



THE  
MENTORING  
PROJECT

TILL DEATH DO US  
PART: LIVING  
THROUGH THE  
DEATH OF A SPOUSE



ROBERT WOLGEMUTH

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# INTRODUCTION: WELCOME TO THIS HARD ADVENTURE

Because you've read the title of this field guide and remember these words from wedding ceremonies, you know what these pages are about.

You may have already experienced the death of your mate. Or because he or she is terminally ill, you're about to fall into the great pit. Because of this, you're eager to know how to navigate the season ahead in a way that keeps you standing and honors your loved one. Right? Good. I'm glad you're here. Welcome.

After almost 45 years of marriage, I buried my wife. If you had listened carefully at about noon on November 14, 2014, at the Dr. Phillips Cemetery near Orlando, the sound you could hear as her casket was slowly being lowered into the ground was tearing flesh. Mine. This was more pain than I had known.

I trudged back to my home just a few hundred yards away, and greeted a couple dozen friends who were already there with lots of food spread out on the dining room table. Drowning out the sadness of the moment in conversation with family and friends I loved, the next few hours were a blur. I recall that they were sweet, but I remember very little of what actually happened.

Then, early the next morning, before the sun had crested the eastern horizon, I walked back to the cemetery. Stretching my legs on the trek felt good. When I arrived, there was a veritable mountain of fresh cut flowers, now beginning to wither and smell, piled up on the spot.

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“What am I going to do, now? What am I going to do?” I actually heard myself whispering quietly.

For the next few minutes as you read along here, it would be my honor to have you join me in this muted conversation. What had I done to prepare for that moment, and what would I do moving forward?

# 1

## TILL DEATH DO US PART

### *What We Said at Our Wedding*

“Repeat after me,” the parson intones, “till death do us part.” The bride and groom obey and the words are repeated.

Over the years, as a veteran of this marriage and even the death of a mate thing, the moment in the ceremony when I’m in the congregation actually makes me smile. Not in a cynical way, but actually sympathetic. More often than not, the man and woman standing before their family and friends are young and vibrant and eager. They’re at the peak of health. Dying is hardly on their radar — such a thing could not be further from their minds.

But, now that you’re a little older than those newlyweds, you’ve likely already thought about this, maybe even discussed it with your mate. Someday, you and your spouse are going to die.

The only unknowns are, who’s going to go first and when?

As you know, this actually happens. Husbands die; wives die. They breathe their final gasp often while their mate sits by, completely at a loss for what to do next.

### *Yucky*

As the father of two daughters, many years ago my girls introduced me to the word “yucky.” This could have been spoken when the neighbor’s dog had been hit by a speeding car or when something sticky had been discovered on the smooth kitchen counter. Under stress, boys make mouth noises or sock their brother on the arm; girls get silly or speak words like this.

The undeniable truth is that death is real and that you or your mate are going to die. In a word, this is “yucky.”

It’s my story, and with this field guide, I have a chance to unpack the account of what happened to my wife of almost forty-five years. And what happened to me. The plan is to encourage you as you prepare for this painful possibility.

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### ***Nothing New Here***

The first two chapters in Genesis, the first book in the Bible, paint a pristine picture of all things good. In some cases...*very* good. But when we arrive at chapter three, everything changes. And what we find in the remainder of Genesis, includes what bad — yucky — looks like. In some cases, *very* bad. *Very* yucky.

And one of these terrible things that resulted from Adam and Eve's disobedience was death. Until that moment, nothing died. Everything lived and would keep living. Forever. Flowers and animals of every size and shape, including giraffes and caterpillars. At first, people had no expiration dates. Then, they disobeyed God and a horrible decree was pronounced that eventually everything will perish.

"For you are dust, and you will return to dust" (Gen. 3:19).

And the most sobering part of this God-spoken directive is that the word "you" isn't just delivered to Adam. The pronoun is plural. We are in there — you and me. Plus, the people we have loved, the people we love now, and the people we will love tomorrow are in there. And, thanks to Adam, the process of dying begins the moment we suck in our first big swallow of air as buck-naked newborns. Like an hourglass that's been flipped over, the sand above begins trickling below through the pinch in the middle. There's no turning that thing right side up. We're on a one-way trajectory. And, again, like any self-respecting teenage girl would rightly say, this is "yucky." It really is.

And beyond the Garden of Eden, and throughout the Bible, and all of recorded history, there's more that's been written about death.

For example, the man Job, from the depths of his own despair, affirmed this to be true: "Anyone born of woman is short of days and full of trouble. He blossoms like a flower, then withers; he flees like a shadow and does not last" (Job 14:1–2).

A flower "does not last." A brilliant and more than adequate metaphor for death, right?

Even in his most beloved, genteel psalm, David assumes life's end. He doesn't open this subject in the Shepherd's Psalm with "just in case" or "maybe," rather he begins the death phrase with the words, "even though." It's as if there's no choice in the matter — because there isn't.

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*“Even though I walk through the darkest valley...” (Ps. 23:4)*

So, because death is inevitable, after the foolishness, the defiance, the shortsightedness of Adam and Eve’s disobedience way back in the Garden of Eden and the consequential result, as I said, the Bible includes the stories of men and women dying. From these accounts you and I can learn a few important things. Here’s one of my favorite examples.

### ***Circle Up, Men***

Jacob — also known as “Israel” — was a very old man nearing his finish line. The full account of his life is a Hollywood movie script if there ever was one. Unable to see any longer, the feeble patriarch called for his son, Joseph, and his two grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Jacob gathered them onto his lap and spoke. Joseph bowed low before his dying father. What a tender scene.

