Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Hample and Marshall’s book titled *Children’s Letters to God* includes a few simple sentences on death from a small boy: “What is it like when you die? Nobody will tell me. I just want to know. I don’t want to do it.”

“The living know that they will die,” says the preacher (Ecc. 9:5). At least, once past the age of forty they know it. Someone once observed that early in their forties most people psychologically try on their shroud. It’s a farewell to innocence. You know that when your parents die, you move to the head of the line. As you grow still older, your teachers die, and your aunts and uncles. Then your brothers and sisters, one by precious one, and people at church, and colleagues, and neighbors, and friends. You can’t miss the trend. The streets toward death are all one way. And you, too, have been traveling for some time.

The Bible teaches us many things about death. One of them is that death is an enemy. It’s why we don’t want to do it. But the Bible also teaches us that death is a conquered enemy. The women who came to Jesus’ tomb, says G. K. Chesterton, found that their Lord was alive. It was death that had died in the night. Weeping may stay for the night, but joy comes in the morning.

We will die, but not as those who have no hope. Someone has compared a Christian’s dying to a child’s movement down a flight of stairs to a basement. It’s late. There’s an emergency and the lights have all gone out. From the basement the child hears her father calling to her. The child can’t see anything. She is thoroughly afraid. She doesn’t want to descend those stairs. She doesn’t know what’s there. Yet she knows who’s there. And so, perfect love casting out fear, the child moves to her waiting father.

In this issue of *Forum*, my colleagues reflect on issues surrounding death. John Cooper addresses the small boy’s question: What happens when we die? Calvin Van Reken carefully distinguishes the moral issues surrounding assisted suicide. Ronald Nydam tells the story of his own brush with death, and what he learned from it—including from one of his students. Scott Hoezee tells us from 1 Corinthians why death is not a wall, but a door, and what God’s plan is for getting us through it. Then *Forum* interviews Robert DeVries and Susan Zonnebelt-Smeenge on bereavement and the goals of the grieving process.

This is another solid issue of *Forum*. God bless you as you read it.

Neal
Soon or later all of us must face up to death. Energetic adolescents ignore it, and their middle-aged parents often pursue illusions of perpetual youth. But the elderly and terminally ill know better. Nothing in life is as certain as death. And we all wonder what happens when our friends and loved ones die.

Most Christians believe that our souls are taken immediately to be with Christ until we are reunited with our bodies at his second coming (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 58). This view of life after death has two phases—being with Christ until the resurrection, and then everlasting life in his kingdom. It also involves two modes of existing. Body and soul are unified during this life and after the resurrection. But we exist without earthly bodies between death and resurrection. Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and most Protestant churches teach this two-phase doctrine.

Challenging Alternatives

However, some Christians wonder whether the traditional teaching is true, or at least whether it is the only possibility. Several sources stir their questions. Some are intrigued by the beliefs of other religions, such as reincarnation or mystical union with God, and try to imagine Christian versions of these scenarios. Near-death experiences are another source of wonder—vivid reports of euphoric journeys toward heaven, sometimes meeting deceased loved ones and occasionally even Jesus. Don’t these visions reveal what death is like?

Other Christians have scientific questions. They wonder whether our souls can survive death because neuroscience demonstrates how extensively consciousness and personality depend on functions of the brain. When our bodies die, how can our minds and spirits still exist?

Perhaps the most troubling challenge comes from Bible scholars and theologians who reject belief in the soul. They claim that the idea of a soul existing separate from the body is not taught in Scripture but comes from the Greek philosopher Plato. Plato’s opposition of body and soul reflects an unbiblical dualistic worldview that desires to escape the body and life in the world. These scholars allege that this unbiblical dualism began to distort Christian teaching when church fathers, such as Augustine, mistakenly read the Bible in terms of Greek philosophy. The biblical view, they claim, affirms the unity of body and soul and the importance of life in this world. In order to engage this world with the gospel, they conclude that we must reject the belief that we have separable souls. But then we cannot exist with Christ between death and bodily resurrection. Instead, either we are resurrected immediately at death, or we do not exist at all between death and the future resurrection. Most mainline and some evangelical theologians challenge the traditional doctrine in this way.

Mixing and matching these reasons, many Christians lack clarity and confidence about what happens when we die. Because Scripture is our ultimate authority, let’s meet the last challenge first and then consider the others.

The Biblical View

It is true that great theologians, such as Augustine and Calvin, borrowed from Greek ideas about the soul. But they reformed them to fit with Scripture. They did not distort the Bible’s teaching about life after death nor downplay our responsibility to seek God’s kingdom in every aspect of life in this world.

Modern critics pose a false dilemma about body and soul that leads them to misread the Bible. They assume that either we are unified beings, or else we come apart at death; that either the soul is immortal, or the body is important; that biblical monism or Greek dualism are the only options. This assumption is a false dilemma because the Scripture teaches both that we are body-soul unities and that we exist without earthly bodies between death and resurrection.
The whole Bible emphasizes that humans are personal bodily beings made for life in God’s world. God created us as integral “living beings” by breathing spirit into the dust (Gen. 2:7). We fell into sin and death, both spiritually and physically, by our own fault. Christ took on our human nature, body and soul—the Word became flesh (John 1:14). Salvation includes our whole existence: the Holy Spirit renews us spiritually so that we are new creations in Christ—heart, soul, mind, and strength. Our bodies too are “living sacrifices” (Rom. 12:1) and temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). Every square inch of creation belongs to Christ, as Abraham Kuyper reminded us. Although our earthly bodies “waste away” (2 Cor. 4:16), the Spirit will complete our salvation by raising us from the dead with imperishable and glorious bodies (1 Cor. 15) fit for life in God’s everlasting kingdom (Rev. 20-22).

