

Scripture for funerals, by situation

A funeral is not the place to discover a passage doesn't fit. These are grouped by the situation you are actually walking into, with a line on why each one works there and where it can go wrong. All text is from the World English Bible and can be copied straight into an order of service.

ALMOST ANY FUNERAL

Passages that hold up regardless of the circumstances. If you have time to read only one, Psalm 23 whole.

Psalm 23:1-6

"Yahweh is my shepherd: I shall lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He guides me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runs over. Surely goodness and loving kindness shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in Yahweh's house forever."

Confident because of the shepherd, not because the road is safe. It names the valley of the shadow of death without flinching, which is why it is read so often.

John 14:1-3

"Don't let your heart be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me. In my Father's house are many homes. If it weren't so, I would have told you. I am going to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and will receive you to myself; that where I am, you may be there also."

Jesus, the night before his own death, telling frightened friends there is a prepared place. Read it as a promise from someone who has been through the door.

Revelation 21:4

"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; neither will there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, any more. The first things have passed away."

The last page of the story. Best read near the end of the service, after the grief has been given room, not as a way to skip it.

Romans 8:38-39

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from God's love which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Paul's list of everything that cannot separate us from God's love begins with death. Sturdy, and works for families with mixed beliefs because it makes no demands of the listener.

SUDDEN OR TRAUMATIC DEATH

Avoid anything that hints at explanation or purpose. The room needs presence, not reasons.

Psalm 34:18

"Yahweh is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves those who have a crushed spirit."

Nearness to the brokenhearted, promised without conditions. Written by David after a humiliating day, which is why it sounds like it was written from the floor.

John 11:35

"Jesus wept."

Jesus wept at a tomb he was about to empty. Two words that give the whole room permission to grieve without apology.

Psalm 46:1-3

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we won't be afraid, though the earth changes, though the mountains are shaken into the heart of the seas; though its waters roar and are troubled, though the mountains tremble with their swelling."

A psalm for when the earth gives way. It doesn't say the earth won't; it says where the refuge is while it does.

Lamentations 3:22-23

"It is because of Yahweh's loving kindnesses that we are not consumed, because his compassion doesn't fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness."

Mercy new every morning, written in a burned city. Honest enough for a funeral where nothing makes sense yet.

AFTER A LONG ILLNESS

The family has often been grieving for months. Rest and completion are the themes that land.

2 Timothy 4:7-8

"I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course. I have kept the faith. From now on, the crown of righteousness is stored up for me, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day; and not to me only, but also to all those who have loved his appearing."

A course finished and a faith kept. Right for someone who endured well; use with care if the illness stripped the person of the capacity to 'fight.'

Matthew 11:28-30

"Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Rest for the heavily burdened. Fits the person who has died and the caregivers who are exhausted in the front row.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

"Therefore we don't faint, but though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is for the moment, works for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory, while we don't look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

The outer person wasting away while the inner is renewed. Paul's own words about a body giving out, without pretending it isn't.

Psalms 116:15

"Precious in Yahweh's sight is the death of his saints."

'Precious in Yahweh's sight is the death of his saints.' One line, and it says the death was noticed and valued, not merely permitted.

A CHILD OR INFANT

Say less. Choose one passage and read it slowly. Do not explain.

Mark 10:13-16

"They were bringing to him little children, that he should touch them, but the disciples rebuked those who were bringing them. But when Jesus saw it, he was moved with indignation, and said to them, 'Allow the little children to come to me! Don't forbid them, for God's Kingdom belongs to such as these. Most certainly I tell you, whoever will not receive God's Kingdom like a little child, he will in no way enter into it.' He took them in his arms, and blessed them, laying his hands on them."

Jesus taking children in his arms and blessing them, over the disciples' objection. Read it without comment.

2 Samuel 12:22-23

"He said, 'While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who knows whether Yahweh will not be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me.'"

David after the death of his infant son: 'I will go to him, but he will not return to me.' Grief and hope in one sentence, from a father.

