


When the Call Comes

A Funeral Guide for Pastors



SHARING
THE JOURNEY WITH THOSE
WHO MOURN

D. Alan Baker

A call comes, informing the pastor of a death. Unexpected, or after an extended illness, there is no pastoral responsibility, or privilege, that compares with shepherding people as they say their final goodbyes and mourn their loss. "When the Call Comes" helps pastors serve those who mourn, from the initial call to the end of the funeral services.

WHEN THE CALL COMES:

A Funeral Guide for Pastors

by D. ALAN BAKER

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All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

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CONTENTS

PREFACE	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1 - THE INITIAL VISIT WITH THE FAMILY	3
CHAPTER 2 - MEMORIAL SERVICE OR FUNERAL SERVICE?	23
CHAPTER 3 - VISITATION.....	29
CHAPTER 4 - THE FUNERAL SERVICE	33
CHAPTER 5 - THE FUNERAL SERMON	63
CHAPTER 6 - FUNERAL SERVICE CONCLUSION.....	81
CHAPTER 7 - THE FUNERAL PROCESSION	87
CHAPTER 8 - THE GRAVESIDE SERVICE.....	93
CHAPTER 9 - A FINAL THOUGHT ON FUNERALS	103
CHAPTER 10 - THE DIFFICULT DEATH AND FUNERAL	107
CHAPTER 11 - RESOURCES AND THEIR USE	145
CONCLUSION	153
APPENDICES.....	157
APPENDIX 1: SCRIPTURE READINGS	159
APPENDIX 2: BENEDICTIONS.....	181
APPENDIX 3: SAMPLE OBITUARY	185
APPENDIX 4 COMMITTAL STATEMENTS.....	189
APPENDIX 5 SERMON TEXTS.....	193
ABOUT JOURNEY PASTORAL COACHING.....	219

PREFACE

It is hard to have patience with people who say, "There is no death" or "Death doesn't matter." There is death. And whatever is, matters. And whatever happens has consequences, and it and they are irrevocable and irreversible. You might as well say that birth doesn't matter.

C.S. Lewis

The simple wooden casket was set on the far side of the plain and somewhat shabby room in northwest Indiana. Silence filled the space in an unearthly and uncomfortable way. I didn't recognize the reason why at first, but then it dawned on me: the room was unearthly-silent because it was uncomfortably empty. In this room filled with dozens of empty chairs, there were just two people. And a casket. One open casket.

The two individuals, an elderly woman and her middle-aged son, were seated side by side in the row of chairs nearest to and facing the

casket. The elderly woman clutched a handkerchief in one hand while her other was cradled in the hands of her son, seated to her left. In silence, they sat before the open casket of her husband, his father, waiting for the mourners they knew would come. The mourners who never came.

I silently approached this grieving widow and son. After quietly greeting them, I sat in the chair next to the son.

For two hours, I sat with them. For two hours, I prayed for them (and for me), ministered to them, and sat in silence with them. For two hours I grieved for them. Not just for their loss, but for them. In their pain, they had counted on the comfort of friends who would come to share their sorrow and pay their respects, but not one person came.

And so, they were not just lonely: they were alone. Their loss was made all the more unbearable by the absence of anyone to share their sorrow. The absence of others was palpable in the room, its weight crushing their hearts and mine.

As the scheduled time of visitation came to an end, I helped them with their coats and walked them to their car in the equally empty funeral home parking lot. I reassured them of my prayers on their behalf and God's presence and comfort in their lives. I assured them of my commitment to do my very best for them and their departed husband and father in the funeral services of the next day. It was all I could do to hold myself together emotionally as we said our final goodbyes that evening. After their car had pulled away into the

darkness of the night, I fought to hold back tears as I made my way to my own car. Seated behind the steering wheel, I fought no more, but gave way to my emotions, weeping for this family of two and the empty, aching pain that overwhelmed them.

Sitting alone in my car, I prayed. Helpless and hurting, I prayed. My prayer was a simple and heartfelt one: "Heavenly Father, break my heart. Break my heart for these two people. Let me mourn with them – not just for them, but with them as a member of the family so that as your servant, I might serve them as you would serve them."

