

## **Introduction**

**"Therapeutic misadventure." "Negative patient care-outcome." "Expire. "Failed to fulfill his wellness potential."**

Those explanations came from actual hospital reports. To what human experience do they refer? It's death. We find that people rarely die in hospitals. They just have a therapeutic misadventure, fail to fulfill their wellness potential, and so on. Those **"verbal tranquilizers"** reflect something almost all people know, the manward side of death. But today, I'm going to preach about something almost all people don't know, the Godward side of death. Psalm 116:15 reveals just that to us.

## **The Death of Godly Ones**

We begin with the word **"death."** In light of what Jesus said in John 8:51-52, we do need to define it. It's the cessation of our earthly bodies. They quit functioning and begin decaying because of a lack of oxygen, which is the ultimate cause of every death.

Verse 15 addresses the issue of who dies. It's everyone of course, including what it calls **"godly ones."** Verse 16 defines them as those who are bound to God. That means think, feel, will, and act primarily in terms of Him. Or in New Testament terms, they're disciples of Jesus. Listen to an excerpt from a sermon manuscript I wrote seven years ago: **"Stop and think about one of the godliest persons you know of or know. I think of Dallas Willard and Jay Alford. Those men are going to die."** Both were alive then. Both are dead now. Everyone who lives eventually dies and that includes godly ones.

## **In the Sight of the LORD**

Now let's move to the prepositional phrase, **"in the sight of the LORD (YAHWEH)."** That stands in contrast to **"in the sight of man."**

**"In the sight of man"** refers to what I'm calling today the

**“manward side of death.”** The manward side of death connotes how human beings perceive and experience it.

The National Institute of Health conducted a study to find out what people fear the most. It's two things far more than any others. The first is public speaking. 74% of Americans fear that. The second is death. 67% fear it, a figure that is likely much higher. Did you know that there are over 200 euphemisms or verbal tranquilizers for death? The most frequently used is **“passed away.”** People say that because they don't want to think about death let alone talk about it, which reflects the manward side of it. It's a fearful and dreadful thing.

But verse 15 gives us something new – the Godward side of it. God is a personal being who perceives and experiences things. Verse 15 reveals how He perceives and experiences the deaths of His godly ones. Their deaths are **“precious”** to Him (NASB). The Hebrew word translated that has two meanings, both of which accurately describe the Godward side of death. So let's examine each one.

### **Costly**

The Jerusalem Bible chooses one meaning of the Hebrew word in its translation of verse 15, **“the death of the devout costs Yahweh dear.”** That meaning is **“costly.”** Verses 14 and 16 are the context of verse 15 and open up that sense of the word to us. Verse 14 speaks of godly ones paying their vows to God. Verse 16 speaks of them serving Him. Those verses imply that God accomplishes His earthly purposes through His godly ones. It costs Him dearly, therefore, when they die.

Leighton Ford's son and Billy Graham's nephew, Sandy Ford, was a devoted follower of Jesus and dynamic Christian leader on the University of North Carolina campus. But he developed a heart problem that required surgery, during which he died, at the age of 20.

We all grasp, I think, that Sandy's death cost God dearly. How many college students are disciples of Jesus and devoted to His work? The percentage is miniscule. I wonder how many people Sandy could have

influenced for Jesus, but didn't because he died. I wonder how much value he could have added to our world and life in it. His family and friends did too. Billy Graham conducted his funeral service and said he knew the question on everyone's minds as he did. Sandy could have done so much more for God. So, why did He let him die so young?

I don't know the answer to that question. But I do know this. His death cost God dearly, which He took into account in letting him die. For reasons we'll probably never know, He determined that Sandy's work on earth was done. What He could have done through Sandy, He chose to do through someone else instead. Or He chose not to do it at all.

The implication is profound. The life of a godly one is never cut short. Most people believe in untimely deaths. According to the Social Security Administration, the life expectancy of a male is 75.9 years and that of a female 80.81 years. Most people believe that those who die before those ages have untimely deaths. And the more before those ages they die, the more untimely their deaths are. The acclaimed psychiatrist Carl Jung expressed just that sentiment. He said that the death of the young is **"a period placed before the end of the sentence."**

But that first meaning of the word, **"costly,"** implies that isn't so. The death of a godly one costs God dearly. It dramatically impacts the achieving of His purposes on earth. So, he never treats it lightly. He always carefully considers it instead before He allows it to happen. That means godly ones never die prematurely. They only die when God's work for them is done. Billy Graham said it well at Sandy's funeral, **"His life was not cut short; it was completed."** How right he was. God always places the period at the end of the sentence of every godly one.

### **Precious**

Now let's consider the second and happier meaning of the Hebrew word in verse 15, **"precious."** It suggests that God highly values, prizes, or cherishes the deaths of His godly ones. That translation conveys two realities or truths about Him.

