

Pastor: Serve the Weak!

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Carl Muller brings a B.Th. from Ontario Bible College, a B.A. from Waterloo University, and most importantly, over 25 years of pastoral experience to bear on this important topic of ministering faithfully to those who most desperately need it.

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Stephen Leacock described someone in this way: *“he flung himself on his horse and rode off madly in all directions.”* He may have been reading my paper. Be that as it may, let’s mount up and trust that our wandering will be profitable.

I take it for granted that we know and feel the need to shepherd the sheep entrusted to our care. I assume that the following Biblical goals (as summarized by Derek Prime¹) are our goals:

- *Feed the flock:* John 21:15-17; I Peter 5:2 – we must feed and care for the flock so that they might be strong in the Lord (Ephesians 6:10) and strong in His grace (II Timothy 2:1);
- *Proclaim the whole counsel of God:* Acts 20:28 – we must present a balanced diet to the sheep and a balanced gospel to those still outside the fold;
- *Present every man mature in Christ:* Colossians 1:28, 29 –

¹ Derek Prime, Pastors and Teachers: The Calling and Work of Christ’s Ministers, Highland Books, chapter 3.

our goal is their perfect conformity to our Lord Jesus.

So much may be said about pastoral work in general. William Sangster wrote: *“the average layman has only the vaguest idea of what is meant by the term ‘pastoral care’.”*² But you know all about it, so we will proceed to focus on the care of those members of the flock with whom we are particularly concerned today, the elderly, the sick and the dying, and we will begin with:

Ministering to the Elderly

“The last scene of all, that ends this strange eventful history, is second childishness and mere oblivion; sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste³, sans everything.” Now “age” is a relative term. P. G. Wodehouse wrote: *“at age 68 I had reached the stage when, picking up a novel and finding that a new character the author had introduced was 60, I say to myself, ‘Ah, the young love interest!’”* So I will leave you to choose the numbers and will proceed to discuss how we might

² Ibid., p. 121.

³ The Bard may have been on to something. Apparently at age 30 we have 245 taste buds; at age 75 only 88.

be a blessing to such folk. We will need to. We face an aging population. In the US people over sixty years of age are the fastest growing segment of the population, and the American Association of Retired Persons has noted that by the year 2030 there will be about 70 million older persons in the US, more than twice their number in 1996. Today seniors represent 13% of the population; by 2030 that percentage will rise to 20.⁴ Now though each local church will have its own peculiar demographic, we must consider how to minister to the elderly. Let me suggest several things.

1. Love them

a. *This must be knowledgeable love:* do you understand what it is like for them and the peculiar difficulties they face now at this age? Have you studied and understood Ecclesiastes 12:1f? Do you understand, in some measure, why Jay Adams (now a senior himself) calls old age a “*process of loss*”? They lose abilities. They lose loved ones. They lose their homes. They lose their independence. They lose their health. They may lose their driver’s license – one dear friend of mine was more devastated recently by having her license taken away than by the stroke she had just suffered! But it’s not just loss.

i. *They are fearful:* they’re afraid of falling and they’re afraid of going out on the roads (Eccl. 12:5). They’re afraid of being embarrassed in public because they can’t see well and can’t hear properly.

⁴ Howard G. Hendricks, “The Other Side of the Mountain”, *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume 157 (157:3-14). See also, David O. Moberg, “Preparing for the Graying of the Church: Challenges from our Changing Society”, *Review and Expositor*, Volume 88 (vnp. 88.3.179-88.3.190). I assume Canadian statistics are not much different.

And they’re afraid of being in need! Archibald Alexander notes in his “*Letters to the Aged*” that it is a strange thing that the nearer men come to the end of their journey, the greater the concern they feel as to the means of their future sustenance!

ii. *They have vain regrets:* perhaps this is in regard to the raising of their children or the significance of their work, but regrets can be debilitating and devastating. By discussing Philippians 3:13, 14 with them you can offer them a better perspective. Another wrong view of the past can be unhealthy nostalgia, and this poor saint will then see nothing of value in the present generation. (There was that one elderly lady who assured me that there has been no preaching, at all, since T. T. Shields!)

iii. *They are lonely:* friends and family are dying off and they are left on their own. Ill health makes church attendance difficult and social engagements are severely cut back. My mother, who lives in a nursing home, told me about a woman she knows. This woman wept as she watched my mother leave to come to our home on Christmas day. This woman would be alone on Christmas day. Her son lives in town but they do not speak.

iv. They suffer physically: life for many has become a constant round of visits to the doctors. Men, healthy all their lives, are now broken physically and sometimes mentally. Of course situations will vary – Moses was vigorous at 120 (Deuteronomy 34:7) whilst David, at 60, needed to retire from armed combat (II Samuel 21:15f). Nonetheless, generally speaking, old age is a difficult time.

v. They face the challenge of worldly philosophy: turn off and tune out. You've done your bit, and it's time for others to step up. Head for Florida and sit on a balcony watching life go by. Or go "cruising" – on a ship – one gentleman I met announced proudly that he had been on 45 cruises, and counting!

