

'TIL DEATH DO US PART

You might think by the title of this essay that I am planning to write about how death severs the bond of marriage, and I will – but that will not be my main emphasis. People have many relationships on earth, all of which are unavoidably changed by death ever since God told Adam and Eve:

“By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19).

I have no problem thinking of God as all-knowing when I consider how God made our bodies biodegradable! Surely he knew we would disobey him and made this provision for death, one of the consequences of our sin. Isn't it amazing that God made us anyway? What love!

As I write this, I am well aware of the many changes there will be when I die. Today is November 28, 2004, the end of the Thanksgiving weekend. Leo and I have had a lot of company this year, including this week. Our son David, his wife Dana and their three children (ages twelve to fifteen) were here from North Carolina. MaryBeth, our daughter, was here from Massachusetts with her husband Charles Dyer and their sons, ages five and seven. Son George, his wife Janet and their three sons (ages twelve to nineteen) and our daughter Marty and her husband Ed Ford live in the area; we see them frequently. Our son Paul, his wife Marita and their three children (ages ten to thirteen) were here from California in August. I know my family is coming to see me because of my progressive disease, and believe me, I am glad they want to come! I am so blessed!

God never promised that children would have the nurturing care of their parents until well into their adult life, nor that children would get to know their grandparents personally. Think of Jacob's wife Rachel, who died giving birth to Benjamin. That little boy never knew his mother nor his children their grandmother. Does that mean that Rachel had no impact on their lives? No! I'm sure that stories of her life made her seem very real to her offspring in a loving way. Love is eternal; it is the greatest of the things that remain (1 Corinthians 13:13), even after our death. I find that comforting.

In my case, I am now forced to think about subjects that never came up before. Do my children and grandchildren – and my friends, for that matter – need twenty more years of my presence with them in order for me to have an impact on their lives? No! If I have not influenced them for God by now, I never will. I can trust the Holy Spirit to finish the work that God has been doing in all their lives for years, not only through me, but through many other people. Now the time is coming for me to get out of the way. So be it!

And now let's look at some stories and illustrations about our subject: 'TIL DEATH DO US PART.

God brought Elisha into Elijah's life when the latter was suffering a kind of "death": deep depression. Elijah was emotionally drained from the great contest on Mt. Carmel in Israel between God and Baal (1 Kings 18). What a victory God had that day! And what a vindication of Elijah as God's prophet! The aftermath was just as exhausting: Elijah slaughtered the 450 prophets of Baal, then ran down the mountain in a severe wind and rain storm, only to be told that wicked Jezebel intended to have him killed before the next day ended. The prophet's reaction is clearly described in detail so that we can ponder and learn from it all these years later:

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the tree and fell asleep (1 Kings 19:3-5).

God knew exactly where his servant was, his physical condition and the state of his emotions:

All at once an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." He looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank and then lay down again. The angel of the Lord came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." So he got up and ate and drank. Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night (19:5-8).

Paul, my 92-year-old friend and tablemate here at Drum Hill, was feeling low one day. "I'm going to go to my room and throw myself a pity party," he told me at lunch time. "How did it go?" I asked him at dinner. "Nobody came, so I canceled it and gave myself a good lecture instead," he replied. "Now I'm feeling better." Paul has picked up a lot of wisdom along his lifetime!

Alone in the cave, Elijah was also filled with pity for himself. Then the word of the Lord came to him asking: *"What are you doing here, Elijah?"* The prophet revealed what he had been pondering:

"I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too" (19:10).

What a pity party he was having! Elijah felt that he was doing more than his duty for God. The people among whom he lived had all rejected God, desecrated the places of worship and killed every one of God's prophets except Elijah. They would probably kill him also; surely he deserved better than that – especially from God! Didn't God notice the quality of his service?

