

The 2011 Resolution That Will Make a Difference

By Doug Hamilton

I have a creepy confession to make to the congregation this morning: I like to walk through cemeteries and read tombstones. There is something that intrigues me about burial grounds that really has nothing to do with death or dying, but about the lives of those that have gone onto the afterlife.

It has been said that a hundred years from now all those who personally know us will likely be dead and gone. If we become famous perhaps our name will be recorded in a history book, but that is a long shot at best. For most of us it is likely that the only thing that we will leave behind in this world to carry on our memory will be a memorial marker. The sad reality is in only a few decades after we are in the ground nobody on this earth will really give a thought to our existence anymore. That is what likely draws me to the grave markers at cemeteries, for I leave a more humble person, closer to God and more at ease with the reality of my humanity and mortality.

Even more than that, I like to look at the memorial markers and try to imagine the past lives of the people who are interred in those spaces. From a memorial marker and gravesite placement one can often find out...

- if a person was married
- the children they had and whether some went on before them
- if they were wealthy
- if they had military experience
- the families they came from
- the clubs they joined
- the culture they lived in
- their religious persuasions
- their hobbies and passions
- their personalities and other characteristics

One can often have a story unfold from the few words, dates and locations of a memorial marker. I have even gone back through some of the more interesting markers and read the obituaries on record either at the cemetery or on the Internet. It is amazing what you can find for follow-up.

Some examples

- Years ago I saw a marker of a woman had “Love Me Tender” on one side and an acoustic guitar on the other. She was born in the forties and was a big Elvis fan. She only lived to be fifty-three and was never married, hence a single marker. On the bottom of that marker was the phrase “See I told you I was sick!” Obviously she had a sense of humor.
- In Oklahoma, a woman had a marker with a parking meter mounted on the side. Naturally the meter states “Time Expired” and the marker says at the bottom “Her Humor Lives On”.
- I have come across many military markers from times of war reminding that there were real people that died while serving our country. I remember finding the graves of two brothers that served in the Korean Conflict and died only three months apart. Right next



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to them was the graves of the parents, both of which departed years later. I thought about the heartache that family must have been going through during those days of trauma.

- I once saw a famous musician's grave that actually was bolted to the ground because it had already been stolen twice. That alone was symbolic of his chaotic life.
- Sadly another marker said "Here lies and atheist, all dressed up and nowhere to go."
- A preacher had put on his marker by his family, "He Prayed".

I try to envision when being in a cemetery that is not only filled with dead bodies, but dead memories, waiting to be stirred up in the minds of those that come to the graves. There was a life behind each memorial marker. What they focused on in that life is quite relevant to what is going on in the eternal life. A common poem on markers a couple of centuries ago was the following:

*Dear Friend, As you pass by, as you are now so once was I,
As I am now you soon will be, Prepare yourself and follow me.*

A man came by and placed a note under one of those markers. It read the following: *To follow you I'm not content until I know which way you went.* There is a connection to this life and the afterlife.

- Luke 16:25 "But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.
- 1 Tim 4:8 On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and {also} for the {life} to come.

What legacy that you want to leave behind for others to know about you? What is that one New Year's Resolution that I implore you to keep in 2011? "What do you want on your tombstone and how can you make sure you will get it?"

Genesis 47:29-31 When the time for Israel to die drew near, he called his son Joseph and said to him, "Please, if I have found favor in your sight, place now your hand under my thigh and deal with me in kindness and faithfulness. Please do not bury me in Egypt, ³⁰ but when I lie down with my fathers, you shall carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place." And he said, "I will do as you have said." ³¹ He said, "Swear to me." So he swore to him. Then Israel bowed in worship at the head of the bed.

- Israel, alias Jacob, was nearing the end of his long life. For the last seventeen years he was in a foreign land, but reunited with his son Joseph and the rest of the family. For the seventeen years prior to that he thought Joseph was dead, for the jealous brothers deceived their father about the matter. They sold their brother into Egyptian slavery at age seventeen, thought he was dead for seventeen years and now was completing the last seventeen years of his life with the while family.
- His request was to be buried in his motherland of Israel in the cave of Machpelah with his father and grandfather. He wanted to be in the family plot as a Patriarch of the family. It was important for him to be with his family, both in this life and symbolically in the afterlife. He was a family man and it showed. He will be remembered in that way.

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- What is behind the placing of the hand under the thigh? Abraham had a similar incident of hand/thigh oath with his eldest servant and the selection of Isaac's wife, Rebekah in *Genesis 24:1-4*.
- The reason that Joseph was to place his hand under the thigh and take the oath was because it was symbolic of the seed line which came from Jacob's loins. The oath to do so would be based on the entire lives of the entire seed line.
 - Exodus 1:5 All the persons who came from the loins of Jacob were seventy in number...
 - Genesis 35:11 And God said unto him, *I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins...*

Israel wanted a special moment with his special people in the closing moments of his life.

