

PREPARING TO DIE: THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

All four gospel writers devote much of their narrative to the five or six days between Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his death and burial: Matthew, seven chapters; Mark, five; Luke, four and a half; and John, almost eight. Jesus was fully human as well as God incarnate, and he was scheduled to die the most horrible death that any person had ever undergone, for he was to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Jesus was well aware of the implications of the ordeal that awaited him in Jerusalem. Many of the details had been spelled out in the prophetic scriptures, including the heart-wrenching cry that he would make from the cross: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1).*

How did Jesus prepare himself for his coming death? How did he prepare his loved ones for his impending absence? What did he do, what did he say that is not only informative, but also useful for us as we age and face the inevitability of our leaving this earth? (Let me state again that I have believers in mind – those in God's large faith family – as I write my essays. I cannot imagine how a person without faith would prepare to die.) For one thing, Jesus didn't wait until that last week to admit to himself and others that he was going to die. And we would do well to follow his example.

FACING THE FACT OF DEATH

Would we live our lives differently if we kept in mind that we have no guarantee of being here tomorrow? James gives us excellent advice in his book (3:13-15): *Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this city or that, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."*

Notice that living as though our lives are transitory (which they are – like a mist!) does not preclude planning for the future. But it does mean being realistic while making our plans: we may or may not be able to carry them out. It seems to me that training ourselves to think "Lord willing," even if we do not always say the words aloud, would greatly temper our feelings of disappointment when plans must be canceled or changed. There is so much to be gained by taking James' advice. What a wonderful concept to teach children!

In writing the above paragraph, I found an answer to some of my own questions. "Lord willing" was part of my spiritual vocabulary for most of my life as a believer. Then, years ago, James 3:13-15 became one of the many Bible passages that I set to music, the tune "coming to me" as I was reading the Bible. I have always felt that when a tune "came," God was saying to me, "Pay attention to these words. You are going to need them." My questions had to do with my giving up the plans I had for my old age. I had several things in mind, among them extended visits to friends and relatives whom I dearly love. My life is totally changed now and I am content. How can this be? I wondered. Am I being stoic? Am I repressing my desires? Is it resignation that I feel? And now I know: it's none of the above. Instead, I am benefitting from having lived by James' advice; my disappointment is minimal to nonexistent. God's Word is powerful – and practical!

A sharp contrast is given in the story Jesus told about a rich fool (Luke 12:16-20), who never considered the possibility of death when making his plans. His barns were filled before his bumper crop was completely stored. And then he got an idea: *"This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things stored up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"* But God said to him, *"You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what*

you have prepared for yourself?" We can learn from anyone, even rich fools! We are not guaranteed "many years" on earth. Let's order our lives around that truth.

One day Jesus asked his disciples who people thought he was. They gave various answers and then Jesus asked them who they thought he was. Peter answered right away, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" Then the gospels say (I'm combining accounts for this essay): From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Despite Peter's rebuke (he couldn't believe such a thing should happen to Jesus), it sounds to me like Jesus kept coming back to the subject. We have only a small fraction of what Jesus said and did in our written accounts! I think it is instructive that Jesus did not stop with the thought of his death, but coupled it with his resurrection. This was habitual for him, according to the gospel records. Jesus faced the fact of his coming death by doing something I call:

LOOKING BEYOND

Hebrews 12:2 is a longtime favorite verse of mine (it is number 2 in my song book): *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter 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.* This tells me that it was not death that Jesus was looking forward to, but to the aftermath of the "mission accomplished" aspect of the cross, to the reward of "It is finished."

Philippians 2:5-11 expresses the same thought so beautifully, while also making it clear from the start that we are to learn from the attitude of Jesus shown here: *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (This is the incarnation, God in human form, God brought very low.) And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – (In human form, God in Christ lived the humble servant life, the obedient life that led to death. Could it get any lower?) even death on a cross! (Yes, it could – and did! Death on a cross had special significance, as Galatians 3:13 states: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."*) Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (As low as the humiliation of Jesus was, so high – and ever higher! – is his exaltation, and deservedly so. His humiliation took place in time and then ended; his exaltation is forever – and we will take part in it! Now that's something to look forward to!)*

If we are to have the same attitude as Jesus, then we need to practice endurance, humility, servanthood, obedience (no matter what the circumstances) and finally, we must face death. How can we do that? As Jesus did, by looking beyond. He focused beyond death to his resurrection and exaltation. What is ahead for us after death? Heaven, obviously, but (as that were not enough!) also much more. We are not given too many specific details but there are hints all through the Bible of things such as rewards (everything we have done for love of God, even giving someone a drink of cold water, has been recorded!); receiving resurrection bodies; reigning with Christ; a marriage banquet; angel choir concerts; etc. Wow!

