

God's Call to Eternity
An Essay by Bob Chism



“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:
a time to be born and a time to die” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2).

This article is adapted from *Basic Ministry for the Second Half of Life* (2012) and
“Death and Dying”, Certification in Gerontology at McHenry County College in Illinois.

The Fourth Age

The Fourth Age or completion age is a time of integration (Polishing of, coming to terms with life, acceptance of eternity). The completion age is possibly the least understood and most feared, because of our reluctance to think about death.

Bible Reassures

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.

You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you. Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs— heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified" (Romans 8:1-30).

Death and Dying

Life transitions such as death and dying can be a catalyst for great personal and spiritual growth if they are successfully managed. For the dying person, to die peacefully and to die with the knowledge that life has had meaning is important (Dossey & Keegan, 2009). A "healthy death" is the goal. A healthy death has been defined as a death that has positive benefits for the dying person and the dying person's family and friends.

Spiritual Dimensions

Spiritual and religious beliefs play an important part in older adults making sense of their lives. It is during life transitions such as dying or death that a person's most deeply held beliefs are challenged and opportunities for growth are experienced (Meiner & Lueckenotte, 2006). Seniors who attend church frequently are much less afraid of dying (Duff & Hong, 1995).

Spiritual Needs of the Dying

Doka (1993) identified three spiritual needs of the dying. These are to search for the meaning of life, to die appropriately and to find hope that extends beyond the grave

Spiritual or religious beliefs can be crucial in helping older adults meet these needs. Spiritual issues may surface as they search for meaning in their own death or in the death of a loved one. Bereaved people may ponder the existential issues of life, not only with regard to the loss of a loved one, but for themselves as well.

Dying is a profound process of spiritual transformation. It is a spiritual event of enormous importance. Often, attention is turned away from the outer distractions in the world and attention is turned inward, toward a greater peace, and comfort in spiritual fulfillment (Singh, 2000).

The Moment of Death

Often when people are dying, they may reach a period of time when it seems they are getting better. They may wake up or communicate briefly with those around them for a few hours or a few days. This can be confusing but it is a normal part of dying and can be a good time to gather family and friends around the dying person to say final good-byes (MFMER, 2007).

Keeping vigil at the dying loved one's bed is an important way to show support and love for the dying person. When keeping vigil, it is essential to remember that some people, especially those who were independent or private in life, may choose to be the same in death. Step away from the loved one from time to time to allow for this (MFMER, 2007).

It is important to prepare rituals for the moment of death. If healing rituals have been done prior to death, the dying person usually has a sense of serenity and inner calm. Before the person's eyes finally close, tight brow muscles may become relaxed and a sense of peace may appear on the face. To help the person with a peaceful crossing into death, touch, hold, talk, and be with the dying person in ways that deepen hope and faith (Dossey & Keegan, 2009).

Depending on the dying person's beliefs, give him or her permission to leave and to meet others who have died before. Continue to communicate with family caregivers and others who are there to support the dying person. Shut the half-closed eyes of the dying person, stroke and hug the physical body, and adjust the head on the pillow for the last time.

The Grieving Process

Grief is the normal human response to loss. Each person experiences grief differently, depending on his or her inner resources, support, and relationships (Dossey & Keegan, 2009). According to Feinstein and Mayo (1990) grief work has three characteristics:

It furthers the healthy grieving process by encouraging ventilation, planning, and insight.

It does not exploit others. The mourner has a healing team that provides comfort.

Appropriate grief work cannot be rushed. It takes time to accept that death has occurred and to work through feelings. The individual who goes through the grief process may experience a sort of transformation from profound sadness to a sense of comfort.

Stages of Grief

Grief is subjective and can have a physical, emotional, and social response to a loss. Grief occurs in phases that people can move in and out of during the grief process (Luggen & Meiner, 2001).

Kubler-Ross (1969) is perhaps the most widely cited author on death and dying. She identified five stages of grief. Not all stages may be experienced nor may they be experienced sequentially. General emotional transitions and stages of grief include:

Denial (the individual is not ready to accept the loss)

Anger (may be directed at God, the medical staff, or family members)

Bargaining (an attempt to postpone the inevitable)

Depression (as the full impact becomes apparent, depression may set in)

Acceptance (a time of relative peace or coming to terms with the situation)

It is best not to think of grief strictly as a series of stages. Grief can be like a roller coaster, with many ups and downs. Sometimes an individual may be doing well and other times not so well. Coping with grief is individualistic, with each person finding his or her own sources of comfort through support groups, activities such as journaling, or through spirituality and religion. Experiencing grief can be very stressful, so it is important to eat well, sleep well, and engage in adequate exercise (Doka, 2000).

Questions for Reflection

Does your Church have a Grief support group?

Could this be a second half service passion for you?

What are the obstacles at your church?

How might these obstacles be overcome?

What are you going to do about it?