But Scripture also teaches that we can “be away from the body and present with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). Isaiah 26:19 already hints at the two-stage view of the afterlife taught in the Heidelberg Catechism: On the Day of the Lord “your dead [rephaim in Sheol, the Underworld] will live; their bodies will rise.” The Pharisees taught the existence of (human) spirits and future bodily resurrection. Paul explicitly endorses this doctrine in Acts 23:6-8. In 2 Corinthians 5:6-9 and Philippians 2:21-24, he anticipates being with the Lord without his body because the resurrection will not occur until the trumpet sounds at Christ’s return (1 Thess. 4:16; 1 Cor. 15:52). Jesus himself was in Paradise without his body between his death on Friday and his resurrection on Sunday morning (Luke 23:43).

Modern theological rejection of the separation of body and soul is mistaken. Scripture clearly teaches that we are with the Lord between death and future resurrection. It also teaches that God created and redeemed us as bodily beings for everlasting life in his good creation. We are not forced to choose one or the other.

Science and the Soul

Scientific discoveries about the brain, consciousness, and personality are fascinating. Scans of people’s brains while they pray, imagine a favorite tune, or remember an embarrassing event can identify the places and processes in the brain that are active when they are thinking and feeling. We know that chemicals affect our moods and personalities, and that brain injuries can impair our mental-spiritual functioning. There is no doubt that body, brain, mind, personality, soul, and spirit are integrated.

But science cannot answer philosophical and theological questions about the nature of body and soul. Science only yields biological and psychological data that must be correlated within a model of human nature. Science certainly does not validate the idea that the soul or personality is merely generated by brain functions. In fact, there are world-class biologists and neuroscientists, including Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus, who believe that we have souls that survive biological death. Science does not undermine what Scripture teaches about life after death. The challenge comes from world-view perspectives, such as naturalism and materialism, that have no place for souls.

Near-Death Experiences

Many people, including Christians, report the unusual phenomena of near-death experiences in extreme life-threatening circumstances, such as heart attack or drowning. They are in a euphoric state, drawn toward a place of light and peace, encounter a barrier, and then are sent back to their bodies. These experiences occur with high levels of endorphins in the brain. They can be artificially induced, and also happen under anesthesia. But some near-death experiences include elements that cannot be explained naturally—for example, encounters with persons who were not known to be dead, or learning things unknowable by earthly means.

We should evaluate these experiences cautiously. They may be an aspect of God’s providence—a natural anesthetic in life-threatening situations. The Lord might sometimes use them to comfort and motivate people who have encountered with death. But we should not draw conclusions about life after death, because we do not know whether really dying is like almost dying. When we really die, we don’t come back to tell about it. Maybe really dying is totally different. So we ought not to base our beliefs about the afterlife on near-death experiences. We ought to rely on what Scripture teaches.

Other Religions

Other religions may have fascinating views of the afterlife, but they pale in comparison with the promises of the gospel. Hindus and Buddhists believe in reincarnation until union with ultimate reality is achieved. Reincarnation is quite different than Christian resurrection. One does not retain his or her personality or body. Bad karma might even turn a human into an animal. Final escape means moving beyond life and individual selfhood and realizing unity with ultimate reality. Popular Western notions of reincarnation and union with God are usually quite different than actual Hindu and Buddhist beliefs.

The gospel is so much more attractive. God affirms and saves our humanity by taking it on in Jesus Christ. A community of individual, bodily, earthly persons are redeemed, renewed, and fulfilled by God for everlasting life with him in his kingdom. Christians have nothing to learn from other religions about life after death, and everything to gain from relying on God’s promises in Scripture.

Conclusion

The Bible does not reveal what dying is like, or what the blessed dead experience in heaven with Christ, or details about resurrection bodies and life on the new earth. But it tells us all we need to know. It assures us that we have nothing to fear and everything to anticipate with joy. Jesus Christ has been through death and resurrection already. He has prepared the way for us. He will lead us through it (Ps. 23:4). Not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:38-39). That is enough comfort for life and death.
The health care debate that dominated the news in 2009 raised many ethical issues surrounding the end of life. Politicians accused each other of “killing grandma” with their health care plans. Attempts to discuss “end of life” ethical issues generated more heat than light. Dismayed at the failure of our nation to grapple thoughtfully with these issues, Stanley Hauerwas, ethicist from Duke Divinity School, suggested our society lacks a “theology of death.” In the Easter sermon that follows, Rev. Scott Hoezee, Director of the Center for Excellence in Preaching and instructor in preaching at CTS, offers just such a theology of death … and life.

As I prepared an Easter evening sermon some years ago, I decided to check my files and look back on a few past Easter sermons to see if there were any old ones I could revise. As I did so, I was also able to look at a lot of old church bulletins. Each week before I filed a sermon, I would use a paperclip to attach that week’s bulletin to the sermon. At the top of each such bulletin I always wrote down the prayer needs for that day. So as I perused my old Easter sermons, I glanced over a half-dozen or so bulletins from Easter Sundays past. I took note of the names on my prayer lists and noticed that all but one of those people had since died. We had prayed for those dear folks. We prayed in faith and in hope, we prayed with fervency, fierceness, and maybe even a sense of desperation. And then they died.