Perhaps an illustration might help. Something I saw in the movie Patch Adams stayed in my memory, slightly modified, and has given me much pleasure. Hold your hand six to ten inches in front of your face, fingers spread apart. Looking directly at your hand, it seems very solid, blocking other things from your view. Now, with hand still in the same position, focus your eyes on something beyond your fingers, something in the distance. Doesn't that make your fingers look shadowy, almost transparent? Let your hand and fingers represent death. If your focus goes no further than that, death does seem formidable. Jesus looked beyond and found the endurance he needed to go

through death. Let's try to focus more and more on the glory that awaits us and see if the challenges of ageing and dying fade in comparison.

Again I must remember that people are different. At the end of his book Pilgrim's Progress, John Bunyan has two devout believers facing together the river that, in the book, represents death. On the other side, Heaven awaits both of them. The one says the river is not very deep, but the other is afraid he'll drown, as the river seems deep to him. Both arrive on the other side, but their experiences of getting there were very different. This reminds me of Peter walking on the water to Jesus. He did well at first and then became afraid and began to sink. All the time he was safe, for Jesus was there with him.

Because Easter and beyond were in Jesus' mind as he went to the cross, and because we know the glorious end of the story, I personally cannot bring myself to focus solely on the crucifixion and the sorrow connected with it in our commemorative services. Every Good Friday service that I have ever given was given with a sense of awe and gratitude, rather than sorrow, and always ended by acknowledging Easter. Instead of making myself sad and somber, I'd rather celebrate; I like to look beyond and find the joy. But then, that's just my opinion.

LETTING GO

Jesus lived his life and conducted his public ministry with the full knowledge that he was going to die before the Kingdom work of spreading the good news throughout the earth was finished. Therefore, he spent a lot of time training those who would carry on the work after he was gone. Far more than the Twelve were being prepared for service. Jesus had a whole entourage of men and women who traveled with him, listening, learning. Once he sent seventy-two people out, two by two, to gain practical experience in advancing the kingdom of God. Luke 10 records the instructions Jesus gave them, the success of their mission and the debriefing he held for them at its conclusion: *"However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."*

Jesus was full of joy because of the work of these teams, joy that he turned into a paean of praise to his Father. Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, *"Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it."* How happy they must have felt! Clearly, Jesus was operating under a plan, and that included turning his ministry over to others, rather than resisting death so he could continue his work himself.

Letting go is a hard thing to do for some of us who are in teaching ministry. We tend to think that God really needs us and the particular way we have of presenting the message. Somehow we don't think of training others to replace us. It is humbling to know that we are dispensable; that God has others who are as eloquent and creative as we are; who write songs as beautiful as ours; whose written work will instruct, encourage and inspire for ages to come. It's humbling, true, but also freeing. There's a time to work and a time to rest; a time to hold on and a time to let go.

When I was a girl, we children spent a lot of time jumping rope. In addition to our individual ropes that we jumped in one spot or while traveling up and down the sidewalks, we also had long pieces of wash line rope that we used for group jumping. Two people would be the rope turners, one at each end, and the rest of us would line up, awaiting our turn to jump. As I write this, I can "feel" how we used to get ourselves in rhythm with the rope as our turn approached to jump in. We wanted to enter successfully, without getting tangled in the rope. Then we jumped for a specified time, often until the rhymes we were chanting ended (remember them?), and then we carefully exited, returning to the end of the line until our turn came up again. Sometimes several of us jumped together. Always, when we entered the rope, we had an exit plan in mind.

