

# Dying well

Dying well is nothing more than living well right up till the end. Of course, some people don't have the opportunity to die well; especially if they die in an accident. But while we live, we can all make preparations so that our death is the best it can possibly be. A good death is rarely a coincidence - rather it results from choices made throughout life.

Dying well requires more than practical caring: there is work to be done – the work of completing a life. Relationships need to be finalised, and sometimes mended; faith needs to be nurtured; stories need to be told; goals need to be achieved; goodbyes need to be said and you need to prepare yourself spiritually for eternity. In days gone by people typically died at home surrounded by loved ones and in a familiar environment. The family called for the Priest and the moment of death was a spiritual event for everyone. These days, dying has become a medical event where most people die in hospitals or similar medical institutions. The dying person's body can become a battleground where medical professionals use technology to wage war on death. Dying well does not focus on medical interventions. It recognizes that death encompasses every aspect of life, and that it is primarily a spiritual event.

## A Biblical view of death

- Death is not part of God's original design and so is not 'natural'. Adam and Eve were placed in the garden and could have eaten from the tree of life and lived forever in perfect fellowship with God. Genesis 2:8-25. After the fall Adam and Eve were driven from the garden to prevent them eating from the tree of life and living forever. Genesis 3:1-24.
- As a result of the fall all people are subject to death. Romans 5:12. Hebrews 9:27. Death is now part of our fallen nature and is our great enemy. 1 Corinthians 15:26.
- Jesus provided the way by which death can be overcome, so we can have eternal life. 1 Corinthians 15:12-58.
- Through the Cross death has been swallowed up in victory. When Christians die our mortality takes on immortality and we will live forever in Heaven in fellowship with God. 1 Corinthians 15:53-55.

## Opportunities that dying well can bring

The process of dying can be redeemed and turned into a source of blessing. Opportunities it can bring include:

- **Internal spiritual growth**

Being aware of our spiritual state can lead to deeper repentance and strengthening of trust in the Lord. 2 Corinthians 4:7-18. Dying well can also be an example to loved ones, family, friends and carers.

- **Thankfulness**

Knowing that life is short can help make us grateful for all that we have experienced in life.

- **Completing of relationships**

When we know we are dying we often become much more real when saying 'sorry' or 'thankyou' to those closest to us. This can lead to broken relationships being healed and good relationships made stronger.

- **Finding forgiveness**

If we know we are dying we often realise the importance of asking for forgiveness from those we have hurt, and from God. Repenting and receiving forgiveness often leads to great peace and a sense of burdens lifted.

- **Letting go**

Being aware of our impending death is an opportunity to let go of tasks and responsibilities we can never complete. We accept that God is in control and begin to focus on our future eternal life. Letting go of loved ones is particularly hard, and requires sensitivity to their needs and to the impact on their lives.

- **Leaving a legacy** Psalm 71:17,18; Psalm 89:1; Deuteronomy 6:6,7.

Dying well gives us an unparalleled opportunity to reflect on how God has blessed us over the years and the lessons we have learned. Passing on this legacy can be extremely helpful for future generations, as can provisions we have made for them practically and financially. Notes, letters, autobiographies, prayers and personal blessings are some of the ways we can do this. Ensuring that our wishes are recorded in our will and funeral arrangements is an essential part of leaving a legacy for future generations. And perhaps we could revive the Old Testament custom of conferring a blessing on our loved ones before we die?

- **Reordering priorities**

Knowing that we are dying often helps us identify what is really important in our life; to reorder our priorities and to focus on essentials.

- **Fulfilling dreams**

Knowing that our time is short often brings life-long dreams to the fore (sometimes leading to a 'bucket list'). Recognising that we 'live until we die' can help us express and fulfill some of these dreams.

- **Preparing to meet the Lord**

Rather than focusing on what has happened or might happen, we can focus on the Lord and abandon ourselves to Him in the present moment. Knowing He will never leave us or forsake us can give great peace regardless of the circumstances. Deuteronomy 31:8; Proverbs 3:5,6; Philippians 4:7; John 14:27.

We can then focus on completing our life 'looking unto Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith'. Hebrews 12:1,2; Romans 8:38,39; Romans 14:8; 2 Corinthians 4:17,18; 2 Timothy 4:7,8.

## **The challenges of dying well**

As we approach death various fears, temptations and trials may emerge, but there will always be a way to turn each one around so that they become a blessing. Here are seven common challenges we may face and the virtues that they can bring.

