



# The Christian Funeral

## SESSION 1

*Christians believe that God accompanies us in life and in death.*

### Introduction

Whether a full-fledged worship service, or a short prayer service in the midst of a picnic in honor of the deceased, funerals are almost always memorable. Part of what makes a funeral or memorial service memorable is the act of gathering together when someone who loved us has died. Though we may forget the specific prayers, songs, or sermon at a funeral, most of us would affirm that the service was meaningful and we are glad we went.

#### A "FUNERAL SERVICE" OR A "MEMORIAL SERVICE"?

A funeral service is a service at which the body or ashes of the deceased is present. At a memorial service, those gathered memorialize or remember the deceased.

A funeral serves various functions. It gathers friends and family of the deceased, many of whom may



have never met. It provides a chance to remember collectively the person who has died and begin what may be a long process of healing for some. It helps many of us in pain to know that others are grieving with us. And, most importantly, a funeral is a chance to put the person's death in a perspective we may forget due to the pain we feel. The perspective often lost through our tears is that God is with us always, especially when we face loss. Even in our tears, then, the funeral is a time to worship God, to remember, confess, give thanks, even celebrate that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39).

For whatever reason, most of us rarely think about funerals, our own or those of others. Yet, it is good to consider some of the questions raised at someone's death, such as:

- Should the body or ashes be present at the worship service?
- What is the most helpful thing to say to the family of loved ones?
- How much should be spent on a funeral? Could thinking ahead avoid questionable decisions made in a moment of extreme grief?
- Who should attend?
- Whom is the funeral for?
- Who should plan the funeral?

This two-session study offers an opportunity to think about funerals, what they are for, and how to prepare for them—either for your own funeral or for that of someone you love. This first session looks briefly at the history of funerals and how a Christian funeral may differ from other religious events. It also examines several of the theological truths Christians claim about life and death. A number of sidebars address some of the questions many of us have. The second session will address some issues and practices of planning a funeral.

## A Brief History of Funeral Practices

Most cultures remember the dead in some way; all cultures have a way of dealing with dead bodies. Perhaps at least three things are common to the funerals of many cultures over many years:

- A sacred way of dealing with the body
- Remembering the dead
- Some sort of ritual or ceremony

While cremation and burial were practices of some early Greeks and Romans, Jews and early Christians favored burial, often in tombs. Funeral practices have changed significantly over the years. Let's take a brief look at the history of funeral rituals.

## From Jesus' Day to the Reformation

In first-century Palestine, funerals took place as soon as possible after death, often on the same day. Family members would close the eyes of the deceased, wash the body, anoint it with perfume, and bind it in cloth. The wrapped body was then processed from the home of the family and laid in the family tomb, generally on the outskirts of the city. In many cases, after decomposition, the bones of the deceased were collected



by family members and placed in an ossuary box. Though the burial ritual took place soon after death, Jewish mourning rituals took many months to complete.

The earliest Christian burial practices were identical to Jewish practices. As time progressed, however, Christians began to modify their practices on the basis of their beliefs. For example, though Jews saw touching a dead body as ritually unclean, Christians

#### SHOULD THE BODY BE PRESENT?

In years past, conducting a funeral without a body present would not have made sense, as those gathered actually placed the body in the grave as part of the service. Today, though, in churches far removed from graveyards, many services take place without the body present. Some even suggest it is easier to focus on God's promises without being distracted by a casket. Recently, others have begun to revive the practice of having caskets present at funerals. Some say it helps the grieving process and serves as a reminder of the service's purpose.

interpreted Jesus' teachings to mean the dead were saints worthy of being touched and embraced. As Christianity later spread throughout the Roman Empire, Roman funeral customs gained traction in Christian circles.

By the time of the Reformation, funeral practices had evolved into elaborate rituals performed so that the deceased would be received in heaven. In some parts of Catholic Europe, after the dead body was prepared it was processed into the church the evening before the burial. Vespers were held, and after midnight priests would lead the Matins Office of the Dead. This was a service consisting of prayers that the soul be accepted into heaven. Following a Mass for the Dead, the body was buried—sometimes even in the floor of the sanctuary! The sequence of services was often repeated several times after the burial in case the deceased remained in purgatory. It was believed that the prayers and actions of the living could affect the fate of the dead. Following the Reformation, in the Reformed churches, these practices changed drastically.

