

Appendix 1

Funeral Service

Introduction

There are various situations that a pastor faces when called to **say a few words** or give a **sermon** at a funeral. In India, a pastor may be asked to say a few words after the cremation of a Hindu friend. Sometimes, he may be asked to say a few words at the death of a friend from a Christian background. I will give some suggestions along the way.

More often, however, a pastor has to give a sermon and conduct a funeral service for a person in the church. Here is what I found helpful:

1. Essentials
2. Pre-funeral preparations
3. Suitable scriptures

1. Essentials

Sermon length: A funeral sermon in the church should last at most 20 minutes. (Saying a few words at an informal gathering of friends should be much shorter).

Celebrate the deceased's life: Say a few good things about the deceased.

Judgment: If you are unsure whether the deceased believes in Christ, don't say they are now gone to a better place (like heaven). Though it may comfort the relatives of the dead, it will give false hope. Worse still, it is not the gospel. (But if the deceased underwent a long time of suffering, it is comforting to everyone to acknowledge the relief that the suffering has ceased).

However, even if you are sure the deceased is an unbeliever, don't say the deceased is going to hell. In other words, don't judge life after death unless you are sure the dead is a believer and will go to heaven.

Grief: Whether the deceased is a believer or not, you **must** acknowledge that the relatives are grieving. So, saying a few words of comfort and praying for the relatives is essential.

Words of comfort: Few people know how to process grief at the death of a loved one. Some unfortunate accidental deaths occur, and often loved ones blame themselves or have regrets for having failed to meet the need of the deceased when they were alive. But there is a universal truth that the pastor can stress that would bring comfort: God appoints the day of birth and the day of death. When we acknowledge this, then the causes of death become less important. We help grieving relatives see a broader perspective than blaming themselves or others for neglect.

Long-term grief counselling: Grief doesn't go away by just using words, however comforting they may be. Silent commitment to listening would be a better option. It will help the grieving to talk about their loss. Some people grieve so much that they don't want to talk about it, even after a month or a year. **Pastoring is always a long-term occupation.** You have to be sensitive in each case. If the grieving relatives are members of your church, then you are responsible for caring for them. Even if they are not your church members, you may still be the best person available to help them. You could act as a trusted friend. In doing so, you are a good witness to the community.

Focus at the Funeral: Your focus at the funeral mustn't be on the deceased but on the living. So, a funeral presents an excellent opportunity to give the gospel. **Even amid grief, there is hope in the gospel** — eternal life after death. There is no hope at all without the gospel.

Worship: Ask the family if they have any favourite worship songs/hymns they want to be sung. But suggest that they ought to be Christ-centered.

After worship, you may begin the funeral service with the following words:

- *Funerals are a stark reminder to us all that we will all face death one day*
- *Funerals remind us that life is short and life is vanity.*
- *Funerals help us stop momentarily and start living with an eternal perspective.*
- *Funerals remind us that man is destined to die once and, after death, face judgment.*
- *Funerals remind us that there is hope only in Christ, in His gospel.*
- *Funerals also remind us that even amid grief, there is hope in the gospel of Christ—eternal life after death. There is no hope without the gospel.*

Such an introduction invariably makes people sit up and hear what you say in the sermon.

Scripture: Choose an appropriate scripture to preach the basic gospel message.

Basic Gospel Outline:

God is holy and has given us a conscience to know we are breaking His laws daily, weekly, yearly, even to the day we inevitably die. Then we face His judgment.

God is love. And He loved us so much that He sent His One and only Son Jesus, who came on earth, lived a perfect life that we should have lived and then died on the cross to take the judgment we should have. But Jesus rose from the dead on the third day—having paid for our sins and having conquered death.

Christianity is unique because we believe good people don't go to heaven. And bad people have every chance to make it to heaven. Jesus says, *I am the way, the truth and the life—no one comes to the Father except by Me*". So whether you are a very good or horrible person, you need Jesus.

Today, you can be sure you are going to heaven if you turn around from the way you are living and from the way you are trusting and turn to Jesus and trust only Him as the way to heaven and make Him your only Lord of your life. Ask Him to forgive you and give you eternal life with Him now and in heaven when you die.

Responding to the Gospel message: You may ask all those attending whether any of them would like to respond to the gospel message. (Even if you are asked to say a few words in an informal gathering of friends of the deceased, you may still ask them to respond to the gospel message and ask if they have any questions).

Prayer: End the funeral service by praying for the deceased's spouse, children and grandchildren, and friends that they would be comforted by God and find their hope in the gospel.

