

Dying Well  
Trinity Baptist Church  
March 19, 2017

Today we are going to focus on the very end of life. We do it from the context of our Christian faith. The question that will be before us is “How do we come to the end of life well, in a way that honors life and honors God consistent with the Gospel we embrace. In one sense for you students there is a final exam coming up for all of us-how are we going to prepare for it. We do not typically see death as a way in which God can be glorified but it truly is. Too often we view death in very negative terms and this may not always be appropriate.

Indeed, death can be a time in which God is glorified. Recall Jesus comment to Peter after the resurrection: “This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God” (John 21:19). Or Paul’s wish that “Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death” (Philippians 1:20). That should be the goal of all of us. In fact I believe that one of the metrics by which a church’s ministry can be assessed is how well the saints are coming to the end of life. Unfortunately this is one of those things we give little thought to.

Howard’s story and cartoon

This morning I want to propose seven strategies that will help us come to the end of life well.

### **Strategy 1: Understand what Scripture Teaches about Life and Death**

To begin our discussion we do well to consider what the Bible has to say about life and death. First we must see that life in Scripture is not so much about our cells functioning our hearts beating and lungs breathing but life is primarily about entering eternal relationship with God

“And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

We err when we place too much value on physical life. I am prolife but not antideath. Second we must recognize the biblical tension between death as an enemy that we should fight and a defeated enemy that we can accept.

The last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15:26).

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:56-57).

The challenge is to figure out when we should be fighting and when we should be accepting, in a very practical sense when do we go to the ICU and when do we go to hospice.

Another key biblical principle that we must keep constantly in mind is that death should always be seen in context of resurrection. Jesus died and rose from the dead and that means that for all those who are his death is not a tragic end but a glorious beginning.

## **Strategy 2: Slowly Give up on the Things and Values of this Life.**

God has allowed many of us to enjoy his rich material blessings. Our families, careers, homes, independence, and health are all privileges we have come to treasure and we should be grateful for them.. As we age and come closer to the end of life it is tempting to cling to these. Some however will be taken away from us and there will come a time when we should voluntarily give up others. It may mean selling the home, giving up driving and being less independent. The more we can do this gracefully and recognize it is the right thing to do the easier it will be but that does not mean it is easy.

## **Strategy 3: Embrace Eternity**

We should be longing more for God and his presence; longing to know him better and have a deeper personal relationship with him. Living in a sinful world and with besetting sins in our own lives should be increasingly frustrating-we should desire his kingdom to come, his will to be done. Finally as our own bodies begin to fail we should long for the resurrection body he will give us free from disease and the limitations of the flesh. It is my suspicion that my future body will be far more capable of experiencing the glory of God than the one that I currently have.

I would summarize by saying

To the extent that we can understand and experience God's love for us, develop a longing for God and find ourselves increasingly satisfied with him, more than all other things in this life, we will be prepared to die and to enter his presence. We will find what we have longed for and more. But, if we are grasping on to the things of this earth, we will never be fulfilled.

## **Strategy 4: Fulfill your Agenda**

There are a number of things that you can towards the end of life to add significant meaning to our later days.

First, do a life review. Think through the story of your life. Do not make yourself the main character. That is God's role. Tell of the ways he has led and blessed you. Do not be afraid to share your failures and the story of receiving God's forgiveness. Do this in a form that you can pass on to your family. You may want to write it out or make a recording. Think about making a recording as your family sits around and you share the story of your life with them.

Second do all you can to strengthen family ties. If there are damaged relationships perhaps you can be a means of reconciliation before you die. Allow your family to serve you, it may well bring them together. The end of life is often the time when the word family changes from a noun to a verb. It may be helpful to schedule one on one times with each of your children just to talk together. That is what the Jacob did in the book of Genesis. During these times be very conscious of saying four things

I love you  
Thank you  
I forgive you  
Forgive me

Carefully think through who needs to hear these. You want to be sure to have these conversations before you die and since you do not know when that is there is no better time than now to initiate them.

### **Strategy 5: Make Appropriate use of Technology**

You will recall from our lesson last month that technology is a gift from God and we are to use it wisely recognizing that it is not technology that heals but rather it is a tool that God can use. We are never to depend on it but couple it with prayer. When we are viewing death as an enemy we should be grateful for what medicine has to offer but recognize that there comes a time when technology has little to offer and then we should consider death a defeated enemy and back off. It has been my observation that people who are anxious to have everything done to prolong their lives do not take time to complete the agenda we were just discussing. Death comes only at the end of a fight to the finish and take everyone by surprise.

### **Strategy 6: Changing Gears**

All too often the default of medicine is to keep offering things to try to defeat death. The assumption is that the disease can be cured. In reality that is usually not true and if we are to die well we need to make the conscious decision to no longer pursue cure but opt instead for maintaining comfort. This is what I call changing gears. That raises some questions; specifically, Why? When? and How?