### A Reformation of Funeral Practices

The Reformers argued that the practices of the Roman Catholic Church had departed from the Bible. Reformed leaders encouraged only the most simple of church ceremonies. In Scotland,

### OPEN OR CLOSED CASKET?

If the casket is present at a funeral, people wonder whether the casket should be open or closed. Some prefer the casket closed so that they might focus on God rather than being distracted by viewing the body. Others say that open caskets assist the grieving process because it makes it clear that death is real. Still others say that whether a casket is open or closed has no bearing on our theological claims about death, so either practice is fine.

for instance, funeral processions were banned and images of Christ, Mary, and the saints that had previously watched over the dead were destroyed. Seeking to eliminate any notions that the actions of the living could affect the fate of the dead, Reformers rejected prayers for (or even over) the dead.

Funerals became austere, even uneventful. Though bodies were still buried, the Reformers ordered that burial services be minimal if held at all. Some branches of the church banned sermons and prayers at funerals, while others declared that the minister should not be present at all. The Reformers wanted to be clear that salvation did not occur by any human works, but by God's grace alone.

### What Is Embalming?

Embalming slows down the decomposition process and makes bodies suitable for viewing at funerals, even days after death. Modern embalming is conducted by undertakers and requires chemicals to be injected into the body. If a dead body is not embalmed, it must be buried quickly before decomposition progresses.

In the United States, embalming practices were not developed until the Civil War era. During the war, soldiers

### WHEN WILL THE RESURRECTION OCCUR?

Speaking of the resurrection messes with our normal understanding of time. On the one hand, we can say the resurrection has already occurred since Christ is *already* raised from the dead. This is the faith we celebrate: Christ's triumph over death has already set us free to life eternal. We are sure of it! On the other hand, the final resurrection has *not yet* transpired. We are still waiting for Christ's final return and triumph. So at funerals we can both claim our assurance of Christ's resurrection and the victory over death already won, and look forward to the final resurrection when the dead will be raised forever.

## WHAT TO SAY AT A FUNERAL

Just your presence at the funeral is a clear and helpful statement of support. You don't need to—and probably shouldn't—say too much at all. If there are many people there, introduce yourself (if you don't know the deceased's family), explaining how you knew the deceased. Some possible things to say include:

- I am praying for you.
- We will miss her very much and are glad to have known her.

Or, share a brief positive and honest memory about the deceased.

Be aware of allowing others time with the family as well. Don't forget that grief is an important part of the healing process, and it is OK for you and the family to grieve. Overall, your mere presence is a great comfort by itself.

who died were many miles away from their families. So that the bodies might be buried near their homes, the military developed more sophisticated embalming practices and sent bodies home for burial and funerals.

The ability to bury a body days and even weeks after death changed funeral practices in America. Today, most bodies are embalmed and many are viewed before burial by family and friends.

Some faith traditions, like Islam, Judaism, and Eastern Orthodox Christianity, prohibit embalming under most circumstances. This said, today embalming is a common practice in the United States.

## More Recent Trends

Just as culture and society change over time, so do funeral practices. For example, compared to just twenty years ago, funerals today are much more likely to take place without a body present at the service. On the whole, current-day funerals are more personalized than in the recent past, and they often involve several nonordained speakers rather than just one minister. Commonly, prayers, photographs, eulogies, songs, and even flowers are personalized in some way to remind those of the deceased.

Previously, people relied on standard funeral liturgies led by ministers. Today, funeral directors will often help orchestrate unique services highlighting particular interests of the deceased. Nonreligious services are increasingly common.

A public funeral service today is often preceded or followed by a private burial at a cemetery, usually some distance from the church. In years past, the congregation would process from the church to the churchyard to witness the burial.

Cremation is also becoming much more common. While cremation used to be rare, it now accounts for more than 30 percent of the dispositions of bodies, and many predict this trend will continue.<sup>1</sup> “Green funerals” (where nonembalmed bodies are cremated, or buried in biodegradable coffins) are also a recent and rapidly growing trend.