Well, pastor, you must know the challenges these folk face. This must be knowledgeable love.

b. This must be respectful love: listen to this from a secular writer: "*what most of us fear about ageing – not death, but neglect; not added years, but lack of love and lack of respect*"!⁵ It is a great danger for young Christians to despise older Christians and dismiss them as irrelevant and useless. They have clearly passed their "best by" date. And yet we read: "*You shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man, and fear your God: I am the LORD*" (Leviticus 19:32) and Timothy is told that an older man is not to be rebuked but exhorted as a father (I Timothy 5:1). One of our el-

ders is in his seventies, and I am not sure whether I know a man who is more worthy of respect than he.

c. This must be sympathetic love: remember the sympathetic High Priest (Hebrews 4:15) we have and seek, as His under-shepherd, to imitate Him. Sometimes old people are a little slow on the uptake; they don't know the technology, or the latest trends in theology; they are resistant to change, or they are skeptical of new endeavours. Be understanding and sympathetic. You will be in their positions soon enough.

d. This must be attentive love: that is, visit them. Don't just bury them, visit them. There was that poor old lady who, when she finally saw the pastor on her doorstep, assumed she must be dying! Visit them – our Lord was always in homes! You are not just a preacher, you are a shepherd.

*"Shepherding and teaching should not be separated. Preaching and pastor work help each other. Visiting enhances our preaching in that it helps us to appreciate how our fellow-believers think, their problems and their temptations. When we preach to those we know well, and whose situations we understand, we apply God's word more relevantly, and almost unconsciously – and probably the less consciously the better."*⁶ And visit them all, not just the ones who provide great baking, but the old mentally challenged fellow who now, in his dotage, smells because he can't look after himself and whose room is nau-

⁵ James Taylor, *Pastors Under Pressure*, Day One, p. 143.

⁶ Prime, *Pastors and Teachers*, p. 122.

seatingly musty. They need your attention. Be like the Lord: *“He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young”* (Isaiah 40:11). In our church, one of our elders focuses on visiting seniors.

2. *Marshall them*

Marshall the forces! Encourage senior saints to be productive and useful, resisting the worldly philosophy of an unproductive and useless retirement. Ralph Winter writes: *“Most men don’t die of old age, they die of retirement. I read somewhere that half the men retiring in the state of New York die within two years. Save your life and you’ll lose it. Just like other drugs, other psychological addictions, retirement is a virulent disease, not a blessing.”*⁷ Now people may retire from their life’s work but we want to encourage them to continued usefulness in the kingdom during their retirement years. We teach them to grow old with purpose! They must not be like “Bear” Bryant, the legendary football coach of Alabama who said, *“when I stop coaching, I’ll die”*. There is life and purpose and significance and much work to be done after middle age! Carey was 60 when he built his college at Serampore. Wesley claimed he was better able to preach at 73 than 23. And Brian Edwards reminds us of two lovely old ladies, Peggy and Christine Smith. On the Isle of White in the 1940s Peggy and Christine prayed in their cottage. Peggy was 84 and blind, Christine was 82 and crippled with arthritis. They prayed for revival and they saw it come!⁸

So urge them to pray. This is a foundational ministry for seniors. Their pres-

ence may no longer be felt but their prayers can be. Link them up with individual young people and have seniors’ luncheons put on by the young people so as to foster relationships that feed the prayers. One brother I know provided private prayer lists to individual seniors and on his visits kept them up to date with how their prayers were being answered. And then remind them that *“prayer cancels loneliness”* (Oswald Chambers), so they will benefit too.

And urge them to serve where they can. We have a grandmother who has gone on several medical mission trips. Hugh Clarke, saved at 60, was a vibrant witness throughout his senior years, and one day, in between excruciating bouts of pain as a result of kidney stones, urgently inquired of my son, *“Calvin, are you right with the Lord, my boy?”* One beautiful old woman announced to me that she had long ago decided that one of her ministries was to encourage me. (I understood then why I always wanted to visit her.) So urge Psalm 92:12-14 upon them and help them to see ways in which they can continue to bear fruit in old age. Urge them to bear the fruit of thankful, declaring God’s goodness to the next generation (Psalm 71:17, 18); urge them to be spiritually vigorous and thus an encouragement to younger saints (Proverbs 16:31 – *“the silver head is a crown of glory, if it is found in the way of righteousness”*). Andrew Bonar, on his 79th birthday, spent the morning praying that *“my latter days may be days of rapid progress in the knowledge of Christ”*! And encourage them to be steadfast in suffering! What an example and inspiration they can be in that way. When John Quincy Adams, in his old age, was asked how he was keeping, he answered: *“Thank you. John Quincy Adams is very well himself, but the house in which he lives is falling to pieces. Times and seasons have nearly destroyed it.*

⁷ Taylor, *Pastors Under Pressure*, p. 46.

