

CARE OF THE DYING

Preface

I am very grateful to Pat Davies for both the contents of this booklet and the talk that she gave in the “*Serving Today*” radio programme about the care of the dying.

Pat trained as a nurse and has been involved in hospital visitation since she first went to Barcelona in Spain almost 20 years ago. For the last five or six years she has been caring specifically for the dying in the Evangelical Hospital there. When the hospital first asked Pat to take on this particular ministry she felt very inadequate, but the Lord has given her the gifts and strength to cope with it.

Pat has found it a tremendous joy to share with believers who are really looking forward to meeting the Lord. But most of the patients whom Pat visits are not believers, and these meetings can be very difficult. She has to share in their sadness and anxiety, their problems and difficulties, and seek to share the love of God with them. It is very sad to see a patient near to death and unaware of the danger they are in for the future. It would cause the patient too much suffering to state blandly that hell is the only destination for someone who does not believe in the Lord. One way Pat approaches this situation is by seeking to build up a relationship with patients, by talking about things in which they are interested. This can take several visits. Once she has been accepted, she offers to read the Scriptures and pray with the patients. However, she always respects their wishes in this matter.

Over the years Pat has developed a system for coping with the emotional trauma of being involved with a dying person. She obviously cares deeply about the patients, but has found a balance between keeping a certain distance and showing loving support for both the patients and relatives. If possible, Pat visits the relatives after a patient’s death, and seeks the opportunity to read the Scriptures and pray with them. Psalm 23 has proved to be very special at such times.

In the following pages Pat shares with us some of the lessons she has learned in this ministry, and we trust you will find them helpful in your own visitation of the dying. The final chapter is a very moving testimony of how Pat herself responded when at the bedside of one dying believer.

Derek French

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Introduction

Birth and death form the two sides of the same coin and both are essential to life. The one side of the coin can never be separated from the other; both form a unity and belong together. Death has been the natural end to the existence of physical life for mankind ever since sin came into the world and ruined the perfect creation of Almighty God. It doesn’t matter where we live or what our background or occupation may be, these two major aspects, life and death, will be experienced by you, by me and everyone else in the whole of humanity. The birth of a child into a family, under normal circumstances, brings great joy and

happiness. Death, however, whether we believe that there is a life after death or not, will always produce pain, sadness and a great sense of loss. Separation from those whom we love is never easy, and can cause us great suffering and distress.

In this booklet I would like us to concentrate our thoughts on certain aspects of the subject of death. How can we be a positive help to a person who is dying? What if he or she is not a Christian and doesn't believe in a life after death in the presence of the eternal God? Do we tell them that they are dying, that they are in a terminal state and that perhaps they have only three months of life left? In this case is it best not to tell them the truth, or perhaps avoid the subject altogether? How can we present the Gospel of the love of the Lord Jesus Christ to someone who is suffering and expects to die within the next few weeks or perhaps days? It is never an easy matter to make decisions in these circumstances, not for the person who is dying nor for family and friends, nor even for the members of the medical team.

This is certainly not an easy subject and there are no set rules to apply. Every individual person is different and the way they approach death will depend upon their education, family and economic situation, their religious beliefs and the quality of the medical care which they may or may not be receiving. In many areas of the world, medical treatment and drugs to control pain are difficult to obtain, especially for a family with little or no economic resources.

There is no way that we can help those who are terminally ill unless we ourselves are willing to suffer. We must

endeavour to enter into, and try to understand, the reality of a dying person's situation with honesty, respect, love and compassion in order to give them the support which they so desperately need. They need to be able to trust us, and rest peacefully knowing that we will help them to do those things which they are no longer able to do for themselves. We need to spend time at their bedside, assuring them and expressing with our presence that we really do love them and care for them.

We must consider it a privilege to be able to accompany someone during the last days of their life here on earth, to share the message of God's divine love of eternal life with them, and also to suffer with them in their time of distress, pain and anxiety.

