

HELPING THEM PACK

It was 1986. Our youngest son Paul, who had just turned twenty, was on the phone with me bringing some unexpected news: in a few weeks he would be moving to California! That was far from the New York area where we both lived. He answered some of my unspoken questions: he had been in touch with a school friend from Yorktown who now lived with California relatives. Paul had, through the friend, a place to live and the promise of a job. That sounded good to me. The question that hung heavy on my heart perhaps had no answer, that is, would I ever see him again? Just how permanent was this move?

Paul had been through some troublesome years. Later on he would admit to (and take full responsibility for) making bad decisions which led to dangerous actions. It is a wonder that he survived his teen years! Most of this was hidden from me by my naivety and his skillful lying.

In a moment, while still on the phone, I got the feeling that God was somehow prompting this move, that Paul was supposed to go West. That being the case, I had no alternative but to let him go. I would actually do more than that: I would help him pack.

And I did. The job was a big one, but I knew it would soon be over. I wanted to do it well. He had things to sell, including his motorcycle. After that was gone, he had no means of transportation, so I would drive him around as much as possible. And when the lease on his rented house expired, I let him move back to our house for the last five days. Around this time my husband asked me to explain to him, if I could, why I was spending so much time helping Paul with his move. I told him I felt my days of mothering were coming to an end and, when I looked back on these days, I wanted to have no regrets. He seemed to understand. And I continued doing what I could for my son.

Helping Paul pack involved much more than putting things in suitcases. He had to decide what to take with him, what to store, what to discard and what to give away. And he had friends to see; especially on the last night, his room was full of friends. Throughout the whole process I did not try to dissuade him from moving. What good would that have done? Instead I talked with him about California until his move seemed not only an adventure for Paul, but for me as well. Late at night on the final day, after the friends had gone, the three of us held hands and committed Paul to the grace of God. Early the next morning my husband drove our son to the airport, and Paul was gone.

As time went on the thought of helping people pack took on new meaning for me. At one time or another all of us are going to die. People of faith, those who belong to God's faith family, will be moving to Heaven. Shouldn't we be packing, getting ready for the trip? Shouldn't we be helping others pack? And if so, how?

Just as we read travel brochures about the places we intend to visit, we should be reading, thinking and talking more about Heaven, the country to which we are moving. As we try to familiarize ourselves with the culture and language of our earthly destinations, learning a few helpful phrases at least, so we need to learn the language and culture of Heaven. The Bible is our Guide Book, full of information about our future home. Eagerly we should peruse its pages, meditate on its message, digest its directives until we are so full of its glory that we radiate hope and peace to all those around us.

But as we read the Bible we find out another fact, namely, that there are two possible destinations after death, not just one. In all fairness, wanting to help people pack, I must tell of the place to which those without faith are heading.

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A story that Jesus told, as recorded in Luke 16:19-31, is most instructive:

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

“But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

“He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them listen to them.’

“‘No father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

“He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”

This story leaves a lot of questions unanswered, such as: Why did the rich man go to hell after he died and Lazarus to Heaven (Abraham’s side)? Certainly the rich man was not in hell just because he was wealthy, nor Lazarus in Heaven because of his earthly poverty. Faith comes into the picture somewhere. Could it be that the rich man was an upstanding person in the community who simply had no time for God? Are there such people today?

Now let’s see what the story does reveal to us:

- There is life after death for everyone. You don’t have to believe this for it to be true.
- Hell is no joking matter. If you have friends who are in hell, know that they do not want you to join them.
- The time to become a person of faith is while you are on earth. You cannot change places after you are dead.
- We all keep our identities in the afterlife. Besides the new arrivals, there was Abraham, alive and alert nearly two thousand years after his death! I have never been anyone but Verna and I will always be Verna. Some day I, too, will see Abraham and ever so many others that I am longing to meet or see again. How this helps me prepare for my death!

I mentioned above that the time to become a person of faith is on the earth. I believe God accepts those who put their faith in him up to their last breath, and the following story supports my belief.

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Jesus, when he was crucified, did not die alone. Two other men, both criminals, were also executed with him. Listen to this exchange among three men who were in the process of dying, as recorded in Luke 23:39-43:

“One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: ‘Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!’

“But the other criminal rebuked him. ‘Don’t you fear God,’ he said, ‘since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has

done nothing wrong.'

"Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

"Jesus answered him, 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.' "

These few verses are rich with meaning. While hanging on a cross, his life ebbing away, see how the one criminal prepared for his death:

- He admitted his guilt.
- He parted company with his fellow criminal and praised Jesus, thus risking the sneers and mocking of others.
- He recognized who Jesus was: a man who had done nothing wrong. How did he know?
I can think of two ways:
 1. by observing his actions and hearing his words (what criminal would pray for his executioners, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"? and
 2. by reading the sign over his head. The signs were supposed to list the crimes for which the people were being crucified. The sign over the center cross said, "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews." That was an identification, not a crime!
- He believed as much as he could: that Jesus was a king and that he had a kingdom. Moreover, he wanted to be a part of this kingdom.
- He cast himself on the mercy of Jesus and oh, how he was rewarded! Imagine how much "easier" his last hours were now that he knew he was going to paradise (Heaven) with Jesus. What he had received was forgiveness. When we are packing for Heaven we are not allowed to bring our sins with us; we leave them behind through God's forgiveness.