⁸ Brian Edwards, *Revival! A People Saturated with God*, EP, p. 82

The roof is well worn, the walls are shattered and it trembles with every gale. I think that John Quincy Adams will soon have to move out, but he himself is very well." What a fine attitude! But every Christian who knows II Corinthians 5:1-7 must certainly say the same thing!

So, marshal the troops! Old soldiers should not fade away, but must fight on in whatever way they can!

3. Minister to them

There is so much that can be done. We must certainly pray for them and they must know that we pray for them. Some denominations get involved in housing for seniors (let's hear it for the Dutch!). Some churches have weekly or monthly luncheons for seniors, a great blessing for those who eat many a meal on their own. Some churches have regular outings and bus trips arranged. Some churches hold regular services at nursing homes and this provides a wonderful opportunity for younger folk to minister. Some churches use Bell Telephone to set up a system whereby seniors can phone the church and listen to the services in real time. Some churches have a team of helpers who will do chores for seniors that they cannot do themselves. The things that some big churches do⁹ are impossible for small churches, and so I would remind you that an absolute key in ministering to seniors is to spend time with them. At our last board meeting we encouraged our deacons to be "ministers of mercy" and visit seniors.

4. Be encouraged and inspired by them

Part of loving and valuing seniors is the fact that we will appreciate them, and be

⁹ Dr. Robert J. Riekse and Dr. Henry Holstege, The Christian Guide to Parent Care, Tyndale, chapter 8, "How Can Christians Help Older People".

encouraged and inspired by them. How wonderful to hear such a testimony: "I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread" (Psalm 37:25). And there is so much more we gain by listening to them. Jonas Shepherd was a retired Presbyterian minister, for many years a vital part of our church, and who spent his latter days in a nursing home, unaware of his circumstances and his surroundings. He would always ask, "now, brother, what is your name?" But when he prayed for me (as he always did to conclude our visits), he always seemed to remember who I was. I often asked him to reflect on his ministry: "what did you enjoy most about your ministry" – "witnessing to people". "What advice would you give to a young minister" – "preach the word". Don't ever think that you cannot learn from and be humbled by older saints, no matter how much of their faculties they have lost. When I listened to Joe pray I knew he was closer to the throne than I have ever been and was breathing the rarefied air of such intimacy with God as I had only dreamed about.

MINISTERING TO THE SICK

Now when it comes to visiting and seeking to minister to the sick, let me make these suggestions.

1. Be real

"Brothers, we are not professionals," says Dr. Piper, and he is right. And this is the case in the pulpit, the study and in the hospital room. It's easy to become slick. I heard someone say, "slip in, don't stay more than five minutes, read and pray, slip out – and you can do ten visits quite efficiently". God deliver us from being slick. People need to feel that we are there because we love them, that if this were

our day off we would still be there, that of all the places in the world, this is where we want to be. This is not a notch on our ministerial belt. We are not professionals. We are overseers, we are shepherds, we are family, we are friends, we are brothers, and we're there because a family member is sick!

Be real. There is an appropriate ministerial dignity but there is a ministerial stiffness and starchiness that is to be avoided. The Prince of Preachers counsels us: *"When I have seen a flamingo gravely stalking along, an owl blinking in the shade, or a stork demurely lost in thought, I have been irresistibly led to remember some of my dignified brethren of the teaching and preaching fraternity, who are so marvellously proper at all times that they are just a shade amusing. Their very respectable, stilted, dignified, important, self-restrained manner is easily acquired; but it is worth acquiring?"*¹⁰ He continues by saying that he is writing to deprecate that *"dreadful ministerial starch. If you have indulged in it, I would earnestly advise you to go and 'wash in the Jordan seven times', and get it out of you, every particle of it. I am persuaded that one reason why our working men so universally keep clear of ministers is because they abhor their artificial and unmanly ways."* So we will seek to be relaxed and cheerful and pleasant, engaging people in conversation, careful not to talk too much – *"a man has no more right at table to talk all than to eat all. We are not to think of ourselves as Sir Oracle, before whom no dog must open his mouth"* (Spurgeon) – nor too little – *"don't be an inanimate log"* (Spurgeon).

