

When Loved Ones Are Called Home

HERBERT H. WERNECKE



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*To the blessed memory and
continuing influence of*

*Ida A. Wernecke (1899–1947)
devoted and loyal companion for over
a quarter of a century*

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Foreword

To the Christian, death should not be a morbid subject. And yet we need to confess that we have too often repressed and put out of mind all serious consideration and discussion of death. Someone has suggested that we are now repressing discussion of death the way we used to do about sex. Yet death is a fact of our lives, and the lives of those we love. And there is a Christian attitude toward death and grief and bereavement. Anything which can help us to see this, to stimulate us to see the Christian attitude, is of great importance. We need to consider death before it occurs to those we love.

When death has come to a friend or family member, we naturally feel lost for a time, however deep our faith. There is no substitute for the pain of acute grief. But when that has begun to change from a sharp pain to a dull emptiness, then we seek eagerly and properly for new light on the Christian meaning of death and grief.

I believe Dr. Wernecke's book will prove useful both to those who have experienced bereavement, and to others who want light on the Christian attitude even before a personal grief experience. He writes out of personal experience and a deep Christian faith.

Seward Hiltner

Preface

The words in the title of this booklet say much in a few words. The aim is to help loved ones to understand more clearly something of what is involved for those who leave us and those who are left behind, so that we may understand more clearly the meaning of Paul's words, "But I would not have you be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that we sorrow not, even as others which have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13); and Jesus' words, "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27).

The Christian views the departure of loved ones in the faith as a home-going. They are "at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8). This is our faith and blessed is he who enjoys a fair measure of it—for there is no other support that can be compared with it when the "silver cord is broken." This faith is "our sure and steadfast hope" (Heb. 6:19) that enables us not merely to bear the pain of separation but also to become so reconciled to suddenly interrupted plans and new adjustments that confront us that we can bow humbly and say, "The Lord hath given, the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

Death as Home-Going

When all is done, say not my day is o'er

And that through night I seek a dimmer shore;

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Say rather that my morn has just begun.

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I greet the dawn and not a setting sun,
When all is done.

While they who are asleep in Jesus are thus safe from suffering, from sorrow, and from sin, we also are drawn nearer to heaven as we watch them entering. The door stands ajar a moment and we catch glimpses of what is within. The death of friends opens our eyes to many truths which we have but dimly discerned before, and gives a preciousness to what has been only an intellectual belief.

John O. Means

The incisive criticisms of the first manuscript by The Reverend Robert M. Trenery, Chaplain of City Hospital, St. Louis, Missouri and by The Reverend R. Huenemann, Pastor of Zion Church, Lodi, California, are especially appreciated. They represent two significant areas—the hospital and the Christian congregation—where a distinct need is keenly felt for the all-sufficient comfort our Christian faith offers.

Herbert H. Wernecke

*When God sends forth a spotless soul
To learn the ways of earth,
A MOTHER'S LOVE is waiting here;
We call this wonder BIRTH.*

*When God calls home a tired soul,
And stills a fitful breath,
LOVE DIVINE is waiting there,
This, too, is BIRTH, not death.*



God Comforts Us and Heals the Wound of Separation

Your loved one has departed from your side. It is only natural that you should feel an aching void, that grief should weigh you down, and that your tears should flow. This is well. Do not unduly suppress your emotions. Jesus, too, wept at Lazarus' tomb. Do not put on a mask of "all's well" when your heart is breaking. Physical expression of your emotions is the God-ordained safety valve to protect you from physical, mental, and spiritual destruction in this hour of grief.

On the other hand, do not allow yourself to become the slave of your emotions. To mourn as one who has no hope is unbecoming to your position as a Christian witness. And to prolong your grief through careful nursing of it is a sin against God, and an injustice to yourself and to those with whom you associate. God has left you behind because he has some work for you to do before he also takes you home. He expects you to adjust yourself to this environment from which your loved one is so painfully absent. It may seem well nigh impossible, but remember

His grace is sufficient, whate'er may befall,

Perhaps, even now, you may hear his sweet call;

"Come, cast upon me all thy conflicts and care;

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Let me carry thy burdens, thy sorrows, I'll share;
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In faithfulness I all thy comfort shall be,
I'll give consolation, O, come unto me.”

Selected

It is helpful to analyze in as detailed a manner as possible the various elements that go to make up our grief, whether in this crisis, or in others. The really satisfying comfort is not found in mere mental readjustments or proper psychological approaches. Before we turn to helpful sources of comfort, a word ought to be said about time.

The Healing Balm of Time

Time in itself is a great healer—another one of God’s gracious provisions for us. The further you are removed from an experience in time, other things being equal, the less it affects you.

Recognize that the healing process is a slow one—that there will be empty days, poignant grief, seemingly unbearable loneliness and pain, even resistance to consolation and disinterestedness in life. But he who promised “as thy days so shall thy strength be,” in his gracious providence causes these wounds to gradually grow less painful, and give way to the healing sunlight of love, friendship, and the challenging duties of life itself.

Time like an ever-rolling stream
Bears all our grief away.