The man with lung cancer and the woman with breast cancer, the man with Alzheimer’s and the woman with Parkinson’s: all died. They died, and so we rolled them back into the sanctuary in a box, shedding more than our share of tears even as we choked out the words to the Apostles’ Creed and fought our way through the lyrics of “By the Sea of Crystal.” We then went home, feeling sad, but such feelings were nothing compared to the situation of the family members who went home to a void so vast they could hardly breathe.

Whatever else Easter means, it does not mean people stop dying. The very early church did not realize this right off the bat. That’s why in Paul’s earliest letter (1 Thess.) you find Paul dealing with what looks to be the shock and sorrow of Christians who, despite their belief in Jesus’ resurrection, nevertheless watched fellow believers die just like anybody else. Some may have thought that with the power of resurrection life in them they would not die at all. Some may have thought that everyone would remain alive until Jesus came again. Still others may have thought that you needed to be alive yet when Jesus returned if you were going to get transported to heaven.

Whatever they thought, the need still to attend funerals shook them up enough to warrant Paul’s intervention in his first epistle. Paul had some reassuring things to say on this subject, of course, but what cannot be disputed is that the Thessalonians knew what we still know: namely, the stark and stubborn fact of death in our world poses a most difficult challenge to our faith. Maybe we do not always realize it, but when we stand on the lip of an open grave—slit into the skin of the earth like an open wound—and say via the words of the Creed, “I believe in the resurrection of the body,” we are committing a most audacious and bold act.

There is no doubt in our minds just how dead the corpse is. Though we don’t like to think about it, we know the decay that is already present. The New York Times Magazine once presented a grim report on a research institute somewhere down in Kentucky. The doctors and scientists there conduct research on cadavers whose bodies were left to science. In an effort to hone the science that helps police determine the when and the how of murders, these scientists study the breakdown and decay of the human body under...
the kinds of conditions where the bodies of murder victims are sometimes found. Under many circumstances it does not take long before there is virtually nothing left of us after we die.

Modern morticians are good at making a dead person look reasonably OK (“She looks good, doesn’t she?”), but we don’t pin any Christian hope on the relative success of the funeral director’s art. It’s not make-up and rose-colored lights that give us any hope for this loved one’s future. And yet as Christians we proclaim the reality of that future. Before we close out our weekly recitation of the Apostles’ Creed we stake our belief in “the resurrection of the body”—and what we mean is not Jesus’ body, but your body, my body, Uncle Sylvester’s body.

There is absolutely nothing about the nature of corpses that provides a basis for that belief. Our only basis was also the apostle Paul’s only basis: Easter. If Jesus was raised from the dead—if God really and truly pulled that off—then we can and will be raised too because the same God who made the first Easter possible has promised it. “As in Adam all die,” Paul says. No one doubts that much. “In Christ all will be made alive.” A great many people doubt that. Faith bridges the gap between the death that no one denies and the life to come that Christians proclaim.

Faith gives us that hope but also counsels us to humility. Let’s not pretend that this is easy to believe or that we have all the details of this sewn up in our minds. For all his confidence, Paul himself, a bit later in 1 Corinthians 15, struggles mightily to draw a bead on just what kind of a body we will have after the resurrection.

There is much we do not know and will not know for now. As Paul says in comparing our present bodies to seeds, sometimes you just need to plant a seed to see what will grow.

Some years ago archaeologists in Japan uncovered a tomb estimated to be at least 2,000 years old. Among the artifacts in this tomb was a cache of seeds. Since these seeds did not come in some Burpee’s seed bag with a picture of the plant printed on the label, it was a mystery what kind of seeds these were. They analyzed and pondered them for a very long time until one bright scientist finally made the sensible suggestion of just planting one. So they did; and to their wonder the seed was still able to grow, sprouting eventually into a glorious, seven-foot-high, eight-petal, white magnolia.

What we are to be in the future we do not yet know. But when Christ Jesus appears, we will be made like him. The scientists in Japan were much taken with their find of seeds in that tomb. What they maybe did not realize is that the corpse in that same tomb can, in Christ, also sprout and grow and be made alive once more.

For now I feel sad when I see old bulletins and spy the names of those who are not with us on this earth anymore. I can remember most of them so well, see them so clearly, hear their voices and their laughter. But we are not the only ones who remember them. God does, too. And he has a plan. It’s called Easter.
Henry was dying of throat cancer. He knew it; his wife, Joan, knew it; their two grown children knew it; and the doctors knew it. But he wasn't dying quickly, and it wasn't painless. It was a slow, agonizing, painful dying. The most the pain medications could do was take the fiercest edge off the pain. He could live for weeks before his body succumbed to the cancer. The disease and the pain it brought had already beaten down his will to live, as well as the will of everyone else involved. Everyone wanted the pain to stop, even if it meant Henry's death. A side issue was the cost of sustaining his life; he had already run up the tab to over $75,000, and every day he lived tacked on another $1500. Henry hated the pain, and hated how much his life was costing his family.

Henry wanted to die. When he told Joan, at first she objected, but after a while she, too, started to wish he would die, for his own sake. What made it easier for her to wish such a loss was the fact that Henry and she were both committed Christians. She knew that his death was, as the Heidelberg Catechism says, “our entrance into eternal life” (Q&A 42). What he seemed to be enduring was a prolonged pain, and eternal life loomed as a much better option. For Henry, to live is to be in pain, to die is to be with Christ. But their shared understanding of what a Christian may do also blocked them from actively doing anything that would end his life prematurely. They told the hospital staff they did not want any intervention that would prolong his life, and waited patiently for Henry’s disease to end his life. So they prayed for his death, and together endured what would remain of his life.

