

Our Christian Response to Blessings and Challenges

Part Two

A Bible Study Course for Adults

by

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Lesson One
Our Christian Response to Blessings and Challenges

**When Someone We Love Is Afflicted
with a Terminal Illness**

Goals

- To grow in understanding the spiritual and emotional needs of those who are afflicted with lengthy, terminal illnesses.
- To learn how to help those who are suffering from terminal illnesses.
- To learn how to comfort both those suffering with terminal illnesses and their family members with the Word of God.

Life example

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, a Swiss-born psychiatrist who has worked extensively with the dying, has observed that the terminally ill go through a series of stages as they come to grips with impending death. The following chart shows the five stages along with Scripture references related to those stages.

KÜBLER-ROSS STAGES OF DEATH AND DYING

_____ and _____

1 Kings 19:1-5

Romans 8:18-21

Job 2:7-10

Romans 8:28

_____ with _____

1 Samuel 1:10,11

Romans 8:31,32

Psalms 88:13-18

Romans 8:37-39

2 Corinthians 4:7-15

Although these five stages describe with almost surprising accuracy the experiences of the majority of those struggling with terminal illnesses, not everyone goes through all the stages. Some may go from hearing the news that they are terminally ill to the acceptance stage. Others may repeat the cycle or portions of it as they hear more about their diseases. Since these grief stages are the common experience of the majority of those who are dying, we will use those stages as the framework for our lesson.

Life example

Denial and Isolation

Eunice, age 55, was often so exhausted she could hardly finish her daily chores. She had to stop to catch her breath while clearing the table; she had to hang on to furniture when she walked around the house. Thinking that she was just out of shape, she decided on a walking regimen. But after walking only one block, she became so dizzy and out of breath that she could hardly make it back home.

A trip to the doctor brought bad news. She was suffering from congestive heart failure, emphysema, and kidney failure. Besides needing powerful medication, the doctor explained that she would no longer be able to live alone. At the very least, she would need round-the-clock care in her home. She might even need to move to an assisted-living facility.

When Eunice called to break the news to her family, she showed no emotion. Though Eunice is not by nature a cold and distant person—others have called her their angel for the compassion she has shown for the sick—she spoke to her family in a very matter-of-fact way. There was no emotion in her voice. There were no tears. She asked for no help. She didn't even ask for advice about how to make plans for her needed care.

Reflections of faith

1. Eunice is in the first stage of death and dying—the denial and isolation stage. Why do you think people who react like Eunice refuse to accept a doctor's diagnosis?
2. This will be a challenging time for family members who want to help her. Why?
3. When people are in a state of denial, they tend to isolate themselves. But they need family and friends around them. They need someone to listen to them. They need someone to talk to them. If Eunice was a member of your church and your friend, what would you say to her?

Light from the Word

Read 1 Kings 19:1-5.

1. Elijah heard the news that his life was threatened by the queen. Eunice found out that she was dying from a terminal disease. Compare the ways they reacted to the news.
2. Fear, denial, and the desire to be alone are often part of the first stage of grieving. Elijah's fear was immediate. Jezebel had threatened his life. He fled to the desert and then lay down and asked God to take his life.

How might fear show itself in the actions of people dying of terminal illnesses?

3. Lack of trust in God often contributes to the fear we feel when we have received disturbing news. Explain how lack of trust contributed to the fear exhibited by both Elijah and Eunice.
4. Elijah didn't seem to think he deserved what was happening. That is an expression of self-righteousness. Explain why a feeling of self-righteousness might be one reason for Eunice's apparent denial of impending death.

Fear, denial, and the desire to be alone are emotions that often overwhelm people shortly after hearing that they may not have long to live. Those are normal emotions, but they are not the best way to deal with troubling news.

Elijah prayed for death. Likewise, a person afflicted with a terminal illness may often pray for a quick death or may even be tempted to take his or her own life.

5. **Romans 8:18-21** tells us that all creation waits for the day when every heart will be revealed (judgment day). On that day, creation will be released from bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom enjoyed by the children of God. How might you use these words to help and comfort Eunice as she deals with the doctor's diagnosis?
6. Read **Romans 8:26,27**. Sometimes the burden of our hearts is so great that we don't know what to pray for or how to pray. The Holy Spirit intercedes for us. What comfort could Eunice find in those words?

Life example

Anger

Eunice was very angry with her doctors because they weren't helping her. (She switched doctors twice.) She did get some help through a home health-care organization, but that didn't work out either. The caregivers kept quitting because Eunice was so bitter and angry and so hard to please.