## **Tensions about Funerals Today**

Funeral planning often occurs when families are in delicate emotional states. Planning the service may bring back memories of other deaths or exacerbate existing family arguments, so it is no surprise when tensions arise.

One tension often present at planning is balancing the wishes of the deceased with practical limitations. Families may struggle with how to honor the spirit of such wishes without sacrificing other expectations or standards. Churches may have certain requirements or restrictions not considered by the deceased and those planning may need to consider local customs as well. Other tensions may crop up over religious or nonreligious music, Bible or poetry readings, or eulogies (at all? by whom?).

A common tension—in families and congregations—is whether the flag of a particular country may be placed on

the casket, and if so, when. Some ministers and congregations insist that funerals recall the baptismal identity of the deceased, an identity irrespective of patriotic claims. Others think that the identity of the deceased (perhaps a veteran) was so tied to the flag that a coffin lacking the flag is misrepresentative of the person. These tensions are not easily resolved, and it is the challenge of funeral planners to work within the tensions, discerning what is at stake, and seeking a positive outcome for all.

## **Christian Beliefs about Death**

As stated above, funerals serve many purposes. While the particular service will vary given cultural and local customs, the Christian funeral focuses on the promises of God. We now consider some of the foundational beliefs Christians affirm that relate to death.

### **There Is a Time to Die (Eccl. 3:2)**

Christians, like all people, die. Death is a natural part of the life cycle. It is unavoidable, though the certainty of death does not make it any less sad or distressing. It is difficult to acknowledge that our friends and family will die, and even ourselves. But even when we consider our mortality, we don't have to wallow in it. For Christians who believe in life after death, death is acknowledged, but it does not win the day. Death brings us together, but it's not the focus of a funeral.

## Death Is Never the Last Word

The gospel story is ultimately not one of death, but life. In Christ, we have victory over death. Death is real—and it is sometimes painful and sad, difficult and distressing—but death is *not* the last word.

God created each of us good, our bodies blessed as part of God's creation. God also promises that, in the fullness of time, our bodies will be resurrected and we will enjoy the paradise of God's presence forever. Sometimes we even refer to heaven as "going home."

So even as we realize the pain of death, Christians who believe "in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting" speak a word after death—many words, in fact: hope, love, grace, peace, and salvation in Jesus Christ.

## The Funeral Service

Going out in public may be the hardest thing to do after a loved one dies. Attending a funeral can seem almost like an obligation. Yet it is helpful to gather with other mourners to remember the deceased and give thanks to God for the life that brings you together.

While the motivation for the funeral is the death of a person, the service remembers that person in the context of the resurrection. Many Christians, in fact, will call a funeral a

"Service of Witness to the Resurrection," for this title reminds us that the main point of the service is a public witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As people gather for a funeral, they worship through spoken prayer, and by singing hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs to God. In worship we listen for God's word in Holy Scripture, and hear that word proclaimed in preaching.

Even though we give thanks at funerals, it doesn't mean they are all happy affairs. Scripture can be a helpful guide in these cases, since the Psalms include praise and lament. Funerals can be a time to share our joys and sorrows. Many people grieving will feel their pain articulated in some of the Scriptures of lament, even as the community together expresses its trust and hope in God.

A sermon or meditation at a funeral is an opportunity to help worshipers connect the death of their loved one to the faith they possess in God—who never leaves us. Or to put it another way: Particular words at a funeral may help remember the life of one individual in the context of the larger gospel story of God's redemption. How we tell the person's story can become a question of delicate balance. But most of us will agree that funerals are times to give thanks for the life of one par-

particular child of God without letting the personal story of one believer overshadow the gospel we all confess.

Most funeral services conclude with a final benediction and charge, words of comfort and inspiration. It might sound strange, but funerals can be a way to recharge our spiritual batteries as we remember that in death—and even now—we belong to God.

## About the Writer

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## Endnote

1. According to the National Funeral Directors Association, <http://www.nfda.org/index.php/media-center/statisticsreports>.