2. *Be God centered*

In your being and in your conversation, be God centred so that your visit will "strengthen his hand in God" (I Samuel 23:16). Know God and how He relates to

suffering and sufferers. Tell them about truths like these – tell them with wisdom, tact, sensitivity, but tell them:

- God is not indifferent to their suffering: Hebrews 4:15
- God is compassionate: II Corinthians 1:3. David Watson had cancer and explained that *"his cancer had led him to enjoy God more than ever before and that the reality of worship had never meant so much to him as it did then"*. He continued: *"we need to find God's love and stay resting in it. Nothing is more important than that"*¹¹. My own mother had cancer and bore testimony to my father (who died ultimately in unbelief) that she was thankful for her cancer for through it she had grown to know God better. Under God we seek to help people experience His love and compassion.
- God uses suffering for our good and His glory: Genesis 50:20; Isaiah 45:7; Romans 5:3-5; 8:28-30; John 9:1-3; James 1:3. Consider just one thing in relationship to this – sometimes God's people are born blind (or suffer heart attacks) so that His works might be displayed in them. And the whole thing is about Him and His being glorified, not us and our ease and comfort. (I have a wonderful atheistic friend who advises me that the key to counseling is to always tell people: *"get a grip"*. There is a sense in which we must tactfully

¹⁰ Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, Zondervan, p. 166.

¹¹ Derek Tidball, *Skillful Shepherds*, Ministry Resources Library, p. 285.

and graciously help people to “get a grip” and realize that it is all about God and His glory.)

- Suffer unites us with Christ – Philippians 3:10
- Suffering is, in view of eternity, temporary and light: II Corinthians 4:17; I Peter 5:10

3. *Hospital visits*

Here are some thoughts about this vital ministry. Don't stay too long, but be sensitive to the fact that they just may not be up to a long visit because they feel absolutely awful. Don't make your stay too short. You don't want them to feel as if you can't wait to get out of there. Stay as long as you can. One of the most precious things you can give people is your time. Many of them know that and deeply appreciate the time you spend with them. When it comes to reading the Scriptures and praying, it may be wise to give some thought beforehand as to which passage to read, lest you read all of Daniel 9 to a patient on morphine as did one fellow I know. Be conscious of other people in the room, and be encouraged by the fact that sometimes God blesses those you did not intend to visit. Sam Dempster, erstwhile pastor in Kingston, once got a letter from someone who had been lying in bed behind a curtain, had listened while Sam read and prayed, and testified that it had led to his conversion. Be sensitive to what the medical staff requires, to any unbelieving family members who might be present, and try to avoid visiting at meal times. Be interested and ask

about their situation and sometimes help to clarify the situation for them – this is especially important for old people, who are often confused about their status. Be careful to clarify with people what you can and cannot communicate to the church about their condition. And then be careful not to be too interested – there are times when women tell me that they're going to be in hospital and signs are everywhere that I should not even think about asking, “for what”.

Now always encourage people to let you know what is going on. Some will complain that you did not visit them in hospital, but the fact is that you simply did not know about it. It is terribly important though to be so evidently concerned and interested that they know you want to know! We need to “minister like the Master”. In Mark 1:29-31 we read with regard to Peter's mother-in-law and her sickness, that they told Jesus “about her at once”! Stuart Olyott comments: “Are people around me sure that I am a caring person? Are they sufficiently confident of this to feel free to tell me about any sick person who might benefit from a visit? If they are not, there is something wrong; and it is plain that I am not yet ministering like my Master.”¹²

Remember to be timely in your visits. People often need encouragement before an operation and there is usually enough time between when they sign in and when they are taken away to talk and pray together. Emergency wards can be terrible places (this week an elderly woman told me she had been “treated like an animal” – of course this is not always true) and can involve incredible delays and the whole experience can prove to be

¹² Stuart Olyott, *Ministering like the Master*, Banner of Truth, p. 76, 77.

frightening for people. Your visit can have profound significance. I shall never forget the member of our congregation who visited me in the emergency room while I sat anxiously awaiting treatment for my very sick child.

MINISTERING TO THE DYING

Somerset Maugham said: *“dying is a very dull dreary affair. My advice to you is to have nothing whatsoever to do with it”*. Our society seeks to take that advice to heart. But the statistics as to who dies are pretty overwhelming and so we ought to think seriously about ministering to the dying and the grieving, for death will touch our congregations no matter how young and healthy they may be at present.