Psalms 139:13-16

"For you formed my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother's womb. I will give thanks to you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful. My soul knows that very well. My frame wasn't hidden from you, when I was made in secret, woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my body. In your book they were all written, the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there were none of them."

Formed in the womb, every day written before one of them came to be. It says the short life was known and whole.

Isaiah 40:11

"He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arm, and carry them in his bosom. He will gently lead those who have their young."

The shepherd gathering the lambs in his arms and carrying them close. An image, not an argument, which is what the day can bear.

AN ELDERLY BELIEVER

A long life of faith deserves passages that honor it as a course completed.

Psalm 90:10-12

“The days of our years are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty years; yet their pride is but labor and sorrow, for it passes quickly, and we fly away. Who knows the power of your anger, your wrath according to the fear that is due to you? So teach us to count our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”

Moses on the length of a life and the wisdom of counting days. Fitting for someone who counted theirs well.

Psalm 92:12-15

“The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree. He will grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in Yahweh’s house. They will flourish in our God’s courts. They will still produce fruit in old age. They will be full of sap and green, to show that Yahweh is upright. He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.”

Still bearing fruit in old age, ‘full of sap and green.’ For someone who kept going.

2 Timothy 4:7-8

“I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course. I have kept the faith. From now on, the crown of righteousness is stored up for me, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day; and not to me only, but also to all those who have loved his appearing.”

The finished race. Nearly always right for a faithful elder.

Isaiah 46:4

“Even to old age I am he, and even to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear. Yes, I will carry, and will deliver.”

‘Even to old age I am he, and even to gray hairs I will carry you.’ A promise kept to the end; read it as fulfilled.

WHEN THE PERSON’S FAITH IS UNKNOWN, OR THE FAMILY’S IS

Choose passages that comfort without requiring the listener to affirm anything. Let the text do its own work.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.”

A time to be born and a time to die. Recognizable to almost everyone, honest about mortality, and it asks nothing of the hearer.

Psalm 103:13-17

“Like a father has compassion on his children, so Yahweh has compassion on those who fear him. For he knows how we are made. He remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass. As a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone. Its place remembers it no more. But Yahweh’s loving kindness is from everlasting to everlasting with those who fear him, his righteousness to children’s children,”

‘As a father has compassion on his children.’ Frailty and mercy together; the ‘dust’ line is unusually honest for a funeral.

Matthew 5:4

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

Blessed are those who mourn. A single sentence that dignifies the grief in the room without preaching at it.

Romans 8:38-39

“For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from God’s love which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Read as a description of God’s disposition rather than a test of the listener’s.

AFTER A SUICIDE

Do not speculate about the person’s eternal state from the pulpit, in either direction. Speak to the living. Have a crisis line number available for the family and say so.

Psalm 34:18

“Yahweh is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves those who have a crushed spirit.”

Nearness to the crushed in spirit. The most important verse for this room, and it applies to the person who died as much as to those who remain.

Psalm 88:1-3

“Yahweh, the God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before you. Let my prayer enter into your presence. Turn your ear to my cry. For my soul is full of troubles. My life draws near to Sheol.”

The only psalm that ends in darkness. Reading it says the Bible knows what despair sounds like and kept it in the canon.

Romans 8:38-39

“For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from God’s love which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Nothing, including death, separates from God’s love. Read it plainly and let it stand.

1 Kings 19:4-8

“But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree. Then he requested for himself that he might die, and said, “It is enough. Now, O Yahweh, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.” He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, an angel touched him, and said to him, “Arise and eat!” He looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on the coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. Yahweh’s angel came again the second time, and touched him, and said, “Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you.” He arose, and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, God’s Mountain.”

Elijah asking to die, and God’s answer: food, sleep, and a touch. A gentle passage for a family asking why they didn’t see it.

HOW TO USE THIS

Pick two or three passages, not six. Read them slowly. If a verse needs a paragraph of explanation to fit the situation, choose a different verse. For a graveside committal, Psalm 23 or John 14:1–3 alone is enough.