The death of a Christian like Henry, suffering the agony of a fatal illness, seems to be a good thing, and it is not wrong to pray for it. Henry and Joan believed that their Christian faith did not permit them to end Henry’s life, even when his death was something they prayed for. Were they right? Are there things we may pray for that we should not cause to occur?

Consider a situation reported by BBC News in February, 2010. A television host, Ray Gosling, was arrested “on suspicion of murder by Nottinghamshire Police after he admitted to killing his lover.” The 70-year-old’s confession that he had smothered the unnamed man who was dying of AIDS was broadcast on the BBC’s Inside Out program on February 15, 2010. The Nottingham filmmaker said he had made a pact with his lover to take action if his suffering increased. Mr. Gosling said he was aware of the possible consequences and had no regrets: “It’s a terrible situation. I loved him to bits. We had a pact—he said if the pain gets bad and if nothing can be done, don’t let him linger on. I don’t think it’s a crime…. When you love someone, it is difficult to see them suffer.”

Only four places in the world legally permit assisted suicide or euthanasia: Washington and Oregon, and Holland and Belgium. In a way it is surprising that these acts are almost universally illegal. After all, one can list specific benefits, like the cessation of suffering and the saving of needless expense, and there doesn’t seem to be any downside. In fact, it seems compassionate to relieve Henry, and others in his situation, of the suffering. Still, the fact that so few places have legalized euthanasia or assisted suicide is a testimony to the widespread moral perception that euthanizing or “assisting” the suicide of someone like Henry is morally wrong. How can bringing an end to suffering be something we are forbidden to do? How can it be wrong not to bring about something that we are praying for?

From a moral perspective, two interrelated reasons help us understand why it is wrong to intentionally and actively end a human life. Those reasons are our limited knowledge and our limited power. Our limited knowledge means that, while we can see some of the short-term, immediate consequences, and we can even know that they seem good, we cannot know all the consequences that our actions will produce—nor do we know whether those effects will, on the whole, be for the good. Our limited power means that we cannot control all the consequences, or the fallout of our actions as they reverberate through time.

When Eve “saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it” (Gen. 3:6). The problem with Eve’s
conduct was not that she was mistaken about the fruit; no doubt it was good for food, and desirable, and a means to gaining wisdom. All the consequences of eating it seemed good. The only problem is that she had been told not to do it. The immediate effects of eating the fruit were presumably good: Adam and Eve had a tasty fruit lunch. Of course, the full consequences of what they did were horrible. Once evil was triggered, Adam and Eve were powerless to stop its rampage. In spite of God’s instructions not to eat from the tree, Adam and Eve thought they knew what was good; they thought that any fallout would be within their power to manage. And their mistake was the first instance of what has become a long-lasting human hubris.

God does not command that we do good, but that we obey. Generally, of course, obeying God will bring about what is good. So giving to Christian causes helps support the proclamation of the gospel and provide food for the hungry and homes for the homeless. But what makes our actions pleasing to God, what makes them right, is not that they have good outcomes, but that they are obedient. We must not measure our actions by their outcomes; we must evaluate our actions by whether they conform to God’s will. A seeming good end does not justify an immoral means. Choosing to act outside of God’s will to achieve an end that we think is good is to act like Adam and Eve.

The Heidelberg Catechism asks the question “What do we do that is good?” (Q&A 91). And the answer is that a good act must meet three conditions (none of which involve the production of a good outcome): it arises out of true faith, conforms to God’s law, and is done for God’s glory. Note this second point: “conforms to God’s law.” What this implies is that unless an action is permitted by God’s law, it cannot be good, no matter how many apparent good effects it may cause. This is hard for us. There are circumstances where we are sure that if we do this one thing, the outcome will be very good, but the thing we would need to do to cause the outcome is forbidden to us. We do not doubt that the death of Henry will be a good thing, and it’s very hard to let him keep suffering; however, intentionally causing that death is against God’s law.

Only God knows what the future holds, and what is truly good; that is why God acts according to his good and perfect plan. We don’t know exactly what God’s plan is, nor how he intends to unfold it in our lives or the lives of others. We may pray for situations that seem good to us, we may pray for them to come about, but that does not give us the authority to take action in order to cause such situations. We are not authorized to bring about every good. The only goods we may pursue are those that are attainable through morally permissible actions. Actively and intentionally ending an innocent human life is one of those actions which we may not do. Scripture teaches that the life of every person is a gift of God, and that it is only on his authority that life ends. We each confess, “I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ” (Q&A 1). To do as we think best with what belongs to God simply proves our ignorant human hubris.

We live in a culture that has lost its Christian moorings, and morality has been set adrift. Very few of our society’s most influential people are committed to a set of moral imperatives that are not a product of human fashioning. Thus, the consequences of an action have become the only measure of whether it is right or wrong. With such reasoning, if the death of someone like Henry is good, then causing that death is morally permitted. This line of reasoning has some appeal, but we should resist it. What we should do is support and encourage Henry and Joan as much as we can, sympathizing with their agony, and praying for God to quickly end Henry’s suffering.
The Fear of Facing Death

We all know that someday, unless our Lord returns, our earthly “tents” will cave in; we are all going to die. But I know it differently. My “tent” was nearly blown over. As I walked close to the cliff’s edge I could sense how far a fall to death might be, how frightening it was for me to encounter the end of my days on Earth. Our Christian faith assures us that death is the experience of transition to a far better life with our Lord in heaven, where a room is well prepared for each of us. I have known that and I have believed that all my life. I had also wondered in days gone by how I would do were I to be confronted with my mortality, with a terminal disease—not with a life sentence of difficulty, but a death sentence once and for all my days. Would my Christian faith hold up? I was afraid. I wondered especially how calm or how frightened I would be. Well, now I know: I was afraid.

