

Assisted dying 3: Facing Death with Confidence: A Christian Perspective on Palliative Care

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Date: 02 March 2025

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[0 : 00] So now we come to the third part of our talk. I, Gareth, will be talking about facing death with confidence.

! Death is a certainty for all of us. Yet it remains one of the most avoided topics in society. As Christians, I believe we have a unique and powerful hope that transforms how we approach death. However, cultural attitudes, including euphemisms and fears, often prevent us from speaking openly and honestly about it. I hope that by this last section, after we've done some of the understanding of where we come and how we make decisions, Matthew's given us a really clear idea of what the theology around the topic is.

I hope this might equip you with maybe the hope that you can talk about death. I hope that you can talk about death. Biblically, to talk about it truthfully, and to stand alongside those people who are facing life-changing decisions with a sense of dignity here in our parish.

We've spoken a lot about palliative care, about hospices, and how they seek to provide comfort and dignity in the final stages of life.

[1 : 26] One of the challenges is how you interact in that story. I, in my going around and discovering what people think about assisted dying, I sat with somebody not too long ago who said, Go on then, Vicar, where are you on this subject?

And I said to this person, I'm obviously against it. I am for life. I'm for life in all of its fullness.

And I'm for life being God's and holding it in his hands. He said to me, let me tell you a story. And he carries in his wallet a picture of his father.

And he talks about his father and about the care and the pain and the difficulty in the last moments of his death. And we have that discussion. And I say, so what made your father choose that option? What made him go through that when there was, seems like there's so many other opportunities for him to go into a home or stuff like that? He said, well, my brother didn't want my dad to die until he made 95.

[2 : 46] So often, our lack of being confident in death has an impact on how we handle all of this decision making. Because we ourselves are frightened of losing somebody, we refuse to allow them to go.

And so we say that when we see the outcome of that, that we need these bills in place to allow us to have control because we're so worried in the future.

I wonder how many of you have spoken to your loved ones about how you would like to die, where you would like to die, what you'd like for your funeral. Where would you like it to be?

Would you want to be buried or cremated? Would you want to be here or there? How long do you want your service? What readings do you want? What hymns do you want? Do you want your friend to do the tribute?

Have you spoken to them? I wonder whether any of you have had any of those thoughts. I wonder whether you've had any of those discussions. My betting is that if you come from a medical sphere or you come from a theological working with this, you've had those conversations.

[3 : 57] There's a chance that if you haven't, then you do what my parents did, which is say, Gareth, we're not talking about it. We're not discussing it because we fear that talking about our death will bring it on.

Genuinely, we believe that. If I plan my funeral, it might happen. I've had people say that to me. It will hasten this thing to come towards us.

On the flip side of that, during the COVID pandemic, I was in touch with a person who had a diagnosis of cancer.

And the conversation went something like this. I said, what's the prognosis on what you're doing? And this person said, I've had a great life. I love the Lord Jesus. I know that he's got a home for me. He's got a place for me. And so I've said to everybody, I'm happy to go. I'm going to enjoy these last few months with my family. I'm going to enjoy making memories and writing stuff and talking to people without having to go through all of the difficulties and stuff.

[5 : 13] The doctors have told me it will just lengthen my life by a few months. And so I'm choosing life that may be a little bit shorter, but there'll be full bodies.

And then I'm going to go and be with the Lord. And I spoke to his wife after he died. And I said, how was it? She said, it was lovely, Gareth. It was, we did everything we wanted to do.

We had all the family when we wanted to have the family. And everything was what we wanted to do. Because they had had the conversation about death. Death wasn't a scary thing for them.

And so they could choose the right direction. They could make the right choices. And I think I agree with what Matthew was leading us to.

The palliative care in aiding people to be confident in their death needs a lot of work. The hospice movement needs a lot more support. It's been broadly underfunded since the 1960s, when Dame Cicely Saunders kind of started that movement in the 1960s.

[6 : 26] She was one of the first people to research pain control in end-of-life care. And being a committed Christian, she said this about that bit of study.

She said, as the body becomes weaker, so the spirit becomes stronger. She saw that transition in people that she was looking after.

Going from being fearful and with the right care, their spirit becomes stronger. And they're good to see the next world. Funding is terrible.

34% of palliative care is funded through the NHS. Primarily that comes down to palliative care provided in hospitals. Very little of it is provided to the hospice movement.

So all of that is done by charitable donations and voluntary contributions. And so we see people raising money for Rowcroft, raising money for Children's Hospice Southwest.

[7 : 29] We raise money here in this place for those two organisations because they're so important. Because people don't, the government doesn't want to pay for it. They don't want to have people maybe living their life any longer and all that kind of cost.

And so often this is seen as being, how much life have you got and are you worth it? So my encouragement to you firstly is to use the word death.

Somebody is dying. They will die. They have died. And they have met their death. Those words all should be in our vocabulary.

And I just want you to take no more than a minute, maybe 30 seconds, share on your table every euphemism you've heard for dying.

Okay. Can you share with me one, what you think the best one is, or one from each table, just so we get a flavour? Brown bread.

[8 : 30] Brown bread. Excellent. You only know what that means if you've got any hope about Cockney rhyming slang. The only way you understand that is if you know the Cockney rhyming slang.

And so if somebody said to you, oh, so-and-so is brown bread, you might be like, did they have an accident? Like, what, granary? How does that work?

This table. Sorry. Oh, I was saying, I've lost my wife. Yeah. And you might be tempted to say, well, that's remiss of you.

