

When I Die...

God's Word Speaks to Christians on Their Concerns About the End of Life

What is the God-pleasing attitude I should have as I approach the final days of my life or that of a loved one?

You have asked the right question when you ask about attitude. Even though God reveals his will in many specific ways in his Law, he also emphasizes the attitude in the heart. Jesus told his disciples, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." (John 14:15) Similarly the writer to the Hebrews told his readers, "Without faith it is impossible to please God." (Hebrews 11:6)

St. Paul reveals what the attitude will be in the heart of a Christian as he lives his life, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." (I Corinthians 10:32) Everything we do in life from the greatest endeavors to the smallest daily activities are to have as their purpose the glory of the God who has created and redeemed us. "You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your body," (I Corinthians 19-20) St. Paul reminds his people. Christ lived, died and rose again that you might belong to him for time and eternity. Show to whom you belong by the way you live.

Does this mean that we can do anything we want to as long as we claim that we are attempting to glorify God? Certainly not! The Psalmist prays, "Teach me, O Lord, to follow your decrees; then I will keep them to the end. Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart. (Psalm 119:33-34) We glorify God by doing his will. The only way to know that will is to study what God has revealed to us in his Word. Our approach to Christian obedience is clear then. We seek to glorify and praise our Savior God according to the commands he has revealed in his Word.

Sometimes, however, God does not speak directly to all situations. For instance in different circumstances at the end of life he does not indicate whether we should be striving to preserve our lives or preparing for our deaths. Both are part of God's revealed will, but a Christian is going to have to study both principles and apply them as best he can to the glory of God. No matter what specific action a Christian takes at the end of his life or the life of someone for whom he is responsible, his attitude should always be, "If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." (Romans 14:8)

What are the God-given principles that should guide a Christian in end-of-life decisions?

Although there may be many factors involved in these complex situations, there are chiefly two principles that must always be kept in mind. They are hinted at already in the answer to Question #1.

The first principle is that human life is a sacred gift of God. Only God can create it, "he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else." (Acts 17:25) He protects it, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man." (Genesis 9:6), and he devotes one of his commandments to that protection, "You shall not murder." (Exodus 20:13) God has redeemed all human life, "[Jesus] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but for the sins of the whole world." (I John 2:2) All human life, no matter what its condition or situation, whether it belongs to the newly conceived fetus in its mother's womb, or to the severely impaired (mentally or physically), or to the person nearing the end of life, is a gracious life of God. We are to preserve it and care for it as best we can. Only God can begin human life, and only he has the right to take it away as he claims in His Word, "See now that I myself am He! There is no god besides me. I put to death and I bring to life." (Deuteronomy 32:39)

The second principle is that God does put his right to end life into practice. He does call his people home. Moses proclaims, "You turn men back to dust, saying, 'Return to dust, O sons of men.'" (Psalm 90:3) To fight against the time God has determined as the end of your life would be to fight against his will. Jesus warns, "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matthew 6:27)

There are other principles that also come into consideration in end-of-life situations. The principle of stewardship is one example. Although we are not going to put a price on human life, saying that if it costs a certain amount to preserve it, the price is too high. But we will recognize that God has given us a certain amount of financial resources and specific responsibilities to meet with those resources. The amount of those resources will sometimes influence the end-of-life decisions we make. We must remember, however, that decisions made out of greed are not decisions that glorify God.

How do I know which principle applies in any given situation?

The Christian always has the Psalmist's confession on his lips, "my times are in your hands." (Psalm 31:15) This is a statement of his acceptance of the two principles mentioned in Question #2. He then studies the situation and asks the question, "What is the Lord doing here? Is my condition or that of the person for whom I am responsible terminal, i.e. it will cause my death at some future time? If the condition is terminal, is death imminent, i.e. death will come in a short time, several days at most, no matter what treatment or care is given?" Of course, the advice of doctors and other medical personnel, pastors, family members, friends and other trusted people will be sought to help make these determinations.

Knowing that no decisions we make are ever pure, all are tainted with selfishness and ignorance, the Christian will pray with the Psalmist, "Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me." (Psalm 19:12-13) With such an attitude, seeking to be free of sins corrupting effects and focused on

glorifying the Lord of life, the child of God may proceed with his decision-making.

We should recognize that we will not all make the same decisions in what may appear to be similar circumstances. In chapter 14 of St. Paul's letter to the Romans he advised the Jews in the congregation to continue refraining from eating meat sold in the marketplaces of the heathen because they were glorifying God by not eating what had been dedicated to idols. To the Gentiles, however, he said that they could continue eating such meat as long as they did not offend their Jewish brothers because they were glorifying the only God who gave them all their food, even that from the meat shops of idol-worshippers.

He summarized his teaching by saying, "He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God." (Romans 14:6) To put Paul's words into the context of our discussion we could say of the Christian who wishes to glorify God according to the principles revealed in his Word, "He who continues medical treatment does so to the Lord who has entrusted him with the sacred gift of life, and he who refuses medical treatment does so to the Lord who is calling him out of this life to himself in heaven." Or to again turn to St. Paul's words, "If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. (Romans 14:8)

What if I make the wrong decision?

As you can see from the discussion above, there really is no wrong decision that a Christian can make. He can make a decision for the wrong reason, for some sinful consideration, but when he seeks to glorify God according to God's revealed truth, no decision will be wrong.