“You have blood cancer; it is either aplastic anemia or acute leukemia. Most likely one of the two … probably leukemia.” Those were the words of a new reality, unbelievable to me but true. Suddenly everything was different. A day later I was told I had been diagnosed with AML—acute myelogenous leukemia. I had heard lots of stories in my years of ministry about people who died from leukemia. The word always gave me shivers; now I was the one shaking from the news.

“So … what are my chances?” A common question—but it became my question. “At your age, we have about a 50 percent cure rate. It depends a lot on your basic health and how you respond to the chemotherapy. It’s pretty powerful. And then you will probably need a bone marrow transplant. That will be done later in Ann Arbor when you have enough health and strength to endure it.” I quickly learned that the survival rate on such a transplant for someone my age was about 75 percent; one in four people, I was told, run into significant complications with infection that takes your life because for a period of time you have no immune system to speak of. Or, later, there are problems with guest vs. host disease, your body fighting the new stem cells in your blood system. One thing was clear to me: I could soon be gone from this earth.

I did not feel just knocked to my knees; I felt kicked to the floor, without the strength to get up. At such moments, as always, life itself is so up to God. I often lay there hoping and praying that I could live. I remember one evening at St. Mary’s Lacks Cancer Center when eleven bags of ice were cooling the edge off a high fever caused by heavy-duty antibiotics. It was work to open my eyes. I remember my fear that night; in ways it is still with me.

Talking with students nine months later in a pastoral counseling class, I rehearsed how frightened I had been. For all of them, well on their way to ministry, I wanted to model a strong, solid faith in my Savior and demonstrate the confidence that a Christian can have in the face of death. But there in the classroom, on medication every day to counter chemotherapy fatigue, I told my story with a lump in my throat. Not the strong, self-assured Christian teacher that I wanted to be; not that model of a strong Christian faith. I was still scared to death of my death. Students were positive, reassuring, reminding me of how well I had done so far, but their words had little traction with my fears. Then, a Chinese student spoke in somewhat broken English: “You feel like Jesus felt in Gethsemane. He was afraid of dying too. Jesus knows how you feel—he was scared too!” My heart did a double-take, the thing that happens when God’s Spirit moves and you hear the word of the Lord in the words of others. I heard the whisper of God that my fears of dying were acceptable, truly human—that God understood.

Yes, Scripture tells us that Jesus was overwhelmed by his death that was soon to be. Mark reports that in Gethsemane, “deeply distressed and troubled,” Jesus confessed to Peter, James, and John: “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” He needed their prayerful support: “Stay here and keep watch” (14:34). Luke reports that “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” (22:43-44). I have often wondered about that image of Jesus bleeding drops of sweat, of how deeply distraught he must have been, knowing what was to come...
The Fear of Facing Death

before him. Distressed, troubled, sorrowful … our Lord was so human, so deeply engaged in his fear of dying … and so could I be. My Chinese student was Christ to me that day, telling me powerful words of spiritual comfort.

As a Christian I take heart, first of all, in knowing that Jesus the Christ has gone before me and taken the lead in facing death straight on, as tortuous as it was for him. Being sure that Jesus was terrified gave me courage to face my own fears. But there was more. Not only did I know about Jesus taking on death and winning that battle, but I also experienced Jesus in the many ways that people continued to be Christ to me. I read cards from people at LaGrave CRC whom I did not know. I heard the report of the prayers of many, advocating for my life before the throne of God. I heard the prayers of pastors and family and friends who assured me that I was not alone in all my fears. Some read Scriptures that I knew, planting in my mind and heart the truths of our Christian faith. The presence and the voices of others calmed my fright. These people were the body of Christ to me when I was too weak to speak to God myself. As the Heidelberg Catechism reminds us, faith is both knowledge and confidence—knowing about our eternal salvation, sealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and having confidence that his Spirit, the Comforter, never leaves the room.

Facing the challenge of dying includes facing the biggest questions of living. My fears drove me toward a shift in personal values. When the future looks precarious you weigh your choices more carefully—like how you spend your time and who you spend it with. Or how you spend your money. What matters little now really matters little. And what matters more comes more sharply into focus. Services of worship are one of the things that simply mean more. When sunlight streaks through stained-glass windows I quietly sense God’s smile, his blessing in our direction. In the time of Lent when we remember the suffering and death of Jesus, I know that Jesus died so that ultimately we don’t have to. When psalms of lament echo through the sanctuary, I remember my own distress and how, in my case, God delivered me from my fears and my sorrows. When the congregation sings songs of thanksgiving, I look at the cross and recall our Lord in Gethsemane facing his fears, showing me how.

And the people of God mean more to me. My own family members are part of that people. If I have just a few more years to live, if remission breaks and leukemia takes me down, I want to have spent enough time with these people. I want to share my faith with children, grandchildren, friends near, friends far. Such time of communion, conversation, and care has become premium for me. I have learned this about fear: you can face more of it if you are not alone. Being alone doesn’t work when it comes to facing such spiritual and emotional challenges. In the community of Christian faith we can stay open, we can stand up before the door of death, and ultimately fear no evil. Yes, I still carry some fears, but they lessen. I never needed the marrow transplant, and my remission looks to be solid now two years out from the disease. Today I am pretty healthy, living life again, but knowing now how lightly we all walk on the face of the earth. If I do die, I know well in mind and in heart with you who read this, that in life and in death, yes, we belong to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ.
Growing through Grief

