

Into the Sunrise of Eternity:
Reflections on the Journey Home

RVS Notes

**National Presbyterian Church
Adult Nurture
Spring, 2023**

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Preface

Let me but live my life from year to year,
With forward face and unreluctant soul;
Not hurrying to, nor turning from the goal;
Not mourning for the things that disappear into the dim past,
Nor holding back in fear from what the future veils;
But with a whole and happy heart,
That pays its toll to youth and age
And travels on with cheer. (Henry van Dyke)

Strolling into the light—I am a frequent visitor to colonial Williamsburg. My favorite way of starting the day there is to rise a little before dawn, find my way to the Visitor's Center and take the pedestrian pathway to the colonial town. If I time it right, I can turn on the Duke of Gloucester Street and walk toward Virginia's colonial capitol while the sun rises. It's a glorious sight and reminds me of Jeremiah's exclamation—

Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness (Lam. 3:22-23)

Strolls like this at dawn are the inspiration for the title of these meditations. As they initiated many a new day for me here in this tent, they also serve as a centering vision for the end of my life's journey.

Christian art of dying—If we live long enough, we will be bereaved. When we have lived long enough, we will die. These are givens, no matter how much our culture tries to deny them or hide from them. These reflections are about aging into a good death. It is important to establish Christian patterns of thought before death and bereavement strike.

Christians have always believed that life was a preparation for death and the life beyond. The Christian idea that death can be inspirational, even redemptive, almost never enters modern conversations about dying. The good death doesn't occur in a vacuum. We need to think about it and prepare for it. “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” (Ps. 90:12).

In an earlier day, this mental preparation resulted in what was called the *ars moriendi*, the art of dying. This was advice explaining how to “die well” according to Christian precepts of the late Middle Ages. Protestant Christian traditions continued in this vein, believing that the death of a believer ought to be different than those who die without faith. C.S. Lewis asks a poignant question: “If we really think that home is elsewhere and that this life is a 'wandering to find home,' why should we not look forward to the arrival?”

This life is prelude to our destiny in glory beyond. We, in Jesus' resurrection train, will be reunited with our glorified bodies and with so many of our loved ones. We will have a joyous eternity together that beckons us with expectant hope. A good death must be seen as the fitting conclusion of a faithful life. Life is a wonderful gift from God. The way we pass from life to death can be a wonderful legacy to those we leave behind. Dying well is a good work to which we are called.

Preview of the journey—Let us peruse these themes as we explore the process of aging into a good death. We will start with our journey's destination—***Longing for a Better Country***. First, we'll consider how the law of sin and death stalks our earthly passage and sounds forth in a minor key as we approach the grave. That melancholy note must not rule our trek home. We have a heavenly destination and that expectation needs to frame our earthly passage. This must be a seeing faith, firmly holding to God's faithfulness to bring about a full and complete redemption. Then we will briefly examine our wonderful heavenly hope. We must dwell with biblical truth to reflect properly on our journey. We are heirs with Christ in the heavenly places, conquerors and victors over all that would thwart us. We are those who are beloved of God.

Next up, in the section entitled ***Along the Way***, we'll examine some issues as we make our pilgrimage home. Modern advances, medical and otherwise, have occasioned the phenomena of the long afternoon of this earthly life. There are wonderful opportunities and serious issues in this era of prolonged aging. We'll look at purpose and engagement in our later years, the necessity of an uplifting faith, and examine some of the advantages of aging in focusing our spiritual lives. There will be some practical advice and exhortation for getting our affairs in order. We'll visit the downside as well, the loss of power, place, and significance, and the reality of our growing limitations that can make our world seem small and isolated. We'll examine regrets and worries, the need to let go and wisdom in doing so, and the onslaughts of the enemy of our souls in our later days.

We'll conclude with some reflections about our earthly exit ***Into His Presence***. These include grieving the exits of loved ones and our own, sickness and suffering that so often attend our earthly end, the death trauma itself, and our fears of not departing as we hope to.

Longing for a Better Country

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Heb. 11:13-16)

The Lord beckons us to the embrace of eternity and the understanding of all life in the grandeur of its sunrise. Not merely pie in the sky, bye and bye, but the ever-present backdrop to our lives here and now. Christ is the source of enduring delight and joy. He comes to those who receive him with the simple all-sufficiency of his indwelling presence, which supplies, if not mirth, then hope, in the day-to-day of our lives. The sunrise of eternity bathes our situations with its glimmer of glory. At the core of our universe, yes, even as we face our own death, the face of God in the person of Christ wears a smile.

Modern believers are far from the perspective of being so heavenly minded as to be no earthly good. Indeed, the truth is that we are uncomfortably at home in the world. One believer describes this spirit: “I don't want pie in the sky; I want ham where I am!” God's Word speaks to believers who are not purchasers, but sojourners; more likely to be indigent than self-indulgent; not a significant market to be plumbed, but a movement to be joined. It speaks to a pilgrim people, who must never forget that.

This portion of these reflections speaks of our destination. We are on a pilgrimage; perhaps in the latter stages of that journey. *The Player's Stage* reflects on what human life looks like without the eyes of faith. *Destined for Glory* supplies a heavenly perspective. Let us remind ourselves of where we're headed.

Chapter 1—The Player's Stage

**Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God stands forever. (Isa. 40:7b-8)**

Life is tragic—The basis of life in a fallen universe is tragic. It sounds forth in a minor key; its despondent tones crescendoing with the passage of time. Each of us has a GPS set for the cemetery. Physical death supplies an exclamation point to the Fall. The consequences of our human rebellion against God are conspicuously highlighted. The law of sin and death stalks our earthly passage.

Shakespeare has Jaques hold forth on this subject in *As You Like It*:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like a snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like a furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,

Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Melancholy moments—Many of us are the latter stages of this play. There's a quiet and haunting sigh that accompanies the passage of time. We sense it slipping away oh so gradually. We want it to halt, to stay at some pleasant way-stop. This is it, just this, enough now, we'll stay right here. But time cascades on and begins to show in the mirror. Our look, our gait, our routines. This march has a destination. Our natural melancholy mistakes it for the the casket that holds father, mother, brother, sister, relatives, and dear friends.

Preaching to ourselves—But that is not the terminus. We must rouse ourselves and reflect in a different mode. We must preach gospel truth to ourselves in the midst of this journey. We have a heavenly destination and that expectation needs to frame our earthly passage. This must be more than believing babble. The promise must be embraced before it is seen. This must be a seeing faith, firmly holding to God's faithfulness to bring about a full and complete redemption.

C. S. Lewis once remarked that joy is the serious business of heaven. He was not speaking primarily of glory and our yearning for it, but of heavenly joy invading our earthly toil, aches, and pleasures and transforming them while we live in this present order. If that is to occur, then the faith structure that frames that joy needs to attend our earthly pilgrimage. The quandary that haunts our trek through time, need not rule it. That journey can be ruled by his grace. By faith, we can see a different, better result and something we can live into with hope and with purpose.

Let's us ponder that journey now as we reflect on aging into the sunrise of eternity. And let there be the joy of faithful expectation as we let go into the arms of our most faithful Savior and friend.

Chapter 2—Destined for Glory

Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may share in his glory. (Rom. 8:17)

Query for the ages—Go back in your mind's eye, some fourteen hundred years ago to the court of King Edwin of Northumbria in old Saxon England. Picture an old wattled hall, ablaze with torches, with a great log fire burning in the middle. The atmosphere is tense with excitement, for the early Christian missionaries have just arrived from Rome. The first discourse of their message has concluded. There's a hush, an opportunity, an invitation to venture forth with questions.

“Can this new religion tell us anything of what happens after death? The souls of people are like sparrows flying through a lighted hall. They enter at one door from the darkness outside, flit through the light and warmth, and pass out to the dark again at the other end. What comes to people after death, in the dim unknown? Can this new religion solve for us the mystery?” A query for the ages and one we cannot avoid.

Anchors to a biblical perspective—If you want to know the purpose of a course of activity, look to the end. The one thing that stands out at the end of the Scripture, the final and ultimate outcome of time and eternity, is the spotless bride of Christ and the wedding feast of the Lamb.

Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!
For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.
Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.
(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)
Then the angel said to me,
“Write: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!”
And he added “These are the true words of God.” (Rev. 19:7-9).

God invests the Son's bride with royalty and authority. We, the Church, are heirs with Christ in the heavenly places (see Rom. 8:17 quoted above). God's eternal purpose is to prepare and train a Bride for her glorious role.

This eternal purpose is anchored in Christ's victory. It is vital to know with certainty that Christ's sacrifice on Calvary was a glorious triumph. Jesus was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21), and tasted of death for us (Heb. 2:9). With his resurrection and victory over sin and death, Christ was exalted and the Church enthroned. The apostle Paul waxes eloquent on this theme:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus ... (Eph. 2:4-6).

In the mind of God, every redeemed believer shares complete identity with Christ from the cross to the throne. We are crucified, raised, exalted, and enthroned with Him. We are in his resurrection triumph, if you will. Included in this is exaltation to his authority and victory over the evil one as we abide in

Christ.

Faith must be a seeing grace—This truth must be a structuring truth. Faith often means believing in advance what will only make sense in reverse. Thus, we will start at the end of the matter—our destiny in glory. If we do not meet our deaths with hopefulness, then we are failing to preach the gospel to ourselves.

The Father calls us into the sunrise of eternity. The Savior purchased and promised us this. The Spirit prepares us for it and provides the longing for home. It must shape our approach to illness, bereavement, and death itself. The more a Christian lives in the consciousness of the presence of God in the here and now, the easier it is to anticipate the unqualified delight that will be experienced in God's presence hereafter. Encourage our souls with this—we follow in the triumph of his death and resurrection. We step into a glorious inheritance.

Let's break this down into some particulars:

We are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, princes and princesses of the realm—Romans 8:15-18 says it this way:

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father”. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then ***we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ***, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

We are fashioned in the image of the Son and will share his glory and dominion. While there is an infinite distinction between the Eternal Son and those fashioned in his likeness, yet such is the heredity resulting from the new birth, that God recognizes us as bona-fide blood brothers and sisters. Rees Howell captured this mystery in verse:

So nigh, so very nigh to God, I cannot nearer be;
For in the person of his Son, I am near as he.

The psalmist soars with a similar accolade: “What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man, that you care for him? You have made him a little lower than God and crowned him with glory and honor.” (Ps. 8:4-5).

This may sound like megalomania and utter fantasy, but redeemed humanity outranks all other orders of created beings. By the new birth, a redeemed human being joins the cosmic family, next of kin to the Trinity itself, the aristocracy of the universe. From all eternity, God purposed to have a family circle of his very own, not only created, but generated, by his own life. Christ is the prototype after which all other sons and daughters are fashioned.

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. (Rom. 8:29-30).

In and through Christ, God realizes and fulfills his paternal longing for a generic family relationship.

We are conquerors and victors over all that would thwart God's good for us—Romans 8:37-39 says:

No, in these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We will abide in the victor's circle, overcoming through Christ the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. A fabulous inheritance awaits us. This prospect of eternal glory far outweighs our earthly concerns. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 states this truth this way:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Think of it. Our knowledge will be perfected. We will know him face to face and probe the mysteries of our redemption. We will be in the heavenly Jerusalem, with the church triumphant. We will better understand God's Word and his works of providence. We will be flooded with the nature and excellencies of the divine mercy. Our wills will be perfected. No more sinful inclinations, no more striving against the Spirit, no begrudging God's words, works, and ways. No principle of enmity or rebellion left to raise its ugly head. Our wills will find peace in perfect conformity to the divine will. And not the least of heaven's pleasures will be the companionship of kindred spirits perfected by the grace of God. How can we not yearn for such a destiny?

Death is far less daunting an experience when viewed from a biblical perspective—Death most certainly remains an enemy, a sign of judgment on sin, a formidable opponent to be met. However, from another perspective, it is a portal through which we must pass to a consummated life. Isaiah reflects on the Lord's good purposes in Isaiah 57:1-2:

The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart;
devout men are taken away, and no one understands
that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil.
Those who walk uprightly enter into peace;
they find rest as they lie in death.

Erwin Lutzer has commented on the “gift” of death. While in this tent, death is our terrible enemy. However, on the other side, the monster turns out to be our friend. It is our passageway to the Lord Jesus' resurrection triumph. For those in that triumph train, death has been defanged.

Practical suggestions for making truth real—In our day, these truths are either ignored or openly challenged. Calvary, if pictured at all, is portrayed as an act of symbolic sympathy or as a defeat, a silly display of supine weakness. The resurrection is asserted to be a hoax only believed by gullible types or understood as a sort of symbolic triumph of the human spirit. “The aristocracy of the universe, eh? Do

you really believe that?”, a sarcastic voice asks mockingly. “Yes I do” needs to be our emphatic answer.

We must dwell with biblical truth to reflect properly on the journey home. It is so necessary because of the general worldliness of our age that so readily grinds us down. Our natural aversion to death has been greatly increased by sin, by unbelief, by the darkness of our flesh, by our too great familiarity with this visible world, and by our want of more lively foretastes of heaven. How do we make biblical truth our structuring truth?

Meditate on the joys of our destination—

- *Think on the preciousness of heaven—*Our Father is there (Mt. 6:9). Jesus is there (Heb. 9:24). Our spiritual brothers and sisters are there. Our names are recorded there (Lk. 10:20). Our citizenship is there (Phil. 3:20). Our real wealth and reward is there (Mt. 5:12). Meditate on the heavenly throne room scene in Revelation chapters 4 and 5. Picture yourself looking into the throne room of some illustrious king and then looking beyond into the far more glorious hall of the King of kings and Lord of lords. Envision yourself watching the emerald city descending from heaven and a voice echoing from the the celestial throne:

Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them.

They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Rev. 21:3b-4)

- *Adopt a worldview that looks to heaven—*Heaven is our home, where we belong, with a place uniquely prepared for us. The Lord Jesus, in the Upper Room discourse, said as much:

In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you.

I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

(Jn. 14:2-3).

A proper Christian worldview is focused on heaven. Nothing is more obvious than how transitory human life really is, and yet we cling to it so. If this earthly life were the sum total of human existence, then our existence would be tragic indeed.

- *Ponder the prospect—Heaven is a perfect place for people made perfect.* What a wonderful prospect! The most earnest Christian well knows the sentiment expressed by Paul in Romans 7:24—“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” In the next chapter, he says that the whole creation is groaning for our revealing as the children of God (Rom. 8:22). There will be a remedy. We will be changed from the inside out. Redeemed without any trace of human fallenness. In heaven, God graciously glorifies us and admits us into his presence.
- *Withering into glory—We will have glorified bodies—*This body, withering away now as it is, is an eternal aspect of our humanity. In heaven, we will have glorified bodies. Bodies that never die or break down, never again diseased or withering away.

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable,

it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory;
it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power;
it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. (1 Cor. 15:42-44)

- *Our relationships will be perfect*—The present scheme of this world order will be done away. Our manner of life and ways of doing things will change, but we will recognize one another and know the joy of reuniting with friends and family in heaven, minus the downside of damaged relationships in this fallen world with which we are all too familiar.
- *Unbroken friendship with God*—Living in the presence of God is the final summary of heavenly life (Rev. 21:3b-4 quoted above). In heaven, we will be free from sin and will see God's glory unveiled and in its fullness. It will be an abode of ceaseless worship and everlasting praise; a place of perfection and unimaginable joy.