This game can serve to illustrate many things, our whole lives, for example. The rope of the world's

population is turning, turning; it has been, ever since the time of Adam and Eve. We are born (we enter the game). We jump (we live our lives). We die (we exit the game). And each part is normal! Our careers, our hobbies, our volunteer work all have a beginning, a continuance and then, an ending. It is the same with our work in the Kingdom of God. God's realm has been in operation from the beginning. Think of all the wonderful people of faith who have served God in their time! At the age of about thirty, Jesus himself took his turn in the work in progress. After more than three years it was now time for him to exit, and he wanted to do it well. I want to exit well, too, not only in my death, but also in preparing to die. The process is underway! I find pleasure in watching others do what I used to do in the Kingdom: teach and preach, for example. May they enjoy their turn as much as I enjoyed – and am still enjoying – mine.

One area of disappointment for Jesus was the way the residents of Jerusalem responded to him. As he was approaching the city, riding on a donkey, Luke records that Jesus wept over the city and said, *"If you, even you, had known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes."* He went on to describe the horrors of destruction that would soon come upon Jerusalem *"because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."* Being involved in a project that did not turn out as we had hoped is not necessarily a sign of failure. Kingdom work is God's work. God can assign his servants to carry an ongoing project forward and then have us let go without bringing it to completion. It takes wisdom – and grace – to know when to leave, to retire, to hand over the leadership to someone else. But, then, our God has plenty of wisdom, plenty of grace available for us. Let's make use of his supply.

Yes, others could follow Jesus in bringing the good news to the people who lived in Jerusalem, but there was one thing only Jesus could handle, and that he did – perfectly. When Jesus cried out *"It is finished!"* on the cross, he meant that the assignment for which he had come into the world was completed: he had paid the penalty for our sins. *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).* We will always be thankful that he didn't let go of that project!

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

There were several items of business that Jesus needed to handle in the days before he died. His followers were there to watch what he did and to hear what he said. That, too, was part of the plan. Jesus would be teaching and training his disciples until he took his last breath. Here are some of the matters that Jesus handled after he entered Jerusalem:

CLEANSING THE TEMPLE. *On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a 'den of robbers'."* I'm so glad this incident was written down for us. It teaches me that there are times when it is appropriate to be angry. Obviously, cheating was going on there ("den of robbers") and that practice was inconsistent with praying to God. Jesus always denounced hypocrisy. This time he included unforgettable actions to back up his words.

MAKING PREPARATIONS FOR THE PASSOVER MEAL. The gospels say that *on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus sent Peter and John, saying "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover."* *"Where do you want us to prepare for it?" they asked. He replied, "As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house, 'The teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room, all furnished. Make preparations there."*

What I imagine is that Jesus, earlier in the week, sought out the home owner (no doubt a friend of

his) and made the arrangements for using the guest room at that time. I can hear Jesus saying, “Be sure there is a basin and towel in place, and a pitcher of water.” A certain amount of secrecy was needed in making these plans, for Jesus was not safe in Jerusalem, especially at night. “How will your disciples know where I live?” the home owner asked. “I have a sign in mind,” said Jesus. “Have a man from your household carry a water jar near the entrance to the city at a certain time on the first day of the feast. He will stand out among all the women carrying their jars. I will send Peter and John to the same area at the appropriate time and they will follow him to your house.” “Agreed,” said the home owner.

It all worked out according to plan. Peter and John saw that everything was in place, even a basin, water and a towel. I wonder if they thought about which of their group would wash the dusty feet of the others?

TEACHING. True teachers need to teach, whether the audience is vast or one person, whether the words are transported through oratory or by writing. I am a teacher, the word deliberately written with all lower case letters. When I was a six-year-old first grader, I knew I would have to teach school some day. In our neighborhood, we children enjoyed gathering our supplies – my cousin Barbara’s blackboard and chalk, orange crates to serve as chairs and a bookcase, miscellaneous books, pencils, paper and crayons – and spending time playing school. Two things always surprised me: one, that I was the only one who wanted to be the teacher and two, that the others did not mind having me as their teacher!

My reaction to a simple act of recognition by my fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Loose, confirmed that I was a teacher down to the core of my being. At the end of the school year, she gave me some battered books from her classroom library, along with a new class record book and two new pencils, one with red lead and one with blue. And she said: “Some day, Verna, you will take my place.” I was ecstatic! I could not have been given a finer gift!

