

When An Unbelieving Loved-one Dies

When someone at home who is not a Christian dies, what do you do?

A Christian need not have to struggle with despair when death strikes him personally. Christ's resurrection shows that He is victorious over the enemy of death. This victory assures him that death has no power to destroy his soul. When the Christian dies, his soul is safe in Jesus' care. He enters heaven to be with the Lord Jesus Christ forever.

But Christians do struggle with the death of an unbelieving loved-one. The main reason for the struggle is that the loved-one dies without eternal life. In many cases, guilt enters in. I have seen many Christians grieve with guilt because they blame themselves for not being earnest enough to lead their deceased loved-one to know Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this tract is to help Christians cope with the lost of a dear one who is not a Christian. What happens to his or her destiny? What kind of funeral services should we hold? Should we go through the religious rites?

Don't blame yourself

One of the most common reactions when we receive the news that an unbelieving member has died is guilt. Guilt steps in because we feel that we did not do enough to help the person to know Christ and the salvation He brings. Coping with grief and loss is itself tiring and distressing. To add the feeling of guilt to this distress is not going to help. It will only aggravate our emotional hurt and pain.

The first thing we must never do in such a situation is to blame ourselves. Those who feel guilty usually say, "If I had spent more effort in telling him about Christ, he wouldn't have to go to hell." This is absolutely untrue. One of the most fundamental Christian truths that we must remember when death takes place is that life and death is determined by God. God alone sets the limit as to how long we live in this life. God also appoints where we will be after death. He decides whether your loved-one should be in heaven or in hell. Your praying and your witnessing are all only means to bring salvation to your loved ones. They do not determine their destiny.

Meditate upon your own life and death

When death of an unbelieving family member has taken place in the home, be thankful to God that your life and death is different. The death of an unbeliever in the home is going to hurt you more than the rest of the other family members. This is because you view the whole matter in a "heaven and hell" perspective. You know that the person without God dies in his sins and is barred from entering heaven. In fact, he joins the rest of lost mankind in the abyss of hell. While these thoughts are sure to hurt, they should at the same time drive you to be grateful for God's saving grace in your own life.

This thought is not selfish. It would be if you think that your eternal salvation is because of what you have done and achieved. Here again, it is important to be God-focused. God is the One

who makes the difference. Your life and death is different only because of His wonderful grace. Every time we witness death, we should think of this. If not for the grace of God, we too would perish without eternal life.

Christian fathers should especially use such an occasion to lead the family to meditate about their own life and destiny. One thing that ought to be taught to covenant children in such a time is the truth that Christians die differently from unbelievers. Children must learn the truth that their death and destiny is different. Christians die with Christ, and will be raised to be with Him.

The comfort that God is our Father

When a person is converted, grace makes him a living member of God's heavenly family. God is His Father, and Christ is His elder Brother. This privilege of belonging to God's spiritual family is a tremendous comforting truth in the crisis of death. When we lose an earthly father, God is still our Father. When we lose a parent, we lose a dear earthly relationship. But none is dearer to the Christian than his Father in heaven. When our deceased earthly father can no longer provide for us, our heavenly Father continues to care for us with His daily love and provision. Our earthly family and friends can only help us for a limited time. But God is by our side every moment. Time and death cannot break this covenant bond we have with God.

The thought that God is my everlasting Father also strengthens us in the crisis of death in another way. When we reach heaven, there will be no more father and mother. Our relationship with each other will be so changed that we are related to each other in a new way. The relationship of father and mother, husband and wife, parents and children is only for the comfort of this earthly life. When we reach heaven, we will no longer desire after such earthly relationships. Believers will dwell with each other in heaven as brothers and sisters. There is only one Father in heaven - God himself. In heaven, our thinking will be made new, and we will no more recall the sorrows of this earthly life.

Funeral matters

Gathering family members to decide on what form of funeral service to hold is another difficult matter when death happens. This is usually left to the most respected member in the home. A surviving spouse or the eldest child is usually asked to decide on the matter. Here, seeking a common consensus from the other members is important. However, the first question to consider really is the religious status of the deceased person. Is he a Christian? Or is he a Buddhist? Or is he a freethinker? Your faith should not be the decisive factor.

But what do you do when the family leaves you to decide on the funeral service? In this case, is it permissible for you to hold a Christian service for the non-believer and give him a Christian burial?

I would. I would do it for two reasons. Firstly, the Christian burial does nothing to change the deceased destiny. It is not as if our Christian service will sanctify the dead and promote him to heaven. Secondly, the service provides me an excellent opportunity to address the living, and to explain to the family and friends the hope of the gospel.

Funeral rites

But what if the funeral is a Taoist or Buddhist one? How much of the rites should I participate? This is perhaps the most frequently asked question by a Christian facing death at home.

A Christian must avoid all the funeral rites that are performed with religious significance. This includes the offering of joss sticks to the deceased, walking round the casket with the monks leading in the chanting, washing our hands to ward off the bad luck etc.

But such avoidance must be done tactfully and with respect. We should not distant ourselves in such a way that leaves the impression that we have no interest in the deceased person. One thing the Christian can do is to stand reverentially near the casket (or sit) and quietly fill his mind with comfort from God's word. Or, he can pray silently for God to bring comfort and hope to the other members of the home. Another thing he can do is to help out with the guests and visitors. When doing this, he can explain to them the family crisis and covet their support, comfort and understanding.

How the Church can help Christians do not grieve alone

The Bible teaches us in 1 Corinthians 12 that when one member grieves, the whole body grieves together. Death is one way in which God brings the Church together spiritually and emotionally.

If death is the greatest crisis, (and indeed it is), then the Church especially should come together to encourage those who are affected by this crisis.

The Church can show support in a variety of ways. But I just want here to mention one thing in closing, and that is, visit the family at the wake if you are able to. This is especially necessary when the funeral is a non-Christian funeral. Sometimes the bereaving family puts pressure on the Christian to make him go through the rites. In cases like this, the Church should be there to stand with our brother and sister. Our presence at the wake can strengthen our brethren's faith so that they do not yield to such pressure.

When visiting the bereaving brethren, remember to pray for, and with the person. Usually a person in a crisis is lost for words. And by praying for the person, you hold him up before God so that he may sense and know Father's comfort and care.

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