Develop a homesickness for heaven—An earthbound perspective harangues us from every media platform. Not to make heaven the Christian's hope and goal is not only unfaithful to the Scriptures, but robs us of the perspective to help us cope with the pressures of the here and now. Author Malcolm Muggeridge writes: "I long to be gone. Extricating myself from the flesh I have too long inhabited, hearing the key turn in the lock of time so that the great doors of eternity swing open, disengaging my tired mind from its interminable conundrums, and my tired ego from its wearisome insistencies."

Jesus, the prize of contrite hearts—The greatest prize does not rest with a perfect abode, a perfect body, or in blissful times with fellow pilgrims. We have had human relationships that hint at the richness awaiting us. Relationships that got us beyond ourselves, out of the shallows of our own secure egocentricity and into the dangerous and unpredictable depths of real interpersonal encounter. These prepare us for the ultimate personal encounter with the Lord himself.

Richard Baxter counsels his own soul: "Draw near, my soul, to the Lord of love, and be not seldom and slight in your contemplation of his love and loveliness. Dwell in the sunshine, and you will know that it is light and warm and comfortable. Distance yourself from your doubts and strange ruminations. Acquaint yourself with him and be at peace."

Bernard of Clairvaux reflects on the home our hearts truly long for in the hymn *Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee*:

Jesus, the very thought of thee, with sweetness fills my breast
but sweeter far thy face to see and in thy presence rest.
O hope of every contrite heart, O joy of all the meek,
to those who fall, how kind thou art! How good to those who seek!

But what to those who find? Ah, this nor tongue nor pen can show
the love of Jesus, what it is, none but his loved ones know.
Jesus, our only joy be thou, as thou our prize will be;
Jesus, be thou our glory now, and through eternity.

Along the Way

I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:14)

The journey into the sunrise of eternity is prefaced by the earnest desire and diligent effort to finish this earthly pilgrimage well. As a general principle, the person who will die well, must live well. Of course, there are exceptions to this general rule, but in most cases, a good death is prefaced by a good and earnestly faithful life. The reflections in this portion aim to flesh this out along our journey home.

The New Testament has relatively little to say about an extended period of aging. It was a different social and cultural world. Far fewer people lived to advanced age, and those who did were honored and esteemed in community. The text is relatively silent about such burning questions as forestalling the physical appearance of advancing age; how to cover the costs of long-term care; and how to deal with the preferences of dying patients. The matter of greatest concern is not aging as such but mortality, the end toward which the aging process leads. The biblical perspective on aging focuses on death and the end toward which we move—the last enemy confronted by God's redemptive power.

So how are we to think “along the way” of what might be the long afternoon of our aging? This journey may well be characterized by an early period of greater energy and activity followed by a later stage where our faculties are clearly on the wane. In this season of life, let's speak to our own souls and try to anticipate the issues we will face along the journey home:

- Living purposefully and keeping at it;
- Growing vibrant in the faith;
- Appreciating our blessings and opportunities that come our way;
- Getting ready to go home;
- Dealing with the “world” and its attitudes;
- Dealing with limitations, regrets, and worries;
- Letting go of so many people and things we cherish;
- Reminding ourselves that we are never alone however assailed by the enemy of our souls.

Chapter 3—But One Thing

Not that I have already attained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained. (Phil. 3:12-16)

Secret to life—In the film *City Slickers*, Billy Crystal plays a dissatisfied thirty-something character, who is fearful that life is passing him by. Jack Palance plays the role opposite him, a seasoned old guy, wise to the ways of the world. Palance asks Crystal if he would like to know the secret to life. Crystal can't hide his interest.

"It's this," Palance says, and holds up his index finger.

"The secret to life is your index finger?" Crystal cynically inquires.

"No. It's one thing," Palance replies. "The secret to life is pursuing one thing."

This resonates deeply with Crystal's character. His life is fractured, confused, torn between many things. His obligation to his family and his desire for career advancement are pitted against one another. His need for security battles with his appetite for a thrill. The list could go on and on. The truth is his life is scattered over many things, without any particular focus. He has no center, no soul. His life is about everything, and so he sadly senses, about nothing at all.

Pursuing the right thing—The honest simplicity that brings peace and purpose to our lives comes when we pursue the one thing worth pursuing. I am not speaking of money, of success, or of personal fulfillment. I'm not speaking of entertaining ourselves to death or of designing just the right bucket list. Augustine said it well: "You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they rest in thee."

The purpose of our lives fits into a much larger, cosmic agenda that God has designed for time and eternity. It is so easy to forget that the pursuit of happiness or success is not what life is all about. God allows us discontent and dissatisfaction to remind us of that. Oh, there will be pleasant stops along the way, but he will not allow us to peacefully vest in the transitory. He has placed eternity in our hearts, yet we cannot fathom it. (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

God's goal for us on earth is not our comfort and happiness, but the realization of his purposes, our character development being one of the foremost of them. He desires to restore the image of God in us,

which has been so fractured by sin. This earth is a vale of soul making and of the building of his kingdom. These endeavors continue throughout our lives.

We're on the journey of aging into a good death. The right purpose is still front and center to the mindset we should have on that journey. This stage may be different from those that came before, but the need to live up to what God would have for us is the constant to our remaining days. To that point, Philippians is a wonderful book, full of attitudinal gut checks in every chapter.

- Philippians 1:20-21—"I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."
- Philippians 2:5-8—"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!"
- Phil 4:13—"I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

Living up; leaving room—The passage that we'll focus upon is from chapter 3 quoted at the beginning of this meditation. The passage is a wonderful guide for reflecting on our own life's journey. The upshot is quite simple:

- Living up – to God's purpose for us and forward-leaning into God's grace.
- Leaving room – for others to do likewise as the Lord would lead them.

Prison context—Let's set the stage. Paul is in prison. There is a serious interrupt in his life and ministry, and his future is unclear. As you read Philippians, it's clear that he thinks he's getting out and his ministry will be continuing, but this disruption is a serious pause giving him time to reflect on his ministry and his life's journey.

Purposeful living—Purposeful determination frames and pervades this passage. "*I press on*" radiates that determination and bookends verses 12-14. In verse 12, he says "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me:". Verse 14 reiterates this: "I press on toward the goal to win the prize ..."

I press on (dioko) is a strong word. The ancient Greeks used the term to describe a hunter pursuing his prey or an athlete pressing to the finish line. Paul's point is a determined orientation to finish what God had given him to do. This deliberate action is in response to God's prior action stated in verse 12 that in verse 14 is described as the heavenward call or the high call of God in Christ Jesus.

Akhwari illustration—Let's turn our clocks back fifty some years. It's an early evening in October, 1968. You're one of the few people remaining in the Olympic Stadium in Mexico City. The last of the marathon contestants struggles into the arena. Number 36, John Stephen Akhwari, an Olympian

marathon runner from Tanzania, fell early in the race and injured his left leg and ankle. His leg is bloodied and haphazardly bandaged with a T-shirt. His ankle is seriously swollen. It's painful to watch his hobbling steps; his pace is a mere semblance of running.

But there is something going on here. As he circles the track on the final lap of the race, the remaining spectators arise and applaud. Crossing the finish line, he slowly limps off the track. Instantly he's surrounded by reporters, asking the obvious question. Why did you finish? You fell; you're injured, maybe seriously. You didn't have a ghost of a chance of placing or winning anything. Why continue and risk injury? His reply: "My country did not send me 5,000 miles to see me start the race. They sent me here to finish it. That's what I came to do, and that's what I did."

The illustration highlights the point of determined orientation, rather than the noble heroic. Paul wants to do his Lord proud in the right sort of way. To think that heaven applauds our less than heroic and not so dramatic efforts should bring an overwhelming sense of God's grace to us. What a privilege to be a conduit of that grace to others!

Back to the text. In between these bookends comes our chapter title. "*This one thing I do*" (3:13) is literally "but one thing". Paul's life is a centered one. He has plenty of concerns—his chains (in prison), his critics (chirping "I told you so"), the well-being of the churches, and his own legal crisis (before Nero). But he knows what his purpose is. "*But one thing*" focuses on God's call and to live into the good future God has for him.

Forward-leaning—This orientation to purposeful living is forward-leaning. Let's read on:

"But one thing I do forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal ..."

"[F]orgetting what is behind" does not mean to obliterate the memory of the past. Paul is not saying that living into God's grace is an amnesia act. What this "forgetting" involves is the conscious refusal to allow the past to absorb our attention and impede our progress.

Too often people live in yesteryear. Sometimes by way of regret – "oh, if only...". Sometimes by way of triumphal parade -- "back in the day" This can be particularly the case as we age. However, we need not and should not be shackled either by our regrets or our attainments in some yesteryear. Learn from the past or draw encouragement from it, but don't allow it to obstruct your new action.

"[A]nd straining toward what is ahead". We're to be forward-leaning, stretching forth, reaching out for what God has before us – living into His grace. The picture here is a runner stretching to the finish line. This is the posture of welcoming the future because we're in God's hands. This is a word of exhortation to us – Lord, give us new energy and a "holy optimism" that welcomes what is coming next, particularly as we age.

Let's summarize. Paul is telling us to choose to live up. God's grace meets us with open arms and carries us forward as we live up, as we consciously reach for his purpose for us and step into his grace. But there's a corollary to this. *Living up needs to leave room.*

Leaving room—Our text continues:

“All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.”

Evidently, there was some ongoing discussion concerning Christian growth and maturity in the Philippian congregation. In other parts of the letter, Paul indicates that dissension existed in the congregation among those who were working hard in the cause of Christ.

In his exhortation to live up, he's also telling us to leave room. He avoids coming down with the apostolic hammer on those who see things differently. God is free to deal with individuals as he sees fit. Our experience is not necessarily the norm. God is not chained to a certain way of dealing with individuals or with congregations, forever and ever, Amen.

The truth is that God often gives us much more room than we give each other. There's a type of well-meaning striving that can get positively meddling. It's means well, but often veers off-course. This matter of leaving room has important personal implications. It is my observation that as we age, we tend to move in one of two distinct directions. Either we grow sweeter in spirit or more sour. The latitude we grant to our fellow pilgrims is often a good measure of which way we're headed on the inside.

Purposeful orientation—In our day and age, this type of meditation, so full of vim and vigor, is usually the energetic contribution of youth. However, Paul was nearing the end of his earthly days, perhaps at the very end, when he pens these words. He has been imprisoned for years now. His body and physical strength may be waning, but his heart and mind are in the trim. He yearns to serve his Lord whole-hearted right to the end.

And what an end he awaits expectantly! He uses a word for that expectation later in this chapter of Philippians. Eagerly await (*apekdechometha*), used in 3:20, suggests a tiptoeing anticipation and longing. With that anticipation also comes a very focused use of his remaining time. So too for us, as we prepare to depart this life, let us wisely discern and apply ourselves to the good Lord's purpose for our remaining days.

So what's the upshot? What is our “But one thing”? Knowing our purpose gives meaning to our lives. It simplifies and provides focus for our activities. Modern people don't live lives of quiet desperation as much as we do of aimless distraction. Knowing our purpose motivates our living. George Bernard Shaw once remarked: “This is the true joy of life; the being used up for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; being a force of nature, instead of a feverish, selfish little clot of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.”

A centered purposefulness that is forward-leaning is our takeaway from this passage. But what does that look like for you and me at this stage of our lives? We'll pursue this more in our next mediation entitled “Keep Buggerin' On”.

Chapter 4—Keep Buggerin' On

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Heb. 10:24-25)

KBO time—One of Winston Churchill's famous maxims was the phrase “keep buggering on”—KBO. It summed up his tenacity and determination in Britain's war effort that he was uniquely prepared to lead. Dedication to that purpose drove his war years. KBO in the right purpose is one of the keys to aging well into the sunrise of eternity.

Secular studies of “successful” aging—after speaking of location, resources, and health—identify two keys: purposeful activity and social engagement. Studies advise active engagement with life focusing on relationships with other people and productive behavior that is forward-looking. Yet later life in our modern setting sets forth a key dilemma. Our patterns of life often entail diversion from purposeful living and a pervasive sense of isolation and loneliness.

We sense intuitively that we have a calling to count for good in God’s universe. We sense that purpose and meaning doesn’t come from just believing in something larger than yourself, but from being of service in a way that fits how we are put together. As we ponder the journey of aging into a good death, we need to noodle on this. How can we glorify, love, and honor God? How can we best tangibly serve others? How can we be good stewards of our time, talent, and treasure and figure out how to contribute to making our communities better places as a result of our having passed through them?

Problema—I speak from my current standpoint that you may well share. I'm in the early years of the winter of life. My energy levels are little diminished at this point, but I know that will be changing soon. As I age, I'm transitioning from a highly scripted life full of schedules, routines, expectations, and obligations to a largely unscripted life that begs for structure, purpose, and clear direction. My dilemma in a nutshell is that later years years can be:

- Roleless, where it is no longer clear picture of what is expected of me.
- Stageless, where my well understood forums of activity are gone or changed drastically. I don't know what forum or stage on which I will operate.
- Extended, in that the chances are good that I will be around for a while and in relatively good health. When the Social Security Act was passed in 1935, it pegged the retirement age at 65. The typical life expectancy back then was 62. My paternal grandfather died at 62; my maternal grandfather at 58. There weren't a lot of late afternoon of life decisions to make.

Fast forward to today: retirement age is still age 65 (66 for those born after 1946 and 67 for those born after 1960), but the overall life expectancy has now climbed to into the later 70s and may keep increasing. If we were to perform a longevity adjustment to Social Security and make it correspond to the reality at its enactment, today’s official retirement age would be the early 80s, not the mid-60s.

- Unsure and uneasy, since I'm not skilled in figuring out a new role or in developing a new stage. On top of all this, it's easy to let that slide when society (media, advisors, family, etc.) is telling

me to take it easy, to disengage, to retreat to the “good” life, which basically means to entertain myself.

Yet there is a tremendous upside to aging and benefits of growing maturity:

- Increased practical knowledge of life;
- Expanded understanding of people and the “way things work”;
- Increased wisdom, combining knowledge and experience;
- Better feel for your abilities and your limits;
- Heightened self-awareness;
- Deeper relationships and an appreciation of their importance. Our relationships can be so much better as we get older;
- Increased spirituality;
- More nuanced understanding and approach to life.

How can this upside be meaningfully and realistically engaged in focused activity for God's glory and his kingdom's growth?

Taking Aim—Aristotle likened this process of assessing life's direction at various points in our journey as an archer taking careful aim at a target. Embracing your mortality sets you free to live a meaningful and satisfying life without regrets. For Christians, this involves loving and honoring God and tangibly serving others along the way of our journeys.

Process going forward that makes sense—We need to take time to assess, a pause to review and rethink what matters in our lives and to set or adjust the course for the future in light of that. This self-assessment examines our dreams, achievements, and disappointments. It consciously takes stock of our time, talents, and treasure, especially how they relate to our purpose and aspirations. It moves us to decide where and how we go from here.

It might be good to write a script to chart that course. What am we trying to do? A time to soberly assess ourselves so we can be effective in the way that God has put us together and to gauge the resources the Lord has given us in order to last our lifetimes and facilitate our purpose.