# The Christian Funeral

## SESSION 2

| *Thinking about funerals ahead of time may provide great comfort for those left behind.*

### Introduction

For some of us, thinking about our own funeral is a disturbing task. It reminds us of our mortality, and we don't like considering our loved ones coping without us. For others of us, think-

#### **OH I'M SORRY, WE DON'T DO THAT HERE**

Some congregations have policies that do not allow caskets in the sanctuary. Other congregations strongly prefer open caskets. In areas of the Midwest it's simply too cold to have a burial service in winter, so bodies are kept for internment until spring. Some congregations would need to hold a vote of the church board to allow for Communion at a funeral service, but at others it's normal practice. The point: There is not only one way to have a funeral and we can't control every detail of the service. And that's OK.

ing about our own funeral is a curious intellectual exercise, but will always seem unreal. For still others, planning one's own funeral is a



great comfort and joy. The plans may both relieve one's family and help all acknowledge in words what they know in their hearts: Death is coming and preparations will need to be made.

It is probably helpful not to go it alone, but have the help and support of a community of faith. So in the case of planning your own funeral, you may want to discuss your plans with your minister, your friends, and your family. Certainly, before you finalize your funeral plans, it's a good idea to go over your ideas with a pastor. Most

## LOCATION OF THE SERVICE

In the sanctuary? At a funeral home? At the graveside? Elsewhere? For most Christians connected to a congregation, a service in the usual place of worship can bring comfort to the grieving and help remind those gathered of God's promises. For non-Christians, a service at a funeral home might convey a respect for the beliefs of the deceased, especially if the person felt uncomfortable in church. Outdoor funerals have their own challenges with weather, seating, and comfort, but may helpfully connect the deceased to all of God's creation.

pastors have a lot of experience leading funeral services, so considering your pastor's perspective and having a chance to voice your wishes out loud may be really helpful for you. Once you have planned your service, file it in the church office, with your pastor, with family, and even with friends. There's no use making funeral plans if they aren't known and available after you die, so make a few copies and make them easy to find.

Be aware that your plans may not be carried out *exactly*. As much as one might want a thousand doves to be released at their graveside service, for example, it's probably next to impos-

sible for a family, minister, and funeral director to make these arrangements. In fact, making too detailed plans for one's own funeral might seem like an imposition on one's family rather than a help. Any funeral plans you make, then, would be best understood as a gift to your family. Circumstances may not allow every suggestion to be carried out precisely, but your family will likely really appreciate knowing your preferences. Plans for your funeral are a gift to your family, even in death.

## Burial versus Cremation

Until fairly recently, cremation was rare in America and the norm in much of Europe. Times are changing, though, and if the trends continue, in

## THE GREEN FUNERAL

Both cremation and burial take a toll on the environment. Crematories need energy to cremate the body, and burials require coffins (often made of metal or imported wood). Burial also may cause people to burn fossil fuels when visiting the grave site later. Embalming requires use of significant amounts of chemicals. An ultra-green funeral might be burial in a cloth shroud in a nontraditional cemetery that's also a nature preserve with unmarked graves. For more information, visit <http://www.greenburialcouncil.org/>.



a few decades a majority of people may opt for cremation. People's reasons for burial or cremation run the gamut, but some

common perspectives in favor of each follow.

The appeal of burial, for many, is a family grave or plot in a cemetery. Though ashes too may be buried in a cemetery near family members, some prefer all members of the family in the plot to be buried in the same way. Burial, also, has great historical precedence and some understand it as more natural, connecting the body to the earth forever.

Cremation appeals to others, sometimes even for remarkably similar reasons. For instance, cremation can also be understood as connecting the body to the earth since the body becomes ashes itself. Fire, dust, and ashes strike some as very natural. Cremation advocates point out that the upkeep of cemeteries is expensive and, as population increases, is unsustainable in the long term.

These and other reasons affect people's preference for burial or cremation, while many of us have no clear preference. No matter your preference, however, it's a good idea to make

## CHOOSING A FUNERAL HOME

Many people, even before death, like to choose a funeral home to care for them. The knowledge that this choice has been made can be a comfort for you and your family. Even further, many funeral homes offer consultations for those planning their own funerals. You can even prepay for the care of your body, sometimes at a discount (and sometimes not). Check with the funeral homes in your area for more details.

your thoughts known to your family, so when the time comes for making plans for your body they do not feel great anxiety.