The next day, God answered my prayer. My wife and I preached, prayed, sang, comforted, and ministered as if there were only two people in the whole world. Because in the world of that room, that's all there were. At the funeral home and the graveside, we mourned as members of the family, and we ministered as the heart and hands of God extended. In our own need of comfort, we comforted; in our own sorrow, we were able to extend God's grace. All from hearts broken by the heart of the God in heaven whose heart first and most deeply broke for the one deceased and for the ones he had left behind.

You may wonder why I was so surprised at the lack of turnout for this funeral or why it was that my church did not come out to support this grieving mother and son. The answer lies in the fact that this family of two was not a part of the church where I served: I was just their pastor in their time of loss.

The senior pastor I served under at the time had opened to me the opportunity to officiate funerals for families without a home church. Grieving families would contact our church because of previous connections with us or on the recommendation of a local funeral director. Eager to serve in any way I could, I accepted as many of these requests as I could. These calls led to dozens of ministry opportunities as I walked with individuals and families in their grief, their losses of all kinds: the expected and the unexpected; the old, the young, even infants; the believers and the unbelievers. I spent many hours with mourning family members in hospitals and homes - at bedsides, in living rooms, and at kitchen tables - as they waited for the death of a loved one or after the fact, as they struggled to come to grips with the all too present and personal reality of death.

In the parking lot of that funeral home that night, behind the steering wheel of my car, I prayed a prayer for the first time that I have prayed many times since: "Father, break my heart for this family; let me mourn as a member of their family even as you enable me to minister as your heart and hands extended." It is a prayer I continue to pray to this day. And it is a prayer God has never failed to answer. I thank Him for it.

Often, the grave buries two hearts.

José Luis Navajo

INTRODUCTION

*It is only when we have said goodbye that we feel and
understand the strength with which we have loved.*

Fyodor Dostoevsky

One of the most challenging ministries pastors face is walking with families as they pass through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, helping them navigate the dying process and death of a loved one. These experiences can be heartbreaking or heartwarming. They can be both at the same time.

If the process begins with a phone call informing you of an unexpected passing, or it involves ministering to people during an extended illness with days or weeks at bedsides, there is no pastoral responsibility - or privilege - that compares with shepherding people as they say their final goodbyes and grieve through their loss.

Pastoral care during times of mourning is both a serious responsibility and a precious privilege. A family calls a pastor to guide

it through this most difficult of journeys and to be the one person in the world who will speak the final words over the life of their loved one. One person will shepherd them through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and that person is you. This experience is one that infinitely affects and even changes us as pastors, as followers of Christ, and as human beings. I've been forever by these experiences. As undershepherds of the Good Shepherd, it is a ministry that is worthy of our best effort in prayer, sermon preparation, and pastoral care.

What follows is a collection of practical lessons I've learned about this most important of ministry responsibilities, pastoring people as they process the death of a family member or friend. The foundational notes for this book come from my time teaching future pastors at Central Bible College in Springfield, MO. Its heartbeat comes from the many hours spent walking with families as they said their final goodbyes to loved ones. Its voice is not clinical, but conversational. Envision a pastor's study, a conversation between pastoral colleagues as we consider this life, the life to come, and helping people navigate the moment of passing from one to the next.

*In the last analysis it is our conception of death which decides
our answers to all the questions that life puts to us.*

Dag Hammarskjöld

THE INITIAL VISIT WITH THE FAMILY

*Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved
in mankind, and, therefore, never send to know
for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.*

John Donne

Approach. The Cambridge Dictionary defines approach as "a way of dealing with something." Think "method applied to accomplish a pre-defined purpose." Approach is not so much the "what" as the "how."

When it comes to funerals and walking with people in grief, many pastors identify the obvious "what" but miss the more subtle "how." They understand they are to meet with the family, prepare a funeral sermon, attend the visitation, officiate the funeral service, etc., but they

miss the mark when it comes to the pastoral care required in all of this. They check all the necessary boxes, but at the end of the day, they have not provided lasting Psalm 23 ministry.

Funeral approach: the way a minister of the Gospel deals with the "something" (the death) and the "someone" (those who mourn the death) involved. When it comes to walking people through grief, the approach (the how) is as important as the action (the what).