This aging process will have different periods. The earlier periods may well be much more active than the later ones. Our activity levels need to be sensible and to fit our situations, inclinations, and remaining energy levels. Devote yourself to what you can do that makes a contribution to the community and fits who you are. Learn to say no to endless diverting activity.

Agenda to help others as you near the end—Increasingly, moderns need to adjust to the “long afternoon” of aging. This interval provides opportunities to bring closure to life, to completing our agendas. These opportunities may include—

- Strengthen family relationships. End of life can provide opportunities for intimacy, a richness of relation without equal in life.
- Bequeath a legacy of grace. Bequeath to others a testimony to the might, power, love, and mercy of God. Think ahead of the message you want to leave to each.
- Enjoy the moment. Learn to live contentedly in the present.
- Provide closure. Express love, thankfulness, and forgiveness to our circle of family and friends.

Aging into a good death gives us the opportunity to own again and with greater insight to our chief end

– to glorify God (to show Him off) and to love and enjoy Him forever. We have had time to savor his many mercies and kindnesses. We have known a free forgiveness for our many sins and faults. We have come to realize how lost and alone in a vast cosmos we would be without him. We have tasted the joy of unpretentious service to others in his name. We yearn to serve him and others in that same unadorned way with the time, the talent, and the treasure we have to the end.

In the end, our souls are not hungry for notoriety and meaningless social standing. We don't pine for oh-so-passing paradises where we wallow away in self-absorbed comfort and ease. We hunger for meaning, for the sense that we have figured out how to live so that our lives matter. We yearn to love God, to fulfill his good purposes for us, to serve our fellow human beings, and to leave our communities a little bit different, and hopefully better, for our having passed through them.

Conclusion— O Jesus, I Have Promised —John Bode (1868)

O Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end
Be thou forever near me, my master and my friend;
I shall not fear the battle if thou are by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway if thou will be my guide.

O, let me hear thee speaking, in accents clear and still,
Above the storms of passion, the murmurs of self-will;
O, speak to reassure me, to hasten, or control;
O, speak, and make me listen, thou guardian of my soul.

O, let me see thy footmarks, and in them plant my own;
My hope to follow duly is in thy strength alone.
O, guide me, call me, draw me, uphold me to the end;
And then to rest receive me, my Savior and my friend.

Chapter 5—Getting Faith Airborne

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Heb. 11:6)

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. (Heb. 13:15)

Missing element—These meditations are largely personal in nature. However, God's purpose from all eternity is primarily a corporate one: the preparation of the Church, the bride of Christ. She is to share the throne with the beloved Son and must be trained, educated, and prepared for her queenly role. She must learn the art of spiritual warfare, of overcoming evil. To do this, among other things, God has ordained a program of believing prayer. The prayer closet is the arena which produces one who ages well into the sunrise of eternity.

Christian literature abounds with exhortations to pray. John Wesley, founder of Methodism and a leading figure in the Great Awakening in the 18th century, remarked: “God will do nothing but in answer to prayer.” S.D. Gordon, evangelist and Christian educator, is in accord: “The greatest thing anyone can do for God and for [people] is to pray.” E.M. Bounds, that 19th century champion of the prayer closet, stated: “God shapes the world by prayer. ... The prayers of God's saints are the capital stock of heaven by which God carries on his great work upon the earth. God conditions the very life and prosperity of his cause on prayer.”

The missing element energizing prevailing prayer is triumphant faith. Perpetual, purposeful, persistent praise in prayer energizes triumphant faith. Praise is the spark plug that gets faith airborne. It is the detergent that purifies faith and purges doubt from the heart.

Let's recall some of the characteristics of, and benefits to, the soul that consistently offers praise to the Almighty:

Praise, a heavenly characteristic—The entire universe is envisioned as a paean of praise to God. The concluding psalms in the book of Psalms (Pss. 145-150) can be effectively summarized in a short phrase—praise the Lord. Praise is the *lingua franca* of heaven, the common speech of glory:

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang:

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise! (Rev. 5:11-12)

And again at the Lord's return:

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like the loud peals of thunder, shouting:

Hallelujah! For the Lord God Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and give him glory!

For the wedding of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready. (Rev. 19:6-7)

The highest function of angelic hosts is praise. Just as hostility against God so strengthens what is base in the human spirit, so worship and praise strengthens the transcendent and sublime in the inner being. Praise can affect mental and emotional health. Many, but certainly not all, of our mental and nervous disorders is an over-occupation with ourselves. Out of this self-centeredness arises a host of disorders.

Praise decentralizes the self. When it becomes a habit of life, the lovely God rather than the bankrupt self becomes the center out of which we live. Praise, when it grips us, puts us in the ambiance of heaven. It lifts the soul to the venue of glory.

Praise effective against the enemy—God dwells in the aura and atmosphere of praise. God inhabits the praises of his people: “Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the praise of Israel.” (Ps. 22:3). Where there is adoration, reverence, and praise, God adorns it with his presence and the enemy cannot operate in the divine arena. Satan is allergic to praise and is bound and banished where there is persistent and robust praise to God.

Praise as a way of life—To be most effective, praise must be a fixed habit, a diligently pursued vocation, a persistent habit of life.

My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast;
I will sing and make music.
Awake my soul! Awake harp and lyre!
I will awaken the dawn.
I will praise you, O Lord, among the nations;
I will sing of you among the peoples.
(Ps. 57:7-9).

Praise is to be for all things and unceasing. The inspiration for unceasing praise is the character and integrity of God himself. Hebrews 13:15 (quoted above) speaks of offering the sacrifice of praise continually. One must suspend one's own opinion and evaluation of a situation and praise God for all things. In offering this sacrifice of praise, the believer embraces the faith that God is benevolent and kind and supremely in control.

When we praise God in the midst of misfortune, affliction, and sorrow, we release the power that strengthens and reinforces all that is best and most godlike in our characters. Bad news is a challenge to the faith of believers. Do we really believe a text like Romans. 8:28: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”? Do we give credence to Ephesians. 1:11: “In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity to the purpose of his will”? Do we really believe that God is big enough, powerful enough, and loving enough to deal with our adversities in ways that will bring more glory to his Name when we have overcome? That adversity can leave us stronger in faith, courage, and the knowledge of God?

Praise, the secret of faith without doubt—The missing element in a faith that is not triumphant is praise. Let's say it again—praise is the spark plug of faith. It is the one thing needed to get faith

airborne, enabling it to soar above the deadly miasma of doubt. Praise is the heartbeat of a living faith and of prevailing prayer.

Antidote—I'm a comfortable Presbyterian, perhaps too comfortable. I love the place of the mind in the Presbyterian faith. I want to love God with my mind and I am drawn to a faith that focuses on that and on having things done “decently and in order.” Thus, I find myself suspicious of spiritual enthusiasm and concerned about where it might lead.

However, I see on the evangelical horizon Christian groups who have rediscovered the importance and power of praise and of the energizing dynamic of the Spirit. In their order of public worship, they have included extended periods of worship and vocal praise to congregational singing, public prayer, and the gospel message. I believe that this focus on public and persistent praise in the power of the Spirit is the true secret of the burgeoning growth of many of these groups.

As we age into the sunrise of eternity, may the good Lord grant an enthusiastic expectation of going home to a glorious destination. May God grant us hearts and voices full of praise that give wings to our souls as we journey home. Praise is the ticket to see God as he really is and getting us out of our natural self-orientation and the self-absorption that can hinder a faithful earthly exit.

I'll sing the praise of Jesus who bore the cross for me,
His wond'rous love so precious my constant theme shall be:

Refrain: I'll sing the praise of Jesus till heart and voice shall fail,
and then forever praise Him when safe within the veil.

I'll sing His praise at morning, and in the noonday bright,
I'll sing His praise at evening, and in the hush of night.

I'll sing the praise of Jesus on whom my hopes depend;
My everlasting portion, my best and dearest friend.

Chapter 6—Beside Quiet Waters

He leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. (Ps. 23:2b-3a)

Stupor sitz—For a number of years during my career, one highlight of my work day was a lunch hour spent at the United States Botanic Garden across from the Capitol. Inclement weather drew me to the Garden Court inside the Botanic Garden proper. Glorious weather saw me outside at Bartholdi Park. Both of these venues feature lush vegetation surrounding a fountain or water exhibit with plenty of benches on which to sit and take in the scene. I frequently nodded off by quiet waters. Friends kindly described them as my power naps. I called my awkward periods of unconsciousness in these wonderful places my “stupor sitz”. More than once, visitors to the Capitol stopped to wake me and to inquire into my well-being.

I yearn to be beside quiet waters on the “back nine” of my life's journey. There will be busy times, my older friends assure me. However, I hope they will not be so busy as to neglect the opportunity for regular restorative times with the Lord, to being in his glorious creation, with family and friends, with the body of Christ, and attentive to opportunities to serve that fit my situation and person.

Long afternoon of life—Up to this point, I have enjoyed growing old. I'm entering the late afternoon of life and there are real advantages to aging, in the value of maturity in relationships and in the development of skills. Relationships can be so much better as we age. We're more sure of who we are, what life is all about, and better able to use our abilities to make contributions. We have (or at least hope to have) more leisure time to seek service opportunities and to spend with children and grandchildren, friends and neighbors. This stage can be a most enjoyable season of life.

We nod and chuckle when we read George Sweeting's list of advantages to growing old:

- Many of life's struggles are past;
- Your secrets are safe with friends—they can't remember them either.
- There's little left to learn .. the hard way.
- Kidnappers are not even interested in you.
- You can have a big party, and the neighbors don't even realize it.
- You get into heated arguments over pension plans.
- You eat dinner at 4:30 and go to bed at 8:00.
- You don't have to hold your stomach in.
- Your joints are more accurate than the weather service.

Due primarily to advances in medicine, aging into the sunrise of eternity in our modern age takes a much longer time on average than in past days. There is great advantage to this gradual aging into the sunrise of eternity. The slow journey offers opportunities to orient our lives toward God, spend time with family and friends, reconcile relationships, and say a lingering good-bye. We have the chance to travel, to experience new vistas, and to check out some items on our bucket lists. However, and so much more to point, we have the opportunity to affirm our faith and to see our experience of death and resurrection in the pattern set by our Lord's death and resurrection.

Modern advantage and conundrum—Before our time, people retired when they could no longer work

and that retirement rarely lasted very long. Today, Westerners spend their working lives saving so they can live and enjoy 25 or more years of work-free or work-light life. No other generation in human history has had such an expectation. This kind of extended life means that we can expect to observe our bodies' slow decline. However, it can mean that we “retire” from the kinds of caring relationships in which we formerly vested. Receiving and giving spiritual care in the midst of a congregation is essential to dying well.

The way the early church cared for widows is instructive here. Those widows were cared for but also had responsibilities in community (1 Tim. 5:9-10; Titus 2:3-5). Later life can provide us with time for spiritual pursuits not possible in the busier days of our careers. The pastoral epistles cast a vision of a community in which the younger generations benefit from the experience and wisdom of their elders. It also assumes inter-generational respect that allows healthy instruction to the young and a sense of mission and purpose to the old. God is not through with us until he takes us home.

Another reason the elderly presence and connection to the community is important is that serving the elderly and giving them a place in our midst can help the younger members of the community confront their own mortality. The young cannot be fully present to their elderly kin if they are hiding from their own aging. This can be a tremendous outreach opportunity as it was in the early church. Caring for the sick and dying attracted many to the fledgling Christian community.

Culture of resurrection—Throughout the Bible we see a pattern of death bringing forth life. We see that most perfectly in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The church embodies this reality of life following death. A culture of resurrection takes the lessons of dying well and the hope of new life in Christ and applies them throughout the life of believers and in the body of the church. If we cannot learn to die well, we cannot learn to live well. Churches that are growing “younger” sometimes hinder their members from doing what they must do: grow older. Allowing ourselves to be confronted with death, we are prodded toward living more in view of what's important.

A positive vision—We need to rethink our vision of the winter of life. The culture's mantra of work hard, live frugally, and enjoy the journey into your sunset, often means disengaging not only from the workplace but also from the church and community we have known through our lives. Many of us, who served the church faithfully and diligently in our younger years, may find ourselves in situations lacking support and personal connection as we age.

While our physical lives may decline, our inner lives can grow. Lord, grant us strength to live unto you:

- To nurture our inner life. Grant us quiet and well-ordered hearts. The well-ordered heart was Augustine's phrase for the process of a growing friendship with God that requires you to align yourself with his concerns and do so in his way. To have a well-ordered heart, he said, was to love the right thing, to the right degree, in the right way, with the right kind of love. May the good Lord grant each of us such a heart as we age.
- To wisely implement a rhythm of life attuned to the reality of our later years. A well-ordered heart requires a rhythm for living in which we grow more connected to our wonderful divine friend and attend to the deep issues at the core of our being. What strategy can we implement in order to consistently bring ourselves into the arena of the Spirit so that God can work on us? It will involve hearing him in his Word and talking with him in prayer. It will also involve sustaining activities with our fellow pilgrims.

- To actively cultivate our mental life. Pursue reading the great books and other endeavors that will feed your mental and spiritual growth. Have an inquisitive mind to the end of your days. Don't shut down mentally. Hope, humor, and vision is the triad Henri Nouwen recommends in this endeavor. Real hope is open-ended, built on trust in God who will fulfill his promises. Humor is knowledge with a wry smile. It helps us take ourselves and our situations less seriously. Vision relates to focusing on where we're going. Let go, let go, and let yourself be carried into the light of the sunrise of eternity. These are three factors that help forge in us a mental openness while enjoying the fruit of already long experience.
- To pursue corporate and individual worship. Engage with others as we are able. Lord, grant us servant hearts that wisely engage where we can be of real help.
- Grant us focus. Keep our minds free from the recital of endless details and digital trails. Give us wings to get to and keep at the point of the matter.

Conclusion—Our faith challenges the secular idea that death is a solitary event. With the advent of long afternoon of life in our time, we may have more time to prepare. Time to reaffirm our faith, to offer and receive forgiveness, to bond with family and friends, to devote ourselves more fully to the God of the ages. The winter of life can be a major wake-up call for spiritual and relational growth. We have an opportunity of sharing God's ways with the next generation. We can sing with the psalmist:

Since my youth O God, you have taught me,
 and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds.
 Even when I am old and gray,
 do not forsake me, O God,
 till I declare your power to the next generation,
 your might to all who are to come. (Ps. 71:17-18).

Chapter 7—Is My House in Order

**This is what the Lord says: Put your house in order,
because you are going to die; you will not recover (Isa. 38:1b)**

Moving Mrs. C—I had just graduated. New job, new town, new church, new schedule, and new acquaintances. A group of us had an outing scheduled for a particular Saturday when our associate pastor let us know that an elderly woman in our congregation was moving and needed help. He gave us a rosy time estimate. A couple hours max. Many hands make light work. Sounded good. A trip to my favorite greasy spoon for breakfast would serve as excellent preparation.

Mrs. C was utterly unprepared to move. Her possessions were unsorted, unorganized, and unpacked. There was clutter everywhere. A moving van had not been reserved. Her stuff was packed by a group of young guys on the fly. We were just throwing stuff into whatever containers we could find, oblivious to the destination of the contents. It was tossed into the back of whatever truck we could beg or borrow on short notice. It was a nightmare on the front end. I can't imagine what unpacking was like!

