

DEATH AND AFTER

Practical Approaches for Acceptance of Death

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Death is an awkward subject and by nature men generally choose not to talk about it. However, it is a subject that must be talked about because death is the final act of life and it is the inevitable for us all.
- B. When we know a person is dying, what do we say to him or her? How do we comfort someone who has lost a loved one or a precious child? What words do we have for the dying unsaved man or for the bereaved family of an unsaved man? These are all practical questions that all of us will face many times. NOTE: There are very few direct Biblical verses that deal with these subjects but there are some Biblical principles and common sense principles that can be applied.

II. ACCEPTANCE OF DEATH BY A DYING PERSON

- A. Facing Reality: In the secular world, much study has been done on death (thanatology) and three basic facts arise from these studies: (1) The dying person is often first to know that he is dying, and he recognizes and resents efforts to conceal the fact from him; (2) The person who is told his illness is fatal usually can – and wants to – talk about death, but he usually cannot find good listeners; (3) The person who knows he is dying generally passes through five recognizable stages of mind before he dies and he comes to know almost to the hour the time when that final stage will end (National Observer, Jan. 5, 1970, “New Seminar Helps Take the Sting Out of Death”). NOTE: We must never run from the subject of death with a dying person.
- B. Steps to Reality: A person who is told he is dying usually passes through five stages: (1) Denial in which he refuses to accept it as true and this may last from a few seconds to months; (2) Anger in which a person gets uptight with God and man and says, “Why me?”; (3) Bargaining in which a person tries to make deals with God to get Him to spare life; (4) Depression in which the person feels helpless to do anything and (5) Acceptance which is a kind of quiet time for the person almost void of feeling, a time of withdrawal.
- C. Words of Reality
 - 1. Saved: If a person is a true Christian, we can talk very frankly with him about death and meditate on all the promises of death and eternal life the Christian possesses. Death should be accepted as a basic part of life and the total experiencing of eternal life with Christ. This is a time to get all wills, financial matters, etc., in order and a time for a discussion on the remarriage of one’s partner. This is a time for deep discussion in every area. It is also a time when the family should be very close, for we should all want to leave this temporal world with those we love the most at our side. NOTE: In the closing hours of death, we can quote Scripture, declare our love for the person and make him as comfortable as possible. NOTE: During the last months and weeks and days before death, a person needs to see his pastor.

2. Unsaved: The unsaved man also needs to be talked squarely to about death and, if possible, opportunity should be sought to tell this person about the good news of Christ for sinners. NOTE: Even at death we should respect a man's wishes, and if he wants no gospel witness, we have no right to force it on him. It is wrong for a pastor or Christian worker to go into a stranger's room and bombard him with the gospel if he does not want it. However, if the person calls for a minister, then one should definitely go and speak directly to the person about eternal issues. NOTE: Never underestimate the power of God, for deathbed confessions are often real. We know the thief on the cross was saved because his heart was right even though he had no time to show the reality of salvation with his life. God does save men at the last moment (Lk. 23:42, 43). All it takes is a simple act of faith in Christ to save a person. We can never know absolutely that one who died did not exercise faith in the closing, private moments of his life. God will make the final decision as to the reality of a person's faith.

