

WHY TALK ABOUT DEATH?

Only weeks after the invitation to write this book, our family came face to face with death and future glory once again. Despite the distress we felt, the Lord graciously made this spiritually profitable for us. On hearing that our relative had just a few days to live, or perhaps only hours, one chapter was actually written in draft at the bedside during the night hours. This book, therefore, is earthed in real pastoral situations.

Although I hesitated when invited to write about death and dying, that experience was one reason that I was persuaded to write this book,¹ but it is appropriate that I share several others.

DYING GRACE IN ABUNDANCE²

Having pastored churches in South and North Wales³ before training pastors and missionaries,⁴ I pastored many believers on their way to, and entrance into, heaven. The memories of godly believers sometimes struggling but

often enjoying and longing to be with the Lord whom they loved have lingered with me. I had heard of the grace given to famous believers over the centuries. I remember, for example, reading of Idelette—the wife of John Calvin in Geneva—who died on March 29, 1549 after years of ill-health. Her faith shone brightly in her final hours. On her death-bed she rejoiced in the hope of the gospel: ‘O glorious resurrection! God of Abraham and of all our fathers, never has any believer who put his hope on You been disappointed. I also will hope.’⁵

It is moving to read about such believers but this was also true of believers under my charge. The Lord gave them dying grace in abundance, and they were ‘more than conquerors’ through Him who loved them (Rom. 8:37). Often I was humbled by their faith and the reality of the Lord’s presence with them.

AN UNMENTIONABLE TOPIC

Few people, including Christians, talk about death. They may think about it, especially young people, but they do not often articulate or share their thoughts. That is particularly true of men. It is almost a taboo subject in the West.

Some writers disagree. For example, quoting Geoffrey Gorer⁶ that death had become a twentieth-century taboo, Tony Walter⁷ proceeds to use M. Simpson’s 1979 statement that: ‘Death is a very badly kept secret; such an unmentionable topic that there are over 650 books now in print asserting that we are ignoring the subject.’

By 1987 Simpson could refer to another 1,700 books subsequently released on death and dying.⁸ For that reason Tony Walter poses the question of whether we are witnessing a revival of death. He partly answers his question in an

earlier article,⁹ claiming that death is talked about much more and refers to the wide publicity for cancer research, terminal illnesses, like leukaemia amongst children, the active promotion of hospices, and the availability of trained counsellors to assist those suffering grief and bereavement. Without answering his question, Walter insists if there is a revival in talk about death then this is not due to religion or medicine but to the ‘dying, dead or bereaved families themselves’.¹⁰

Certainly responses to death have become more postmodern and individualised, with a wide range of responses and options available, in a society which is pluralist and secularised. There is a growing amount of literature from various perspectives on the subject of death but nevertheless there remains a reluctance by many people to talk about dying and death.

Consider an article in the *Big Issue*—a magazine widely distributed in the United Kingdom, sold by the unemployed, often immigrants, in the main shopping centres and thorough-fares.¹¹ Caitlin Doughty’s article entitled ‘How to lose the fear of death’ is unusual; a disturbing exposure by the young author from Los Angeles of the secretive culture and wealthy business of those who care for, and dispose of, the deceased.¹² Doughty encourages people to talk about death and prepare for it, making their wishes known to their families. Some in the United States are responding to her appeal. ‘Death salons’ and ‘death cafes’ are being opened across the country where people meet to talk about their mortality.

The author of *Being Mortal*,¹³ Atul—a medical physician in the United States—also encourages people to converse concerning their end-of-life care and plan. In addition to books, considerable publicity is given to celebrities

struggling with terminal cancer, as well as efforts to raise money for medical research. Almost daily our TV news brings reports of natural disaster and the carnage of wars and terrorism, while violence and death are prominent features in films and documentaries. We are surrounded by death but also the slowly increasing number of voices challenging people to think about death and prepare for it.

Challenging the Silence

An example is the growing debate in the United Kingdom over euthanasia and assisted dying. For several years parliament has discussed these issues, while pressure groups lobby politicians to influence public opinion, often through highly publicised and emotional stories of terminally ill patients travelling overseas to exercise their 'right' to voluntary euthanasia. In this context, people are challenged to talk about end-of-life issues.

Nevertheless, there remains stubborn reluctance to talk about death and Michael Henshall, the former Bishop of Warrington, confirms that 'for many people death has become an unspoken subject'.¹⁴ In the United Kingdom, the Dying Matters Coalition of Care Organisations was established by the National Council for Palliative Care in 2009.

One recent survey undertaken by the Coalition discovered that about four-fifths of the United Kingdom public are uncomfortable discussing dying and death, preferring to avoid the subject. Approximately one third of British adults think about dying and death at least once a week, and while it has 'become more acceptable to talk about death and dying over the last decade, it remains a taboo subject'.¹⁵ That is despite Julie Beck's statement that 'we are all going to die and we all know it'.¹⁶ However, the

fact that death is rarely talked about is understandable. We only see death at a distance on the TV and in films; rarely do people die at home but in a hospital, clinic or nursing home. When a relative dies, the dead body is removed to a mortuary or a funeral parlour immediately until the funeral.

Laura Winner is in no doubt about it, especially for the twentieth-century:

Americans have embraced an unprecedented denial of death, an unprecedented evasion of death. In general, we have removed death from our homes. People no longer die there; corpses no longer repose there before burial. We no longer allow people to say they are dying—rather “battling” an illness.¹⁷

Professor Mayur Lakhani served as chair of the Dying Matters Coalition and is a general medical practitioner in England. She has given advice to medical practitioners concerning the silence over dying:

We want to encourage people to talk more openly about dying and bereavement...we need to bring dying back into people's homes, rather than in hospital, care homes or hospices. There is a huge change required in our culture, starting with the medical profession.¹⁸

Professor Lakhani urges colleagues to be compassionate but direct and honest with patients when talking about dying, not offering false hopes to patients. In the United States of America, for example, Atul Gawande claims he learnt ‘almost nothing on aging or frailty or dying’ during his medical training; later in his surgical training and practice he felt unable to help those who were terminally ill.¹⁹

Cancer Ward

Solzhenitsyn captures well the negative attitude towards death in Communist Russia in 1968. A profound discussion had been in progress between some patients in *Cancer Ward*. Kostoglotov's remarks seemed to another patient—Nikolayevich—to represent an attack on a government institution. But Kostoglotov continued 'recklessly putting forward his own ideas'. Provocatively he asked, 'Why stop a man from thinking? After all, what does our philosophy of life boil down to?'

There was an immediate interruption from Nikolayevich: 'Please! We mustn't talk about death! We mustn't even remind anyone of it!'

Kostoglotov was not impressed: 'If we can't talk about death here, where on earth can we? I suppose we live forever!'

His objector was not impressed at all: 'You want us to talk and think about death the whole time?'

By this time Kostoglotov was ready to develop his point: 'Not all the time, only sometimes. It's useful. Because what do we keep telling a man all his life? "You're a member of the collective!" That's right. But only while he's alive. When the time comes for him to die, we release him from the collective ...he has to die alone.'

Turning to another patient, Kostoglotov asked for a response and a 'nice geologist' replied that 'within limits that's true. We're so afraid of death, we drive away all thoughts of those who have died.'²⁰

This narrative illustrates the fact that whether in Western or Eastern Europe or in America, death is often a taboo subject. I fear too that there is a silence within many Christian churches and amongst believers about dying, so