This reflection is about getting your earthly life in order as you approach your exit. Most of these meditations deal with our spiritual and emotional preparation. Of course, that has a relational and material dimension, but those two aspects have not been front and center in our reflections. In this meditation, they are.

Ship shape or not so much—Some seem to live ship-shape lives. Their situation is always in order. However, many of us, perhaps most of us, have left things undone or half done. As we come to grips with our own mortality, we need to focus on putting our affairs in order.

Financial and legal agenda—

- A carefully conceived and executed estate plan relieves stress for all involved. It provides clear direction for concluding your affairs at a time of grief and emotional distress for those close to you, maximizes the preservation of your assets for those you love, and can minimize the tax burden on your estate. So get your will done and up to date. Don't chintz in the preparation. That preparation should also include an advance medical directive as to your desired treatment if indisposed and a power of attorney to a designated agent to act on your behalf if you are unable to act for yourself. Choose an attorney with experience in estate matters. A number of firms devote themselves to practice in this area. Determine to benefit from their expertise. Whatever you do, don't do a holographic will. That is being penny-wise and pound foolish.
- Dying without a will means dying intestate. In that instance, state law will decide how your assets will pass and state courts will determine who will attend to your affairs. State law disposition may not reflect your wishes and its disposition is often slow and expensive. Your loved ones may rue your lack of diligence in tying up your affairs.
- Assemble your instructions and vital information and leave it where it will be found. Having a legal professional prepare your will jump-starts this assembly process. Carefully organize and pass on your relevant financial information. This is particularly true if you have been the financial person in your relationships. Provide a clear overview of asset holdings, including account numbers, user names, and passwords for each of the holdings. Information of how the property is held that may bear on its estate distribution should be noted. Besides your will, trust,

beneficiary forms, and deeds to real property, you'll want to gather and organize a number of other documents. The following list is meant to help prod that process:

- Life insurance policies;
 - Medical insurance card;
 - Birth certificate;
 - Social security card;
 - Marriage certificate;
 - Military records;
 - Copy of your driver's license;
 - Password list for all relevant online accounts;
 - Vaccination records;
 - Location of important keys and combinations to safe deposit boxes;
 - Passport;
 - Citizenship papers/work permit;
 - Adoption papers;
 - Prenuptial agreement;
 - Tax returns.
- You will also want to maintain lists of financial and personal information that the person with a power of attorney and your executor or executrix may need. That information includes:
 - Contacts of people who are involved with your money and property (accountant, financial advisor, etc.).
 - List of your assets, property, and financial accounts, including things to know about each item/account.
 - Debts and expenses, and how you pay them.
 - Contacts for medical matters like your doctors and dentist.
 - Health insurance and a list of medicines can be handy.
 - Be aware of what property will pass through the will and thus through probate (the legal process to execute your will's directions) and what will pass in other ways. The property you hold as joint tenants with another person or as tenants by the entirety with your spouse will pass to the other tenant without going through probate. Likewise, property controlled by instruments having named beneficiaries will pass outside the will. This can include living trusts, life insurance, pension assets, stocks, bonds, and bank accounts. Most people don't think of beneficiary forms for their retirement accounts or life insurance as estate planning documents, but they are "governing instruments" that direct where those accounts will go when you die. Having these assets pass outside the will can speed up their distribution upon your death and reduce estate expense. However, you need to make sure that the named beneficiaries of these assets reflect your desires for your overall estate plan. Beneficiary designation forms should be consistent with the terms of your will or trust.
 - Your "fiduciaries" are the people you choose to handle your financial and medical affairs if you are not able. They go by different names—"executor," "trustee," "guardian" of person or property, persons with "power of attorney," or "patient advocate." The selection of your fiduciaries, including backups, is a very important estate planning decision. Take care in choosing someone whose values are consistent with your own.
 - Assuming you have the time and physical wherewithal, getting your physical abode in order will bless your heirs. I have witnessed the chagrin of descendants dealing with preparing the

family home for sale after the death of their loved one.

- Especially early in the winter of your life's journey, assess insurance coverage and your need for it. Decisions on carrying long-term care insurance has become more important as the lengthy late afternoons of modern life have grown. Earlier generations provided care for their elders, but often in different situations than we face now and for less lengthy periods of time. Back in the day, and still in our day, care giving falls heavily on the younger women of family units. However, today those younger women are older, often employed full time, at a distance from their elderly kin, and needing to make very serious life transitions in order to meet their customary or expected care giving role. Be kind to your children. Anticipate your own care giving needs and make appropriate arrangements. Think it through and seek good advice. This can be a very expensive choice.
- Schedule a regular check-in time to make sure your collected information is accurate and up to date. Our lives continue on and important information changes. Staying on top of your affairs is a tangible way of expressing your love to those you cherish.
- Make key choices now so as not to burden your loved ones in the time of their grief. Make your wishes known and leave instructions in a place where they can be found. Decisions on donating organs should be taken care of in your will. Choose ahead of time whether you will be cremated or buried. Burial seems to be the common practice throughout biblical history, but there is no definitive biblical reason to prefer burial or cremation. Key factors in your decision may rest with geography, local or family customs, and finances. Arrange for your resting place ahead of time, be it cemetery or columbarium.

Relational agenda—

- Strengthen family relationships. The end of life can provide opportunities for intimacy, a richness of relation without equal. Be willing to be vulnerable in resolving tensions or conflicts from the past. This can be a precious time of reconciliation with, or affirmation of, those in your family circle.
- Give others a testimony to the might, power, love, and mercy of God. Think ahead of the message you want to leave to each of your family members. Give concerted thought of how best to affirm those around you. Think of leaving a statement with your will, affirming each of your loved ones and telling them how you love them. Let your ringing affirmation be your exit song to them!
 - A couple of years before my father died, he gave me a Victorian-style waist watch with the following message engraved: "I hope you will always believe in yourself as much as I believe in you." That, among many other things, was my father's legacy to me. Dad was a very practical man and was greatly concerned about me because of my ethereal side, a tendency to get lost in my thoughts. Regardless, he always believed in me. His confidence that I would find my way was a priceless treasure to me as I grew up. The watch was his way to speak to me once again from beyond the grave.
- Have fun as you can with the time that is left. Laugh and enjoy the moment with family and friends. Provide relational closure. I love you, I thank you, please forgive me, and I forgive you is the communicative palate. Make peace ASAP and before you deal with legal and financial issues.
- Plan your own funeral or memorial service. Remember that funerals are for the living, including those loved ones grieving, the church, and the community at large. It gives closure to death, provides an opportunity for a clear gospel proclamation and statement of Christian hope, and

aids in and structures the grieving process. Be kind to your loved ones and clearly specify your desires. Be proactive in helping them grieve. Let your faith in Christ radiate at the end. Let your imagination run with this. Choose your favorite hymns. Write a testimonial to your faith in Christ and to your love for those you leave behind.

- Do whatever you can to help your loved ones grieve. Remember how Christ was concerned for his mother's care even when he hung dying on the cross (Jn. 19:26-27). In helping your loved ones grieve you are following in wonderful footsteps. This is marvelous medicine for them and for you. It gets you out of yourself and into what is happening to them. This could be a final bonding time like no other! It also models for them what dying well really looks like.

Prayerful preparation and exit—

- Review your life. Reflect on what you have accomplished, what you failed to do, and where you have erred. Make amends as you can and let it all rest on the bosom of Jesus.
- Examine your faith. "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you ..." (2 Cor. 13:5). Precious Jesus, precious Jesus, Oh for grace to trust you more.
- Pray and commune with the Lord while you go about setting your house in order. It is often over the ordinary stuff of life that we step without expectation into one of those moments that is suspended between time and space and lingers in the mind. The more comfortable we are with God, the easier it will be to go to him. Pray for strength to die well, to honor the Lord by the way your pass from this life to the next. Indeed, this is your final legacy to those you cherish.

Conclusion—

Show me, O Lord, my life's end
and the number of my days;
let me know how fleeting is my life.
You have made my days a mere hand-breadth;
the span of my years is as nothing before you.
Each man's life is but a breath.
Man is a mere phantom as he goes to and fro;
He bustles about, but only in vain;
he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it.
But now, Lord, what do I look for?
My hope is in you. (Ps. 39:4-7).

Graham Kendrick, *Knowing You*

All I once held dear, built my life upon
All this world reveres and wars to own
All I once thought gain, I have counted loss
Spent and worthless now, compared to this

Refrain: Knowing you, Jesus, knowing you
 There is no greater thing
 You're my all, you're the best,
 You're my joy, my righteousness

And I love you Lord

Now my heart's desire is to know you more
To be found in you, and known as yours
To possess by faith what I could not earn
All surpassing gift of righteousness

Oh to know the power of your risen life
And to know you in your sufferings
To become like you in your death my Lord
So with you to live and never die

Chapter 8—Losing Power, Losing Place, Losing Significance

**But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.
What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness
of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.
I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ... (Phil. 3:7-8)**

So Old, So Wrong—I was in the Rotunda of the Capitol reviewing some talking points before going to the Speaker's office for a meeting. I checked the time on my cell phone, which certainly was not the latest model. As I did, a thirty-something walked up to me, pointed to the phone and in a voice of utter disdain announced “That is so old and so wrong.” It was done with such cheek, such nonchalant effrontery, and was so quickly past, that my reaction at the time was stunned silence. Gratefully, I didn't have the time or the wherewithal for return serve.

That vignette occurred a number of years ago and, in some ways, jump-started my thinking about aging in our culture. Our society has demonstrated little understanding of growing old and has valued it even less. The central concern of these reflections—the idea of aging into a good death—is nonsensical to moderns for basically three reasons:

- the medicalization of aging and death, that treats aging and dying akin to a disease;
- the market model, which assesses the value of human beings primarily in terms of production and consumption, casts a disparaging light on aging;
- the erosion of the spiritual significance of death and the traditional communal practices of aging and dying.

Medicalization of aging and death—Aging and approaching death has entered the domain of scientific management, which essentially denies the aging process and our universal participation in it. Growing old is a solvable “problem”. The central goal is the conquest of premature death from acute disease and prolonging healthy, vigorous life. A worthy goal in many ways that has led to the reality of gradual dying and a long, “late afternoon” of life. This management applies technical answers that oppose physical decline, but leaves unaddressed the unmanageable aspects of aging that inevitably results in death.

Accompanying our culture's de facto denial of death is a quest for longevity—the maintenance of perpetual youth and prolonged life. Our therapeutic culture encourages us to pursue perpetual youthfulness and provides us means to strive for it. Yet in that very provision there arises prejudices toward growing older and the inevitable physical decline. Our culture greatly values youth and physical vitality and strength. The irony is that the culture's therapeutic strain produces so many of us that are neither. A culture that exalts feeling good about ourselves ultimately denies us the ability to feel good about ourselves as we age.

Tithonus illustration—We have become like the Greek hero Tithonus, who asked the gods for immortality. They granted his wish, but to his horror, he realized that he had neglected to ask for eternal youth. He simply grew older and more frail in a never-ending nightmare. Attempting to feel good and escape death, many may reach a point in their old age of fearing that death may not come soon enough.

Youthful ideal—With this medicalization of aging has come the ever more vigorous portrayal of a youthful ideal. We are bombarded with images and words shouting that youth is strong, vigorous, beautiful, and well-informed in a with-it modern way. In our youth-oriented culture today, aging and even the appearance of aging, is something to be put off as long as possible. Our culture places a premium on youth, physical beauty, and athletic prowess—all things in the rear view mirror of aging. Older people are frequently seen as unproductive, disengaged, inflexible, senile (or soon to be), and poor and sick (sponges on society). They need to retool—be seen as healthy, sexually active, engaged, productive, and self-reliant. In other words, they need to be young again.

Shakespeare's skewering of old age in *The Passionate Pilgrim* finds a ready audience in our society's mindset:

Crabbed age and youth cannot live together:
Youth is full of pleasance, age is full of care;
Youth like summer morn, age like winter weather;
Youth like summer brave, age like winter bare.
Youth is full of sport, age's breath is short;
Youth is nimble, age is lame;
Youth is hot and bold, age is weak and cold;
Youth is wild, age is tame;
Age, I do abhor thee, youth, I do adore thee.

Scripture has a very different assessment of old age. “Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly” (Lev. 19:32a). Nowhere in Scripture are “old-timers” pitied, patronized, and treated with condescension. Aging is certainly dealt with realistically (see Eccl. 12:1 et seq.), but the elderly are not treated as irrelevant, behind the curve, or unproductive. They are never lampooned as comic figures.

Market model—Productive and efficient—In our modern system, our identities are economically gauged. The market mentality values human agents in terms of their ability to produce and consume. The aged can't produce very much anymore and scarce resources are consumed in caring for them. Endlessly measured for our value in what we produce or can consume, individuals position themselves as autonomous agents essentially unencumbered by commitments outside of this economic value system. Particular attachments to certain people or certain places must be loosened or let go of to realize your economic potential.

This has had tremendous impact on family ties. This reality has been accentuated by the numerous women who have joined the workforce long-term. The people normally looked to to care for aging parents or relatives were now part of the economic system. As the people and communities that once cared for the aged and dying atrophied, and an entirely new economic model has replaced them—an industry of efficiently “caring” for the aged and dying.

Shift to an information society in that market model has further undermined esteem for gray hair. The information age has worked a shift from knowledge gained by experience and tradition to that gained by logic and digital precision. The former is usually the preserve of old age; the latter the forte of young adulthood. Thus, the respect for wisdom gained through experience through the years has waned in our society. The information society is focused on tomorrow's knowledge to be stored and transmitted digitally, not yesterday's knowledge encrypted in an old person's mind and passed on by

story.

Erosion of tradition—The modern culture makes it difficult for the elderly to age and die well and teach others to do the same. This market idea of individuals as autonomous agents of production and consumption, whose descent into the arena of non-utility must be efficiently managed. In this efficiency model, the aged are segregated and often treated as if they are superfluous. This undercuts the traditional concept of relationships extending through the generations in which each generation finds significance and worth in the transmission of history that transcends all the generations.

Various traditions of graceful aging that have deep spiritual significance have been shelved by our therapeutic culture. The idea of the preeminence of God has been replaced with a personalized sense of well-being. We want and deserve to “feel good”. This expectation attaches to any suitable spirituality. We are self-determining beings along a journey toward “feeling good” needing therapy. We are not broken, dependent sinners needing salvation. In this journey of feeling good about ourselves, the culture has sought to rid itself of moral expectations and foster an ever growing list of assumptions of personal prerogatives. It's all about us! But in this journey we get old, we encounter physical frailty and cognitive decline, and we face the inevitability of death however much we deny or postpone it.

Original chapter title—My initial title for this reflection was “Toothless, Youthless, and Useless”. “Toothless” was speaking to the reality that aging often leads to a sense of feeling powerless and without meaningful roles to fulfill. In our era, the elderly are often feel or are made to feel this way. “Youthless” grew out of my Rotunda experience and others like it. There is a sense losing touch with the mainstay of society with no way to regain lost status or a sense of place, of being outside of the pulse of the culture. “Useless” relates to a growing sense of a loss of significance. It reflects our society's emphasis on economic utility as framing our person-hood and the consequent loss of self-worth that naturally flows from the limits that come upon us as we age. The irony is that many are marginalized just when they feel they still have much to give.