Then Jacob blessed Joseph and said, “May the God before whom my fathers, Abraham and Isaac walked faithfully, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the Angel who has delivered me from all harm—may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly on the earth.” (Gen. 48:15–16)

Then Jacob gathered his twelve sons, and who knows who else may have joined them? His task was to do with all of them what he had just done with Joseph and Joseph’s sons, instruct and bless them.

“When Jacob had finished giving charges to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed, took his last breath, and was gathered to his people” (Gen. 49:33).

Even though these words were written thousands of years ago, when you and I think deeply about them, they still pack a punch. Jacob, even though very old, is very alive, enough to speak to his children. Then he lays down, curls up in a ball, and expires.

### ***After You — Who Goes First?***

As you read these words, the fact of your eventual death may be highly disturbing. I get that. In fact, perhaps as a precursor of my own death, I’ve always lived with a sense of caution in nearly everything I do. You may be different, throwing yourself into life, tossing discretion to the wind. Skydiving, rock climbing, and high-speed motorcycles may be an inseparable part of your world. That’s good. Not me.

Much of my genetic anxiety about danger and death comes from a terminal



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case of acrophobia. And, although I know that heart disease is the leading cause of death in the world, falling comes in a respectable second. This is especially true for folks like me, older than fifty. I found this fact on the World Health Organization's website. And just in case you're not sure what is meant by "a fall," the United States government bureaucracy has taken the time to spell it out in a single, helpful sentence:<sup>1</sup> "A fall is defined as an event which results in a person coming to rest inadvertently on the ground or floor or other lower level."<sup>2</sup>

This is exactly why I'm afraid of heights. It's the potential of falling — and dying because of that "coming to rest inadvertently"<sup>3</sup> — that creates that empty knot in my stomach even at the thought of finding myself at the top of a twelve-foot extension ladder or hiking a narrow mountain path along the edge of a deep canyon. I even move to the inside lane when driving over a tall suspension bridge. You can never be too careful, right?

If you're a therapist or if you took Psychology 101 in college (and consider yourself something of a qualified advice-giver), you may be thinking about hosting an intervention for my phobia. I'm envisioning walking into a room, unsuspectingly filled with my friends who have gathered for the purpose of helping me face and, perhaps, overcome my fear of heights. In the center of the room is an 8-foot step ladder.

The spokesperson tells me that the purpose of the intervention is to help me deal with and, perhaps, overcome my fear of heights. Then he tells me to climb the ladder to the second-to-top rung (there's a sticker up there that warns against stepping on the very top rung.) while my friends watch and try to encourage me.

Silly scenario, right?

Since, in so many cases, falling equals dying, what if, instead of anxiety about heights, my paralyzing phobia was death? What if the thought of dying freaked me out? Not surprisingly, like acrophobia is the single word that defines that height fear, there's a name for this death fear: thanatophobia.

Perhaps the next few pages will help with this fear.

### ***Discussion & Reflection:***

1. How would you describe your thoughts about death? Do you give it much thought at all?
2. Read Hebrews 2:14–16. How should the work of Christ affect our feelings and thoughts about death?

## 2

# THE CERTAINTY AND FINALITY OF DEATH

### *Yes, He's Dead*

It was the first time I had seen a dead body.

I was only ten or eleven years old. My family had taken our annual pilgrimage to Winona Lake, Indiana, where my dad was involved in Youth for Christ's annual conference. He was, for most of his adult life, an executive in this particular ministry.

The little town in north central Indiana featured a world-famous conference center — which is why we were there — and a lake. It was here I learned to swim, though not by my own choosing.

Standing on the long pier that jugged out from the shore across the surface of the water, my oldest brother determined that this would be a good time to teach me to swim. Notice, I did not say, to teach me *how* to swim. He simply pushed me into the water that was well over my head, figuring that the desperate moment of sheer terror would do all the necessary instructing. Thankfully — for my children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren — he was right. Through the treachery of the event, and the gurgling and sputtering that ensued, I floated to the surface and swam.

It was around that time when my day at the lake included witnessing something that involved the death of a married student. He was in town to attend the Bethel Theological Seminary. And it was his last day on earth. What I remember about that was his panicked wife yelling for help on a pier on the other side of the lake from my swimming lesson, men dashing to the spot where he failed to surface, and after a few minutes, pulling his body from the water. I ran to get a closer look.

This was before anyone besides physicians had heard of CPR or would have had any idea what those three letters meant. So, they laid him face up on the pier and I stood there at a safe distance, gazing at his body. His wife was frantic, but no one tried to revive him. We heard the sound of

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sirens headed our way. Straining to see everything, I looked at the graying frame of the man who had just a few minutes before, been, like the rest of us at the lake that day, splashing around with his friends. I was close enough to see that it looked like his eyes were open. Actually, this part of the experience is what haunted me for a long time.

Over the past sixty or so years, I've seen my share of corpses. Mostly in funeral homes where the bodies have been properly outfitted, coiffed, plasticked, and painted to camouflage the actual color and shape of their sunken faces. Dead people, nonetheless.

### ***Yes, She's Dead***

When I was asked to write this field guide, my qualification to do so was not something I had pursued. Or enjoyed. Or boasted about. Actually, my ticket to ride on this train was, as I mentioned above, watching my wife die.

In late October of 2014, my mate of almost 45 years, passed away — or as I always have preferred to say, “stepped into heaven.”