III. ACCEPTANCE OF DEATH BY THE BEREAVED

- A. Natural Responses: Death always leaves a wound to the living and it takes God's grace and time to heal from the loss of a loved one. When death comes, there are always some natural responses which are normal and healthy.
 1. Grief: It is not wrong to feel a great sense of loss at the passing of a loved one. There will be many times of quiet shedding of tears and a desire to be alone to pray and think. There will undoubtedly be a time of mourning where one will limit his or her social contacts and commitments. NOTE: Excessive and prolonged grief is wrong and if it persists a person should see his pastor.
 2. Guilt: It is natural to feel guilty about something we failed to do with or for our loved one when he was living. Our mind becomes occupied with "If only . . ." thoughts. NOTE: Excessive guilt is wrong and one needs counseling.
 3. Gravitation: A person may feel bound to his loved one and ask questions like, "What would Sally want me to do?" or "How can I carry on John's work?" NOTE: Death wounds but a person must want to be healed. Life must go on even though we have lost a loved one.
- B. Unnatural Responses
 1. Fantasy: People at the death of a loved one often escape into an unreal world, a world of fantasy. They must be brought to understand that death is final. If we really want to help a sorrowing person, then we want to encourage him and cause him to grasp reality. We must encourage instantaneous acceptance of total reality. NOTE: In most cases, it is not good to have a doctor to prescribe tranquilizers or other drugs to lessen the effect of reality. However, in some extreme cases medication is necessary.
 2. Depression: People often go into a form of shock or depression at the death of a loved one and need a great deal of understanding. NOTE: The bereaved often wants to talk about death but can find no good listeners. When comforting, learn to be a good listener before you do much talking to the bereaved. Comforters should be sensitive to the needs of the bereaved. Often an arm about the shoulder, a firm grip of the hand, a kiss does more good than all the logical reasoning in the world. NOTE: It is better to say,

“I’m sorry” than to say, “I know how you feel” because you may not know at all.

3. Escapism: Often the bereaved wants to escape from making any decisions which is not good, for life must go on. NOTE: To comfort the bereaved, we should take food, send cards, and take some responsibility off their shoulders, but not all. A bereaved person must make some decisions, do some work and face some problems. Most of the decisions made about the funeral should be made by the bereaved. NOTE: The time that the bereaved needs friends most is not the three days prior to the funeral but the next eight weeks after the funeral. It may be weeks or months later when desperate loneliness and grief overwhelms a bereaved person. NOTE: Be careful about phoning the bereaved, for you are just one of hundreds who will call. It is better to send a card or to drop over for just a few short minutes. Do not call past 9:00 at night, for the sorrowing need rest. NOTE: Organized efforts by fellow Christians to pray for and bring food can be of great help to a person in mourning, but most of all, people and friends.

IV. ACCEPTANCE OF DEATH IN THE CASE OF CHILDREN

- A. The Death of Children: The hardest deaths to accept are that of children. Humanly, it seems the most unnatural. The death of a child must be placed under the sovereignty of God and left to His own wise purposes. Whatever the cause of the death of a child, whether sickness or accident, it is simply the occasion of God to do His will. Even children have an appointed hour from the Father. NOTE: Parents must remember that they do not own their children but they are given to them by God to provide for, take oversight of and train. Children are parents’ trust but God may relieve that trust any time and take the child. NOTE: Christian parents can hold out eternal hope for their children who die because of the covenant. As to the children of unsaved parents, we do not know for sure because the Bible does not say anything on this issue. NOTE: When children die, parents must not blame themselves for this could destroy a marriage. Ultimately, a child, like every other human being, dies because it was God’s will.
- B. Explaining Death to Children: Our attitude about death, when it is explained to a child, should be positive, natural and to the point. Children need to know that everything that is alive, except God and His angels, will one day die. Death is shared by animals as well as men. While we cannot be absolutely sure where animals go after death, a person goes to sleep and wakes up afterward. If he loves Jesus, he wakes up in a wonderful place called heaven. NOTE: The Bible speaks of heaven in terms of rest. This may appeal to an older person because he is tired of the struggles of life, but this hardly appeals to a younger person. The child will respond to other descriptions of heaven as a happy place, a beautiful place, a place of activity where there will never be sadness or tears. NOTE: Every child must be told that one day Mom and Dad will go home to be with Jesus. We must prepare children for the death of their parents, for it is the inevitable, but this is also the time to speak of the gospel. NOTE: Never exaggerate death to a child or run from the reality of death. Just stick with the facts because children want truth.