Our self-worth; our hope—Our modern idea of self is framed by our roles, our sense of being productive, and the status that we derive from these things. Aging attacks and impairs all of these and therefore undermines one's sense of person-hood. There is physical, mental, economic, and social decline to reckon with. As we age, our lives become undone on a number of levels. The bounty of aging is in the full bloom of one's mature and true self. Its bane is the beginning of the dissolution of that self. With modernity's positioning of the self as the source and end of all meaning, the self's dissolution is a threat to be feared.

The modern notion of true person-hood is jaded and attacks our sense of self-worth as we age. Christians challenge the modern ideology of person-hood centered in the autonomous self, a productive and consuming member of an efficient market-oriented society. Rather we situate our value in our bearing the image of God and in the reality of being part of the communion of saints following in the resurrection train of the Lord Jesus.

We are not what we do. We are not what we have. We are not what others may think of us. This is soul-check time. We are created in the image of God, stamped with the likeness of the Almighty. We are redeemed by the atoning blood of Jesus Christ. Therein lies our identity, our dignity, our infinite worth. God's standards for judging personal worth are radically different than those of our narcissistic and

therapeutic culture.

This is not to say that what we do doesn't matter. Of course it does. We are to take our callings, our vocations, very seriously. But those vocations are what we do, and while they do much to frame us, they are not who we are. Likewise, we are to be good stewards of what God has given, but what we have is not the measure of who we are. Our self-worth is not dependent on our net worth. We are to be jealous for God's reputation in and through our living. We are called "Christians" and we ought to bear that name worthily and strive to do so. But what others think of us does not frame our self-worth. Our self-worth is forged by the indelible mark of God upon our souls in our creation and in our recreation in Jesus Christ.

Christians need to be children of hope and vision. The modern view of aging and death is jaded and false. We need hope-filled tales, tales of the gift of years. We're not speaking of hope as our culture often does—as a wish or an aspiration. This is hope drawn from the cross of Jesus and the manifest grace of God as guaranteed by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. A hope framed by the divine promise of deliverance and by a vision of a redemption unfolding in a glorious and inviting eternity.

My Worth Is Not in What I Own (Fernando Ortega)

My worth is not in what I own, not in the strength of flesh and bone,
but in the costly wounds of love at the cross.
My worth is not in skill or name in win or lose, in pride or shame,
but in the blood of Christ that flowed at the cross

Refrain: And I rejoice in my Redeemer, greatest treasure, wellspring of my soul;
 and I will trust in him, no other. My soul is satisfied in him alone.

As summer flowers we fade and die, fame youth and beauty hurry by;
but life eternal calls to us at the cross.
I will not boast in wealth and might, or human wisdom's fleeting light;
but I will boast in knowing Christ at the cross.

Chapter 9—The Liberty of Limits

Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have become encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. (Phil. 1:12-14)

No limits—"No limits" blares the refrain of the commercial world. "Freedom" and "choice" are the code words of our age, whether concerning access to the Internet, the indulgence represented by the luxury and power of the latest sports coupe, or the "da-a-a-h" impatience with what are deemed prudish and antiquated social conventions. Time Magazine, in one of its anniversary issues, aptly summarized the prevailing spirit:

Behind most of the events of the so-called American Century (i.e. 20th century) lay the assumption, almost a moral imperative, that what was not free, ought to be free, that limits were intrinsically evil, that science and humanity should go wherever they please in a spirit of self-confident autonomy.

Background to the text—With this mantra ringing in our ears, we have difficulty hearing Paul's message on the liberty of limits in the text quoted above. The apostle discusses those limits in verses 12-26 of Philippians 1, a portion that can be summarized by chains (1:12-14), critics (1:14-18), and crises (1:19-26). Let's think about aged apostle's circumstances for a moment.

Behind "what has happened to me" is the stark reality of the apostle's imprisonment at Rome, handcuffed day and night to a Roman guard. He had been in the slammer for several years, first in Jerusalem, then in Caesarea, and finally in Rome. Imprisonment has never been a joy-ride, and it certainly wasn't in first century Rome. Gloating rivals were enjoying his apparent misfortune, having a field day maligning him in their ongoing envy-fest. Meanwhile, Paul awaited his trial before that most profligate of judges, the Emperor Nero. Could he really expect justice from such a one? He could easily be feeling totally marginalized and be taking to heart the cat-calls of those lampooning him. How could he have not been discouraged by the length of the legal process and for his chances of a successful outcome?

Blessing in limitation—However, God used Paul's chains, critics, and crisis to advance the Gospel. The apostle's prison became his pulpit and also inspired sincere brethren to a bold proclamation of the gospel. His critics became effective advance runners of the message, albeit for wrong motives. His judicial crisis produced a most unique platform from which to lift up the Lord Jesus. Paul's confinement became the occasion for a surge of the Lord's kingdom into the capital of the kingdoms of the then known world. God took him from the dusty roads of the senatorial provinces of Achaia and Asia Minor through Jerusalem, that outpost of nationalistic unrest, to the citadel of his day. He thrust his herald into the company of the mucky-mucks of the Empire's military and judicial establishments.

The ever-present guards chained to him and intruding on his privacy became a captive audience for gospel preaching. These soldiers were part of the elite Praetorian Guard, the 9,000 member bodyguard of the emperor. In terms of prestige, they were the Pentagon operatives of their day. His trial was conducted at the level of the Supreme Court of the Mediterranean world. If you wanted an audience with clout, it would be hard to beat the one God chose for his spokesman. Paul's limits had opened a wide avenue of opportunity for witness and service. Like engineers clearing a path for an advancing army, Paul's chains were the occasion for the Spirit to unleash the gospel with liberty and power at Rome.

Vistas of new opportunities—This meditation is about seeing the limits of aging as opening vistas of new opportunities you previously ignored. Paul indicates that he is in something of an emotional straight jacket over this very point.

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. (Phil. 1:21-24)

Paul is not a young man. He has been imprisoned for years. He has had more than fair share of suffering and the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Yet he expresses a most interesting perspective on both death and life's limit situations. He says he's torn between continuing in the slammer or dying and going home (1:23). Torn (*sunschomai*) depicts a person or object held under pressure from two different directions so that movement in either way is difficult or impossible. The apostle is in an emotional straight jacket.

He's serious both in seeing his limits as a wonderful opportunity and in his desire to go home and be with Christ. He uses a wonderful word picture of our exit from this life. Depart (*analutai*) was a word used for a ship weighing anchor, or for a group striking camp. For the Christian, death need not be a fearful thing, but a departure for our true home. This term was also a political term for setting a prisoner free and an agricultural one for unyoking oxen. Each of these uses lifts our eyes to our true home and moves us beyond death's immediate horror. To be called home to glory would be "better by far" (*pollo mallon kreisson*) in the apostle's estimation. This is the only place in the New Testament that a triple comparative is found.

All that being said, candor requires that this can be a most difficult word. It's all fine and good to speak of limits as opportunities when limits are not your own daily realities. It's a painful one when they are. For the last five years of his life, my father was confined to a chair with his oxygen tube by his side. He suffered from severe Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) making even slow and deliberate movements an adventure of gasping for breath and requiring forthright and agonizing concentration. Viewing your own limitations as the occasion for God's ministerial originality in such a situation requires the Spirit's prompting and enabling.

Your health concerns may well be God's way of bringing you into contact with people whose disease of soul dwarf the severity of your physical problems. Your limits may introduce quiet space that invites soul communion with God Almighty. But you need the Spirit to give you eyes to see that reality. It is easy to bristle over your ever-shrinking horizons. Seeing such confinement and limitation as a divine appointment for service and intercessory prayer requires a prior work of the Spirit.

We minister from our brokenness, not from our completion—All that being said and acknowledged, the secret to accepting limits and finding a silver lining in them is really quite simple. There are no accidents with God. When Christ is your life, you come to view your circumstances as divinely supplied windows through which to shine forth the light of the Gospel. Instead of focusing on our need for relief from that which we would have never chosen, let's thank God for reminding us again that we minister from our brokenness, not from our completion. Let us ask him for eyes to see his innovative ways of granting us the liberty and power of the Spirit, within our limit situations, for the furtherance of his kingdom work.

Conclusion—When we find ourselves thwarted or disappointed, when our world seems small and ever shrinking and closing in on us, we need to be able to hear the gentle and wise voice of the Father, urging us to follow him more closely, trust him more fully, and to love him more deeply.

From prayer that asks that I may be
Sheltered from winds that beat on Thee
From fearing when I should aspire
From faltering when I should climb higher
From silken self, O Captain, free
Thy soldier who would follow Thee.

From subtle love of softening things
From easy choices, weakenings
Not thus were spirits fortified
Not this way went the Crucified
From all that dims Thy Calvary
O Lamb of God, deliver me. (Amy Carmichael)

Chapter 10—On the Bosom of the Lord

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.
(Mt. 6:33-34)

Between two thieves—It is said that people regularly crucify themselves between two thieves: the regrets of yesterday and the worries of tomorrow. These thieves are a plague on our heads throughout our life journeys, but can be a particular bane in our elder years. We have had more life experiences to question, more words we would take back now, more evidence of our fallenness in concrete particulars. We mull over things that happened in the past, a loss or missed opportunity. We feel sad, disappointed all over again, repentant for harsh words, insensitive actions, and damaged relationships. There's a forlorn sense of what might have been, could have been, or should have been. When we realize that we have not done what we had a magnificent opportunity of doing, we can wallow in discouragement, even despair.

Gift of tears and your new action—The Puritans spoke of the “gift of tears”. Indeed, true repentance is a wonderful gift of tears.

My sins, my sins, my Savior
How sad on Thee they fall

However, for too many of us, this is a gift that keeps on giving and very unproductively so. The Lord does not resurrect that lost opportunity, but counsels us to let the past sleep on his bosom and to go on into the future with him. We don't have to stew over our regrets. Learn our lessons and do what we can to make things right, but give them back to God. He can make something beautiful out of them, often in surprising ways.

Never let the sense of your past failure discourage your new action. Instead, let them motivate it and give it wings. Consider what you might have changed and done differently, but instead of ruminating over what cannot be changed, reframe it as a learning opportunity that will allow you to make better choices in the future. Make amends when possible and then stop beating yourself up.

Bemoaning a romanticized past—Or we look back to some period of an idyllic past and bemoan its passage. Things were so right then, why couldn't it have stayed that way. Rather than being thankful of the blessing of such wonderful moments that were given to us, we grow hard in a sense of entitlement that those moments should have continued ad infinitum. They were ours to have in perpetuity. We forget or choose to forget that all life is a gift, on loan to us for but a little while.

Fretting about tomorrow—And then there are the worries of tomorrow. We worry about our health and our wealth. We fret over temporal life issues, forgetting that God is the one who provides and that this world is not our home. Most often the worry is about provision—having enough food, clothing, and shelter. Will our earthly treasure last or will we outlive our fortune? If it does not come on those lines, it will come on the line of health concerns or difficult circumstances.

The word worry comes from the old English *wyrgan*, originally meaning to strangle and then evolving

to mean to harass. The term's etymology is revealing. Worry indeed strangles, harasses, and badgers us. It becomes a steady encroachment all the time in its suffocating persistence. It feeds itself as it returns again and again, growing in alarm. We become possibility worriers. The truth is the vast majority of the things people worry about never happen. We tie ourselves in knots, choking ourselves in the fear of possibilities.

A story is told of a prominent Anglican bishop who developed a morbid fear of paralysis later in life. One evening while he sat at the head table of a denominational banquet, his fellow diners overheard him muttering to himself that his great fear had finally materialized. He couldn't feel anything in his left leg. The tale concludes when a distinguished elderly woman sitting next to him leaned over and whispered in his ear: "Your Grace, you'll be pleased to know that it is my thigh you're pinching."

Embracing true values—In our regrets and our worries, we struggle to fully embrace the values of heaven. The world's spirit is contagious with its constant allure of "just a little bit more" or attempts at controlling what we can't master. Worry centers on the future—unresolved issues that our frequently beyond our control. Regret often focuses on the past that is gone and cannot be altered. Worry, regret, and anxiety reveal what we treasure and who we trust. Fretting often springs from the determination to get our own way and secure our own means.

The verses quoted at the beginning of this reflection conclude a passage from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus addresses the subject of worry. To worry about life's provisions is to fail to believe that God is God and that he will provide what we need (Mt. 6:25). The Lord points to God's faithful care for his creatures and creation that are far less important than those created in his image. The birds of the air obey the principle that is within them (6:26-27) and the lilies blossom where they are put (6:28-29). Jesus clearly says that when we obey the life God has given us, he will look after the other things that we need.

So do not worry, saying "What shall we eat?"
or "What shall we drink" or "What shall we wear?"
For the pagans run after all these things,
and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.
But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness,
and all these things will be given to you as well.
Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow,
for tomorrow will worry about itself.
Each day has enough trouble of its own (Mt. 6:31-34)

Conclusion—Does this mean we do not plan? That we do not heed any earthly concern? Of course not. It means we hold ourselves and our personal concerns loosely and seek God and his kingdom first. That and that alone will bring a sense of security. We need to learn to leave our yesterdays and our tomorrows in God's hands.

O God, you do not change with the changing years,
but we are creatures of time.
As we look back on the road we have traveled,
we thank you for your faithful mercies along the way.
Where the road has been dark, you have not failed us,

though we have often failed you.
Forgive us, we pray, these failures and all our sins.
You are both our guide and goal, our strength and stay.
In this [trek homeward] help us to walk with you,
for you alone can bring us to our journey's end in peace. Leslie Weatherhead (adapted)

Chapter 11—Grace in Letting Go

If I knew dying was so easy, I wouldn't have fought so hard. (Alan Skutt)

Things that make dying hard—The story goes that a parishioner of the London Tabernacle invited his pastor to visit his estate outside of London. This was at the height of Charles Haddon Spurgeon's ministry in the late 19th century. This individual had prospered tremendously during the Britain's commercial heyday. The sun never set on the British Empire nor on the wealth to be made in the wide expanse of its commercial net. The man gave Spurgeon an extended tour of his estate, thankful for, and a bit prideful of, all that God had provided. Spurgeon took it all in rather quietly. When asked directly what he thought, the prince of preachers replied: “These are the things that make dying hard.”

While this anecdote may be apocryphal, it does highlight the need to hold our earthly possessions and our lives in this tent loosely. This meditation is about the grace of letting go. Please understand, we do not surrender our blessed hope in letting go, but in our expectation for a lengthy and continued life in this sphere. We consciously place our hope in the Lord once again as we walk through our catalog of things to let go of. We fortify our souls with godly hope to do what is right and good. Loosening our ties to this world is difficult but essential to dying well.

Hope in the grip of the pierced hand—We don't abandon ourselves to the great abyss. We hold ourselves loosely, our lives, our loved ones, our possessions, and our dreams and aspirations. We place them all in the grip of the pierced hand of the Lord Jesus. That reality leaves us with a very different perspective on letting go. A dear friend, as he lay dying of cancer, reflected this perspective as he faintly remarked in my hearing: “If I knew dying was so easy, I wouldn't have fought so hard.”

Preparation for departure—We must depart before we can be with Christ. Place your hope in God and begin to let go of the things of this world and prepare to receive your eternal inheritance. C.S. Lewis reminds us that this won't be easy in *Screwtape Letters*. The senior devil is advising his apprentice how to capture people with enjoying the good things of this life:

Prosperity knits a man to the world. He feels that he is “finding his place in it”, while really it is finding its place in him. His increasing reputation, his sense of importance, the growing pressure of absorbing and agreeable work, build up in him a sense of being really at home in earth which is just what we want.

