

# Where do we go from here?

The haemorrhage had gradually spread to the rest of the brain. Since his heart was healthy and strong, it affected the breathing centres bit by bit and caused suffocation. For the last twelve hours the lack of oxygen was acute. His face altered and became dark. His lips turned black and the features grew unrecognizable. The last hours were nothing but slow strangulation. The death agony was horrible. He literally choked to death as we watched.

At what seemed like the very last moment he suddenly opened his eyes and cast a glance over everyone in the room. It was a terrible glance, insane or perhaps angry, and full of fear of death and the unfamiliar faces of the doctors bent over him. The glance swept over everyone in a second.

Then something incomprehensible and awesome happened, that to this day I can't forget and don't understand. He suddenly lifted his left

hand as though bringing down a curse on us all. The gesture was incomprehensible and full of menace, and no one could say to whom or what it might be directed. The next moment, after a final effort, the spirit wrenched itself free of the flesh.<sup>1</sup>

These moving words come from the book *Twenty Letters to a Friend*, the autobiography of Svetlana Alliluyeva, youngest child and only daughter of the man whose last earthly moments she was so vividly describing. Born Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, he called himself Joseph Stalin ('Man of Steel') and was the undisputed dictator of some 285,000,000 people living in the Soviet Union. For some twenty-four years his word was law and had the power of life and death, wiping out millions of people who opposed his political or religious convictions. Tens of thousands of priests, monks and nuns were persecuted and killed, with over 100,000 shot during the purges of 1937–1938. At the peak of his career he was arguably the most powerful man on earth, yet was eventually reduced to a feeble physical wreck, and on 5 March 1953 he was forced to yield to a more powerful enemy that would not be denied: death.

What makes our opening paragraph so arresting is not the writer or the subject, but the

event it describes, the moment of a person's death, an event made irresistibly compelling because every human being on our planet is moving towards his or her own appointment with it at the rate of twenty-four hours a day. There is a growing interest in subjects associated with death, such as spiritism, life beyond the grave, psychic communication with the dead, astral projection and various occult practices, though millions of people who are drawn to these things fail to get to grips with the matter of death itself.

Yet death is inescapable, and what we call living could equally well be called dying. We could rightly say that the whole world is a hospital and every person in it a terminal patient. Death is no respecter of persons. It comes to young and old, rich and poor, good and bad, educated and ignorant. It knows no colour bar and runs no means test. From kings to commoners, all must eventually bow to it. 'Superstars' and 'nonentities' share the same fate. Alexander the Great once found his philosopher friend Diogenes standing in a field, looking intently at a large pile of bones. Asked what he was doing, the old man turned to Alexander and replied, 'I am searching for the bones of your father Philip, but I cannot seem to distinguish them from the bones of the slaves.' From the greatest to the least, from the most

beautiful to the most plain, from the richest to the poorest, death is the universal equalizer.

Nor is death a respecter of time or place. It strikes at every minute of day and night, claiming its victims on land, on sea, in the air, in the hospital bed, the office, the supermarket and the armchair, on the open road, the sports field and in the study. Even cutting-edge science is unable to deny it; ‘wonder drugs’, intensive care and spare-part surgery must all eventually give way to its demands. For both the writer and reader of these words our last appointment in life is one we will not make yet cannot avoid. We can take regular exercise, eat nothing but ‘health foods’, swallow vitamin pills and other food supplements on a daily basis, have regular medical check-ups and follow the best possible advice in micro-managing our lifestyle, yet the best we can do is to postpone the inevitable—and you are twenty-four hours nearer that appointment than at this time yesterday.

For countless other people the inescapable fact of death is so unpalatable that a truckload of terms have been invented to avoid using the dreaded ‘D...’ word. In the 1970s the English anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer claimed, ‘The truth of the matter is that death has replaced sex as the forbidden subject of conversation in polite society,’ and this is certainly true today. Sex is gratuitously dragged

into more films, television and radio programmes, books, magazines, advertising and conversations than ever before, while death is carefully sidelined. We say that someone has 'passed away', 'moved on', or 'is no longer with us'. Numerous internet websites reflect a stream of euphemisms, with death described as 'the big sleep', 'crossing the river' and 'the end of the line', while being dead is called being 'six feet under', 'de-animated' or even having 'left the room'. Some people trivialize the issue by referring to those who have 'kicked the bucket', 'popped their clogs', 'snuffed it', 'croaked', 'pegged out', 'bitten the dust', 'cashed in their chips', or 'fallen off the twig'. In the United States undertakers are frequently referred to as 'grief therapists', funeral homes as 'slumber rooms', cemeteries as 'memorial parks' and gravestones as 'horizontal markers'. Some hospitals even go so far as to refer to the death of a patient as 'negative patient care outcome', which states the truth while hiding the word that nobody wants to hear.

## **The fear factor**

Avoiding the subject shows that almost as universal as the fact of death is *the fear of death*. Film producer Woody Allen famously said, 'I'm not

‘righteousness and self-control and the coming judgement’, the ruler was ‘alarmed’ (Acts 24:25). In one of the most dramatic passages in the Bible we are given a glimpse of the moment when godless multitudes meet their Maker: “Then the kings of earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful ones, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”” (Revelation 6:15-17).

Should this surprise us? Surely there could be nothing more terrifying than to know that when death strikes (as it could at any time and without a moment’s notice) it would bring us face to face with a righteous and holy God *in our present moral and spiritual condition* and with no further opportunity to put things right?

Death is the ultimate reality for every human being, and the only sane approach is to face it honestly, examine it carefully and prepare for it wisely. This booklet has been written to help you do all three of these things, guided not by human speculation but by the clear light of the Bible, ‘the living and abiding word of God’ (1 Peter 1:23).