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The Ministry of Friends

Then there is the gracious ministry of friends. “When one member suffers, all members suffer” (1 Cor. 12:26).

“Rejoice with them that rejoice; weep with them that weep” (Rom. 12:15).

We share our mutual woes,
Our mutual burdens bear,
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.

Just the presence of friends without a word spoken can be precious. But most of all do we find healing with those who have suffered a sorrow like our own. Deepest understanding comes out of like experience.

Oh, ray of light, my friend!
When sorrow’s gloom made life so drear,
Then comfort sweet thy words did lend,
As if Christ spake, “Be of good cheer!”

Oh, rock of strength, my friend!
When shifting sands beneath my feet
And changing scenes my steps attend,
Thy truth and constancy are sweet.

I clasp thy hand, my friend!
Thank God that thou art here;
I am not worthy He should send
To me a gift so dear.

God's Comforting Promises

Our chief comfort is Jesus himself.

What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear.

Jesus' words are understood by the grief-stricken soul with new clarity and deeper meaning.

“Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:1).

“I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you” (John 14:18).

“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28).

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life” (John 5:24).

The messages of prophets, evangelists, and apostles supplement and illuminate those of Jesus.

I opened the old, old Bible,
And looked at a page of psalms
Till the wintry sea of my troubles
Was soothed as by summer calms;
For the words that have helped so many,
And the ages have made more dear,
Seemed new in their power to comfort,
As they brought me their word of cheer.

Author Unknown

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“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Ps. 23). No other Old Testament words have brought more comfort to souls in distress than this Shepherd Psalm. Millions have had their faith strengthened through Paul’s great resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15. Peter, the Apostle of Hope, has brought encouragement to countless others. John, the Apostle of Love, reveals him who is the light and life of men.



Death: A Reverence-Inspiring Experience

To see our loved ones pass on, to see them, so far as this world goes, enter the eternal silence and breathe their last breath is a reverence-inspiring experience. Then as in no other way and at no other time, the words of the psalmist come home to us, “Thou . . . sayest, Return, ye children of men” (90:3). We are in the presence of the Lord of life. Physicians and surgeons, nurses and loved ones—all have done their utmost to prolong life but in God’s mysterious yet gracious providence, the end has come.

The Finality of It

The life of that loved one is now beyond recall. We can think back and remember all that he or she has meant to us, how life was enriched through that loved one; but nothing that we can say or do, no matter what we are willing to offer of labor or sacrifice, can restore the person to us.

Nor would we ultimately want to, if we truly believe that our life is in God’s hands and “He doeth all things well.” Few of us feel capable of assuming the responsibility of saying when any person’s



Accepting the Fact of Death

We suffer when loved ones pass on, partly because we are unprepared for this separation. While we recognize that sooner or later death will come to all of us, when it does come into our circle, we are shocked, often confused, and upset.

To be mature to the point of facing the realities of life includes the recognition that death can come to us or our loved ones any moment and requires an adjustment to this fact.

Baron Rothschild left one corner of the foundation of his house unfinished so that he might constantly be reminded “For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come” (Heb. 3:14).

Nothing is more certain than the fact of death; nothing is more uncertain than the time of death.

Some may agree with Bacon that it is as natural to die as to be born, but we find more comfort in the more profound words of Paul, “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). When children come into the world, we cannot predict whether they will follow or where they will live; but we can declare positively that one day they will die.

Seeing Death as Jesus Viewed It

Death is not extinction. It is not the end of life. True, it is the end of this state of existence. The separation of the soul from the body does not mean the destruction of the soul, but rather a sleep and an awakening in a better land. We must always remember that we bury only the body of our loved one; the soul has gone on to be with its Lord.

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One day in his eightieth year John Quincy Adams was tottering down a Boston street. He was accosted by a friend who said, “And how is John Quincy Adams today?”

The former president of the United States replied graciously, “Thank you, John Quincy Adams is well, sir, quite well, I thank you. But the house in which he lives at present is becoming dilapidated. It is tottering upon its foundations. Time and the seasons have nearly destroyed it. Its roof is pretty well worn out, its walls are much shattered, and it trembles with every wind. The old tenement is becoming almost uninhabitable, and I think John Quincy Adams will have to move out of it soon; but he himself is quite well, sir, quite well.” And with this the venerable statesman, leaning heavily upon his cane, moved slowly down the street.

John Quincy Adams had the same assurance which we all have. He knew that “if the earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal, in the heavens” (2 Cor. 5:1).

If we fear or question the future, we have not come to a true realization of Jesus’ counsel, “Let not your heart be troubled . . . I go to prepare a place for you . . . that where I am, there ye may be also” (John 14:1–2).

Job’s question, “If a man die, shall he live again?” the question of every grief-stricken heart, is answered by the words of Jesus, “Because I live, ye shall live also.”

A few days before his death, F. B. Meyer wrote a very dear friend these words: “I have just heard, to my surprise, that I have only a few more days to live. It may be that, before this reaches you, I shall

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have entered the Palace. Don't trouble to write. We shall meet in the morning."