## Thinking about Music

Music helps us express our deepest emotions. In times of grief, music can comfort. In times of gratitude, music can communicate even more than words. In times of remembering, music can help us recall in ways unimagined before. In all times, music connects us to one another. In Christian worship services, music also connects worshipers to God. So there's no wonder that, for many, choosing the music for one's funeral is at the same time the most exciting, intimate, and daunting part of planning.

## SCRIPTURES TO CONSIDER

- Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd

- Psalm 139:1–12

Where shall I go from your spirit?

- Ecclesiastes 3:1–15

For everything there is a season

- Isaiah 40:1–11, 28–31

Comfort my people<sup>1</sup>

- Isaiah 65:17–25

I create new heavens and a new earth

- Luke 23:33, 39–43

Today you will be with me in Paradise

- John 11:17–27

I am the resurrection and the life

- John 14:1–6, 25–27

Let not your hearts be troubled

- Romans 8:14–23, 31–39

Nothing can separate us from the love of God

- 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

The comfort of Christ's coming

Consider the singing of hymns and songs in worship as a form of prayer. Some have actually called singing in worship “praying twice.” So don’t fret about hymns too much—surely God will accept our prayers! Many hymnals will have certain suggested hymns for funerals, and these certainly may be appropriate for yours. Some people select hymns particularly meaningful to them, or hymns that were sung at one’s wedding, baptism, or the funeral of a loved one. Beyond these possibilities, you might want also to consider hymns beyond the “funeral” section of the hymnal. Some other hymns may work well at a funeral, including

- Easter hymns that celebrate Christ’s reign and the resurrection
- Closing hymns which remind that God is always present
- Hymns of thanksgiving to God
- Evening hymns noting the close of a day

As mentioned earlier, it’s a good idea to speak with your pastor about the funeral plans you’re considering. This is true especially when it comes to music. If you are considering selecting music out of the ordinary, it would be kind to discuss this in advance with your pastor and see if he or she is comfortable with it. Similarly, it can sometimes be a practical challenge

## HOW MUCH DOES A FUNERAL COST?

In 2006, the National Funeral Director Association determined the average cost of a U.S. funeral with metal casket was \$7,323, and that didn't even include cemetery fees, a gravestone, and flowers!<sup>2</sup> For many families the cost is daunting. Life insurance policies may have a funeral disbursement, but it may not cover the cost of all the funeral home services. There are ways to save money, though. Consider renting a casket. Consider opting out of embalming (in states that allow it). Consider getting flowers elsewhere. Consider having the church print bulletins. Recently, some families have even opted not to use the services of a funeral home at all, caring for the body themselves at home (though it's not clear this is legal in every state). Surely, few families will explore this option but all families should know: funerals are expensive.

for a congregation to sing a hymn not in a hymnal owned by the congregation. Consider also that music selections—sung by the congregation or as a solo—are often complicated at locations other than the regular place of worship.

Beyond hymns, you might consider gathering and sending music (sometimes called the prelude and postlude), anthems by a choir or small group, and solo pieces. These all may be appropriate; just remember that the service—and the music in it—is ultimately about giving thanks to God and witnessing to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's not to say secular music is never appropriate at funerals, it's just good to remember that there's a difference between a concert and a funeral.

Some congregations and funeral directors have good relationships with soloists who may be called on short notice to sing at funerals. That's not always the case, though, so be aware that noting a preference for songs by soloists may present a difficulty. And as anyone who has tried knows, it's impossible to sing and cry at the same time. Though it's sometimes wonderful for family members to sing at funerals of loved ones, at other times it just doesn't work.

Finally, remember that one of the unique aspects of a funeral is the particular gathering of people—friends, family, coworkers, and acquaintances of the deceased. Having all these people sing together is a gift, and can be a great joy and comfort to all gathered. So whatever hymns or songs you choose, know that their benefits may be more than you can ever imagine.

## What Should Be Said?

Though much having to do with funerals concerns actions—the death itself, the gathering for a service, burying the body—also very important are the words we say while we act. Sure, the people are gathering for a funeral, to dispose of a body, but what do they say about it? What words are appropriate for such a time as death?