The Lord told Elijah to get out of his cave, that the Lord was about to pass by. Elijah did so. When the Lord asked again what Elijah was doing here, he got the same answer. Have you noticed that depressive talk seems to be repetitious? But God listens – even to repetitive talk! And after that the Lord took steps to bring his servant out of his isolating condition into LIFE:

- He got him away from his cave, sent him back the way he had come.
- He gave him work to do: anoint Hazael the next king of Aram and Elisha as the prophet who would succeed Elijah.
- In mentioning his successor, God made Elijah face the fact that God's work would go on after Elijah had finished his earthly service. Truth sets us free!
- He corrected Elijah's faulty thinking. Seven thousand people in Israel had not bowed in worship to Baal, nor kissed the idol. (Implied: God knew each one of them!)
- God chose in Elisha a happy, committed person who would remain with Elijah until he left this earth, and would be a friend as well as a trainee and attendant.

2 Kings 2 records the story of the separation of Elijah and Elisha. Not only is the story fascinating, but, like the previous story, it is full of instruction for us. Elijah knew that the last day of his time on earth had arrived and that he would leave in a whirlwind, not by death. There were prophet schools in those days and Elijah wanted to visit them before he left. The prophet and his designated successor, Elisha, were together in Gilgal when Elijah announced his plans:

*Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to Bethel."
But Elisha said, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel.
The company of prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?"
"Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "but do not speak of it" (2:2,3).*

This brings many questions to my mind: Did Elijah and Elisha both know that the other knew about the coming departure? Did the prophets from school know ahead of time or were they told by Elijah? Why did they tell Elisha? Might their shared loss have forged a bond that would help them all in the days to come? Why might Elisha have not wanted to talk about it? Why might Elijah have wanted to travel alone?

(We all answer questions such as these out of our own personalities, preferences, backgrounds, experiences. Almost forty years ago our family doctor died of cancer in his mid-forties. I had known he was ill, but could not comprehend that he had died. To make matters worse, there was no funeral service that I could attend. But then word went around town that in two weeks there would be a memorial service in our high school auditorium. No doubt about it: I would be there! The scheduled speeches were wonderful, but to me the best part took place in the foyer afterwards. Mingling with others who also loved him and swapping anecdotes was such a relief. Now I could face reality; somehow life would go on. And now you know why I asked about the shared loss in the questions above.)

Elijah finished his visit in Bethel and then told Elisha the next stop was Jericho. The same conversations as in 2 Kings 2:2,3 took place in connection with Jericho. By that stop they had traveled over thirty miles together. What did they talk about? What would you say to your successor (or others) if you knew you had only a few more hours until your death? Or would you rather not talk about it?

There was one more short trip to make, a five mile jaunt to the other side of the Jordan River. They walked together, with fifty of the prophets following along at a distance. At the river, Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided and they walked over on dry ground. Now they had to talk; they could put it off no longer!

Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"

"Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied.

"You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours – otherwise not" (2:9,10).

This is my interpretation of what Elisha was requesting, based on the thought that the oldest son inherited a double portion: "Elijah, I'm glad you asked. I admire you so much and am grateful for all I have learned from you since the Lord brought us together. I really feel like you are my father and I your son, at least your spiritual son. Make it official, please. Adopt me as yours. I don't care about your possessions, but I certainly would be honored if I could inherit a double portion of your spirit." If this is close to what Elisha meant, what a tender moment for both of them!

As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father!..." And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart.

He picked up the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. Then he took the cloak ... and struck the water with it. "Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided ... and he crossed over.

The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha" (2:11-15).

Elisha got the inheritance he desired because he was faithful to Elijah, staying with him until God parted them (Elijah's "death"). His subsequent ministry as a prophet was very powerful, filled with miracles. So strong was the spirit in Elisha's work that an interesting incident took place after his death. Here is 2 Kings 13:20,21:

Elisha died and was buried. Now Moabite raiders used to enter the country every spring. Once while some Israelites were burying a man, suddenly they saw a band of raiders; so they threw the

man's body into Elisha's tomb. When the body touched Elisha's bones, the man came to life and stood up on his feet.

