
Contents

Preface	9
Foreword	11
1. Death and Contemporary American Culture	13
2. Death in the Old Testament	23
3. Death in the New Testament	37
4. Death and the Physician	55
5. Death and the Christian Caregiver	65
6. Death and the Funeral Director	79
7. Death and the Family: The Pastoral Opportunity	89
8. Death and the Final Good-Bye	107
9. Challenging Situations	129
10. Questions Pastors and Mourners Ask	155
11. An Anthology of Resources	177
Appendix—Ideas for Funeral Messages	191
Bibliography	203
Scripture Index	225
About the Authors	237

Death and Contemporary American Culture

It's becoming more and more difficult to minister to grieving people, because in their attempts to enjoy life, many of them are denying death. Mention death and the average person responds something like comedian Woody Allen: "It's not that I'm afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens." There are no funeral homes in shopping malls to remind us of our mortality; and if there were, the salespeople would have to hand out free coffee to keep shoppers from looking the other way. With one hand gripping the steering wheel and the other holding a cell phone, most people breeze their way through the day and never consider that it might be their last.

Ours is a culture that insists that we remain young, no matter how old we are. As for death, don't mention it! We live in a society that invents harmless antiseptic words for death—"going into the light," "passing away," "released," and so on. But avoiding the word doesn't eliminate the experience.

The Bible looks death squarely in the face: "Yet as surely as the LORD lives and as you live, there is only a step between me and death"

(1 Samuel 20:3). A step—not a mile, not light-years, just a step. The Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* burial service puts it this way: “In life we are in death.” But how many people actually believe this?

This attitude of denial is strange because world events shout “death” at us day after day. How can we deny death when 2,500,000 people die in the United States each year, and their names are listed in hometown obituary columns? About 13,000 of these people are shot—murdered—and another 17,000 deliberately shoot themselves. Sixty million people died in World War II. Over six million Jews died in the Holocaust. Watch the news on television and you may actually see people being burned to death, shot to death, or blown to bits. Let death claim a prominent person—President Reagan, the Pope, Elvis Presley, or Princess Diana—and the world follows the television reports for days, maybe weeks. As of this writing, lives are being lost in conflicts around the world daily. *Violence and death are an accepted part of contemporary life, yet people still believe it won't happen to them.*

Why this self-imposed blindness?

PEOPLE GROW HARDENED TO THE FACT OF DEATH

No matter how you get your information—television, radio, newspapers, e-mail, or Internet sources—you can't escape the rapidity and immediacy of today's news reports. We learn about suicide bombings in Baghdad or Jerusalem, or about an angry ex-employee who shot his boss and two innocent bystanders. Perhaps a violent mob scene after a soccer game left twenty people dead and many more injured. A gang fight erupted in the inner city and claimed thirteen lives, including the lives of two policemen. A couple of teenagers shot a dozen students and three teachers on a high school campus and then took their own lives.

You can't be constantly exposed to this kind of information without something happening to your inner person. Eventually the news may totally overwhelm you, and you will throw up your hands in desperation and stop listening and looking. Or the news may gradually harden you and slowly rob you of the sensitivity of heart that we all need if we're going to be emotionally balanced and build healthy personal relationships. Like guards in a death camp, people can see and hear so much that is horrible and inhuman that they get used to it, to the point where they're able to tell jokes as they stack up the corpses. In his poem “Man Was Made to Mourn,” Robert

Burns wrote, “Man’s inhumanity to man / Makes countless thousands mourn”; but it also makes countless millions *lose* the ability to mourn.

In her article “TV’s Love Affair with Death” in the March 25, 2001, issue of the *New York Times*, Wendy Lessner makes some telling points. “Television blurs our sense of what death means, making it hard to distinguish visibility from survival, biological dissolution from corporate termination, rerun from afterlife. . . . Nestled in your living room, that little box is designed to minimize any sense of public responsibility, any sense of shame. All your reactions to it can be safely private; you can be as grossed out or as coldhearted or as maudlin as you like, and no one else needs to know.”

PEOPLE BELIEVE THAT “DEATH IS NATURAL”

“Death is not an enemy to be conquered or a prison to be escaped,” write Joseph and Laurie Braga in their foreword to *Death, the Final Stage of Growth* by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. They call death “an integral part of our lives that gives meaning to human existence,” an “invisible but friendly companion.”

In *Thoughts on War and Death*, published in 1915, Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, wrote that “death [is] natural, undeniable, and unavoidable. In reality, however, we [are] accustomed to believe as if it were otherwise.” Since humans are a part of nature, our death is obviously natural, and in that sense we are “like the beasts that perish” (Psalm 49:12, 20).

