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Death,
Where is your sting?

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- Rev. David Niebuhr

INTRODUCTION

As a chaplain in the emergency services, I have been confronted on a daily basis with deaths that extend over the entire spectrum of beliefs and church boundaries. I presently serve as the President of the Emergency Services Chaplaincy of Southern Africa in addition to being the training officer for aspirant chaplains. I find it fascinating that there is such a great number of people, and even church leaders, that truly have no idea of what the Bible really says about death. I have certainly come across more people with incorrect ideas about death than I have come across with a correct understanding that is truly based on biblical principles. To start with, I will be attempting to help you in examining your views on you really believe about death, and to test your understanding of death, against what we learn from the word of God.

Then, I wish to equippe you in being able to assist others when they lose a loved one through death. In this book I will try to show you some of the wrong things that should not be done or said as well as to show you some of the things that can really be helpful to someone that is going through the trauma of losing a loved one.

Lastly, I want to try and assist you to prepare for the day when it will be your turn to enter the realm of death. Therefore, we shall look at the reasons for fearing death, and how we can overcome that fear by having knowledge about death, and the assurance provided by our faith.

May God also use this book to help you to grow in your knowledge and love of Him.

- *Rev. David Niebuhr.*

DEATH. WHERE IS YOUR STING?

Death – I fear you, I admire you, I hate you, I look forward to your arrival...

So many of us are badly wounded by death which has ripped someone away from us at some stage or other of our lives. Death is the cause of so much pain, emptiness and sorrow.

“How well I still remember the feelings of shock, pain and being shattered the first time that I heard that somebody near and dear to me had been snatched away by you, Death. So quickly, so suddenly, so mercilessly, so final. You did not take my pain and suffering into consideration. You come and tear my life to pieces leaving me shattered and alone. Never before had I understood what it means to have people around me and yet to feel totally alone. Stripped, naked and empty. I try to remain strong, but how does one stand without legs? My legs have been knocked out beneath me. I want to try and get rid of you through reasoning but you, Death, have robbed me of my logical reasoning and thought-patterns. Suddenly, everything that was normal and permanent is gone and nothing makes any real sense. I am standing in bright sunlight and yet everywhere around me I experience darkness.

My eyes stare straight ahead, but they are dull, stripped of all signs of happiness, love and life. I look but see nothing. Emotions tug me this way and that. Shock, denial, rage, fear, heartache, pain... unbearable pain. I try to be strong and yet, I know that I cannot. I can't go on – I do not want to go on – I feel torn apart, broken, and empty. I feel how all my strength has been drained from me, as if I am leaking and just becoming more and more empty. I can cry until I reach the point where I believe that there is not a single tear left anywhere in me. Empty from crying, tired from crying, I wish that I can forget... Then, as if from nowhere, memories come streaming through my confusion and I cry – I feel I can cry no longer, but I cry...

I want to see my loved one, I must see him or her with my own eyes! I refuse to believe it if I do not see it myself... If it's not possible, I become annoyed and agitated, I want to scream, I want to fight.... I must see my loved one or I refuse to believe it.....

If I may see my loved one, I am scared... Do I really want to see "it"? Then, it looks so different from what I expected... I want to shake my loved one and shout.... "Wake up, you have played long enough! Wake up, this is enough. Get up! Please, just wake up...." Then, I have to say farewell - my loved one must be taken to the mortuary. I don't want to.... I cannot.... How can I allow them to take the one I love away, never to return.....? It tears out a part of my soul when the one I love is taken away and we can no longer be there together... NO, please, do not do it.....! And yet my logical thoughts know that there is no other way.

I must be strong for everyone else, try to conceal my tears. After all, we can't all cry, someone has to remain strong... Who am I fooling.....? My brokenness and hurt continues to eat at me like a cancer. I am battling, but I must go on, I cannot give in.... Why do you do this to us? LORD, please help...!

I also wish to die now, please? I cannot go on with these feelings in me... I am so drained, I might as well just die... Death, why did you not rather take me – I cannot suffer like this...

You are playing games with my thoughts... If I had only been there, maybe I could have helped... could have prevented.... If I had possessed more knowledge of medicine - if the doctors had possibly acted in a different manner. If only we had left earlier or used another road.... I should have made peace; there are certain things that we had not finished discussing... It is my fault. All these things drive me mad...Why? For what reason? What if....? It could have been so different.

It must be someone's fault... Such things don't just happen.... The doctors should have stumbled across something... Drunken persons are not allowed on the roads – the traffic officers should have done something about it.... the disregard for the law in our country and crime levels are getting out of hand and the government is doing nothing about the situation... If only I had returned home earlier, if I could only tell you how much I love you.....

The paramedics should have got there faster.... "Lord, why did you do it?"

It feels all wrong to go through my loved one's possessions... Death, you stole the one that I love! It feels wrong to be in your private space because I know that you

would not have liked it and, if you were to walk in here now, I would be in a lot of trouble. But you are not here, and now I want to ask you what I should do – what were your wishes, but I can't my loved one... Death, can't I see the one I love for just a couple more minutes – there are things that I have to say, have to know, so badly want to hear.... Please....? There is no reaction.

People, dear people.... Everyone is buzzing around me, everyone wants to speak to me, comfort me, I wish they would just go away.... I know they mean well, but if one more person tells me that the Lord came to pick His most beautiful flower, I shall scream! I just want someone to be there, someone that will understand. A friend that can cry with me and laugh with me about the good old days... Someone that will take each step with me and help me without my needing to ask.... Just be there. Words often just hurt me - they cannot reason away that which is going on inside me. I know they mean well. Although I do appreciate the fact that they are taking the trouble – I wish that I could just go and sit on the highest mountain alone... Even then, it would be nice to know that, although my genuine friends have allowed me to sit alone on my mountain, just a short distance away they are also sitting on the mountain, near me in case I need them – they haven't left me on my own. Still I long for someone to hold me, to comfort me and to assure me that it is all just a terrible dream.... I hear someone laugh; how dare they? How insensitive... don't they realise that Death was here...? It annoys me - and it hurts me... Don't they understand the pain and raw wound that I have... How can people still laugh...? Yes, logic tells me that it is possibly children in the street, or someone in the neighbourhood that is completely unaware of our situation and is not affected in any way by what has happened... But still, I do not want to know about joy and happiness. Selfishly, I want the whole world to mourn and grieve with me... I want everyone to experience the loss of the one I love as intensely as I do...

Someone tells me I must be strong, my family needs me... What about me? Who is there for me? Why must I always be there for others? Who is there for me? I am also affected by death; may I not also mourn and grieve? My family....I no longer want family and loved ones. It hurts too much if I have to lose one of them. I no longer want to love; I cannot go through so much pain again... Never again. I build a

wall to keep others on the outside, I shall not allow myself to go through this hell again...

I feel annoyed! How could the one I love do this to me – how could the one I love leave me in this situation? How selfish was it of him or her, and can't he or she see what I am being put through...? My intellect tells me that they are not given any choice, Death tears them away from us without them having asked for it to happen – and yet, I am annoyed that they have gone. Selfishly, I want to blame my loved one for the hurt which, because of their passing, has shattered me... Surely, someone must be guilty... Then I feel guilty again – How could I think that way? Some people say it is normal, but I think I am going mad.

What will happen to us? Who will now perform the important role that was previously undertaken by our dead loved one? Who will now take on the role of providing for us and doing kind deeds as our loved one did? I feel helpless, terrified, uncertain, agrieved. A part of my security has been torn away. What now? Yet, no one must dare to pretend that they can replace my loved one. No one and nothing can take the place of my loved one.

Everything that is happening around me feels like a movie that is being shown - unreal. I look at it and the experience is like a video that is being played at high speed. I watch, but take nothing in. It is too unreal – the emotions and events are something that I cannot identify with. The situation that I find myself in is something totally strange – nobody has taught me about this. I do not know what to do, I feel so powerless... Is this a reality? I don't know anymore... What must I do? Oh, please help me..! What is expected of me now? I want to flee from the unknown danger, but I cannot. I have to take action and do something... But what?

The days that follow are not much better. So much to do - so much to arrange. A funeral must be arranged. A coffin must be chosen and pallbearers must be selected. It feels so unkind, so heartless... It feels as though we want to get rid of our loved one, yet we dread the funeral, the final goodbye. We arrange it, but sincerely hope that someone will come and tell us that there was a mistake... the one I love has regained consciousness... the one I love was not really dead... but that does not happen. The undertaker wants to know which flowers I would prefer.... How

ridiculous! Flowers?! Yes, I know it needs to be arranged... But do I really want to worry about flowers and colour schemes right now? And yet, I do want to make it special for my loved one... The service must show something of my love.... my last respects! Even small choices, like the choice of a coffin, the flowers, the hymns to be sung and the selection of pallbearers feel like enormous tasks that have to be executed. It drains me, leaves me tired and empty... Where has my strength gone?

A tribute has to be written – the words for the service sheet need to be chosen... It hurts... It is me and a piece of paper. I must page through the memories of my loved one – the good memories and the not-so-good memories need to be re-lived and from them I need to choose words that will say “farewell” in an appropriate manner. Tears flow like the ink should...

There is an enormous empty feeling in my stomach. It can really not be compared to the enormous gap in my chest, the emptiness of the place where my heart once was full of love. The emptiness deep inside actually feels as heavy as a stone – empty and yet so heavy. I feel bilious; I don't want to eat... It's strange that everybody is bringing food, because nobody wants to eat. Still, I am very grateful for each person that brings something because we know that we need to force ourselves to eat a snack or else we shall have a total collapse... I know that not one of us has the power or energy to cook. People are streaming to our house so luckily there is something to offer... I cannot eat... nothing can fill the empty hole... I am not hungry.... But I know I must....

Some people are offering me medication, ‘something to help me relax’ and ‘something to help me sleep’... But I don't want it! I don't want to sleep and I cannot relax. I don't want to forget – I don't want to dream. How will it help anyway... it can only extend my pain and grieving... I must confront it now... I must start to work through it... I do not want the process to last any longer than necessary. Eventually sleep comes as a result of sheer emotional exhaustion... if you can call it sleep because the brain and my thoughts keep on wandering... I jerk as I wake up, hope it was just a dream, but realise that it really is so.... I lay awake waiting to hear the familiar sounds made by my loved one when returning home later than usual, or even those well-known coughing sounds... something that can indicate that it is just a bad dream which will go away. It has not gone away. Exhausted, as if I have

never rested I am dragged further through what is happening around me.... In every case I experience a feeling of having no control over things.... I just go along with it, instinctively like a lamb being led to a place for slaughter... unwillingly, yet knowing that I have no choice.

The funeral...

I choose my best outfit and get dressed - it is, after all, expected of me to look like someone on their way to a funeral. I must show respect. The family has decided that we should be able to see our loved one before the funeral service. We are taken into a room where the coffin is. I see that the lid is open. I approach slowly, scared of seeing what is inside – scared, even though I know what is waiting for me. The image that I see before me as I stare into the coffin tears at me deep in my heart of hearts. It hurts... “Why are you doing this to me? Just wake up!”..... it looks so “unnatural”. It looks as though my loved one has been prepared like a parcel that has to be sent away.... My loved one looks peaceful.... but different.. I feel as though I can stand there for ever, just looking... I do not ever want to let go.... I want to make this moment last for as long as possible, because when the coffin is closed, I shall NEVER see you again. I know it cannot be so.... I must say goodbye. I must turn around and walk out.... I am torn between feelings that make me want to run away and never look back, and an urge to grab hold of you and never let go.... But the people are waiting at the church.... I must say goodbye – until inside the church...

Feeling downcast and shattered, we are awaiting the arrival of our loved one. Then we notice the hearse. It approaches slowly and is parked neatly in front of the church. People walk past, and everyone wants to encourage, everyone wants to comfort, everyone that cares... I appreciate the fact that everyone came, but I wish that I could rather avoid them. Everybody’s words of consolation, love and encouragement make it so much more difficult for me to try and concentrate my thoughts on things other than the reality of what is happening. The scene is being enacted like a movie... my brain has switched off... I am watching and yet I am seeing nothing. In my mind the proceedings are being played out. I know that we have to carry our loved one into the church... I know that we need to gather around the coffin... I must get a copy of the service sheet.... I purposely try to concentrate on the proceedings, because I do not want to think about the final goodbye.

I stare at the contents of the hearse. I see the nice shiny coffin, and the large bunch of flowers lying on it. So nice – so monstrous! The undertaker helps us by explaining exactly how to take hold of and carry the coffin. I do it, although it feels strange – horrible, and yet, an honour to be able to do it. For the very last time I am able to do something for the one I love.

What a difficult occasion. I walk into the church full of people and I sense that everyone's eyes are fixed on me... everyone wants to see how I am going to react. And so, I try to be strong, but the moment becomes just too big. Everything inside me rips to pieces and my tears stream. It is, after all, my turn to mourn and to cry for my loved one if I wish to, it doesn't matter what other people think! I have developed an attitude of detesting the opinions of those who say: "Boys don't cry". Those who say that clearly have no idea of the pain inside me. I sit and stare straight ahead. The minister talks and preaches but the words simply flow over me without my absorbing anything. It feels as if everything is just being acted out in front of me while I am not really a part of anything – just like watching the television.

Eventually, all of the proceedings in the church come to an end and we travel along the road to the cemetery. On arrival there, it is easy to see where the grave has been prepared and is almost like an open wound in the earth, wide open, waiting for us to gather round it. Once again, the coffin must be carried. Now for the final time, even though my brain does not want to believe it, but nothing could have prepared me for these feelings.

I still remember it so clearly – the feeling when the coffin was being lowered – I hear the straps of the lowering device moaning and groaning while the coffin slowly descended into the gaping earth. If I thought that the pain and hurt earlier was bad, I now know that it can get a lot worse. If I thought that I had already said goodbye, I realise again that I cannot let go – I do not want to! It feels as if I want to scream, NO!, Don't..... please? But I cannot. I feel that I also want to jump into the hole in the earth and just die, because that cannot be worse than the hurt that I am experiencing right now.

How do I leave you here, in this hole in the ground, how do I walk away from here and leave you alone? My heart is once again ripped out of my chest and I am so

empty... A part of me has died today together with my loved one, and a part of who I am – who I was – is also being buried. The role that my loved one played in my life was so dynamic that it was part of my moulding, my character - who I am. Today, something inside of me is dying. The funeral is not just that of my loved one, but also a part of me.

We are offered the opportunity to assist in the closing of the grave. I must help. I feel it is my duty. What a ghastly sound as the red clods of earth land on the lid of the coffin. The dull thud against the hollow wood. Slowly, the sound becomes softer as we make more progress until only a pile of ground remains as an indication of the gaping wound in the earth.

It is all over. We must go. We must leave our loved one here and depart because arrangements have been made for tea and snacks after the funeral. It is time to put on a smile and pretend that you are “okay”. On the one hand there is relief because it is over, but on the other hand you wish that you could be alone, just escape to go and sit on a mountain and scream – scream as loudly as you want to with no-one in sight to see you... But life goes on.

Slowly but surely, in the days following the funeral, everyone starts returning to their various homes and jobs, and then comes the great loneliness, the great absence. Where your home at first felt like a beehive just after the death, you now begin to find yourself really alone. Even though you longed to be alone, now you start to fear it. Loneliness gives one time to think, to re-live – and it hurts. I try to remain busy because, when I’m busy, I do not have to think about what has happened. I try to avoid the memories and hurt. I run away from myself, but battle to get away. I wonder if people are purposely avoiding me or is it just that I desire to have people around me because I do not want to confront the reality?.

Now I need someone that can help. Someone to talk to, someone that will understand. Strange, I am looking for someone that can understand, and yet it annoys me so much when people say that they understand how I feel because, how can they? No-one can! My situation is so unique no-one else’s can compare with it... Maybe they might have gone through something similar, but I don’t want to hear about their pain because mine is still too great. Selfishly, I want to see my pain as

more important and greater than that of others, because I yearn for my pain to be comforted... I don't think that it is wrong, but I am definitely also not in a condition where I am 100% objective... the feelings are still too raw, too sore.

Time and time again I find myself back in the cemetery. I have to go and visit my loved one regularly. After all, I cannot just leave him or her there alone. New and fresh flowers have to be placed on the grave every day. My loved one must know that I shall never forget him or her. After a month or two the visits become less as the obligations and workload increase again. To start with, I feel guilty, but ensure that I go there every weekend. However, sometimes I have guests for the weekend, or I have to attend a course for the weekend, or for a week or two. After a few months I feel guilty because I find that I only get there occasionally... I know that my loved one is no longer actually there, in the cemetery, and that it is only the mortal and perishable remains that are resting there, and yet, I cling steadfastly to that which was tangible. And still I look for the knowledge that my loved one is here with me albeit in the grave. My brain convinces me that my loved one has left the bodily form and continues to live on. But it takes a long time to try and get the right perspective of that which was tangible and the proof that, once, my loved one lived here amongst us in a flesh and blood form, as we knew and remembered them.

I know that I must allow my loved one to rest in peace and I genuinely don't begrudge the rest that is deserved, but selfishly I want to have him or her back in the flesh – with me, touchable, visible and in the worldly, familiar form....

What I have written up to now is an attempt, from my own experiences and emotions, to try and help you understand what a person experiences when they have lost someone near and dear to them as a result of Death. I can only share what I feel as a result of my personal experience and feelings, but I trust that in doing so, it will help you to understand a little of the hurt that a person suffers in these situations.

In writing this, I would like to share with you how I, as a Chaplain in the Emergency Services, have been confronted with similar situations almost daily for several years, and what I have found to be helpful so that, as a result, it may assist you to help and support others when they are confronted by the death of a loved one.

Please note that I am not trying to say that I have all the answers or that I believe that my manner of approach is the only one that works or even that it is the correct method. All I am trying to do is to share my experiences with you in the hope that it may be of assistance to you.

UNDERSTANDING DEATH

It is important that any person who wishes to assist others at the time when death strikes should know what they believe regarding death, and why they believe it. I make this statement because, all too often, I have experienced how people confronted by death have cracked under the dreadful reality of it because it does not fit in with what they believed or thought they understood. Sometimes the faith of people is severely damaged because, what they originally believed, has been torn to shreds by the reality of death.

On a few occasions, I have even had aspiring chaplains who wanted to become involved in the chaplaincy because they believed that God wants to use them to pray for the deceased in order to awaken them from the dead. They firmly believed that, if they asked God in faith, it would happen. That is what the word of God has always taught us.

It was a terrible reality for them to be called out to a gruesome motor vehicle accident where the bodies of dead people had been torn to pieces and body parts scattered all over the scene of the accident. Terrible was the reality that this body will never again become joined together or whole. Or even to be on the scene of a fire where the body has been so badly charred that it is not recognizable.... Or to be called to a scene where a teenager has placed a shotgun into his mouth and there is not much left for the purpose of identification.....

Believe me, the word of God is true. If it is God's will that someone should indeed be awakened from the dead, then it will happen. But the truth and reality is that 100% of people that die, will not come back again. The exception is so small that it would have no effect on the statistics. Death is final. I can witness about a scene where, in fact, God did bring someone back for a while – definitely a miracle.