Reflections of faith

Why would it be very difficult for you to help Eunice as she struggles through this stage of dying?

Light from the Word

Read Job 2:7-10.

1. The story of Job focuses on his spiritual struggle, but his wife also lost her children and her wealth. How is Job's wife similar to Eunice?
2. Job and his wife went through a serious spiritual struggle as their lives seemed to fall apart. As depressing as this struggle might seem, Eunice might be encouraged as she studies these words. In what way?
3. It is relatively easy to recognize the truth expressed in **Romans 8:28** when our troubles are small. But when death is approaching, we may have trouble comprehending the good that God is working in our lives. What can we point to when a person is struggling with a terminal illness?

Breakout/discussion

1. It often happens that family members and friends go through some of the same stages of grief as a person who is terminally ill. Why do you think that is the case?
2. What kinds of relationship problems might develop if Eunice and you (a friend or family member) are each at different stages in the grieving process?

Life example

Bargaining with God

Eunice remains terribly frustrated. She tells you that she is praying and praying that God will make her healthy again. She has promised God that if he heals her, she will give the money she would have spent on her hospital care to the WELS Scholarship Fund. That will help future pastors and teachers get an education so that they can be sent out to preach God's Word. "Still," she tells you, "I am not getting healthy."

Reflections of faith

1. The bargaining stage isn't healthy. The person's entire thinking process is skewed. What false assumptions might lead people to think they can bargain with God?
2. How would you respond to Eunice as she complains that her bargaining has gotten her nowhere?

Light from the Word

1. Read **1 Samuel 1:10,11**. Hannah wanted a son. At first it may appear that she was bargaining with God, but notice that she was making a vow. She didn't offer the vow as a strategy to incline God to answer her request—to try to change God's will toward her. She was stating what she would do out of thanks for this marvelous gift. What might you point to in the story of Hannah that might encourage Eunice
2. Read **Romans 8:31,32**. What proves God's love and compassion for Eunice?
3. God will not automatically give Eunice everything she asks for, the way she wants it. However, what can Eunice know about God's answer to her prayers?
4. In **2 Corinthians 12:7-10**, we read that Paul too prayed that God would take away some physical problem that troubled him. Review God's answer to Paul's prayer. What did it mean?

5. As you read about Paul's struggle concerning his affliction, point to several truths that would be helpful to Eunice.

Life example

Depression

Bargaining with God has failed and Eunice knows it, so she gives up. Deep in self-pity, she sees no hope for her future. Since she doesn't sleep well, she is listless and lies around all day. She forgets things. She neglects her grooming.

Reflections of faith

1. Depressed people often focus on the wrong things. What is the focus of Eunice's attention? What should she be focusing on?
2. Counselors urge family members to monitor a depressed person's moods carefully. Why?

Light from the Word

1. In many ways, the thoughts expressed in **Psalm 88:13-18** reflect the thoughts of a depressed person. Using this psalm as a guide, describe some of the feelings Eunice might likely be feeling.
2. How might you use this psalm as you counsel Eunice?
3. When Paul wrote the book of Romans, he and many other Christians were suffering because of their faith. **Romans 8:37-39** is a passage that offers comfort, no matter what kind of suffering people may be enduring. List all the comforting thoughts in this passage that might apply to Eunice.

Life example

Acceptance

As time passes, Eunice begins to accept the fact that she is going to die. She trusts that her Savior loves her and that she will be in heaven. When she sees a tear in your eye as you visit with her, she encourages you, “Why are you crying? God is taking me to heaven to be with my Jesus. I am not sad. I am happy.”

Reflections of faith

Is your work of encouraging finished? Explain.

Light from the Word

1. In **2 Corinthians 4:7-15**, God reminds us that he uses frail, ordinary human vessels to convey his precious gospel. He follows with a description of the hope every Christian has. Summarize for Eunice the hope that is hers.
2. What does this passage say about the purpose of human suffering?
3. How might Eunice’s suffering be of benefit to others?

Let’s think about the lesson

At each stage in the grieving process, Eunice has needed slightly different help. What does that tell you about

- the need to listen to what Eunice is saying before trying to help?
- the need to be persistent in offering to help Eunice?

Perhaps you are already helping someone who is suffering from a terminal illness. If not, ask your pastor to offer your assistance to someone in your church who needs loving encouragement as he or she struggles with a terminal illness