1. First of all, you need to think about death and have a Biblical view of death yourself.

People may not like to think about death, but you must. People don't know what to say at funerals. You must (at least you must try). When people don't know what to say, they generally say it. I recall standing next to a man who had been estranged from his brother for 30 years, the same brother who now lay before us in the coffin and whose funeral I was about to conduct. The estranged brother, fumbling for words and gazing at the corpse, said to me: “well, at least he kept his hair”. At a loss for words, I walked away. It is important for us then, to have something of substance to say about this terrible reality of death. So think about death. Learn from Edwards: “resolved, to think much, in all occasions, of my own dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death”.

- a. We ought to know what the Bible says about death and the glorious future that awaits God's people. We ought to know about Job 19:25 and I Corinthians 15 and Philippians 1:21 and II Timothy 4:6-8. We ought to know what the Bible says about heaven. We ought to read Boston's Fourfold State and MacArthur's book on heaven and Randy Alcorn's book on heaven and Ligon Duncan's excellent little book as well.¹³ The latter makes reference to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 37: “What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?” *“The souls of believers are, at their death, made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united with Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection.”* Vincent notes that the benefits are two-fold: first in regard to their souls, and second in regard to their bodies.¹⁴ A shepherd well-versed in these sublime realities is prepared to care for troubled saints.
- b. We ought to know that the Bible says that death is not a natural thing, but a tearing, wrenching, terrible thing. Touch a dead body and realize that death is an ugly thing. I made sure I touched the dead body of my father and prayed that God would never let

¹³ Ligon Duncan, Fear Not: Death and the Afterlife from a Christian Perspective, Christian Focus, 2008. John MacArthur, The Glory of Heaven, Crossway, 1996. Randy Alcorn, Heaven, Tyndale, 2004.

¹⁴ Duncan, Fear Not, p. 25.

me forget what it was like. Death is, in fact, an enemy. And we must never sugar-coat funerals by referring to them, simply, as a celebration of life. It can be that, in part, but we have funerals because of an enemy, and there is a terribly ugly side to it. This is usually true even of the death of Christians. William Kiffin writes thus about the death of his wife: *“It pleased the Lord to take to Himself my dear and faithful wife, with whom I have lived nearly 42 years, whose tenderness to me and faithfulness to God were such as cannot by me be expressed, as she continually sympathized with me in all my afflictions. I can truly say that I never heard her utter the least discontent under all the various providences that attended either me or her. She eyed the hand of God in all our sorrows, and so constantly encouraged me in the ways of God. Her death was the greatest sorrow to me that I ever met in the Lord.”*¹⁵ It is sorrow met “in the Lord”, but it is great sorrow! Christians do not grieve as the world, but they do grieve! And often people need to be told that it is alright to grieve, it is alright to grieve deeply, it is alright to grieve for a long time (though we must watch them, as time goes by), and that certain times and circumstances will be more difficult than others. And so keep an eye on them in the days and months and

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 25, 26.

years to come, knowing that Christmas and anniversaries and the like will often prove to be particularly difficult.

- c. We must know that some Christians are deathly afraid of death. It is easier for me to quote, *“O death where is your sting”*, to them than it is to go through what they’re going through. It is a terrible thing to hear that you have cancer on the brain or some disease that will cause you to lose control of your bodily functions. Such people need a wise, sensitive, and compassionate pastor. For them, the dying process is terrifying. And we remember that what Paul is saying in Philippians 1:21 is that it is the “having died” that is gain, not the actual dying itself. The actual dying can be terrible – the having died will be glorious. Keeping the “having died” before their eyes is part of our work. So we will remind them that *“precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints”* (Psalm 116:15). Jerry Bridges describes the impact of this verse in his life when his first wife was dying of cancer in 1988. As he struggled with her approaching death he read this text and came to the realization *“that God Himself had an interest in what was happening to my wife. For me I would be losing my sweetheart, but for God, it would be the homecoming of one of His children. I thought of the time*

when our fifteen-year-old son went on an eleven week summer missions program and how we eagerly anticipated his coming home. I realized that as incredible as it seems, God eagerly awaits the homecoming of His children. And then there came to mind a part of Psalm 16:11, “and in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” As I prayed over that Scripture, I realized that very soon Eleanor would experience the incredible joy of actually being in the very presence of God.”¹⁶ This is sweet tasting medicine to hold up to the lips of fearful saints. Even when they are not afraid of death, it is a great privilege to minister these truths to them. I used to talk to a brother who was on such a daily regimen of pain-killing drugs as would have felled a good sized elephant. And then he found out that he had cancer! And we talked often about those realities the Catechism referred to: perfect in holiness; immediately...into glory; bodies awaiting resurrection and perfection! And then remember to remind the healthy ones that a close walk with God prepares us for the valley of the shadow of death – whether it be their own death or the death of a loved one. Bridges testifies: “I never experienced the various stages of grief that so many people go through after the death of a loved one. I never became

angry at God or experienced days of depression. Within a week or so I was able to resume my normal responsibilities in my work. All of this because years before I had established the practice of a daily time of communion with God.”¹⁷

