

Pastor's Column - Aging

The Reverend Byron Snapp

Rev. Snapp holds a B.A. from King College and an M. Div. from Reformed Theological Seminary. He is assistant pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church and principal of Covenant Christian School in Cedar Bluff, Virginia.

The inspired Paul was exactly right. "The last enemy that will be destroyed is death." (I Cor. 15:26) Unless one is alive when the Lord returns, the individual can be assured that his physical body will one day face death and lose.

However, we live in a culture that does not want to face the thought of death. There are several reasons for this avoidance. First, many are not prepared to face God. Hebrews 10:27 teaches us that men die once and then face judgment. If men can avoid thinking about death then they can better avoid the thought of facing a holy God. I believe this is one reason that our culture demands extraordinary means to preserve life (except for the unborn humans). Respirators, tubes, expensive surgery, monitors, etc., all seemingly postpone the inevitable death and life on death's other side.

Secondly, death is often hidden from the living. In previous generations people generally died in a home of family members. Death was hard to avoid as relatives had to tend to the needs of the dying. The pain and effects of approaching death upon the physical body were clearly evident. Even children could not escape seeing death's advance upon its prey.

Today our culture is quite different. The dying are often in a hospital room. They are nursed by their closest family members and the hospital's nursing staff. As death makes its final advance often family and friends are ushered out of the room so they are not confronted with death's victory over one's physical life. Thus, one can go through life without seeing death firsthand.

Thirdly, the thought of death is often suppressed because death is abnormal. Man was created to live and bring glory to God. Adam's sin which was in God's

eternal plan, resulted in death, physical and spiritual, coming on all of Adam's descendants. Thus, that which is abnormal to the body became a normal part of life. Man is conceived in sin and thereby spiritually separated from God. Man also faces physical death - the separation of the body from the soul.

Fourthly, man takes little thought of death because he lives in the present. He is alive now. Tomorrow often does not matter today. To keep the present longer, man will go to great expense to look youthful. In and of itself looking youthful is not wrong. At the same time "youthful" man will often continue to be involved in unhealthy lifestyles at work and at meals that lead to stress and overweight. These along with immoral lifestyles can lead to medical problems and, humanly speaking, hasten death's approach.

For these and other reasons man is often unprepared for debilitating illnesses that result in life's slow ebb. Therefore it is important for those in and out of the medical profession to give some thought to preparing for this time in life.

First, one must realize that spiritual death is worse than physical death. To prepare for one's physical death it is important that the individual confront spiritual realities. Without God-given repentance and faith, man will end up in hell on death's other side. The inspired writer's words need to be taken to in the days of your youth before the difficult days come." (Eccl. 12:10a) If one does not make peace with God in youth, hearts often become hardened as the years go by.

Christian medical personnel can often minister spiritually when giving a patient a diagnosis of a terminal illness. If the doctor is unsure of the patient's salvation, it is a

good time to ask, "Are you ready to meet God?"

I know such a question goes against the grain of cultural thinking. Sadly, relatives often want to keep the thought of approaching death away from the terminally ill. Death must be faced however. God may use this pointed question and your accompanying ministry in a saving way.

In ministering to younger patients, doctors are also to minister to the whole person. You may see signs of a lifestyle or bad habits that can hasten debilitating illness. You have a duty not only to treat the person physically but also to minister spiritually by pointing out the effects of the lifestyle on one's body. Offer the preventative medicine set forth in Scripture - that of the importance of turning away from sin and turning to God. This involves replacing sinful habits with godly practice.

At the report of a terminal illness to a Christian, the Christian needs to be assured of God's promises such as Rom. 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." Second Corinthians 4:16-18 is also important, "Therefore we do not lose heart; even though our outward man is perishing, the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we do not look at things which are seen, for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

Another approach may well be to remind the patient of God's tender mercies. When deadly illness comes as a sudden onslaught an unprepared individual may have no time to take care of important business in life -reconciliation with God and/or with relatives, the disposal of possessions, and reflecting on one 's life. Although fatal illnesses are no fun, their slow work provides time for any necessary decisions to be made.

Spiritual matters can also be approached by having a tract or booklet that Biblically explains the Gospel to hand out to the patient along with literature on the deadly disease. The patient may well read the spiritual

material and reflect on it when he/she will not readily talk to you about it. Why not include some good Christian booklets on worry, anxiety, salvation, etc., in your waiting room reading material? You may be surprised how often this material has to be replaced because they are taken for further study by the sick who are suddenly open to spiritual matters.

This waiting can be agonizing whether or not one is deathly ill. God may well use these verses to get the patient's attention regarding spiritual matters. You may well call attention to these verses in your conversations with patients.

This ministry cannot be had if word of debilitating illness is left for a nurse to deliver by phone to a patient. From a layman's viewpoint I cannot stress enough the importance of a doctor's delivering a displeasing test result to the ill. This is particularly true for those who have no family members with them at the time the report is given.

I have spent much time on the first step one needs to take when confronting a debilitating illness. The importance of this first step cannot be overly stressed. It has eternal consequences. Christian doctors can often be on the front lines of ministry in these situations. Never forget that one's ministry is to the whole man, not just the physical aspect.

Other preparations that need to be made for the possible approach of wasting diseases will be covered in a future article.

Your spouse can have a part in this ministry by seeing that the tracts and booklets are replaced when needed. Also, wives may need to needlework of appropriate Scripture verses to be displayed in the rooms where patients wait for you to enter.