But while death is a biological fact, people are much more than bodies, and life is much more than physical functioning. Unlike the beasts that perish, humans are created in the image of God, and therefore death involves important matters such as God, judgment, and eternity. Death came into the world because of sin; and sin separated us from God. The sovereign Lord is the only One who can rescue us from the consequences that lie beyond death.

The “death is natural” school has lulled many people into a false sense of security. But 1 Corinthians 15 states that death is “the last enemy” (v. 26) and that victory over death is found only in Jesus Christ (vv. 21–58).

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1926–2004) was a pioneer in the field of

thanatology, that branch of medicine that focuses on the terminally ill and their families. Dr. Kubler-Ross gave to the world the well-known five responses (or stages) that terminal patients usually experience as they await death: (1) shock and denial, (2) anger, (3) bargaining for more time, (4) depression, and (5) acceptance. But Kubler-Ross saw no reason why people should fear death. She compared death to the butterfly shedding its cocoon. To her, death was only a higher state of consciousness where people continued to laugh, perceive, and grow, something like being “born” into a new world or being graduated from school to a higher level. What basis she had for these convictions, she never revealed, but many people have believed her romanticized views of death and therefore are sure they need no spiritual preparation to die. While many of her insights into the “death process” are helpful to the alert caregiver, her views of what goes on after death are not always biblical.

The New Age movement has capitalized on these views as well as on the data from people who have had “out-of-body” (ecsomatic) experiences, such as those recorded and discussed in Raymond Moody’s two books *Life After Life* and *Reflections on Life After Life* (1975).¹ New Age counselors also lean heavily on mystical statements from Eastern religions, what Lucy Bregman calls “glow words,” words that are “filled with positive feelings, but lacking exact definition.”² These “warm, fuzzy words” sound so soothing, but they lack authority. Carol W. Parrish-Harra opens her *New Age Handbook on Death and Dying* with an anonymous poem that illustrates our point. The person who has died tells us not to weep, because he or she is the wind blowing, the glitter on the snow, the sunlight on the grain, the refreshing rain, the circling birds, the stars. “Do not stand at my grave and cry / I am not there. I did not die.”

The “out-of-body” testimonies usually emphasize the experience of seeing a bright light at the end of a tunnel and moving toward it with confidence. This explains the large number of New Age books with “light” in their titles, perhaps the most popular being *Embraced by the Light*, by Betty Eadie and Curtis Taylor (Bantam, 1994). But there are also *To Touch the Light* by Kevin Randle (New York: Windsor, 1994), *Closer to the Light* by Melvin Morse and Paul Perry (New York: Villard, 1994), and *One with the Light* by Brad Steiger (New York: Signet, 1994). That Satan can appear as an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:13–15) never seems to enter into the discussion.

Multitudes of people no longer think Christianly about death. For many, fear of death is no longer part of their emotional equipment, although you won't see them taking risks that might end their lives. If they attend a Christian funeral and hear a biblical message, they will smile, filter out the theology, and hold tenaciously to their "glow words."

PEOPLE BELIEVE THEY ARE IN CHARGE OF LIFE AND DEATH

In 1988 the state of Oregon passed a Death with Dignity Act that allowed certain patients to request death at the hands of a physician. The assisting physician would be immune from prosecution, but the procedure must be carefully monitored and regulated by the proper authorities. All of this added up to "death with dignity," a practice that has been carried on in the Netherlands for several years, although without the same degree of medical accountability as is required in Oregon. "Euthanasia" is the official word for this procedure. *Euthanasia* comes from the Greek and means "easy death" or "good death." PAS is the code word: "physician-assisted suicide." Of course, euthanasia refers only to the *act* of dying, not to what happens to the individual after death. Physicians and legislators have no authority over people in the afterlife.

The great contemporary proponent of "mercy killing" is Dr. Jack Kevorkian, at this writing serving time in a Michigan correctional facility. He claims he assisted in at least 130 "mercy" deaths. Hollywood plans to make a film about him.

But euthanasia isn't the only current practice that gives society the idea that we're in charge of death; there is also abortion. It's estimated that in the United States alone, a million and a half unborn babies are legally killed each year. We have made the life-giving womb into a death-receiving tomb. Our society permits persons to be killed before they are born and when they get old and have no "quality life," a phrase that's difficult to define. If this kind of activity is legal, what does this say about our views of life?

The strange thing is that many people who approve of the killing of innocent unborn children and unhappy older folks are against killing convicted criminals. In some states, a criminal must kill at least two victims before being eligible for death row. This means that the life of one guilty murderer is worth the lives of two innocent citizens, which is

strange mathematics indeed. The execution of a guilty criminal may not deter others from committing a capital crime, but it is a signal that the ultimate punishment is death, *because death ends all as far as this world is concerned*.