Technically Elijah did not die, but he did leave this earth, and his friends, family and students were just as bereaved at the separation as if he had died. And certainly Elijah was changed as he ascended, perhaps receiving his resurrection body. His experience draws my mind to 1 Corinthians 15:51-54, where Paul tells us that we may have an experience similar to Elijah's:

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

Blessed hope! One day death will no longer exist to separate us! Come, Lord Jesus.

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Another fine example of faithfulness 'TIL DEATH DO US PART is the superb friendship between David and Jonathan. Jonathan was the son of Saul, the first king of Israel, who suffered from dreadful mood swings. David, from a different family line, had already been anointed as Saul's successor due to the king's disobedience to God. I find it interesting that Saul's moodiness was what brought David and Jonathan together – that, and David's musical ability. It was also what separated them physically from each other. The story is recorded in 1 Samuel 16 through 2 Samuel 1.

In one of Saul's down times, his attendants suggested that a harp player might be able to make Saul feel better. The king gave his consent and David was chosen. The music therapy worked – at least for a time. Perhaps this is when Jonathan, who as a warrior in his father's army, and David met. Then came the story of David and Goliath, the ungodly Philistine giant whom David killed, in the name of God, with a stone from his slingshot. At the end of the contest ...

After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return to his father's house. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt (18:1-4).

What marvelous words describe the friendship between these two young men: one in spirit; covenant; he loved him as himself! The latter sounds so selfless, so rare; yet it is a fulfilling of the law that God gave Moses for the Israelites and that Jesus repeated: Love your neighbor as yourself. It should be common!

David was very successful in King Saul's employ, especially in battle. When people began singing David's praises, Saul became very angry. He thought, *"They have credited David with killing tens of thousands but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?"* And from that time on Saul kept a jealous eye on David. Twice Saul tried to kill David with his spear while David was playing the harp and twice David eluded him. Things got so much worse until finally Saul tried to involve his son. Instead of killing David, Jonathan warned him and then tried to reason with his father. Sometimes that worked and sometimes it didn't.

The crisis that separated the two from each other's presence came at the time of the New Moon festival. Knowing they might have to part, Jonathan and David renewed their covenant of friendship. Together they worked out a plan to test Saul's attitude toward David and a signal to let David know

whether he could stay at the palace or if he had to flee for his life. Saul was so angry that he threw his spear at his son to try to kill him! As arranged, the two friends met and the unhappy message was delivered. Then they kissed each other and wept together.

Jonathan said to David, "Go in peace, for we have sworn friendship with each other in the name of the Lord, saying, 'The Lord is witness between you and me and between your descendants and my descendants forever.' " Then David left and Jonathan went back to town (20:42).

Now the friends were separated physically, though still one in heart. David spent years hiding and running from Saul. The Bible records another meeting between David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 23:15-18:

While David was at Horesh in the Desert of Ziph, he learned that Saul had come out to take his life. And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God. "Don't be afraid," he said "My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this." The two of them made a covenant before the Lord. Then Jonathan went home, but David remained at Horesh.

The two men never did get to work together. There was a fierce battle between the Philistines and the Israelites in which Saul and three of his sons, including Jonathan, all died. David lamented the deaths of both Saul and Jonathan. Of his friend he said, *"I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women"* (2 Samuel 1:25,26).

Now death had parted the friends. Was this the end? What about the covenant? David did not forget Jonathan. After he was king, David asked if there was anyone left of the house of Saul to whom he could show kindness for Jonathan's sake. He found out that Jonathan had a surviving son named Mephibosheth, a man who was crippled in both feet. David had the man brought before him, restored to him all the property that had belonged to his grandfather Saul, found Ziba, Saul's former servant, to farm the land for Mephibosheth and ordered that Jonathan's son eat every day at the king's table. David certainly honored the covenant. And years later David died, too. I love to think of David and Jonathan united in Heaven for eternity. No more grieving or parting for them!