I have also known people who believe that what the Bible says regarding the fact that someone living close to the Lord will live to the age of 70 years and older, also indicates that anyone dying at an age younger than that obviously does not have his or her affairs right with God. What happens then, if their children die as a result of illness or in an accident? What if they know how much their children loved the Lord?

Do they, as a result, lose their faith as a result of the death? How do you comfort a mother then, who has lost her three-month old baby as a result of cot death?

What words of comfort will you give to the person who has lost her teenage son through a senseless suicide? If you have already decided that the child is in hell and does not deserve the mercy of God, then what words of comfort can you give to his family? Later in this book, I shall dedicate a chapter to suicide.

In my introduction, I wrote: “Death – I fear you, I admire you, I hate you, I look forward to your coming.....”

What does that mean? I believe that most of us do understand and experience, to some extent, the first concepts of fear. We all know and realise that our life can end at any moment, whether it be through illness, accident or disaster. One of the only facts of life that we can be sure of, is the approach of death. We understand only too well that we must be ready and we fear that death could surprise us unexpectedly and find us not ready for its arrival. We fear the way in which it will happen. Will it be painful? Will I suffer? What happens thereafter? Is there really life after death and, if there is, where will I open my eyes after leaving this world or dimension? We do have the word of God that assures us that Jesus overcame death, and that death is merely a passage for God’s children to an everlasting life together with Him. In Psalm 23 we read: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, FOR YOU ARE WITH ME;” Even in the days of King David, God taught His people through His servant that He is there for His children as they move through the realm of death. Even in death, which can be described as the loneliest of places, where we are stripped of everything, even our earthly bodies, one fact remains strong and true – God does not let His children go through it on their own. We do not need to fear, but we have a responsibility to ensure that our affairs with the Lord are in order in case it should happen that, even today, we have to stand before Him without having another chance to put our affairs with Him in order.

Death, I admire you... There seems to be something magical and fascinating about death – something superhuman and beyond our understanding. Death is the birth of a new dimension in our existence that stretches far above our human understanding and thoughts. People who have had near-death experiences have related stories of

how they were met by an angel who led them to these breath-taking scenes. Some have told of how their loved ones came to fetch them. We hear of an extremely bright light, a tunnel that leads us to a new existence. We hear of a marvellous peace.... We do not know if it will really be like this, as we have, in all probability, not been at that point ourselves to experience it and yet, we sometimes cannot help but wonder about the life hereafter. We wonder about the beauty of God's city, with streets of gold and unparalleled cleanliness. The marvel of being able to see angels – to be able to see God.

Death, I hate you! For the pain that you left behind, the broken lives, unbearable hurt and emptiness – I am able to do nothing else but hate what you leave behind. The expression on the faces of those loved ones, devastated at being left alone by death, is so terrible, so final, so deserving of our hatred. If death had a face, we would have hated it. We would have chased and destroyed it because of the hurt that it leaves behind.

Death, I look forward to your coming. Oh, won't it be wonderful to be able to see, once again, all of those who I have already lost! How much joy is waiting for us in heaven to be able to be re-united with the loved ones that we miss so terribly? How phenomenally beautiful will heaven be and how beautifully will the streets sparkle with gold... and to be able to meet God. How breathtaking and what an honour. And also to be relieved from the worldly body – the pain and suffering that sometimes comes with our earthly existence - to be truly free of the burden of sin and temptation. Oh, how wonderful it must be to meet my God. There is so much that I still want to ask, still want to know...

So, what do **I** believe about death? What do **you** believe about death?

Do you believe that, when you die, it is because God has determined that it should be so and that your time on earth is finished? Do you believe that people only die because it is their time as determined by God?

How, then, do you explain to the wives of employees at a security firm that their husbands were involved in a cash-in-transit heist, that the robbers poured petrol over their vehicle and burnt them to death because it was God's time to come and fetch them? How do you tell a mother and father that have lost their teenage son, as a

result of suicide, that it was the son's time and that is why he is dead? In fact, the truth is that we do not know. We speculate and try to understand, but we do not know.

Personally, I believe that when someone dies from an illness or some other natural cause, or even in an accident, or a freak accident, then it is because God has determined the time of death. I know that there are those that will disagree with me about this and I am not in any way trying to profess that my theory is necessarily the right one, but it is how I understand and interpret it.

Murder and suicide do not fit in with the will of God and, therefore, I do not believe that it is the will of God to end people's lives in that manner. That is why the word of God states that it is a sin in the eyes of God. However, even when one dies unexpectedly and not at the time determined by God, Psalm 23 is still true – God will also be there when we enter the valley of the shadow of death.

Here, I also want to touch on another point, and explain my views in this regard. I want to talk about the feelings of guilt after the death of a loved one. I am talking about: "If only we had gone to the doctor sooner" or "if only I hadn't told them to follow that route, maybe they would not have been in the accident." Perhaps "If only I had known some first aid, my loved one might still have been with us. "

My view is that God has determined the time when He will come and collect each one of His children and it makes no difference where we are, what could have been done to help or what knowledge we have. When our time on earth is over, there is no way of escape. If I truly believe that, then surely I know that all the "what if's" or "maybe's" would not have been able to alter the end result.

However, I do not want you to see my views as the only truth, but what is important is what you believe and why you believe it. If your understanding about death has to be tested with the reality of death, will it withstand the test? I do not want to believe that I have stopped learning and that I have a perfect understanding, because the living word of God would then no longer be able to offer me any challenge to find out more and more about God. We gradually learn more and more in proportion to the growth of our relationship with God. Possibly, God also indicates to me that, what I believe about death is not correct. My prayer is simply: "Lord, may I never be so

short-sighted that I do not grow in my thoughts and knowledge, thereby rendering me useless in the areas where You want to send me.”

Another conception which has more views and debates than I wish to touch on, is where we go after death and whether or not we shall have knowledge of what is happening on earth when we can no longer be here. Once again I would like to express my humble opinion, and the reasons for my belief. In doing so, I do not wish to pretend that I necessarily have all the answers, nor do I want to do an exegesis about the subject. I base my views of death on Luke 16:19-31. The story of the poor beggar named Lazarus and the rich young man. Here we see an example that Jesus himself uses to teach His followers. Firstly, we see that God sent His angels to fetch Lazarus when he died and to take him to heaven. This may give us an indication of what will happen when we die and what will happen to our soul. Then we read about a definite heaven and hell. Two places that exist. We also read that the rich young man saw the way that his brothers lived and he begged father Abraham to talk to them and to ask them to put things right in their lives because they, too, would end up in hell if they continued to live in an incorrect way. And so, from that I want to presume that we shall certainly be aware of what happens on earth even if we are no longer here. Once again, this is my humble opinion.

Another portion of the Bible which fascinates me is Acts 7:55-56 where we read about the stoning of Stephen. Here we find that Stephen, before his death, already saw Jesus in His splendour standing at God’s right hand. He tells everyone around him that he sees the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. That resulted in their stoning him. But Stephen does not call for help, nor does he worry too much about what was happening because he could see Jesus standing before him. Instead Stephen pleaded with Jesus that He should not hold the people’s deeds against them because they were acting that way as a result of their ignorance. Is it possible that, when a child of God dies a death of horror, God is already there, standing by, so that what happens around them is of minor importance compared to the image of Jesus himself standing in front of them? I do not know, but I would like to think that it is possible. That is always Jesus’ promise to us – that He will never leave us alone.

Pray to God and ask Him to help you also to understand death and to open His word to you – and keep learning... That way you will be able to help others.

SUICIDE

This is surely one of the most difficult predicaments that one can be confronted with in life. How can I be of assistance to my friends, family and the members of the community if they are affected by this enormously traumatic death of a loved one? Once again I wish to look at what we believe and what the Bible actually says about suicide. Is what I believe about the subject 100% correct? Is it not perhaps that God wants to open my eyes to some truth that I have not probed up to now? So then, what does the Bible say in this regard? In the Bible, we read of five suicide cases that resulted in six persons losing their lives.

The first incident that we look at can be found in Judges 16:23-31. Here we read about the death of Samson. Samson who, after he was taken prisoner by the Philistines, and having had his eye cut out, finds himself in a position where he is used for the entertainment of the Philistines. We read that he finds himself between the two pillars which support the building and that he cries out to God. His prayer is that God will at least give him the strength again to enable him to destroy the Philistines and die himself. God hears his prayer and many Philistines die, and so does he. Samson is not judged for his death, but rather hailed as a hero of the Jews. There is no record that Samson burnt in hell as a result of his suicide.

Secondly, we look at King Saul and his sword-bearer as we find it recorded in both, 1 Samuel 31:1-13 and 1 Chronicles 10:1-14. Saul finds himself in a situation where they are losing the battle being waged against them. The enemy has already killed his sons and now he has become the target of the archers. First he requests his sword-bearer to kill him before he falls into the hands of the enemy. And then, when his servant refuses, he falls onto his own sword. When the sword-bearer sees this and realises that his king is dead, he does the same. Once again, we do not read that any judgement was passed over them.

We find the third case in 2 Samuel 17:23. Here we read about Ahithophel, an adviser to Absalom. We see that Absalom does not listen to his advice and that he then returns home, sorts out his affairs and then takes his own life. He could not handle his circumstances and would rather die.

In the fourth instance, we read about King Simri – king for only seven days. This king of the Jews learns that his people are closing in on the city in order to take revenge on him for the death of their previous king. He flees to a safe area in his palace and burns it down. That is how he dies by his own hand. Much is written about his sins, but take note that his suicide is not mentioned.

Fifthly, we read about Judas. We read about his death in Matthew. 27:3-10 and Acts 1:12-20. We read about his repentance for what he has done. We find him trying to return the money to put right what he has messed up. Then comes the realisation that he cannot rectify the matter. He had been responsible for Jesus' death sentence. His self-reproach is so great that he kills himself rather than having to live with his guilt. That is how Judas dies, he that disowned Jesus. For all that, there is no mention of any judgement being made or of any unquestionable suggestion that Judas is now burning in hell for his betrayal. It will really not surprise me if I should see Judas in heaven one day. His remorse for his sins is so very great – too great for him to live with it. We do not know if he begged God for forgiveness or if God did forgive him. That we shall only know one day when we get to heaven and can see for ourselves.

Here, then, we have seen the five instances in the Bible where six persons died. In each case there is a successful suicide without mention of any judgement being passed. We also read about a case of someone who is very depressed and wishes that he could take his own life. At least in this case, the person did not die. In Job 7:15 we read, as translated in some versions, that Job says that he sometimes wants to strangle himself. Job, who suffers hardship and daily does not know where to escape to, considers suicide. He is simply so devastated that he no longer is sure if he can see his way clear to face life. But still, God helps him through his crisis.

Then there is also the instance of an assisted suicide. In Judges 9: 50-54 Abimelech stormed a tower in which all the people of the city were taking shelter. A woman dropped a stone out of the tower onto his head. When Abimelech realised that he was going to die, he called his armour-bearer and asked that his servant should kill him as he did not want to be known as the man who was murdered by a woman. For him it would have been an embarrassment to be killed by a woman, so his servant complied with his request and Abimelech died. And so we see how another assisted

suicide occurs in Bible history. Once again, we actually see no sign of judgement of the suicide itself.

Let us have no misunderstanding. The Bible makes it quite clear that suicide is a sin and that it is not acceptable to God. You may not lay your hand on your own life. It leaves behind so much hurt, pain and sorrow, all of which you could have prevented. It is, and it remains, wrong to do such a thing.

But, where does all of this information leave us? What, then, do we believe about suicide, and how can I help someone to understand and to work through it? What do I understand about it?

One of the questions that I am asked 90% of the time at suicide cases is: “is my loved-one in hell now?” Why do people ask that? Only because they have always believed that one goes straight to hell if one commits suicide. Is what they believed wrong then?

I have no idea. If the Bible stated unquestionably that everyone that commits suicide would definitely end up in the fire in hell, it may have been easier for me to answer the question. But the Bible does not do that. On the contrary, in not one of the portions that deal with suicide does the Bible suggest that the persons have now ended up in the fires of hell for eternity as a result of their actions.

I have found myself at many more suicide scenes than I can try to remember. Such a large number of persons that could no longer see their way clear to face life. However, do you know what I have found so many times on the scene? It is not strange to find a Bible there. So many of the suicide notes are actually left in the Bible that the deceased read before their death. So many letters explain that the deceased pleaded with God for mercy and forgiveness. In the last moments before death these persons looked for God’s countenance. In such cases, where are they now?

What, then, is the answer that I give in response to the question about whether their loved one is now in hell? My answer is as follows: “I do not know and it is not for us to decide. We know that suicide is wrong in the eyes of the Lord but we also know that we serve a merciful God – a God of love. It is not for man to judge where the

deceased are going to find themselves now, but the decision rests with our loving, merciful Father. All that I do know is that we serve a God of love and we can only entrust our loved one to Him and, at the same time, know that God will be there for us in this time of trial and sorrow.”

Therefore, I do not see myself as God’s equal and I do not believe that I can decide on His behalf who can be allowed into heaven and who not. I read in the Bible about people who have also taken their own lives, but I do not read about God’s judgement of them. Yes, it is wrong, but God’s decision is exactly that. It is God’s decision alone.

Suicide is surely one of the most difficult cases where a person can try and offer to help and comfort the loved ones. The situation is of such a nature that the general things that people always say in the event of a death are of no help at all. Comments such as: “It was his or her time, God came to fetch him or her, God saw how the person was suffering and came to release him or her, God picked His most beautiful flower...” All of these words of comfort do not help at all, because this person has taken his or her own life, and it was therefore not at the time as determined by God. We also do not know for a fact where that deceased person’s soul finds himself or herself.

Why do people commit suicide?

Let us study a few reasons and try to understand why people do such things, and what we might be able to do to prevent such tragedies...

Certainly, the most common reason is depression. Depression also plays a large role in many other instances, where the circumstances are of such a nature that the person just sinks into deep depression. It is also important to understand that one of the most common symptoms of depression is actually suicide thoughts, suicidal tendencies and suicide attempts. This means that, if someone that feels depressed, it is normal to think about suicide, and those thoughts, to a certain extent, make the depression worse which may lead to a suicide attempt. It may be successful, or maybe not. Suicide should not be seen as a result of depression, but rather as a symptom thereof and that is an indication of exactly how serious the depression really is.

Without referring to actual cases, or highlighting any one specific instance, I want to create a scenario for you that is descriptive of a summary of various similar cases that I have already attended in order that I can illustrate what I have experienced on many scenes. Let us start with teenagers.

The very first suicide scene that I had to handle was that of a teenager. It does happen that we come to know what types of teenagers are actually the highest risk group, but I want to share with you, from my own experience, what types of trauma in the lives of teenagers drove them to such drastic steps. I have found that the most common type is where children come from broken homes, especially where great tension is created by the conflict being waged between the parents. Here we find a child that feels he or she is being torn between the two fighting parties, and where both expect him or her to take their side, whether consciously or not. The child feels trapped between the two parents.

The second most common reason is disappointment in romance. In our day and age it is extremely important for teenagers to be accepted and rejection is something that very few of them have learnt to deal with. When they find themselves exposed to someone that they really believe they are in love with, and it does not work out, they feel that they have failed, and they do not know how to handle it. Too many young people take their own lives for this very reason. They can simply not see how they can go on with their lives after having been exposed to this type of pain.

Then we come to disappointment. When a young person feels that they have disappointed their parents or loved ones, by doing something that was possibly criminal or drug-related, or even in the line of school-achievement, they would choose death rather than have to see the disappointment in the eyes of their loved ones. Sometimes, parents make themselves guilty by saying things like: "If you do not reach this target, I shall kill you, or give you a beating..." I have heard this type of self-reproach from so many parents of a child. Or: "Do not even bother to come home if". The child may very well not come home again. Then the question is, whether they feared that they would really be physically assaulted or did they just not want to see the disappointment on their parents' faces. It is difficult to say exactly which of the two is the real reason, or even to determine in which instances one of these reasons could be true, because the answer always becomes lost forever with

the deceased. All that remains is parents with so many feelings of blame. They feel responsible and sometimes wish that they could rather die themselves.

The fourth type that I want to look at is teenagers that want to call out for help, either, because they need attention and love, or simply because they are just looking for attention. Also under this group, we sometimes find people who, in my opinion, commit suicide by accident. Let me explain. I have already spoken to so many young people that have attempted suicide but been unsuccessful, and who have told me that they did not really want to die. All that they wanted, for example, was for mom and dad to stop fighting – for mom and dad to become reconciled and not go through with the divorce, or that mom and dad will notice how much I am hurting – or, how they are hurting me. We also get those that are looking for attention and think that they will show the boyfriend or girlfriend that they cannot live without them – they would rather die than live without them. Thus, they only do it to because, they want to try and win back the one that they have lost, or perhaps, to make the one that they have lost feel guilty about what had been done to them. It sometimes seems to me that some of the attempted suicides, which have actually been successful, were never intended to lead to death but that something went wrong. The person had pretended that he wanted to hang himself, but the leg of the chair on which he was standing broke..... A tragic ending to an attempt intended to get attention – or to cry out for help.

The fifth type that I have come across is what I would like to refer to as 'acquired suicide behaviour'. There have been cases in the neighboring towns where I live, not too long ago, where, for example, a quiet reserved young man in matric committed suicide. This, once again, does not refer to an isolated case because it is commonly found in a few areas. Suddenly, the whole town was up in arms over the death of the young man. His photograph was on the front page of the newspapers and everyone was talking about him. As always happens after a person's death, everyone spoke highly of the young man. Everyone was talking about what a good boy and how wonderful he was. Overnight, this young man had achieved hero-status. Naturally, no-one dared to speak badly about the deceased... nobody wanted to upset anybody else by saying that, what he had done was wrong and unacceptable. What was the result? Within one month another three of his school-friends had also committed

suicide. If he could do it and everyone says how good he was, and how wonderful he was, why can I not also do it? If he can obtain fame and notoriety through his death, then surely, so can I. OR if that was a socially acceptable way for him to escape from his problems, then it is surely also a solution for my problems. The result.... More lives are ended. The only thing that could put a stop to the suicides was to start speaking out about what had taken place and to educate the young people about the fact that it was wrong and not acceptable. Yes, their friend is gone, and they will miss him, but what he did was not right and not the solution to a problem. We have to be so careful about how we behave towards persons that have become emotional as a result of a suicide. We have to stand by them and support them without unconsciously intentionally condoning the act of suicide.

Whilst on this subject, we also find so often on suicide scenes that suicide runs in the family. Gran committed suicide, an uncle committed suicide and so did dad. Now, this person has also done it, just like the previous three in the family did. Why? Is it in the genes? Or has it just become an acceptable way in the family to get away from one's problems when everything becomes too much. I mean, if it was okay for gran, uncle and dad, why should it not be the right solution for me? The family is exposed to suicide as an acceptable solution and it is not so easy to break the cycle.

Those five points are, from my own experience, the most common ones that play a role in teenage suicides. There are, naturally, also other factors, such as an absence of vision for the future, career problems, sexual molesting, abuse, emotional and physical rejection, pregnancy and so on, but they are not as prominent as the previous five.

The most common way in which teenagers commit suicide is that boys, in particular, would shoot or hang themselves and girls would hang themselves or take an overdose of pills.