Beginning with the publication of their first book, Getting to the Other Side of Grief: Overcoming the Loss of a Spouse, in 1998, Robert C. DeVries, Professor Emeritus of Church Education at Calvin Theological Seminary, and co-author Susan J. Zonnebelt-Smeenge, licensed clinical psychologist at Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services, have been busy writing and speaking on issues of death, grief, and bereavement. Both of them experienced the death of their first spouse in the 1990s and have now been married to each other for twelve years. They have written two more books on grief—The Empty Chair and Traveling Through Grief—and one on preparing for death—Living Fully in the Shadow of Death. Their fifth book, From We to Me: Embracing Life Again after the Death or Divorce of a Spouse, deals with reinvesting in life after completing the grief journey following the death or divorce of a spouse. We talked with Susan and Bob about their passion for ministry to grieving individuals and their suggestions to pastors and other caregivers who wish to support those who have experienced loss.

**Forum:** Why do people seem to have a difficult time talking about the inevitable grief we all experience when a loved one dies?

**Susan:** We like to talk about happy, joyful things, like birthday celebrations, a special vacation, or the birth of a child. We tend to avoid talking about tough stuff that seems negative and perhaps produces anxiety, especially a death. If we develop close bonds with people, their deaths hurt deeply. If we intentionally talk with our loved ones about dying and have the courage to express our feelings and say “good-bye,” we can feel good about having done that when the death occurs.

**Bob:** So we suggest that pastors and other caregivers help the dying person and family talk about what they think and feel about dying and tell each other what they’ve valued and appreciated in their relationship. Often the dying person or family both hesitate to talk about how they would feel if the medical treatment they hoped for didn’t work. Having a conversation with someone about their death before it happens makes the work of grief after the death far less complicated.

**Forum:** What do you mean by “grief work”? Doesn’t grief just heal itself over time?

**Susan:** Although grief occurs naturally as a normal response to loss, it also takes intentional work. Too many people say, “Just give it time.” Time is a necessary component—working through grief often takes longer than people might expect. The grief journey can last up to two or three or even four years. But if there isn’t a reduction of emotional pain during that period of time, the bereaved would benefit from some professional counseling.

By “work” we mean engaging in deliberate activities that are attached to five specific goals designed to help bereaved persons face their pain and eventually disempower feared things. Facing the pain actually helps a person heal.

**Forum:** You mentioned five “goals” of grief. What are they?

**Bob:** These goals for the griever are interactive and nonsequential. Actually, each bereaved person must deal with them before they can get through their grief. Like David talked about in Psalm 23, we walk through the valley of the shadow of death—not over, under, or around it. One of the five goals is to accept the fact that your loved one died and isn’t going to return. That may sound pretty simple, but often a bereaved person’s mind and emotions can play tricks on them and keep them from facing the finality of that death. Even caregivers tend to soften the blow by talking about someone being “lost,” or “gone to a better place.” Using the words “dead” and “died” reinforces the fact that this person no longer lives on this earth.

**Susan:** Actually, the entire funeral process launches the beginning of accepting that the person has died. Having
Growing Through Grief

a viewing of the body is very beneficial. If the body is not available to be viewed, grieving will be more complicated. That doesn’t mean you cannot get through grief—but seeing the body, and doing everything else you can do to confront the painful reality of death, helps you move through the grief journey.

Another goal is to express all of the emotions associated with the death of your loved one. We cannot suppress emotions very long—if a person stores them up they will eventually come out in many other, often unhealthy, physical or emotional ways. Emotions do not just go away, so those providing care and support need to encourage the bereaved to express them.

Bob: That is one of the reasons why we stress the need for Christians to lament—to do what the psalmists so often did. We need to know we have the right and freedom to wail in God’s presence, to ask God “Why?” and even be angry at him for a time. And we need to know that God understands. Even Jesus, standing before the tomb of Lazarus just prior to bringing him back to life, wept.

Susan: Another goal is to store the memories of the deceased person and place them in the past so that the bereaved person can eventually move on with life. This means that the person does have to “let go” of their relationship with the deceased, even while never forgetting him or her. An essential part of this goal is learning how to formulate honest, realistic, and balanced memories, and then store them where they can be retrieved. This does mean that they have to acknowledge that the deceased person is no longer a part of their present life.

Bob: So often we try to comfort each other by asserting that we will one day see in heaven loved ones who have died. However, the Bible is silent on that issue. It also doesn’t say anything very directly about the type of relationships we will have with each other except that marriage will not be part of heaven. The emphasis in the Bible is on the relationship we will have with Christ, the Lamb who has been slain. The form of intimacy and depth of relationship seems to be as brothers and sisters in Christ—and keep in mind this will be the most wonderful place and experience ever! We see this as all the more reason why grieving people need to store their memories, move the deceased into a treasured part of the past, and move on with life.

Forum: I assume, then, that the remaining “goals” have something to do with moving on.

Susan: Exactly. That’s what our latest book is all about. Bereaved persons need to reformulate their identity independent of the relationship they had with the deceased—another one of the goals of grieving. The last is to reinvest in life with a renewed sense of purpose and direction. When someone close to us dies, it is like removing one of the figures from a mobile hanging over a baby’s crib. The whole configuration is thrown out of balance. Grievers are then forced to ask some questions: “Who am I without this person?” “How has my life changed?” Or even more pointedly: “Who am I—alone, by myself? My loved one died. I did not. What are my purposes now in life?”

Forum: You had mentioned “getting through grief.” Can you help us understand what you mean by that?

