

Stoop Down, My Thoughts

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Stoop down, my thoughts, which use to rise,
Converse a while with death;
Think how a gasping mortal lies,
And pants away his breath.

His quivering lip hangs feebly down,
His pulses faint and few;
Then speechless, with a doleful groan,
He bids the world adieu.

But Oh, the soul, which never dies!
At once it leaves the clay!
Ye thoughts, pursue it where it flies,
And trace its wondrous way.

Up to the courts where angels dwell,
It mounts triumphing there;
Or devils plunge it down to hell,
In terror and despair!

And must my body faint and die!
And must this soul remove?
Oh, for some guardian angel nigh,
To bear it safe above.

Almighty Saviour, to thy hand
My naked soul I trust;
My flesh shall wait thy kind command,
To mingle with the dust.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

How to Speak at a “Questionable” Funeral

Jon Pratt

Have you ever had occasion to speak at the funeral of someone whose faith in Christ is uncertain? While we never can truly know whether a decedent has trusted the Lord for salvation—only God is qualified to judge the hearts of mankind—we have all attended a “questionable” funeral. This is one in which the decedent’s life was marked by little to no observable fruits of righteousness.

I recently attended such a funeral for a 36-year-old man I’ll call Bradley (I’ve changed the names of all individuals referred to here in order to protect their privacy). Bradley grew up attending independent Baptist churches with his family where he actively participated in all the church and youth group functions. After graduating from high school, he attended a Bible college for one semester. But Bradley struggled with ongoing bouts of depression and same-sex attraction. By the time he reached his 30th birthday he decided to pursue what would make him happy (in his words), so Bradley and Clarke were officially joined together in a civil union.

Bradley’s remaining years were filled with much despair and turmoil as he spiraled downward in the throes of depression exacerbated by addiction to prescription drugs, which culminated in a fateful decision to take his own life.

A good number of Bradley’s relatives and friends attended his funeral, many of whom were believers in Jesus. I’m quite sure that Bradley’s family would have preferred to have his uncle, who is a gospel-preaching pastor, officiate the service. But Clarke made the decision to ask the pastor who oversaw Bradley’s and Clarke’s civil union to give the main address at the service. Her talk, based on Revelation 12, included a message about fighting the “dragons” of homophobia and exclusion—a rather strange text to use at a funeral.

Providentially, some other family members were given the opportunity to speak, and I was particularly impressed by the words of Bradley’s younger brother, Sam. I would describe Sam as a mature, Bible-saturated Christian, who loved his brother deeply even as he disagreed completely and was grieved with the path Bradley chose to follow.



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During his four-minute address Sam shared some happy memories of Bradley and then proceeded with these words:

I don't know the final thoughts that Bradley might have had on this earth. I don't know what his death and transition from this mortal coil was like, but I do believe with all of my heart what the Bible says in Romans 14:11: "It is written: 'As Surely as I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.'" I believe that as Bradley faces his Creator, his knee will bow and his tongue will acknowledge God. And though I wish Bradley could come back here to tell all of us the truth that I believe he now fully sees, God has spoken truth and given it to us in His holy Word. I would like to leave you today with what the Bible says to all of us: I pray you will seek the Lord while He may be found and call on Him while He is near. And that you find true comfort in these words as I do."

Sam then quoted each of these verses without comment: Mark 10:45; Romans 5:8; 6:23; 8:1, 32; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 8:9; 1 Timothy 1:15; and 1 John 4:10.

Though Sam did not give the main address in that service, he presented some clear truths that every gospel preacher should present at a funeral, whether the decedent is "questionable" or not. First, every human being will bow the knee to God; believers will do so willingly and unbelievers begrudgingly, but all will bow before the Judge of all the earth.

Second, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim 1:15) as our ransom and propitiation and to show His love and grace in order that those who believe in Him will have eternal life. Third, Sam implied another truth that we should proclaim at a funeral when he said, "I wish Bradley could come back here to tell all of us the truth...he now fully sees."

I would like to expand on this third point which speaks to the truth of what the physically dead would say to those still living if they could return to their own funeral and address the audience. If the deceased person did believe in Jesus during his or her time on earth, he or she is presently "with Christ." This is the language Paul uses (2 Cor 5:8; Phil 1:23), and this is the hope all true believers have. We can be sure that someone who is with Christ would desire that all their friends and loved ones could join them to be in His presence forever. This would be their message at their funeral: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved!"

But what of the one who has died without Christ? What would he say at his funeral? The Bible does not leave us in doubt in regard to these questions. Luke 16:19–31 provides us with a window into the experience of life after death for the rich man who did not believe Moses and the Prophets, a phrase Luke and John understand to refer to the gospel message about Jesus (Lk 24:44–47; Jn 5:39–46). Two aspects of the rich man's abode should

be noted from this passage: 1) it is a place of torment and 2) it is completely separated from the place of blessing where Lazarus resides. And what is the rich man's message from this horrible place? "Please warn my five brothers to believe the gospel so they don't end up here!" Put in modern terms, a person in hell would say to his loved ones and friends, "Please trust in Christ so that you can have eternal life!"

Speaking at a "questionable" funeral presents us with a difficult challenge, but God's Word provides at least three truths we can share with confidence: 1) every human being will one day bow the knee to God; 2) Christ came into the world to save all who trust in Him; and 3) every decedent, if given the opportunity, would plead with the attenders, "Seek the Lord while He may be found!"



This essay is by Jon Pratt, Vice President of Academics and Professor of New Testament 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.