The fate of baseball legend Ted Williams has turned the media spotlight on the practice of cryonics—that is, keeping a dead body frozen for possible revival. Cryonics is another means through which humans try to have the last word over death. After Williams died on July 5, 2002, his body was shipped to an Arizona cryonics center where it was prepared and frozen, awaiting the day when science will discover how to restore dead cells and bring people back to life again. At this time, however, the cost of preparing and preserving the body is about \$120,000—prohibitive to most families.

Embryonic stem cell research is yet another area in which the denial of death is practiced. This process of experimenting on embryos is called “therapeutic research,” but the fact is that the embryos are destroyed in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. The word “therapeutic” applies, not to the embryo, but to the person who might benefit from what is learned. To those who believe in the sanctity of human life, embryonic stem research involves killing a person. A utilitarian perspective says that it is acceptable to take a life in order to save a life, but the word “death” rarely enters the discussion.

PEOPLE BELIEVE THE WRONG PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

Most people aren’t professional philosophers and wouldn’t know a logical positivist from a moral realist, but what professional philosophers believe, teach, and write filters down to us and quietly influences our thinking and living. All writers and artists have a philosophy of life, and it’s bound to show up in what they produce, be it comedy, drama, sculpture, paintings, or television specials. What we see and hear in movies and on television, as well as what we read, can subtly introduce us to some of these philosophies. If you watch enough reruns of your favorite TV series, you will discover the writers’ views about a number of things, because gifted writers share their philosophy of life. Or, you can read *Sophie’s Choice* by William Styron and get a short course in philosophy while following the story.

We don't talk much about existentialism nowadays, but its influence lingers. After World War II, existentialism invaded American academia and from the campus moved to the marketplace, the theater, and even the church. There is a Christian existentialism (Kierkegaard, for instance) as well as an agnostic (or atheistic) existentialism, but both schools believe that everyday existence is artificial and superficial and therefore puts people into bondage. But when individuals come to grips with the realities of life, especially death, this creates anxiety, which when accepted leads the way to freedom. This demands a courageous "leap of faith," but for most existentialists it's faith in yourself, not faith in God.

MULTITUDES OF PEOPLE
NO LONGER THINK
CHRISTIANLY ABOUT DEATH.

The fact of death occupies a central place in existentialism, although the agnostic existentialist has no belief in an afterlife. Karl Jaspers wrote, "To learn to live and to learn how to die are one and the same thing."³ To them, the essence of true human existence is found in freedom, and freedom comes from self-determination, the individual's acceptance of reality and responsibility, no matter where the decisions may lead. "Man makes himself," said Jean-Paul Sartre, the existentialist philosopher, playwright, and novelist. "He isn't ready-made at the start." Existentialists like to think of themselves as self-made people.

Existentialism's emphasis on death and the anguish of life helped to produce the theater of the absurd, certain schools of modern art and experimental music, and a host of novels and plays. All of these declare the importance of the individual and his or her decisions, and the need for courage to be yourself in spite of circumstances. It's William Ernest Henley's poem "Invictus" all over again: "I am the master of my fate / I am the captain of my soul."

Students discuss Sartre's novels from high school to graduate school, and his plays are produced by drama classes, so his philosophy gets a hearing and influences people's thinking whether they know it or not.

Fascinated by such a daring approach to life, students try to display their erudition by quoting Sartre, not realizing what he's really saying. "I am condemned to be free." "Hell is other people." "Human life begins at the far side of despair." It sounds clever, but is it true?

Existentialism isn't a popular philosophy today, but the seeds sown by the songs, novels, and plays produced by existentialist writers are still bearing fruit.

AS WE MINISTER TO PEOPLE,
THEIR WORLDVIEW WILL EITHER
FILTER OUT GOD OR OPEN
THE DOOR TO HIS TRUTH.

THE WORLDLY MIND AND THE WORD OF GOD

Put all of the above together and add the allure of money, the quest for worldly success, the appetite for pleasure, and the strategy of the Evil One, and you have "the world," which is the strongest influence that affects people's minds today. The apostle John called it "the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does" (1 John 2:16). Many people are like the farmer in our Lord's parable who was sure he was ready to retire, only to discover that he would be summoned by God that very night (Luke 12:13–21). Most people don't know that parable, but they do practice the farmer's philosophy of life—"eat, drink, and be merry."

Our point is simply this: as we minister to people, their worldview will either filter out God or open the door to His truth. The people may not even know what's going on in their own minds, but we must be aware of the process and do our best to communicate God's truth in such a way that they will understand it and accept it. We need an understanding of the Word of God, the fullness of the Spirit of God, and a love for these people for whom Christ died.

NOTES

1. Raymond Moody, *Life After Life* (New York: Bantam Books), 1976.
2. Lucy Bregman, *Beyond Silence and Denial* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 7.
3. Quoted in *Death and Western Thought* by Jacques Choron (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 228. This book is an excellent survey of what Western philosophy teaches about death.