Susan: What we mean by “getting through one’s grief” or “resolution” is that a bereaved person can get to the point where he or she is no longer in pain regarding their loved one’s death, and their life no longer revolves around missing the deceased person. The death no longer controls the person’s emotions or daily activities. But we make a distinction between grief, which refers to the more lengthy and complicated process that can end if it is worked through, and the emotion of sadness that can still be experienced on some occasions. We may feel momentary sadness from time to time because of the death of someone we loved.

Forum: What advice can you give to pastors and other caregivers who have the challenge of ministering to bereaved people in their churches?

Bob: We often hear from people whose loved one died following an illness that while pastors and other caregivers were there during their loved one’s failing health and death, they felt abandoned after the funeral. Pastoral calls stopped rather abruptly, or slowed down to a trickle. We encourage churches to develop an action plan to minister intentionally and at regular intervals to the bereaved for at least twelve to eighteen months (or longer as necessary) following a death. Church members will benefit by being informed about what bereaved people need to do in order to move through their grief. They also need to be equipped to approach grieving individuals, to listen carefully and take cues from what they are saying, and to support and encourage them to work actively and intentionally through grief.
We got off the “farm,” and it was rich. Fifty-eight students gathered toothbrushes, Bibles, and our seminarian hearts and traveled to Camp Geneva on Lake Michigan this past January to explore important questions together. Henry David Thoreau writes in *Walden* how he went into the woods “to front only the essential aspects of life.” Thoreau got out of town to listen without distraction for something important. So did we. Unlike Thoreau, however, we seminarians went to the lake to hear God speak to us through each other, through his Word, and through his Holy Spirit.

As part of the new Master of Divinity curriculum at Calvin Theological Seminary, students participated in a course titled “Pastoral Identity.” During our three weeks of classroom time, we studied Jaco Hamman’s *Becoming a Pastor* and Ronald Richardson’s *Becoming a Healthier Pastor*. We carefully investigated our families of origin, studied family systems theory, and had several group discussions on topics related to pastoral identity and pastoral care. The class concluded with an overnight retreat at Camp Geneva. Professor of Pastoral Care Ron Nydam and Pastor Ruth Boven, who serves at Neland Avenue CRC and teaches and mentors students at CTS, hosted the community of seminary students for twenty-four hours of worship, prayer, and fellowship, exploring God’s Word and listening for God’s voice.

Free from the distractions and restrictions of classroom environments, we experienced at Camp Geneva a sense of freedom to commune with one another in fresh, uninhibited ways—skipping around icebergs on the lake; talking by the fire; playing football and basketball in the gym; connecting without the limitations of having to run off to class or home to meet family.

We went to the lake to discern together answers to important questions: How has God been working in our lives, and how has that journey led us to seminary? With what gifts has God equipped us, and how is he asking us to use them? Where do we see God working, and where do others observe his work? These powerful questions were more effectively addressed by getting off campus. We needed the getaway, the space, the freedom. As Thoreau would say, we needed “to live deliberately, to front only the essential aspects of life”—in our case, the essential questions before us. God spoke to those questions in a variety of ways.

At the retreat, we gathered in groups of five to pray about our calling, our spiritual gifts, and our pastoral strengths and weaknesses. Some groups prayed for one another individually. Others laid hands on each other. Some prayed aloud simultaneously. During our prayer times, the Spirit’s presence was powerfully evident. Many callings were confirmed, answers to hard questions were discerned, gifts were revealed, hearts were encouraged, community was deepened.

God’s voice was also evident during our one-hour silent retreat when we scattered to various parts of the grounds to meditate on John 21:15–19. We sat quietly before the Lord, and we listened for his voice. Much of what the Lord spoke to me during that time was in direct alignment with what my classmates had discerned through prayer. It was beautiful.

We got off the farm, and it was rich. More specifically, we got off the farm together. James writes, “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you” (4:8). We drew near to God together as a community, and he responded by drawing near to us in and through community. It was rich, indeed.
Back to the Basics

By Paul De Vries, CTS Trustee and Pastor of Brookside Christian Reformed Church

In the Winter 2010 issue of the Forum, Old Testament Professor Michael Williams wrote about “Discipleship in the Classroom” through his Bible Survey course. In the following article from the January 2010 Newsletter at Brookside CRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan, CTS alumnus and trustee Paul De Vries tells of the impact of the course on one pastor and his congregation.

I had a wonderful experience during the last four months of 2009: I went back to seminary! I sat in Professor Michael Williams’s “Bible Survey” class. This course is brand-new at Calvin Seminary and is now part of the required curriculum for all first-year students. For each and every book of the Bible we were given a theme and a memory verse to learn and reflect upon. At first this struck me as rather rudimentary and remedial. After all, I am a seminary graduate with more than twenty years of preaching and teaching the Word. Do I really need to go back to such basic things as a simple memory verse and theme? The answer is yes! One always needs to go back to the basics from time to time. In fact, most of us would be a lot better off if we spent more time mastering the basics instead of thinking we have moved beyond all that. So, I went back to the basics—back to seminary—back to good, old-fashioned Bible Survey. Having been through the course, I can say I was richly blessed by the class and also by the memory work. By focusing on a theme and memory verse from each book of the Bible one gains an understanding of the flow and meaning of the whole book in a very vivid way.

I am thinking that we here at Brookside could also benefit from going back to the basics of simple themes and memory work. So, beginning in the new year we are going to walk our way through the Bible, book by book, Sunday after Sunday. Every Sunday morning in 2010 (with a few possible exceptions), we will be considering a biblical book and its theme. Lord willing, by this time next year, we will have covered the entire Bible in this manner.