Before leaving this story, notice this: being faithful to someone until death parts you does not mean you must be together all the time or even be there when the first one dies. It is a matter of the heart. I'm sure David and Jonathan felt each other's love and loyalty as a comforting, strengthening factor when they were apart almost as much as when they were together.

My Grandma Hicks taught me about that long ago. Some of her children lived miles away and she seldom saw them. "It's not the distance between you that matters so much as the feelings between you," she said. Her acceptance and peace was beautiful to see. Some of my own children live at a distance, too. But the relationship I have with each one is so strong and wonderful that I feel they are with me after all! (Is this what "being one in spirit" means?) We "eat together" at the table of our King and that erases miles.

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The story of Ruth and Naomi contains the sentiment of faithfulness until death parts us that is used in wedding ceremonies, but it concerns two women who first were related by law and then by choice. Naomi and her husband were Israelites who moved to Moab with their two sons. While living there, the two sons married Moabite women. In the course of time all three of the men died, perhaps breaking the legal ties between the women, though not their affection for each other. Naomi decided to move back home to Bethlehem in Judah, so all three women started out together. On the way Naomi was thinking of the welfare of these two wonderful women and said to them, *"Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead*

and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.” Then she kissed them and they wept aloud and said to her, “We will go back with you to your people” (Ruth 1:8-10).

Naomi reasoned with them further, causing them all to weep again. *Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. “Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her” (1:14,15).* And then Ruth made her well-known statement of commitment to Naomi:

“Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me” (1:16,17).

Oh, the value of true, lasting friendships like that, whether in the family or between unrelated people! Notice that there was nothing forced in this friendship. Naomi was willing to lose both women from her daily life rather than suggest that they stay out of a sense of duty toward her. How many potentially fine relationships (especially between adult children and their parents) are ruined by the imposition on either side of a guilt factor, of “the law.” Not so in this case.

Naomi returned home from Moab accompanied by Ruth, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning. The rest of the story is fascinating. Ruth did marry again and had a son, much to Naomi’s delight. Ruth actually became an ancestor of King David and by extension, of Jesus. I’m sure Ruth and Naomi remained heart-bound friends until death parted them.

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From 1991 until I retired in 2000, I was the congregationally chosen pastor of The Community Church of Yorktown. In this capacity I had the legal right to perform marriage ceremonies. The first one I conducted was for our daughter MaryBeth and her husband, Charles Dyer in 1995. What a privilege that was! I wanted their ceremony to be special and to incorporate the truths I had come to believe through the years about husband and wife relationships. The result of my musings was a demonstration I called the Parable of the Candles. Here is a picture of my church after a wedding had ended, showing the table where the parable was explained.



While the candles I used were all the same size, I used candle holders of different heights, the tallest one representing God. That one was lit at the start of the ceremony. The side two were the same

height, though perhaps slightly different in design. Front and center was the smallest holder which held the candle representing marriage. In every wedding ceremony that I conducted, there came the time when the bride, groom and I would move over to the table and act out the parable, the text of which follows.

PARABLE OF THE CANDLES

The Scriptures we have read speak of God as Love and the source of love. God is also Light and the source of light. The Bible says, "God is light and in him there is no darkness whatever." God created light with the words, "Let there be light" – and there was light. When the Son of God entered the world, he came, among other things, as light. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." So it is fitting that we use a candle to represent God in our parable. The one that stands for God is the most prominent one, the one already lit.

The candles on the sides represent the two of you, one for _____ and one for _____. All life has its source in God. We are all descendants of Adam and Eve, who were directly created by God. Like them, we are all made in the image of God. More than that, God is the only source of spiritual life. Each of you has become God's child by believing in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. To demonstrate that your physical and spiritual life comes from God, please take your candles and light them from the one already lit.

As you stand here with your candles lit, I want to say that your individuality is a precious thing, for it is the sum total of all that you were born with, all that you have learned and experienced, and all your dreams and aspirations. Although you share much in common, there are some things that you will always see differently. Do not be afraid of these differences, but rather nurture and enjoy each other's individuality. As you do, your own understanding of people, of God and of things will be enlarged. Don't ever lose your own or blow out each other's uniqueness.

