DYING WITH GRACE AND HOPE

Introduction

Why do we resist facing the reality of death, whether our own or that of others whom we love dearly? Is it fear of the physical, emotional and spiritual pain of dying? Is it fear of personal extinction on the "far side?" Is it fear of facing God's judgment? Perhaps it is a combination of these and others issues.

The reasons we avoid facing death until it is actually thrust upon us vary from person to person. The tendency to avoid this inevitable reality, however, seems almost universal. Few of us openly embrace death unless it is inevitable, and even then, denial is an essential stage of the process.[1]

I seem to be something of a rarity in this regard. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that I lost both of my parents early in life, one after years of struggle with heart disease and the other after a yearlong battle with cancer.

Then came my own wrestling match with death in my early 30s. After spending two months in the hospital and coming close to death several times, I slowly regained my health. These experiences made a strong imprint on me and brought me a strange blessing, since I am now a pastor who has ministered to hundreds who have died and to their loved ones. I have discovered a very special ministry in helping people die with grace and hope.

While this book is largely based on my personal experiences, some of what I share I have learned from books and seminars. For more than 30 years, I have stood by the side of dying parishioners every week, and for months afterwards with their grieving loved ones. I seek to share what I have learned for the sake of all of us who must face our own death, as well as family, friends and clergy who must minister to the dying. Consequently, I have all three audiences in mind as I write. I am also writing about the entire process of dying and grief, for this is one existential reality and cannot be divided in real life. I certainly do not pretend to know it all, but my hope is that these little lessons will help you respond to one of life's deepest events with grace and hope.[2]

---

[1] Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, On Death and Dying (New York: Macmillan, 1969), pp 38-49.

[2] Masculine pronouns have been used throughout this booklet for ease of reading and not because of a lack of sensitivity to issues of sexism in language. I trust the reader will understand.