If this seems like a lot to you, imagine how Professor Williams and his students felt when they knew that they had to cover the entire Bible in just a few short months! We will get a whole year! It is my sincere hope that this back-to-basics approach will help educate and stretch us in the truth of God’s Word.

Seminary Starts New Toastmasters Club

Self-confidence and communication skills are two important abilities for seminarians to develop as they prepare for ministry. The new Toastmasters Club, sponsored by the Center for Excellence in Preaching (CEP) at Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS), is helping students to gain both. The Ted Spoelstra Toastmasters Club, named for a generous donor who provides funds for communication resources for seminarians, began in the fall of 2009 and celebrated its charter organization on March 8, 2010. The group meets twice a month at the Seoul Garden restaurant near campus and enjoys lunch while listening to each other’s speeches and encouraging one another in public speaking.

CTS students are enthusiastic about the new venture. Club secretary and CTS student Reita Yazawa says, “We are practicing to become better public speakers in a supportive, encouraging atmosphere, attracting members from Calvin Seminary, Calvin College, the CRC headquarters, and the local community.” Fellow CTS student Amos Oei serves as president of the club, and CTS Preaching Professor John Rottman and Calvin College Communications Professor Randy Bytwerk are also charter members of the club. Sponsoring the Center for Excellence in Preaching’s Spoelstra Communications Fund, the club is open to anyone interested in improving his or her communication skills.

Toastmasters started in 1924 and has helped adults learn communication skills ever since. The key to Toastmasters is learning through participation, according to District Governor Ron Musich, in his address to the club at its charter celebration.
party. Participants also gain self-confidence, since the repetition of giving speeches and doing exercises builds confidence over the long haul.

Club members are learning to encourage one another as they build up their communication skills. At the club’s charter celebration meeting, Lisa Sochacki, Volunteer Coordinator for Service Link at the CRC denominational headquarters, gave an impressive speech about God’s work in her life, titled “Write Your Plans in Pencil and Let God Have the Eraser.” Group responses included evaluation of her speech as well as gratitude for the story she told of God’s work in her life.

The mission of a Toastmasters Club is “to provide a mutually supportive and positive learning environment in which every member has the opportunity to develop and practice communication and leadership skills, which in turn fosters self-confidence and personal growth.” This mission is being realized for seminarians and all who are part of the new Toastmasters club. For more information, see the club’s webpage at www.calvincollege.freetoasthost.org.

Distinguished Alumni Awards, 2010

The CTS Board of Trustees has named two recipients of the Seminary’s Distinguished Alumni Award for 2010. The award is given annually to persons who have brought unusual credit to their alma mater by their effectiveness in Christian ministry. For 2010 the recipients are Rev. Duane A. Visser and Dr. John William Wevers.

Duane Visser, a native of Doon, Iowa, graduated from Calvin College (A.B.) in 1962, from Calvin Theological Seminary (M.Div.) in 1965, and from Western Michigan University (M.A.) in 1966. He also received a Master’s Degree in counseling psychology from Arizona State University in 1973. Rev. Visser has been pastor of the Fresno, California, CRC; Chaplain and Director of the Calvary Rehabilitation Center, Phoenix, Arizona; Director of the Department of Pastoral Services and Team Chaplain for Adult Services, Pine Rest Christian Hospital, Cutlerville, Michigan; Chaplain of the Loyola University Medical Center, Chicago; and from 1995-2009, Director of Pastor-Church Relations in the CRCNA. In this last post, Rev. Visser helped administer our denomination’s participation in the Lilly grant program titled “Sustaining Pastoral Excellence.”

For forty-three years Duane Visser has ministered with uncommon wisdom, skill, and compassion. He has demonstrated and taught ways of integrating clinical and spiritual insight. He has trained hundreds of seminary students and pastors in Clinical Pastoral Education. He has led teams of mental health care professionals to bring peace to disturbed people. As long-term Director of Pastor-Church Relations, Rev. Visser exhibited not only wisdom, but also stability and toughness in cases of pastor-church turmoil. In all his ministries, Rev. Visser has been a model of the healthy pastoral care provider—a person who can calm troubled waters without drowning in them. He is a master of his field.

John William Wevers is Professor Emeritus of Near Eastern Studies at the University of Toronto. A native of Baldwin, Wisconsin, he graduated from Calvin College in 1940 and from Calvin Theological Seminary in 1943. He then attended Princeton Theological Seminary and Princeton University, received his Th.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1946, and taught there for five years.

In 1951 Professor Wevers accepted a position on the faculty of the University of Toronto, where he taught in the department of Near Eastern Studies until his retirement in 1984.

For much of the twentieth century Professor Wevers was the internationally recognized top scholar in the field of Septuagint studies. (The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, and was the early church’s Bible until the New Testament was written and canonized.) Professor Wevers has published thousands of pages of scholarship on the Bible, including the first five volumes in the standard critical text edition of the Septuagint as well as a number of commentaries and a host of learned essays and special studies. He is the pioneer of Septuagint studies in Canada. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. He has delivered learned lectures all over the world.

In all his work on the Bible, Professor Wevers has shown exhaustive research, impressive erudition, and absolute mastery of his field.
At Calvin Theological Seminary we are deeply invested in the personal and spiritual formation of every student. Rooted in Reformed theology, our program is designed for developing pastors and nurtures the individual growth and development essential to this important calling.

We like to think of the Master of Divinity program as the thread that brings all the pieces of a biblical, authentic, contextual, and life-changing ministry together. Our new M.Div. curriculum integrates these dimensions through innovative learning and teaching methods and can be customized to ensure a formative and meaningful experience.