Therefore, Pastor, when walking with people in grief, do not let your approach be that of a professional "clergyman," aka, a hireling. Approach them instead as their pastor, an undershepherd of Jesus, sent by Him to shepherd His people in their time of loss - a shepherd who knows his sheep, cares for his sheep, mourns with his sheep, serves his sheep, and lays his life down for his sheep.

Pastor, if you've not already done so, when the call comes and people need you to help guide them in their time of loss, ask God to break your heart for them, to give you His heart for them. Mourn with them as one of them even as you mourn as their shepherd, one who, by God's grace, can help guide them through their grief. Then ask God to speak His peace through you and to give His comfort through you. If you skipped over it, I recommend you read the Preface of this book for help in this most important of pastoral heartbeats.

"Good Shepherd, deliver your people from professional practitioners, hirelings who only do their duty in working

with grieving families as they process the pain of death and loss. Heavenly Father, give your people shepherds worthy of You and of them, shepherds with hearts that beat in time with your heart and the hearts of hurting people as well. Amen."

Heartbeat

As mentioned earlier, when I was a young pastor, I worked with funeral homes in our city. When unchurched families lost a loved one, the directors of these funeral homes often called to ask if I could meet these families and officiate these funerals. This led to countless ministry opportunities, each of them precious, all of them heartbreaking. Weeks, months, and even years after I had officiated a funeral for these families, they would call to say hello or come by to seek my counsel. I would happen to meet these families in restaurants and stores where they would proudly introduce me to their friends as “our pastor.”

Some of these families never became a part of our local church, but they gratefully received my ministry and the ministry of the Gospel. I always encouraged them to become a part of a local church (especially ours), but whether or not they chose to do so did not influence my decision to serve them in their time of loss and sorrow. It did not influence my decision to walk with them in the months and

years that followed. Because I said yes to them in their time of need, the Gospel of Jesus Christ - in all of its love, life, and hope - was delivered to people who might otherwise never have heard. People who might never darken the door of a church opened their lives to a minister of the Gospel, and more importantly, to God.

I have preached the funerals of Christians and non-Christians, those who died of natural causes and those who died sudden, tragic deaths. I have officiated funerals before hundreds of attendees and before only a few. As mentioned earlier, I once preached to an audience of three: an elderly widow, her son, and my wife.

It was in that funeral for three that I asked God for what some might think a strange gift: the gift of a broken heart. I asked God to never let me walk with a family through death as an outsider, but to help me mourn with them as one of them. I asked Him to help to even me preach and bring comfort as a member of the family.

How critical it is that pastors genuinely mourn with those whom they serve in funeral ministry. How essential that we give pastoral care worthy of them, and even more importantly, worthy of Jesus. It is imperative that we approach every funeral as a fellow mourner and as the undershepherd of Jesus, the heart of God in human form.

RESOURCE: A great resource on this approach to pastoral ministry in general, and to pastoral ministry in times of grief, is the Henri Nouwen classic, "Creative Ministry." It is a "pastoral heartbeat book," in that it focuses first on the heart of the pastor, and second on

the hands of pastoring. Pastor, first and pastoring, second because being leads to doing. Nouwen clarifies the difference between the servant-shepherd who empathizes with his people and the professional practitioner who only does his job. This book is highly recommended for everyone involved in funeral ministry.

Factors to Consider As You Meet With the Family

No two experiences walking with people in mourning are the same. Individuals, groupings of individuals, circumstances, and even moments in time are different. The pastor must be prepared to meet people in grief where they are and walk with them as they are. Here are factors to consider as you prepare to meet for the first time with a family in mourning.

The spiritual condition of the deceased. When we mourn the loss of someone whose faith in Jesus Christ was evident, Christians' sorrow is colored by an even greater hope. The death of a person marked by a lukewarm faith leaves us with troubling questions as we grieve. Facing the loss of someone who did not profess faith in Christ can pull away the floor from beneath us: our grief seeks hope and comfort but finds none. As a pastor, I can never forget the brokenhearted parents who have asked me where their dead son or daughter had gone, to heaven or to hell? No one can stand in the place of God, judging another's soul, but it is difficult for people in grief to consider the life lived and

not make their own assessment. The pastor needs to be prepared to walk with people who have reached their own conclusions, spoken or unspoken, on the eternal destination of the one who has passed. Our preparation is found in the truth, grace, and love of God. We'll return later to this important part of pastoral care.