- d. And then we must know the worst part of it all. Death means hell for some people to whom we will minister. Try never to forget the vivid picture of people fleeing down the streets of New York with billowing clouds of death pursuing them – and that was only the faintest picture of judgment day, terrifying though it was. How unspeakably awful to face the “fierceness and wrath of Almighty God” (Revelation 19:15). Like Wesley, we must keep heaven and hell always before our eyes when ministering to people like this: he was dying, he was Catholic, and he was headed towards the judgment day with his head held high, confident that he had done enough. He said that he understood the gospel of grace, as I had sought to explain it to him and as he had read about in the literature that had been given to him, but he simply disagreed and felt that he was quite secure. He died, I believe, within two days. Knowledge of the eternal destiny of such souls must move us to courageous faithfulness (I Corinthians 4:1-5). It is not an easy thing to

¹⁶ John Piper and Justin Taylor, Stand: A Call for the Endurance of the Saints, Crossway, pp. 21, 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

blast false hopes and challenge a dying man. It is not an easy thing when questions begin to plague you about the genuineness of a church member's profession, and you find yourself having to ask him if he *truly* is trusting in Christ! But, with heaven and hell ever before you, you will do your duty and seek to rescue the perishing. Spurgeon said: *if sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to Hell over our bodies!*

- e. We need to think long and hard about the "*why do these things happen*" issues. His father had died of cancer a year ago and now, as we sat outside the hospital where his mother was dying of cancer, he explained to me that his wife was having an affair, and wondered, "*why do these things happen*"! God deliver us from pat answers! As C. S. Lewis worked through his grief over the loss of his wife, he wrote this: "*Talk to me about the truth of religion and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand.*"¹⁸ Now of course there *are* wonderful consolations of the Christian religion. But because people *will* think we do not understand, the wise physician chooses the right medicine with the right dosage at the right time. I

¹⁸ Tidball, *Skillfull Shepherds*, p. 280.

believe that one of the reasons "these things happen" is so that we might be better Christians, but be very carefully how you say that to a grieving father! There is a profound Biblical perspective with regard to sin and suffering and the problem of evil: suffering is the result of sin ultimately; not all suffering is a result of particular sin; God is sovereign and even sin and suffering fall within the compass of that control; there is purpose in the universe and even suffering falls within the pale of the divine plan. But even when we have exhausted all that the Bible reveals to us about the purposes of God in suffering, there is much that is left hidden to us. When we come then to minister to living, breathing sufferers, we must be aware of our limited understanding. Even when we bring all of our vaunted knowledge to bear upon the situation, that might only explain a part of the whole. After all, God plants His footstep in the sea, too deep for us! And so we will be unafraid to say that we do not understand why these things happen, and with tears we will point them to the only One who does, the One who was nailed to a cross and now wears a crown. I read a wonderful book once about a mother and her autistic child. It was entitled: "*too wise to be mistaken, too good to be unkind*"! Some-

times that is all we are left with. But what a “rock of Gibraltar” that is! On the day we were burying his sister who had died in a fire, he found out that he had cancer and that his condition was terminal. I didn’t know what to say, but he did: “*God is good. God is able!*”

2. *We need to think carefully about the “edge of life” issues – death, dying, abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research and so on.*¹⁹

Twenty minutes before an evening service at Trinity my sister called the church office from British Columbia. Their twelve day old son was dying and they were about to remove him from the respirator. Was it ok? What would you say? Are you thinking these things through? Are you aware that increasingly the world doesn’t think much of old people – they too much trouble and altogether too expensive. I believe I see this attitude reflected in the quality of care old people receive even in our hospitals (you don’t have to go all the way to Holland!). Well, we need to be aware of trends, and we need to read the books, and we need to pray.

3. *We need to talk openly and honestly with people.*

Dealing with the reality of imminent death is not an easy thing for the dying and for the family. You might have the opportunity to bring clarity for people. What exactly is the prognosis? One old fellow really didn’t understand what the doctor was saying to him about his wife’s condition. Failure to bring clarification might well have meant that her death, not long after, would have been an even more terrible shock. Other people cling to empty hopes and with great wisdom and tact

¹⁹ John Ling, [Responding to the Culture of Death: A Primer on Bioethical Issues](#), Day One, 2001. John Ling, [The Edge of Life: Dying, Death and Euthanasia](#), Day One, 2002. Excellent!

you might be used to facilitate a more realistic understanding of the situation. On occasion you might want to talk to the family before talking to the one who is dying – you don’t want to be a bull in a china shop! And then when everyone is on the same page and all are aware that death is imminent, to ask, “are you afraid” often leads to the most solemn and sometimes sacred conversations.