When we look at adults that commit suicide, we find things that coincide as well as other factors that play a large role. The one thing that is especially prominent is 'acquired suicide behaviour'. This appears right through the spectrum. The risk becomes greater especially where persons who are suffering from depression have seen that someone else has got out of the situation by committing suicide,. However,

let us look at a few more things that I, from my personal experience, have seen as reasons that people do such things.

Marriage problems is of course the first, after depression. Marriage problems can be caused by financial problems in the family, adultery by one of the parties, unemployment, personalities that clash, alcohol, drugs and much more. However, I have found that there are basically two main reasons why people would commit suicide. The first one is because the person cannot see their way clear to face a life without their life-partner, or simply cannot handle the rejection or humiliation. They see death as being better than the situation in which they find themselves at that particular moment. The second may sound strange but ask any person in the police or emergency services, and they will confirm that a very large portion can be attributed to that beautiful word, "*SPITE*". I have already read so many suicide-notes that state: "I am doing it to ensure that you will never again be happy, because that is what you have done to me", or "Now, see if you are going to be happy without me, because this is the result of your actions." People do commit suicide in order that they can try to get back at others, or purposely hurt them. The irony of the matter in such instances is that, as a rule, they are unsuccessful because the other party was actually trying to get out of the relationship as a result of the fact that they could no longer see their way clear to handle the emotional blackmail from the deceased any longer. The other party is, neither, necessarily sorry, nor do they feel bad about the death. Sometimes, their attempt to be spiteful is successful, especially if the one that is left behind was guilty of adultery, or something similar, and actually not only feels guilty, but also is guilty. Our role however, is not to make accusations but to support and assist the people. No one is responsible for another person's suicide. It was the single-handed decision of the one that committed suicide, without us being able to have any input. Suicide as a result of marriage or relationship problems is equally popular with men and women.

The next point is that of lack of finance and/or loss of employment. We find it particularly amongst men. When the breadwinner feels that he can no longer provide for his family and he regards himself as a failure, then suicide is often chosen as the way out. It so often happens that during an investigation after a suicide, when the question is asked about whether there could be any other factors, apart from

marriage or relationship problems, that could have given rise to the problem, the next most common problem is financial difficulties. This is the cause of a great deal of tension within a family and sometimes has very tragic consequences. Although this is more usually found amongst men, it is also the case amongst women. Employment opportunity is very often also coupled to this. It is becoming more and more difficult for people in their thirties or forties to find employment and if it should happen that they lose their jobs, the pressure that they put themselves under sometimes becomes just too much for them to handle. At times the family and relatives also increase the pressure.

Drugs and alcohol also play a big role. While I am on the subject of alcohol, I should also mention that many people find it easier to commit suicide when they are drunk. Here, especially, we find impulsive suicides or rather, those that do it just to prove a point. We sometimes find that a drunken person will say that they would rather die because 'nobody understands them anyway' and 'nobody wants them anyway'. These comments are made while suffering alcoholic remorse and the reaction from the family is usually: "Oh, go and sleep it off, you are drunk. You don't know what you are talking about." The result is that the person, in their drunken state, then attempts to prove a point and once again we might end up with someone that takes their own life by mistake because it was not really what they wanted to do. Nevertheless, the mis-use of alcohol and/or drugs has also led to many suicides. A much larger number of suicides are committed by persons that abuse alcohol than by those that do not. According to the AFSP (*American Foundation for Suicide Prevention*) National Statistics of America alcoholism plays a major role in 30% of all successful suicides. This is particularly so when the user is confronted with the fact that they are dependent on their alcohol or drugs and that they need to seek help. They are often unable to see their way clear to do so and would rather end their own lives than go for rehabilitation.

Then we must also look at those persons that are trying to escape from criminal prosecution. We find this type of suicide when a person is about to be arrested, or when they have to appear in court as a result of a criminal offence. These offences can range from people that are guilty of murder, rape, child molestation, fraud and other crimes. These people realise that they have messed up and what the result of

their actions is. They are unable to face what lies ahead of them and attempt to end everything rather than suffer the consequences.

Then there is loneliness. In this instance, it is especially prevalent amongst men above the age of forty. It is also found amongst the elderly. A person finds him or herself in a situation where they are utterly lonely and have no one else with them. They have no reason to carry on living and do not know why they have to continue battling to make a living. They fall into depression and can no longer understand the meaning of life. This is also a high-risk group.

We also find that elderly persons sometimes commit suicide as a result of serious health problems. This can be found amongst patients suffering from cancer, emphysema, heart and lung illnesses amongst others. The condition of the person's health deteriorates to such an extent that they cannot bear to face further suffering. They would rather put an end to everything. The effect of the illness is just too much to live with and so suicide is the result.

In my experience, I have found that ill health, loneliness and financial problems are the most common cause of suicide amongst the elderly.

Yet another cause of suicide is that of young people that are homosexual or transvestites. These persons are more likely to take their own lives. In my opinion, these persons are, generally speaking, those that experience the most social rejection and, at the same time, battle the most to obtain help. I sometimes wonder if the church is not guilty of causing the death of most of these young people who feel rejected and unwelcome in the church. The churches are very quick to close the door on them and their struggle and so these people feel abandoned by the community and God. Who can they approach for help? It is especially difficult for them to accept themselves when their upbringing and the doctrine of the church makes them out to be abnormal, sinful and dirty. Many of the young people that commit suicide have found themselves in a situation where they are not able to make peace with themselves, the community or their God. Where, then, do they go for help? Everyone else is welcome to go to church but, are they welcome? How lonely and confused they must feel in such circumstances. Where do they seek guidance and comfort when their relationships, finances and employment

circumstances disintegrate around them? Isolated from their family, church and community, there is very often not much else to live for. What would Jesus do? It reminds me of the portion in the Bible where Jesus is at the well, talking to the woman who had been with many men and, even at that time, was with a man that was not her husband. Jesus did not turn His back on her nor did He shun her. No, He also showed her love and helped her so that she could get herself back onto the right road. He was able to do so by showing her love and not by avoiding or judging her. That type of attitude could not have lead to her salvation.

As I have already said, depression is the “number one” cause of suicide. Most of the points that I have mentioned here are factors that lead to severe depression. There is, however, one point that I want to mention and it is also one of the things that is queried regularly after a suicide. The question relates to the reason why the person committed suicide at that specific time. Things were going so much better for the person. He or she had started going out again and was visiting friends. The deceased was once again “his or her old self” – so why now? – No-one can believe it. Things were starting to go so much better...? The answer to this is also rather simple. When someone has been suffering from severe depression and has reached the decision to commit suicide, they relax. They experience a feeling that they have found the solution for all their problems and the end of their battle is in sight. The person is no longer living under the pressures of all of the problems because he or she has already found a solution. We have even found that people go out with old friends or they might even arrange a large braai (barbeque) and invite everyone to join them. They want to try and repair the relationships that have crumbled, and try to finalise all the unfinished business regarding their relationships. Then they are ready. Everything is finalised and they are ready to “go”. Suicide is very seldom impulsive. The decision is taken in advance. Whether it is a day, a week or a month before the time, it is very seldom impulsive.

A final point that I wish to mention is: If you become emotionally involved with someone who threatens to commit suicide and says that he or she is simply going to do it now, get help, even though they have already said this so many times that you are tired of hearing it and you see it as a type of emotional blackmail. I have already been in attendance at so many cases where the family and friends state that he or

she threatened to do it but that they no longer took any notice because the person always threatened suicide. If you are personally involved with a person making threats do not make your own decision about whether or not they are serious. You may be wrong, or they may even decide to do it just to prove a point. Rather call in professional help. Contact a doctor, the emergency services or the police to talk to the person. Make certain that you will not be left with a guilty conscience simply because you thought that the person would not really carry out the threat.

And, remember that nobody can be held responsible for another person's suicide. Yes, a person could have played a role that gave rise to the actions of the dead person, but it was the deceased's sole decision to find such a solution to the problems. Nobody else could have made the decision for them and nobody could have changed their decision without them giving someone the opportunity to do so.

Also, be aware that legally, suicide is regarded as an unnatural cause of death and in terms of the law there has to be a full post-mortem. This procedure is necessary to establish the exact cause of death and also to eliminate any possibility of foul play, in other words, a murder having been committed and thereafter having been made to make it look like a suicide. The law demands a post mortem and the family can do nothing to prevent it.

A few interesting facts that I have noted over the years are:

- Women attempt suicide many more times than men. The number of women who attempt suicide is five to six times more than that of men.
- Men commit the largest number of successful suicides. Women are less successful in their attempts to commit suicide.
- The first choice for men to commit suicide is hanging, second is gassing and third is to shoot themselves. We have also found that men will drive under a truck or race into the pillars of an overhead bridge.
- Most women choose to take an overdose of tablets, or to hang themselves, or alternatively to shoot themselves.

- Most successful suicides are double attempts. In other words, the person first takes an overdose of tablets and then gasses, hangs or shoots himself or herself. We find that people will first take pills or poison and will then take a second, more drastic step. If the drastic step fails, then the pills or poison will serve as an alternative plan. Alcohol also plays a large role in many suicides. It is fairly common to find alcohol on the scene where, especially men, have committed suicide.
- The person that really wants to commit suicide will usually do so where they know that they will not be found immediately. He or she will also ensure that no one knows about his or her intentions to do it. They usually hide their suicide plans very well.
- It is becoming more common that people commit suicide without leaving any suicide note. This makes it much more difficult for the family to understand the reasons. Some people who commit suicide also hide the letters away in areas such as a Bible, diary or magazine belonging to a loved one so that the letter will not be found immediately but at some later stage. I have even had a case where a wife left it in her husband's breakfast cereal box. He found it there the following morning.

DROWNING

There are two basic groups into which I wish to divide this subject. The first is accidental drowning in a swimming pool or bath, or drowning because of being unable to swim. The other group is drowning in a dam, river or the sea where the body is missing and has to be searched for.

The first group is where people, especially children, fall into a swimming pool – or even where small children drown in a bath. I have even had a case where a toddler that had just started walking fell into the bucket being used by the maid for washing windows and drowned. These cases become very difficult simply because, in most instances the drowning could have been avoided. It sometimes happens that teenagers, or even adults become victims of swimming pool drowning purely because they are unable to swim, or they developed a cramp whilst in deep water or even as a result of consuming too much alcohol or drugs. In spite of the fact that these types of drownings are accompanied by extreme feelings of blame, they are not as traumatic as those occasions when the body is missing in a river, dam or the sea.

How can we assist and support someone who has lost a loved one as a result of drowning in a swimming pool or bath? Once again we need to be there for support. If you want to be of any help, do not pass judgement in the way you handle the situation, your words, your facial expressions or your actions. You can be of no help if you want to let people feel guilty about the incident. They are already experiencing many feelings of guilt and self blame. Be a friend. Be the shoulder to cry on and the one with tissues readily available. Promise them that you will be there for them during this difficult time and that together, you will all get through this crisis with the help of God.

Be honest by not offering false hope to people. By this I mean that you should not say the usual things that everybody says, such as: “It’s going to be okay, it’s not so bad, everything will come right.” This is not so and, saying that it is, assists people to become stuck in the denial phase of the grieving process. It is always better to use facts - “Indeed, the person is dead and can no longer be with us here, but I am here and I will help you where I can.” Should the person become stuck in the denial phase

and keep on saying: “He is not dead.” please do not agree. Also do not become involved in an argument with the person. It is better to answer in a calm and peaceful manner that, unfortunately, the person is actually dead without saying: “No, you are wrong!” We should rather state the facts in a calm and peaceful manner. Help them to come to terms with the facts rather than to try and keep them in the denial phase.

We must remember that the denial phase is a normal reaction of the body and brain and it exists in order to protect us against the possibility of our receiving more traumatic information than we can process. The brain attempts to believe that things have not really happened until such time as it becomes possible for the brain to deal with all the facts. It has led to a great deal of frustration when, having begun to work through the denial phase with someone and, having seen definite signs of progress, someone appears on the scene and in reply to the following question from the person in denial:- “It can not be possible, he is not really dead is he?”, the naïve person, thinking that they are helping, says: “No, it’s not true.” – At that stage all of your work crumbles to bits in seconds. The person believes that he or she is helping but by not telling the truth, and in trying to spare the person from further pain, the entire process of dealing with the trauma has been lengthened. If we know that a person is dead, please do not continue telling the family that he or she will be “okay”. It is not true and will only result in further pain. Rather try to assist with working through the pain caused by the crisis.

Back to drowning. I wish to share with you some of my experiences at deep-water drownings where the body is missing to begin with. This is one of the most complicated times for persons that have lost loved ones. I would have preferred not to be able to quote from personal experiences, but I have already been involved in such cases and I have supported quite a number of persons at such times.

The process of searching is by far the most difficult part of all. This is the time when everyone searches with such expectation for any sign of the missing person. Eyes that try to penetrate the water, a search for anything that might indicate the possible whereabouts of the missing loved one. This search can take anything from a couple of hours to a couple of days.

Your role as a supporter is more a role of patiently waiting, watching and comforting the family. I have noticed some of the following mistakes. We were once called to a national disaster where floodwaters had washed away homes whilst families were still in the houses. Everything washed away and there was no further sign of any life. Police search units started to remove bodies from the river and the search for more bodies continued. Some parents that had lost children were also present. A minister assembled all of the parents and families in one house where he preached to them. He made them sit quietly and listen to a sermon that he had prepared for them in the difficult time that they were experiencing. Believe me, those families did not remember one word that he had said. Their thoughts were next to the river together with the search teams. They could not wait for him to finish speaking so that they could get out of there and go and help search for their children. What could have been done to help? Walk with the parents next to the river. Encourage and support them. Be a pillar of strength and pray while you walk. That would be very meaningful to them.

Whether someone is missing in the sea or drowned in a dam, the procedure is the same. Just make sure you take along your sun-tan lotion. Here you sit alongside the family next to the edge of the water and stare, together with them, out over the water trying to see if something hasn't perhaps been found. The process sometimes takes more than a day and sometimes the search has to be called off simply because the body cannot be found. Sometimes the search teams call off the search because, after about three days in the water the body will swell up and it will begin to float. They will then be able to locate the body and remove it from the water - unless the body has become trapped in reeds and grass, or washed out into deep sea waters where it will be lost for ever and never found.

In these cases your role will be one where you convey the facts and just be there as a friend and a shoulder to cry on. Denial is very prominent here. "They will find him, he will be okay". The mere fact that they do not find the body makes people believe that he is not there and he could well have been washed out somewhere else, or he is trapped under the water, somewhere, underneath something where there is air, or maybe The fact remains that it is not possible for a person to live under the water without oxygen. And if someone has drowned, he or she can only be

successfully resuscitated if found within the first couple of minutes. However, people still want to believe that three or four hours later they could possibly still find their loved one and be able to help him or her. It is important to be present when the body is found. This is the great moment of truth for the loved ones who have been expectantly standing, waiting for news. Only then do they realise that he or she is really dead and there could not possibly have been any mistake. Even when they have previously come to terms with the fact that their loved one could not still be alive, there still remains a small glimmer of hope until the body has been found. This is once again a shock and a death notification that can be compared to that of a sudden and unexpected death from a heart attack or a tragic accident. There was no time for preparation. The reality of the body which has been found, and the realisation that it is dead, is something that, once again, needs to be dealt with.

It is so much more difficult when the body is never found. Something remains unresolved about the death of the person. Even though the family have no option but to believe, they have difficulty coming to terms with it because there is no grave, there is nothing tangible to take leave of. There will always be questions and possibly the faintest glimmer of hope. Maybe one day we'll hear that it wasn't so.... Maybe one day we'll get some logical explanation and find that our loved one is actually still alive. I do not even wish to try and imagine what these families must go through. Once again beware of giving false hope in these cases. It does not help the families to find peace.

Another aspect that I want to explain is the role of the police divers as well as the reasons why the emergency services cannot simply go in and try to find the missing person. Time is the greatest factor. What happens if someone in a dam gets into difficulties? The natural reaction is that family and friends, and perhaps other people in the vicinity rush to the scene to try and rescue the person that has disappeared under the water. Everyone knows that it is important to try and get the person out of the water as soon as possible. Then, when they realise that they are not going to find the person, they phone for the emergency services to come out. It can sometimes happen that five to ten minutes passes after the person has disappeared under the water before someone phones the emergency services. The emergency services may reach the scene very quickly, possibly within ten minutes. That brings the

average time that the person has been missing to almost twenty minutes. The person cannot survive for such a long time under the water. They can initially endeavour to find the person, but once thirty or forty minutes have passed it is already too late. It is at this point that the police divers must be called in to search for the body. By this time there is no longer any possibility that the person will be found alive, and neither could there be a successful resuscitation if the body were to be found.

The most common complaints that I have heard when the police divers arrive on the scene is: "Why did you take so long?" or "They are wasting time, they must go and help him or her." People will not believe that there is no longer any way that the missing person can be helped. What is important at this stage is the safety of the divers. Firstly, they must try to establish where the person disappeared and, believe me, ten witnesses will indicate ten different places. Water is very deceptive and the area pointed out by the eyewitnesses will differ depending on where they are standing. In this way, the divers get an approximate idea of where the person might be. They then have to unpack all of their diving equipment and check it to ensure that everything is ready to do the dive. We must not forget that diving can be very dangerous should anything go wrong with the equipment. Here the safety of the divers is also very important. They also usually wait for the arrival of one of the dogs that have been specially trained to pick up the smell of bodies, whether in water, or where buildings have collapsed. This can assist divers to identify a specific area in which to commence their search.

Only when all of these things are in place, will the divers enter the water and start their search for the body. The divers work in teams of two. They move out with a rope which they place in a search area. They then swim on both sides of the rope and if they find nothing, they move the rope and search again. In this way they ensure that not one centimetre is missed but the entire area is fine-combed. For their own safety, divers are not permitted to remain in the water for an unlimited time and so, the teams have to be rotated. For this reason they will search for a while and then they have to be relieved by the following team. Also, for their own safety, it is not always possible for them to continue their search in the dark and so, they sometimes have to stop searching and wait for daylight. These men are professional

and really do their best. We cannot try to hurry them up or place extra, unnecessary pressure on them to find the body. They are also family people who have to take their own safety into consideration. Also, their work is not of the most pleasant kind. To search for bodies is certainly not everybody's dream type of employment but they have a passion and desire to help people to get their loved ones back so that they can bury them. Let us try to ease their task by allowing them to carry out their assignments with the minimum amount of pressure possible.

I must repeat this important point once again. The law stipulates that, in the case of every unnatural death, or a death where the cause of death was or is not clearly determinable, a post-mortem examination must be carried out. This is not something that we can choose nor can we refuse to allow a post-mortem to be carried out on the person. That is, unfortunately, what the law decrees and we have to resign ourselves to that fact. This also, therefore applies in the case of drowning, suicide, fatal motor accidents, shooting incidents and so on.

EXTENDED SICKBED / DEATH-BED

When our loved ones are suddenly attacked by a terminal illness, we sometimes find it difficult to understand where God is in all of it. We are completely overcome by the cruelty of illnesses that devour the human body until the illness results in death.

We read in God's Holy Word that it is a blessing to reach an advanced age but we sometimes wonder about the suffering of a body that is collapsing, full of pain and weakness as a result of old age. How, then, can this be a sign of grace?