The spiritual condition of those who grieve. Christians and non-Christians alike mourn their loss, but not equally. The non-Christian sees the end of earthly life and finds only questions. The Christian sees the end of earthly life and finds the promise of God – life eternal! Where the non-Christian mourns without hope, we in Christ can mourn with a most certain hope, a “blessed hope,” when someone dies in Christ (I Thessalonians 4:13). The Christian knows the Word of God to be true and that, because of the resurrection of Jesus, “Death is swallowed up in victory,” and its power over the believer is no more (I Corinthians 15:54-56). A heart that stops beating does not mean the end of life, but the entrance into real life in the presence of God. The unbeliever, uncertain of where her deceased loved one is, mourns without hope. Certain of where her deceased loved one is, the follower of Christ mourns with hope, peace, and even joy. I have seen it – and I've experienced it - many times.

The emotional condition of those who grieve. The pastor needs to understand the “emotion culture” of each family or set of mourners to whom she ministers. Some families are more Stoic, revealing little or no feeling when grieving. Others will be more emotional. And still

others will be a blend of the two. I have met with families and conducted funerals where everyone looked on as if it were a day like any other day. I have also walked with families that had one or more members who endlessly wept and wailed, making it difficult to minister to them individually or to conduct the funeral. In a family I know, one person fainted at every funeral, usually at a public and “opportune” moment. Being aware of information like this, the pastor can be prepared to handle difficult situations or even avoid them. It is a good idea to learn what you can about any “exceptional” individuals in the family who may stand out emotionally from the rest, and so, require special help from you or someone whom you ask to assist.

The relationships of mourners with the deceased. This includes those present in the initial meeting with the family and those who attend the visitation or funeral. Be it the nuclear family, extended family, friends, or significant individuals from the past, the relationship of each person with the deceased at the time of the death will significantly affect how each person processes the loss. Those who have shared a healthy relationship with the deceased are most likely to process their pain in a healthy way. Those who have unresolved issues, unfulfilled expectations, or even separation due to time or distance may struggle.

The previous experience of mourners with loss due to death. There are those who have been raised from childhood to face death and taught to deal with it as a normal part of life. Some people refuse to

attend funerals: from their childhood they have been unable to face the reality of death. Others who attend or do not attend the funeral will struggle to deal with this death because the heartache of a previous loss is still fresh in their hearts: a spouse, a child, or a parent. The pastor will need to be aware of these factors as he approaches the first meeting with the family and in conducting the funeral that follows.

The circumstances of the death. The circumstances of each death will significantly affect the grieving process of family members, as well as their interpersonal relationships. Unexpected losses can be the most difficult for people to process, often leading to self-recrimination, to blaming others, or even to blaming God: "If only I had had more faith; if only someone had done more; if only God had done what He promised us." Unexpected losses include deaths due to accident, violence, or suicide. They also involve the death of an infant, youth, or young adult. The trauma of sudden loss shocks mourners, forcing them into emotional spaces where they are not yet prepared to go. We will address this more fully in the chapter on "difficult deaths."

At the same time, deaths following an extended illness present their own set of challenges for mourners and ministers. Death may have been an invisible but real presence for far too long, leaving people emotionally or physically exhausted at the end. In these cases, relationships between caregiving and non-caregiving family members can be strained, again leading to self-recrimination and blame. Finally, in the immediate pain of their loss, family members can experience

anger or resentment toward medical or hospice care providers, unexpectedly blaming the provider for the death. Whatever the circumstances of each death, the wise pastor considers them and their ramifications as he walks into his first meeting with the family and prepares to conduct the funeral. The pastor must be ready to show respect and patience for each individual as he or she expresses even explosive emotions in this first meeting. Understanding, wisdom, and secure pastoral care in this first meeting can do much to help a family experience the comforting presence of God and begin a healthy grieving process individually and together.

When The Call Comes

On receiving the news that someone has died, contact the family immediately and arrange to see family members as soon as possible. While your phone call will be appreciated, it is your personal presence that is needed. Connecting only by text or social media is unacceptable because it is insufficient to meet the need. Any minister of the Gospel who considers this to be appropriate ministry needs to reconsider his or her calling as a shepherd: shepherds don't "phone it in;" and they don't "text it in" either. They instinctively go their sheep.