My school teaching career lasted two years, just long enough to satisfy my soul. But I have never stopped teaching. My joy in teaching about God through Bible studies far exceeded the great pleasure I had in my first career. When I started teaching my Bible Basics seminars for adults in 1980, I made the setting as much like a classroom as I could. During the two hour sessions, I used an overhead projector, a blackboard, maps, charts and a pointer; I gave handout sheets and homework; I lectured, answered questions, illustrated with object lessons and skits, and gave book reviews aimed at whetting appetites for the book tables. If possible, I had the men and women sit at tables and loved to see them take notes and file their papers. I was having fun, all the time being in awe of God over how the courses came to be. Surely it was God’s doing and to God belongs the glory for all the benefit the people gained from being there.

During the 1980s I began to be invited to give talks, mostly for women’s prayer or fellowship groups. That was a pleasure also. I still remember the shock – and awe – of the moment during that time when I realized that I would never run out of ideas for talks, no matter how many I gave; that’s how much God had opened up his word to me. This thought was tested – and found to be true – in the 1990s, when I was preaching every week. Almost always I had too much material and would spend Saturdays paring it down into something manageable. Now, as I write my essays, I find that the well of inspiration still has not run dry, and I realize it never will. But sometime I will have to stop. Everyone must.

Why have I gone into so much detail about my teaching experience? To serve as a backdrop for telling you that Jesus is my **TEACHER**, the same way that David, a shepherd, said the Lord was his **SHEPHERD**. Referring to Jesus, I purposely wrote the word “teacher” in all capital letters and in bold print. If I had followed the word with an infinite number of exclamation points and then surrounded the whole with asterisks, if I added beautiful colors and anything else my computer is capable of doing, I could not put into print the vast gap that I know exists between my Lord and me. Yet I feel

that, as a teacher, I can understand to a degree what Jesus was doing as he handled the business of teaching in his last few days on earth, for he is the one who still teaches me.

Basically, Jesus taught in the final days in Jerusalem the same way he taught throughout his public ministry, with the addition of a sense of urgency. Jesus always saw teaching opportunities in the events going on around him and tied his lessons to objects at hand. Among the springboards for discussion in this time frame were:

- an unfruitful, withered fig tree (a lesson about faith);
- people putting money into the temple treasury (the heart matters more than the amount);
- the massive stones used to build the temple (everything on earth is temporary);
- Mary's pouring perfume on Jesus' feet (devotion to Jesus is never a waste);
- the washing of feet (a call to servanthood);
- bread and wine (a way to remember Jesus and his sacrificial death).

A prayer: Lord, open my eyes and ears that I might see you working and hear you speaking everywhere and in everything.

Throughout his ministry there were groups of people who challenged Jesus with questions, some with evil intent, some merely curious, and some sincere. Representatives of all these groups were in Jerusalem for the Passover, and all had their turn talking with Jesus, who was more than equal to their challenges. Let's learn from the Master Teacher as he faced in the days before his death:

– The chief priests, teachers of the law, and the elders. Their questions were: *"By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?"* (Perhaps they were referring to the overturning of the money changers' tables.) *Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism – where did it come from? Was it from heaven or from men? Tell me!"* The religious leaders realized that there was no way they could answer that question without getting themselves in trouble. *So they answered, "We don't know where it was from." Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."*

– The Pharisees and Herodians. *They pretended to be honest but were hoping to catch Jesus in something he said so that they might hand him over to the governor.* They approached him with flattery and then asked: *"Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." They were astonished by his answer – and silenced.*

– The Sadducees. This group, who did not believe in resurrection, concocted an absurd story about a woman who had been married in turn to seven brothers, all of whom died before she did. Their question: *"At the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?" Jesus replied, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those taking part in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, for they are like the angels."*

(Personally, I'm glad the Sadducees asked this question, silly as it seems, because it addresses some sincere questions many people have. It is not unusual to have more than one spouse over the course of a lifetime. From this answer we know that multiple spouses here will not pose a problem in Heaven, for there we will not be living as married couples; that is an earthly thing. There won't be any jealousy either! Notice that we will not become angels, but will be like God's angels in this: they do not marry.)

Jesus was not finished with the Sadducees yet. Here was a wonderful opportunity to teach the truth

about the resurrection! *"Now about the dead rising," he said, "have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"* The crowds who were listening were shocked by his teaching. Some of the teachers of the law even complimented him on his answer.