My daughters, Missy and Julie (at the time, ages 43 and 40), were sitting with me next to Bobbie's rented hospital bed, awkwardly plunked down in the middle of our living room in October of 2014. Enid, our faithful hospice nurse, was also there. She had come by the house only fifteen or so minutes before my wife slipped away. Enid had taken Bobbie's blood pressure. It was very low. She then tried to take Bobbie's pulse with her thumb on the backside of her wrist. At first, Enid told us it was faint. Then she told us there was none. Incredibly, we knew this because Bobbie had asked her.

“You don't feel a pulse, do you?” Bobbie queried.

“No, Miss Bobbie. I don't.”

Then Bobbie asked for the head end of her hospital bed to be lowered so the whole thing would be flat. Then she rolled toward me, reached out, took me by the shirt with both hands, drew my face within a couple inches of hers and said “I love you so much” as clearly as she had said it in 1967 when we fell in love. She sighed deeply and died.

“Is she dead?” Missy asked the nurse in a voice that was more resolute than panicked.

“Yes,” Enid said evenly.

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I reached toward Bobbie's face and gently closed her eyelids, since, like the drowned man at Winona Lake, she had failed to do so on her own.

Then I sat for several minutes next to the hospital bed, watching as Bobbie's body slowly turned gray. Then cool to the touch. Then cold.

After my call to summon them, two body-bag toting men from the funeral home arrived with a wheeled stretcher. My daughters and I stepped out of the living room while they lifted her from the hospital bed and slipped my wife's form inside, zipping it almost to the top. They loaded it onto the cart and called for us, letting us know they were ready. We joined them, and what was once my vibrant wife, in the foyer of our home. They had only left Bobbie's face visible above the almost closed zipper. The men graciously stepped away.

Missy, Julie, and I took each other's hand. We stood encircling the gurney carrying my late wife. Their late mother. We sang a song we had sung...oh, maybe a thousand times when one of us was headed out of town, returning to college, or when a party at our house was breaking up. Bobbie had learned this song at River Valley Ranch somewhere in Maryland, when she was a young girl.

*Good-bye, our God is watching o'er you.*

*Good-bye, his mercies go before you.*

*Good-bye, and we'll be praying for you.*

*So good-bye, may God bless you.<sup>4</sup>*

When we finished singing, I offered a short "thank you" prayer for this lady's life and love and faith and beauty. Nodding to the two men who, on that cue, finished zipping the body bag over Bobbie's face, wheeling her out the front door to their van.

I haven't sung that song since. It's too sacred to repeat under any other circumstances.

When we were married in 1970, Bobbie was a mere twenty years old, I was a much older twenty-two. Even though the death phrase was part of our traditional wedding vows, it was the last thing on our minds.

For the ensuing four and a half decades, many times Bobbie told me that she wanted to "be the first to die." I always demurred. Who wants to talk about death when the majority of your life stretches before you? Not me.

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But now, I was facing the reality of Bobbie's wish. She was dead. I was a widower. Missy and Julie were launching the remainder of their young lives, motherless.

### ***Bobbie Goes to the Hospital***

Like so many each year around the globe, it was cancer that captured her at 64. The journey this disease took us on began with a visit to a woman's oncology clinic in 2012 at MD Anderson in Orlando, where we lived. When Bobbie, Julie, and I first stepped off the elevator on the second floor, the waiting room — as quiet as a mortuary — was peppered with women. Some were reading a book, studying their smartphones, or quietly chatting with their husbands sitting close by. Others were alone, doing nothing. Almost all were bald. A few had their naked heads covered with a scarf or a beanie of knitted yarn.

I wish I could describe what I felt that day without the limitation of words, but I cannot. It is scorched into my memory where it will be until it's my turn. And so, this visit to the second floor began a thirty-month journey that ended that chilly October day when we sang "The Good-bye" song. Bobbie had been nothing short of a warrior. I tried to be, too, and was successful much of the time.

What I'd like to say right here in this field guide is that the experience of walking through the door of death with my wife nearly eliminated my fear of the same. Mostly, this was because of Bobbie's remarkable attitude about the inevitability of her demise after being diagnosed with Stage IV ovarian cancer.

And although I'm deeply grateful to be alive right now, Bobbie showed me how to die without shaking her fist at the God in whom she trusted in the good times. In spite of the shameful rigors of what she went through, with me by her side, there was no complaining.

I've told people that Bobbie didn't protest, even during the horrendous effects of chemotherapy and a clinical trial that literally made her feel like she was freezing to death, even in the heat of a Florida summer. Their quizzical looks tipped their hand of wondering if I'm exaggerating. I'm not. Not even a little. She did not whimper or complain, even hunched over the toilet throwing up the meager nutrition that had been left in her stomach. She'd finish vomiting, struggle to her feet. And smile. Oh, and thank me for being there for her.

It's because of the living example of my wife dying that I determined to

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embrace what I'm sharing with you here. I'm glad you've joined me on the adventure of this guide about death — the death of your mate and, someday, your death.

### ***It's My Turn***

I had been a sideline spectator to Bobbie's adventure, now in only a few short years I had a chance to put my own training to the test.

In January 2020, I visited a dermatologist to take a look at a “little nothing pimple-like thing” on my right earlobe. What's more innocuous than something that shows up on that soft, fleshy thing that hangs down from your ear?

Thanks to the wonder of local anesthetic, there was a painless slice and a quick trip to the lab for that tissue. One week later, Nancy and I were preparing to fly to Latin America for a conference she was hosting. A call came to me from my doctor with the report. Unfamiliar with the concept of diplomacy, tact, or bedside manner, she cut right to the chase. Her diagnosis was unvarnished.