Maybe we regard the physical aspect as the predominant factor. Maybe our earthly existence is measured against what is physically acceptable and not against that which has everlasting value. What is our gift in life other than life itself? We know that the body will decay, that it is of no value whatsoever and that it will return to dust. And yet we want to measure so much of our quality of life against it. No, it is not wrong to try and measure our quality of life against our physical capacity because while we are still here on earth, that is the only way possible. However, we must not be blinded into believing that this is the only important factor.

Time is such a wonderful gift but, by definition, time is something that can be measured. So, we have all been given time on earth. As we very well know, time does not stand still for anyone and not one of us know when our time will run out. The only thing that we know for certain is that it will come to an end. What really makes a difference then is how we use our time so that when our time does run out, there will be everlasting values resulting from the time that was allotted to us. Illness is not supposed to change anything.

In Hebrews 12:1–3 we read the well-known passage written by St Paul where he urges us to continue to persevere like athletes. But what does this mean? When I watch an athlete, it makes me realise that they do not always find things easy. The nearer the marathon runner gets to the end of his race, the more tiredness, cramps and exhaustion take their toll. Still he perseveres because he knows that the end awaits him.

“I wish this week would come to an end... I can't wait for Friday! I wish this year was finished....I wish I could win the Lotto..... I wish I had rather chosen another career...

I wish my illness and suffering would come to an end.... I wish that death would come....”.

Does that not sound like all of us? Don't we wish most of our lives away? Don't we always complain about our hardships and wish that things could have been different? Much of the time we find ourselves ill or in circumstances that are difficult and sometimes even unbearable. We pray that God will just take us out of the situation and offer us some relief.

This reminds me of the story from the Second World War. A young mother, together with her twin sons of about six or seven years of age, was imprisoned in a Nazi camp. The mother was removed from the children and put to death in a terrible manner. The father was killed during the war. Two very frightened young boys were left. At a later stage, both boys became very ill with pneumonia and all kinds of illnesses and they were admitted to two different hospitals. In time, as a result of the one brother's continual nagging to see his brother, a nurse informed him that the brother was also dead. He felt totally alone and did not have any idea of what to do in the future. What was to become of him? The only thing that he had left over from his family was a photograph of his father, mother, brother and himself. Each of the members of the family carried one with them at all times so that they could always remember each other. Now he was alone. After the war he was placed in an orphanage where he worked very hard and he eventually became a very successful man. However, all of the heartbreaks and hardships that he had endured had turned him into a heartless, hard person. He became very wealthy and acquired blocks of flats all over Germany. He was a very strict businessman and when it happened that his tenants fell into arrears with their rent, he would immediately evict them and their families and then sell their furniture to recover his overdue rentals. And then one day, shortly before Christmas, he entered the door of a poor family and, with his helpers he proceeded to force the family out into the freezing winter weather. He then began to load their furniture into his vehicles for removal. The poor man pleaded unsuccessfully on behalf of his wife and small children but there was no sympathy to be found in the rich man. And then a strange thing happened. The rich man removed a photograph from the wall and stood staring at it. In a raging temper he shouted at the trembling man in front of him: "Where did you get this?" That

photograph was identical to the one in his pocket – the one of his father, mother, brother and himself. The poor man explained that it was his family. At that point, the rich man realised with shock that his brother had never died and was now standing before him. The two of them had met again after many years during which each of them had believed that they were alone in the world. In an interview some time later, both of them were asked the same question: “How did it happen that you have ended up where you are today?” The poor man answered: “As a result of my circumstances I never had anything”. The rich man answered: “As a result of my circumstances, I never had anything”. What makes the difference? Your choices make the difference. One chose to rise above his circumstances, the other chose to sit and do nothing about his circumstances.

And you? How do you live in the circumstances in which you find yourself? Do you try to rise above your circumstances and turn them into something good or do you just sit back and pray that God will change everything? Do you pray that difficulties will disappear? St Paul writes that life is a race. Definitely not easy. You will become tired, you will experience pain and many difficult times, but Paul lives his life to the full for Jesus, because that is his ultimate aim.

Jesus is waiting at the end next to the finish line and that is the only encouragement he needs. Jesus was our example. He knew what was waiting for Him, He knew the meaning of the crucifixion. He knew what the pain and sorrow would be, and even though He prayed for it not to happen, He knew that God had a purpose. He walked the difficult road, until He reached the finish line, all the while showing love and not becoming malicious about His circumstances.

So, what else can we learn from this about the body and the illnesses that sometimes cross our paths causing us to find ourselves next to someone’s deathbed before we know what has happened?

On the one hand it is an act of grace if the Lord does not take someone quickly but allows the person an opportunity to put his or her matters right with the Lord, to take his or her leave and to say farewell. This is something that others do not necessarily get because they are taken suddenly. However, on the other hand there is the

suffering of a loved one and that is not something that we want to see happen. Why is it necessary for the person to endure such hardship?

This question is something that so many have wrestled with and still the answer continues to escape us. I also do not want to pretend that I know the answers. I believe that the words that are written in 1 Corinthians 13 really are true: that now we can only understand a small portion, a blurred image. But one day we shall understand everything. For this reason, I do not believe that we are supposed to understand everything at this stage. Nevertheless, I still want to believe that time is indeed the gift to us.

As I stated previously, life is all about choices and not about circumstances. As human beings we are so often trapped by our circumstances that we spend all of our time and energy trying to find some relief. "Lord, please help me out of this predicament and I will serve you!" This is not necessarily right. We must not want to serve God because he helped us out of our circumstances, but rather in spite of our circumstances. Here we see the example of Peter and Paul. At various times, they found themselves in jail because they were proclaiming the gospel of Jesus. They found themselves facing heavy punishment and even the possibility of death. We do not find them crying and asking God to relieve them from their problems. They do not blame God for the trouble they are in. No, they glorify and praise God. They carry on singing the praises of God and they even lead prison warders to the feet of Jesus.

Is this not also how we should be? Sometimes, when our health and circumstances become difficult, we forget to keep our eyes focused on Jesus. We begin to look down, our stare becomes fixed on our circumstances and we use our energy trying to get out of the problems. "If God will only help, then we will be able to serve Him totally again....." No my dear friends, we must serve God in spite of our circumstances.

One of the quotations that I want to use comes from the renowned Swiss-American psychiatrist and thanatologist (a person that studies death), Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. She devoted her life to be able to understand death, and she said the following: "People are like stained - glass windows. They sparkle and shine when the sun is

out, but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within..” How does our light shine when we find ourselves in dark times?

At some stage, I was in a discussion with an elderly lady who was dying of cancer. She had told me something that I grappled with for a long period of time. She had said that her children did not know God and that they lived their lives as though there is no God. She had prayed to God and asked that He should use her to lead her children to Him. She had said that she would be available to God for Him to use her, no matter how He wanted to, for this purpose. Shortly thereafter she found out that she had cancer and that nothing more could be done for her. She was of the opinion that God had allowed the cancer precisely so that, through it, she would be able to show her children how she, as a true believer, could go through the trauma with God at her side. She said that she was pleased about her cancer because through that difficult time all three of her children had been converted and were serving God. She was now ready to go and prepared to meet her God. Whether her views were correct and if it really was God that allowed the illness in order to save her children, is another debate altogether, but what is important is that she shone her light, despite her difficult circumstances so that, through doing so, others could get to know God.

So many times I have heard that people keeping watch at the bedside of a loved one that is dying, will confess right there how God has revealed something new and precious from his loving heart.

I have so often heard the question: “Am I doing right if I pray that God will release our loved one and take him or her home? Would God take offence at me if I were to pray that my loved one should rather die than have to endure further suffering? Would I be able to live with my conscience if I were to pray in that manner?”

In my opinion, there is nothing wrong with praying such a prayer as long as it comes from a heart that is overflowing with love and empathy for the dying person. The only time that it can be wrong is when we pray such a prayer because someone is in the way and we want to get rid of him or her.

There is nothing wrong with asking God to shorten the period of suffering that someone endures or to ask for clemency if a person is suffering hardship. It requires so much more love to let a person go rather than, selfishly, to try and keep them in

order that we can be spared the pain and sorrow of a death. I have personally already pleaded for mercy from God for my own loved ones during periods of suffering at the time of death. God is a God of love and He knows our hearts. He knows when your intentions are genuine and if they are prompted by love and He does still hear and answer our prayers. Actually, we should resign ourselves to His greater plan in all things and trust that His timing will be good and well and correct.

It is also sometimes necessary for us to tell our loved ones that are fighting to hold on to life, that it is acceptable to us if they want to go. Although it is difficult for us, we need to understand that they can no longer carry on in their state and that they can go and rest. We should tell them that we shall look after their loved ones and their affairs and they no longer need to worry any further about those things. Medical science has already shown that, even in the case of a person in the deepest coma, hearing is the last of the senses to go. Once again, we should not have our attention fixed on the physical body, but we should remember that there is more to life than the body with its limitations. Our loved ones are quite possibly aware of our presence and can hear us when we speak to them. Do not be afraid to speak to them and to re-assure them. I know from personal experience that it is not easy to say goodbye but I also know that it sometimes makes all the difference.

Sometimes the duration of a deathbed is not long and it is possible that it may only take a couple of hours – for example in the case of a fatal accident or even a sudden medical crisis such as a serious stroke or heart-attack. Sometimes we are only able to spend a couple of minutes with someone after a traumatic incident. The principles remain the same. When we see that death is near and we need to say goodbye, it is certainly one of the most difficult periods in a person's life. However it is also your last opportunity to give those few minutes an everlasting value. It remains a time, and set of circumstances, that we must use so that we can also walk away afterwards without having any regrets.

Know that God is there for you when you go through these dark depths. Psalm 23 says it so beautifully in the old translation when the psalmist talks about the 'valley of the shadow of death'. When we find ourselves in the place where the shadow of death comes and touches our lives, and it feels as though our hearts are being torn out by what is happening around us, God's word comes to us once more. His word

says that we do not need to fear because He will be there for us. We have a choice of whether we take hold of His hand of help and support and try to become strong, or if we rely on our own strengths. I think that everyone that has been through a situation such as this, will tell you that it is only a person that has experienced such a situation that realises exactly how little our own strength really is, and how weak a person can feel when such a crisis affects us.

How very blessed we are to have a God that really wants to take our hand and help us in these difficult times. Psalm 121 always remains so appropriate for me: "I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth"- and He is always there for me.... This is the exact portion that I repeat to myself over and over when I find myself going through dark depths. I remind myself of this psalm when my strengths diminish and no relief is in sight. My help comes from the Lord, because His word teaches me this and I believe that the word of God is true.

When she was asked about what can be done for someone that is dying, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross said: "I say to people who care for people who are dying, if you really love that person and want to help them, be with them when their end comes close. Sit with them - you don't even have to talk. You don't have to do anything but really be there with them.."

MURDER

This type of death is not strange to us these days. Regretfully, it has become something that we experience far more than we would wish to. It is for this reason that I have decided to devote a chapter to this aspect of death.

Whilst examining murder, I want to include purposeful murder as a result of an agenda or personal grievances, farm murders, murders as a result of political agendas, and this includes the use of bombing attacks and other terrorist activities, murder as a result of the carelessness of another person, for instance, drunken driving, and non-purposeful murder, where someone accidentally causes another person's death without any intention of doing so, for example in a shooting accident. In all of these examples, the actions of one or more persons result in the loss of another person's life.

The first thing that we need to realise is that it is normal for a person that has lost a loved one as a result of murder to have feelings of hatred and rage. In all instances of death, at some stage or other, the persons that are left behind usually become filled with rage whether it be directed at the doctors that should have done more, themselves because there were areas in their lives where their own relationship with the dead person was not as it should have been, or even towards God because He has taken their loved one. When it comes to murder, however, things are different because now it is not just an emotion or sentiment that the person has to deal with, but there is also a physical face to which their pain and suffering can be attributed. Someone that actually was the cause and that deserves their hatred and rage. It is also not going to help to tell the person that they should not hate, because at that moment their emotions are far greater than any reasoning or hypothesis that we can make. Understand what the people that have lost loved ones have gone through and be there for them. Be careful not to stir up their rage, rather just be there for them.

Once again, I wish to share with you some of my personal experiences and, unfortunately, I have attended far too many of this type of incident. Without highlighting any specific case, I will share with you the thoughts that go through my mind when I have had to be present at the scene of a murder. The most difficult murder cases by far are those where children are involved. I find it beyond my own

understanding and thought processes that anyone can go as far as to shoot or use a knife to stab a toddler or baby to death. I cannot imagine what thoughts must go through the mind of a toddler at the point when an adult does such a thing to them. What fear and mental agony they must endure when such a thing happens to them. In a previous chapter, I wrote about the death of Stephen and I would like to hope and believe that it must also be true in these instances. I find it shocking when I move around on murder scenes and, walking around amongst bodies, I see how lifeless children, young people and the elderly are scattered on one scene. I sense the trauma that some of the dead must have endured when they were obviously tortured before they died and there are obvious signs of the attempts of parents to try and save their children from death by torture as their bodies are sometimes found on top of those of their children. In my own memory I can recall how, on more than one occasion, I have had to leave scenes such as this, and how I was so shocked by what I had seen and experienced that I would have to just get out of there. I was so traumatised by the images that kept on repeating themselves before my eyes – almost like a replay and “let see that again” flashes on television. Some of the scenes are so utterly gruesome that not even the worst horror movie from Hollywood can compare with them. You walk away and suddenly you do not know where you are. The shock overwhelms you and you don't know where to go or what to do. You realise that you are there to perform a function and to support the families, but you are so overwhelmed by what your senses have just experienced, that you want to vomit, you want to run away, you feel as though you are going to faint....

Then you realise how the poor family must have felt to have returned home and entered the house, only to have seen their parents, grand-parents, children or grand-children in this condition. What absolute trauma they must have experienced to see the family and friends that they loved so dearly all lying dead. To see scenes where it looks like a battlefield with the floor literally transformed into a blood bath. How will that family be able to leave the scene and ever function normally again?

How traumatic is it for an elderly couple to be attacked on their farm? To be bound together on their own bed and then to be tortured to such an extent that one of them dies and the other is then left to lie there, together with their loved one's remains – sometime for hours or even days – before someone finds them. What trauma the

surviving partner must experience. How can any person come out of such a situation without being affected by it and still be able to go on with their life as it was before the incident? I believe that not one of us will ever fully comprehend it if we have not personally experienced it. How do I ask the surviving family member that came across the horror murder of all of his or her loved ones to forgive the murderers and not to allow feelings of hatred to develop? How can I ask them to carry on living as they did before the incident and not in anxiety and fear? I cannot. If they can ever reach the point where they can live a normal life again, it will truly be remarkable and praiseworthy. I know from experience as an outsider that this type of event influenced me to such an extent that I was never the same again afterwards. How much worse it must be for those whose loved ones are affected by it.

The one thing that haunts one's thoughts after such a case is the images that play themselves out in one's mind. In this instance, I am not necessarily talking about the scenes that you have witnessed but the images produced by the mind when you try to imagine the hell that your loved ones might have endured when it happened. You wonder if they had much pain, or if they died immediately. You try to imagine what fears and thoughts they experienced before death took them. You wonder how much pain they had to endure and in your thoughts, you try to relive what they must have gone through and it drives you insane. So many questions... So impossible to find the correct answers. We can never really know, nor can we ever really understand. Maybe one day, when we are re-united with our loved ones in the eternal life we will have the opportunity to talk about these things and then we shall understand completely. Maybe by the time that we are re-united, it will no longer make any difference. That may well be the last thing we want to talk about. But for the moment it is something that occupies our mind and drives us to insanity.

How do you support someone that has just gone through this type of hell? Firstly, it is important just to be there. Do not let them feel that they are alone. Also, never tell them that you know how they feel because, unless you have personally experienced the same type of tragedy, you really do not know how they feel. Be the shoulder for them to cry on and the ear to listen. Allow them to vent their emotions. If they want to cry, let them. Do not tell them that they should not cry. If they are angry and want to share their emotions with you, and if they want to tell you about their innermost rage,

hatred and pain – let them do so. Do not try and tell them that they must not talk in that way or that it is wrong to feel the way they do – because at this point it is too soon. This type of hurt takes a long time to heal and, in some cases, healing never does take place. You can say that you can understand why they feel the way they do and that you can only “try” to imagine the type of hell and agony they must be experiencing. It is important for the people that have lost loved ones in this manner to express their feelings and to talk about the incident. However, do not insist that they talk if they do not want to. You should just be the friend that assists them and that does not nag them. Just be there when they need you.

Murder is a sin and it is wrong. That any person should die as a result of murder causes God no pleasure and for that reason there is a direct command in The Ten Commandments: “You shall not murder.” Why then does God not prevent it and why did He not stop it? God has done His share. He is the one that instructed the murderers through His word and by means of feelings of guilt in their consciences that they should not do it and that it is wrong. They knew that what they did is wrong. For this reason they fled after having committed the deed and they tried to destroy the evidence because they fear the consequences of their deeds. God had taught and warned them not to do it, but they chose not to listen to Him. Unfortunately, this is the risk that God took when he created us as human beings and gave us a free will. We can choose whether we want to do the right things, as we know is expected of us, or revolt against the will and the law of God. Should God have decided to take our free will away from us, our lives would have had no meaning and we would have been like robots. We would have had a function to perform and once we required upgrading to a newer model, like an old cellphone, we would simply have been thrown away and forgotten. However, we have been placed on this earth with a purpose.

The purpose is simple. Each one of us is granted a short opportunity to choose how we are going to experience eternity. In a short lifetime of maybe 70 years, or older if we are lucky, we get an opportunity to choose, either to accept God as our Redeemer and Saviour, or to turn our back on God and to live our lives rebelling against Him. If we do live our lives rebelling against God, we are doing exactly what Satan and his followers have done and the same fate that awaits them will also be

our fate. But, if we should make our lives right with God, and choose to serve, follow and honour Him, then the eternity that awaits us will be wonderful. An eternity with God.

It is not the will of God that any person should lose their loved ones as a result of murder, or that any person's opportunity to live their lives on earth to God's glory, should be shortened. It breaks God's heart when a person behaves against His will through rebellious actions and has no respect for His will or His laws. It breaks God's heart if His children have to suffer under those that harden their hearts against His love and His teachings. God actually promises His children that He will be there for them, just as He was for Stephen at the time of his death. Remember that Jesus himself was murdered by the people and, on the cross, even He was abandoned by God just so that we will never again be abandoned by Him. God, himself, had seen His Son die as a result of torture and murder just so that He could save us. He, as God and Father, knows the suffering that His children are enduring. He also promises to be and remain with His children.

The following point deals with forgiveness. You know, my beloved reader, the Bible states so very clearly to us that we may not hate. There are actually a couple of things in the Bible that we so willingly want to misinterpret and forget, but that does not make it any less of an instruction simply because we do not want to do it. The first thing that we read in the Bible is that we may not judge because judgement belongs to God alone. The second thing is that we should forgive and love each other. But, as you yourself know, these two things are so difficult and even almost impossible. Before we even realise it, we have once again judged somebody and found a reason for us to harden our hearts towards that person. We do not see the person as being worthy of our love and forgiveness and we expect God to understand this. This does not really make it any less of a sin.

What did Jesus do when He went through His death by torture – when He was slowly but surely being killed by the persons that crucified Him? Did He hate them, because He certainly had sufficient reason to do so? How must His mother and disciples have felt about it? Would we, like Peter, have drawn our sword and tried to kill some of Jesus' assailants so as to save our beloved Jesus' life?

