

Facing Imminent Death

Not everyone is given time to anticipate death. One who dies in an accident or of a sudden heart attack does not have time to think about what dying means. Many, however, are given the privilege or burden of knowing in advance—sometimes months or weeks beforehand—that they will soon die.

What is it like to know that you are dying—that you have a terminal illness and will not get well, but will eventually die because of it? In a ground-breaking study, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross interviewed more than two hundred dying patients at a large hospital and reached the conclusion that people with terminal diseases go through five stages: (1) Denial and Isolation, (2) Anger, (3) Bargaining, (4) Depression, and (5) Acceptance.¹ Kübler-Ross also said that through all these stages, patients consistently manifested hope—hope, for instance, that a cure might be found before a cancer completed its deadly work. Each patient who finally expressed hopelessness died soon afterward.²

What suggestions can be given to one who knows that he is dying?

(1) *“Recognize the fact that dying is natural.”* Someone said, “Life is a terminal illness.” We all must die, unless the Lord returns first. Even though death is not a pleasant topic and discussing it is almost taboo, perhaps we would be better off if we spoke of it openly.³

(2) *“Acknowledge your emotions.”* Dying is a fearsome prospect for almost everyone. Death is often viewed as a monster, an enemy. At best, the land beyond death is a mysterious place to

which we have never traveled, an unknown destination. Nothing is wrong with feeling sorrow, anger, or resentment when you learn that you will die prematurely. Rare is the person who is ready to say goodbye to life and loved ones.

(3) *“Get help in dealing with your emotions.”* One who is dying should talk to God and to others about how he feels. The healthy are usually reluctant to bring up the subject of death to one who is dying. Therefore, if the terminally ill person wants to discuss the topic, he should bring it up. By sharing his feelings with others, he will be better able to cope with doubts and fears.

(4) *“Make preparations.”* One who realizes that he is dying has the advantage of knowing that it is time to “put his affairs in order.” He has the opportunity to organize his finances and family affairs and to say goodbye to loved ones. *Part of his preparation ought to be getting ready to face God in judgment* (Hebrews 9:27). One can prepare spiritually for death by making sure that he is right with God. That requires a sinner to turn to Christ for salvation by believing in Him and being baptized for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 16:16); or it may require a child of God to repent of and confess sin, or to be reconciled with a brother who has been an enemy.

(5) *“Never lose hope.”* The Christian can hope for a miracle cure, just as others do; but since he is in Christ he has an even better hope—the hope of living in a better land after death. Therefore, he should be able to say, “To live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

If you are healthy and death is, as far as you know, far in the future, why should you think about it? Because the best time to prepare for death is now. In a sense, you prepare for death every day that you live. A good life, lived for God by the grace of God, is the best preparation anyone can make for dying. The Christian really has nothing to fear from death. Coy Roper

¹Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1969), 34–121. Even though Kübler-Ross was writing for caretakers of the dying, knowing these stages may help those who are terminally ill to understand their own feelings.

²Ibid., 123–24.

³Kübler-Ross said, “It might be helpful if more people would talk about death and dying as an intrinsic part of life just as they do not hesitate to mention when someone is expecting a new baby” (Ibid., 125).