– A Pharisaic expert in the law. Whether his question was a test question posed by the Pharisees or if it came from this man's sincerely seeking mind, I am not sure, but Jesus treated it as an honest inquiry. The man asked, *"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"* Jesus answered, *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."* The man agreed with Jesus' answer. *When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."*

There must have been a sense of completion, now that all the groups had ended their questioning. Then the Master Teacher took the initiative by asking a question of his own. Time was running out for Jesus. His challenge to the crowds at the temple had to be one that would leave them thinking about what really mattered: the person of Christ. *Jesus asked them, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied. He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? David himself declares in the Book of Psalms: 'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."' David himself calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?"* No one could say a word in reply, but they certainly had much to ponder!

There was one other group that Jesus spent a lot of time teaching during the days before his crucifixion: his disciples. I will address this in the next section, because although he was teaching and thus, handling business, he was doing something more: Jesus was ...

LEAVING A LEGACY

Jesus did not have money, property or "things" to leave his loved ones upon his death, not even his clothing, for he knew the prophecy that said, *They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing (Psalm 22:18)*. But he did leave his disciples a priceless legacy of intangible treasures – the kind that never wear out; the kind that can be passed down from generation to generation until they reach us, giving us something to cherish and then pass on to others. Here are some of the components of the legacy Jesus left for those he loved:

– Words. Beautiful, comforting words. Strengthening words. Words of warning. Instructive words. Corrective, predictive, realistic words. And these words, spoken first to his disciples, were written down by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit so that we can cherish and benefit from the words of Jesus as much as the disciples did.

– The Holy Spirit. Jesus made a promise to the disciples: *"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The Counselor ... will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you"* (John 14:16,26). This wonderful gift, the Holy Spirit, was given to the disciples on the day of Pentecost, fifty days after the resurrection, ten days after Jesus ascended to Heaven. It is recorded in Acts 2. Since that initial giving at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has been given to everyone who believes, at the moment of spiritual birth. Now, as then, the Holy Spirit teaches us, reminds us of the scriptures when we need them, and so much more! What a gift!

– Example. I mentioned that Jesus had the disciples with him so they could learn from his example in all sorts of situations. But there was one particular time in the last days when Jesus set

out to be an example for his disciples. I'm referring, of course, to the foot washing in the Upper Room. *When he had finished washing their feet, ... he asked them, "Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master" (John 13:12-16).* Oh, that all of God's people would have servant hearts! Lord, may I follow your example.

– Peace. I love the words of Jesus in John 14:27: *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.* Jesus could leave peace as a legacy because he himself was at peace (he possessed peace). I cannot imagine Jesus worrying or being afraid, can you? And he wants us to be as peaceful as he was, even so close to death. Let's draw on that legacy.

– Hope. *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going" (John 14:1-4).* How full of hope these verses are! Jesus was going to continue living after his death – and so would they. As they were together at that moment, so they would be in the future. And Jesus was not going to some secret hiding place; they knew the directions for getting there.

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:5,6). Jesus is the Road to Heaven. If we are connected by faith to Jesus, he will take us all the way into our Father's presence, guaranteed! That's hope!

Jesus left more in his legacy than what I have listed, but I have highlighted some of the riches we have as heirs of our Lord Jesus. Let's be encouraged by the thought that intangible qualities that we possess make a wonderful legacy to pass on to our loved ones.

TALKING WITH HIS FATHER – AND OURS

Jesus demonstrated several kinds of prayer in the last week before he died. An example of conversational prayer is found in John 12:28. Jesus was talking with his disciples about the difficult task he was facing in his death, when he said, *"Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again."* A two-way conversation, Son to Father; nothing formal. Walking and talking together in union: beautiful!

John 17 records a marvelous prayer that Jesus prayed the night before he died, with his face turned toward heaven. First there is a summary of the work Jesus did on earth, a looking back with satisfaction, and a looking forward with anticipation: *"I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began."*

If the disciples overheard this prayer, as I believe they did, how their hearts must have been stirred as they heard Jesus talking about them: *"Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name ... so that they may be one as we are one ... I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one."*

And then Jesus began to pray for us! Think of that! *"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you sent me."* We

have the power to help answer this prayer by living in complete unity with all believers. May God enlarge our hearts and minds to this end.

And then Jesus made a request that is just awesome, one that should help us to look beyond our problems with joy: *“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have give me because you loved me before the creation of the world.”* What a prayer request!