The first is His desire for face to face fellowship with His people. The death of the great Oswald Chambers was cablegrammed around the world in four words, "**Oswald in His presence.**" That was literally true because the moment godly ones die, they're in God's presence. We call that being "**face to face**" with Him. That metaphor attempts to express the indescribable depth of relationship we'll have with Him then.

Dwight L. Moody experienced a manifestation of God's presence about which he wrote these words: "**It is almost too sacred an experience to name. I can only say that God revealed Himself to me, and I had such an experience of his love that I had to ask Him to stay his hand.**" He went on to explain why he asked that. He felt as if he were going to be crushed and die.

Moody's experience illustrates that our earthly bodies limit the degree to which God can engage us. He has to restrain the extent to which He manifests His presence to us or it would kill us. But when we cast off these earthly bodies, the degree to which He can engage us will dramatically increase. We'll have a continuing experience of His presence that makes Moody's experience pale in comparison. That's what the metaphor "**face to face**" conveys and most of us long for that.

And so does God. That's the staggering implication of verse 15. He loves us so deeply that He longs to engage us, to manifest His presence to us, far more profoundly than He's able to now. He longs for the full fellowship with us that our deaths bring. Or to use our metaphor, He longs to be face to face with us as much as we long to be face to face with Him, which in turn makes our deaths precious to Him.

The word "**precious**" implies a second reality or truth about God. It's His desire to make us whole.

None of us can be that now because our world and we are fallen. I think of it in terms of "**slices.**" Consider, for example, that all of us are competent in slices. We are competent in some ways and incompetent in others. One godly one I know struggles with percentages. She can't calculate 10% of a 100. Or all of us are healthy in slices. We're healthy

in some ways and unhealthy in others. One godly one I know suffers with diabetes. She can't eat Milky Ways. Or all of us are loved in slices. We are loved by some but not loved by others. One godly one I know is slandered by a jealous co-worker of hers. It's true. None of us are whole in life on earth. We're everything in slices.

But we won't be anything in slices after we die. So, that godly one won't struggle with percentages. She'll be able to calculate 24% of 157 in the blink of an eye. Or that godly one won't suffer with diabetes. She'll be able to eat all the Milky Ways, or whatever heaven's equivalent is, she wants. Or that godly one won't be envied and slandered. She'll be highly regarded and deeply loved by everyone. My point is godly ones won't be anything in slices after they die. They'll be whole instead (perfect and complete) in all aspects of their beings and lives.

You and I long for that but according to verse 15, so does God. He loves us so deeply that He longs for the perfection and completeness our death brings us. He longs for us to be whole as much as we long for us to be whole, which is the second reason our deaths are precious to Him.

The elders at Barberton Friends Church and I anointed and asked God to heal a 32 year-old wife and mother who had cancer. He didn't though and she died. After her funeral, I overheard a person say, "**God didn't heal Sharon. He made her whole.**" That wasn't just nice talk. It was the truth. Sharon's death was precious to God. He didn't choose to heal her. He chose to make her whole.

So, there we have it – the Godward side of death that verse 15 reveals. The deaths of godly ones are both costly and precious to Him.

### **Live As If It's So**

And we need to live as if that's so. Psychologists tell us that one of the characteristics of a mature person is the ability to face his or her death – and I would add, the deaths of loved ones. Well, you and I, as disciples of Jesus, can have that ability, by doing two things.

First, believe what I've preached today. What you and I firmly

believe directs how we perceive and experience everything, including death. Believing the deaths of godly ones are costly and precious to God, therefore, will direct how we perceive and experience death.

Understanding is the basis of belief. So, understand what I've preached today. Give it further and deeper thought. Ponder the implications I've shared and deduce the ones I haven't on your own. The Holy Spirit will give you the gift of belief or faith if you do.

We do a second thing. We interpret our deaths and the deaths of our loved ones in terms of our belief. We apply our belief to their deaths and ours. We ask and answer the question, **"If it's true that the deaths of godly ones are costly and precious to God, what must also be true if my loved ones or I die?"**

When my wife was diagnosed with cancer a year ago, several facts indicated she might die from it. So, I interpreted her death in terms of Psalm 116:15. I recognized and affirmed that her life will not be cut short. She will not die if God's work for her as wife, mother, mother-in-law, grandmother, and children's teacher at church isn't done. If she does die, it means His work for her was done. He will place the period at the end of her sentence. I also recognized and affirmed that if she dies, she'll be face to face with Yahweh and whole, which makes me rejoice.

Doing that didn't take away my grief. But it did dramatically shape it. I didn't grieve as do the rest who have no hope. I had a confidence and peace in the midst of my grief that anyone who doesn't firmly believe what I do can't have. That's the consequence if we believe and interpret as I explained it today – confidence and peace, not fear and dread.

## **Conclusion**

I'd like you to bring to mind in closing the godly ones that you're remembering on this Memorial Day weekend. Mine include my mother Ruby, my brother Danny, my father-in-law Harold, and my mother-in-law Erma. Who are yours? Whoever they are, their deaths were costly and precious to God. That's the Godward side of death.