

Our Journey Is a Thorny Maze

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Our journey is a thorny maze,
But we march upward still;
Forget the troubles of the way,
And reach at Zion's hill.

See the kind angels at the gates,
Inviting us to come!
There Jesus the Forerunner waits,
To welcome travelers home!

There, on a green and flowery mount,
Our weary souls shall sit,
And with transporting joys recount
The labors of our feet.

No vain discourse shall fill our tongue,
Nor trifles vex our ear:
Infinite grace shall fill our song,
And God rejoice to hear.

Eternal glories to the King
That brought us safely through,
Our tongues shall never cease to sing,
And endless praise renew.

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ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Death and Funerals

Kevin T. Bauder

To everything there is a season . . . a time to die (Eccl 3:1–2).

It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting: for that is the end of all men; and the living will lay it to his heart. Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better (Eccl 7:2–3).

The past several months has been a season of bereavement. My father's younger brother was the first to die. The next was my mother's oldest brother, an uncle who invested a great deal in me when I was a child and young man. Then two mentors and friends died within weeks of each other. Two weeks ago, my father's youngest sister passed away; she was one of my favorite aunts.

Both mentors were radiant believers. My father's brother and sister both professed faith. My mother's brother resisted the gospel all his life, but my aunt reports that he called upon God to save him before he died. I have at least some hope of meeting all these people again.

Nevertheless, the sorrow and the sense of loss have been real. These feelings have been intensified by the fact that I was not present for three of the funerals, which were restricted by COVID-19. Previously, I had not much considered how important the funeral or memorial service is as a way of providing closure for those who remain. Subsequently, I've been thinking about death and funerals. Funerals serve two great purposes: first, to comfort the living, and second, to offer spiritual guidance in a time of need. Three current trends tend to thwart the accomplishment of those purposes.

The first trend is to redefine the funeral as a "celebration of life." No, funerals are not celebrations of life. Birthdays celebrate life. Graduations celebrate life. Weddings celebrate life. Baby showers celebrate life. No celebration, however, draws us to a funeral. We gather because death summons us. We must never forget that death is an interloper, an intruder, an enemy, and a divine judgment upon human sin. Christian funerals (i.e., those conducted by Christians) must display death in its proper context and then explain its character rightly.



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Christian funerals must also provide the bereaved with an opportunity to mourn. Funerals are not a time for celebrating. They are a time for sorrowing (though not as others who have no hope). Even if we expect to meet the deceased in heaven, we know that we must endure the pain of separation, perhaps for many years. Funerals are a time for saying goodbye. The funeral is not for the dead, but for those who live and grieve.

The second harmful trend grows out of the first. It is the tendency to shift the focus toward memories of the deceased, whether happy or otherwise. Of course, funerals do constitute an acknowledgement of the departed, and certain expressions of personal interest are natural and appropriate. For example, a funeral should include an obituary or some other recollection, normally presented by the officiant. Believers' funerals should always feature their testimony of conversion. These are ordinate ways of personalizing a funeral.

Incidentally, when I conduct funerals, I always ask to see the Bible that was used by the deceased. Surprisingly, even very secular people usually own a Bible and have often read it. Those owned by Christians are usually well thumbed and heavily marked. I look for verses that are marked or underlined, and I use these verses as a starting place to design a service that is more personalized to both deceased and family. If possible, I will preach from that copy of the Bible, and then place it in the hands of the family after the burial.

Personalized funerals are good. Obsession with the deceased is not. The funeral is a time for letting go, not a time for holding on. It is a time for turning the minds of the mourners away from the deceased and toward other things. An intensified focus on the deceased works against an effective funeral.

One of the destructive trends in recent funerals is the practice of featuring extended reminiscences by family members. Even worse is opening the microphone to anybody who wants to share a memory. This practice is the funeral equivalent of karaoke: an opportunity for the self-obsessed to put themselves on display. Occasionally—rarely—these remarks end up honoring both the deceased and the occasion. More often they become exhibitions of maudlin sentimentality, or sometimes even of hostility as a family member vents a lifetime of anger against the departed. These eruptions must be discouraged at all costs.

The final trend, and the one that distresses me most, is the neglect of the gospel. The main point of a funeral should be *hope*, and hope is grounded in the gospel. Even gospel-believing churches and ministers, however, are offering less and less of the gospel in their funerals.

My aunt professed belief in the gospel, and her life gave evidence of conversion. I have some reason to suspect that the minister who conducted her

funeral also knew and believed the gospel. Yet not one word of gospel was spoken. The entire focus was on memorializing her. Well, I loved her and honor her memory, but neglect of the gospel was no fitting tribute to the things she held dear.

The gospel can and should be preached, even at the funerals of the lost. When the rich man lifted up his eyes in hell, he begged Abraham to send someone to warn his surviving brothers (Luke 16:27–28). The minister at the funeral is God's messenger, and God commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30). The gospel message is a message of deliverance, of hope, and of ultimate triumph. It is the message that our great enemy, death, has been defeated. It is the very message that people need to hear when they tread the valley of the shadow of death. A minister who neglects the preaching of the gospel when people most need to hear it is shirking a fundamental duty of his calling.

By the way, when I arrived at my aunt's funeral, I was told that it wasn't really a funeral. I was told that Governor Gretchen's mandate forbade gatherings for funerals. Since the governor was allowing protests, however, the family and funeral director had decided to hold a protest against the death of my aunt.

Well, death is worth protesting, but none of our protests can do anything about it. The one truly effective protest was registered on the cross. There the Prince of Life submitted Himself to the demands of death and, by dying, defeated that great enemy. He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, and by doing so He canceled our guilt and guaranteed the salvation of those who believe. We who trust Him have every confidence that our sins have been forgiven, that we enter His presence when we die, and that our resurrection is certain. That message must dominate every Christian funeral.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