Many of us can say with the psalmist—

The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
surely I have a delightful inheritance.” (Ps. 16:6).

We have had loving relationships, comfortable homes, productive careers, and many perks in an affluent land of freedom. It is only right for us to enjoy God's bounty and to be thankful for his gifts. But we are not to love this world or its enticements (1 Jn. 2:15-17). Be careful to love and trust the Giver of the good gifts and not the gifts themselves.

So let's catalog what we're leaving behind and consciously let go of these things. Recognize what needs

to be let go of, plan for that, and make the appropriate changes gradually.

Our bodies and perhaps our mental awareness—First, we must depart from the body. As much as we have loved and perhaps over-loved our bodies, we must leave them to the grave. It has been our tabernacle, our suit of clothes, but not our souls. In the end, this separation will be from a troublesome companion, a wrinkled and increasingly complaining one, akin to putting off shoes that have bloodied our feet. The body is a curious and wonderful work of God, such a strange tabernacle!

Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 provides a grim commentary on aging, describing some of the physical consequences of advanced age. These include a loss of pleasure, fading eyesight, weakening of the body, and stooped posture. The list continues: dental issues, inability to get out and enjoy normal human contact, poor sleep patterns, multiple fears and phobias, graying appearance, loss of sexual drive, and the loss of interest in things that were previously attractive or useful. This reality assaults our sense of self-worth. Coping involves remembering your Creator. You are a creature made for a purpose which is about him, not you. He knows everything about you and he will exhibit wisdom in taking you through the diminishing horizons of your elder years.

However, body is an eternal aspect of self. We are destined for glory and for a new and perfect body. Not the troublesome companion Francis of Assisi once dubbed “Brother Ass”, but its perfected counterpart.

Loved ones, friends, acquaintances—Departing means leaving loved ones, friends, and so many amicable acquaintances. This is the most trying aspect of our exit. Death would not be so bitter were it not that love makes life so sweet. Death would not inspire such fear and dread were it not that it cuts us off from those we love and who love us. We must leave those we cherish in the hands of the Almighty. Our temporary care and provision for them was only from what he loaned to us for a little while. The delight of acquaintance in this vale of soul making is a mere shadow of what we will experience in the beyond. Friendships will be so much sweeter where we go.

Career and productive activity—Here we are dealing with the loss of identity as well as a loss of status, income, acquaintances, and a sense of accomplishment. Candidly, I fear that I have served too willingly and vested too much on this line. We can identify our self-worth too much in what we do and in being useful, at least as recognized by those familiar with our place in the arena. Stepping away from this tests our faith structure. We are not what we do. Our self-worth is not tied to our net worth. We are not what others think of us. We are children of God, created in his image, recreated by his redemptive mercy, and destined for a glorious inheritance!

Our abodes and personal possessions—Our homes so reflect who we are. They provide a sense of security and stability. They are familiar to us, comfortable as a pair of old shoes. They hold memories in every corner. Leaving this behind is difficult. Many commentators suggest aging in place, continuing to live in the family home as long as possible. Increasingly, as the afternoons of life grow in length, other options include—

- Downsizing to condominiums or apartments;
- Living with children—this maximizes contact across generations but can be stressful and restrictive for all involved;

- Moving to assisted living;
- Moving to a nursing home.

With these transitions, come decisions in the disposition of personal possessions and family heirlooms. Be generous in giving these things away and pray for wisdom to avoid hurt and family conflict. But don't delay unduly. Do this while you have your wits about you.

Financial security—Trusting God may be a challenge here. Putting your financial house in order will be a boon to those you leave behind. More on this in the meditation entitled “Is Your House in Order?”.

Loss of independence and self-sufficiency—I know I will struggle here. I have breathed deeply of the air of independent self-sufficiency. I observed this concern as I watched my father age. His vehement reaction to our suggestion that he give up driving took us all by surprise. That vehicle was his sense of independence and self-sufficiency. He could go where he wanted, when he wanted, and with whoever he wanted. He wasn't about to give that up.

Our elder years often ushers us into the ministry of dependence, an assistant from the Lord in dealing with our pride. There is an essential humility in being willing to be served. Shakespeare notes in *The Merchant of Venice*:

The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

Care-giving—An aside on care-giving. When we are aging into death, loss and our decline can reveal a face to ourselves and others that gives all of us pause. Dramatic changes in personality can accompany us in the latter stages of our journey and our care-givers bear the brunt of that. We will owe so much to them, be they professional or family. After our ornery episodes, let them have glimpses of the old person. Appreciate the sacrifices they make and the care they give.

Delights and past-times—We must also depart from former delights, hobbies, and past times. They were sweet, but passing, disappearing like a vapor. We will lose none of them by death, for they are already past. Perhaps we have enjoyed them too much, avoiding the best pursuits in our devotion to pleasant ones?

Conclusion—As we let go of our lives here and yearn to go home, let us remind ourselves of the rich mercy that awaits us:

O Lord: to be turned from you is to fall.
To be turned toward you to rise,
and to stand in you is to abide forever.
Forgive our manifold sins, and cleanse us, we pray.
Then grant us in all our duties—your help,
in all our perplexities—your guidance,
in all our troubles—your protection,
and in all our sorrows—your peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Augustine)

Chapter 12—Through the Night Watches

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5)

Grima Wormtongue—There is a scene in the movie *The Lord of the Rings: The Twin Towers*, where the character named Grima Wormtongue comes upon Eowyn, the lady of Rohan, mourning the death of her brother at the hands of the orcs. Grima was secretly in the employ of Saruman, Rohan's mortal enemy, who was seductively portraying himself as a friend. Grima had been quite successful in reducing King Theoden to a mere shadow of his former self by means of enervating false thoughts and suggestions. With her brother dead and the king incapacitated, Grima suggested that Eowyn was quite alone and undefended. He was whispering his poison into her ear, desiring to subject her to his fancies.

Logismoi—The enervating whisperings of Grima is a vivid image of what earlier Christians described as *logismoi* (lo-gee-smee). *Logismoi* are thoughts and images that assault us in ways that lead us away from Christ. They are distracting, potentially degrading and enslaving, and part and parcel of our fallen state. They lead us to discouragement, anxiety, and despair. These wandering thoughts are subtle and relentless. You can compare them to maggot eggs that incubate in the soil of our fallenness.

The devotional writer, Henri Nouwen, described his own mind as a banana tree filled with monkeys jumping up and down and scrambling from branch to branch. His thoughts were so many chimps clamoring for attention. Some of these are positive—imaginative schemes taking form and worth the pursuit. Others are preposterously silly—the Walter Mitty-ish imaginings of our grandiose daydreams. Many more are wandering, purposeless, or worse. These are the meandering thoughts of which earlier believers warned us.

Earlier Christians identified five stages of *logismoi*:

- Assault—when the idea of the wrong act comes vividly to your mind. You see something desirable and thought springs upon you—“Go ahead and take it. No one is looking.”
- Interaction or dialogue—You begin to debate the idea. Should I take it? What will happen? I really could use that.
- Consent—You agree to commit whatever act the thought urges you to do. In the example being considered, you take the item you covet.
- Captivity—Once you succumb, the *logismoi* returns with ever greater force. It takes root in your heart, you sense deeply your spiritual defeat. It is ever more difficult to resist the next time and the next time after that.
- Obsession—The person becomes captive to excessive *logismoi*, leading to destructive acts to himself/herself and others. Pick any number of examples of addictive behavior in our modern world—the kleptomaniac, the compulsive gambler, the serial adulterer.

These wayward thoughts will come during our journey home. At points of loss along the way we will feel alone in the darkness, alone in the universe, alone with our worst thoughts and imaginings. Overwhelmed by fear and doubt, our well-being will seem so precarious. Does God really care? Is He even really there? Will some sham shelter lure us, testing our tendency to wander?

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love
Here's my heart, Lord, take and seal it
Seal it for Thy courts above.

Spiritual warfare—We are dealing with the reality of spiritual warfare. When assailed with these wandering and enervating thoughts and imaginings, how do we handle them?

- Ignore them is the persistent advice from antiquity. Frankly, this is difficult to do. What is more practical is to redirect them. In this, Scripture memory is a vital tool.

1 Corinthians 10:13 assures us: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” 2 Corinthians 10:5 instructs us: “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ”.

Taking your thoughts captive to God one by one is a persistent task. Its fruit is a quiet heart and mind that facilitates the transformation of our lives and times by God's Spirit.

- Pray—Early Christians often credited these assaulting temptations for developing their prayer lives. In their grief, in their loss, in their struggling state, the Spirit strengthened their weakness, interceding for them with groans deeper than words could express (Rom. 8:26).
- Move beyond yourself—The way of escape described in 1 Corinthians 10:13 often involves reaching out to others and purposefully doing good. In other words, the temptation can have a decidedly different effect than the tempter intended. Instead of wallowing in ourselves, we engage with others. Instead of pursuing our selfish desires, we do the good we find to do.

Dark Night of the Soul—Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross spoke of what they called the dark night of the soul. They described it as “the secret way in which God not only liberates us from our attachments and idolatries, but also brings us to the realization of our true nature. The night is the means by which we find our heart's desire, our freedom for love.” Some members of Alcoholics Anonymous call themselves “grateful alcoholics” because their addiction finally brought them to their knees and a true surrender to God. This dark night of the soul, this time through the night watches, can enable us to give up control of our lives and to rest in the grace of the One who cares.

Logismoi and mental/anxiety disorders—This is an important proviso. Many of those suffering from severe mental and anxiety disorders and depressive states need treatment and should seek it without apology or shame. This meditation is not arguing against treatment in these severe/persistent cases. Certainly, not all disorders have spiritual causes.

However, it is increasingly the case that our therapeutic society treats physical symptoms and ignores (indeed, denies) any possible spiritual cause. We live in an age that downplays or denies spiritual reality and elevates biological, chemical, and psychological causes and remedies. It actively ridicules the idea of spiritual warfare. Sedation is hardly the remedy for attacks by the enemy of our souls.

I Am Not Alone—Let's close with the encouraging lyrics of Todd Murray's *I Am Not Alone*:

I find myself in a chapter I had not anticipated
and one that I would just as soon was not part of my story.
I'm standing at a crossroads without a single sign to guide me.
I'm not lost, but I'm unsure what my next step should be.

Chorus: And I refuse to fear, when the future is unclear,
 Knowing you are here close beside me.
 When I haven't got a clue, what it is that you are up to,
 Even then I know that you have not abandoned me.
 Because faith is believing in things that are yet unseen.
 Faith is believing God will intervene.

But when I look, when I look only with my eyes,
I'm tempted to believe the lies that say I'm all alone.
When I perceive only with my darkened mind,
then I'm sure to find a God who is cold like stone.

So when heaven seems like brass,
and your nearness a thing of the past,
I am not alone. With the eyes of faith I see
that you are here with me.

I will not resist you, when you move your hand to mold me.
I will not insist you show me all your plans today.
I will not despise the tools you are using now to shape me.
I will not require understanding to obey.

So I will not look, I won't look only with my eyes.
I won't believe the lies that say I'm all alone.
I won't perceive only with my darkened mind,
And I refuse to find a God who is cold like stone.

So when the heaven seems like brass,
and your nearness a thing of the past,
well, I'm not alone. With eyes of faith I see
that you are here with me.

Into His Presence

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints. (Ps. 116:15)

Versailles—When I was a student, I had occasion to visit the palace and the palatial grounds at Versailles, the splendid court King Louis XIV of France constructed for himself outside of Paris. I've seen a number of very intentional displays of human pomp and power, but Versailles tops the list. The throne room, designed as the sovereign's ceremonial room, has a ceiling dedicated to the Sun King. The symbol of the sun, adopted by Louis early in his reign, glows through Apollo, riding on his impressive chariot, surrounded by allegorical figures. It is completely over the top for this earthly realm. Whenever I read Revelation 4 and 5 and picture myself answering the call “Come up here”, peering into the throne room of the Sun King frames my imagination.

Though our earthly exits may not be easy, our destination is glorious. The biblical descriptions of the glory of entering his presence (e.g. Ezek. 1; Rev. 4-5) lends heightened expectation as we journey on. Let us brace our souls in that expectation as we enter this final stage of our earthly passage—on grieving loss, on sickness and suffering, on the finale itself, and on our fears of being something less than we hope to be as we exit.

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
nought be all else to me, save that thou art—
Thou my best thought by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.
Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true word;
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord;
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be my vision, O Ruler of all. (Ancient Irish poem/hymn)

Chapter 13—On Grieving

[We do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. (1 Thess. 4:13)]

Groping through grief—Poignant lines from Edna St. Vincent Millay speak to the stark experience of grieving loss:

Life must go on
and the dead be forgotten
Life must go on
Through good [people] die;
Anne, eat your breakfast;
Dan, take your medicine;
Life must go on;
I forget just why.

Grieving is the experience all of us will undergo, both in the loss of those we love and, ultimately, in leaving those we love behind when it's our turn to exit this life. We weep and we heave with intense pain, not physical, but an ache deep down in our souls. Like a type of death itself.

Grief begs for community and strangely repels it at the same time. C.S. Lewis, in *A Grief Observed*, expressed the isolation grieving people often feel even in the midst of society. “An odd byproduct of my loss is that I'm aware of being an embarrassment to everyone I meet.” Acquaintances, and even friends, were unable to speak with him without making him painfully aware of their discomfort in talking to him. Grief is often a lonely and awkward experience. Yet grieving well is best done in a supportive community that is willing to suffer, wait, and care for the person devastated by loss. In our fractured society, it is not in our nature to be this kind of community.

Grief includes a variety of strong emotions, including guilt, anger, withdrawal, and depression. The process of grief has been documented—

- Stunned disbelief or denial;
- Yearning for the one you lost;
- Anger and depression;
- Bargaining;
- Acceptance.

These “stages” may be better expressed as “moods” that come and go. It is important to walk through the whole process. There is emotional and psychological healing that needs to happen. The first six months are the most traumatic. However, professionals tell us that the grieving process typically takes two years.

Grieving is healthy; to not grieve is not healthy. The Bible assumes that those who are bereaved will grieve. Note the descriptions of grief over Stephen's passing in the New Testament (Acts 8:2) and Joseph's demise in the Old Testament (Gen. 50). Yes, the loved one goes to a better place, but we grieve

for missing them now, for missing their companionship and love. So much depends on the quality of relationships prior to death. To lose a loved one is to lose part of oneself. Likewise, if relationships were not solid, regret and recrimination could be part of the emotional turmoil.

There is also a spiritual dimension to our grieving. Undergoing such personal loss that seems so utterly final is a deeply soulful experience. Many people have commented in my hearing that watching the casket lowered into the grave was overwhelming. We learn much about ourselves and about our God as we grieve. In *A Grief Observed*, Lewis noted that in grieving over the death of his wife, he observed an inversion in the “proper” course of grieving. His grieving started with himself, then went to his wife, and finally about God. He concluded that the inverse is what it should have been.

We need to be encouraged to grieve. Job's friends started out on the right track in consoling him. “When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their clothes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.” (Job 2:12-13).

