

'The Message' Author Eugene Peterson Dies at 85, May Have Spoken in Tongues on His Deathbed

Prolific author and speaker Eugene Peterson died Monday. He was 85.

"During the previous days, it was apparent that he was navigating the thin and sacred space between earth and heaven," according to his family. "We overheard him speaking to people we can only presume were welcoming him into paradise. There may have even been a time or two when he accessed his Pentecostal roots and spoke in tongues as well.

"Among his final words were, 'Let's go.' And his joy: My, oh my, the man remained joyful right up to his blessed end, smiling frequently. In such moments it's best for all mortal flesh to keep silence. But if you have to say something, say this: 'Holy, Holy, Holy.'"

Peterson was placed under hospice care in mid-October "when he took a sudden and dramatic turn in his health caused by an infection," according to an email from his son Eric Peterson. The elder Peterson already had been dealing with dementia and congestive heart failure at the time.

Peterson is perhaps best known for his paraphrase of the Bible called *The Message*, which is written like a storybook.

He also wrote books, including *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (1980); *Run With the Horses: The Quest for Life at its Best* (InterVarsity Press, November 1983); *Traveling Light: Modern Meditations on St. Paul's Letter of Freedom* (Helmets & Howard Publishing,

1988); *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1988); and *Where Your Treasure Is: Psalms that Summon You from Self to Community* (Wm. B. Eerdmann Publishing Company, 1993), among others.

According to New Release Today:

Peterson was born in East Stanwood, Washington and grew up in Kalispell, Montana. He earned his B.A. in philosophy from Seattle Pacific University, his . from New York Theological Seminary, and his M.A. in Semitic languages from Johns Hopkins University. In 1962, Peterson was a founding pastor of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland, where he served for 29 years before retiring in 1991. He was professor emeritus of spiritual theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, until retiring in 2006.

Peterson shared much of his personal ministry story in his book *The Pastor: A Memoir*:

...When I did [become a pastor], I knew that it was a vocation, not a job. I told my friends in the Company [of Pastors] the story of Willi ... We were honing our observational skills in discerning the difference between vocation and job. As we were seeing pastors left and right abandoning their vocations and taking jobs, we were determined to keep the distinction clear for ourselves. A job is an assignment to do work that can be quantified and evaluated. It is pretty easy to decide whether a job has been completed or not. It is pretty easy to tell whether a job is done well or badly.

But a vocation is not a job in that sense. I can be hired to do a job, paid a fair wage if I do it, dismissed if I don't. But I can't be hired to be a pastor, for my primary responsibility is not to the people I serve [but] to the God I serve. As it turns out, the people I serve would often prefer an idol who would do what they want done rather than

do what God, revealed in Jesus, wants them to do. In our present culture, the sharp distinction between a job and a vocation is considerably blurred. How do I, as a pastor, prevent myself from thinking of my work as a job that I get paid for, a job that is assigned to me by my denomination, a job that I am expected to do to the satisfaction of my congregation? How do I stay attentive to and listening to the call that got me started in this way of life—not a call to make the church attractive and useful in the American scene, not a call to help people feel good about themselves and have a good life, not a call to use my considerable gifts and fulfill myself, but a call like Abraham's "to set out for a place ... not knowing where he was going," a call to deny myself and take up my cross and follow Jesus, a call like Jonah's to go at once to Nineveh, "a city he detested," a call like Paul's to "get up and enter the city and you will be told what to do"?

How do I keep the immediacy and authority of God's call in my ears when an entire culture, both secular and ecclesial, is giving me a job description? How do I keep the calling, the vocation, of pastor from being drowned out by job descriptions, gussied up in glossy challenges and visions and strategies, clamoring incessantly for my attention?

Peterson came under fire in 2017 when he reportedly said he would perform a gay wedding ceremony. Peterson quickly retracted the statement, claiming he was put on the spot in the interview.

Daniel Groethe, a Peterson family friend, shared his interactions with Peterson ahead of Peterson's 85th birthday:

This is a guy who lives in his childhood home. They have one car, a Honda. There is not an ostentatious bone in their bodies. These are people who have turned down opportunity after opportunity in order to preserve a life of simplicity

and quiet faithfulness. A long obedience in the same direction. I have long said that it only took Eugene Peterson 65 years to become an overnight success, and the success came when he had gotten over his need to be successful. God must have known he could trust this old couple with that kind of money, that kind of acclaim.

What I discovered is that Eugene and Jan have been doing this their whole lives, been giving themselves away, their strength away, their money away. I basically made him admit that he and Jan have paid for scores of his students to pursue master's or doctoral degrees. Full scholarships out of their own pockets.

"We determined that that's why God gave us this money. That's what it's for," he said. They have given to local and global mission work. As the psalmist said, "They have freely scattered abroad their gifts to the poor, their righteousness endures forever; their horn will be lifted high in honor" (Ps. 112:9).

Eugene and Jan could have gone the traditional retirement route that is the last stretch on the highway to the American Dream and no one would have blamed them. They could have circled the wagons and shut everyone else out. They could have spent that money on themselves. But they haven't.

Many people posted their condolences and memories on social media.

The world is far poorer today than we were yesterday. Eugene Peterson has died.

– Jonathan Merritt (@JonathanMerritt) October 22, 2018

Beloved pastor and author Eugene Peterson has died. Among his last words? "Let's go."

– kate shellnutt (@kateshellnutt) October 22, 2018

Eugene Peterson was a giant of evangelical Christianity. His famous Bible translation "The Message" sold more than 20 million copies and shaped the spirituality of millions.

– Elizabeth Dias (@elizabethjdias) October 22, 2018

"Among his final words were, "Let's go."

– Sarah Bessey (@sarahbessey) October 22, 2018

Eugene Peterson:

– *God has used your exceptional writing skills to deepen and revitalise the spiritual lives of many.*

– *And God has used the fruit of your pen to deeply influence me.*

– *THANK YOU!*

"Well done good and faithful servant".

– Brian Houston (@BrianCHouston) October 22, 2018

My dear friend and pastor Eugene Peterson has died this morning. The lantern is out, but the joy he carried with him to his final breaths endures. Eugene is now with the Triune God he has loved his entire life. Memory eternal.

– Winn Collier (@winncollier) October 22, 2018

Breaks my heart to hear about the passing of Eugene Peterson.

The MSG translation and his book 'Long Obedience In The Same

Direction' truly changed my life for the better.

– Jarrid Wilson (@JarridWilson) October 22, 2018

RIP Eugene Peterson.

I count myself among the thousands who were influenced by his life, words, books, and perseverance.

– Clayton King (@Clayton_king) October 22, 2018

'There is nothing terribly difficult in the Bible – at least, in a technical way. The Bible is written in street language, common language. Most of it was oral and spoken to illiterate when we make everything academic, we lose something.'

– Eugene Peterson (1932-2018)

– Nicky Gumbel (@nickygumbel) October 22, 2018

Grateful to God for a long obedience in the same direction. Thank you Eugene Peterson.

– Russell Moore (@drmoore) October 22, 2018

Thank God for Eugene Peterson. His words have changed my life. And a long obedience in the same direction has finally led him home. â™¥ï¿½,

– Annie F. Downs (@anniefdowns) October 22, 2018

*“(If) Christians worshiped only when they felt like it, there would be precious little worship. Feelings are important in many areas but completely unreliable in matters of faith.”
â€• Eugene H. Peterson, A Long Obedience in the Same*

Direction

– *John Stonestreet (@JBStonestreet) October 22, 2018*