Why do we hate and why do we find it difficult to forgive? I think it is fairly obvious why we would want to hate the persons that have committed murder because they have been the cause of so much pain and heartache. They have robbed us of someone that we loved and also of the opportunity to be able to enjoy life together with our loved one. They turned the last moments that our loved one had on earth into moments of pain and suffering. For that reason we hate them. We hate them because of the situation in which they have placed us and we wish that the same would happen to them so that they can go through the same hell that our loved ones went through. We cannot forgive because, before we reach the point where we are able to forgive, we first want to see them suffer and pay for what they have done. We want to see to it that the pain that the murderers experience must be so much worse than we, and our murdered loved ones, have had to experience. They cannot be forgiven before they have paid for their deeds.

Do not misunderstand me, because it is normal to feel that way after having lost loved ones as a result of murder. It is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation into which we have been placed. To expect someone to forgive directly after they have been subjected to such trauma is unrealistic. To find healing after such a traumatic injustice takes time. To experience someone being able to forgive very soon after going through such trauma is very rare, but it would testify that the person lives very close to the Lord. Sometimes people feel that the person that is able to forgive is not doing right. They feel that such a person could not really have loved the person that was murdered or they would never have been able to forgive. However, that is not necessarily true. We sometimes feel that we are not allowed to forgive because we need to carry this hatred within ourselves. We feel that, if we do not do this, it shows that we are doing an injustice to our departed loved one. We feel that we owe it to them to carry this grudge until we have seen the execution of justice. We think, and believe, that our loved one will resent us if we dare to forgive and that they might interpret it as an act of being uncharitable towards their death. We would feel too guilty because we still owe it to our loved one to hate and to want to see to it that his or her murderers are also made to suffer and/or die for their offences. We want to get revenge for their death on their behalf. But, must it be this way? Is it true that this is what our loved ones expect of us? Are we correct?

What effect does the hatred and resentment that we carry around within us have? What is the purpose of the emotion? What is the effect of the emotion? Firstly, I think that it is important that we examine the effects of the emotions. Let us ask ourselves the following question: "To what degree does the emotion that I am developing within me, in any way, causes suffering, torment and punishment, or even sleeplessness to the person at which it is directed?" I am spending all my time, energy and sleepless nights being resentful towards someone that does not even know about it and who is not in the slightest way affected by it. What is the result of the resentment and hate that I carry around within me?

I change into a bitter, discontented and cold person. I do not sleep and I do not eat. As a result, my health suffers and I suffer from high blood pressure, or even heart problems, and insomnia. I become transformed into a negative and unpleasant person, and I am possibly being avoided because my negative disposition repels other people. My own job, relationships and family-life suffer as a result. While I make it my main aim in life to chase after retaliation, my own life crumbles and I become very similar to the persons that brought so much heartbreak to me in the first place. The fact still remains that the life of the one towards whom I am directing my hatred is, quite possibly, not being affected by my grudges and hatred in any way at all. I am the only one that is suffering because of my own emotions.

I know that grudges and feelings of hatred are surely the most natural experiences and emotions to be felt if you should lose someone as a result of a murder. If you do not experience them, it is possible that you are the one that is different. I do not say, in any way, that you cannot or should not experience these feelings. As far as I am concerned, it is just important that we should not stagnate in this dark, deep hole. Somewhere along the road we must, once again, lift ourselves up and choose to not let the murderers also murder us on a spiritual level. – we must make a decision to rise up and re-claim our lives once again - live our lives without willingly surrendering them spiritually to murderers that have not even asked our permission but simply proceed to destroy our lives. Remember, nobody can take our joy, love and freedom away from us, but we can decide to surrender them.

In Luke 15 we read the story of the prodigal son. We see our own life as the older brother sees his. He sees himself as not being quite as bad as the younger brother.

The younger brother deserves to be chased away like a dog. The younger brother deserves no mercy from God the Father. He has already made such a mess and hurt his father so much. How must the father feel when his younger son tells him that he cannot wait for the father to die? He wants his inheritance now and his father is taking too long to die. How that dagger in the father's heart must have hurt.

Sometimes we are like the older brother. We look at the festivities and the mercy that the younger brother received and it leaves us cold. How could the father do that? The young man does not deserve it. After all the heartache and pain that he caused their father, the young man does not even deserve to be allowed to work on the farm as a day-labourer. Instead of his father receiving him in such a festive manner, he should rather have chased him away.

In actual fact, the older brother is not much different from the younger one. He is selfish. He is the one that has worked the hardest, and he is the one that must get everything. He believes that he earned it and wages are important. As far as he is concerned, it is all about the fact that he believes that his father does not love him enough and he had worked hard to ensure that he would earn all of his father's love. How can his father be so lenient on his younger brother? "Father, you slaughter the fattened calf after all he has done to you, and I do not even get a small buck to say thank you...." says the older brother.

That is also how we sometimes feel. What would we have done as a congregation if one of the young men from our church had almost destroyed his parents by demanding his half of the inheritance out of them, left and went to gamble and drink, basically writing his family off, and then living his life as if he didn't even know them. Then, when he had lost everything, he returned and tried to move in with his parents again. Would you mistrust him because, after all, a leopard doesn't change his spots? Would you receive him back into the congregation with open arms, with no preconditions?

Sometimes we feel as though we are the ones that should decide who deserves God's love and mercy. Sometimes we begrudge another person God's mercy in an attempt to keep it for ourselves. Is it acceptable to you that the person that caused you sorrow might also get to heaven one day? Did that person possibly cause the

death of someone special? If the person realises how great his or her sin is and approaches God with sincere repentance in order to get the relationship right with God, would you be happy and would you assist the person to help them to grow in his or her relationship with the Lord? Or would you begrudge that.... would you, in a selfish manner, rather see to it that you, having tried to do everything correctly and having attended church your whole life long, (maybe even served on the church council), should get something from God, rather than those EVIL people? How could God? They do not deserve it after all....

Earnings? Not one of us earns God's salvation. It has always been a gift from God to us. We could never ever have earned it.

Remember, love is not selfish – share it. Grant that “un-earned” love that you have received also to others that need it just as much as you.

Today, your Father is standing with open arms waiting for you to decide if you want to come to Him as His child. What are you going to do with God's love today?

In Matthew 18 we read about Peter who, believing that he is doing so with much wisdom and discernment, asks Jesus a question: “Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, ‘Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?’” And we all know how Jesus answered: “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven.” In order that Peter might understand better, Jesus told him the story of a king that decided to settle his accounts with his manservants. He sent for one of his manservants that owed him a massive amount of money. When the servant admitted that he would not be able to repay it in his lifetime, the king said that the servant, together with his property, wife and children must be sold so that the king could be paid what was owing to him. But, the servant pleaded with the king and begged him for mercy. The king felt sorry for him, released him and wrote off his debt.

But then, we read that the manservant went outside where he came across another servant who owed him just a small amount. He grabbed the man and demanded that he pay back the money owing to him immediately. The other servant then also pleaded: “Be patient with me,” he begged, “and I will pay back everything.” But the manservant would not hear of it. He went off and had the man thrown into prison

until he could pay the debt. We then read that friends of the king, having witnessed what had taken place, went to the king and told him that the servant that had received so much mercy and forgiveness from him had refused to forgive someone that owed the servant money.

When the king heard this news he was very unhappy and immediately sent someone to go and fetch the servant that he had forgiven. When the servant appeared before him, he confronted him and asked: " You wicked servant, I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"

The king then sent the manservant to the jailers so that he could be tortured until such time as he had paid back his debt in full. Matthew 18:35 tells us that our Heavenly Father will also do the same to us if we do not forgive others most sincerely for their transgressions against us. I am sure we are all aware of the suffering and uncomfortable feelings that we experience if we walk around with a grudge and hatred in our heart. We all know the symptoms of this illness. The sleeplessness, the emotions that eat away at us like a cancer, the bitterness that leaves us feeling so lonely because people no longer wish to associate with us. Do you want to be free again, and once again enjoy a peaceful night's rest? Then maybe this is the time for forgiving.

Do you really believe that your deceased loved one would expect you to become a bitter and wounding person? Do you really believe that they would wish to see your life destroyed by the grudge that you are carrying around inside you? No, where they find themselves now, the chances are very good that this would not be the case. If our loved ones are with God they will not want you to miss your opportunity of joining them there. So, if we really want to do something to ensure that our loved one's lives have eternal value, we need to live our lives in a way that will show others who our God is, regardless of circumstances. By doing so, we point others to the eternal life and the true God of love.

Romans 12:18 - 21 "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the

contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil; but overcome evil with good."

So, let us take the word of God seriously. Let us not carry any hatred around in our hearts, but rather let us forgive. Remember that in the above passage, God gives us an instruction that we should not avenge our loved ones, but rather allow space for His wrath. God Himself will take vengeance for the transgressions against His children. We are expected to be kind to our transgressors.

Romans 12:17 "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody".

We cannot hasten forgiveness by loved ones because they need time to work through the process of grieving and that may take a very long time. We must also not use this as an excuse for never reaching the stage of forgiveness because our own lives may just come to a sudden end. Then, we shall never have forgiven and, been able to live in love with our neighbours and our God.

WHEN A BABY OR TODDLER DIES

Cot death, or for that matter, the death of a baby or toddler from illness, or as a result of traumatic circumstances, is one of the most difficult forms of death that any parent or grand-parent can ever experience. The death of a baby or toddler disrupts the pattern of life that we regard as the norm. A child is supposed to grow up, attend school, learn, go to university, marry, have children, become successful in life, grow old and only then should the child die. The norm is for children to bury their parents one day, and not for parents to bury their children. Parents are just not made to bury their children and the pain that the death of a child causes is a pain that never leaves the heart of a parent. It is, therefore, unacceptable to us for a child to die and it is the cause of so much heartache and uncertainty. It disturbs our idea of what is normal as well as our understanding and views on death. The death of a child allows the reality to break through that life does not necessarily always run according to the norms, as we understand them.

Parents are confronted with the fact that they have to say goodbye and take leave for the last time of a child that they have not been allowed the opportunity of getting to know. Parents have to let go of a life that they began to cherish from the very first day that they were made aware of the pregnancy. During the nine months before the birth, they had already started dreaming of and looking forward to sharing a life with the precious child that has been entrusted to them. Now they are confronted with something that they could never have prepared themselves for. They must say goodbye and let the child leave their care and home. I do not believe that it is possible to ever fully understand this type of pain and suffering unless you have been through it yourself.

Cot death is certainly one of the most difficult types of death to try and work through because it is not expected and cannot be prevented. Cot death is when a baby falls asleep and dies whilst asleep, without any logical reason being found for the death. Even after a post-mortem examination, no reason can be found for the death. Without going into detail about the possible causes of cot death, I would rather spend time equipping you with information about how to support parents when they have suffered the loss of a child. It is generally accepted that cot death possibly

indicates that the child had fallen into such a deep sleep that they simply stopped breathing and the little heart just stops beating. There is no indication that there is any suffering or, even that the child is in any way aware of the fact that they are dying. As far as we can understand, death is instant.

These facts make it difficult for the parents to come to terms with the knowledge that a child can die without any reason. They want to believe that there has to be a reason and that there must be something or someone that can be blamed for the child's death. It is especially very difficult if a child should die whilst in another person's care. It is almost impossible to convince the parents that the baby-sitter is innocent. No parent is prepared to believe that their child could just die and they will look for someone to blame. Even if the child should die whilst in the care of both parents, it is normal for them to blame each other. Someone must have done something wrong. It is very difficult at this stage to convince either of the parents that the other parent is not to blame. We must remember that neither of them is reasoning logically and they will react emotionally to their loss. It is not possible for us to use logic to reason emotions away. Give them time and do not get caught up in an argument. That will not help the situation.

It really does not make much of a difference whether the child died from cot death or as a result of an accident at home, or anywhere else for that matter. The reaction of the parents will be very much the same. The most difficult part is to get the parents to hand the body to the emergency services for possible medical help to try and save the little life. If that is not successful, it becomes almost impossible to get the parents to release the body for removal when the hearse arrives. Here it is, once again, very important to know that, not even cot death is regarded as a natural death because there is no logical explanation for the death. Therefore, there needs to be a post-mortem to try and establish the reason for the death. In spite of the fact that the prospect of a post-mortem might be very distasteful, the investigation is very often necessary in order that the innocence of the parents, or the person(s) responsible for looking after the child, can be proved in cases where fingers are being pointed and one of the parties involved is being blamed.

This investigation is not optional. The law requires that a post-mortem must take place. No parent would want to see his or her baby go through this but there is

usually no option. It very seldom happens that the investigating police officer that comes to the scene might give permission for the child to be buried without a post-mortem. In fact, this would only happen if he is convinced that the child did die of natural causes. We should not regard this avoidance of a post-mortem as being the norm.

The most important thing is to start getting the parents to understand early that the body will be removed. Allow them time to prepare themselves for what is going to happen. Be there with the parents and just be a friend to them. Do not try to keep them away if they do have permission to be with the child. Grant them the opportunity to say their farewells. If it is permitted, allow them an opportunity to hold the baby for a last time, and even to soothe the child. Just be a friend that is there for them, to stand by and assist them wherever possible. When you become aware that the hearse has arrived, advise the parents in a kind way. If it will make it easier for the parents, offer to take the baby from them as they may find it very difficult to hand the baby over. If they do not want you to do this, do not pressure them, back-off, and allow them some time in a loving manner. Be prepared for the fact that it is going to be extremely difficult for the parents to hand the baby over and to see it being taken away from them. It is a very traumatic moment when the hearse leaves the property. It usually becomes necessary to hold the mother and to stop her from running behind the vehicle. Just be the arms that hold and embrace her with love. Do not make a judgement based on her emotions, just love her. The father also requires the same help and support.

Do not say that you understand what they are going through if you have not personally lost a child through death, because you can only try and imagine how much pain it must cause. They will also very quickly tell you that you can never know how they feel. You must also not try to console them with the fact that they have other children. Just because they have other children does not mean that they loved the one that they have lost any less. It also does not help to point out that, at least they could still have other children. Another child cannot replace the one that they have lost. This is one of the cases where you can answer, with complete confidence, that you do not know why it happened and that you, yourself, do not know how to handle it but that you will try to help and support them wherever you can. Do not try

to explain the problem away. Do not endeavour to try and explain God's will if you really do not know why God allowed it to happen. There is nothing wrong with admitting that we do not know why it happened, but that we do know that God will help and carry us through this difficult time. It is normal that the parents will feel very judgmental and have guilt feelings at this time. They will possibly blame themselves that they did not notice that something was wrong or, if the child had experienced something like a runny nose, they may blame themselves because they did not consult a doctor. If the child's death was caused by an accident at home like, for example, as a result of falling into a swimming pool, or falling down a flight of stairs, the self-blame and guilt-feelings will be so much worse. There is also the possibility of blame being thrown back and forth between the parents and family-members.

Be prepared for the fact that the parents might be angry with God because He allowed their child to die. Do not try to reason with them about this because your words cannot make their emotions disappear. Rather tell them that you do understand why they feel like that and leave it at that for the meantime. Later on, you will be able to have a logical discussion and you can then reason with them. At this stage you should rather allow them the opportunity to work through most of their emotions.

Another thing that you should remember is to give attention to the other children in the home. They are going to require help and support just as much as the parents. This is actually the time when they are really going to need their parents but it is also the time when the parents are not necessarily going to be able to offer the necessary attention and guidance to them. Be a friend for the family and assist wherever possible with the children without trying to take over the role of the parents. Stand back in instances where the parents want to do things for the children themselves and support the parents in whatever they do. In short, be a good friend, an ear, a shoulder and a messenger.

"What becomes of my baby or toddler after he or she has died?" This is a question that so many theologians have argued about. The answer is not as clearly defined as we would have liked it to be. The word of God gives no direct answer in this regard. There are, however, a couple of portions of scripture that do refer to the question, but these are also subject to interpretation.

We find the first portion in 2 Samuel 12. Here we read the account of the time when King David's baby died and the servants asked him why he did not mourn as was the custom. In verse 23, he answers them: "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." What is it that David was trying to say here? Some believe that David was trying to say that his son is in heaven and cannot return to him, but that they will be re-united one day in heaven. However, most of the authorities on this portion of scripture believe rather, that David is speaking simply about the realm of death. Everyone that dies does not come back, but one day we shall all have to enter there.

We can also not simply accept that children are born in innocence and that they enter the world without sin. If we study the word of God, we find portions such as Psalm 51:5 "Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." Or John 3:5-6 "Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit'."

We learn from the word of God that our children are conceived and born in sin. We learn that there must come a time in our life where we have to make a conscious decision to accept the Lord as our personal saviour and redeemer. If we do not do so, we shall be doomed and go to hell. This sounds harsh and cruel, but do not lose heart. Together, let us page further through the word of God.

The first place we stop is at Matthew 19:14: - "Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these'." Although this portion can possibly be understood as a reference to the childlike faith that we need in order to make our way to God, it can also be seen as Jesus' unconditional love and acceptance of children. The teachings of Jesus regarding children indicate His high esteem for their love and His respect for their child-like love and approach.

We also read in Matthew 18:1-6:- "At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He called a little child and had him stand among them. And He said: 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore,

whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea'.”

The next portion of scripture that I want to examine refers more to what the Israelites believed regarding their children and their accountability toward God and His commandments. This can possibly also be seen as one of the reasons that neither Jesus, nor the apostles, felt it was necessary to talk to the people about the subject. It is accepted by most of the students of the ancient Jewish faith that the Jews believed that a child must reach the age of accountability before he or she would be recognised as being adult enough to accept responsibility for his or her faith. This view lays claim to God's salvation for the child, based on His mercy and love for those that have not reached the point where they are able to make their own decisions in this regard.

The age of accountability also fluctuates based on the individual. In those times it was accepted that children of an average age of 12 to 13 were adult enough to make such choices. However, a person that is mentally retarded would never be able to reach an age of accountability. This is also not a subject about which we can quote from the Bible and so it depends mostly on what we understand about the faith of the Jews of that time.

In 1 Corinthians 7:12-14 we read: “To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer, and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.”.

In spite of the fact that the question of the salvation of babies and toddlers is a very emotional debate that has been investigated by a multitude of people over a period of many, many years, one thing is certain. There are sufficient portions of scripture to

give us an undeniable hope that children are able to go to heaven. It is actually my personal belief that children do, in fact, go to heaven. I do not necessarily base my opinion on deductions and interpretations made from portions of scripture, but on the knowledge that I have of my Saviour and my God. I believe that my God is a righteous judge and a God of love. I know that my God loves children very much. In humility, I believe that my view is based on my limited knowledge of God.

HOW DO I EXPLAIN DEATH TO A CHILD?

This is, very often, one of the most difficult situations that adults have to contend with. “How do I explain the concept of death to my toddler or young child?” It is important to know that a child’s understanding depends largely on the age of the child. The phases of a child’s emotional and discerning development plays a large role in their understanding and handling of the definition of death. The ability of a child to understand death is related directly to their ability to understand an abstract concept. Pre-school children of five years and younger believe that everything, even a teddy bear, motor car, chair or table has life. They see death as a separation that can be compared to sleep. They do not yet have an understanding of eternity. Between the ages of five and ten years children develop an understanding of mortality and then a fear that their parents might die and leave them alone may exist. Only when children reach their teens do they begin to realise that death is a universal event, and that it is the destiny, that cannot be prevented, of each one of us.