- He blessed Joseph's sons (*Genesis 48:8-10*).
- He encouraged Joseph (*Genesis 48:21 Then Israel said to Joseph, "Behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you, and bring you back to the land of your fathers."*)
- He instructed the rest of the family (*Genesis 49:1-2*).
- He died in their presence (*Genesis 49:33 When Jacob finished charging his sons, he drew his feet into the bed and breathed his last, and was gathered to his people.*)

We are all only a heartbeat away, only one wrong turn on a highway, only one accident away, only one breath away, only one illness or only step away from the end of our lives. If you knew today was the last day that you had to live, what would you be doing? This is what I would do:

- 1) Gather together my family and friends.
 - Jacob called them together for one last reunion to say the final goodbyes.
 - *Genesis 49:2 "Gather together and hear, O sons of Jacob; And listen to Israel your father."*
 - Who really would want to be alone and away from their family and friends at the point of death?
- 2) Encourage them with kind words and blessings.
 - *Genesis 49:28* says that "...*He blessed them, every one with the blessing appropriate to him.*"
 - This was his last chance to encourage them and it would not be denied.
 - Would you encourage those in your circle if you knew it was your last day to live?
- 3) Resolve all grudges.
 - Not everything was encouraging, for he settled his difficulties with Simeon and Levi concerning their anger problem (*49:5-7*).
 - We certainly would not want unsettled strife to be taken to the grave.
- 4) Try to draw them closer to God.
 - It says in *47:31* that *Israel bowed in worship at the head of the bed*. Being closer to God and drawing your family closer to God at the end of the day is really the highest importance.

What if you had two days to live? Would you not have the same plan?

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What if you had a week to live? Would it not still be the same?

What if you had a month to live? I would still carry out those four steps, wouldn't you?

What if you had a year to live? You do and this is the year and here comes your resolution. What is the 2011 New Year's Resolution?

Answer: Spend quality time building memories with your loved-ones today.

- 1) Gather together your family and friends. Spend time with your family and your church family.
- 2) Encourage them with kind words and blessings. Be there for them and write the good memories of encouragement in the hearts and minds.
- 3) Resolve all grudges. Do not let the sin go down on your wrath. God to that brother or sister today and clear the air. Seek to have peace for it could be your last opportunity.
- 4) Try to draw them closer to God. Make sure that you have done everything to help them bow their head to the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, Jesus Christ.

For 2011, let us imagine that this is the last year we have to live. Don't waste it! Spend some real quality time writing that tombstone with phrases like "He loved me", "He cared for their souls" and "Together Forever" in the kingdom of God. Paul refers to Christians "*whose names are in the book of life.*" (Phil 4:3) Make sure that you are on that memorial marker in heaven.

Closing Story

There is a grave of a woman on the grounds of St. Peter's Church in Tewin, England. Her name was Lady Anne Grimston and she was born into wealth and self-indulgence. Never being in need helped contribute to her atheism and she carried it to her grave in November of 1780. She mocked the concept of the afterlife and even refused the last rites from a priest. One of the last things she said was "I shall not continue to live. It is as unlikely that I shall continue to live as that a tree will grow out of my body." She was buried in a fancy marble tomb fit for a Lady of the Court.

Quoting writer Margaret Galitzin:

Lady Anne Grimston died, and was buried in a strong tomb made of marble – buried and forgotten. But not quite, for one day, many years after, the marble slab over her grave was found to have moved from its position. The builders fixed it firmly back in its place and left it, thinking it quite secure. Again the heavy marble slab tilted slightly on one side, and in the middle was a crack, with a tiny bunch of leaves bursting through. The crack was closed with cement, and the slab put back. But again the slab was lifted up, the crack opened wider than ever, and the thin trunk of a tree appeared. They repaired the crumbling tomb and built tall iron railings around it to hold the masonry together. But the young tree made its way, breaking the masonry in two, destroying the walls of the tomb, and tearing the heavy iron railings out of the ground.



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And today, growing right from the heart of Lady Anne Grimston's grave in St. Peter's churchyard in Herfordshire County is one of the largest trees in England, with four trees growing from one root. The trunk of the tree has grown fast through heavy iron railing, which cannot be moved. The marble masonry of the tomb has shattered to pieces, and today Lady Anne Grimston's grave is a heap of broken stone and twisted iron bars. For over 200 years the trunks have forced their way through the tomb to raise their branches in a silent but powerful triumph.

Conclusion:

You can tell a lot from a grave. From hers we can see that God always has the final word. She did not take the time to have a relationship with God's people and has become a sermon illustration for you fine saints this morning. She denied the afterlife, yet life comes forth after her in the form of a tree. God has a way with irony. Make it your resolution to write your tombstone today by following the four steps with your circle of friends and family.

- 1) Gather together your family and friends.
- 2) Encourage them with kind words and blessings.
- 3) Resolve all grudges.
- 4) Try to draw them closer to God.

Simply put: Start writing your tombstone today by working on those relationships around you. Gove them something good to remember.