- **The temptation of doubt and the virtue of faith**

As we get closer to death, some Christians struggle with fears and doubts. They may question their previous beliefs about God, and struggle with the reality of their faith and the genuineness of their salvation. Often they are embarrassed about this and find it hard to talk about. The best response to doubt is to be honest about it: with God, with ourselves and with others. Most believers have doubts at times. Recognising and acknowledging these doubts can lead to a deeper and more honest faith so that we can approach death with confidence and trust.

- **The temptation of despair and the virtue of hope**

Despair is the loss of hope. In the last stages of life some Christians may have regrets, what-ifs, hopelessness and a desire for God to take them home. This is likely to be reinforced by the lies of the accuser of the brethren. (Revelation 12:10; John 8:44). Some may try to put on a façade of confidence about this despair but as with the loss of faith, the best approach is to face it honestly. Reminders of the realities of the Christian faith are helpful: Christ is risen; our struggles are making us more like Jesus. Philippians 3:10; Heaven is real, our future is secure.

- **The temptation of impatience and the virtue of love**

Sometimes people get very focused on themselves as they near death, and this may result in impatience, grumpiness and complaining. The best approach to dealing with this is to focus on the needs of others - to practice agape love. 1 Corinthians 13:4, 5, 7.

- **The temptation of pride and the virtue of humility**

Spiritual pride is another temptation that sometimes emerges in the final stages of life. It may show itself in self-congratulation, self-reliance and a failure to recognise the need for God or others. e.g. *I'm all right. I don't need anything.* Dying can be very humbling because it makes us recognize that we do in fact need God and others.

- **The temptation of greed and the virtue of letting go**

As they get closer to death, some people cling on to their worldly possessions, experiences and relationships. Rather than letting go, they try to extend their life e.g. by cryonics, or by accumulating even more. Dying well leaves us satisfied with God alone and means we can put aside our earthly hopes and focus on the heavenly. We let go knowing that God's love and grace are greater than anything this earthly life can provide.

- **The temptation of denial of death and the virtue of acceptance**

In the last stages of life some Christians may cling to the hope that their death can be put off indefinitely – usually by medical interventions, or by miraculous healing. This can lead to tensions between the dying person and their loved ones. It is true that we need hope as we face our death but if our hope is in medical technology, we will be disappointed. Far better is to place our hope in God's redemptive power, and actively let go, trusting in His goodness and grace. This approach was modelled by Jesus Luke 22:42; Hebrews 5:7; Matthew 26:39, and was exemplified by Job in the Old Testament. Job 1:20,21.

- **The temptation of self-reliance and the virtue of dependence**

These days choice, control and self-reliance may influence people's approach to the last part of their life, especially with interventions like euthanasia becoming more available. Self-reliance often shows itself with a desire "not to be a burden" and a refusal to accept help from loved ones. Typically, though, loved ones are only too happy to help in whatever way they can and recognize that we are all supposed to bear one another's burdens. Galatians 6:2. To be dependent on others is not a weakness. Rather it is an expression of our dependence on God in every area of our lives.

## Communicating honestly

An official UK government report on end-of-life care offers a helpful framework for patients with a terminal illness, describing timeframes as death approaches (see diagram).

THE END OF LIFE At risk of dying in 6–12 months, but may live for years	THE DYING PHASE			
	MONTHS 2–9 months	SHORT WEEKS 1–8 weeks	LAST DAYS 2–14 days	LAST HOURS 0–48 hours
<b>DISEASE(S) RELENTLESS</b> Progression is less reversible Treatment benefits are waning	<b>CHANGE UNDERWAY</b> Benefit of treatment less evident Harms of treatment less tolerable	<b>RECOVERY LESS LIKELY</b> The risk of death is rising	<b>DYING BEGINS</b> Deterioration is weekly/daily	<b>ACTIVELY DYING</b> The body is shutting down The person is letting go

**Framework of timeframes as death approaches**

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Everyone's situation is different but this framework can help carers and patients understand typical timeframes as death approaches.

Important topics need to be discussed, because we are called to bear one another's burdens and to be there for one another, particularly at the end of life.

- What symptoms am I likely to suffer. How can these be alleviated?
- Should I carry on receiving treatment to prolong my life? When should this stop?
- Should I agree to a 'do not attempt resuscitation' order?
- Where would I like to die?
- Who will care for if I decide to die at home?
- Who will support me spiritually?
- What do I want to happen to my body?
- What do I want to happen at my funeral?

## **Learning from the example of Jesus**

*O death where is your victory? O death where is your sting?* 1 Corinthians 15:55

It is helpful to *look unto Jesus* because He suffered for us *as an example, so that you might follow in His steps.* Hebrews 12:1,2; 1 Peter 2:21.