Well, Chris, I've lost my wife.

And he said, no, I'm so sorry. He said, no, I brought you to an appointment. And it's those things that make life difficult. One last one from this table.

[9 : 32] Passed away. Passed away. Yeah. What does that mean? It's a street in Italy. Passed away. And so I want to encourage us to speak with honesty about death.

One of the barriers to facing death with confidence is that language we use. Society often employs euphemisms such as passed away. Gone to a better place.

I don't know how that works in Devon. Or lost. These phrases obscure the reality of death and make it harder to engage with grief properly.

And so people are fearful about what might happen because we don't speak about it. The Bible speaks plainly about death. The Bible says the words about death and dying. And so should we. We should say he died. It helps process loss truthfully and prepares us to face our own mortality with faith.

[10:43] I often talk about a funeral being an opportunity to do several things. It's an opportunity for the family to journey through their grieving process. It's an opportunity for me as a person presiding at that service to commend that person to God for his safekeeping.

But it also allows us to interact with the idea of death. To interact with our own mortality. And to see what that might mean for us.

And how that might impact us. And so as we move not only to this assisted dying idea. But also direct cremation. Where you have no service and no idea.

Death moves even further. And we say. Send mum. Send dad. Send auntie. Send them back in a box.

And we'll do something at some point. Because we can't cope with death. And we'll put them in a box. On a shelf or in a cupboard. And when I'm ready. Which they'll never be. We'll deal with it then.

[11:49] And so all of this comes to how we deal with death. And from Genesis to Revelation. The Bible does not shower away from the reality of death. We see death is a consequence of sin.

In Romans 6.23. It's not the end for those who trust in Christ. Jesus' resurrection gives us an assurance that death has been defeated. 1 Corinthians 15.54-57.

As Christians we do not grieve as those without hope. 1 Thessalonians 4.13. But we recognise death as a transition into the presence of God.

Philippians 1.21-23. All of those readings handle death with the dignity and the purpose of what it's there for.

So let's just think a little bit about what it means to be facing death with confidence as Christians. What should we have when we think about death?

[12:55] Should it cause us to have anxiety, fear, hesitation, worry? Well I think we should face death with hope. Knowing that Christ conquered death.

John 11.25-26. I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die. And whoever lives by believing in me will never die.

So we all can have the hope that this bit of time we spend here in this earth, for however many years we get, is not the end of the story.

It's not the end. And therefore, we can say that when death comes, it's okay. We can face death with truth, refusing to hide behind those euthymisms.

Ecclesiastes, one of the older books in the Old Testament, chapter 3, verse 2, there's a time to be born and a time to die. And that's the truth of our life and what we do.

[14:03] With compassion, supporting palliative care. Truly I tell you, Matthew 25, verse 40. Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.

Matthew's absolutely right. We should be campaigning. We should be people who are saying the antidote to assisted dying is a strong and powerful hospice movement that can allow people to live their life fully up until the point that they die.

That they don't need to be worried or anxious about a hospital bed. They don't need to be worried or anxious about whether they have to leave their home because there might be enough people to come and look after them and support them to die in their home.

We should be the people who are making that argument, not just against something, but we should be for something. And that for something should be the hospice movement.

That should be our for something in this. But it should also be those other services even before we get there. Yeah. Mental health community care.

[15:13] So, and being together, saying your life, our lives, lives matter. Everybody is unique and everybody has a purpose.

And I think that for us is often lost in this discussion, that each of us has a purpose. When you think about resisting the culture that says you're only worth what you can give into society.

So, when you can no longer do something for society, you no longer have an output, it's time to go. And so we should say that we know what God has said.

Deuteronomy 30, verse 19, I set before you the life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life. And we should do it with peace.

Trusting that to die is gain. Philippians 1, 21. For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. So I hopefully, in conclusion, can encourage you that we can be people who say that we trust.

[16:34] That what Psalm 139 says, that all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. We don't know how long each of our days are.

We can't see that book. But what we know is that God has given us a life. And he has said, I know your beginnings and I know your endings. I know where you've come from and I know where you're going to.

And I know what I created you for. I know what that means. Ephesians 2, 10. You are all God's workmanship. Created by him to do the works he's put before you.

And we don't know when that ends. And so my commitment is to be that person who's there until the very end. The Bible also says that we should not presume to live longer than God wills for us to live.

And this is where it comes to this idea about science overtaking God's order. We should be people who say, I love this saying in James 4, 13 to 16.

[17:41] You ought to say, if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that. If the Lord wills, I will get up tomorrow morning and I'll come to prayers. And I'll do my day.

But if that's what the Lord wills. If it's not what the Lord wills, that's absolutely fine. Because I'm confident this isn't the end of the story for Gareth. So, by proclaiming and reclaiming a biblical understanding of death, speaking truthfully and promoting the care of all, we can help shape a culture that honours life to the very end.

So let us, as Christians, be a voice of hope in society. Where death is a fear. That we might be people that, in Christ, have the ultimate assurance that death is not the end, but the doorway to eternal life.

And my hope is that if we're those people, we do that in our daily life, with our friends, with our neighbours, with those who are old and those who are young. We talk about death using the word. We talk about our death and how we're confident in it. Then maybe we can help move other people to a place where they can say, my life has purpose and I don't have to worry about the end.

[18:59] If you haven't planned your funeral, if you haven't thought about your death, if you haven't talked to your family about it, go be that person in the next coming weeks.

Amen. Thanks for listening. Thanks for listening.