“Robert, you have melanoma cancer.”

At once my mind was transported back to MD Anderson in Orlando. I was sitting with my daughter and my late wife's surgeon, in the consultation room, hearing the words, “Your wife has Stage IV Ovarian cancer.”

Now my number was up.

Fortunately for me, I had a track to run on...the one Bobbie had laid down. Cancer plus a generous dose of grace.

So, the phone call had come. I had cancer. Nancy was busy upstairs, packing her suitcase and collecting her notes and materials for the conference, so I did not tell her about the call...or the news.

The next day, we were hanging out and waiting for our flight to Mexico, at the behemoth known as DFW.

“My doctor called yesterday,” I said. Nancy smiled. Then froze. “Yesterday, a call came from the dermatologist,” I repeated, taking a deep breath. “I have melanoma cancer.”

Remember, this was the year 2020, when the wheels were about to come

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off around the entire world.

“Pandemic” wasn’t a word you often heard until this year. Then, it dominated every headline. So, my cancer added to the potential anxiety that the idea of Covid-19 brought up for Nancy and me. Incredibly, ninety days later, after surgery to remove the lower third of my ear in order to park the melanoma, I was diagnosed with another, completely unrelated cancer.

Two months later, still in recovery mode from surgery, I was working out on our elliptical. Within less than five minutes on this contraption, my breath suddenly was incredibly short. “What’s wrong with me?” I said out loud.

So, like a guy revving his engine “to blow out the carbon,” I pushed forward. No luck. Still gasping for air.

I called my general-practice doctor and told him what had happened. Following his orders, I hurried to our local hospital for a blood draw. In less than two hours and thanks to online access to test results, I learned that my red blood count was treacherously low. Again, my doctor ordered me back to the hospital — the emergency room, to be exact. What followed was a couple infusions of healthy blood plasma, an overnight stay, and a veritable parade of more doctors and some grim news. I had lymphoma.

Now with a new cancer it would be time for chemotherapy. Bags of poison connected to a port in my chest, attempting to stem the cancer cells without killing the host: me.

But the path through this frightening forest had been cleared. My late wife had shown me exactly how to do this. So with my own cancer diagnoses — two of them — I was as ready as I could be. By God’s grace I had been the recipient of an unforgettable lesson, watching my wife face death. Day after day.

### ***Discussion & Reflection:***

1. Have you lost anyone close to you? How did the Lord sustain you through that? What did you learn?
2. Have you witnessed anyone else go through loss faithfully? What lessons did you take from what you saw?

# 3

## STORM READY

Having lived in the Sunshine State for seventeen years, I grew very familiar with weather forecasts that included that spinning hurricane icon. Watching this little red rotating icon on your computer when you live in the north is interesting. But when you live in its path, it's a lot more than that. It's terrifying.

When your precious mate is diagnosed with a terminal disease, it's like that spinning hurricane thing headed for your neighborhood. It's serious.

Can I let you in on what that actually looked like living in the “path” of hurricane Bobbie? And what you might be able to learn from my experience? If you and I were enjoying a cup of coffee at your favorite hangout and you had just discovered that your mate was really sick, based on my experience, here's what I'd suggest — like hurricane preparation:

1. *Bathe your journey in prayer.*

Bobbie and I married in 1970. Our first night at the lovely Hay Adams Hotel in Washington D.C., I gave her a heart necklace with the promise that our lives would be laced with prayer. Sitting on the edge of the bed, we both resolved that when trouble came our way, we would default to inviting the Lord into the situation. For almost forty-five years we did pretty well at this.

If you're married, and even if you're both physically well, my encouragement to you is to pray with your mate. This does not need to be a long, drawn-out survey of the mission field (as important as that is), it can simply be an expression of your gratitude to your heavenly Father for his goodness, his provisions, and his mercy. And the gift that is your spouse.

This season of your mate's illness promises to be a challenging one — what better way to face it courageously than with the promise of your heavenly Father's intervention and companionship? This will make a huge difference to you — both of you.

2. *Cut back on the news.*



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The expression, “there’s nothing good on TV,” fits perfectly here. “Stressed” is likely going to describe you and your mate’s demeanor. You both are dealing with things you have never faced before. And, in case you have not noticed, there’s nothing “good” about your news feed, whether it comes on your phone, your computer, or your television.

You’ve always prided yourself on being informed, but with the doctor’s diagnosis, this might be a good time to set that aside, daring to move ahead without all the headline news. Your mate will likely be thankful for the peace.

### 3. *Turn on the music.*

I’d like to encourage you to find something to fill the empty spaces in the air. As you know, on YouTube, you’ll be able to find wonderful, seamless music to fit your mate’s taste. Replacing the harrowing noise of “All The Ugly News Tonight,” will be the ambiance of sounds that will actually lift your spirits. What a good idea, right?

If you and your mate can enjoy similar music, keep it playing as much as you can. Even last night, my wife, Nancy, and I were talking about how to spend our evening. It was a Saturday. College football games were either finished or inconsequential to us. The news was the same-ol-same-ol. So, I pulled out my laptop and clicked to YouTube. For the next few hours, we regaled in the kind of music we love. Even though, for now, both of us are enjoying good health, this was a sweet spirit-lifting, bonding time. Money in the bank, if you know what I mean.

Bobbie and I did the same in the final months of her life. Because she had a lovely singing voice and I could harmonize, we’d sing. When our children and grandchildren visited, we did this together. In fact, I have a video stashed right here in my computer of Bobbie singing a duet of “Jesus Paid It All” with our granddaughter, Abby.<sup>5</sup> This was just weeks from her death.