4. *We must understand that involvement in the dying process of Christians is a sacred privilege.*

It was an extraordinary thing to stand in the room as she died and lift her arm toward the ceiling as if to touch someone. After someone dies hospitals, and especially hospices, allow the family to spend time with the body of the deceased. These can be wonderful times of ministry. So much needs to be “played by ear” and the wisdom of the Spirit is needed as to what to say and do. A character marked by love, gentleness, grace, tact, prudence, and a certain amount of good manners is needful. Early in my ministry someone said to me: “be there for people”. I have not failed to remember that; but I have failed to practice it. Please do not fail your people – especially in the valley of the shadow of death. Remember, they are, after all, not your people at all, but His! You are shepherding His sheep, and you want to look after them as He would. And then, when you are “there for them”, you find that the most profound and extraordinary blessing is poured out upon your soul!

5. *We must understand our absolute inadequacy to minister in such circumstances.*

The mother had just died, the father was dying, and the family was squabbling in the waiting room, and on my way to the hospital I pulled over to the side of the

road and said out loud to the Lord: I cannot do this. But you must go even when your hands are sweating! A certain Bishop Simpson said: I had much of this timidity when I entered the ministry. The palms of my hands sometimes burned at the very thought of going out to visit. But I felt I must go; the church bade me go; I had promised God I would go; and as the soldier in the army walks forward timidly, yet determinedly, into the thickest of the fight, so I went in my Master's name!²⁰ And so you go, but you go leaning wholly and completely upon the Lord. II Corinthians 3:5 – "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God". This is true for our ministry as a whole and it is true for situations like this. At our "Kids' Club" we have a "pastor's night" at which the kids can ask any question they want. A year or two ago I was asked: "what's the most difficult thing about being a pastor?" I believe I would still say what I said that night: seeing people suffer. And only the Spirit is able to give us what we stand in need of in times like that. And it really is extraordinary what God is able to do! One of the most difficult experiences of my life was conducting the funeral of my spiritual father and friend. Through it all, I believe, God gave me strength. The interment followed and at the conclusion of that brief service I went to hug his widow, and finding it all too much, broke down briefly. She whispered in my ear: "be strong". On the darkest of days she was a tower of strength by the grace of the Lord.

²⁰ Hezekiah Harvey, *The Pastor: His Qualifications and Duties*, Backus Book Publishers, p. 79

6. *We must allow involvement in the dying process to clarify things for us.*

When I visited her in the hospice she asked me how things were. I said that we had just celebrated the birthday of one of our children. In a matter of fact tone she said that she no longer cared about such things. What she care about was plain for all to see and hear. Anyone who entered her room, whom she believed to be outside of Christ, was urged to get right with God. Even one professing Christian, whose profession she doubted, was publicly urged to get right with God. At times her words embarrassed her family, but she remained a frank and faithful witness right to the end. I find that I never see things as clearly as I do when involved in the dying process of a saint. The things that matter, really matter, seem so very obvious. And I always pray that I will remember those spiritually lucid moments, and live in light of them.

The last time I saw Jonas, my fellow elder and I visited him in the nursing home. After a typically edifying chat he said, "Well, I'll let you go – let's pray" – and he did. After he had prayed he aimed his wheel-chair down the hall way, turned briefly and said, "Well, boys, I'll see you in glory", and off he went singing the 23rd Psalm. He died two days later. There is a lot of sadness in the world and you will come face to face with it as you minister to the weak. But, the blessing of gospel hope! For some, the passage across the Jordan is difficult and sometimes "God puts His children to sleep in the dark". But always, for all of them, there is the sure hope of a bright tomorrow. *Well, boys, I'll see you in glory!*

Some Resources:

Helpful messages from a conference entitled “*The World, the Church, and Older People*” are available for download at the following website:

<http://www.pilgrimhomes.org.uk/Online/pilgrim.nsf/0/7EF00925005F7B60802572B1006C048B?OpenDocument>

Adams, Jay, *Wrinkled but Not Ruined*, Timeless Texts, Woodruff, SC, 1999.