For most adults, the explanation of death to a child is an almost impossible task because, very often, we do not know what death is. We do not really know how to try and explain something that is above human understanding to a small child. I must admit that it is not one of the easiest principles to understand or to try and explain. I have learnt about it from other ministers. I have been present at two church services for the burial of young children and also at a school where the death of a fellow pupil was being explained. At all three of these occasions the ministers used the same example. This example is certainly the simplest way to let anybody understand death and is based on 2 Corinthians 5:1-9. Verse 1 is reasonably well-known to us and reads as follows: “Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.”

In both of these sections and in 2 Peter 1:13-14 reference is made to the body being like a tent. Children also generally understand these examples. Most children know what a tent is and have, at some time or other, played in a home-made tent in the backyard or they may even have gone fishing or camped in a tent. Children know

how imperfect a tent can be and that it is not the most comfortable or safest place in which to take shelter. Children know only too well how easily the tent can tear or break. They know about the tent poles that bend and the roof that leaks. This all makes the use of the “tent-home” ideal for children.

To use this example, one can even build a couple of model tents out of small sticks and material so as to show children how the example works in practice. In order to explain it, we must tell the children that we all live inside our bodies. Each one of us has a soul, and our soul is who we really are. While we are actually on earth, we need somewhere for our soul to live and so God provides each one of us with a body for that purpose. We stay in our bodies and we need to look after them very carefully, because our body is a gift from God. However, the Bible tells us that the body cannot last for ever because it is merely a tent-home. So, the body is just like a tent. We know that many things can happen to a tent. There are occasions that the canvas tears and sometimes one of the poles breaks. To illustrate the point, a model tent can be very handy in order to show how something can tear or break but can still be repaired.

However, the reality is that no tent can, or will last for ever. Sometimes something happens to a tent that damages it so badly that it can no longer be repaired. It is exactly the same with the body. Sometimes we become ill or maybe we even break something, but that does not mean that we will die, because the body can be repaired. It is important that we should guard against children developing a fear of illnesses or disabilities, and so we should explain to them that things like normal child-illnesses, broken limbs and so on will not cause death because they do not damage the tent-home to the point that it is beyond repair. However, it is also true that the body, just like a tent, sometimes is broken beyond repair. We then have a soul which no longer has a home here on earth and then the word of God promises us that there is a home waiting for us in heaven. Then our time of living in tents is past and we can live for ever in a house that God has prepared for us. This house is strong and cannot be damaged or broken down. We shall stay there for eternity without having to become worried about things that can hurt us, because our house is strong and there will no longer be any illness or hurt. This example will also make it easier to explain the funeral to a child. We are going to store the old and broken

tent-home at a special place so that we will always have somewhere special to go to at times when we are longing for our loved one. We know that our loved one is no longer in the tent-home, but we can go and visit there at any time when we are lonely and want to remember how special times were whilst our loved ones were still on earth.

The above is the truth and does not create any false impressions about God or death in the minds of children. I remember so clearly how, as an eight-year old boy, I asked my mother why they were burying a coffin and what was inside it. They told me that Jesus had come to fetch granddad and that he is no longer here with us. Then what was in the coffin that they were burying? This is a very simple, and yet also one of the most descriptive, examples concerning death that we find in the word of God. I remember in my childhood days, with the deaths of granddads and grans, how I was told all these nice stories and yet they contained no truth. Certainly, the one that I hear the most often, and it is also told to adults, is naturally: "Jesus was walking through the garden when He noticed this beautiful flower and so He picked our loved one's flower to place it in His throne room. There the flower will always bloom beautifully and will never again experience hardship." But, is that the truth? If so, are we just flowers that God plucks at random whenever He thinks we are beautiful enough? Then, is there no plan for my life and are there no goals for me to reach on earth, other than to wait until such time as it is my turn to be plucked? If that is the case, then God has not planned the time and date of my death from the beginning and it just depends on when He feels like cutting my life short. Am I just going to spend eternity standing in a vase? Is that, then, what heaven is? This story may sound lovely, and the purpose of using it may well be to make death sound more "romantic", but it very seldom has that effect. It creates in us a false image of God and what His purpose is for our lives.

There are many other stories that are told so many times, but for which I have never found any theological explanation. "God must have needed him or her in heaven and so He came to fetch him or her" is another explanation. Does God need us and, therefore, He selfishly comes to fetch us so that we can work for Him without Him ever having taken into account those that we leave behind? **I doubt if God really needs us mortals to go to heaven to do anything for him, because we are that**

which God needs, otherwise we would never have the privilege of being allowed to enter heaven. Words of consolation of this nature are also very often received with resistance because the person that is grieving would rightfully say that he or she also needs their loved one and that God must therefore give him or her back.

Another well-known phrase is: “God saw that our loved one was battling and that the illness or suffering would not get any better and so He decided to come and relieve him or her....” So, God took the life because He felt sorry for our loved one as he or she had suffered for long enough and He thought it would be better just to let him or her die. If we believe that, then we do not believe that, at the beginning of our lives, God plotted the path that our lives would follow, and that the date of our death is already noted with that of our birth.

In saying this, I am not saying that God does not have the right to end suffering by being compassionate to a person, but I do want to say that God also does not allow people to suffer for unnecessarily long periods whilst showing compassion to others. God has a purpose for every life and everybody’s birth and death was noted in His plans for our lives long ago. I believe that God has determined the time and day and that He does not make a random decision about this. Also, where do people get the idea that, when someone dies, they change into an angel? This is not true. We are not upgraded to a new level through dying. Angels are a separate creation of God. I can find no biblical proof to make me believe that, some day, I shall sit on a cloud playing my harp....

Back to children and their understanding of death. Children handle death very differently to the way that adults do. We should never think that they do not grieve or care simply because, before very long, they are playing and laughing. It is normal for children to be crying and heartsore one moment and to be running around outside, having the time of their lives with their friends the next. In a short while they will come back inside to look for security and comfort from others. That is just the way that children are. We need to try and understand that.

We also need to understand that children, even less than adults, have no understanding of the concept of eternity. To them, “for ever” simply means that it is

for a very long time. So, when someone is dead and never returns, they will understand that the dead person will be away for a very long time, but the very long time must come to an end at some stage or other. For this reason it is normal, after a couple of days, for young children to ask: "But when is our loved one coming back?", or even to say that the loved one has been with Jesus long enough and must now come back. That is when you should use the opportunity to tell them that the loved one that has left us can never return because their earthly tent-home is no longer of any use.

In my opinion, it is not wrong to say, or to believe, that our loved ones are actually in heaven and are looking down on us and that they still love us. Is that not what we can understand from the portion of scripture found in Luke 16:19-31 where we read about Lazarus and the rich young man?

Let us get into the habit of not using nice stories to console others when we know that the stories are not true. We are possibly causing more damage than being helpful. Let us rather spread the truth and in doing so we shall not leave ourselves open to criticism because we have told a child something that may, in the future, leave him or her with wrong impressions of God and death.

Remember that security is very important to children when the time comes for them to lose someone as a result of death. Their greatest worry is how they are likely to be affected negatively by what has happened. They will be far more at ease if they know that they will still get food and be able to sleep safely in their beds. It is important that children should be made to feel safe and we should let them understand that they will be well cared for. At such a time, children need lots of love and attention. Sometimes, these are the very occasions when parents themselves are guilty of spending so much time on their own pain and misery that they completely forget that their children are also experiencing exactly the same feelings. This is the time that your child really needs you in order to find love and security. The little ones have not yet learnt how to handle the death of a person and will be looking for the support of someone older. Sometimes it is necessary for a granddad or a gran, an uncle or an aunt to help with this love and security because the parent is probably not in a fit state to do so. Parents must also guard against letting their emotions cause the children to suffer. It is so easy to take our emotions out on those

that love us and this also happens when parents are irritated, heart sore and unhappy, or if they are annoyed because of the loss caused by the death. That is when children should rather be encouraged to go outside and play so as to stay away from under their parents' feet. The children may experience this as rejection, especially in a case where death has taken one of their parents and the other one now behaves in this manner. Guard against that and just give more love and attention. Children have a need to experience parent-love and security.

Something else that I have so often experienced is that parents force their children to go and look at the remains of a deceased person. The old story of: "You must go and say goodbye to gran or grand-dad". It makes no difference how much the children beg and plead, they are forced to do it. I see this as something that can do much more damage than good to a child. The fear that a child experiences at the possibility of having to see a dead person becomes a reality that they are forced to confront. Such a traumatic experience can result in the child having sleepless nights and can even leave a scar that can haunt them right up to the time that they are adults. You should leave it completely up to the child to decide. If they ask, out of their own free will, to go and say goodbye, you can certainly allow them to do so. However, do not allow it if the corpse is not a pretty sight, as it might have possibly been badly mutilated. If the child is afraid or hesitant to do this, rather assure him or her that they do not have to look at it. Please, never force a child, or an adult, to look at the remains of a loved one if they do not want to do so.

HANDY ADVICE TO REMEMBER WHEN SOMEONE DIES

In this chapter I want to try and give you guidance by mentioning a few practical tips and things to remember when someone dies. The first bit of advice deals with situations where someone has died from unnatural causes. In other words, in a situation where the laws of our country require that a post-mortem investigation must take place after the death. This includes deaths classified as motor vehicle accidents, murder, suicide or even a death that could be from natural causes but where there is no medical history to account for the sudden death. By this I mean, for example, a fit young man, 20 years of age with no history of any ailments that suddenly drops down dead from a heart-attack. At first, the death makes no medical sense, and so, a post mortem investigation needs to be carried out so that any suspicion of foul play, for instance murder, can be removed. In this category we will also find cases like cot death and drownings.

What do we need to know when a loved one's body is removed to a state mortuary prior to a post-mortem? Firstly, I must mention that the post-mortem examination is not optional. Because the laws of our country require it, we cannot prevent it from being carried out. It is also important to know that the state mortuaries are not open 24 hours a day for the public. The mortuaries are only open for viewing and investigations on weekdays during office hours. Except where faiths/religions like Islam dictate that their dead must be buried before the sun sets, no post-mortems are carried out over weekends or on public holidays. There are special investigative officers that are used by the state for the sole purpose of carrying out post-mortems on persons whose faith or religion lay down certain requirements. However, these persons are not available to the general public.

So, if you are aware that one of your loved ones is in a state mortuary it is most important to establish where the mortuary is and at what times they will be available for viewings. Mortuaries are usually only available at certain times of the day for viewings.

You might ask: "Why must there be a viewing, and who should do the viewing?". The law stipulates that one of the members of the family of the person that died, or a very close family friend that has authority to do it on behalf of the family, must officially

identify the person that died. This is to ensure that the person that undergoes the post-mortem is actually the correct person and that the correct findings are associated with the correct body. If that does not happen, then the investigation cannot be regarded as being complete and the body will not be made available to the undertakers for the burial service. If the body has been badly mutilated or damaged as a result of an accident or a fire, it is possible to make use of dental records, fingerprints or in extreme cases even DNA can be used in order that a positive identification can be made. Should the face of the deceased be badly damaged, the body can also be identified by a family-member through birthmarks and scars that are unique to the deceased.

Having established what time the viewing will take place, there are a few more things to remember. Firstly, you should remember not to leave for the mortuary without your own identity document as well as that of the deceased. If you do not have sufficient identification documents you will not be allowed to identify the body. Should it happen that the identity document belonging to, either yourself, or the deceased person is lost, you should find out before the time from the investigating official, about the declarations that will be needed in order to carry out the identification. When you arrive at the mortuary, there will be a few forms for completion. You will have to answer questions about the deceased as well as yourself. The questions relate to, for example, the residential addresses of both yourself and the deceased, identity numbers, relationship, where both parties work or worked, what the highest academic qualification of the deceased was, whether or not the deceased was a smoker and so on. This information is necessary for national statistics and also to help with the investigations.

Be prepared for the identification. Generally it follows a standard procedure. You will be taken to a room where the actual identification takes place. The room has a glass window behind which the remains of your loved one will be. Sometimes there is a curtain that will be opened and sometimes the body will already be prepared at the window, waiting for you to enter the room. The aim is to make a positive identification. You can make the identification alone or there may be a couple of members of the family with you. It is also advisable to have a minister of religion, a friend or even a chaplain with you for emotional support.

Be prepared to see a scene that is anything but pleasant. Remember that the body will not yet have been cleaned up or washed ready for the funeral, because that would destroy evidence that still needs to be investigated during the post-mortem. Therefore, the remains may very well still be covered in blood and gravel if, for instance, the person had died in an accident. For this reason, if you know that there are any members of the family that will not be able to cope with the situation, you should not expose them to this sight unnecessarily. They should rather view the body at a later stage, before the funeral and at the undertakers after it has been cleaned up and prepared for burial. It is better to remember the loved one as he or she was before death, rather than carrying an image around forever of a badly mutilated body.

Once the identification has been done, there is another form that requires completion. This form is to verify that you have confirmed that the body that you have seen is, in fact, that of your loved one. You will also be asked to make an impression of your left thumb print on the form. There is also a space on the form where the fingerprint of your loved one must appear. This proves that a positive identification has been made. Before you leave the office of the mortuary they must hand you a form that you, in turn, need to pass on to the undertakers of your choice so that they can collect the body. If the undertaker should arrive without this form, he will not be allowed to remove the body. You should also find out when the post-mortem will be done and when the undertakers will be able to collect the body. It is important to obtain all of this information because, especially in smaller towns, post-mortem investigations are probably only carried out once a week by the doctor.

If the body is not made available after the completion of the post-mortem, you will not be able to make arrangements for the funeral. If the mortuary personnel do not know when the post-mortem will take place, try to establish the name of the doctor that will be doing it and contact him to get more information. The undertaker that you choose will also be very helpful in this regard.

The next important point is to find an undertaker that can handle the service for you, whether it is a burial or a cremation. There are a few things that you should keep in mind when looking for an undertaker. For instance, whether or not the deceased might already have a policy that would cover the costs of the funeral if it is arranged

through the undertaker that he or she had chosen. Then there are also selected undertakers that are contracted to handle the funerals of certain groups of people such as railway employees, miners, military personnel and so on. Should there be a possibility that the deceased might have an ordinary funeral policy at a bank or an insurance company, it would be wise for you to do your homework by enquiring from various undertakers to find out about any package deals they may offer and the costs of those deals. Be careful of recommendations made by officials at hospitals, police stations or even at mortuaries. Families very often eagerly seize their suggestions because they are ignorant about such matters. It may well be that they sincerely mean well and only want to offer guidance, but it is not a strange occurrence to find that officials are paid a commission if they refer families to certain undertakers. An undertaker can apparently pay up to R500 for every body that is referred to him by an official. It will be better if you visit the undertakers in your area and find out what they have to offer. Find out if the vehicles, coffin and the quality of service that would be to your satisfaction is available from the undertaker. If any official really wants to assist you, he or she should rather make a list of undertakers and their contact information available to you.

You should also be careful not to tell the undertaker how much money you have available for the funeral. From experience I know that, if you mention that you have R5,000 available, they will try to convince you that the cheapest that they can do it for is R5,500. Should you say that you have R20,000 at your disposal, they will offer you a package of R25,500 and convince you that it will be the package that will best meet your requirements. They will also offer to submit a claim against the policy on your behalf so that you do not have to attend to the administration in that regard. This can be very helpful if you have an honest undertaker, but you can also be exposed to exploitation by them if you are not careful. A funeral is very expensive, but it is possible to pay as little as R3,000 through certain undertakers. A funeral can cost as much as R50,000 if the family insists on the most expensive coffin and large exotic wreaths and so on. Rather do your homework and remember that these costs do not include a tombstone. This expense comes later and will also be a couple of thousand Rand. A plain flat tombstone, without much detail, is easily in the region of R5,000.

Once you have chosen an undertaker, you and the family will probably need to decide about taking clothes, in which your loved one will be buried or cremated, to the undertaker. If your loved one underwent a post-mortem examination, I would recommend that you should include a T-shirt or some other item of clothing that will cover the neck. A post-mortem usually includes a wound where they have cut into the chest and this does not look good if it is visible because of a V-neck garment. Rather choose clothes that will hide any signs of wounds.

In the case of a person dying from natural causes, it is important to remember that a death certificate still needs to be issued by the doctor of the deceased to certify that the person did, in fact, die from natural causes that the doctor was aware of. However, if the doctor is not prepared to issue such a certificate because the death of the person does not make sense to him, a post-mortem examination will have to be carried out. You could possibly be requested to obtain such a certificate from the doctor of the deceased although, in most cases, the undertakers arrange it with the doctor themselves and sometimes they even collect it from the doctor. Here you should also be prepared for the same questions to appear on the forms as those that would be asked at the state mortuary and, a thumbprint will also be required.

Of course, you also have the option of arranging a private autopsy. If you do wish to have an autopsy performed, even though the person appears to have died from natural causes, your undertaker will be able to provide you with more details.

The costs connected with a funeral are usually not small. A funeral is, and will remain, very expensive. It is important that you should take out a funeral policy for yourself, and the whole family, early on. It might also be wise to include gran and granddad in the policy in view of the fact that there may well not be a sufficient amount available at the time of their deaths. I very often find that the elderly are not at all worried about such things as they have, for the last 40 years, carried around a paid-up funeral book, or two, from their chosen undertakers. The problem with this is that, most times, the funeral policy that they took out so many years ago usually has very little value. Find out what the value of existing policies is. It is shocking to find out that the owner of two or three paid-up funeral policies is only going to be paid out an amount of four or five hundred Rand when a claim is made against the policies

and that is not even ten per cent of the expenses that need to be incurred for a funeral.

It is also important to find out what other benefits may be available for the deceased. For example, there may be a funeral policy coupled with certain savings accounts at a bank. It happens that some people already own certain benefits without really being aware of the fact. There are also certain clothing accounts and clothing account clubs which offer this type of benefit to their customers or members. Find out if any such benefits do exist and make use of them when death occurs.

When a person dies, you must obtain the death certificate as soon as possible. My advice is to make many copies of this certificate, and also of the deceased's identity document, probably 30 or more. Every time a claim is made for payment of a policy certified copies of these documents must accompany the claim. You will not be able to submit any claim without the death certificate.

Certain employers also offer a death benefit to their employees in the form of a funeral policy, or a payout at the time of the person's death. You should also enquire about this at the time of the death of anyone close to you.

Also note that, as soon as the bank hears that a person has died, they will immediately freeze the deceased person's account. This may cause a major problem if people have joint accounts as, for example, in the case of a married couple. In such a case it may be important to withdraw funds from the account before it is frozen. These funds would be necessary for the other party's existence and daily expenses until such time as the administration of the estate has been finalised. If it should happen that the surviving spouse receives a monthly pension and that pension was being paid into the joint banking account, a new account should be opened immediately in the name of the surviving spouse and the details of the new account must be given to whoever is responsible for the monthly payment of the pension. Money that is paid into the frozen account will not be available and therefore, cannot be withdrawn.