### 4. *Lean into your church.*

God’s house is as important as the hospital or clinic where your mate gets treatment. Actually, it’s more important. Like swarming crows on a June bug, there’s just something about believers when “prayer requests” are spoken. They pounce. The last thing you want during this season is wondering if anyone cares. In general, Christians are highly-skilled “carers.”

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Once chemo had begun and Bobbie's beautiful dishwater blonde hair hit the floor, she was hesitant to go to church. Anticipating full-on love and support for her, I encouraged her, bald head and all, to come with me. Our church did not disappoint. Yours won't either.

5. *Find a trusted confab of friends for your suffering mate.*

This is a conjoined twin to the previous one. Surround your mate with same-gender friends. Although reluctant to say "yes" to this, Bobbie signed up first to attend, then to lead, twenty or so women in Bible study. This became a lifeline for both of us.

These friends were like a safety net as Bobbie swung wildly on the trapezes above. Their words, their cards, their prayers were all priceless.

At this point let me say something important about friends and visits. Some visitors are encouraging. Others are, frankly, toxic. You're officially the crocodile in the moat and sometimes this is not a pleasant responsibility.<sup>6</sup> At one point, as Bobbie was nearing the exit ramp, she told me that a particular visitor really dragged her spirits down each time she visited. So, I asked this person, as graciously as I possibly could — not in Bobbie's presence — to not visit any more. Even though this conversation was extremely hurtful to the recipient of the news, I had to put any relational concern aside. I was the doorkeeper and Bobbie's comfort was a priority. It needs to be for you as well.

6. *Keep your close friends and family posted.*

For the months of Bobbie's cancer, I sent emails to friends.<sup>7</sup> These gave our close acquaintances around the world a snapshot of the Lord's kindness and Bobbie's faith and witness during these months. Less than a year before she died, I wrote this to our friends: "The women in our church are truly family. They have been the loving hands and feet of Jesus, soup makers and meal bringers and prayer partners who have given gifts of time and care at every turn. We continue to be overwhelmed with the kindness of God's people."

When you take the initiative to inform your network regularly, this will cut down on what could be a barrage of questions from well-meaning inquirers who, otherwise, might become a source of distraction and frustration for you.

7. *But avoid TMI (Too Much Information).*

In your updates, although it's tempting to disclose the details of

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tests and scans and treatments, be careful. Yes, there is basic medical information necessary to keep everyone properly informed, but by and large, your circle doesn't need the gruesome details. They do need information about your loved one that will encourage them. You have an important role to play as the conduit here; guard the information, even troublesome medical news, with care.

### 8. *Find reasons to laugh.*

There's truly nothing funny about this journey, so you have to make your own fun. Laughter was one of the reasons you fell in love in the first place, and even though there are many reasons for sobriety now, please do your best to keep smiling.<sup>8</sup>

Maybe some of the humor we shared when Bobbie was sick was actually a little dark, but we still laughed. For example, one of the hospice doctors had abandoned "bedside manner," assuming he had ever known it. When he'd walk into our house, he didn't bother to even say "hello" to Bobbie, or "how are you today?" Without even looking directly at her, he'd ask, "On a scale of one to ten, what's your pain level?"

Each time on these visits Bobbie would call him, "Dr. Death" after he'd leave the house. When she first dubbed him this way, I cringed. Then it became a landing place for humor.

Another funny moment was once when I said to her, "You know I'm really going to miss you when you're gone." The expected response to such a statement would surely be, "Thank you, I'm going to miss you, too." But she didn't say this. What I actually got was a thin smile and crickets. This was clearly because she knew that when she was in heaven, she wouldn't actually miss me. And for me, that was perfectly all right. This dawned on us simultaneously and we had a good laugh about it.

### 9. *Spend time in God's Word yourself. Every day.*

Because what I'm about to say is so important to me, and hopefully, someday to you as well, I'm going to eat up some valuable clock on this point.

Bobbie was a tenacious student of the Bible. Each morning at a very early and dark hour, she was sitting in her red chair, her Bible opened on her lap. I always admired this about her, since I was a writer of Christian books and a Sunday school teacher for many years, but I silently took a pass. She would take care of this part.

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We purchased a wingback chair sometime in the eighties from a friend in the furniture business in downtown Chicago. Originally covered in a bright yellow fabric (Bobbie was a big fan of bright colors), its first home was our living room in Geneva, Illinois. Bobbie loved to begin each day perched in that quiet place, reading her Bible and praying. She called this chair her early-morning “altar.”

When we made the decision to move to the Sunshine State in 2000, the chair went with us. Since yellow wasn’t going to work with our new décor, Bobbie asked an upholsterer to give it a new outfit. Red was the choice and for fourteen more years this is where she found herself every day at “dark-o-thirty.”



*An accomplished painter in her own right, one day Bobbie decided to paint an image of her chair.*

I knew that because each morning on my way to my upstairs study I’d walk past her. Whispering a habitual but friendly, “Good morning,” I’d head upstairs to my computer to get a start on my own day. Even though I fully embraced the idea of my wife spending these valuable hours in meditation and prayer, I had more important things to do. Mail to catch up on. Schedules to set. Articles to scan. Clients to call. Proposals to review. Contracts to finalize.

During parties, when our house was crowded with friends, I occasionally sat in the red chair. But this was Bobbie’s chair. Of course, there

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were no posted rules about this, but it was her place to sit and read and study. So, I usually used other furniture and that was fine by me.