Chapter 1 Informing the patient that he is going to die

Whether we should inform a person that he is dying or not, is a very difficult question to answer. To begin with, this is really a confidential matter between the patient, his doctor and also the relatives, and therefore it may not be our responsibility to intervene at all. However, if we should need to make decisions concerning this issue then here are a few guidelines:

- a) If the patient does **not** want to know then it is far better that he should **not** be informed of the state of his terminal situation, although the relatives should be told. To give bad news such as this to a patient who is not prepared to receive it, would be extremely cruel and could cause him tremendous suffering.

It is much easier to deal with a situation like this if the people involved have discussed the matter previously with family and friends before the illness existed or even in the early stages. An open and sincere level of communication is essential in order to know what the patient's thoughts are concerning his terminal illness.

- b) If the patient does want to know that he is dying, then our answer should always be honest and sincere, otherwise we will lose his trust in us. However, if we can avoid giving all the information in one session that may be desirable. For example: if the patient asks if the illness is serious, we can answer that question without saying that he is going to die. It is much better to give the bad news gradually in order to give him time to come to terms with his situation.

On the other hand, if the patient wishes to know, but his relatives do not want him to be informed, then we can only leave the issue with the patient, his doctor and relatives, and we must respect their final decision.

Chapter 2 Preparing the unbeliever for death

To prepare an unbeliever for death can be very difficult, and we must be honest with ourselves and admit that we do not have all the answers concerning life and death. Everyone, both the believer and the unbeliever, has the right to reach the moment of death at peace with himself and with his loved ones. However, only those who truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord can die at peace with God. We do not always know the condition of someone's heart in relation to God, only the Lord Himself has such knowledge. Our responsibility is

faithfully and simply to communicate the message of salvation through Jesus Christ and the need for repentance and faith in the Son of God. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to prepare the way for the unbeliever to receive and understand God's Word and to bring the individual to a knowledge of salvation through Jesus Christ alone.

In my experience, there are only a few who truly come to know the Lord during the last few days of their life, as did the thief on the cross.

We must gently and compassionately lead the dying to think carefully about the purpose of Christ's death on the cross and their personal need of salvation. It is very important that this is done while their medical condition allows them to consider it intellectually and whilst communication is still possible. Every unbeliever has the right to know what the Lord has revealed to man concerning salvation and eternal life.

Remember that the dying are very sensitive and able to discern the state of your own heart. If you express with your lips the urgency and importance of the gospel message but do not do so from your heart with love and concern for the dying, then the message received will just be an empty collection of words. Your conversation will not have the desired effect as the words will fall upon stony ground and will not germinate and grow. The message of salvation must reach the heart of those dying in their sins; it is not merely an intellectual exercise. It must produce a total change in their lives, in their relationship with God, and lead to repentance and forgiveness of their sins.

Time can be our greatest obstacle as we can never know when our last conversation will take place. We can never be sure that tomorrow we will be able to continue the conversation. In any terminal illness a medical crisis, such as an internal haemorrhage, can always be imminent.

The Scriptures are very clear concerning those who will be received into heaven. Only those who have a correct relationship with God will have eternal life in the presence of the Lord. Everyone else will be condemned to eternal punishment. These are very serious matters and at times it is heartbreaking to consider all the consequences of sin with someone who may be only hours away from eternity. You may feel a deep sense of helplessness in the face of death and if the truth of the gospel message is rejected you may well have a tremendous sense of anguish. In these circumstances let us thank our Lord and Saviour for the assurance of our own salvation.

Chapter 3 Preparing the believer for death

We must consider it a privilege to be able to participate in the last months, days or hours of a believer's life on earth, to be able to share one's faith with each other, and our eternal assurance of a dwelling place in the house of the Lord for ever (Psalm 23:6), to be able to contemplate the different aspects of what heaven will be like, the presence of the Lord in eternity and to see God face to face. There will also be moments of sadness as the dying will consider the fact that they will soon have to leave their loved ones behind. Some of their loved ones may not be Christians so the dying may not be sure that they will have the

opportunity of seeing them again. Others may be leaving small children, sick and elderly parents, or mentally ill close relatives who would normally make demands on them for help and support. They may well be concerned about what will happen to their loved ones when they die and go to be with the Lord. We can only encourage them to leave their burdens with the Lord and to trust in Him for their future care.

