

DEATH

Facing life's greatest fear with confidence and hope....

The greatest problem in life is death! We naturally fear the unknown, and people fear death more than anything else. We usually fear the death of loved ones more than they do. Even talking about death is difficult for us. We fear that facing the reality of death will make us all too aware of the possibility of our own death, so we try to avoid the subject altogether. Yet, in trying to avoid discussing death, we instill it with such uncertainty and terror that individuals facing it quite often go through five distinct stages before reaching the stage of final acceptance.

The five stages of death and dying:

1. Shock/Denial
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

Stage 1: Denial or shock

An individual in this stage often refuses to accept the possibility of his or her own death. Repeated trips to different doctors, endlessly repeated tests (in the hope of better results), refusal to undergo the accepted treatment of a life-threatening illness – all are symptoms of the denial stage. When facing the reality of their own death, some throw themselves into frantic activity, working long hours or overtime or doing endless community work. They are trying to deny their own mortality through the wholesale pursuit of vitality and activity.

Stage 2: Anger

After futile attempts to undermine the reality of approaching death, people lapse into loneliness, guilt, purposelessness, and a real sense of grievance. This produces the stage of anger – visible anger. It is not uncommon for terminally ill patients to flare up at their physicians, their spouses, their neighbors, and relatives – eventually at God Himself.

Stage 3: Bargaining

This is the individual's last effort to escape the now overwhelming reality of oncoming death. Large gifts to charitable organizations, virtuous promises of a change of life-style, long lists of "New Year's resolutions" are all common to the bargaining stage. The length of time spent in this stage depends largely on the patient's ingenuity, energy, and reluctance to think about death.

Stage 4: Depression

The person has now moved past the endless expenditure of energy as seen in the previous bargaining stage and begins a somber and gradual realization of the consequences of oncoming death. Friends or companions are especially important in this stage. Contact with people going through the same experience, participation in terminal patient support groups, quality counseling

– all can minimize the despair of this fourth stage of death and dying. In many ways this stage constitutes a letting go of the fruitless attempt to walk backwards in time, to a point when death did not seem to be so real. It is here that secular counseling falls so dreadfully short.

Stage 5: Acceptance

For many, this stage is hardly more reassuring or comfortable than any of the others. For the unsaved individual, acceptance is merely a retreat to a fortress of self-reliance. It encompasses the hope of extracting a final purpose and meaning for the harsh reality of the previous months. For the Christian, however, the stage of acceptance brings a renewed appreciation of the fact that death is merely a transition point, a change of address, between life in a physical body on this earth to eternal life in a spiritual body in heaven. For the Christian facing death, the Bible's message is one of hope and acceptance.

Accepting the Reality of Death

The Bible reminds us: "It is appointed unto men once to die" (Hebrews 9:27). Death is inevitable and undesirable. It is something to be feared because of what the Scripture calls the sting of death (1 Cor 15:55). The term in the Greek New Testament literally means the "stinger of a scorpion."

Death is not something people casually accept. The Old Testament tells us why people do not want to die. In Ecclesiastes 3:11, the Scripture says God has "set eternity in their heart." Man has an innate desire for the eternal and can never fully be satisfied by the temporal aspects of life. From the time we are born, we strive to live forever. We want to know the secret of eternal life, because we who were created in the image of God sense the reality of life after death.

Life After Death

The Bible clearly teaches life after death, for both the saved and unsaved. To the born-again believer, the Scripture declares: "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord" (2 Cor 5:8), and to the unsaved it warns: "many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake... some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2).

The Bible emphasizes that physical death is not the end of human existence. Man enters a conscious eternity, where he faces the possibility of heaven or hell. We make our choice on this side of the grave for either eternal blessing in God's presence or condemnation and exclusion from His presence.

Sometimes we fear death because we get our focus off the eternal and onto the temporal. If you spend your entire lifetime living for the things of this world, you are going to be greatly disappointed, for real life does not consist of the things a person accumulates. Real life is a dynamic fellowship with the living God. If we keep our spiritual focus on eternity, we have every reason to hope and rejoice. The Apostle Paul wrote: "Behold, I shew you a mystery; we shall not all sleep (die), but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption and this mortal must put on immortality" (1 Cor 15:51-53).

The Hope of the Resurrection

Christians have a totally different view of death, because they alone know the One who has conquered death itself. “Death is swallowed up” in the victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:54). Thus the beloved apostle asks the ultimate question: “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? (1 Cor 15:55). The reality of death is still there for every one of us, but the sting is gone!” God will triumph over death because Christ has already risen for us. “Dust to dust” and “ashes to ashes” holds true only for a while; it is not the final chapter. Far more than that, the Bible declares that though the body perishes in the dust, your soul will live forever and stand before God on the Day of Judgment to be received into heaven.

The hope of the resurrection is the reason Paul could say with triumph: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21). For the apostle, every day was a new and exciting encounter with the risen Christ and death was but the means of ushering him into the presence of the Savior. Therefore, Paul feared neither life (with all of its complexities) or death (with all of its uncertainty). To the Christian, death is not something to be feared: It is the first step of a grand entrance into eternal joy and blessing.

Everlasting Life

Death is one of the most feared experiences of life. To the unsaved, it is the ultimate defeat of the human spirit. Man’s desire to stay alive is ever threatened by the approaching steps of death. We were born to die. What happens in between our birth and death is the sum and substance of life.

For the Christian who knows the eternal God, death is only a change of scene, not a change of life. The Scripture states: “He that hath the Son, hath life...” (I John 5:12). One does not have to die and go to heaven to obtain everlasting life. When you were saved, you became a “partaker of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). You already have eternal life right now! Learn to live like it! Live above the petty human fears of death and aging, recognizing that the eternal God lives within your soul. When you were born again (1 Pet 1:23), your life became eternal with the life of God. You shall live as long as God shall live. Why should I be afraid to die? I have everlasting life in my soul. Why should I fear the sting of death? God has called me to live forever.

The greatest commitment in life is serving the eternal God who is the lover of my soul. The greatest fulfillment you will ever find will be in living for Him and co-operating with His eternal plan and purpose for your life. Stop fearing that which God has already conquered. Learn to have confidence in the character and nature of God. Where is the sting of death? It was conquered by the death of Jesus Christ, who put death to death for everyone who trusts Him as their personal Savior.