On the day of Bobbie's funeral and burial, our house was a busy place. Neighbors had volunteered to prepare lunch and our place was packed with neighbors and extended family. Connections, new and old, were made and lively conversations were had. Bobbie would have been delighted. Taking a page from the homes of famous people from the past that I've visited, I stretched a ribbon across the seat of the red chair from arm to arm. Even though places to sit were at a premium that afternoon, no one trespassed the ribbon. Everyone knew about the red chair and non-verbally asking visitors to avoid using it just seemed the right thing to do. Graciously, people left the chair alone, except to comment and graciously comply with the unwritten "thank you for not sitting here" ribbon.

Early the following morning, I woke with a start. For the first time in almost forty-five years, I was a single man. A widower. My new reality stared me down. But, wiping the sleep from my eyes, I knew I had an assignment. A new destination. Bobbie's red chair. Gingerly, almost reverently, I removed the ribbon, still there from the previous day's gathering, and sat down. In a voice just above a whisper, I confessed, "Lord, I've been a lazy man. I've watched my wife start her day right here with you for all these years." I took a deep breath, knowing the seriousness of this moment and the resolve of my heart.

From the red chair I said aloud, "As long as you give me breath, I intend to start each day with you." Bobbie's well-worn, One-Year Bible was on the little end table close by. I opened it and began the reading for the day marked November 15. Here is what it said that quiet morning:

Blessed be the name of the Lord  
From this time forth and forevermore!  
From the rising of the sun to its going down  
The Lord's name *is* to be praised. (Ps. 113:2–3)

Imagine the power of these words: "From the rising of the sun..." And "the Lord's name is to be praised." I will forever be grateful for the Lord's sweet nudge in the silence of that morning, and each morning since. As for me, whether in the comfy brown, leather recliner in my study or when traveling, in a nondescript chair in a hotel room, the peace and joy I have experienced day after day in those early morning hours with God have been indescribable.

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You likely don't have a red chair in your living room or study. But you have a place to sit. To lift up your eyes and your heart — from yourself and earth's demands and problems — to heaven. And to embrace the wonder of a loving God who is eager to meet with you each day. My sincere hope is that my story will inspire you and that you'll purpose to start meeting with the Lord, reading his Word, and praying. If it does, you can thank that old red chair and my faithful, late wife who showed me what to do with it.

### 10. *Share select verses with your mate.*

Two months before Bobbie stepped into heaven, she told two women what she wanted me to do after she was gone. One of the women she talked to was a neighbor. The other was the wife of a business colleague. "After I'm gone," she told them, "I want Robert to get married." And then she added, "And I want him to marry Nancy Leigh DeMoss."

I knew the first part. We talked about this many times. But until she was in heaven and those two women filled me in on her wishes, I had no idea.

So, just over one year later, in November 2015, I answered Bobbie's wish and married Nancy, a single woman, called to ministry from the time she was a youngster.

Earlier I spoke of hearing newlyweds recite their vows that included "till death do us part." You'll remember I confessed to smiling about the fact that these youngsters knew painfully little about life as it really was. But now that I was getting ready to speak those words again, at age 67, the smile was no longer there. At my age, "till death" for either Nancy or me — especially me — was an ominous thing.

So, what could I do now, "the second time around" to bless my bride?

Early one morning, an idea popped into my head. I had my daily Bible on my lap and was reading portions of Scripture — Psalms, Proverbs, Old Testament, and New Testament clips. *I'll bet Nancy would be blessed by some of these verses*, I mused. So I texted her some selections. Two, maybe three, and sometimes four verses that jumped off the page. She was sleeping when they were actually transmitted, but I knew that just as soon as she awakened, these would be there for her.

A happy and grateful text came flying back just as soon as Nancy was up. This was plenty of motivation to do it again.

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As of this writing, we're approaching our ninth anniversary. And, according to my calculations, I've sent her more than ten thousand Bible verses. And it's been just like my wife was sitting next to me every morning. This is highly motivating, as you might imagine.

11. *Say and text "I Love You."*

For the next few minutes, I'd like to shoot you a metaphor. There's no need for me to check with an actuary to settle the following question: "Who will die first: Nancy or me?"

Since I'm fully ten years older than she is, this doesn't take a long time to figure out.

So, like the Bible verses that she's "banking" in her cell phone, I've filled her love cup as best I can. All the time. With all my might. This is something I would like to encourage you to do with your mate while you're both alive. That would be now, right? These three words are pure magic. Tell her. Text her. Rinse and repeat.

***Discussion & Reflection:***

1. Which of these eleven suggestions do you need most to work on in your life so that you're prepared for suffering with your mate faithfully?
2. In your particular trials, which of these suggestions come easily, and which ones are hard to regularly carry out?

# 4

## JUDGMENT READY

### ***Ready Is Good***

You and I have adventured through this field guide together, spending a couple hours chatting. We've covered all kinds of things that I truly hope have been helpful as you serve your mate in a difficult struggle.

Regardless of your age, you and I don't know how long we have until it's our turn to hit the tape at the end of the straightaway. But like golfers on a crowded course who have decided not to waste any time to take their shot playing ready golf, my deepest hope is that you and I will be just that: ready.

Think back to your school days. It doesn't matter how far back you go. It could be grade or graduate school. Junior or senior high.

When you were headed into a classroom or to the panel of professors ready to hear the oral defense of your doctoral dissertation, if you believed you were ready, you were at peace.