Practical ways of helping the dying Christian

- Try to find out what their personal interests are:
 - Do they like reading Christian books or magazines?
 - Do they like listening to Christian music?
 - Do they just prefer to talk?
 - Do they enjoy listening to sermons on tape, etc.?
 - Do they like to listen to Christian radio programmes?
- Be informed and find out as much as you can and be prepared to supply them with books or cassette tapes, etc. If the family are Christians, then many of these things will be supplied by them. But it may well be that their relatives are not Christians, in which case your help will be far more important, and may bear fruit in their lives as well as their dying loved one. Don't overload them with too much material at any one time. Remember that they are seriously ill and their powers of concentration may not be what they used to be.

- It is very important that believers are kept up to date with all the news and activities of church life although they are now unable to attend any meetings. Make sure that they receive regular copies of any church magazines and news of any special activities. They should be updated about any Church Meetings which take place, etc., if their present health will allow this. As their illness progresses and their mental and physical health deteriorate they will no longer be able to consider these issues.
- Remember that although they are ill, they do have plenty of time for prayer and meditation and their living testimony in the face of death can have a tremendous impact on others. Do try and read a portion of the Scriptures and pray with them every time that you visit. Encourage them and lovingly support them in their last days before seeing the Lord face to face.

A personal testimony in the face of death

I would like to share with you a personal experience while visiting an elderly Christian gentleman who was very near to death.

There are circumstances when it can be tremendously moving to express our feelings in the words of a hymn or chorus. This was my experience one day as I sat beside a dear elderly saint who had dedicated many years to serving the Lord. At the end of his life he lay emaciated, almost motionless, on a bed in the palliative care unit of the Evangelical Hospital in Barcelona, Spain. He gathered up

all his strength to reach out with his right hand from under the white sheets. The flesh hung from his fragile bones. I took his now skeletal hand in mine with such gentleness and he rested comforted on his pillows.

As I sat at his bedside I quietly observed the face before me – one could study the anatomical form of practically every bone in his face. The flesh had disappeared over the last few weeks of his terminal illness and yet there was an incomparable beauty there in the midst of the horror of death. He was at peace with God and had absolute assurance that he would shortly see his Saviour face to face. It was at that moment that I began to sing the following chorus to him:

*“I love you with the love of the Lord.
I love you with the love of the Lord,
Because in you I can see the beauty of my King.
I love you with the love of the Lord.”*

As I came to the words, “...in you I can see the beauty of my King”, tears rolled down my cheeks. He smiled understandingly. In the face of imminent death I could see, in this dear man of God, the victory of the cross. The magnificent beauty of the Lord’s sacrificial death at Calvary was so profoundly evident. There on the cross the horror of death was also lost in the beauty of holiness.

Death had no hold now – suffering and pain would shortly come to an end and within hours this dear servant of God would be taken up to heaven to be with the Lord forever.

It was such a privilege and joy, but not one without sadness and emotional suffering, to share with him the last days of

his life here on earth. What a joy it was to witness his peace and his expectation of glory! He is now in heaven with the Lord but one day I will see him again, not with an emaciated face any more, but with a transformed countenance that will reflect the perfect beauty of our King.

What tremendous joy, peace and perfect happiness is waiting for the redeemed child of God! But we must never forget that many are dying every second without any hope of peace and reconciliation with Almighty God. The Gospel still needs to be proclaimed throughout the whole world, to the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the weak and the powerful, the living and the dying. It is the dying, no matter what their age may be, who so desperately need to hear of the saving love of Christ. Let us be faithful to our eternal calling and with confidence endeavour to share what we believe with those who are on the brink of death.

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