

Death, Be Not Proud

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In 1949, John Gunther wrote a very emotional novel entitled *Death, Be Not Proud* chronicling the illness (a brain tumor) and death of his young son. I like to hope that death will not conquer me, as this quotation suggests, but it is unwise to boast of what I will do when I have not yet been tried (as Ahab said to Benhadad, "Let not him that girdeth on his harness boast himself as he that putteth it off" [1 Kin. 20:11]). Peter learned this lesson the hard way (Mat. 26:33-35, 69-75), and I hope I have learned and continue to learn from him.

I also remember a preacher who, during my childhood and teen years, was much in demand for Gospel meetings. He had a talent for arousing people's emotions and always had many responses. He constantly preached that we should never fear death, that death is a release from the troubles of this world, that death for the faithful means entry into Heaven – not the end, but the beginning. He admonished others, even gently rebuking them for their fear; but then when he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, he was absolutely terrified. I felt sorry for him for more than one reason. First, the fact that his life was cut short and that he had to suffer was sad. Second, such unconcealed fear must have been most humiliating after he had so boldly preached to others.

Having said that, we know that pain, sorrow, discouragement, and death are part of this life. These are not a punishment for our sins, but they happen because we are human beings (Rom. 5:12). As God allowed Job to be tried and tested, he will allow us to be tried, tested, and proved also (Job 5:6-7; 13:15; 14:1). Since this is without a doubt true, let us study some ways to deal with this pain and sorrow and with the knowledge that death is not far away.

In July of 2004 I was diagnosed with Mantle Cell Lymphoma, a very rare and very aggressive form of non-Hodgkins Lymphoma. From one viewpoint, it was almost a relief, because I had felt so bad for so long and no cause could be found. My relief, however, was short-lived when I began to research this disease. Because it was so newly isolated (from the other Lymphomas) and so rare, little research had been done on it and, consequently, few treatments were available. The survival rate was two to four years, according to the Internet information I found. I began to experience that sinking feeling!

I was sent to Baylor Hospital, Sammons Cancer Center, in Dallas, TX. The oncologist/blood/bone marrow transplant specialist assigned to me outlined the basics of the

disease with my husband, Dub and me and then the proposed treatment, step by step. He said that, without treatment, I would be dead in six months; with treatment, maybe I would live two to four years. He felt very confident that we could beat the odds. He has always said “Don’t say **if** it comes back, say **when**. It **will** come back.” When I asked what we would do when it comes back, he replied, “We’ll hit it again!”

So I am truly thankful for Sammons Cancer Center, the staff, and my oncologist. The care—of every kind—that they have given me cannot be bought with money, and I know it has made all the difference in my attitude. They have inspired confidence.

There is some advantage in knowing that my death is likely to come sooner rather than later. It forces me to think about my life, changes I need to make, things I need to say and do, people whose forgiveness I may need to seek. We should be conscious at all times that death is certain: “And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27), but there is nothing like a terminal illness to make one face the fact that death is not somewhere out there in the nebulous, distant future, but is before me in the here and now. Compared with a lifetime, it is imminent.

I have been blessed to have the prayers of Christians literally all over the world. I have been mentioned in countless church bulletins and oral announcements; some still include me regularly, after all this time. I have lost count of the cards, e-mails, letters, and phone calls I have received and still receive. Whenever I start feeling sorry for myself, I try to remember those who care about me. I also know there are many who are much worse off than I am. I keep a list, and I try to send cards, e-mails, and notes often to encourage others who are sick, suffering, or in despair. When my mind is on other people, it is more difficult to think about myself (Rom. 12:10; 1 Cor. 13:4-5; Jam. 2:8).

I have also been blessed with a husband who loves me and who has cared for me faithfully and uncomplainingly throughout this ordeal. I realize many are not so blessed. We have so much for which to be thankful in that he is in excellent health. When I was undergoing chemotherapy, he would take his laptop computer and work while my treatments were going on. He does the same when I have my semi-annual PET scans. He has had to take over more of the chores than he was accustomed to doing, since my strength will not stretch to cover very much. Our children’s love and care have been a source of strength, as well. I include Paige, our

granddaughter who lived with us for many years, who was here to help me in so many ways, and was unfailingly kind, generous, and patient.

One of the most valuable lessons I have learned from my illness is the necessity of determining what is important and what is less so. I try to use my strength and my time to do things that will matter for my family and others, both now and for eternity. I remind myself not to worry about things that are insignificant (some would say I carry that policy to extremes when it comes to housekeeping!). I am very conscious of the example I am setting, and continually monitor my speech accordingly.

God has promised that He would be with me in all aspects of my life (Psa. 23:4). He did **not** promise that I would not have to suffer or that I would not die prematurely. I have been surprised at the people who have assured me that God will answer my prayers, meaning He will spare me if I pray fervently. "Prayer works," they tell me. Yes, God will answer my prayers; I do not doubt that God is **able** to deliver me, but why should I expect special treatment? If God could allow His own Son to suffer a horrible death and not intervene, even when that Son cried and begged for deliverance (Mat. 26:39; Heb. 5:7), why should I think I am better than Jesus Christ? God told Paul, when he asked that his "thorn" be removed, "My grace is sufficient for thee" (2 Cor. 12:7-9). I think of the three young Hebrews who told the king, "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us...but if not...we will not serve thy gods" (Dan. 3:16-18).

Two verses of a beautiful folk song, "Wayfaring Stranger," express our longing for a better place and our hope of the comfort it will provide (I quote from memory):

I am a poor wayfaring stranger, while trav'ling through this world of woe.
Yet there's no sickness, toil, nor danger in that bright land to which I go.
I know dark clouds will gather o'er me, I know my way is rough and steep.
Yet beauteous fields lie just before me, Where God's redeemed their vigils keep.

As Abraham looked, so I am looking for a city whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11:10). "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). What a beautiful description of what awaits the faithful! These things help me to be confident and unafraid, and encourage me when I am weak.

I hope these thoughts will be of help to others who are, like me, struggling with fear and discouragement.

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