On the contrary, there is no sheer panic like the sheer panic of *not* being ready. This is the fluster of terror that makes breathing difficult. The sweat on your face that shouts, "I didn't do my homework. I'm not prepared for this."

It's the confidence of striding into the sanctuary for your wedding, dressed and ready. Or sitting down at a business meeting with your research completed. This wedding or this meeting did not sneak up on you. You knew all about them with plenty of time in advance to do what you needed to do to prepare.

In the late sixties, a popular West Coast-based singer/songwriter named Larry Norman penned the words to a song with a sobering theme. The setting was the second coming of Jesus Christ which, according to Scripture, will happen unexpectedly. In the twinkling of an eye.

So, fitting to the idea of this final chapter, the song was titled, "I Wish We'd All Been Ready." The lyrics included the following:



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*A man and wife asleep in bed  
She hears a noise and turns her head  
He's gone  
I wish we'd all been ready  
Two men walking up a hill  
One disappears and one's left standing still  
I wish we'd all been ready<sup>9</sup>*

There it is. Just like speeding up your golf game because the course is well-occupied, or readying yourself in the case of an airplane disaster, the operative word is “ready.”

One of two things waits for us in our future. These are not speculation. They're fact. And we have no choice.

The first is that, during our lifetime or later, Jesus Christ will return to earth. His physical, resurrected form will show up, just as he did on Christmas Eve. Back then he came as an innocent baby boy born to a peasant couple. But not this time. He's not going to be a helpless, dependent newborn infant sleeping on the scratchy straw in a feeding trough. No, he'll look more like the Apostle John describes him in the first chapter of the book of Revelation:<sup>10</sup>

The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. (Rev. 1:14–16)

Take a moment and let this image sink in. And what did John do when he witnessed this with his own eyes? He did what we will do when we see Jesus.

“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead” (Rev. 1:17a).

And what will Jesus do and say to us, as we're on our faces before him?

“Then he placed his right hand on me and said: ‘Do not be afraid’” (Rev. 1:17b).

The Apostle Paul also references this view of the Savior. He uses words we completely understand: “In a flash” and “In the twinkling of an eye.”

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Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. (1 Cor 15:51–52)

Or as the late John Madden would say when a linebacker leveled an unsuspecting quarterback, unable to throw a pass because he was knocked on his backside by a charging linebacker: “Boom!”

The second sure thing is that you and I will die. Like Bobbie, we will take that final breath and our bodies will turn gray and cold. This end may come at the close of a protracted illness. For you and your loved ones it will not be a surprise.

Or it may happen like my wife Nancy’s father, Arthur DeMoss. On a clear Saturday morning on the tennis court with three of his buddies, at the age of 53, my future father-in-law, whom I’m eager to meet in heaven, suffered a massive heart attack, a lethal myocardial infarction. Doctors said that he was dead before his body slammed to the hard surface of the court.

Because of the wonder of technology, as I was working on this manuscript, Nancy and I watched a DVD of her daddy’s funeral service, held on September 10, 1979. Right there, sitting on the front row next to my wife at 21 years old, were her forty-year-old mother and six young siblings. Her eight-year-old sister slept through most of it.

Speakers included well-known Christian leaders and two men whom Art DeMoss had introduced to Jesus. Each speaker affirmed the relentless witness of this man’s words and life. And, in spite of the pain of the moment, they celebrated one simple fact: even as a young man in his fifties, Art DeMoss was ready. How grateful I am for this. And him.

Whether your death is sudden or prolonged, or if Jesus returns before you are hit by a car or get sick, in any case, only one question matters. Only one.

Are you ready?

### ***Here Comes the Judge***

You may be old enough to remember the weekly comedy variety show, *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In*. It ran from 1968 to 1973 and featured many up-and-coming funny people, like Arte Johnson wearing a military helmet,

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who's oft-repeated line with a squint, curled lip (and lisp) was, "Very interesting." Remember?

Another phrase we heard almost every week on the show was Sammy Davis Jr.'s white wig and black robe and the line, "Here Comes the Judge." He'd speak these words as he strode across our screens. This was always good for a laugh.

But, speaking of "Are we ready?" a biblical element of what we're going to face after death, we will be standing before the judgment seat of God, the ultimate judge. And there will be nothing funny about it.

The Apostle Paul says, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive what is due to us for what we have done in the body" (2 Cor. 5:10).

What that means — if you can begin to take it in — is that when you and I stand before God we will be able to say, "We are righteous before you as your Son Jesus Christ." Now that can sound very arrogant. But if you then ask, "Well how is that true?," the answer is, "Because the only righteousness with which I'm justified is Jesus Christ's righteousness."<sup>11</sup>

Because of Jesus, there's no reason to dread this judgment. There's every reason to anticipate it. How good is this?

### ***Pilgrim's Progress***

My mother, a woman perfectly named Grace, read from *Pilgrim's Progress* to my siblings and me when we were little. The book is an allegory of the life journey of a man named Christian from his birth to his death, the vaunted Celestial City.

Even though I admit to not remembering the portion of the book that mother read about death all those years ago, I have gone back and pulled out a few sentences that describe this in a way that ought to take our collective breath away.

Before arriving in this magnificent city, there was a raging river to cross. This intimidated Christian and his friend, Hopeful, but they forged ahead across the water anyway.

As they are crossing the river, Christian began to sink, and crying out to his good friend, Hopeful, he said, "I sink in deep waters; the billows go over my head; all his waves go over me"...then said the other, "be of good cheer, my brother: I feel the bottom, and it is good."<sup>12</sup>

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For me, the equivalent of “feeling the bottom” is riding on an airplane as we approach a landing in dense clouds. White seamlessness out the window, and then a break in the whiteness and land is spotted below. I love that sight. And that feeling.