#### Why Change Gears?

I would propose four reasons why not to continue aggressive care as the end of life approaches. First, as we discussed above it allows us to complete the agenda. Once we accept that death is not **if** but **when** we can truly prepare to die well. Second, honestly it is what most people want if given the option. Several years ago a Gallop Poll reported that if people knew they only had six months to live 95% would opt to stay at home and not go to the hospital. Third, for followers of

Jesus it honors the Gospel which says that death is defeated. And finally and perhaps most important, it surrenders control of our lives to the Lord.

### When to change gears?

This can be very challenging. I recommend that a number of domains must be considered, physical, emotional, spiritual and social.

In the physical realm it is almost always necessary to have a diagnosis. I have seen several people who felt they were dying but did not have a diagnosis only to find that they had an easily treatable condition. Dave's story. Second we need to know what treatments are available and a rough idea of the associated benefits and burdens. We need some idea of the expected outcome or prognosis with and without treatment. Perhaps the most difficult situation is when one is critically ill and a number of the bodies systems are failing. Each problem has its own specialists and in their particular area they are optimistic. Yet, if you could step back and look at the whole person you recognize that the chance of survival is very low.

Emotionally there comes a time when a near terminal patient loses the will to keep going. They are tired of feeling ill, weary of the side effects of medication, uncomfortable with the thought of going back to the hospital or as they say "their get up and go has got up and went."

Spiritually they are at peace. They have experienced God's forgiveness by trusting Christ as their savior. They long for God's presence and are sick of living in this sinful world. They are ready for a new body.

Socially it is easier to change gears when the loved ones and family are supportive of it. One context where it is especially difficult is when there are young children and or teenagers who could be adversely effected if they felt their parent was just "giving up."

### How to change gears?

This requires a deliberate decision and it should be talked through with loved ones and your primary care physician. If you are in the hospital this may be the doctor who is caring for you while in the hospital and not the one you have seen in the office.

All of us should have an advance directive that includes a limited power of attorney which indicates who should make your decisions in the event that you are not capable. We may want to include two other documents: a living will that states you do not want your life prolonged if death is immanent and a Do Not Resuscitate order that says if your heart stops you do not want any attempt to restart it. Lydia will talk more about this in two weeks.

Many advance directives focus on particular technologies like ventilators, IV's, CPR etc. I find these inadequate because whether I would want them will totally depend on the medical context. I believe the most important thing is to have a clear statement of your values. As I have searched the scriptures for some principle to follow I have focused on Paul's writing to the Philippians.

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between

the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, Philippians 1:21-25

Based largely on that and finding it consistent with the rest of scripture, I have included this statement in my advance directive.

I am happy for technology to be used so long as there is reasonable hope of it allowing me to serve others. But, if for physical, mental, emotional or spiritual reasons it is unlikely I will be able to serve others I do not want that technology.

The next step in implement a decision to change gears is to review you medications and stop those designed to prolong life (or more prolong dying). You may want to have a defibrillator turned off at this time as well.

One of the best ways to pursue comfort care is to get under the care of a hospice organization. Since the first hospice was founded in London the movement has gained wide acceptance. The Connecticut Hospice in Branford was the first one in this country and continues to do a great job. Here you have a group of nurses, home health aides, social workers, chaplains and volunteers who are committed to making the most out of life till death comes. They will do their best to provide care wherever you are, home, assisted living, nursing home and when that is not feasible move you to their residential facility.

### **Strategy 7: When Death Comes, Rest in Jesus**

Now we are prepared to die well. He have come to closure with family and loved ones, we long for our eternal home, we can rest enjoy time with family and in the Lord's presence and rest in him. The fight is over the finish line is in sight and there at the end is Jesus himself.

To allow this requires the help of family and loved ones. I find that hospice nurses are pretty good at coaching family on when the end is immanent (24 hours). Then the family will want to make time to come and be with their loved one. If the dying can participate they will want to talk about the Lord and his love, talk about what heaven will be like and pray together for the surviving family. They may want to share stories about how much the dying has meant to them. They can pray, read scripture, and sing or listen to music. If the dying cannot participate in the conversation they should still assume that they can hear. Along with words there should be a lot of touching and hugging. One wonderful gift is to give the dying permission to give up the fight and die peacefully.

For the one who is dying this is the time to totally surrender control, to trust that God is doing what is right and to rest in Jesus. It is a time to uniquely experience the presence of Jesus.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Psalm 23:4 (ESV)

A death like this can be beautiful. Unfortunately in spite of our best intentions it is not always the way it is. At times it is nasty and messy. Then we can only do the best we can. Sometimes it requires aggressive pain management that dopes the patient up or has other side effects. At other times the patient lingers on far beyond our expectations and we simply cannot be present all the time. We must accept that these, too are in God's control and he has his purposes.