

INTRODUCTION

Don Green is dead. Those words cut like a knife as my pastor spoke them from the pulpit. I couldn't believe it. Don had been a classmate of mine at Malone College and was one of the most capable persons I've ever known. He was highly intelligent, an outstanding speaker, and a spokesman for Friends. But now he was dead at the age of 35.

Some friends from the church he pastored and he had been cutting down trees for firewood. As one of the trees fell, a large branch struck his head, crushing his skull and killing him. He left behind a devastated church, a grieving wife, and five children under the age of 12.

Most people would describe Don's death by saying that it was tragic and premature. But that isn't how God would describe it. He would say that it was precious and that's what I'm going to preach about today – the Godward side of death. Turn to Psalm 116:15.

THE DEATH OF HIS GODLY ONES

Let's start with the word "death." You and I suffer from a terminal disease. That disease is mortality. George Bernard Shaw said it well, *"The statistics on death are quite impressive. One out of one people die."* Three people die worldwide every second? Shaw's point is that everyone that we love and you and I will someday be one of the three.

Even if they or we are what verse 15 calls "godly ones." The book of Ecclesiastes teaches us that death is no respecter of persons. It doesn't discriminate. The rich and the poor, the wise and the foolish, and the good and the bad all die. Verse 15 picks up on that last category and discusses the death of the Lord's "godly ones." That is what this verse is all about – the death of those who love and follow the Lord. Stop and think about one of the godliest persons that you know or know of. I think of Jay Alford or Dallas Willard. Those men are going to die. The death of people like that is what this verse is all about.

IN THE SIGHT OF THE LORD

Now notice the words “in the sight of the Lord.” Those words are why this verse is so fascinating and, I think, unique. It reveals to us what Derek Kidner calls “the Godward side of death.”

All of us know the manward side of death. I mean by that the perspective of people regarding it. France’s King Louis XIV, for instance, decreed that the word “death” not be uttered in his presence. People generally dread death. That is the manward side of it.

But this verse gives us something new – the Godward side of it. I mean by that the Lord’s perspective regarding it. It shows us how He experiences and views death, specifically, the death of His godly ones.

It says that their death is “precious” to Him. That’s how most English Bibles translate it. The Hebrew word translated “precious” can have one of two meanings. It can mean “costly” or in a happier sense, “precious.” Those are different meanings but I believe that both are actually true. So let’s examine both.

COSTLY

First, the death of His godly ones is costly to the Lord. The Jerusalem Bible captures that meaning of the word by translating verse 15 this way: *“The death of the devout costs Yahweh dear.”*

Verses 14 and 16 are the context of verse 15 and open up that sense of the word to us. Verse 14 talks about godly ones paying their vows to the Lord. Verse 16 talks about them serving Him. The gist of those verses is that the Lord accomplishes His purposes on earth through His godly ones. Thus, it costs Him dearly when they die.

Leighton Ford’s son and Billy Graham’s nephew, Sandy Ford, was an outstanding athlete, a devoted follower of Jesus, and a dynamic Christian leader on the University of North Carolina campus. But he developed a heart problem while he was there that was so serious that he had to have surgery on it. He didn’t make it through the surgery though and died.

I think all of us can see that Sandy’s death cost the Lord dearly.

His family and friends certainly did. What they wondered of course was "Why?" He could have done so much more for the Lord, they thought. So, why did He let him die so young, before he was able to do it? I don't know the answer to that. But I do know this. What they wondered the Lord carefully considered before He allowed Sandy to die.

Most people believe in untimely deaths. They believe that people can die prematurely, ahead of their time. Actuarial tables tell us that the average lifespan of a man is 72 years and the average lifespan of a woman is 78 years. 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 renowned psychiatrist Carl Jung expressed that sentiment quite vividly. He declared that the death of the young is *"a period placed before the end of the sentence."*

But that first translation, "costly," implies that isn't true. The death of a godly one is costly to the Lord. It dramatically impacts the promoting 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 that godly ones never die prematurely. They only die when the Lord's work for them on earth is done. Billy Graham summed it up so succinctly at Sandy's funeral. In his homily, he said: *"His life was not cut short. It was completed."*

How right he was! The death of godly ones is costly to the Lord. Consequently, He always places the period at the end of their sentence.

PRECIOUS

Now, the Hebrew word in verse 15 that the Jerusalem Bible translates "costly" can have a second and happier meaning. That meaning is highly valued, prized, or cherished. Most English Bibles capture that meaning of the word by translating it "precious." The death of godly ones is precious or highly valued to the Lord. That conveys two things.

The first is His desire for face to face fellowship with His people.