People in grief, and especially in the earliest moments of loss, associate the visual, touchable presence of their pastor with the presence of God. They deserve your personal presence, Pastor.

And they need it. In his book, *The Art of Pastoring*, David Hansen writes that pastors are in many ways “living parables of Jesus,” visible metaphors of Christ: people naturally associate a pastor's actions with Him.¹ This is especially true when people mourn, as, with breaking hearts, they intently search for God and His comfort. Unable to see, hear, or feel God tangibly, they turn to God's living parables, i.e., pastors, trusting that in these undershepherds of Jesus, they will see, hear, and feel God in their time of need.

P.T. Forsyth describes it this way:

Ministers are themselves the living elements in Christ's hands – broken and poured out and soul; even unto death; so that they may not only witness Christ or symbolize him, but by the sacrament of personality, actually convey him, crucified and risen.²

Therefore, on receiving the news of a death, contact the family and ask if you can come to the home even then. The family needs ministry now: to wait is to miss the moment. Not only will you miss the moment of need, but the family will remember you – and God – not for your presence later, but for your absence now when they needed

¹ David Hansen, *The Art of Pastoring* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2012), pp.24-25.

² P.T. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1917), p.141.

you most. When the call comes, go as God's living parable of His grace, love, and comfort. Unless there are truly exceptional reasons why you cannot do so, on receiving the news of death, arrange to be with the family as soon as is possible.

A final thought on the subject of pastors as living parables of Jesus. This means that the work of comforting those who mourn begins long before the telephone call comes. We must so live among people that they see us as visible metaphors of Jesus in every day life. Only then will they see us as parables of Jesus when death knocks on their door. May people so identify us with Jesus in our faith and faithfulness, our love and compassion that when the most difficult of days arrive, they instinctively allow us to enter their mourning with them as the hands of Jesus, bringing His love, comfort, and hope.

Goals For The Initial Meeting

Reveal. Comfort. Pray. The principal goal for this meeting is pastoral care: shepherd those who mourn into the presence of God. How do we do this?

Reveal Jesus to Those Who Mourn – The Living Word of God

Share the Word of God with the family. Read Scripture with them or quote Scripture to them, but be sure to share the Word of God. In Philippians 2, Paul calls the Scriptures the "word of life." In the

Gospel of John, in the context of great questions, Peter looks at Jesus and says, "You alone have the words of life."

You can have diplomas from leading seminaries, decades of experience in counseling, and sparkling personal charm, but the sum total of your training, abilities, and charisma cannot give one glimmer of hope and comfort to people as they gaze into the unfathomable gap between life and death. Only the Scriptures are divinely inspired, and so, able to breathe life into human beings. In your first meeting with the family, follow the example of John the Baptist: let you decrease and let Jesus increase. This happens as you allow the Creator and Redeemer to comfort people by speaking directly to them through His Word. See the appendices for suggested Scripture references.

While your sympathy as a friend and pastor may be encouraging, Jesus' presence, power, and peace are transforming. These come to us first through the primary means through which He has chosen to reveal Himself, the Word of God. I have seen His Word and presence melt away in a moment what hours of my counsel could not begin to move.

This is true because there are no human words that can adequately address the questions and pain of sorrow or answer the ache of the human soul. Most of us struggle with what to say to people who mourn. We search for just the right words and then cringe as we hear ourselves repeating worn clichés. Many of us have been the recipients of these well-intentioned, but inadequate words in our own times of loss. Human words, however heartfelt, simply cannot meet the needs

of the broken heart. Only the voice of the One who formed the soul and breathed life into it can heal it when it is crushed by grief.

Therefore, as a faithful shepherd, come prepared to apply the medicine that soothes the soul (Psalm 23:5), the Word of God. Ease yourself of the burden of saying just the right thing and let God speak His Words of life through you.

This means the minister who walks into the arena of grief needs to know the Scriptures. She needs to be familiar in mind and in heart with the words of life that remind those who mourn of Christ's personal presence with them (Psalm 23, Psalm 91, Psalm 121, John 14, etc.) of His mighty triumph over death AND Christ's assurance of us entering His presence after death (I Corinthians 15, etc).

