

PREPARED FOR DEATH

We prepare for retirement long before that day arrives. Why not the same for death?

by Rev. Dean C. Kavouras

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I knew something bad had happened when my pager began to beep. I am a chaplain for Cleveland's police and fire departments. The page from fire dispatch said, "222 alarm, civilian fatality" and gave the location of the scene.

"Car 644 responding," I said into the radio's mike.

The victim was a man in his 70s, confined to a wheelchair. His wife of more than 50 years had left for a short while to pick up a few things at the corner store. The man decided to cook something for himself, and, in the process, the stove caught his clothing on fire.

From there, fire quickly spread to engulf the whole first floor before the first firemen arrived on scene.

Words cannot convey what this woman must have experienced when she came home to fire trucks, flashing lights, people screaming and a man whose coat said, "Chaplain" trying to explain to her the hellish details of what had happened in her brief absence.

I led the woman to the passenger seat of a nearby police car, got into the driver's side and turned up the heater against the day's chill. Though I was an experienced chaplain, what could I do at a time like this?

There was only one answer: Do what has always worked—rely on God's Word.

I put my hand on her shoulder and began quoting the 23rd Psalm. To my amazement, this sobbing, shocked woman began to pray it with me in a voice steadier than my own.

Blessed be the pastor who had faithfully presented the medicine of God to this woman, now lodged in her heart after a lifetime of repetition, ready and working. That day I witnessed the healing of Christ begin to repair what no agency on earth could ever fix.

So how do we get ready for death's inevitable call?

When we enter the working world in early adulthood we begin to save for retirement, though it's 50 years away. If we can be so concerned about our earthly future, why can't we understand the necessity of preparing for death long before it comes? How is this done? By faithfully attending the services of God's house—singing the same body of hymns, reciting the same liturgy and quoting the same creeds every Sabbath.

And no one is more favored in this regard than Lutherans.

In our hymns, in sermons and sacrament, the Gospel of Christ shines like a beacon on a dark and tempestuous sea.

As pastor and chaplain, I've ministered to all types of people—from those who've never set foot in a church to those who've worshipped Christ from the day they were baptized. And I've noted that people on the latter end of the continuum face death with the greater composure.

What a comfort it is to minister to a Christian in a coma by singing: "I know that my Redeemer lives, what comfort this sweet sentence gives."

Or to sing to myself: "Jesus lives! The victory's won, death no longer can appall me," as I operate in the most ghastly police and fire scenes.

How does one prepare for death? With the words of eternal life on our lips from birth. "Jesus loves me; He who died." "If I should die before I wake." Go back to the basics: the Bible and our thoroughly scriptural catechism, liturgy and hymns. You'll never exhaust them. They will see you through life and through death's dark portal, into the Master's heavenly mansions.

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