

## Suffering and Doctor-Assisted Death

Our human intellect questions why someone in the pain of a chronic or terminal illness must languish for a long time before death comes. Our reasoning suggests that such a person would be better off if they died sooner. According to the proponents of the growing Death with Dignity movement, when the quality of life is diminished, someone should have the right to end his or her life through doctor-assisted suicide. However, God's children cannot allow reason to displace faith. Instead, the Holy Scriptures and the teachings of living Christianity form our foundation for understanding these matters, and neither supports such human reasoning.

Proponents of allowing assisted suicide argue one main point: being terminally ill or living with chronic pain is a loss of dignity, and a great burden that no one should have to bear. For that reason people should be able to choose their time of death. Unfortunately, our western culture is increasingly embracing this concept as a logical option, and various jurisdictions have legalized doctor-assisted death. According to Dr. Arthur Caplan, Director for the Center of Bioethics in Philadelphia, proponents seek to gain personal control and victory over death by saying, "I'll control the timing of it. I'll beat death by becoming its master." Further, he states, "It frightens me because I think that's strong in American culture—it's that notion that rather than give in and be compliant, we will master it."

The rationalization of doctor-assisted death is also the result of fears, such as burdening loved ones, mounting medical bills or dying in great pain. This negative thinking and its distortions can lead to feelings of hopelessness and depression, the loss of a will or purpose to live, and finally, the desire to die. Individuals who consider doctor-assisted suicide have convinced themselves of the hopelessness of their situation, and the senselessness of their suffering. They view death as an escape. However, there is a fundamental error in this thinking: the idea of living (and dying) by faith is missing, and the teachings of the Scripture are not taken into account. Paul wrote, "For whatever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23).

Scriptures instruct that death is the consequence of sin. "Wherefore, as by one man (Adam) sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Rom. 5:12). Death is not the end of suffering for everyone, but only for those who are justified by faith: "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27). The Day of Judgment awaits all people. Thus the most important issue for each person is his or her relationship to God, not conditions of bodily health or dignity in death.

God alone has predetermined the time and purpose for each individual's birth and death. Solomon wrote, "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die" (Eccles. 3:1,2). Therefore, even terminal illness, pain, suffering and dying all have a God-given purpose, and do not happen by chance. Through these events, God intervenes in our lives for our benefit. Luther teaches us to thank God for affliction, for in it our own wisdom and righteousness are broken down so that God can build us again in His wisdom and righteousness. Losing health also reminds us of the gift of health, and causes us to consider the brevity of life and our own mortality. When health is lost, life slows down, and people consider their relationships with God and neighbor. Sometimes in these moments, God lovingly makes His final call to repentance to those who are estranged from Him. It can be a final time of visitation.

The process of dying can be slow and painful, yet its purpose is determined by God; as Job wrote, "He is chastened also with pain upon this bed, and the multitude of his bones with strong pain: So that his life abhorreth bread, and his soul dainty meat. His flesh is consumed away, that it cannot be seen; and his

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bones that were not seen stick out. Yea, his soul draweth near unto the grave, and his life to the destroyers” (Job 33:19–22). Being terminally ill and unable to fully function at home or work does not mean life’s purpose has been destroyed, or that one would be better off dead. In fact, we often learn the most from the weak and ill.

Our worth before God is not determined by our work, and God is not a respecter of persons. People who are physically healthy and better able to tangibly contribute at home or in society have no greater worth than those who cannot contribute as much due to illness, handicap or some other factor. God values the person’s soul. True quality of life comes when one owns the hope of eternal life through the grace work and promises of the Lord Jesus Christ. Although such a one might suffer greatly from a chronic or terminal illness, he or she is nonetheless comforted by the knowledge that heaven lies ahead.

However, the pain, doubts, fears and sorrow of parting are very real, and can strain faith. These are normal experiences and feelings. Until death comes we have the comfort of the Scriptures, the gift of prayer, and the support of God’s children. For those who die in Christ, an eternity of happiness awaits. “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (Rev. 21:4).

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