Davis, Robert, *My Journey into Alzheimer’s Disease*, Tyndale, Wheaton, Illinois, 1989. (*A stunning chronicle of a pastor’s personal experience through the early stages of this awful disease.*)

Duncan, Ligon, *Fear Not: Death and the Afterlife from a Christian Perspective*, Christian Focus, Scotland, 2008

Ellsworth, Roger, *Christian Comfort*, EP, Durham, England, 2003

Eyrich, Howard and Dabler, Judy, *The Art of Aging: A Christian Handbook*, Focus Publishing, Minnesota, 2006

Piper, John, Taylor, Justin, *Stand: A Call for the Endurance of the Saints*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois, 2008

Pond, Clifford, *Autumn God: Enjoying Old Age*, Grace Publications, London, England, 2001

Riekse, Dr. Robert and Hostege, Dr. Henry, *The Christian Guide to Parent Care*, Tyndale, Wheaton, Illinois, 1992

Taylor, James, *Pastors Under Pressure*, Day One, UK, 2004 (*Good material for pastors on retirement.*)

Thomas, Curtis C., *Practical Wisdom for Pastors: Words of Encouragement and Counsel for a Lifetime of Ministry*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois, 2001

The Prayer of an Aging Woman:

Lord, you know better than I know myself that I am growing older and will some day be old. Keep me from getting talkative, particularly from the fatal habit of thinking that I must say something on every subject and on every occasion.

Release me from craving to straighten out everybody’s affairs. Make me thoughtful, but not moody; helpful, but not bossy. With my vast store of wisdom it seems a pity not to use it all, but you know, Lord, that I want a few friends at the end. Keep my mind from the recital of endless details—give me wings to come to the point.

I ask for grace enough to listen to the tales of others’ pains. Seal my lips on my own aches and pains—they are increasing, and my love of rehearsing them is becoming sweeter as the years go by. Help me to endure them with patience.

I dare not ask for improved memory, but for a growing humility and a lessening cocksureness when my memory seems to clash with the memories of others. Teach me the glorious lesson that occasionally it is possible that I may be mistaken.

Keep me reasonably sweet. I do not want to be a saint—some of them are so hard to live with—but a sour old woman is one of the crowning works of the devil.

Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places, and talents in unexpected people. And give me, O Lord, the grace to tell them so.

TALK ABOUT HEAVEN (Words written to Dr. Charles from Dr. Harry Rimmer shortly before he died)

Next Sunday you are to talk about Heaven. I am interested in that land, because I have held a clear title to a bit of property there for over fifty-five years. I did not buy it. It was given to me without money and without price. But the Donor purchased it for me at tremendous sacrifice. I am not holding it for speculation since the title is not transferable. It is not a vacant lot. For more than half a century the great Architect and Builder of the universe has been building a home for me, which will never need to be remodelled or repaired because it will suit me perfectly, and individually, and will never grow old. Termites cannot undermine its foundations, for they rest upon the Rock of Ages. Fire cannot destroy it. Floods cannot wash it away. No locks or bolts will ever be placed upon its doors, for no vicious persons can even enter that land where my dwelling stands, now almost completed and almost ready for me to enter in and abide in peace eternally, without fear of being ejected.

There is a valley of deep shadows between the place where I live in California and that to which I shall journey in a very short time. I cannot reach my home in that city of gold without passing through this dark valley of shadows. But I am not afraid, because the best Friend I ever had went through the same valley, long, long ago and drove away all its gloom. He has stuck by me through thick and thin since we first became acquainted fifty-five years ago, and I hold His promise in printed form never to forsake me nor to leave me alone. He will be with me as I walk through the valley of shadows, and I shall not lose my way when He is with me.

The owner of the tenement which I have occupied for many years has given notice that he will furnish but little or nothing more for repairs. I am advised to be ready to move.

At first this was not a very welcome notice. The surroundings here are in many respects very pleasant, and were it not for the evidence of decay, I should consider the old house good enough.

But even a light wind causes it to tremble and totter and all the braces are not sufficient to make it secure. So I am getting ready to move.

It is strange how quickly one's interest is transferred to the prospective home. I have been consulting maps of the new country and reading descriptions of its inhabitants. One who visited it has returned, and from him I learn that it is beautiful beyond description – language breaks down in attempting to tell of what he heard while there (2 Cor. 12.2). He says that, in order to make an investment there, he has suffered the loss of all things that he owned here, and even rejoices in what others would call making a sacrifice.

Another (John 15.13) whose love to me has been proved by the greatest possible test is now there. He has sent me several clusters of the most delicious fruits. After tasting them, all food here seems insipid.

Two or three times I have been down by the border of the river that forms the boundary, and have wished myself among the company of those who were singing praises to the King on the other side.

Many of my friends have moved there. Before leaving they spoke of my coming later. I have seen the smile upon their faces as they passed out of sight.

Often I am asked to make some new investments here, but my answer in every case is, "I am getting ready to move."