Comfort Those Who Mourn – Ask, Look, Listen, Give

In the first meetings with the family after the death and before the funeral, ask about the life of the deceased. This is step one in making a funeral service and sermon personal rather than a cookie cutter presentation.

Ask about the deceased's personal history, the tender and proud moments, the touching and joyful. Inquire about the reminiscences that make family members smile and celebrate, the memories that warm their hearts as they reflect around the fire of shared memories. Don't forget to ask about their hobbies, their social or community groups, favorite music, and interests. All of these threads weave together in

forming the fabric of this person's life. Look people in the eye as they talk, let your attention and interest speak comfort to them. Listen carefully as they speak. Ask follow-up questions. Give affirmation by helping the family connect with each other in their love for the deceased. Give hope and even celebrate with them as they mourn.

Invite family members to share their personal memories of the deceased, the things that marked not just a special life, but their special relationship with this loved one. Ask what they most want people to know about him or her, and what personal qualities or life events mean the most to them. Ask family members what they would say of him or her if they could say just one thing.

This conversation can be easy or difficult to lead. If the deceased was a follower of Christ and an exemplary person, this can be a wonderful time of tears, sighs, and even laughter – a family reunion in the presence of the Lord. I have been a part of these gatherings when old photographs and newspaper clippings were searched for and found. I've been with families as they recalled old stories (to tears and laughter) and even shared together in singing "the old songs" that helped knit their hearts together. In moments like these, the potential for truly meaningful and life-changing ministry is infinite under the wise and gentle guidance of a pastor who is whole-heartedly focused on the family and providing them Christlike pastoral care.

However, if the deceased did not live an exemplary life or if family relations are strained, the conversation about the life of the

deceased can be a complicated and challenging undertaking. The minister will need to assess the atmosphere in the room and proceed accordingly. A word to the wise: do not move too deeply too quickly. Upon entering the house, take the relational temperature of the family, edging into the waters slowly. Determine if they are warm and comfortable, cold and unfeeling, or hot and volatile. Begin conversations with non-personal subjects such as the deceased's birthplace, schools attended, vocation, and favorite pastimes. If tensions are higher rather than lower, do not attempt to move the conversation into more personal subjects. Instead, invite family members to think of the unique qualities of the deceased and the special moments of his or her life and to share them privately with you later. Then move on quickly to another topic.

You can also take the tack of talking privately with one or more family members who appear to be positively disposed toward the deceased. They can share qualities in the deceased, even hidden ones worthy of honor. This approach has the additional benefit preventing potential fireworks.

Pray the Holy Spirit makes you attentive to even the smallest remarks that can serve as open doors in these conversations. Before walking into the home, pause and ask the Holy Spirit to give you sensitivity to Him and to those in the room, and to provide you with spiritual insight and wisdom. Remember that you are burying some mother's son or daddy's daughter, some child's mother or father.

Commit that in this encounter, whatever the relational temperature between family members, you will find a way to focus everyone on the presence of God, on giving comfort, and on honoring the life lived, even when it is difficult to do so. As you invite God's presence and honor the deceased, you are worshipping God and you are ministering to the family. You set the family in the hands of the God who designed and gave life to this person, and you create a platform of trust from which you can point people to God and present the Savior.

Pray With Those Who Mourn – The Presence of God

In this first visit, be sure to pray with the family. It seems obvious, but it needs to be emphasized. I have known colleagues who did not follow this practice. It's no surprise that their people did not recognize them as "shepherds." And I have known families whose pastor did not pray with them in their time of loss. Consequently, they did not experience the presence and comfort of God. Write it down: in this first visit, rule number one is to pray with the family.

Pray as "The Pastor," the person whom God has sent to shepherd this family into His presence. Stand in your John 10 shepherd's vocation. Draw on your Ephesians 4 spiritual office and gifting. This grieving family needs a pastor; be what and who they need.

In the shock of their loss, family members may have a difficult time sensing God's presence: sorrow can easily numb the human soul to the Savior. But at the same time, people can easily see, hear, and

sense God through you, His servant. Many people in grief even count on it. Humbly, yet confidently, you can depend on God's Spirit to move and speak through you in these moments. Again, you are a living parable of Jesus as you walk with people in mourning: through you, they can feel the comforting presence of the Lord. It will not be you, your charisma, your wisdom, or your qualities; it will be the Holy Spirit through you, soothing, strengthening, and encouraging – His divinity through your humanity becomes their reality. All He requires is a human vessel through whom He can make His love and grace tangible, real, and personal.