Some of us here at Bethel Friends are students of Oswald Chambers. Chambers was one of the best friends that Jesus ever had. But while he was ministering to allied troops during World War I, he died of a ruptured appendix at the age of 43. Word of his death was then cabled around the world in four simple words: "*Oswald in His presence.*"

That's powerful isn't it – and true. Philippians 1:23 teaches that the moment we die, we're "*with Christ.*" The great old hymn calls it being face to face with Jesus. That simply means that we're in full fellowship with Him like we've never been before. I think about that all the time and so do many of you. Oh how we long for that.

And so does the Lord. That's the incredible implication of verse 15. He loves us far more deeply than we can ever imagine. He loves us so deeply in fact that He longs for the full fellowship with us that our death brings. 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 death precious to Him.

That the death of His godly ones is precious to the Lord conveys a second thing. It conveys His desire to make them whole.

We can never be that in this life on earth. That's because all of us are fallen mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. All of us, for example, are competent in slices. That means that we have our areas of competence and incompetence. All of us are functional in slices. We have our areas of functionality and dysfunctionality. All of us are healthy in slices. We have our areas of healthiness and unhealthiness.

But all of that changes after godly ones die. One godly one, for instance, struggles with percentages. But she won't after she dies. She'll be able to calculate 27% of 137 in the blink of an eye. Another godly one is diabetic. But she won't be after she dies. She'll be able to eat all the Milky Ways that she wants to. What I'm saying is this. Godly ones won't be anything in slices after they die. They'll be perfect and whole instead – completely competent, functional, and healthy. I don't know about you but the older I get, the more I long for that.

And so does the Lord. Again, He loves us far more deeply than we

can ever imagine. He loves us so deeply in fact that He longs for the perfection and wholeness that our death brings us. He longs for us to be perfect and whole as much as we long for us to be perfect and whole. Which is the second reason that our death is precious to Him.

Some elders at Barberton Friends Church and I once prayed for and asked the Lord to heal a lovely 32 year-old wife and mother who had cancer. He didn't though and she died. At calling hours, someone commented about that, "*God didn't make Sharon healthy so that He could make her whole.*" That wasn't just nice talk. It was, as verse 15 makes clear, actually true. Sharon's death was precious to the Lord. He didn't heal her because He wanted to make her whole.

So that's the Godward side of death that verse 15 reveals. The death of His godly ones is both costly and precious to the Lord.

READY TO DIE

There's a reason that I've preached this. It's that you and I might be ready to die. Psychologists tell us that one of the characteristics of a mature person is the ability to face his or her own death. They say that we aren't ready to live until we're ready to die.

Let me ask you a personal question in that regard. Are you ready to die? That question has two aspects, both of which I want to explain.

The first aspect is the objective one. We have one of two eternal destinies awaiting us after we die. One is a never-ending life apart from God, one that is utterly devoid of love, peace, and joy. The other is a never-ending life with God, one that is permeated with fullness of love, peace, and joy. Ungodly ones have the first destiny. Godly ones have the second. So be a godly one. You do that by deciding to follow Jesus – by making and carrying out the decision to be with and like Him.

Readiness to die has a second aspect – a subjective one. I've ministered to many godly ones through final illnesses over the years. All were ready to die objectively. But many, if not most, weren't ready subjectively. I mean by that, they were either ill at ease or fearful in

the face of death. But it doesn't have to be that way. The good news is that we can be utterly untroubled and at ease in the face of death.

And here's how. It's by understanding the Godward side of death that I explained today and its implications to us.

First, our death is costly to the Lord. The implication of that to us is that we are indestructible until the Lord's work for us on earth is done. I used to worry, for instance, about the prospect of dying and leaving my wife alone. But I don't anymore because of what I now understand and believe. My death is costly to the Lord. I can't and won't die until all of His work for me is done. Part of that work is witnessing and supporting my wife's life. I will continue doing that until He determines that that work of mine is done. Understanding and believing that fills my wife and me with confidence, peace, and joy.

Second our death is precious to the Lord. The implication of that to us is that to die is gain. I'm quoting Philipians 1:21 of course, a verse that I read at almost every funeral. Dallas Willard's paraphrase of that statement is dynamite. Godly ones are literally better off dead.

I read about a 28 year-old Christian who was given six months to live. Shortly after that, someone noticed that he was looking downcast and sad and asked him why. So he explained what it was, that he was just given six months to live. Whereupon the person who asked him the question declared, "*How exciting!*" That may not have been the subtlest response in the world but it certainly was true. The prospect of death isn't intimidating. It's exciting because to die is gain.

So, I challenge you. Study the Bible and get God's perspective on death. You will think and feel quite differently about it if you do.

CONCLUSION

I close this morning with three names – Oswald Chambers, Sandy Ford, and Don Green. Their deaths weren't tragic and premature. They were costly and precious. That is the Godward side of death.