

# Cross Current



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## The Graveyard Shift



In Memphis, Tennessee, I was reminded we can learn a lot about the living from the dead. Elmwood Cemetery shows a side of the city seldom seen.

According to historians, yellow fever hit Memphis in 1873, 1878 and 1879. The epidemics took 8,500 lives, more than the Great Chicago Fire and the San Francisco Earthquake combined.


At their height, the city's main cemetery had 50 burials a day and — owing to a labour shortage caused by the disease — the dead were often piled above ground awaiting interment. People of all races, creeds and social standings were buried in trenches in an area formerly reserved for paupers and unknowns. That section of Elmwood, now called No

Man's Land, is home to 1,500 unmarked graves.

Since nobody knew the root cause was poor sanitation, the epidemics bred wholesale panic. By 1878, half of Memphis' 50,000 people had left in a mass exodus and were often shunned wherever they went. Of those who stayed in the city, 90 per cent got sick. Things were so bad, Memphis went bankrupt and lost its city charter.

Despite the risk, many people sacrificed their lives to help others. Annie Cook was a madam who ran a large brothel known for its red velvet, gold gilt and the "commercial affection" it provided. But when yellow fever hit, Annie turned her bordello into a hospital and worked tirelessly to serve the sick until she caught the illness herself and died. At her burial, she was known, not as a woman of sin, but as "the Mary Magdalene of Memphis".

Another hero was Robert Tate, one of seven doctors recruited from



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Ohio. He became the first African-American to practise medicine in the area. People who ordinarily wouldn't have let him into their home were grateful for his help and he worked selflessly for people of all races. He died of yellow fever just three weeks after arriving.

Along with doctors, many priests and ministers also rushed to the stricken area, to console the sick and bury the dead. Their close contact with the ill usually cost them their lives, too.

In many ways, the Memphis epidemics are a modern parable about human mortality. In it, we can see death in a new context and move from preconceived ideas to a new understanding. Call it a graveyard shift.

First, death is the great equalizer. Despite our earthly obsession with status and social station, death comes to everyone. "Even captives are at ease in death," says Job. "Rich and poor are both there and the slave is free from his master." (Job 3:18, 19). Sometimes we live to a good old age "like a sheaf of grain harvested at the right time" (5:26) and sometimes it comes tragically early — "pegs are pulled and the tent collapses" (4:21). Either way, we take nothing with us. As someone once said, you never see a U-Haul behind a hearse.

But what you do see is those who run from death because they don't see its root cause is the unsanitary condition of the soul. Sin, pride and moral pollution separate us from God — a condition the Bible calls spiritual death. But rather than address it, many turn death into the last taboo, hiding from reality and refusing to even discuss it.

No matter. Sooner or later, death finds each of us. "You have decided the length of our lives," Job tells God. "You know how many months we'll live, and we're not given a minute longer." (14:5,6)

The good news is redemption is always possible for those who recognize their mortality, realize their sin and realign their lives. No matter who we are or what we've done, all we need do is respond to the antidote offered by the Great Physician who gave his life while serving those dying in sin. When we embrace the grace and forgiveness of Christ, we can say, like Job, "I know my Redeemer lives, and he will stand upon the earth at last. And after my body has decayed... I will see God. I'll see him for myself! Yes, I'll see him with my own eyes. I am overwhelmed at the thought! (19:25-27)

It's the difference between running *from* death or *to* it.