V. ACCEPTANCE OF A CHRISTIAN VIEWPOINT ON THE FUNERAL

- A. Introduction: The funeral is probably the most difficult part of the passing of a loved one. It is right to have a funeral to honor the dead but there are no set ways of

paying last respects to a loved one. The way of honoring the dead varies with cultures and individuals. Christians must be sure their funerals honor Christ and they do not fall into the patterns of pagans.

“Christians should avoid the ostentatious show so often seen in modern funerals, and should spend only a modest amount that will in no wise impoverish those who remain behind. It is rather noticeable that as a general rule, people tend to have elaborate funerals in inverse proportion to the amount of true religion that they have. True Christians will not attempt to emulate the world, which sees in the funeral service only the end of an earthly life, but in full recognition of the Biblical truths concerning death and the future life will seek to give proper respect to the bodies of their loved ones and at the same time to center the attention of those present on the reality of the future life.” (Beottner, Immortality)

NOTE: This study will give one possible way to approach death as a Christian, but this is by no means the only way.

- B. Preparations: If you have certain requests concerning your death and funeral, write them down on a piece of paper so that when death comes it will be down in print. Emotions overtake the bereaved and they usually do not grant the requests of their loved ones because they say to themselves, “Bill really wouldn’t want that . . .” If Bill, for instance, wanted to be buried in an inexpensive casket, his wife might feel guilty doing it for this would not be what she wanted and, furthermore, what would her friends think? NOTE: In your death and funeral requests, you should approve an autopsy (if necessary), leaving one’s eyes or other parts of the body for research or transplant, giving of one’s body to the medical school, etc. There should be something said of financial contributions to the church, mission organizations, research or charity organizations in lieu of flowers. NOTE: Certainly, something should be said about cremation or burial, and it is good to have grave sites already picked out. These things are just good planning and eliminate a lot of confusion at the time of death.
- C. Picking the Casket: No Christian should spend great sums of money on expensive caskets and burial clothes. Entering the casket room to pick a casket is one of the hardest things to do when death comes to a family. NOTE: It is always good to have your pastor or someone who can be very objective with you when you must pick the casket, vault, etc. NOTE: We often hear people say, “Just put me in a pine box and bury me,” but this is very difficult to do when it comes time to pick a casket for a loved one. NOTE: You should also remember that the great majority of funeral directors are there to help you and not to take you. Death is expensive in our society because the people have demanded it, causing the funeral home to have excessive expenses. Most funeral directors will work with you in any way to keep the expenses down. NOTE: However, the average burial in 1975 is between \$1,200 and \$1,500.
- D. Memorial Service
1. Have no public viewing of the body. The family may or may not want to view the body. NOTE: Public viewing of the body is not wrong or necessarily pagan, but it is tedious and a terrible emotional strain on those viewing. It does, however, drive home the reality of death more forcibly.

2. Prior to the memorial service have your home open so that friends may drop by to pay respects to the dead and love to the living. NOTE: It might be possible to meet in the funeral home or some centrally located place.
3. Two hours before the memorial service, the family should have a graveside service and commit the body with absolute assurance in the resurrection (if the person was a believer).
4. Have a memorial service at the local church building to remember the dead and to declare openly the gospel of Jesus Christ. This would be a time of hymn singing, reading of Scripture, praise, rejoicing and sharing. A message should be prepared that is geared to comfort the bereaved and be a gospel witness to the lost. It might be well to have a picture of the deceased wherever the people sign to indicate that they have been at the service. NOTE: There may not be as many people come to a memorial service because there is no body to be viewed.
5. After the memorial service, folks should be allowed to visit the home of the bereaved. The home should be open for two or three hours, and there could be punch and cookies for the visitors.
6. A few days after the memorial service, a thank you note should be given to each person who attended the memorial service or visited in the bereaved home. This would be an excellent time to briefly give the gospel out to friends who have not yet met the Saviour. Furthermore, the writing of notes keeps the bereaved occupied during many hours of lonesomeness.