

Pastor's Column

Aging Part II

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Years ago Benjamin Franklin stated that death and taxes are sure things. We are reminded of taxes every time we get our paycheck, make a retail purchase subject to sales tax, and on April 15th. We are not reminded of death quite so often.

In a recent article I surveyed several reasons why death is not a part of our regular thinking. As the medical staff is often on the front line when patients are confronted with debilitating illness, I looked at the most important preparation that needs to be made in the face of a fatal illness. At these times there can be no greater issue than whether or not one is ready to meet God. Is the individual trusting in Jesus Christ alone for salvation? Not only are ill individuals more willing to face the fact of their terminal life, family members often are also. Thus, the spiritual ministry of medical personnel can extend beyond the terminally ill to family members.

Secondly, a properly prepared will is of utmost importance. The death of a loved one is sufficiently traumatic without grieving loved ones being confronted with the legal realities that exist when no will has been prepared. A will should be prepared prior to the advance of old age or the announcement of a fatal illness. No one has the promise of tomorrow nor that one's death will be a slow one. If you are currently unprepared, find out what is required in your state for a legal will and take the steps quickly to have one drawn up. Proper preparation may well keep your property from being unnecessarily tied up, prevent the intervention of the state in determining how your possessions are to be divided, and inform your family how you wish to dispose of what you own. Wills need to be regularly updated.

Thirdly, your covenant children need to be raised in the knowledge of their responsibility to take care of their aged parents, if and when the occasion arises. Joseph in Egypt desired to have his aged father near him (Gen. 45,46). Jacob and Easau apparently took care of their father Isaac in his last days (Gen. 35:27-29). Necessary parental care is one application of the Fifth Commandment. This lesson can be instilled in our children in a number of ways. First, faithful Scriptural teaching of parental and children's covenantal responsibilities is foundational. This is to be followed by faithful application. If our parents are still alive are we, to the best of our abilities, looking out for their needs? Has thought been given to any type of homecare should the need arise? When building or purchasing a new home is any thought given to the possible room needed to house an aging and/or terminally ill parent in the future? Are our living parents prayed for often during family devotions? Children can learn much about their role in our care as they note our concern for our own parents.

I believe there will be greater need for the care of the aged by family members as the government continues its advance into the health care field. Health services for the ill that our generation has taken for granted may not be as readily available in future years. If euthanasia for the terminally ill gains wider acceptance in the next generation homecare will become increasingly important. Our children must be prepared now for such a possibility.

Churches also have an important role in terminal illness. Sermons can be preached on preparing for death. A Sunday School series on ministering to the terminally ill could be very valuable when presented to an adult

class. Within this class medical personnel can play a vital role as they can present excellent instruction on the stages of two or three terminal illnesses once a theological foundation has been laid. We must remember that for those widows who have no one else, it is the church's duty to care for them spiritually and physically. Churches can also help by having at least a wheelchair, crutches, a walker and a hospital bed on hand for those in need. Deacons can be prepared to build a ramp into a home where that is needed for wheelchair occupants.

Visits to the terminally ill are important. These can allow family members time to get out of the house. In addition, the visitor can become somewhat acquainted with the slow effects of a debilitating disease.

Long before the possible onset of a terminal illness the individual and next of kin should sit down and discuss what measures should and should not be taken in case of terminal illness. This conversation is not a pleasant one but it is important. However, few families really take time for this due to the difficulty of the topic and the unwillingness to think about the possibility of long-term illness. However, modern medical technology makes this conversation a needed one. Do you want to be placed on a respirator? Do you want tests and medical procedures performed on you that are needless for one in your condition? Do you have a doctor that you can trust to deal truthfully with you regarding illness, its prognosis, and the cost of treatment? Do you want hospital care or home care? You can (and should) lengthen this list of sample questions.

Money should be set aside for use in case of a debilitating disease, as one is able to do so. Have you made any preparation for the support of family members in case a chronic illness comes during your years of employment, forcing you to quit work?

The importance of a biblical lifestyle cannot be overly stressed. Our life should be one of restoring broken relationships as much as possible, as soon as possible. When needed, forgiveness needs to be sought by us. When it is asked from us we need to prayerfully and readily give it. Do you need to flee from youthful lusts

(II Tim. 2:22)? Often the consequences of youthful sin go with us throughout our lives. Seeking, by God's grace, to live a godly life will prevent many regrets that can fill a weary mind in the midst of chronic illness.

The suffering Job could look back on his life without regret. His hope was in his living Redeemer (Job 19:25). Thus, his suffering was not filled with "if only" or a variety of regrets. He had a habit of seeking forgiveness for his sin and a knowledge that his loving God had faithfully forgiven that sin. One can only speculate as to leprous Uzziali's thinking in the latter part of his life (II Chr. 26:16ff).

We need to gird up our minds to consider that painful and debilitating diseases have a purpose when they come our way. It is very difficult to adjust from an active lifestyle to one of inactivity. Yet, we must remember that as long as God leaves us on earth He has work for us to do. Our illness may restrain our labors. Rather than ministering to others we must learn to humbly accept the ministry of others. Although we cannot visit others, we may well find ourselves ministering to those who visit us. Illness often allows us greater time for prayer. We often forget that one of the best ministries toward others is that of prayer. When called to do so, we must show others how to suffer for God's glory. By this, I mean without an embittered spirit. We should often meditate on God and His character as well as His promises to His people. Cassette tapes of Bible readings, sermons, and religious music can pass the time and enrich our beings.

We should not dwell too much on possible future illnesses. These are in God's sovereign, perfect hands. God deals with Christians in a great variety of ways. (Note John and Peter, two of Christ's closest disciples in John 21.) Our duty in sickness and health is to follow Christ - to glorify and enjoy God.