Several points should be noted, however. A Christian should not act against his own conscience. Such an action would not glorify God because the person thinks he might be breaking God's Law. If a person thinks that he is killing what God wants preserved, he should not refuse medical treatment. If a person thinks that he is trying to lengthen what God wants ended, he should refuse to have treatment continued. St. Paul warns, "Everything that does not come from faith is sin." (Romans 14:23)

We also ought to look at the Psalmist's words again, "My times are in your hands." (Psalm 31:15) These are more than a guide to direct the Christian's actions. They also are a confession of confidence that the Lord's will is going to be done. God does not lose control because we make one decision or another to glorify him. We will die only when our Lord sees fit to call us home, no sooner and no later. Remember Jesus' comforting words, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." (Matthew 10:29-31)

Must my life be unnecessarily extended by medical treatment?

The answer to this question must first of all include another question, "Why are we asking this?"

If by the words "unnecessarily extended" we mean fighting against the inevitable, putting off death for a few hours or days by surgery or extraordinary techniques and equipment, then the answer must be "No!" However, if by these words we are asking why we cannot hurry up the dying process when we are sure to die anyway, then the answer must be "yes" because we are not extending, but maintaining. Our treatments are not unnecessary, but modern gifts of God to continue our lives.

The prayer of every Christian, no doubt, is that when the time comes, the Lord would grant him a swift death. We all would like to die suddenly in our sleep with little pain and no lingering illness. But God has not promised this to us. He may give us a period of suffering before dying. St. Paul says, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." (Acts 14:22) Physical suffering before death may be among these hardships.

There are several reasons why God might will such suffering. One group of reasons benefit us. Suffering produces patience, a quiet waiting on the Lord to carry out his will in his time. St. Paul didn't pray for a life of suffering, but if it came, he rejoiced in it because he knew how he would benefit spiritually. He says, "We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance." (Romans 5:3) Furthermore, a slow journey toward death gives us more of a chance to prepare. Moses prays, "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." (Psalm 90:12) When death comes quickly, it is not so easy to number our days and prepare for the end. Another group of reasons allows us time to be of service to our neighbor. The way we die or the way our fellow Christians care for us when we die can serve as a strong witness of our faith to those around us. Think of the Roman soldier at the foot of Jesus' cross. When he saw Jesus die, he exclaimed, "Surely this was a righteous man." (Luke 23:47) The man may have come to faith as a result of what he saw. We also may have the opportunity to pray for others. Jesus was very busy and heavily burdened in the final hours of his earthly life, but he still had time to assure his disciple Peter, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail." (Luke 22:31)

Finally, if we have a time of suffering or lingering before dying, God may be giving other Christians an opportunity to perform works of faith as they care for us. Faith needs to be exercised. Love wants a chance to work. The Lord has placed a spiritual life in our hearts and he provides times for that life to go into action. St. Paul tells us, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Ephesians 2:10) Supplying our needs may be the works that God has prepared in advance for others to do.

Is death ever a better option for a Christian than continued living?

A Christian thinking of the eternal life he has in Christ might answer, "Yes." But notice that the question does not speak of life, but death. Death is an unnatural end to life. It is present in our world because of sin. St. Paul says, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man,

and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned." (Romans 5:12) For those people who die in their sins without faith in Christ there are only the words of Christ on Judgment Day, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into to eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." (Matthew 25:41) This is hardly a better option than life on earth no matter how hard it may be.

A Christian is not afraid to die because the risen Christ has conquered death. Now death is not easier to take, it is vanquished! Jesus assured his friend Martha at the death of her brother Lazarus, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:25-26) The Christian's death is a celebration of life. For that reason he will never hasten the end of this life to enter the next. The time for that is in the Lord's hands.

What medical treatment may I in good conscience refuse?

We should never refuse any medical treatment for the purpose of hastening our death. The time of death is God's to choose. Under most circumstances we should not refuse treatment for conditions easily and commonly treated like pneumonia, which if left untreated may kill us, for the purpose of hastening our death from a terminal condition like some forms of cancer. We also should not refuse food and water even when given artificially if the purpose is to hasten our death by malnutrition or dehydration so that we do not have to die naturally of some other condition over a period of months or even years.

Major surgery or other costly medical treatment of our modern age whose only purpose is to extend what God will take away very soon may in good conscience be refused. Limited resources may not make these treatments possible, and the knowledge that our times are in God's hands does not make them necessary.

Are living wills of any benefit to a Christian?

Please understand that living wills are the creation of the American Euthanasia Society, now called the Society for the Right to Die. Their original purpose was not to give people the right to refuse treatment, a right they have always had, but to give them the right to decide to die when they saw fit, in other words, to commit suicide. These documents adopted by the legislatures of individual states focus on the right to die that may include the purposeful hastening of death by refusing even food and water. For such a purpose a Christian cannot use a living will.

Although living wills can be used by Christians to declare the limits to which medical treatment should be used in cases of imminent death, a far more useful document for confessing Christians is a Declaration on Life, such as the one prepared by Christian Life Resources. Such a document gives a Christian the chance to declare in writing what God's Word has taught him about his life and its care even in the face of death. It also serves as a good tool to use in

making his beliefs known to his family, friends, pastor and doctor long before the need arrives to use it.

(NOTE: This document has since been updated by Christian Life Resources. The Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care-Christian Version document weaves the Christian's viewpoint into a document that indicates a person's wishes at the end of his or her life that is pleasing to God. Contact the national office of Christian Life Resources for additional information on ordering this document.)

Conclusion: Our times are in the hands of our gracious Lord. He will care for us in every condition for our eternal good. But let the way we care for our lives and those of others be a strong witness to a world sinking into unbelief and wickedness that human life is a precious gift of God that he gives and takes.

May our words and actions proclaim as patient Job once did, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:21).