

A time for preparation



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A Time for Preparation

Cemeteries (and other places of burial) are terrestrial sanctuaries for the fragile remains of one's mortal existence. Wandering these grounds can be a peaceful and hallowing experience. Some individuals speak to the graves and if one listens carefully, they may hear them whisper back. In Herbert's poem, *Church Monuments*, which could act as a verse-like prayer, the speaker feels at peace in such an environment as he contemplates his own death while strolling through his sacred future burial ground. Among various religions and in the Bible, we can find parallels to this poem.

This poem has 24 lines, which could parallel the 24 hours that are in a day. This is significant to the poem due to the importance of passing time and the temporal state of the body in mortality. It says in Ecclesiastes 12: 7 that the body is a temporary vessel for the spirit before it returns again to God. As time passes, the body wears thin, yet remains firmly attached to the soul within it.

The first three lines of the first stanza present the two main themes of the poem: religious devotion and the symbiosis between body and soul. We are then introduced to the speaker. He appears to be an old man preparing for his soul's journey into the next life. In almost all religions, there is a spiritual journey involved when preparing to face the afterlife. For the Ancient Egyptians, death was a catalyst for their rebirth. It was their way to the Afterlife. They physically primed themselves for it by the special preservation of their body (the fascinating process of mummification) and through the storage of their worldly possessions with them in an elaborate tomb. Some of

their ideas were not unlike those of Christian beliefs; there are a few broad parallels. The Egyptians, like the speaker of this poem, did not fear death. They knew that if they were adequately prepared, they could face it with comfort and confidence.

The speaker stops at a grave and admits that someday soon, he will be buried there, too. In a way, he is getting acquainted with his grave so he knows what to expect when death comes to claim him. He can sense that death is approaching his door; the time is near. Death moves forward because he is “[f]ed with the exhalation of our crimes” (line 5). This line is saying that without sin, death wouldn’t have a purpose. The more we sin, the stronger of a hold death has on our souls. Over the span of a lifetime, these sins take their toll, inviting death to claim its dues. For the speaker, “[h]is bones are full of the sin of his youth, which shall lie down with him in the dust” (Job 20: 11). This verse is trying to convey that if we do not seek absolution for our sins before we die, we will carry them into the grave. They will be strapped to our shoulders when we face God at judgment day. This is a common belief with most Christian faiths.

The second stanza discusses the importance of a grave and what will take place there. Although they act as a dignified symbol of remembrance and as a connection between the living and the deceased, monuments are not eternal. They, too, are dust, and are a mere materialistic barrier between earth and body. They, too, will eventually crumble to dust, but the speaker entrusts his body to his grave and knows that it will be safe within it. He will be able to find solace beneath the “dusty heraldry and lines” inscribed on the headstone because he knows that death is part of the course of nature

and of God's plan (line 9). Ecclesiastes 12: 7 confirms this when it says, "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it." Life has a cycle. When the mortal remains wither and perish, they return to the earth; the spirit returns to be with God, its original source.

According to Hebrews 12: 9, our spirits dwelled with God before we came to Earth. He decided to send us to Earth to test our worthiness to live in His presence. Earth and all things on it were then created and we were sent to inhabit it. Our bodies are a gift, a vessel to carry our spirits until our test is finished and it is time to rejoin Him in Heaven. When the day of Resurrection comes, we will be rejoined with our bodies, only this time, enveloped in paradisiacal perfection. No longer will we have to endure the cursed pains and limitations of mortal existence.

The perspective seems to change starting in the third stanza and into the fourth stanza. The body and soul appear to be conversing with one another. If that is true, the soul reminds the body to remember where it came from and to keep its cravings under control: "[F]lesh is but the glass which holds the dust / That measures all our time" (lines 20-21). This is implying that mortal trifles like instant gratification have no eternal significance compared to the higher divinity of eternal life in Heaven. "For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out" (1 Timothy 6: 7). The materialistic goals we achieve here cannot be carried with us beyond the veil of mortality, as also expressed in the popular saying, "You can't take it with you."

A problem that has taken society rampant since the beginning of time is the hedonistic desire for worldly goods. This is demonstrated in the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12: 15-21). In this parable, the Lord blesses a man with a bounteous supply of possessions and property, but he has a condition. He must use this prosperity to build the kingdom of God. Instead of doing that, the man puts all of his energy into increasing his wealth for his own gain. We are not supposed to devote our lives to such endeavors; we can't take it with us. In Proverbs 3: 9, it says that we are supposed to honor God with the first fruits of our increase. He will bless us even more if we utilize His gifts selflessly, for you "cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6: 24).

The last few lines of the final stanza bring the poem to an affective close: "Mark here below / How tame these ashes are, how free from lust, / That thou mayest fit thyself against thy fall" (lines 22-24). These lines can take two possible interpretations. The soul could be warning the body against the potential for falling into sin. It could also be referring to the body's fall into death. Nobody knows when their time will come to an end. It is important for one to always be prepared for when it does come. Psalms 90: 12 confirms this by advising us "to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." The time to prepare is now. Thomas S. Monson, the president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, agrees with this statement when he says, "When the time for decision arrives, the time for preparation is passed" (Monson).

Our time on this planet is minute, a mere grain of sand in the grand existential spectrum. The speaker of Herbert's poem knew this. By having the out-of-body experience that he did while pondering his death, he was

able to better prepare himself for his impending passing. This poem, along with the Bible, teaches us the importance of preparing for death.

Works Cited

Herbert, George. " Church Monuments." Volume B: The Sixteenth Century and the Early

Seventeenth Century. 9th ed. Vol. B. New York: Norton, 2012. 1712-713. Print.

The Holy Bible: King James Version. Print.

Monson, Thomas S. " You Make a Difference." You Make a Difference-Thomas S. Monson.

Apr. 1988. Web. 02 Dec. 2015.