Don't deny your feelings in some show of strength or of faith (e.g. I should rejoice for they're with the Lord). Allow your grief to confirm your love. Move from being consumed by *your* loss to a new experience of unselfish love of the one you cherished. Be honest with God. The psalmist is constantly crying out to the Lord (e.g. Ps. 42:5).

However, don't let your thoughts, fears, emotions spiral out of control. Make sure you get a hold of yourself. Your “why” questions will probably go unanswered. Move on to acknowledge God's goodness even when you “don't get it”. Spend time with others and be active in a reasonable way. Take up your routines and normal community activities but avoid being hyperactive. Grieving takes time. Be kind to yourself while you walk this path.

Presence over pronouncement—How do you provide comfort to those who are grieving when you are short on experience? There is no definitive roadmap. However, a good short word on the matter is presence over pronouncement. Show up to be with people, not to preach to them. Some helpful suggestions that have come my way include—

- Ask God for a tender heart, to come along side to share the pain;
- Listen. A good listener becomes a walking, touching, personal, intensive care unit;
- Don't be shocked by what is said and considered;
- Be ready to share, but let the bereaved decide if they want Bible reading or prayer;
- Keep at it; keep showing up;
- Continue to be helpful in practical ways.

Care-givers—A moment to reflect on care-givers and grief. Family and professionals giving care to the deceased frequently have grown extremely close over time. They have always been there to provide care, to buttress the dying person's circumstances while in decline, to share in the person's fears and cheers, doubts and hopes, and everything in between. Then it's over. Particularly for family members, grief comes suddenly and overwhelmingly. Care-givers need grieving space and community support in their grief and frequently are not the type of people to seek it out or to acknowledge their need for it.

Funerals and dying rituals—Grieving can and should begin in our liturgical practice: the viewing, the funeral, the internment, a period of recognized mourning. Christian funerals speak to our beliefs regarding life, death, and salvation. A funeral is the church's opportunity to express those beliefs, to tell the gospel story, and to tie it to the life of the deceased and those gathered to worship.

The visitation or viewing of the body and the funeral is when mourning, in most respects, begins. The funeral gives shape to grief as the community expresses its faith and ties the swirling emotions surrounding death to the larger story of humanity's fall into sin, the redemption accomplished by Christ, and the recreation of the world. The funeral is a worship service that dramatically recognizes that the Christian life is shaped in the pattern of Christ's own life and death.

My namesake and paternal grandfather died a little less than a century ago. I never knew him. But when he died, dying rituals were quite different than today. The visitation was often held at home. Extended family, friends, and community acquaintances visited the home of the deceased to pay their respects. Then began a journey to the graveyard that paused at the church for a service, before continuing to the cemetery where the deceased was laid to rest. Graveyards were often close by, many times in the general church compound. The community wounded by death gathered together to remember the deceased and to support the family as it accompanied the body to the church to worship and then to the graveyard to be interred. Death was not an event to be grieved by a solitary spouse or a handful of children alone.

Today, the funeral industry often has a more commercial air to it. There is some accommodation to grieving, if quite short, but often totally neglects the religious role the funeral plays for the believing community. The traditional elements of visitation and the funeral allows the community to worship God who has defeated death and to begin to knit together again a community that has been fractured. It is in these rituals that the church displays and reaffirms its resurrection hope and gives witness to the basis of this hope to the rest of the world.

Mourning beyond the funeral—Too often, modern people seem to think that mourning should end shortly after the funeral or least by the time the resolution of the deceased's estate begins. When society so quickly ignores death, young people grow up with no sense of the meaning of death and the whole adult community loses a sense of decorum with respect to the grieving process. Earlier customs had extended periods of mourning rituals. People grieving loss wore special clothing for a while, signaling to themselves and others in the community that they were working through their grief. This is actually reversed in our modern culture. People are praised for how fast they “get back to it”. No need for those around to reach out in comfort and concern.

We need to think of how the church can supply space to grieve—

- keeping mourners in prayer for more extended periods,
- supplying periodic meals beyond the immediate trauma period,
- creating support groups of grieving people,
- recognizing those who have passed on in services at appropriate times (All Saints Day).

Jewish mourning rituals and other community customs may well engender ideas for what can be done to supply grieving space.

Death transcended—We are to grieve, but not like those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13-14 quoted above). Our ultimate hope is a new heaven and new earth, where there will be no more death or mourning, or crying, or pain (Rev. 21:3-4). Death has not yet been abolished, but it has been stripped of its power (1 Cor 15:53-57). The real point of death is no longer a parting from, but a home-going to. We live in Jesus' resurrection train and we are going home.

Grief as the road from death to life—Hope is the most important ingredient. As Paul states in 1 Corinthians 15, death is the last enemy. It is the greatest and most complete of all evils. If we are to know the greatness of Jesus Christ's victory over death, we must know that death is evil and that it has been conquered. It is through sorrow that one discovers a calm, abiding, indestructible joy. Death leads to life and grief is the road between them.

Chapter 14—On Sickness and Suffering

Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the Lord. (Ps. 31:24)

God never wastes our pain—In his book, *Finishing Well to the Glory of God*, John Dunlop likens aging well to running a marathon. A marathon it is not 26 miles, it is 26.2 miles. The last .2 of a mile is the toughest. Serious runners that I have known have commented in my hearing of the necessity of running through their pain. No pain, no gain was their motto. That may be the case for our lives as well. We may suffer at the end. On our journey home, we may need to prepare to suffer patiently in order to die well.

Modern society has given up on believing in life after death and thus suffering has lost its meaning. One of the church's "former" purposes, namely to give hope, to help cope with tragedies here on earth, to bring meaning to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, has lost its cogency. We come to this matter of sickness and suffering against this cultural backdrop.

None of us want to suffer. We pray to be spared this part of the journey. However, God never wastes our pain. Pain and sorrow in this life are used in God's providential hands to make us homesick for heaven, to detach us from this world, to prepare us to go home, to draw our attention to our ultimate destiny, and to begin looking at our joys and travails from the vantage point of the end. Pain, suffering, and bereavement can function positively in a believer's life and to others as well.

Suffering unbolts the door of the heart, allowing the Word of God easier entrance and the freer outflow of empathetic concern for others. Pain can make us bitter or better—its result will be our choice in how we respond. It shapes, tempers, and molds us. It burns up our shallowness and it can be the avenue of finding yourself in its fires. When rightly accepted, it cleanses us from our natural self-centeredness, gives us insight to the fallen nature of this world, brings recall to the sufferings of Christ on our behalf, and prepares for death itself. Further, suffering sensitizes us to the sufferings of others and enables us to empathize with them. Paul succinctly describes this reality in the opening verses of 2 Corinthians:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

Comfort of God—The comfort that God gives in the midst of sickness and suffering is more than creedal comfort. There is also personal comfort—the movement of God on the soul. The psalmist writes: "Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him." (Ps. 34:8). Paul soars in prayer for the Ephesians that Christ might dwell in their hearts, that they might have power to know the depth of his love for them, and to be filled to the full measure of his presence (Eph. 3:17-19).

How we need to cultivate a deeply personal knowledge of God, for it will sustain us when the other "pillars of life" crumble. For this, we need the discipline of growing fervency in prayer, more active meditation on God in His Word, and the growing sense of our need for the presence and power of the risen Christ working in us through his Spirit.

When sickness and suffering come—The first great temptation of suffering and sickness is impatience. Groans, pleading prayers, and agonizing thoughts and expressions are its language. It is inappropriate to expect the sick and those suffering to pretend that all is well. Consider David (Ps. 69:3) and Hezekiah (Isa. 38:14) when in the midst of their suffering. These cries for help are the fitting voices of sickness. Not a cry of sinful impatience, but a plea for pity. However, our groans through sickness must be without despair. In addition, our groaning must be without peevishness. We must not groan in a way that magnifies our sorrows or causes trouble for those trying to help us.

Those who patiently submit to God's will regarding illness can take advantage even in pain. Most of us have adult bodies but immature souls. In sickness, as the body weakens, the soul often grows. People awake and in pain learn the language of prayer. Likewise, sickness alleviates pride. The time we spent on preening and appearance seems irrelevant. Arguing fine points of theology and acrimonious political debate seem pointless. We lay aside all that brought us a sense of false significance and worldly confidence, and care to know only Jesus Christ crucified.

If and when serious illness comes, do not let your thoughts run wild. Remind yourself that you are a child of God. There are times when the Father will appear as if he were an unnatural father, callous and indifferent. But remember that he is not that. The sun is behind the clouds and it still shines. Extrapolating upon the possible pains and dangers of your condition is not a profitable use of your time and energy. Dwelling on all the possible problems attending to tests, operations, sleepless nights, and medical expenses, creates an artificial disease far worse than the real one. Hopelessness is hell's chief lieutenant. We need not place ourselves so willingly in his employ.

For comfort, pick some saying from a book or a sermon that has lifted you in the past and hold on to it tightly. Don't fret about your "uselessness". God has chosen to allow your condition. He understands its disabling arm. While in pain, place yourself in God's presence as often as possible. Remember that the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We don't know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express (Rom. 8:26). Read the Psalms or have them read. Psalms 6, 16, and 31 are good ones for this purpose.

Suffering in the Bible—That good can come out of suffering is the central truth of the book of Job. Job is one of the earliest books of the Bible written and addresses the problem of evil and of suffering in this world. In the first two chapters of the book, Job loses everything—his family, his fortune, and his position and standing in society in the craziest way. The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune in Job's life are pictured as a wager between Satan and God regarding the steadfastness of Job's piety. This wager is followed by some 35 chapters of wrangling between Job and his so-called comforters concerning suffering and evil in this life. Then God shows up in a whirlwind in chapters 38-41, not to provide answers but to ask Job some probing questions. The book concludes with a chapter wrapping things up—Job's fortunes and status are restored. He is blessed with new family ties, but not with the restoration of his first family. No answers as to the why of this very strange and exceedingly painful experience are provided. The readers are left to draw their own conclusions.

The reason for suffering is not rooted in the past, but in the future. God is less interested in answering our questions as in securing our allegiance, establishing our faith, and nurturing our desire to be set apart for Him. What should we do with questions about God that arise from suffering? We should seek refuge in adoring worship rather than in proudly requiring explanations.

Other parts of Scripture elaborate on this. Rising above suffering involves, first of all, an understanding and faith in the character of the one who allows suffering. The Lord is strong and loving (Ps. 62:11-12) and there for you (1 Cor. 10:13). His is an eternal perspective and our understanding of life's painful bumps and bruises involves stepping back and seeing things from his perspective (2 Cor. 4:16-18). Most poignant of all is that almighty God in the person of his Son entered into our sufferings to redeem them. Our lives are first to last underwritten by God's mercy. It is a mercy embedded in the maze of suffering.

God's purpose in our suffering—So remind yourself of what you believe:

- Suffering is part of the fallenness of creation, a consequence of our sin. Peter instructs us: “So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.” (1 Pt. 4:19). We need the confidence that God knows what he is about when we are suffering.
- Our suffering helps others—God can use our suffering to teach others (1 Pt. 5:9) and prepare us to give comfort to others (2 Cor. 1:3-4 quoted above).
- Suffering can demonstrate God's work and proves genuine faith. 1 Pt. 1:6-7 elaborates:

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

- Suffering can transform our character. Hebrews 12:7 states: “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?” Suffering takes away the fanciful posture of our living, it tempers the spirit, it cures hypocrisy, it tames the fumes of pride, it is the school of patience. It gives us a greater appetite for the things of the Spirit.
- Suffering may be a punishment for sin (1 Cor. 11:29-30) and awaken us to our dire situation. Suffering grows us sin-resistant (1 Pt. 4:1), reminding us that we will all stand before the judgment seat of God (1 Pt. 4:12 et seq.).
- Suffering provides a deeper fellowship with Jesus. Paul states: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of suffering in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.” (Phil. 3:10-11). Resurrection power and suffering go hand-in-hand.
- Suffering reflects the divine economy—the cross precedes the crown (Rom. 8:16-18).
- It may be God's way to take us to heaven.
- It may help others find God's purpose in their own suffering.
- It can make us more grateful and appreciative for our blessings. We begin to realize how much we have taken the good things in our lives for granted.
- It can wean us from our worldliness and help us yearn for the ultimate glory and reward in the life to come.
- As we journey home, it can help us let go of the people and the earthly things we so love.

Conclusion—The discipleship of the cross is central to finishing our journeys well. That path may well involve suffering, sickness, and pain. Bonhoeffer's ringing declaration in the *Cost of Discipleship*—“Jesus Christ invites His disciples to come and die”—appeals to the noble heroic of youth. It has a

different ring in old age, one that recognizes that Jesus bids us to take up our cross in the ordinary, everyday aches and pains, and sufferings of human life just as he did. An honest recognition of the losses of aging can lead us to accepting the utter dependence upon God, so integral to restoring a relationship with God so disordered by human pride. Our growing limitations can serve as an avenue of growth in faith in Christ.

Suffering is the result of the Fall, not part of God's good creation. He allows us to suffer to accomplish his good ends. God never wastes our pain. We can be confident that he will accomplish his purposes and we can anticipate better things to come. The psalmist writes: "The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your love, O Lord, endures forever—do not abandon the works of your hands." (Ps. 138:8).

No wound, no scar?
Yet as the Master shall the servant be,
And pierced are the feet that follow Me,
But thine are whole,
Can he have followed far who has no wound,
No scar? (Amy Carmichael)

Chapter 15—In the Valley of the Shadow

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. (Ps. 23:4).

The porter God uses to summon us will come our way,
knock on our door, and it will be time to leave. (Erwin Lutzer)

King of Terrors—When the doctor implied that my wife might be in a late stage of ovarian cancer and that I should prepare myself, I caught a glimpse of the domain of the king of terrors. I felt numb. My mind went blank. Did I hear that right? Could it possibly be so? Why us? We're so young! There is so much left to do, to see, to be. The spectrum of death is often accompanied by such heartfelt questions: Why me? Why now? Why this? Yet it is the final certainty of every person. As George Bernard Shaw once quipped “The statistics on death are quite impressive. One out of one people die.”

Modern attitudes toward death are quite curious. Death is something of a taboo. The more advances we make in medical science, the more we fear and deny death's reality. For many, death has become lonely, mechanical, and dehumanized. The dying are removed from their familiar surroundings and rushed to some institution where they are treated more like a thing than a person.

In past centuries, death had a certain ritual, its own protocol, if you will. In our time, discussing death is seen as morbid, and moving its reality to the margin as the thing to do. It has become forbidden topic in proper conversation, a private affair that even the family is excluded from with the widespread hospitalization of the terminally ill. Death seems as unmentionable in our age as sex was for the Victorians.

Most people delay thinking about death until it is upon them. Then there is denial, even to the point of refusing to think about it. Irrational fear freezes our hearts and cripples our spirits, leaving us intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically drained. Some find refuge in humor that seeks to hide fear with a chuckle. Some see death as a transitory state, insisting that it is merely a crossing over to some mystic, cosmic eternity, perhaps in a reincarnated reality.

Jesus' own agony and aversion to death—The terror of death is very real. The psalmist writes:

My heart is in anguish within me;
the terrors of death assail me.
Fear and trembling have beset me;
horror has overwhelmed me. (Ps. 55:4-5).

Hebrews 2:14-15 conveys the idea that the evil one exercises his terrifying power in the realm of death. The king of terrors was with Jesus at Gethsemane. Jesus' aversion to death is clearly seen in the suffering in the Garden:

He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed,
“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”
An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish,

he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.” (Lk. 22:41-44).

