

Christian Dying and Burial

Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod

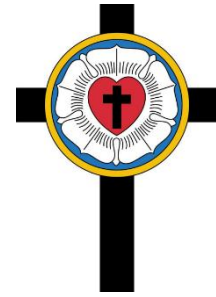
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An Introduction to Christian Dying and Burial

Death is a consequence of the fall into sin (Gen. 3:19; Rom. 5:12). The coming of life incarnate into our world of death signals the death of death and the ultimate victory of life. Jesus meets death and grief head on (Luke 7:11-17; Mark 5:35-43; John 11:1-44) and transforms it by His own death, burial, and resurrection, thus giving us life.

In Holy Baptism we are immersed in Christ's death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-11). Luther says that one's burial and resurrection from the dead are the fulfillment of one's Baptism: "This journey (from this life to the life beyond) begins in Baptism. And as long as there is faith, man continues on this course until he completes it through death" (*Luther's Works* 24:42). The burial rites themselves are a kind of journey that begins at the deathbed, leads to the funeral home and the church, and finally to the cemetery. They follow the believer as he departs this world with Christ through death to life.

In the burial rites, two emphases are held in tension: penitence and the resurrection (2 Sam. 12:15-23). The Kyrie, Litany, penitential psalms, and the ancient Christian hymn "In the Very Midst of Life" (Hymn 755) are examples of how the rites take seriously both death and the deep effect death has on us. In Christ, the sting of death is conquered so that the Christian sees, in the midst of death, the hope of the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. The various Scripture readings, hymnody, and the prayers in the rites testify to the glorious victory over death that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

For Old Testament believers, deathbeds were a time of confession both of the faith and of the resurrection of the body. For example, Joseph confessed this hope in the presence of his sons before his death (Gen. 50:24-26). Job also confessed, "I know that my Redeemer lives..." pointing to his confidence in the resurrection of all flesh (Job 19:25). Christ calls death a sleep (Mark 5:39), and so for the Christian, the hour of death is approached with the confidence of going to bed and falling asleep. In the rite of the **Commendation of the Dying**, the Christian hears the accounts of Christ's suffering and death and sees his dying in light of the Savior's death. The rite offers the opportunity for the confession of the faith, as well as the confession of sins before death. The Lord's Supper may also be integrated into this rite. The deathbed may last hours or days. The rite allows for repeated and extended use over a period of days or many hours. In the event that death appears imminent, the rite may be abbreviated.

On hearing the news of the death of Jairus' daughter, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, "Do not fear, only believe" (Mark 5:36). This is the message of the rite of **Comforting the Bereaved**. At this juncture, many people come to extend their consolation to the mourners and share in their grief. The ministry of the pastor is "to comfort those in any affliction" (2 Cor. 1:4) with the comfort of God's Word. Most often the rite of comforting the bereaved occurs in the funeral home. Local circumstance dictates whether the setting is formal or informal. When words of thanksgiving for the life of the deceased or expressions of condolence are given by family members and friends, the pastor will take care to focus the comfort on what God has done for His child whom He has taken to Himself.

When the funeral takes place at the church, the rite for the **Entrance of the Body into the Church** may be used. This rite may be used whether or not the family is present.

The **Funeral Service** is a public service of the Church. It is a public confession of the faith concerning death, burial, resurrection, and the life hereafter. In the funeral service the baptismal theme of death and resurrection with Christ is most prominent (Rom. 6:1-11). The service begins with the name of God spoken over the body of the baptized. The casket may be covered with a pall as a remembrance of being clothed with Christ in Holy Baptism (Gal. 3:27; Rom. 13:14). The baptismal creed (Apostle's Creed) is confessed, and the prayers confidently speak of the resurrection and new life given in Baptism. In the sermon the pastor has a unique opportunity to preach God's Word of Law and Gospel to many hearers who may not know the source of Christian comfort when a heart is troubled by the grief and sorrow of death. Here he can explain the connection between Christ's work of salvation in Baptism and the death of the Christian. The focus of the funeral service is the public proclamation of Christ crucified to this specific situation, as well as the comfort Christians find in Christ's resurrection.

Acknowledging God as the creator of the body and trusting in the bodily resurrection, Old Testament believers such as Abraham (Gen. 22:1-18; Heb. 11:17-19), Jacob (Gen. 35:19-20, 29), and his sons (Gen. 50:4-14) reverently buried their dead. Christians, too, believe that the body is significant and, therefore, is to be treated with respect. It is God's creation. God Himself became flesh in Christ and redeemed the world in His body. The Holy Spirit sanctifies the Christian's body in Baptism, in the hearing of God's Word, and in the communion of Christ's life-giving body and blood. For this reason, Christians bury their dead in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the body. This is the purpose of the rite of **Committal**. Words of sorrow in the face of death and anticipation of the resurrection are prominent themes in this rite. When circumstances prevent the committal from occurring immediately after the funeral service, the committal takes place at a later date. In that situation, the pastor may speak words of comfort on the basis of the Scriptures, and the Creed may be confessed. Christ is the firstfruits of those who rise from the dead. The body that is buried is a seed that will arise to see Christ with a glorious body (1 Cor. 15:20, 35-44).

Two unique situations are addressed in the burial rites--the **Burial for a Stillborn Child or Unbaptized Child** and **Resources for Commemoration of the Faithful Departed**. In the time of testing and deep grief when a child is stillborn or dies before being baptized, parents can be comforted with the hope of the resurrection of the body. On the anniversary of a death or when a Christian congregation gives thanks for its faithful departed, God's saints are remembered in order to affirm that those who die in the Lord are indeed blessed (Rev. 14:13).

Finally, extensive suggestions are provided in the **Resources for Christian Burial**. In addition to numerous readings, hymns, and prayer resources, several model obituaries are also provided.

For the Christian, death is not the last word. Love incarnate is stronger than death (John 11:25). Christ's death and resurrection proclaim that victory belongs to life. Jesus calls His disciples to follow Him through death to life. That journey begins in the death and resurrection that happens in Holy Baptism. The burial rites take the Christian on the last steps of this journey to the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.