WHEN DEATH IS IMMINENT by Al Diestelkamp

I don’t know who first said it, but I remember my dad often saying, “The old must die…and the young may.” It was his way of warning of the uncertainty of life and the need to be prepared at all times. Solomon wrote about “a time to die” (Eccl. 3:2), but unless man usurps authority by taking a person’s life, just *when* that time comes in a given situation is in God’s hand. However, there are indicators that may lead us to believe that death is imminent. I have found that when the death of a loved one is imminent, having to watch and wait reminded me of lessons I have learned along the way.

I was well aware of the truth that “It is not good than man should be alone” (Gen. 2:8), but it became personal to me as my wife’s illness progressed. Having not been married for over fifty years, I had little “alone time.” Through the years, Connie had been there for me in every way. As her condition worsened, the loss of intimacy left me “alone” in several ways—not just sexually. She was the one in whom I would confide. She was a second conscience for me. She would tell me when I was off base with something I preached. She would also defend me when I was unfairly criticized. The loss of this “oneness” was especially noticeable when I had some good news to share, and suddenly I would realize she was not “all there” to hear it.

I learned that caring for one who is critically ill or dying is a lot of work and requires a great deal of patience. I had always believed I was a fairly patient person, but caring for my wife required even more patience than I anticipated. There were two things I consistently requested in my prayers during this long journey: I asked for sufficient health and additional patience to be able to participate in her care. I thank God for answering those prayers.

Things that under normal circumstances might cause me to be irritated didn’t seem important to me. When Connie wouldn’t respond to a simple question such as, “Do you want more to eat?” or comply when I asked her to open her mouth, it would frustrate me; but I couldn’t bring myself to be angry with her. When I think about it, God is probably frustrated with me when I don’t react as I should to His Word; but I’m thankful that He is “a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth” (Psa. 86:15).

I also learned that expressing and showing love that is not acknowledged hurts a little, even when it can’t be returned. Though I tried to make sure I told Connie often of my love for her, it’s been about two years since she has been able to respond. I do remember the last time she responded. After telling her that I loved her, I asked her, “Do you still love me?” She whispered, “Oh, so very much.” The emptiness felt in not hearing love expressed has caused me to wonder if I have failed to express my love to God often enough, especially since He has revealed and demonstrated His love for me so abundantly (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 5:8).

When death of the love of my earthly life was imminent, I realized how blessed I have been because of her. Wisdom asks the question, “Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies” (Prov. 31:10). When this Scripture is read, I will be tempted to raise my hand and answer, “I found her!” Yes, our children will also “rise up and call her blessed” (v.28). She had the charm and the beauty that is said to be “vain,” but along with them she was a woman who feared the Lord, and is worthy of being praised (v.30).

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