For Christians, the words of the Bible are central to our faith. Though the act that gathers us together is a death, we gather around the Word of the Bible, to hear it, to speak it, to be comforted by it, to remember its promises, even to be inspired.

You may want to select passages of Scripture that have a particular meaning for you. You might also opt not to choose Scripture passages and suggest to your family that when the times comes they should select passages that seem most appropriate for the circumstances. Of course, the minister leading the service can serve as a good resource in their discussion.

For many, the question of whether to have a eulogy (literally, “a good word”) or several and/or a sermon at their funeral reflects our perspective on speeches as a whole. It’s easy for most of us to recall funerals that included too many eulogies, or eulogies not particularly well done, that detracted

from the service. On the other hand, a funeral without any personal words about the deceased might seem too dry and impersonal. If eulogies are included, it’s probably best that they are kept to a minimum and done by people comfortable speaking in public. Many ministers may also ask that they occur before the reading of Scripture and sermon. If you would like loved ones to be involved in the service but you would not like a eulogy, perhaps they can help in the procession, read Scripture, or lead prayers.

It has become fairly common for secular poems to be read at funerals. Poems, as art, consider the big truths of the human condition, so their growing popularity should be no surprise. And, perhaps in ways different from the poetry of Scripture, secular poems appeal to people who do not share the Christian faith. If poems can help those gathered to grieve well, to be comforted, and to love one another then it may well be good to include a secular poem at a funeral. Poems don’t replace Scripture readings, but can supplement them.

## How Can We Give Thanks at a Funeral?

There are many ways to give thanks at a funeral. We can speak, sing, and pray our thanks to God. We can give flowers to decorate the grave. We can donate money in the name of the deceased.

And we can simply make the best of the fellowship of those gathered for the service.

When considering your own funeral arrangements, it's good to think about all these possibilities. You might want to designate an organization or fund to which loved ones can donate in your name. Different congregations have different policies about accepting designated funds, so speak to your pastor or church treasurer about these. At some but not all funeral services, an offering is taken for such purposes.

Many congregations understand the celebration of the Lord's Supper as a way of giving thanks. In fact, another word for Communion, "Eucharist," comes from a Greek word meaning just that: "thanksgiving." In some faith traditions, then, it's normal practice to celebrate the Lord's Supper at every worship gathering, even and especially a funeral. Partaking in Communion might help the congregation to remember Christ's promises. Understanding the meal as one at which all the saints living and dead join in the feast may help worshipers to give thanks to God while also anticipating a day when all may feast together in heaven. If your congregation does not celebrate the Lord's Supper regularly but you'd like it at your funeral, share your request with your pastor. This said, however,

if Communion is rare in your congregational setting, it might be best not to celebrate it at a funeral.

## Final Words

It's hard to say goodbye. Funeral services, though they have a lot to do with saying goodbye, never say it completely. Perhaps this is due to the inadequacy of our words and rituals, but perhaps it's also related to how our lives are interconnected. When a loved one dies we are keenly aware that we are still living. So we, ideally, live our lives in gratitude to God for the gift of our loved one. Also, though, just as at any other time Christians gather for worship, when we gather for a funeral we are also gathering to be sent out again for mission. Funerals can be a time to refocus ourselves on what truly matters in life: loving God and neighbor.

As funerals have become more personalized in recent years, some have decided to give funeral favors of parting gifts to those who attend. As we have been reminded repeatedly, any funeral practice—particularly those out of the ordinary—would be well considered with the question: how does this practice witness to not just the story of the deceased, but the larger story of God's goodness, mercy, and grace?

The goal of this study is to help your family or loved ones know of your funeral preferences, so it's very important they know about your plans. Make sure you communicate with your family, but also with your pastor. Planning your funeral can be a great gift to all involved, and a healthy practice for preparing yourself for the eventual reality that we all shall face. As we prepare, though, the truth is comforting: in life and in death, we belong to God.

## About the Writer

*Adam J. Copeland is a member of the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song and a graduate of Columbia Theological Seminary.*

## Endnotes

1. The following verse suggestions and summaries come from *Book of Common Worship*, The Theology and Worship Ministry Unit (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 949–50.
2. The National Funeral Director Association, <http://www.nfda.org/index.php/media-center/statisticsreports>.