2. Pre-funeral preparations

Whether you are dealing with the very poor or with the very rich, with the well- educated or with the illiterate, whether with people from the North or South, East or West, in the world — when a person dies, **you are dealing with grief, you are dealing with chaos, and you are dealing with limited time to arrange for burial.** Taking all this into account, as a pastor, you have to conduct the full funeral service, knowing that

you represent Christ to the community. **Funerals are not rituals.** Take them seriously!

The following must be done:

- i. Cause of Death Certificate from a doctor (or) Inquest Report from the Police (Panchnama, in India) along with a post-mortem coroner's report if the person died on the street and a doctor's certificate is not available.
- ii. A coffin and a hearse must be arranged
- iii. A grave must be dug in the Christian Cemetery
- iv. You must visit the grieving family to assess their emotional, physical and financial support and as a comfort that you are with them in their life ahead.
- v. You may want to display relevant scriptures in the church and print them on a leaflet for distribution among those attending the funeral service.
- vi. Your worship team and your sermon must be ready, as well as what you will say at the burial site in the cemetery.
- vii. You must be early at the church to greet the family when they arrive.

If your church has middle-class members, you would have to concentrate only on items (iv, v, vi and vii). But if your members could be poor and illiterate, you would have to deal with all the above points and arrange the finances. I know this because, for some years, mine were.

3. Suitable scriptures

You can use some of the following scriptures to make a funeral leaflet for distribution. Choose anywhere from five to fifteen that you find appropriate for the life of the deceased and the grieving relatives.

Regarding how short our life is on earth

- *Psalm 89:46-48 How long do we put up with this, God? Are you gone for good? Will you hold this grudge forever? ⁴⁷ Remember my sorrow and how short life is. Did you create men and women for nothing but this? ⁴⁸ We'll see death soon enough. Everyone does. And there's no back door out of hell. (The Message)*
- *Psalm 144:3-4 O Lord, what is man that you even notice him? Why bother at all with the human race? 4 For man is but a breath; his days are like a passing shadow. (The Living Bible)*
- *Ecclesiastes 3:11 Everything is appropriate in its own time. But though God has planted eternity in the hearts of men, even so, many cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end. (The Living Bible)*

After Death, there is Judgment

- *Heb 9:27-28 Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, ²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. (NIV)*

Regarding faith in Christ alone

- *Rom 3:22-24 The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this. ²³ Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and*

proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, ²⁴ God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of our mess and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ (Message Bible).

- *Romans 5:6–11 Christ arrives right on time to make this happen. He didn't, and doesn't, wait for us to get ready. He presented himself for this sacrificial death when we were far too weak and rebellious to do anything to prepare ourselves. And even if we hadn't been so weak, we wouldn't have known what to do anyway. ⁷ We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for and how someone good and noble could inspire us to selfless sacrifice. ⁸ But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him. ⁹ Now that we are set right with God by means of this sacrificial death, the consummate blood sacrifice, there is no longer a question of being at odds with God in any way. ¹⁰ If, when we were at our worst, we were put on friendly terms with God by the sacrificial death of his Son, now that we're at our best, just think of how our lives will expand and deepen by means of his resurrection life! ¹¹ Now that we have received this amazing friendship with God, we are no longer content to say it in plodding prose. We sing and shout our praises to God through Jesus, the Messiah! (The Message)*
- *Romans 12:2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will. (NIV)*
- *Ephesians 2:8-9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works so that no one can boast. (NIV)*

Regarding Resurrection of the Dead

- *John 11:25-27 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." (NIV)*
- *Phil 3:20-21 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. (NIV)*
- *1 Thess 4:13-15 Brothers, 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. ¹⁴ We believe that Jesus died and rose again, so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. (NIV)*

As believers in Christ, we are better off with Him than being in this world.

- *Phil 1:21-23 For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.*
- *Rev 21:3-4 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "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. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, mourning, crying, or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

In heaven, we will see our loved ones (King David was sure he would see his son)

- *2 Sam 12:23 But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."*

Often, we ask God why He has taken our loved ones away. Remember, we can't see what He sees. We

must trust Him to work things out for our good.

Rom 8:28-29 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.

2 Cor 4:16-18 Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, inwardly, we are being renewed daily. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 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.

In the time of grief, let us come to the Lord and pray for His loving kindness, peace, comfort and strength. God is our Father, and He knows. Come to Him.

Ps 34:18 The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those crushed in spirit.

Ps 61:1-2 Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. ² From the ends of the earth, I call to you; I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

Isaiah 49:15-16 Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! ¹⁶ See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.

Isaiah 66:13 As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem."

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

Matthew 11:28-39 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Hebrews 4:16 Let us confidently approach the throne of grace so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.