"With me": what beautiful words! Yes, I am looking forward to seeing many people in Heaven, but most of all, I want to see Jesus, and I know I will. Blessed assurance! By the way, I would not recommend waiting until your death bed to make things right with God through faith. That would not be good packing!

To think about: What happened to the other criminal when he died?

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For years I conducted a Bible Study at the Field Home, a residence home for old ladies. I talked a lot about Heaven and about dying and the ladies responded so well. I saw their fears dissolve into smiles as confidence overcame doubt. How much better than avoiding the subject, as though death were too morbid to mention!

My elderly friend Elizabeth lay dying. She had been with me in Bible studies for years and had really blossomed with the sure hope of Heaven. This day she smiled at me and said, "It's really true, isn't it?" "Yes, Elizabeth, it's true," I replied. "I don't think it will be long until I'm there," she said. "Neither do I," was my answer. And soon she did leave for Heaven.

My childhood friend Patsy and I got reacquainted several years ago. In our first private talk I found out she had a personal relationship with Jesus, as I do. We were sisters in the Lord! Although we lived miles apart, we were united in heart. Then in the summer of 2003 I was told that Patsy had terminal cancer. I called her and listened to her story. To my delight, she showed no signs of being upset with God. Instead we talked about Heaven and how we would be together there. "I'm looking

forward to being with Jesus,” she said. “Me, too,” I replied. We agreed that seventy was a lot of years to have lived. She left this earth in December, 2003. What an inspiration Patsy was to me! We helped each other pack.

Anna Mae was expressing concern for her sister Reba, who had been ill. “What makes you think she’s depressed?” I asked. “She keeps talking about dying. She thinks she will die from this illness!” “Suppose it’s true?” I answered. “Is it depressing for a believer to talk of dying and going to Heaven?” Anna Mae broke into a lovely smile. “I should have said, ‘Then you get to see Daddy first!’ ” I smiled too. “Yes! That would be helping her pack!” After that breakthrough Anna Mae could more effectively serve her sister until Reba went Home from the ravages of ALS.

Rosemary, seriously ill with emphysema, and I have such wonderful phone visits now that we can no longer visit in person. We openly talked about her condition long before I had one of my own. Our talks are both practical and spiritual. I remember her saying to me that she no longer felt the need to travel, to do the things she enjoyed in the past. “I’ve done it before. I don’t need to do it again,” she said. I was impressed by how she could let go and be content with her memories. How much better than being frustrated by our limitations! Rosemary and I are both appreciating the health of our souls and spirits, as our bodies shut down. What an adventure awaits us!

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Jesus said that the truth sets people free. Does that include truth about terminal illnesses? I think it should; but many, even people of faith, disagree and the word I keep hearing in their arguments is “hope.”

- “The doctor told my father he would soon die! He took away all his hope!”
- “I couldn’t have gone through all those difficult months if I had lost hope (that my spouse would get well).”
- “She had hope to the end that she would be cured.”

Wishful thinking such as this is not what the Bible defines as hope. Our hope, as believers, is the standing we have as forgiven sinners through our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the certainty that we will be in Heaven when we die, there to live on a much higher plane than we could ever do on earth. If this were our hope, how would we react and act if told we had a fatal illness or were otherwise facing death? And how would we want to be treated? Keeping in mind that people are different, I will speak now of my own situation.

If I do not die of something else first, Primary Lateral Sclerosis will eventually take my life. Before that, it will increasingly cripple my muscles and take away my powers of communication. The first thing that thrilled me as I accepted the doctor’s diagnosis was the discovery that God’s grace was still sufficient for me in this situation! Then I was honest with my children, grandchildren, relatives and friends. I wanted everyone to go through this with me, and to grow stronger for it. And then I began to pack, first literally, as we prepared to move from house to apartment, and then in the sense of this article.

This is the time to tie up loose ends: to complete some projects, to pass some on to others and to discard the rest. Some things I couldn’t part with a few months ago are gone now, and I have no regrets. I have invested in my grandchildren and sent them a legacy letter. I have had contact with many friends from the past and have received their kind comments. I know it will be easier for them when I am gone to remember the recent connections when they said whatever they needed to say to me. I am helped by those who accept my disease and talk about it and puzzled by those who insist that I must somehow get well and stay here longer, but I listen to both. I have continued to serve the

Lord, wanting to keep the promise I made years ago: "I will teach as long as you give me breath and people want my teaching." I am letting people help me, delighting in the fact that we often find the time together to be mutually helpful. And I am writing these essays.

I call all of this "packing" and "helping them pack" and I couldn't do it if I were in denial about the seriousness of my disease. You will find other ways to "pack" and perhaps I will, too. Let's enjoy the project!

Paul arrived in California and practically fell into the arms of God. His older brother David was already there and was mightily used by God to bring Paul into a personal relationship with Jesus. David soon left the West and returned to the East, but he left his brother with a new and permanent Inner Guide, the Holy Spirit of God Himself. That was much better than having Paul in New York with a very fallible mom trying to guide him!

Paul lives in California (with his wife Marita and three wonderful children) to this day. The whole family serves the Lord in their church and elsewhere. As for me, I have NEVER regretted the weeks I helped him pack!

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