As far as the funeral is concerned, you should know that there are no fixed rules about the form of service. Talk to your minister about how the service can be organised in order to make it more personal, and possibly to offer others an

opportunity to also take part in the service. By this I mean, possibly give someone the opportunity to sing a song or to recite a poem. It may be a good idea for someone to pay tribute to the deceased, or if it is a child, possibly to give the school friends a chance to sing a song. In this way it can become a special way in which to say goodbye. Discuss it with the minister and ask him if it would be acceptable to him.

When you have decided about the funeral service it is also very important that you are absolutely certain of precisely which grave your loved one will be buried in. For this very reason, I would recommend that you request someone to take photographs. Try to ensure that they photograph landmarks that can be identified, as that will make it easier to find the grave again. By this I mean photographs that will show in which row the grave is, and in line with which existing tombstone. If there is already a distinctive tombstone in that row take a photograph showing that tombstone and exactly how many graves it is away from that of your loved one. It does happen that the grave numbers sometimes get mixed up or that the graves are re-numbered. Sometimes you are accidentally given a wrong grave number and you become aware at a later stage that the number you were given is actually in another area. It is useful in such cases to have photographs that can help to clear up the uncertainty. I know of three specific cases where photographs were the only way in which clarification could be obtained about exactly in which grave a particular person was buried without having to actually re-open the graves.

It may be a good idea to make a wooden cross upon which the deceased's name is clearly inscribed. Make certain that the cross has a spike that is long enough for it to be planted deeply into the ground. It helps if the cross is erected immediately after the grave has been closed, or on the day after the funeral. This also helps with the identification of the grave. It is necessary to ensure that the cross is deeply and firmly put in the ground to ensure that it does not fall over and neither can it be taken out by workers or mischievous people, and then possibly land up on the wrong grave. Unfortunately, we live in an era where large numbers of people are being buried every month. Do your best to ensure that you do not put yourself through unnecessary trauma resulting from your being unsure of the exact position of the grave.

Another handy idea is to make a U-form out of wire, fasten it firmly into the ground, and then fasten all the flowers and wreaths that are placed on the grave onto it. This will ensure that the flowers will not blow away if any strong winds should occur. Also take a reasonably deep plastic or glass holder and plant it firmly on the grave so that fresh flowers can be placed in it. If the holder is placed firmly enough it will not fall over, blow away or be stolen. That makes it so much easier to just visit the grave with fresh flowers, knowing that there is already a container in which to place them. It is also wise to take a bottle of water with you so that you can fill the container with water once you have placed the flowers in it.

Another reality of the times in which we live is the fact that workers at cemeteries sometimes go on strike and will not be there to close the grave. Although, in most cases, the family and friends would prefer to close the grave themselves, on one occasion I conducted a funeral service where there were no spades available to close the grave. The workers were striking so there were no implements available in the cemetery. The undertaker was also unaware of the situation and had not taken spades with him. The end-result was that the grave had to be left open. The undertaker had to return later with workers to close the grave. It was not easy for the family to leave the cemetery in the knowledge that the coffin was still in an open grave. It can do no harm to place a spade or two in the boot of the car, just in case such a situation might occur.

It has also happened at times when workers are striking that there is nobody to dig graves and consequently, there were no graves available to hold funerals. The responsibility then fell on the family to dig the grave themselves before the funeral could be held. These are extremely extraordinary circumstances, and it is very seldom that such a situation occurs. However you should rather make certain at an early stage about such things, before unforeseen problems crop up which may lead to further trauma for the family.

To close this chapter - just a brief note about the erection of the tombstone. Be careful not to be too hasty with the erection of the stone. It is best to wait for about six months. That gives the ground enough time to settle firmly and, preferably a rain season should be allowed to pass. It does not help much for the grave to be left to stand for six dry months and then to erect the stone. As soon as the first heavy rains

arrive, the possibility exists that the stone will subside. A tombstone is very expensive and it would amount to unnecessary expenditure to have to repair or replace it after the first year, only because the stone was erected too early. This is only a suggestion but it can save much expenditure.

HOW DO I HANDLE THE DEATH OF MY LOVED ONE?

No amount of preparation or knowledge gained can ever prepare you for this. None of your knowledge will be able to help you to prepare for the shock and pain that will wrench your feet from under you. The void inside the brain with all of its knowledge and logic feels completely insurmountable as a result of the gaping wound in your heart. At that moment, emotions are the dominating factor and even though your brain tells you how you should actually handle matters, and act decently, and which is the logical and correct way in which to handle matters, the brain cannot compete with the pain and hurt of death.

I want to try and offer some guidance about a few of the matters that you will be confronted with. One of the most worrying things that I observe regularly is family and friends all offering pills. Something to calm you down, something to make you sleep, something for shock... This medication may temporarily blunt the person's emotions, and even let them sleep for a couple of hours, but does it really work and does it help? In my experience the answer is an overwhelming "no". The only thing that it does is to extend the grieving process. During the time that the medication is effective the person does not get the opportunity to work through their pain and sorrow. They do not have the opportunity to work through the grieving processes and so they are unable to reach the point of acceptance. When they wake up from the medicine-induced sleep, they will once again be confronted with the dreadful reality that their loved one is dead and, once again, the realisation that it was not a dream. They then have to re-live all the emotions from the beginning. Rather try to come to terms with the situation from the beginning. Through trying to avoid the pain, a dependency on medication may develop which could cause the person to be permanently in a chemically produced trance. Consequently, they will never work through their grieving process. Wherever possible, we should rather try to work through the death of a loved one without the help of any medication.

Having said that, I also want to mention that, in some instances, there really is a need for medication. However, that is only in very few cases. Here for example, I refer to sick, elderly or hysterical people who, for medical reasons would need something to calm them. A person that has recently undergone major heart surgery, or even brain surgery and whose life could be endangered if they became agitated

may need to be given something by a doctor, and only under the supervision of a doctor. Only a doctor can give this type of medication and not ambulance personnel. We must understand the dangers of accepting medication from family and friends. We have no way of knowing if the medication might contain an ingredient that we are allergic to and which, if we took it, would make us very ill or could even put our lives in danger. So, the golden rule must be – even if a person is in severe shock, hyperventilating, screaming and becoming hysterical, first try all alternative methods to calm them down before sedation or medication is used as a solution. Medication does not make the grieving process any easier, but it does delay and prolong it.

Be patient with yourself. Understand that you are in shock, and that it is very normal to feel confused. Take your time. It might be very wise to place a notebook next to the telephone and let anyone that answers a call make a note of the name of the person, what their message is and their contact numbers. This will be most helpful when it comes to following up on calls at a later stage because, believe me, you will not be able to remember everything. This notebook can also be used to make notes of those that visit to offer their sympathy, those that brought flowers or food and those that have requested that they be notified of the funeral arrangements. It is perfectly normal to not be able to remember who visited, who offered what or who asked what questions. It feels as if your brain is standing still and everything around you is just playing itself out without you actually being a part of any of it. Ask for the help of a friend in this regard – someone that is able to be there to answer the phone, and to take messages should you feel that you are unable to do so at the time.

When it comes to the memorial service or the funeral, it is advisable to arrange for a video to be made, or for photographs to be taken, during the service. On the day of the funeral, you really take so little in so this will allow you an opportunity to watch it at a later stage. You hear after the time of people that were there, and family and friends that came to support you without you being able to remember whether or not you saw them there. If the minister and congregation will allow it, the recording of the service on a video or audio cassette would be a good idea. Believe me, on that day you will hear very little and you will also only absorb the absolute minimum. A recording will help you later, when you are calm and more objective, to sit down and watch or listen to the service. Only then do you see everyone that was there and,

only then, do you really hear the message. It is also becoming more widespread that our families and children are working overseas and are unable to return for the funeral. If there is a video or DVD recording of the service this also allows them the opportunity to be able to experience the service. Of course, this is a personal choice.

It is a good idea, during our lifetime, to have a discussion about organ donation. When a person has just died, it is usually the last thing that we would want to worry about and we would regard the question about the possibility of organ donation as being inappropriate and offensive. At that moment, it feels as though people are descending like vultures trying to see what they can take after the death. At that precise moment, it feels that way because we are reasoning more with our emotions than with our brain. At that moment, we feel as though we need to protect our loved one and we cannot allow anyone to cause any damage to him or her. The reality is that the body is dead and can no longer be protected against the fact that it will perish. That is why we should have this discussion with our loved ones during our lifetime so that we can be aware of their wishes in this regard. If we are aware that, indeed, our loved ones have decided that their organs should be donated when they die one day, it will be less traumatic when we are faced with the request about organ donation. It then becomes more a question of trying to carry out our loved one's last request and, in doing so, respecting their wishes. I do not want to discuss the ethical aspects for or against organ donation in this section and I do not wish to try and convince you of the rights or wrongs thereof. Personally, I see nothing wrong with it and I desire that where possible my organs should be used so that somewhere, someone may possibly be given a second chance in life.

After my death, my body will be useless to me and it will just perish. So then, why should I not rather donate my corneas, and any other organs that can possibly still be used, to those that need them? If I can, through my death, improve the quality of life of a dying child or some other person, and in doing so, allow them a further chance to be with their loved ones, or even for them have some time to ensure that their relationship with the Lord is in order, why not? Personally, this also addresses one of my fears. The ghost stories that we heard as children about people that were buried alive and how, when the coffins were exhumed years later, scratch marks

were found inside the coffins where they had struggled to get out. I know that in these times the chance of that happening is exceedingly small. As a result of the improvements in technology, such a thing would be highly improbable. But what if I am the exception? No way, let them remove whatever they can use and, in doing so, I am assured that I will not wake up in some place that I would prefer not to be. If you would like to be an organ donor, contact the organ bank, or even the company that is responsible for the issuing of the Medic Alert bangles or pendants. They will be able to supply you with a Medic Alert bangle or pendant, or even a card the size of a credit card, which you can carry with you. All of these items are intended to state that you are an organ donor.

Another subject that should possibly be discussed with our loved ones is the question of burial or cremation. My personal choice is that I should be buried. This is only because it is a personal preference but it would really make no difference at all to me. As long as they have removed all the necessary organs, and there is no chance that I may wake up in a grave or in an oven in a crematorium, it really makes little difference to me. However, I have made certain that the people close to me are aware of my preference. In this way, there will be no need for this to become a difficult subject after my death and there is no reason for ill feelings to develop if people cannot reach agreement – they are already aware of my wishes. People are not eager to discuss this subject and they choose rather to avoid any discussion about death, but that does not make it any easier after a person has died to know what their wishes were.

Many people find that cremation is much more difficult to accept as it does not hold the same finality as when the grave is closed. You see the hearse leaving with the body and you know that everything has not been finalised and that another stage will be reached when the time arrives for you to be re-united with your loved one's ashes. Reaching finality after the death is, therefore, sometimes postponed until the time that you receive the ashes and are able, either to scatter them in the area that your loved one has requested, or to place them in a wall of remembrance. Naturally the other question that arises after a cremation is what should be done with the ashes. There are a variety of options to consider and opinions in this regard differ from person to person.

There are people that believe or feel that they want to keep the ashes of their loved one with them. The ashes are placed in a place of honour in the house and, wherever the family may go during their lifetime, the ashes go with them. It is almost impossible for these people to reach closure or finality after the death of their loved one. They live together with the ashes of their loved one as though the person is still with them. This is generally speaking an unhealthy option and is not recommended.

The other extreme is when the family request that the person be cremated and the ashes must be thrown away as they do not want them. With this option, they see the hearse disappearing with the body and they never again have to be confronted with the pain of having to say goodbye.. Sometimes these persons also battle to accept that their loved one is gone and they do not necessarily have anything to convince them that their loved one has, in fact, been cremated. It is often very difficult to reach finality over the death of a loved one in such a situation. This option may also be offensive to other members of the family as it then appears that nothing special is being done to ensure that their loved one's ashes are being treated with honour and respect as they would have wished.

A popular option is to scatter the deceased's ashes in an area where they would have wanted to be and which they would have chosen to be their last resting-place. Sometimes the choice will be to be scattered at sea, or in the countryside, a family farm or even in their beloved rose-garden. This offers an opportunity for the close family to get together one last time to say goodbye as they scatter the ashes in accordance with the wishes of their loved one.

Of course, the most widely used option is to place the ashes in a wall of remembrance. This option is becoming more and more popular because these walls are to be found at many of the churches in towns throughout the country.. As a result of the danger at our cemeteries, coupled with the high incidence of robberies, assaults and so forth, it is becoming very difficult, especially for women, to visit a cemetery should they wish to place some flowers on a grave or spend a few minutes with their loved one. So, where a safe area has been designated for this purpose at a church, this will most probably be the best and safest option. When the time arrives for the ashes to be placed in the memorial wall, the close family can make it a special occasion. Sometimes it is also helpful at such an occasion to invite friends

and family to place a short note in the wall so that it will be cemented in together with the ashes. This allows each person to say goodbye in his or her own personal manner. Of course, the choice of whether or not to do this depends on each person individually. This sometimes also helps to reach finality or closure.

After all of that is over, what now? What must I be on the lookout for? The greatest mistake that anyone can make is that of our being so busy with all of the arrangements after the death of our loved one, and being so busy remaining strong for others, that we never make time for our own grieving over the death of our loved one. Make time to be alone, and allow time for yourself to work through your pain and heartache. Do not try to run away from it. That does not work. The hurt will remain inside you until you have handled it. There are two risk reactions that we must discuss in order that we can handle the death of our loved one once everything is over.

The first reaction is that people try to isolate themselves and withdraw from everything and everyone. They withdraw themselves from their commitments and sometimes even from their work responsibilities. They become like a recluse that has fallen into deep depression.

The converse reaction is that people will start to keep themselves busy with everything that they can possibly lay their hands on. They must stay busy. They cannot sit still for even five minutes because inside them is something that is chasing them. They purposely avoid making time for themselves to try and work through their own heartache and pain. As long as they remain busy, they do not have to confront the subject of the death of their loved one. These people burn themselves out and their health gives in very easily.

The art is, therefore, to try and find a golden middle road between the two reactions. Hold on to your obligations and use that to help you to get through the day. This will bring routine and stability back into your life. But, also make time for yourself. Take a holiday to just find yourself again. Perhaps you could go and visit your friends and family where you can feel safe but where you also know that they will allow you to have time to yourself. Talk about your emotions and the hurt that you are experiencing. Perhaps it would be a good idea to go and talk to a counsellor or even

a psychologist so that you can get some guidance about how to get through this period and come out safely on the other side. After all, we owe it to our loved ones that has died to continue with a life that would be worthy of God's intent for us. We are expected to get on with our lives and to live in such a way that we will one day be worthy enough to be allowed to enter into eternal life as they have.

Do not put yourself under too much pressure to get over your heartache and pain. People sometimes feel that, although a month or two has passed, their pain just becomes worse than it was at the time of the death itself. They fear that there is something wrong with them because by now, surely, they should already be feeling better. If you do feel this way, you are just as normal as most other people. It is generally accepted that an average grieving process takes about two years. Be patient with yourself and know that some days will be much more difficult than others. One day you may wake up feeling much better, only to wake up the following day feeling totally downcast and miserable. This does not make you abnormal – on the contrary, it simply means that you are just a normal person.

UNDERSTAND THE GRIEVING PROCESS

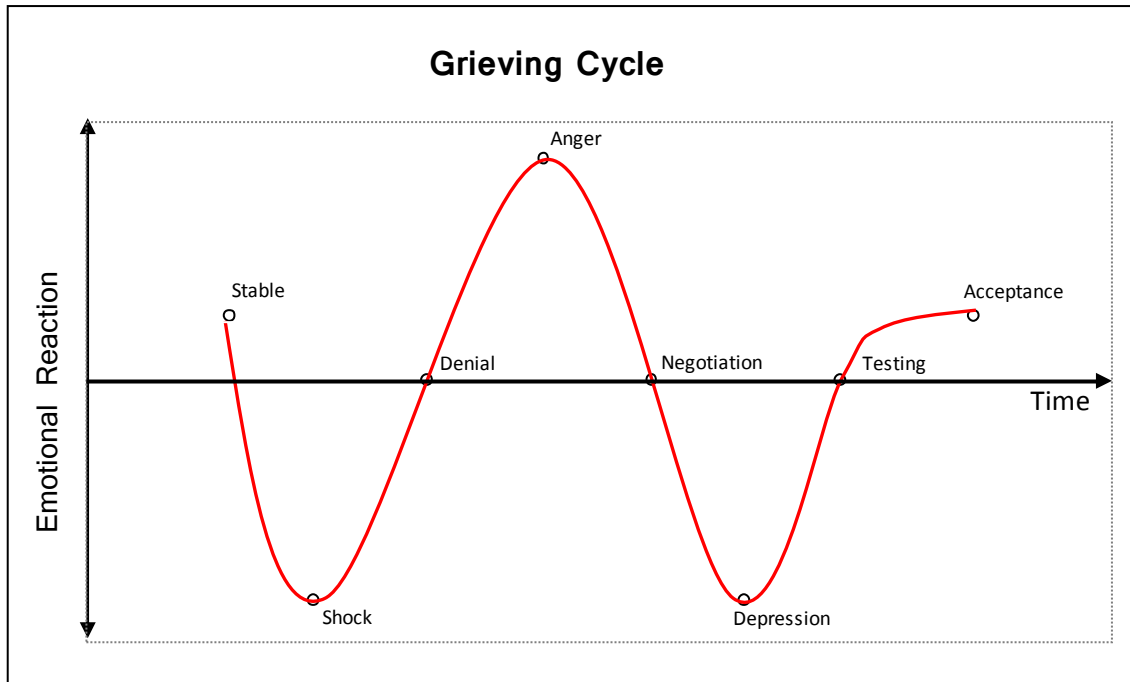
I believe that it is important to pause for a few moments and try to understand how the grieving process works and what the most general pattern that this process follows is. To start with I want to state very clearly that no two people react in precisely the same way. It happens very seldom that a person fits perfectly into the pattern of the grieving process as it is described in the following section. This is actually the generally accepted grieving process as researched by the renowned Swiss-American psychiatrist and thanatologist (a person that studies death), Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. She is regarded worldwide as a person that has spent the greater part of her life studying and trying to understand death and the impact that it has. It is for this reason that her work is regarded as the basis for most of the studies that followed and is still seen as the most accurate and valuable material available when trying to obtain a better understanding of death. Allow me to share her explanation of the grieving process with you.

During her lifetime, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross spent a lot of time with dying people, both to give them support and also to make a study of them. She wrote a very well-known book by the name of: *“On Death and Dying”*.

In the years that followed, it was discovered that the cycle that she had identified was not applicable exclusively to dying people but it also applied to persons that had received the news of the death, as well as to any person that undergoes any traumatic event. It can even be applied to people that have lost their employment or those that have been informed that their spouse wants a divorce.

Although we want to use this cycle to explain the grieving-process, you should also know that it is not exclusively applicable to death and that it can be found in any traumatic event in a person’s life.

The grieving-cycle can be illustrated as follows on a graph. The graph gives a good indication of the see-saw effect that a person experiences emotionally. When bad news, such as the death of a loved one, crosses your path you go through the bewilderment and roller coaster effect of emotions and you try desperately to escape from the adjustment that you have to accept.



STABLE.