Today you are entering into a new union called marriage. To demonstrate this union, please take your individual candles and together light the fourth candle, which represents marriage. (Continue holding the two candles.) Marriage is God's idea. It's been around as long as there have been two people, a male and a female. May the light of your marriage glow brightly for all to see, as long the two of you are living on this earth.

In marriage, besides being individuals, you also belong to each other. To demonstrate this point, please exchange candles with each other. God says much in his word about how he wants people to treat each other, and this certainly holds true in marriage. "Love one another," God says. Also "respect and honor each other. Bear one another's burdens. Serve one another. Be kind and compassionate to each other. And submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."

"Submit to one another." Here is a big key to the equality God intends in marriage. There is no reason to jockey for position in marriage, nor for one to dominate the other. Work together as partners. Recognize your own and each other's strengths, weaknesses and desires when it comes to decision making. Follow God's "one another" principles and let your marriage be uniquely yours. No two marriages are exactly alike, just as no two individuals are exactly alike.

Please put the candles back in the holders now and let's look at the final arrangement. While each of you are special creations of God, you are committing yourselves to unity in Christ. Something new is beginning today that is well worth developing and needs to be developed for the glory of God.

I charge you both to always let Christ have the central, prominent place in your marriage. As you, _____ and _____, look at each other in the time to come, see each other through God and let this perspective soften the rough edges of the adjustment time that you will surely go through

and heighten the times of pure enjoyment that are also in store for you.

Keep all four candles glowing in your marriage. "Let your lights so shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Amen.

Sometime in the weeks prior to the wedding I would sit down with the couple and go over the candle ceremony with them, using it as a basis for a discussion on marriage. Always I added a part that I never used on the wedding day, namely: this beautiful arrangement would only last until one of them leaves, either by death or some other kind of leaving. At that time not only would one individual candle be gone, but the marriage candle would also be blown out. What would be left? One individual – and God! That's why it is so important to develop your spiritual life, even while happily married. God should always be first in our affections – our number one spouse, our number one friend, because God is eternal. We cannot help dying, no matter how hard we try. And unfortunately, in this sin-cursed world abandonment and divorce happen far too frequently as well.

Sadly, a young woman's marriage ended in divorce following her husband's unfaithfulness and refusal to change. Now she had met another man and was facing a predicament. "I promised before God to remain faithful to my husband until death parts us," she said to me. I told her that there had been a death. "The marriage died," I said, "and you didn't kill it." That made sense to her and freed her to marry again.

I hope that you will find helpful instruction as you, too, ponder the parable of the candles.

Because of the particular set of circumstances that I have lived through, I have practiced for years having God as my number one spouse, friend, companion, comforter, confidant. The Lord has truly been my refuge and strength. I have cried on God's shoulders, rested in his everlasting arms, let him hold my hand while taking me where I was afraid to go. NEVER have I felt abandoned by God, though people have left me at times. I am learning to let them go, if they wish, and to watch for those who will remain with me until I die.

When God said it was not good for humans to be alone, he had more than marriage in mind, I think. We are made to be relational. Even the apostle Paul, in his second letter to Timothy (written shortly before his death), lamented the fact that everybody had left him except Luke. "*Please come – and bring Mark,*" he wrote. Being satisfied with God's companionship is one side of the coin, while needing people, both those who are one with us in spirit but away physically, and those physically near us, is the other side. I asked my friend Cliff, who is a hospice worker, if he would be a hospice visitor for me should I need the services of that wonderful organization and he said he would. I was glad. I need people, too.

Things are falling into place. God is in control. I can trust my Faithful Friend, who will never leave me or forsake me, nor will death part us! We are in a covenant relationship that is eternal; I have nothing to worry about.

"Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the Lord had been good to you" (Psalm 116:7).

Amen.