After this prayer, Jesus and his disciples went into an olive grove called Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed an intensely personal prayer with an earnest request. Peter, James and John, by invitation, were close enough to witness the agony and sorrow Jesus was experiencing and to hear his anguished words. He was face down to the ground when he prayed: *“Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. If you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”* An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow.

Two more times Jesus prayed the same prayer, and both of those times also he found the disciples asleep. The third time he said to them, *“Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”* What happened? The Father had said “No” to his Son. From this story we get an answer to the question: What do we do when God says “No”? Notice that Jesus made his request with the stipulation that his Father’s will was more important than his own. When God refused his request, Jesus accepted the answer as final and faced the ordeal that was in store for him.

The apostle Paul followed the same pattern when a “thorn in the flesh” began to trouble him. Paul says: *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:8,9).* Paul accepted God’s “No” as final and went on about his mission. Paul says, *“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1).* Will we?

Ecclesiastes 12:13: *Now all has been heard; here is ...*

THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER

My thought in seeing how Jesus prepared himself and others for his eventual – and then his impending – death was to see what we could learn that would be helpful to us. There is so much! Like Jesus, let’s:

1. Face the fact of death. When our children were small, we wondered what would happen to them if Leo and I were to die at the same time. We located a family who agreed to being named as guardians, and then made it legal by writing a will. Early one evening we went to our lawyer’s office to sign the will. Noticing my demeanor, he said, “You look sad. It is traumatic for many people to face their mortality by making a will.” “Oh, no!” I protested. “I’m not sad. I just get tired at this time of day. Actually I’m thrilled to know our will is now in effect.” And I was! Whatever it takes, remember that this world is not our home; we’re just passing through.

2. Look ahead. Build endurance by focusing on the other side of death. How depressing it would be if death were the final chapter in our lives, but it’s not! If your own sanctified imagination, coupled with the glimpses found in the Bible, is not sufficient for you, read books by people of faith, such as Joni Eareckson Tada and Billy Graham, who are skilled at making Heaven’s reality palpable.

3. Let go. Though this, too, is best practiced throughout our lives and not left solely for old age, it’s better to start late than not at all. We need to hold people, places, positions and things lightly in

our hands, so that we are not devastated when deprived of them. I am so grateful that I had parents who let me go; I have tried to do the same for my children. Now I am letting go of my mobility and my speech, among other things. It can be done, not grudgingly, but joyfully! Jesus bears witness to that.

4. Take care of business. This may include, as it did for us, appointing a health care proxy and giving someone power of attorney over your affairs. But I am thinking in more general terms, namely:

a. Say what you need to say. How well I remember when my brother Harold was dying of cancer in 1992. I took a trip to Pennsylvania just to tell him I loved him. (Love was shown in our family home, but not spoken.) What a relief for both of us when I said, “I love you, Harold,” and he said, “I love you, too.” Over the telephone, in writing or in person (if possible), say what needs to be said.

b. Go where you need to go. Jesus needed to go to Jerusalem and handle business there, but he also spent time that last week with his dear friends who lived nearby: Mary, Martha and Lazarus. In the last ten years I reconnected with my hometown, my high school classmates and former neighbors. With Leo, I traveled by train across Canada (a desire of his) and vacationed on Monhegan Island, Maine, where we had spent our honeymoon. My visits to Israel and Egypt also came during this past decade. I consider these gifts from God who knew my traveling days were numbered. Now I must let go until my final trip!

c. Do what you need to do. We know if there is something unfinished in our lives, something that would bring such peace of mind if handled, especially in the area of relationships. Romans 13:8 says, *“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another.”* Obviously the word “debt” used here means much more than money. Romans 12:18 says *“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”* Using an image from tennis, I feel most comfortable when the ball is on the other person’s side of the net. If it’s on my side, I must return that ball. Some relationships are beyond repair and must be let go, but I don’t want to be the one at fault.

5. Leave a legacy. Happy memories are one of the best things to leave behind; that’s something we can all afford. I want to leave this series of essays, for the glory of God.

6. Maintain a “walking and talking” relationship with God, our Heavenly Father. If this has been our practice throughout our lives, it will only be strengthened in our old age and as death approaches.

Having written all this, it becomes clear that preparing to die is the best way to live our whole lives! It makes sense, for – no matter what our age – we don’t even know what will happen tomorrow, do we?