You will note that, at the point where the graph starts, the state of the person is referred to as “stable”. Although this does not necessarily mean that the person actually is stable, it refers rather to the point of departure of the emotions that would follow after hearing news of the death. In comparison to the see-saw reactions that follow after hearing the news, this point is referred to as the stable point of departure.

SHOCK, or numbness.

This is the first reaction on hearing the news. This is the point at which the proverbial carpet is pulled out from under our feet. Although some people appear to show no reaction in the beginning, that only indicates that, deep inside, they have been shocked into a total shutdown and they are not allowing the news to sink in. To help a person to get through this, it is sometimes necessary to repeatedly tell them the facts. This will most probably be followed by much clearer shock reactions with the person possibly becoming pale, suddenly being short of breath, or even simply “freezing”. When this happens, it is recommended that the person should be encouraged to sit down, as this would reduce the risk of the person fainting or, if in

fact they do faint, of them becoming injured. If the person should become short of breath, or possibly begin to hyperventilate, help them to try breathing more slowly and try to calm them down. Give the person a glass of water to drink. Please take note – sugar water is not always a good idea. If the person suffers from any type of sugar-related problems, they may well go into a diabetic coma after drinking sugar water because it is possible that their sugar or insulin levels may change dramatically after hearing traumatic news. Rather give the person a glass of water if they want something to drink. It is not so much about the water but rather about having something to hold on to.

In the case of children, it might help at this stage to give them a soft toy, like a teddy bear. Something that they can hold on to, something that will offer them a feeling of security.

If the person does faint, make him or her comfortable in a safe place. Lift the person's feet onto a chair or some cushions so that the feet are higher than the head. Do not lift the head. The whole idea is to circulate more blood to the brain and to do this the head must be lower than the body. A blanket is also useful to help maintain body heat.

Give the person support by offering lots of sympathy and acceptance. If you notice the state of shock is not subsiding, take the person to some place where they will be able to sit quietly and allow themselves time to absorb what has happened.

It is a good idea to take the person that is about to receive the bad news to a private place where they can be seated safely before the news is conveyed to them. In this way you can prepare for when the shock does set in. It also allows them to give expression to their emotions openly without them having to be concerned about who will see them and what others will think of them.

It sometimes happens that some people, when going into shock, start to run. This is a shock-reaction to try and get away. Such people do not usually realise what they are doing and could, for instance, run in front of oncoming traffic, or even cross a busy freeway without realising the implications or dangers. If a person does run, it is important to have someone follow them in order that they can ensure that the person will not do anything irresponsible.

Shock reaction may also, sometimes, cause the person receiving the bad news to hit or punch the person that is conveying the message. This is not meant to be personal and most of the time, the person doing the hitting will be completely unaware of the fact that they have behaved in this way. You should, therefore be prepared for this type of reaction and ensure that you do not become annoyed or try to fight back.

DENIAL.

The next phase is denial. In this phase the person will try to protect him or herself against reality. Either, they will argue and say that the person carrying the news is wrong and that it is not the truth, or they will simply carry on as though nothing has happened. They may purposely overlook any sign of reality. They may stick to their guns that it is not true and that everyone is wrong. It is especially in this phase where it would be totally incorrect to support the person in their illusion. Here we see a classic example of what I mentioned earlier. I said that it is sometimes very difficult to convince such a person of the reality. When you have just started making progress, a friend or a family member walks in, and when the person in denial asks them if it is true, the friend supports him or her in their denial. Why lie? What does it help? These people need to be confronted with the truth in a soft, kind manner. Should it happen that a woman denies that her husband has been killed in an accident and she demands that her loved one must now be brought back quickly, an appropriate reaction would be to say: “unfortunately, your loved one is dead and can no longer be here with you, but I am here and I will support you wherever I can. I am not going to leave you alone”.

The denial phase is usually not a very long process, but I have had a couple of cases where it has lasted for two to three days and in one case, where it lasted for more than a month. That person even refused to attend the funeral.

In such a case, it sometimes helps to assist the person to move into the next reactive phase – anger. By this I do not mean that you should draw the person into a fight. No, this is where you would introduce the future into the discussion and, sympathetically talk about the reality of the future without the person’s loved one. You should also make your own feelings of anger about this very clear. Anger is a very strong term and can rather be seen as being cross. Here you would say

something like: “It makes me so cross that he left us alone with this mess. We need him now more than ever. This is so unfair.” In this way we will subtly bring the next phase into play.

ANGER.

If we look at the graph, we shall notice that the anger phase is the opposite of the original shock phase. We find that the person was originally devastated and was in a state of shock. They then attempted to return to normal by trying to deny that it really is so. When they realise that it is a fact, they over-react with anger. Once again, this is not aimed at being personal, but just an overflow of frustration and pent-up emotions. They may be cross with everybody and, therefore, blame and scream at everyone. It can start with the person that conveys the message, some other person in the family, the one with whom there has been a disagreement, the doctors, the ambulance personnel, the Lord and so on. It does not help to reason against these emotions. The brain of the traumatised person is not the dominating factor in anger, but rather the person’s overwhelming emotions. Reasoning cannot make the emotions disappear.

The best advice is to allow the person to have space. Allow them to get everything out of their system and to go as berserk as they feel they need to at that stage. The more the storm rages, the sooner it will pass. If the anger should reach the stage where it could result in damage being caused, it will need to be addressed. Here it may be necessary to remind the person about what behaviour is permissible and acceptable and what is not. Do not be nasty when you do this. Explain to the person that you do understand why he or she feels the way they do but that you are now there to help wherever you can and it is now necessary for them to calm down so that you can both establish what still needs to be arranged and what other responsibilities still await both of you in the future. Whatever happens, do not get involved in any disagreement that could possibly result in your pushing the person back into the denial phase. Rather just support them in the fact that they are cross, accept that it is normal and even allow them to be cross with you.

NEGOTIATION.

Now we find that the graph, once again, makes its way downward, more towards the stable line. This is where we come across the negotiation phase. This is where questions are asked about whether there is any possibility that something more can be done. There is a desperate search to try and find something that can undo what has happened. If the person died from a heart attack and C.P.R. had taken place, the person may ask, in a state of shock, if they cannot perhaps continue the c.p.r. for a few more minutes or, perhaps give the heart another electric shock..... “try just one more time – just, maybe.....”. They might ask if they may contact another doctor because it may just be possible that something else can be done. They may even call out to God and try to negotiate with Him. “Lord, I will change, and serve You, if You will just please...”. It actually does not appear as if God considers this type of request very regularly. It is not impossible but in all the years that I have worked with death, only on one occasion have I seen a case where someone that had died did actually develop a pulse spontaneously, only to die three days later.

If we want to assist these people, we must really not give them false hope. If we know that everything humanly possible has been done, we must not mislead the family with false hopes. If they ask us to pray, because God can change it, do so. However let your prayer be: “Lord, if it is your will,... however, rather than ours, let thy will be done”. Also pray that the Lord will assist, and comfort those that are left behind so that they will submit to His higher will.

Here again, if they are unable to move out of this phase, it may be necessary, once again, to help ease them on to the next phase which is depression. Here, we should look at the future and emphasise how difficult it might be, and how much we are going to depend on God. Paint a mental picture of what the future will be like.

We must be VERY careful in helping people to move on when, according to us, they have become stuck in a phase. Rather allow the process to happen naturally. It is only when a phase becomes disturbingly long that we should consider the possibility of using a little gentle persuasion. Then, when the person realises that their negotiations can achieve nothing that will bring about stability, the emotions, once again, drop into the passive phase causing the person to go into depression.

DEPRESSION.

Here our graph again reaches a low point. Having gone through all the other steps, the person reaches a point where reality actually sinks in. They become so trapped by the dark reality that they are unable to see past it. The reality is so overwhelming that the person feels down-trodden, lonely and broken and, after withdrawing into him or herself, they go and sit down to brood over the situation. At this point they do not allow themselves to be open to any advice or help that might be offered to them and they just concentrate on their pain and hurt. Here we find that the person wants to be free from their responsibilities and work. They do not want to continue with life and just want to be left alone. They can appear to be very tearful and their whole focus is centred on their own world.

To help these people, it is most important not to leave them alone. Accept that the situation that they find themselves in is normal and just be there for them. In spite of the fact that they want to be alone, they still do appreciate the fact that someone is there for them. It should not be an obtrusive action to be there for them but rather a passive presence. Get the person to talk to someone about the emotions that they are experiencing. Perhaps you can get a counsellor, a minister or someone else that has been through a similar situation. These people can give more guidance about the correct way to handle emotions. Try to get the person that is suffering from depression to continue to meet their obligations and to get into a routine. It is very important that we do not allow them to totally isolate themselves. We must remember that one of the symptoms of depression is suicide tendencies. Try to protect the person from this.

TESTING.

This is where the person realises that they cannot stay in a dark pit forever and that life must go on. So they begin to try and find something that might improve their situation. They might decide to go and stay with someone that is close to them, just to see if that will perhaps bring a bit of light back into their lives. They may even decide to go and do shopping and to tackle some little daily tasks, just to see if that might not be a more pleasant experience than the feelings of depression. Slowly but surely he or she will look for more ways to escape the depression and start to investigate other actions and emotions. It is important that we should support such

actions. It is not helpful when someone comes to visit you and you make them so depressed by scratching and delving into every emotion and action that occurred again. Rather take the person out for a nice cup of coffee somewhere and enjoy it with a delicious piece of cake. Go out together to look at the new shop that has opened and help them in that way. If they still want to talk about what has happened, do not try to avoid it. Talk about it and even cry together with the person and then, when the two of you have finished talking, then do something that will help. Maybe suggest something like: "That's enough talking about all of the negative and hurtful things. Come on, let's go and eat waffles with ice cream and get fat!"

ACCEPTANCE.

This brings us to the last phase, that of acceptance. This is the stage at which the person does reach the point where they decide to carry on with their life, and to live the remaining portion of their life to the fullest extent. They, once again, accept responsibilities and they start to communicate with other people again. Their vision, which, up to this time, was only focused on their own world, now changes and starts to take other people into consideration and they also start trying to mean something to others.

It is important that these changes are noticed and encouraged. Wish the person good luck with what they are doing and on the fact that they have reached this stage. At this point it does not help at all to make people feel guilty because they are daring to chase after happiness or because they want to be happy. Rather motivate them to persevere so that they can, in fact, have a life again.

This, then, is a brief look at the grieving cycle. As I have already mentioned, it is not necessarily so that a person will experience this cycle exactly as it is set out here. Also, in exceptional cases, this cycle can actually be over in a matter of minutes. In the case of other persons, it can take months. I have already, on two occasions, experienced at the deaths of elderly persons that the surviving partner has basically said, in one breath: "No, I can not believe it, he cannot be gone! What will happen to me now? Now I am all on my own. Ag, I wish that I were also dead so that I wouldn't have to handle this situation. It is all just too much for me to cope with. But yes, I know that God will help me. Life goes on. I shall get through it." In the course of one

conversation the person moves through all the phases. This may well be superficial and it may happen that the different phases will be experienced at a later stage. And yet, it can happen just that fast. Others take literally months to work through everything. Remember, every person is unique. Do not expect to find that two persons are going to handle it the same way.

Something else to be aware of, when a death notification is given to a family, most of our help and support is offered to the hysterical persons that are so clearly calling out for help. In most cases, it happens that we totally overlook the people that immediately want to withdraw, silently and in a state of shock, from everything and everyone. These are the very people that need our support and help. People that withdraw immediately or those that want to isolate themselves are usually more dependant emotionally on help than those that appear to be hysterical. Be on the look-out for this.

How long is normal for the grieving process? The answer to this question is as impossible to determine as the predictability of a person's reaction to the news of the death of a loved one. Each person handles it differently and the way that each person goes through the process will be unique to that person. It is, however, generally accepted that the average grieving period should be regarded as being between six months and two years. As a rule, the person first has to go through the dreaded "first year syndrome". That means the first birthday that the person is not there, the first Christmas without the loved one, the first wedding anniversary or anniversary of a death and so on. By the second year, it is still difficult but it is not as intense as the first anniversaries. However, if after two years, the person can still not handle the loss, it is necessary to seek professional help. It is, in any case, my recommendation that, if a person feels within the first couple of months after the death of a loved one, that he or she cannot cope, we should rather go and talk to a professional person so that we can be equipped to help them work through the grieving process.

WHEN MY HOUR-GLASS RUNS OUT

Having looked at many of the aspects of death, we now come to the last one – my own death. This is a subject that we are not keen to think about and we often refuse to believe that it will happen to us. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, the psychiatrist and world leader in thanatology (the study of death), said: "It is only when we come to realise that we only have a limited time here on earth, and that we have no way of knowing when our time will end, that we start to live life to the fullest treating, every day as though it is our last." So, it does not help us to try and live as though we are never going to die. Such people feel that they do not have to be serious about their own relationship with the Lord because they are not going to meet Him soon anyway. They live as though there will be no consequences as a result of their activities. Every day is spent, selfishly striving towards things that only have a personal and temporary value. It is only when we begin to live as if today could quite possibly be our last day that we begin to search for something in life that may possibly have everlasting values.

If we look back quickly at the section about forgiveness, I ask the question: "When do people forgive?" Usually, the answer is that people decide to forgive and make peace when they are on their deathbed. That becomes the time and place where they begin to long for peace and tranquillity. They want to make right that which has been spoilt, ask for forgiveness and try to renew relationships. Why? They do this so that they can leave behind something that would have value. So that they would be remembered as someone that died in peace, without having left anyone behind with feelings of pain, blame and hurts over relationships that have been left in tatters. Because the deceased wanted to rest in peace.

What about you? We are all busy moving nearer to our own date of death. Every minute that passes is one minute closer to our own deathbed. Why wait for the last couple of minutes to try and put right what will hopefully save us? None of us know if we will be granted the opportunity to rectify things. Death may come suddenly and then you will have missed the opportunity. Put things right today, while you still have time.

Most people fear death. Why? I do not believe that any of us fear death simply because it is the transition for us to eternal life. I do not believe that we fear living in

eternal life and peace. No, I believe that the fear that we experience is the fear of the transition process. None of us know what it will be like. Will I experience pain and much suffering before I die? Will I have to undergo a long and painful process, or will I be alone when it happens, without loved ones around me to say goodbye and support me? Will my death be swift and painless, or even in my sleep, whilst I am totally ignorant of what is happening? The uncertainty of this process is, in my opinion, more often the reason for our fear than is our fear of what awaits us on the other side. It is in our human nature to fear the unknown. I believe that we would all prefer to be able to pass over peacefully in our sleep without our really being aware of it. Without fear, pain or suffering. However, we do not have control over that. The only thing that I know for a fact is that I do not have to be scared when it happens because I know for a fact that God will be there for me, to lead me through the valley of the shadow of death. Psalm 23 v 4 "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". It is in this promise that I find my consolation and tranquillity. I do not have to be scared because God will help me through it.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross said: "I've told my children that when I die, to release balloons in the sky to celebrate that I graduated. For me, death is a graduation.". Death is when we complete the race that we had to run here on earth. It is when we qualify to be allowed to enter into the presence of our creator – in fact, something for us to look forward to. Hebrews 12 verses 1 and 2 reads: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and Perfector of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." So then, let us run our course of life with perseverance and never take our eyes off Jesus.

Another touching quotation from Elisabeth Kubler-Ross is: "The ultimate lesson all of us have to learn is unconditional love, which includes not only others but ourselves as well." So, the question is: Can we live in such a way that we love others, not because we might get something in exchange, but simply because we want to live out Jesus' love for everyone. It makes no difference whether others love us in return

or not, if we are mocked or mis-used by others, or if the others do not deserve our love. We should just love. We must also love ourselves. This is not a selfish love, but it is a way of seeing ourselves as Jesus sees us. To live thankfully, because I know that I am a child of God and that God wants to, and He will, use me to carry His love out into the world. Life these days is full of depression and despondent people that can no longer see their way clear to cope with it. They cannot see the point of carrying on living and would rather choose to end it all. That is not God's will for your life. We must not live only because everything is going well. We must not proclaim God's love only because we know all the answers or because we are so blessed with happiness, good health, prosperity, the love of a spouse or family or because we have stable employment. No – we must live for God in spite of the fact that we are heartsore or ill. In spite of bodily conditions and circumstances that make it difficult for us. We must refrain from allowing our circumstances to be the focus of our misery as a result of our having forgotten to keep our eyes focused on Jesus. In fact, we read in the portion in Hebrews 12 that Jesus, having the knowledge of what His death would mean for us and the heaven that awaited Him, endured the crucifixion and all the pain and suffering attached to it. He did not run away in fear because He thought that He would not be able to handle it, nor did He even consider the possibility of suicide rather than having to undergo such tremendous suffering. He knew what was waiting for Him and yet His eyes were fixed on the winning post that He wanted to reach. That is why He persevered through the suffering. Do not lose hope. Treasure the life that has been entrusted to you. You are very precious!

If it should happen that we become terminally ill and we are dying, at least we have a privilege that others do not have. It is the privilege of being able to be prepared for death, and to know approximately when it may happen. We get the opportunity to live in such a way that the last stretch of road will have an everlasting value. Be careful not to make use of this last opportunity incorrectly by getting as much as possible out of other people. It so often happens that a terminally ill person goes into depression and selfishly insists that everyone should spend all their time with him or her. This makes it very difficult for others to support such a person because it is emotionally draining. Live your last days in such a way that, your life can make a difference to others, and in doing so, Jesus will be glorified. Make use of the time given to you.

Death does not need to be something that is feared by a child of God. Those that have given their lives to God and have accepted Jesus as their only saviour and redeemer really do not need to fear. We have the promise from the word of God that He will never leave us alone. Not even when we die. Jesus has conquered death for us so that we no longer need to fear it. The only persons that should have reason to fear are those that might die without their ever having taken time to make their lives right with God.

In John 10 verses 28 and 29, we read about Jesus' special promise: "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand." This portion makes us a promise once we have settled our affairs with the Lord. When we have accepted Jesus Christ as our only personal saviour and redeemer we will be with Him in eternity one day. We must not allow Satan to make us have doubts about our salvation. We must not allow ourselves to be convinced by false doctrines that we must work harder in order that we can deserve to get to heaven. If we are in God's hand, nothing and no one can snatch us out of it. The only way for us to get out would be for us to decide to walk out and to turn our back on God. That would grieve the Holy Spirit and God dreadfully. When we have received salvation and given our lives to God, we live as redeemed people, a very high price having been paid with the blood of Jesus. However, if we do throw it back in God's face, we make it seem as though an inexpensive price was paid for us. Do not allow that to happen. Apart from this, there is no other way that you can be snatched out of God's hand.

In conclusion therefore, we can say that we should look forward to death. That will be the day that we will reach the winning post. Like the athletes, we must persevere with the eyes fixed on Jesus and in the knowledge that, even though we sometimes battle to persevere, we must not move our focus to our circumstances and problems, but that we must keep Jesus as our focal point. We have no need to fear death because, in Psalm 23 the word of God promises us that God, himself will be waiting there for us and He will carry us through. However, I have one important thing to do before I die. I have to give my life to God. I have to accept Jesus as my saviour and choose to remain in God's protective hands. Then I have nothing to fear.

At the end of it all, there is a portion of one verse with which I wish to close: Amos 4 verse 12 puts it so beautifully: "Prepare to meet your God, O Israel."