
The Grace To Die Well

by: Ronald L. Dart

When it comes my turn to die—and it will come—I hope that God will give me the grace to die well. I know I will fear it, for I already do, but I am not sure what I fear. It is not just the pain, because death doesn't hurt. It is living that hurts. Even though dying can be painful, we endure most of our pain while trying to stay alive. Surgery and chemotherapy are not inflicted on us by the disease, but by the doctor.

The body has no malice. Pain is not a penalty imposed on us by the body. The body hurts to tell us something is wrong. It asks us to take action to make things right again. When you grab hold of a hot pan, the body screams at you to let go. We call the scream pain.

Like any other sane person, I fear pain, but that is not why I am afraid to die, for I will endure great pain and suffering to keep on living. I will go through surgery, not once, but a dozen times. I will endure days and weeks in agony, if necessary, just to stay alive. I will grit my teeth and endure suffering worthy of a medieval torture chamber in the hopes that my life might be prolonged.

When we were children, we understood little of death. We may have prayed the little child's prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take," but we didn't really go to bed in fear of death.

Nevertheless, children do hate to go to bed—basically because they are afraid, they will miss something. A child will even risk the pain of a spanking just to stay awake and stay involved. I can't help wondering if there is a little of that fear that stays with us all our lives. Even those of us who look forward to the resurrection, still dread death. It may not be a lack of faith at all. It may be closer to a child's response to going to bed—whatever is going on, we want to be in on it.

Solomon thought of death in much the same way:

"For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also, their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion forever in anything that is done under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 9:4–6).

As I get older, I find myself hating to go to bed. There is so much fun to be had, so much living to do, so much work to be done, and a lot of that work is work for God.

Yet I know that if I should die before I wake, my time will come to live again. Meanwhile, others will do what has to be done. I have no contribution to make that God cannot make through someone else. I dread death because I want to be there—I want to be involved.

If I were to become terminally ill, I would surely want the brethren to pray for me. I suppose I would want an announcement made in church. And yet, I don't want to have to explain every day how I feel. I would like to spare my friends and loved ones the inevitable roller coaster of emotion that comes when we pray for one who is dying. How is he today? they ask. Oh, he is much better. The doctor says it was a miracle the way he came through surgery. But then he gets worse, much worse. Then there is another reprieve, another miracle. And then one day the call comes...it's over.

No one can understand what this does to family and friends. Whatever courage it takes to die well, it is worth it for their sakes.

But in truth, it is not so much courage I want, it is style. It is not only bad faith, it is bad form to pray and then check your pulse every five minutes. It seems to me that it is better form and better faith to pray and then get on with living—and then when God is through with you, to pass from the scene gracefully—with style. After all, can't I say as Paul did:

"Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:8).

There is yet one more reason to die well. Too many seem to die before they are dead. They become hostage to their disease. They quit living and start dying much too soon. I don't want to be asked to describe my tumor or display my scars. Every moment I spend describing the disease is given to the disease. It has already taken too much. Why should I give it anymore?

I know people inquire because they care, but I should care enough not to burden them. There might be some value in it if, in the process of burdening them, I unburdened myself, but I don't. I only increase my own burden.

I knew a man who, after a short struggle with cancer, was told by the doctor that he had two months to live. He declined chemotherapy. The doctor offered it, but his heart wasn't in it.

A lot of people knew about his plight, and a lot of people prayed for him. I presume he prayed for himself—he never said. When friends and relatives would call and ask him how he was, the answer was always the same: I'm just fine, he would say, and then he would change the subject. I suppose just fine is all in the definition, because he had a racking cough, was losing weight, and his face was lined with pain.

That was three years ago. And he's still just fine. He just kept on living his life. To this day, he has never given the disease a minute. Whatever it gets from him, it will have to take.

Right now, I am in great health. I don't have the terrible spectra of disease hanging over my head. So, it seemed like a good time to think about the most precious liberty our savior has given us—the freedom from the fear of death:

"Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Hebrews 2:14–15).

None of this is to say that we should not fight for our lives. But when we have prayed, when we have put our illness in the nail-scarred hands of Jesus Christ, we have given enough of our time to it. If worse comes to worse, let the doctors fight the disease—let them dwell on it, think about it, examine it, and worry about it—while we occupy ourselves with the business of living and the joy of loving

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you fear death?
2. If you do, do you know why you fear it?
3. What are your thoughts about Mr. Dart's idea that maybe our fear of death isn't a lack of faith, but more like a child who doesn't want to go to bed?
4. Do you agree that one of the reasons we may dread death is because we want to be involved in whatever keeps going on in life?
5. What are your thoughts about this point that Mr. Dart makes: "It seems to me that it is better form and better faith to pray and then get on with living—and then when God is through with you, to pass from the scene gracefully—with style."?
6. Do you know of someone who has died before they were actually dead?
7. How do we prevent ourselves from being defeated before it is our time to die?

8. What other points did you really like that Mr. Dart made that encouraged you to be joyful, live, and not to think about dying?