The wheel of humiliation, defeat, and death would grind Jesus to the point of his greatest personal agony. He was facing the terror to end its reign.

This same aversion, even anger, can be witnessed in the scene at Lazarus' tomb. The Lord's deep emotion and compassion at the death of his friend is expressed by three descriptive words: “deeply moved” (Jn. 11:33, 38), “troubled” (Jn. 11:33), and “wept” (Jn. 11:35). “Deeply moved” (*enebrimesato*) is literally “to snort like a horse” and connotes anger. Jesus was angry at the ravages of death that characterizes the human condition because of sin. “Troubled” (*etaraxen*) implies a deep agitation of spirit over the loss of a dear friend that gave way to weeping. The idea of “wept” in John 11:35 is that Jesus burst into tears. It was uncontrollable grief.

Theology of death—Let's start with a biblical understanding of what we're facing in death. Death is separation, physically from this world, and spiritually from God unless redeemed.

- After the fall (Gen. 3), human beings still bear the image of God, but that image is marred and defaced by sin. Death enters a fallen world by sin. The fall serves as the basis for the biblical understanding of death.
- Death is an enemy—Death was not part of the original creation, it results from sin. Death is an enemy, indeed the last enemy to be destroyed with Christ's redemptive restoration (1 Cor. 15:26). The origin of death is divine punishment for disobedience (Rom. 6:23; Heb. 9:27). Humanistic attitudes about death being “natural” or “part of human nature” are false. Death is unnatural, it flows from sin, not part of life as created. It is a time of profound sorrow, not an “Oh well, it comes to us all”, shrug your shoulders experience.
- Death is a defeated enemy (1 Cor. 15:54-57 quoted below). Death no longer holds ultimate power over us. The problem of death is resolved in Jesus' resurrection and the promise of resurrection his followers will share (1 Cor. 15:20-28). It is a reality that will be done away with, not something that will always be here. The Scripture testifies to this: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Rev. 21:4). The resurrection shapes our attitudes toward aging and death, affirming God's faithfulness to redeem what he has made (Rom. 8:22-23) and proclaiming God's triumph over the power of death (Heb. 2:14-15). After redemption, people are both image-bearers and redeemed sinners, children of God, and heirs of the cosmos.
- Death is the passageway to receiving our reward. Nothing that is truly of God ever perishes. We can confidently anticipate the day when we will be reunited with our believing loved ones and enter His peaceable kingdom. Be inspired by Paul's words in Philippians—“to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). What we cling to in this earthly tent is really the Shadowlands, a prelude to glory.
- Death leads to receiving a resurrected body. The body is an eternal aspect of self. In aging, we see the consequences of the Fall on our physicality. Our resurrections will restore to us what it means to be truly human and equip us for God's glorious presence.
- And yes, death leads to judgment. The Fall had spiritual as well as physical consequences (Heb. 9:27).
- The Bible teaches two truths that we must hold in dynamic tension. One is that human life is sacred and we naturally want to preserve it. The other is that we will not experience the fullness

of life until we are in the Lord's presence. Death is a defeated enemy and a passageway for the believer.

Making a Good End—We have dealt with a number of practical aspects of dying well in other chapters (e.g. *Is Your House in Order*). This entire book is really addressing the spiritual aspects of a good death. In this meditation, let's focus on the physical and psychological aspects of making an exit to the honor of God and the benefit of those you leave behind.

A famous study by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, prefaces most modern discussions of this topic. Her view of the stages of death has come to be regarded as the accepted roadmap of death and dying in our time. Below are the five stages Kubler-Ross identified as leading to the acceptance of an approaching death adapted by the eyes of faith.

- Denial—The first stage discussed was denial. Candidly, this was my immediate response to the doctor's initial assessment of my wife's condition. Denial is self-protective, shielding us from the full impact of emotional pain. For the believer, denial thwarts the onset of Christian hope. This hope begins by taking a good, long look at the facts, reminds us of the truth of the gospel, and gives us wings to soar above the difficulties. Denial is actually denying the providence of God, never a healthy response to trials.
- Anger—The next stage, the author identifies is anger. The voice inside us announces that this isn't fair. There is so much left undone. The idea that we deserve better populates our thoughts. This anger ultimately derives from viewing our lives as our own possession and not as a gift. Lord, forgive us for thinking that what was yours to start, ever became ours.
- Bargaining—The author suggests that this stage is particularly the preserve of religious types. Your mind goes immediately to Isaiah 38, where Isaiah brings a word to King Hezekiah of Judah to get his house in order because he was not going to recover from the illness that was upon him. Isaiah 38:2-3 records Hezekiah's bitter tears and his bargaining prayer to the Lord to remember his good deeds. He does get a reprieve. However, in all due respect to the eminent author, bargaining in a non-sectarian phenomenon. At death's imminent prospect, we all desire a reprieve. A story is told of a famous comedian, who had shown no religious interest during most of his lifetime. Supposedly, he was found reading the Bible on his death bed. His honest and humorous reply to a bystander's skeptical queries was that he was looking for loopholes.
- Depression—This is an all too human response. Once again, it's time to preach gospel hope to ourselves. Hopelessness is hell's chief lieutenant. We must meet the terror trusting in God. This trust will not magically take away all pain, grief, and the sorrow of separation, but trust in God makes any situation more bearable. This end is a passageway, we are going home. William Cowper, an English poet and Anglican hymn writer of the 18th century, said it well:

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.
His purposes will ripen fast
Unfolding every hour
The bud may have a bitter taste
But sweet will be the flower

- Acceptance—Grief must first come to accept the reality of loss and that it's painful. C.S. Lewis writes: “If we really think that home is elsewhere and that this life is a 'wandering to find home,' why should we not look forward to the arrival?”. Prayerful personal presence with the dying person is powerful in helping someone grieve through to acceptance.

The above is a secular roadmap adapted. One key to that adaptation is that we don't travel that road alone. The more the Christian community is involved the better our transition. Earlier Christians had the practice of what was called the Celtic “happy death”. Key idea here is the practice of the “soul friend” who walked the death path with the dying believer. Dying rituals and liturgical prayer populate this tradition. In addition, we focus on the passion of Christ and on his victory over death in his resurrection. The cross and the empty tomb beckon us on. By his wounds, we are healed. By his resurrection, we have hope for glory.

Dregs at the bottom of the cup—As he neared the end of his days, Benjamin Franklin remarked that those who live long and who drink from the cup of life to the bottom must accept that they will run into some of its dregs. It is good to be aware of, and prepare for, the physical changes that will come upon us as death approaches.

On this front, there are elements of the fear of dying: of pain, of progression of deterioration and inability, of a loss of control, of dying and the levels of separation that entails. Early physical signs and symptoms include—

- Sleeping more and eating less.
- Food and fluid decrease—this may sound harsh, but dehydration is a dying person's friend. It is one of the most peaceful ways to exit the world.
- Disorientation.
- Incontinence.
- Restlessness.
- Urine decrease.

There are often early emotional signs and symptoms—

- Withdrawal.
- Restlessness.
- Decreased socialization.

And as the grim reaper approaches, signs and symptoms of its immanence—

- Change in breathing patterns.
- Increased congestion.
- Vision-like experiences.
- Significant changes in vital signs.

Advice for peaceable exits—

- Maintain faith—We place ourselves in the hands of a faithful God. We will be assailed with numerous doubts focused on attacking our weaknesses and our undeserving state. Our focus needs to be on the faithfulness of God, not on our fickle selves.
- Maintain hope in Christ and in your eternal reward. Avoid desperation and do not let your thoughts run wild. This is best done by preparing for what we will go through. You are a child of God. The sun is behind the cloud and it still shines. Our faith teaches us to hope in a way that makes desperation appear useless and very foolish.
- Avoid impatience—As followers of Christ, we are to practice watchful waiting on God across the span of our years. That should categorize our final days as well.
- Complacency must not rule. We must live faithfully unto God. The good death ushers forth from a faithful life.
- Temporal concerns must not dominate. Get your house in order early. This is the time for farewells to those you love and meditation on the lover of your soul to whom you are going.

Death swallowed up in the victory—

Death has been swallowed up in victory

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of death is the law.

But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

(1Cor. 15:54-57)

My father-in-law, long an agnostic though raised in the faith, came to Christian faith near the end of his days. There were those, including a very persistent pastor of my mother-in-law's church congregation, who witnessed faithfully to Pop. However, I sincerely believe that the single decisive factor in Pop's conversion was his memory of the serene and peaceable death of his mother. He was there for her death and was greatly affected by it. She modeled making a good end for her son. Her passage into the sunrise of eternity gave eloquent testimony to the lyrics of the old hymn:

Teach me to live that I may dread
 The grave as little as my bed;
 Teach me to die, that so I may
 Rise glorious on the Judgment Day.

The good death and the lead up to it is a Christian community event. The elderly are to gift the younger with their acquired wisdom and stories of the journey that morally frame us. The younger are to become the kind of people who love and respect the elderly and understand the significance of their lives for our own. The young offer the old their presence as death approaches, sharing, as they can, in suffering and fear of their elderly loved ones. In return, the younger receive a preview of how to die well, an example that they, one day, will be privileged to pass along. In dying well, the old teach the young the truly valuable lesson of how to conclude this earthly journey.

O Love that will not let me go,
 I rest my weary soul in Thee;
 I give thee back the life I owe,
 That in thy ocean depths its flow
 May richer, fuller be.

O Joy that seeks me through the pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not in vain
That morn shall tearless be. (Elaine Hegenberg)

I pray that my life may end with a peaceable exit, a melodious Amen. Could Christ's death actually break the endless cycle of sin and death, sickness and disease, and roll back the curse under which all creation groans? Could a God-authored utopia really be the end game? I pray for the grace to sing through whatever pain I may encounter a loud and unequivocal yes; the faithful Amen at the end of the journey.

Surrounded by your glory
What will my heart feel
Will I dance for you, Jesus
Or in awe of you be still
Will I stand in your presence
Or to my knees will I fall
Will I sing hallelujah
Will I be able to speak at all
I can only imagine. (Lyrics from *I Can Only Imagine* by Mercy Me)

Chapter 16—And Should I Fainting Be

Oh, make me Thine forever
And should I fainting be,
Let me never, oh no, never
Outlive my love for Thee.

May it never be—For most of us, the most difficult part of this journey home is leaving our loved ones behind, of letting go of those you cherish. But there are things worse than this and death itself—denying your faith, disowning those you love, or leading a profligate life bringing shame on the name of the Lord who bought you. Whatever happens, Lord, help us stay true to the end. With the hymn writer, let us pray:

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears.
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who has by thy might led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met thee;
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget thee;
Shadowed beneath thy hand may we forever stand,
True to our God, true to our [celestial] land.
(Lyrics from *Life Every Voice and Sing* by Johnson and Johnson)

Facing the terror of death, let us draw great comfort from the words of C.S. Lewis:

You needn't worry about not feeling brave. Our Lord didn't. ... Remember the scene at Gethsemane. How thankful I am that when God became man, He did not choose to become a man of iron nerves; that would not have helped weaklings like you and me nearly so much.

We need not be ashamed of our fear of death. God will give us the strength we lack, the courage we don't naturally have, and comfort when we are hurting body and soul. In the season of doubt, make it your practice to quote biblical promises. A couple of places to start:

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things. ... For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:32, 37-39)

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 Jn. 3:2)

Actually, this emotion of self-suspicion, if not taken to extremes, is a healthy one. We have failed our Lord many times. We have drawn on his mercy and strength many times. That realization drives us to face the king of terrors in the strength of the Lord. Let our prayer be that with Jeremy Taylor, an Anglican pastor of yesteryear:

Holy Jesus, I am unable to stand under this cross, unable of myself. Pity me; strengthen me; save and deliver me. You have felt this burden yourself. You sank under it, and you permitted a man to bear part of the load you were carrying. Please bear part of my load now by fortifying my spirit, by being my strength when I am weak. Be the Christ who empowers me to face my situation (citing Phil. 4:13).

The Lord's restoring mercy—We do well to remember Peter's cocky confidence, asserting that he could never deny his Lord, only to do so that very day. However, also remember the gracious way the Lord rehabilitated Peter.

In John 21, Jesus had just reinstated Peter to the apostolic number. Peter had denied the Lord three times and he was asked point blank if he loved the Lord three times. Many have pointed out the wonderful wisdom displayed by the Lord in this passage—the public reinstatement after Peter's oh-so-public denials. Three affirmations counteract three vehement denials. Peter's humility contrasts vividly with his former swagger.

But what draws is the psychological moment that is portrayed. Such an intense moment! Peter realized that he did love the Lord, more than anything, and that it went to the very core of his being to have failed his Lord so miserably in his hour of need. Peter's purpose (feed my lambs, tend my sheep) was tied inextricably to his heart's orientation. He would love his Lord right to the end and that meant serving his body, the church.

In the grip of the pierced hand—The Lord is able to hold us when we can't hold ourselves. He can and will garrison our souls and we can praise him in the midst of our great need. If he chooses to allow us to undergo heavy burdens, we can cry out to him. We can pray for him to strengthen the hands and hearts of those who care for us. Lord, allow us to pass through this valley of the shadow in the confidence of your great mercy and grace. Please let us make this journey in a way that speaks grace to those we love and leave behind.

The title of this piece comes from a line in a prayer of Bernard of Clairvaux. Let that prayer be our own:

What language can I borrow
To thank thee, dearest friend,
For this thy dying sorrow
Thy mercy without end.
Oh, make me thine forever
And should I fainting be,
Let me never, oh no, never
Outlive my love for Thee.

Epilogue

Past the village flowed the river, like time, like life itself, waiting for the swimmer to come again on his way to the climax of his adventurous life, and to the end for which he had been made.

Dying well is a significant act that bears witness to our most profound convictions. We follow in the victory parade of the Lord Jesus: his life, death, resurrection, and destiny. We are heirs with him in the heavenly places—an unimaginable inheritance! How we need “lesson space” for this to truly happen; to question our culture's jaded assumptions concerning biological life and death. Dying well is part and parcel of seeing all of life as a gift from God and part of an interwoven whole.

Dying Thoughts is an exposition of Philippians 1:23 by a famous Puritan preacher, Richard Baxter. In it, Baxter wrestles with his own doubts and fears as he faces death. He scrutinizes his own heart anxious to test his own sincerity, leaving nothing unexamined. He wanted to die with every grace in his soul in full vigor. The book provides counsel, strength, and comfort to his fellow travelers who wrestle in their hearts with the same conflicts, doubts, and fears. He concludes his meditation, as we will with our reflections, with the following prayer:

Father, you of infinite love, though my arguments be many and strong, my heart is bad, my strength is weakness, and I am insufficient to plead the cause of your love and loveliness to myself and others. But plead your own cause, and who can resist! Let it not be my own word only, but yours. A word that tells me you love me, even me a sinner. Say to me, as Christ in the flesh said to Lazarus: “Arise!” Tell me that the sun is warm, that my parents and dearest friends loved me. Tell me that you have given me life. Tell me that you who know all things, know that I do love you, and that I am beloved of you!

Thus, let me come to you in the confidence of your love, and long to be nearer, in the clearer sight, the fuller sense, and the more joyful exercise of love forever. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit! Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Amen.