

The Precious Death

John M. Buttrey II

The Scripture has been quoted countless times at memorial services, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His godly ones" (Psalm 116:15).

Generally, things "precious" to us are babies, sweet things that children do or say, beautiful flowers, or wonderful memories. With such understandings of the word "precious," we might look at the passage in Psalms with the idea that God views the death of the faithful as a beautiful and sweet thing. This would be fine if the word translated "precious" actually meant sweet, beautiful, or wonderful. However, the word does not have this meaning.

Certainly, when a faithful child of God passes, there is a sense of beauty. The apostle Paul spoke of death in these terms, describing it as "gain" (Phil. 1:21). In the same way, we find these words in the book of Revelation:

And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, "Write, 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!'" "Yes," says the Spirit, "so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them" (Revelation 14:13).

While death, for the Christian, can be gain and a blessing, what did this psalmist mean when he used the Hebrew word translated "precious"?

The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament notes that the Hebrew word translated "precious" comes from a root word which "conveys the idea of heavy, honor, and dignity." As one looks at the various uses of this word in the Old Testament, the ideas of value and importance are seen. For example:

*She is more **precious** than jewels; And nothing you desire compares with her (Proverbs 3:15 Emphasis Mine).*

The "she" in this passage is God's wisdom. While we might look at God's wisdom as being something beautiful or precious, the idea here is more related to its worth and importance. Notice also how the word is applied in this example from the book of Esther:

*The king said, "What **honor** or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?" Then the king's servants who attended him said, "Nothing has been done for him" (Esther 6:3 Emphasis Mine).*

Honor in this passage would speak of the recognition of value expressed for Mordecai's actions. This same picture of value or worth is seen in this description of the stones used by Solomon in building the temple:

*Then the king commanded, and they quarried great stones, **costly** stones, to lay the foundation of the house with cut stones (1 Kings 5:17 Emphasis Mine).*

In each of these texts, and others where the word is used, we see the idea of value and importance, more than that of precious (as we typically think of precious). In understanding what the psalmist meant in his use of this word, we must look at the psalm as a whole, not as a single verse.

While the name of the psalmist is not listed, Jewish tradition ascribes this psalm to King Hezekiah. You may recall that Hezekiah was told to get his house in order for he has going to die (Isa. 38:1). After praying to God, Judah's faithful king was given fifteen more years of life (Isa. 38:5). This relates to the theme of the psalm.

The cords of death encompassed me and the terrors of Sheol came upon me; I found distress and sorrow. Then I called upon the name of the Lord: "O Lord, I beseech You, save my life!" (Psalm 116:3-4 Emphasis Mine).

Return to your rest, O my soul, For the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. For You have rescued my soul from death, My eyes from tears, My feet from stumbling (Psalms 116:7-8 Emphasis Mine).

The psalm describes the experience of one (whether Hezekiah or someone else) who was faced with certain death, but found deliverance through his prayer to God. It is in this context of deliverance from death that he writes, "Precious (of great value and importance) is the death of His godly ones."

The psalmist could mean the value of a life faithfully lived when death comes. Hence, death for the righteous (as is typically interpreted) is a beautiful thing. However, in keeping with the psalm's theme of deliverance from death, he might rather have the idea that God takes the passing in death of His godly ones as a very serious and important matter.

Think of the void that is left when a faithful child of God passes from this life. We have all experienced it in our lives and in our local congregations. Gone is the *living* example of faithfulness that we can physically see, not just remember. Gone is the service they offered. Gone is the calming presence and influence for truth. Gone is the leadership. I believe this was the idea of the psalmist, when he wrote of the death of His godly ones as being "precious."

The passing of the faithful may be gain, but it comes with a great price. As such, the psalmist expresses the thought that God takes such matters very seriously. The Almighty recognizes the value the godly offer to others, and the cost experienced in their passing. This is a cost felt by those who must faithfully deal with the passing of the faithful brother or sister.

The passing of loved ones is a part of this mortal realm. How comforting it is to have the hope found only in Jesus Christ. How encouraging it is to know that God understands the loss we experience in the passing of the faithful. Precious indeed, in the sight of God, is the death of His godly ones!