The experience that the world calls death is, in the New Testament, referred to frequently as a sleep. Of Jairus' daughter, Jesus said, "She is not dead, but sleepeth." "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth."

"David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell on sleep"; Stephen "fell asleep"; "Them also which sleep in Jesus"; these are only a few of the many examples of the use of the word. The expression is sweetly significant.

Sleep is transitory. It implies a reawakening. The Bible calls bodily death a "sleep" for the reason that the death state is not eternal, but only temporary, from which there is presently to come a rising up again. That is not sleep which has no awakening to follow. It is said that at three o'clock one morning, A. T. Pierson received a telegram, asking him to preach the sermon at the funeral of A. J. Gordon. Unable to sleep, he spent the rest of the night searching his Greek Testament for what it said about death. He made an important discovery. He confessed before the great throng gathered for the occasion, his surprise to find that after the resurrection, the apostles never used the word death to express the close of a Christian's earthly life; but referred to the passing of a Christian as "at home with the Lord," "to depart and be with Christ," "to sleep in Jesus," "fallen asleep," "loosing the mooring," "forever with the Lord," and in similar terms.

Think of a small boy at the end of a happy day. He seldom regards sleep as a friend. Rather he would keep on playing with his toys. But after a while, most reluctantly, he lies down to sleep in his mother's arms. Then the weary body begins to relax. The touch of

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fever departs from his brow. In the early morning, he awakens in newness of life, and rejoices in powers equal to the new day's tasks.

God is! Christ loves! Christ lives!
And by his own returning gives
Sure proofs of immortality,
The firstfruits he: and we
The harvest of his victory.
The life beyond shall this life far transcend,
And death is the beginning not the end.

Author Unknown

Necessary Readjustments

A vacant chair in the family circle and in the circle of friends compels painful readjustments. The more devoted the relationship has been, the greater the interdependence, the more painful is the change.

There are the physical readjustments of economic factors which alone may seem like a crushing burden. Even more painful will be the social adjustments of dependent children, left without father or without mother, the lonesomeness and at times helplessness of the widow or the widower, and all the more of those left without any family relationships. We cannot, without pain, be separated for even a few weeks from those we deeply love. How much greater the sadness and loneliness when the separation includes the remainder of our mortal life!

Still these broken relationships can be adjusted and in some way provided for, but the new relationship of spirit to spirit or soul to soul is felt still more keenly. For a time there will be acute pain but,

20 Herbert H. Wernecke, *When Loved Ones Are Called Home*, as previously indicated, God gradually heals the wound and we Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2013. Used by permission.



become not only reconciled to the physical absence of our loved one, but also come to see God's gracious hand in it all.

Just Away

I cannot say and I will not say
That he is dead—"he is just away."
With a cheery smile and a wave of the hand
He has wandered into an unknown land,
And left us dreaming how very fair
It needs must be since he lingers there.
And you—O you, who the wildest yearn
For the old-time step and glad return,
Think of him as faring on, as dear
In the love of There as the love of Here.
Think of him still as the same, I say;
He is not dead—he is just away.

James Whitcomb Riley

Many a sensitive soul finds that after the first shock of separation has passed, the loved one is in spirit closer than ever before. Death breaks down the barriers of time and space. So Stanton, in his funeral eulogy of Abraham Lincoln, could declare, "Now he belongs to the ages."

Love Keeps Its Own Eternally

I cannot think of them as dead
Who walk with me no more;
Along the path of life I tread
They have but gone before.

The Father's house is mansioned fair

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All souls are his, and here or there
Are living unto him.

And still their silent ministry
Within my heart hath place,
As when on earth they walked with me
And met me face to face.

Their lives are made forever mine;
What they to me have been,
Hath left henceforth its seal and sign
Engraven deep within.

Mine are they by an ownership
Nor time nor death can free;
For God hath given to love to keep
Its own eternally.

Frederick Hosmer

My Heavenly Home

The destination of my God
Is not within the grave's cold walls;
But where the bells of heaven toll,
I'll soar whene'er my Savior calls!

Yea, far beyond the starry sky
There is a land bereft of care;
When to its glories I draw nigh
I'll see my Savior standing there!

With smiling face he'll bid me come,
And lead me to a mansion fair:
O day of days! When I reach home—

How that joy will be! When loved ones are called home



The destination of my soul,
Is not beneath the cold, gray sod;
But when the bells of heaven toll,
I'll soar to meet my living God!

We had nothing to do with our coming into this world, yet when we arrived, there was a place all prepared for us by the loving care and thought of our parents. Can we not expect the same when we depart from this life?

This conviction, based on the limitless resources of our Christian faith, will enable us to accept and face bravely whatever detailed adjustments must be made and whatever detailed problems will arise.

It Is Not Death to Die

It is not death to die,
To leave this weary road,
And midst the brotherhood on high
To be at home with God.

It is not death to close
The eye long dimmed by tears,
And wake, in glorious repose,
To spend eternal years.

It is not death to bear
The wrench that sets us free
From dungeon chain, to breathe
The air of boundless liberty.

Jesus, thou prince of life!
Thy chosen cannot die;

Like thee, they conquer in the strife,
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