
THE ART OF DYING

A Christian View of Death, Part I

OUR QUALIFICATIONS

To offer information and advice on a given subject, it's helpful to have firsthand experience. A former drug user may be effective in speaking about drug addiction. An airline pilot may be helpful to one who is studying the hazards of aviation.

We may wonder, therefore, what qualifies us to speak on the subject of death. Few of us have come face to face with death. None of us have been dead for any length of time, only to come back and tell about it. Even those with near-death experiences leave many questions unanswered. Did they actually see what lies beyond the grave? Can their reports be trusted?

READ Luke 16:19-31.

Why are we qualified to speak on the subject of death?

WHAT IS DEATH?

Man has made many attempts to define death. To the atheist, death is the end of any meaningful existence—a mere passage into oblivion. To others, death is viewed as a natural part of life. Everything is born, lives for a while, and then dies. Neither of these views gives an accurate picture of death.

Death is not natural. It's unnatural. God didn't create us to die; he created us to live. When God breathed into man the breath of life, he intended that man should live forever.

READ Romans 6:23; 5:12.

What do these passages say is the reason for death?

Why is the phrase "death with dignity" a contradiction in terms?

READ John 8:44.

Why does Jesus rightly call the devil a murderer?

UNDERSTANDING THE DYING

In recent years a great deal of research has been done with the dying. Terminal patients have been interviewed and analyzed in an attempt to better understand the dying process. Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross is a well-known investigator in the field of dying. Though not a Christian, Dr. Kubler-Ross can help us understand and relate to the dying. In her book, *On Death and Dying*, she outlines five stages of grief. These are stages a person may go through after he is told he has a terminal illness and that, in all likelihood, death is just around the corner. Not all terminal patients go through all five stages. Nor is there always a clear progression from one stage to the next. Some may go back and forth between stages.

Others may be in several stages at once. And, as we will see, a Christian's faith has a profound effect on how he or she deals with death.

The five stages¹ are as follows:

1. **DENIAL**—This usually occurs shortly after the person is told he has a terminal illness, although this denial may continue to the end. The person feels there must be some mistake. The doctor must have misread the X ray, or the files must have been mixed up. This denial may lead the patient to consult with other doctors, hoping the initial diagnosis was wrong. As the patient's health deteriorates, denial becomes more difficult.
2. **ANGER**—When a person is no longer able to say, "No, it's not me!" he may begin asking, "Why me?" This may cause him to lash out in anger at family, friends, doctors, nurses, and God. Even a Christian may say things that shock those around him and lead them to question his faith.
3. **BARGAINING**—At this stage the question shifts from "Why me?" to "Why now?" As it becomes more difficult to deny his approaching death, the person seeks to postpone it by striking a bargain, often with God. He promises to go to church every Sunday, to live a good life, to spend more time with his family, if only the Lord will extend his life.
4. **DEPRESSION**—When it becomes evident that death is near, the person often sinks into depression. "During this time the patient will be grieving for what he has already lost (e.g., health, mobility) and is about to lose (i.e., friends, family). It is commonly a period of silence and withdrawal as the dying patient tries to separate himself from all he has known and loved. Kubler-Ross refers to this depression as 'preparatory grief' because it allows a person to prepare for death by letting go of his attachments in life."²

5. *ACCEPTANCE*—Eventually a person may resign himself to his impending death. He once again enjoys the company of people and is able to speak openly about his situation. He works at getting his house in order and may even anticipate his approaching death.

READ the following passages. Determine which stage of dying each person was in.

- **2 Kings 20:1-6**
- **Job 10:18-22**
- **Job 21:3-6; 23:1-5**
- **2 Timothy 4:7,8**

Why may a Christian also go through these stages of dying?

DEALING WITH THE DYING

Some people feel awkward around those who are dying. They aren't sure they know what to say or how to say it. There are a number of points to keep in mind as we minister to the needs of the dying person.

READ the following passages.

- **Ephesians 4:15,25**
- **James 1:19**
- **Matthew 20:34**
- **Matthew 25:36**
- **1 Peter 3:15**

What guidance do they give in dealing with the dying?

READ Matthew 26:36-38.

As true man, what did Jesus long for as his death approached?

What were some of his feelings as he faced death?

What makes his death unique?

READ Job 4:7-9; 8:1-7.

What reason did Job's friends give for all his suffering?

Why were Job's friends of no comfort to him in his suffering? (Cf. Job 42:7.)

What point does Jesus make in Luke 13:4,5?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. From a Christian perspective, why is it usually better to tell a person he is terminally ill?
2. Evaluate: Some people fear dying more than death.
3. Evaluate: When a Christian suffers in life, he should remember it is the will of God.

PREPARING FOR DEATH

It's one thing to help the dying person deal with death. It's an entirely different matter when we are faced with our death. Fear, doubt, and uncertainty may suddenly grip the staunchest of Christians. No longer is it the "other person" who is dying. Now we are.

But death shouldn't take us by surprise. We all know it's going to happen. It is going to take its toll of human beings as long as this earth endures.

Since we know death is coming, it only makes sense to prepare for it. We will be taking the greatest journey of our lives, a trip out of time into eternity. Such a journey requires preparation. To help us prepare for our own death, let us consider some biblical role models.

READ the following passages. Discuss how these people prepared for death.

- **Psalms 23—David**
- **Luke 2:25-32—Simeon**
- **Philippians 1:21-25—Paul**
- **2 Peter 1:13-15—Peter**
- **Luke 23:42—Thief**
- **Luke 23:46—Jesus**

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Evaluate: A Christian should never be afraid to die.
2. Evaluate: A Christian is always prepared to die.

COPING WITH DEATH

In many ways, those who are grieving over the death of a loved one are similar to the dying person. They may go through some of the same stages. The sudden shock of death may leave them in a state of denial. They wake up each day wondering if it really happened, hoping it was all only a nightmare. As the reality hits home, they may express feelings of anger or sink into depression. Even after they finally accept what has happened, the pain lingers. In a sense, the grieving will never end.

Because of these similarities, the way we deal with the grieving is similar to the way we deal with the dying. Some of the points listed in “Dealing with the Dying” also apply here. In general, we need to be patient, compassionate, and understanding in dealing with those who are grieving. They have lost someone who will never be replaced in this life.

READ 1 Thessalonians 4:13.

Is the Lord telling us not to grieve? Explain.

In what way is our grieving different from that of an unbeliever?

READ John 11:35.

What did Jesus do at the death of Lazarus? Why?

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. When does the reality of death often hit a person?
2. Discuss some of the unique social problems a widow or widower has to face.
3. At a funeral a minister once comforted the people by saying, “Death is a friend. It helps us appreciate life.” Comment on this statement.