Christian felt the sandy bottom of the river with his feet and it made him feel safe. He saw land through the clouds and it made him happy.

That can be you and me and our mate, headed for glory. Safely.

### ***Bobbie Was Ready***

A few months after we said good-bye to Bobbie at her funeral, I wrote the following to the many friends who had patiently and prayerfully followed our journey. My family and I had been blanketed with an outpouring of love and kindness.

—

*Closure...A Final Good-Bye...and Grateful*

*“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;  
His mercies never come to an end;  
They are new every morning;  
Great is Your faithfulness” (Lam. 3:23).*

*Precious Family & Friends:*

*Since my last memo to you, our family has experienced an armful of “firsts.” Thanksgiving. Christmas. The New Year. Valentine’s Day. Three grandchildren’s birthdays. My birthday.*

*Many have asked how we are doing. It’s a question we have answered often. In fact, the first Sunday after Bobbie stepped into heaven, I was on the phone with our Julie. “What should we say when people wonder how we are?” she asked.*

*We talked about it and reviewed several options. And then we settled on a single word. A word we have now said over and over again.*

*Grateful. We’re grateful.*

*To folks who don’t know Jesus, this could easily sound like we are refusing to face the facts. The painful truth that Bobbie is gone. How naïve*

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*could we be? But it is true. God's faithfulness has been sure. And certain. As our Shepherd, he takes care of his own. We are truly grateful.*

*When Bobbie was first diagnosed, my family resolved that...we are not angry, we are not afraid, we are receiving this as a gift, and our highest goal is that the name of Jesus would be lifted up. Did we pray for Bobbie's healing? Yes, we did. But some of our friends—people whom we love very much—asked why we weren't "claiming" her healing. "Wouldn't it be God's will for someone like Bobbie to be healed?" they would lovingly inquire.*

*After thanking them for their care, our answer was this: "Sometimes people who love Jesus are, in fact, physically healed. And sometimes they are not."*

*So, my family prayed about this. We asked the Lord, "What is Your will?"*

*His answer was clear and strong. Unmistakable. And wouldn't you know it, the answer came straight from his Word?*

*"The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (1 Pet. 3:9).*

*There it was. Our answer. God's will is that lost people repent and be "found"...that, as Francis Thompson wrote almost a century ago, their hearts would be captured by the "Hound of Heaven."*

*And the reports from around the world of people being touched, inspired in their walk with Jesus as a result of Bobbie's cancer, have brought our family unspeakable joy and purpose in this journey.*

*This past weekend, my children and grandchildren drove to Orlando from the Carolinas to help me celebrate my birthday. The other mission of their trip was to help me gently and lovingly remove all of Bobbie's things from the house. So, her closet is empty, the pantry is again just a pantry, and the laundry and art room, just a laundry room.*

*Then on a rainy and cold Saturday afternoon, we made the short trip to the cemetery where Bobbie's body has been silently resting since November. It was a moment of deep emotion. And gratitude. And closure.*

*Does this mean that we will forget this remarkable woman whom our heavenly Father loaned to us as wife and mother for 44 years and 7 months to the day? No. But, because of her absolute insistence that we*

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*“move on with our lives” after she’s gone, we have taken a deep breath... and are doing just that. With, of course, the absolute assurance that we will see her again. She was ready. One more reason to be grateful.*

*The outpouring of love and care from you over these three years has been more than we could have ever anticipated. We have been sustained by your prayers.*

*So, thank you. Thank you for standing with me...with us. And thank you for your encouragement as we step out in faith, eager to see what the Lord has for us now.*

*We love you.*

*Robert*

—

So, why were we grateful?

Because, even though the “good-bye” meant we would not see her again, this side of glory, Bobbie was ready.

My goal while I’m on this side of my own death, is to also be ready. When your mate takes this step — and someday when you do the same. This is my prayer for you.<sup>13</sup>



## ENDNOTES

1. Your tax dollars at work.
2. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/falls>
3. Doesn't our bureaucracy have a cool way of saying things?
4. Wendell P. Loveless, copyright © 1938, Wheaton, Illinois, Hope Publishing.
5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itmtM0hMGLk>
6. This is why crocodiles look that way.
7. CaringBridge.org can be a wonderful way of keeping people informed and praying "intelligently."
8. Comedian Tim Hawkins has been a go-to many times for us in order to bring a smile. Here's one of my favorite riffs from this gifted guy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Xv10gHvPYo>
9. Larry Norman, copyright ©1969, all rights reserved.
10. I'll never forget the bumper sticker I saw years ago: "Jesus is coming back, and man, he's really ticked."
11. From a message by Dr. Sinclair Ferguson. <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/qas/will-christians-answer-for-their-sins-in-judgment>
12. John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, first published in 1678. Public Domain.
13. Portions adapted from *The Finish Line* by Robert Wolgemuth. Copyright © 2023 by Robert Wolgemuth. Used by permission of HarperCollins Christian Publishing.



The father of two adult daughters, five grandchildren, and so far, two great grandchildren, **ROBERT WOLGEMUTH** has been in the media business for thirty-nine years. A former president of Thomas Nelson Publishers, he was the founder of Wolgemuth & Associates, a literary agency exclusively representing the writing work of more than two hundred authors. Officially retired from actively involved in the business world, Robert is a speaker and best-selling author of over twenty books.

