choose their words carefully, and send attendees away with hope, assurance and peace of mind.

- Don't be afraid to ask loved ones about their preferences for a memorial service. (Not an easy question to ask. Timing and context are everything.)

- Some people don't want a service at all—an understandable choice. On the other hand, it's a safe bet that even if you are an antisocial curmudgeon, at least a few of your friends and family will crave reassurance and closure in the wake of your exit from this world.

Burial or Cremation?

It's helpful to remember that what we call heaven is an entirely different dimension. The immortal bodies we are given are incorruptible—not bound by physics as we know them. They exist in eternity—a concept that is far beyond our comprehension.

In light of this, the state of our physical bodies at death is inconsequential. The institutional church was seriously mistaken when it taught and required that bodies be

buried with a “proper” ritual in a certain kind of cemetery in order for the body to be resurrected and reunited with the soul.

History tells us that millions of Christ-followers went to their deaths without a “proper” burial or funeral. The book of Hebrews mentions martyrs who were tortured, who died without their bodies intact, “that they might gain an even better resurrection” (Hebrews 11:35-38). The Bible teaches that, regardless of the state of our earthly remains, in the afterlife God can provide us with an eternal, glorified body.

So when it comes to dealing with our own remains or the remains of a loved one, the Bible does not offer rules and regulations. Decency compels us to treat the remains of our loved ones with all respect, but the question of burial or cremation is a personal decision—a part of our freedom in Christ.

Ways to Remember

In the accompanying article, Irma's memorial guests tied brief notes to helium balloons and sent them skyward. While this may strike some as bizarre, there are valid reasons for similar symbolic gestures. No one believed that Irma was literally in the sky grabbing messages from popped balloons. But in the face of death, we are often plagued with emotional unfinished business—things we wish we had said or done, conflicts we wish we had handled better. Shared rituals can help us patch those issues, forgive ourselves (or the loved one) and say goodbye. Other activities can help comfort children. The ideas below were gathered from various sources, and some may fit better than others. When combined with the spiritual encouragement of the gospel, a few may help mourners come to terms with their loss.

- Assemble drawings that children created for a departed parent or grandparent. Put them in an album, or print copies as a booklet to be given to friends and family.

- Consider planting a tree with some or all of the cremains of the



Death is like that. On this end of the birth canal, it seems a scary, dark tunnel we are being sucked toward by an irresistible force. None of us looks forward to it.

We're afraid. It's full of pressure, pain, darkness...the unknown. But beyond the darkness and pain lies a whole new world outside.

When we awaken after death in that bright new world, our tears and hurts will be mere memories.

[Taken from *Where Is God When It Hurts?* by Philip Yancey, page 254. Copyright © 1990 by Philip Yancey. Used by permission of Zondervan. www.zondervan.com.] □

—the Editors

loved one. Several companies (use a search engine to look on the Internet) offer biodegradable urns for this purpose. Or course, a memorial tree may also be planted without a person's ashes.

- Give each guest a small bag of forget-me-not seeds to plant in memory of the deceased.
- Give friends and family of the deceased loved one a pen and smooth stone on which to write a memory, quote or characteristic of the loved one. Place the stones in a memorial jar. The stones can be read at the memorial service, or taken home.
- Mix ashes of the departed into a concrete garden sculpture. Some companies will place these sculptures on the ocean floor, where they will become an artificial coral reef.

- Create a memorial quilt using photographs (iron-on and other methods are available for transfer to fabric), art created by the loved one and patches of the loved one's favorite clothing. Display the quilt at a memorial service.

- Assemble a memorial display with mementos of the loved one's vocations, hobbies, interests, travel, military or other public service, accomplishments and honors.

Is It The End...Or the Beginning?

In several biblical passages, Paul relates the death of our own self-

determined path in life, so that we are crucified with Christ and experience a spiritual rebirth.

In his book, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* Philip Yancey compares death to birth:

Your world is dark, safe, secure... You do nothing for yourself. You are fed automatically, and a murmuring heartbeat assures you that someone larger than you is meeting all of your needs. Life consists of simple waiting—you're not sure what to wait for, but any change seems faraway and scary....

One day you feel a tug. The walls seem to press in. Those soft padded walls are now pulsing wildly, crushing you downward. Your body is bent double, your limbs twisted and wrenched. You're falling upside down....

Your head is squeezed flat, and you are pushed harder, harder into a dark tunnel. Oh, the pain. Noise. More pressure. You hurt all over. You hear a groaning sound and an awful sudden fear rushes in on you.

It is happening—your world is collapsing. You're sure it's the end. You see a piercing, blinding light. Cold, rough hands grasp at you, pull you from the tunnel and hold you upside down. A painful slap. Waaahhhhh!

Congratulations, you have just been born.



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