***Father remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but Your will be done. Mark 14:36***

Jesus shared our humanity and in His agony submitted to the will of the Father, fully knowing what it would cost. We too can pray the same intimate, trusting prayer that He prayed: "Abba Father, may Your will be done". Jesus did not die alone, but asked His friends to *watch and pray.* Mark 14: 37,37. Death is not a journey to be taken alone. It is to be taken with those who will stay and watch and pray.

***Father forgive them for they know not what they do. Luke 23:34***

Readiness to forgive is a mark of dying well. Forgiving and asking for forgiveness breaks cycles of bitterness and retaliation; restores relationships, and brings joy in reconciliation. Dying well is an opportunity to heal broken relationships and start again.

***Today you will be with me in Paradise. Luke 23:43***

These words to the repentant thief show that we will be with Jesus when we die, and that it is never too late to repent. Jesus has prepared a place for us in Heaven with Him. How wonderful to be with Jesus forever! John 14:1-3; Matthew 26:29; Hebrews 12:2.

***Woman, behold your son. Behold your mother. John 19:26,27***

Jesus was not preoccupied with His own needs as He was dying and actively passed on practical responsibilities to others. Dying well may involve some kind of spoken or symbolic handing over of our responsibilities as part of our letting go of life.

***My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Matthew 27:46***

Jesus quoted from Psalm 22 as He was experiencing abandonment and separation from the Father. These words of lament are followed in the Psalm by images of distress but it ends with praise and a confident declaration of God's completed work of salvation. See Psalm 22. Dying well may include words of lament e.g. Psalm 10:1; Psalm 13:1; but, like Jesus, we need never fear death because *Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me, Thy rod and staff they comfort me.* Psalm 23:4.

***I am thirsty. John 19:28***

As He died Jesus suffered more than most people do today. His thirst was for water but His cry could also have been reflecting the great longings of His heart. The physical experience of dying is varied and unpredictable, but it can help us identify what we long for most of all. Jesus Himself said that the spiritual water He provides means we will never thirst again. John 4:14; Revelation 21:6; 22:17. Death is the pathway to the water of life!

### ***It is finished. John 19:30***

This is a cry of triumph, not of defeat. Jesus work had been completed so He could die well. How wonderful if we die at peace with God and with others, having completed all that God created us for, so we can also say *It is finished*.

### ***Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit. Luke 23:46***

Jesus' final act was to willingly relinquish Himself over to the care and protection of the Father. John 10:18. This act of committal was based on Psalm 31:5, and was later used by Stephen as he was dying. Acts 7:59. Dying well can also involve a final relinquishing your life to the Lord. Sometimes dying people need a kind of permission to do this – which can be given by loved ones, or those providing care or spiritual support. This letting go is also reflected in the final committal of a funeral.

## **A sure and steadfast hope**

One of the great mysteries of the resurrection is that after Jesus rose from the dead, He was the same but different. His body was somehow transformed and is now part of a new reality – seated at the right hand of the Father in Heaven.

A similar transformation awaits us following our deaths. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul contrasts the body that we have on earth and the new body that we will have in Heaven:

*What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. v42-44.*

We remain alive because of the spirit within us. (In Greek the word for spirit *ruach* means 'breath'). When we take our last breath and die the spirit leaves our body. Like Jesus, we will be transformed so that *we will be like Him*, and will *see Him as He is*. 1 John 3:2.

*The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the Man of Heaven. v45,49.*

This is our great hope, and a source of great encouragement for all Christians facing death.

The New Testament rarely speaks of believers 'dying'. Following the typical usage of the day it uses the term 'falling asleep'. e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:6,17,18; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15; Acts 7:59,60.

Jesus said *I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die*. John 11:25,26.

From a theological view believers don't really die. Just as when we wake up from sleep and are the same person, so when we die we will live forever with Lord and will be the same person but with new bodies. 1 Thessalonians 4:13,14. It will be just like when we go to sleep and wake up the next day. But when we die we will wake up brand new and will behold the face of God!

*As for me, I shall behold Your face in righteousness. When I awake I shall be satisfied with Your likeness. Psalm 17:15.*

*Now we see only a reflection as in a mirror. Then we shall see Him face to face. 1 Corinthians 13:12.*

*His servants will serve Him. They will see His face and His name will be on their foreheads. Revelation 22:3,4.*

What a great comfort!

So we don't need to fear the moment of our death. It will be the culmination of our salvation and the beginning of the eternal life that Jesus won for us at the Cross. We will become part of the great transformation of the entire universe. In the meantime we wait with eager expectation! Romans 8:19.

*The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.*  
Proverbs 4:18