Note that these actions we take to comfort people in pain are not mere psychological techniques. They are ministries of healing, soul "touches" that connect hurting people with God. Again, we are not hirelings only doing a job; we are pastors. We are not simply professional clergy bringing our training to a clinical case. As undershepherds of Jesus, we are His heart and hands extended to people in their time of need. This is who we are. It is our holy calling and our precious privilege. We are caregivers to those whom Jesus created for relationship with Him, people for whom He died and rose again to give eternal life. This fact gives us great assurance! Think of it: as we take on the task of walking people through their pain, we do it in the power and anointing of the Holy Spirit! We count on the ministry of His presence. And as His undershepherds, we have it.

All of this comes through the Word of God and prayer. Again, be sure to pray with the family. Do not do it as a closing gesture to your ministry to them, but do it on your arrival as God's invitation to them to receive His ministry. Again, we have nothing of value in ourselves to give people who are in pain. But Jesus is their Jehovah Rophe: He is the Lord who heals. When we begin in prayer and continue in prayer as we minister to His people, we remove ourselves from the role of healer; we step back into the second position to give Jesus His rightful and primary place in the eyes and hearts of His people. Through the Word of God and prayer, people see God as their help in this time of need, their ever-present help in every time of need.

Practical Help: Shift the Mood

Do not overstay your first visit. The family may have responsibilities to see to or may simply desire time alone. Be sensitive to their needs and respond accordingly. Do not allow your own comfort or your interests elsewhere to be the determining factor in your decision of how little or how long you stay. Stay as long as required to serve them well. There will be times when your stay is brief, and there will be times when families will need you to stay longer. In either case, do not leave until you have completed your mission: bringing the comfort of God to those who mourn, and offering yourself to serve them by walking with them in their grief.

Extended first visits can be both tiring and rewarding as families bring you into their circle of sorrow. At times they will be open and talkative; at other times they will become quiet as they internally process. The best counsel is to allow them to grieve in a healthy manner, neither attempting to push them through their pain nor allowing them to sink into an unhealthy and collective malaise. The longer you are in ministry, and the more intentional you are in developing sensitivity to people in pain, the better able you will be to "read the room" and respond appropriately. Be intentional in pursuing this sensitivity. Ask the Spirit's help.

During this first or second visit with the family, when your presence is still needed, you can help them process their grief in a healthy way by taking practical steps to shift the mood in the room. After you and the family have talked for a while, you may sense tiredness or discomfort in family members. People in mourning, especially early on, need emotional "shifts" from time to time as they wrestle with the ebbs and flows of their thoughts and feelings. You can help facilitate this. It can be as simple as physically moving to a different chair in the room, asking to see family pictures, remarking on a photo or item in the room, or suggesting a move to the kitchen table to share a cup of coffee or tea, etc. As those who serve, we are not manipulating, but helping people in grief to emotionally "shift gears" as they process their loss.

The Ongoing Initial Meeting

A final thought. While this time together is your first ministry opportunity with the family, do not think of this meeting as having ended until the funeral actually begins. Be sure to have the phone numbers of key family members and to touch base with them once a day until the day of the funeral. Again, your goal is pastoral care. Yes, it is possible to call too often. But the mistake of most in ministering to those who mourn is not in calling too often, but in not calling often enough.

If today were your last, would you do what you're doing?

Or would you love more, give more, forgive more?

Then do so! Forgive and give as if it were your last


opportunity. Love like there's no tomorrow,

and if tomorrow comes, love again.

Max Lucado

When the Call Comes

A Funeral Guide for Pastors



SHARING
THE JOURNEY WITH THOSE
WHO MOURN

D. Alan Baker

A call comes, informing the pastor of a death. Unexpected, or after an extended illness, there is no pastoral responsibility, or privilege, that compares with shepherding people as they say their final goodbyes and mourn their loss. "When the Call Comes" helps pastors serve those who mourn, from the initial call to the end of the funeral services.

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