

The Funeral

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The funeral is a way for the living to receive closure that their loved one is actually gone. We use this time to come together, to remember, and to comfort. It is not strictly an American practice by any means.

Luke 7:11-15 says, *"And it came to pass the day after, that he went into a city called Nain; and many of his disciples went with him, and much people. Now when he came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow: and much people of the city was with her. And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not. And he came and touched the bier: and they that bare him stood still. And he said, Young man, I say unto thee, Arise. And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak. And he delivered him to his mother."*

The dead son in this passage was apparently being carried to the grave. His funeral was completed. The procession Jesus came upon would have been the equivalent of our drive from the funeral parlor to the cemetery. Maybe some words would have been said at the graveside, but most of them had likely already been spoken. The closure the mother had was followed by an opening through the power of Jesus. Mary and Martha had a similar experience after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead four days after his funeral (John 11).

Death is a natural part of life after Adam brought sin into the world. We are saddened at funerals because we will not see the person we loved on earth anymore. We are also gladdened at these gatherings if we have the confidence that our loved one has gone to Paradise.

I have spoken at many funerals. Some of these were for

faithful Christians. The funeral of the faithful is easier to preach. I have also been called upon to eulogize the person who never obeyed the Gospel or fell away at some point in his life. These are a little more complicated. I had to bring comfort to the family, but I did not believe their loved one was saved by God. In such cases I have never lied. I focused on what the living must do to prepare themselves for their day of departure instead of discussing the destination of the dead person's spirit.

Although the funeral was designed to bring comfort, many of us have been made uncomfortable by the eulogy. The denominational preacher always turns the dead person into a saint. I have known people who had no interest in spiritual matters at all who were *"preached into heaven"* at their funeral. The speaker would talk of God's mercy and forgiveness with no regard for the departed's lack of repentance and obedience. There is no benefit to berating the deceased, but neither is there any justification for lying about him. Ultimately we do not know where the departed spirit has gone. God does the judging. If there is a circumstance we are unaware of then our perspective of his destination could be completely wrong.

What makes us uncomfortable is not the destination of the deceased, but the preaching of error to the living.

In Luke 16:19-31 we read the story of the rich man and Lazarus. I believe it was a true story. The rich man found himself in torments in the hades realm. He first sought comfort for himself by asking Abraham to send Lazarus to him with a drop of water. When he was told that was impossible because of the impassible gulf between them, then the rich man's focus turned to his family on earth. The only comfort he could receive was to have his five brothers not join him. He asked if Lazarus could go

back to the living and warn them. This request was also denied.

The return of Lazarus would not have helped the brothers. In the first place they likely did not know Lazarus and would not have believed he returned from the dead. The rich man would have had a notable funeral, but this beggar would have had none. This is suggested by the rich man being buried, but Lazarus was carried by angels into Abraham's bosom. Just as the rich man ignored the poor beggar in life, so likely would have his brothers.

If Lazarus could have convinced them he returned from the dead, he likely could not have convinced them their brother was in torment for his sins. They would have thought he was a good guy. The preacher at his funeral would have assured them that their brother was in a restful place. Just as our preachers claim all the dead have gone to heaven, the brothers would have been encouraged to follow the sinful example of their brother with assurance of reaching a favorable destination.

A third reason Lazarus would not have been successful was that the brothers already had Moses and the prophets. That is, they had the word of God. To be saved from their sins they needed to obey God's truth. If they did believe Lazarus came from the dead, and that their brother was in torment, would they then obey the Law of God? This they could do without Lazarus' visit. This they chose not to do as the rich man was already aware. No miracle will help us reach heaven if we do not obey the Gospel of Christ today. A resurrected Lazarus could not have changed the brothers' destiny without their obedience.

The funeral is for the living. No preacher can know or change the destination of the deceased. What we can do is to remember their life. We can comfort the family with our love. We can tell the truth of the Gospel to help them see their needs. Most people never think about their own death until they are at someone else's funeral. That may be the only time they can be reached with the Gospel. Take advantage of the opportunity.