

CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF “THE WAY”

Start Planning Your Own Funeral

by Grayson Pope

Marilyn Johnson starts every morning the same way. She arranges her cup of tea, props up her slippers, shakes out the pages of *The New York Times*, and reads the obituaries.

Why the obituaries? “Obituaries, as anyone who reads or writes obituaries will tell you, are really not about death,” she says. While obituaries explain the circumstances of a person’s death, they spend much more time explaining how they lived, making them a fantastic way to learn about life. Another daily obit reader, artist Maira Kalman, muses, “[When I read obituaries,] I’m trying to figure out two very simple things: how to live, and how to die.”

These artists, as well as many others throughout history, have stumbled on one of the most ancient practices of obtaining wisdom for life—thinking about death.

TEACH US TO NUMBER OUR DAYS

Moses, the towering Old Testament figure, is perhaps most famous for the Exodus—the episode recording his faithful obedience to God, who commissioned Moses to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt. Moses’ 120 years of life (see Deut. 34:7) included an unbelievable range of experiences: being raised in Pharaoh’s house, killing a man, running away from his people and living in hiding, coming back to lead God’s people out of slavery, seeing the Red Sea part before his eyes, almost making it to the Promised Land, being forced to wander around the desert for 40 years, then being prevented from entering that Promised Land.

People who have lived long lives are worth learning from, if for no other reason than they have simply experienced more than we have. In Moses’ case, his faithful example and leadership make him even more interesting to study, which is why we should take seriously his prayer for wisdom recorded in Psalm 90 (we should pay even closer attention when considering his words were inspired by the Spirit of God).

In verse 12, Moses voices a collective prayer for the people of God, saying, “So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” According to Moses, the key to a heart of wisdom is in learning to number our days. Put another way, the key to wisdom for life is thinking about death. As we consider how few our days are, we begin to develop a heart of wisdom.

GO TO THE HOUSE OF MOURNING

Moses is really saying the same thing as the rest of Scripture. In some of the oddest-sounding sections of the Bible, Solomon writes, “It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart” (Eccles. 7:2).

Yes, Solomon said it is better to go to a funeral than a wedding. Why? Because the house of mourning is the end of all mankind—it’s where each of us is headed—and those who recognize this fact will reflect on how they spend their days. Funerals aren’t better than weddings in general; Solomon is saying that funerals are better than weddings for *obtaining wisdom*.

He then clarifies, saying, “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth” (Eccles. 7:4). Solomon—the wisest man to ever live (see 1 Kings 3:12)—tells us that wisdom for life is found in pondering death. We shouldn’t move on from death too quickly, going from the house of mourning to the house of mirth, either, because thinking about the brevity of life is the key to finding wisdom. Most of us are ready to go parties or receptions after someone’s funeral, but perhaps we would be better off to sit at the graveside a bit longer.

OUR DAYS ARE NUMBERED

How exactly does thinking about death make us better at living? Let's turn to David, another psalmist worth learning from. David struggled with how to live a life that honored God while being surrounded by those who denounced and demeaned him. How could he live for God when the wicked seemed to receive nothing but good fortune for their evil? How could he make sense of it all?

By thinking about the brevity of life. Out of his turmoil, David wrote "O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am!" (Ps. 39:4). The way out of his thinking about the futility of life was in seeing his life in light of eternity. To live each day well, he had to reflect on how few of those days he had left. David, Solomon, and Moses all realized that thinking about death helps us make better decisions for life.

Similarly, Francis Chan writes: "[We] make wiser decisions after our hearts spend time in the house of mourning. I tend to make good decisions at funerals and poor ones in restaurants. I have made wise financial decisions while surrounded by starving children, and poor decisions from the suburbs. We need to keep our hearts close to the house of mourning to avoid decisions we will regret. As difficult as it is, we need to be mindful of death. We must make decisions with our day of death in mind."

START PLANNING YOUR FUNERAL

Jonathan Edwards is known for his famous resolutions—short promises he made to help keep himself on the path of righteousness. His ninth resolution reads, "Resolved, To think much, on all occasions, of my dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death." He was resolved to think about his death and the normal circumstances it would bring. That means Edwards was resolved to plan his own funeral in his mind. His example is one we can follow.

Try this short exercise: for 10 minutes today, think through the reality that you will die. Reflect on all that thought brings, from death certificates to funeral plans and coffin choices. Remind yourself that in Christ "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28); that your next breath comes only if he allows it. Imagine you will die tomorrow, next week, or next year. Then, ask yourself questions like, "If I were about to die..."

- "What would I do differently? What would I start doing? What would I stop doing?"
- "Would I keep living the way I am—living where I live, doing the things I do, working the job I have?"
- "What would I be ashamed of not attempting for God?"
- "Who would I spend more time with?"

Surely, God will bring some things into focus, namely that we should live today like we'll die tomorrow. Resolve to think about your death more often. Resolve to plan your own funeral every now and then, at least in your mind.

WHY THINKING ABOUT DEATH SHOULDN'T SCARE YOU

Thinking about your own death sounds a bit morbid, at first (certainly, planning your own funeral does!). But what Edwards and others have seen is that in ruminating over our death we obtain wisdom for our life. Are men and women who think about death more emotionally robust than the rest of us? Are they of some strange, macabre mold? Perhaps, but I doubt it. Instead, they seem to understand what Paul put so memorably, that "to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). As believers, we have the *opportunity* to live for Christ today.

We get to love his church, love his people, and tell others the greatest news ever heard. Our eternal, heavenly life informs our ephemeral, worldly life. That heavenly life is an eternal one alongside Christ himself! Death might frighten us because it's unknown—but it doesn't have to. If we think about death often, and realize that to live is Christ and to die truly is gain, then we can live lives full of wisdom and godliness. We get to live for Christ today, and we gain him even more if we die tomorrow.

Each of us will stand before God one day to give an account of our lives (2 Cor. 5:10). Don't let that day be the first you've thought about death.