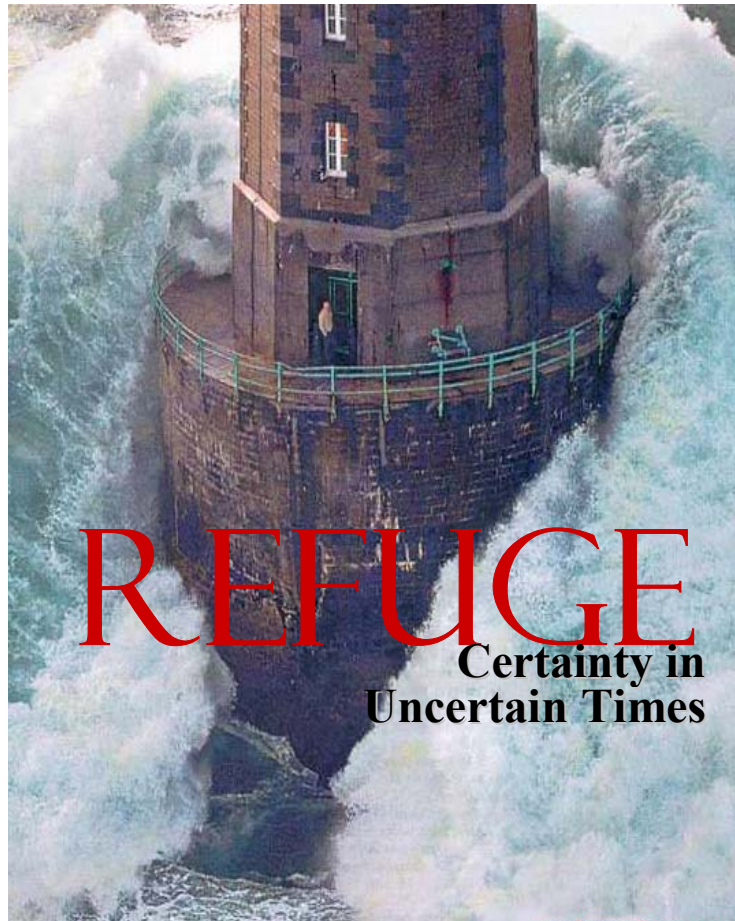


*The Covenant Pulpit*



**A View from the Hearse**  
**Psalm 116**

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In an uncertain world, death is a certainty. Benjamin Franklin wrote, "In this world nothing is certain but death and taxes." The British playwright, George Bernard Shaw quipped, "The statistics on death are quite impressive. One out of one people die." Death is inescapable. No wonder we dread it.

The ancient Greek sage, Sophocles observed, "Even the stout of heart shrink when they see the approach of death." Just before he died, heavyweight champ Joe Louis whispered to a friend, "Everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to die to get there."

I recently read a graphic account of Joseph Stalin's death, written by his daughter, Svetlana in her book, *Twenty Letters to a Friend*. For a quarter of a century her father ruled 285 million people with an iron fist. On his orders, millions were murdered in history's bloodiest reign of terror. He once joked, "A single death is a tragedy, but a million is only a statistic." A hundred thousand priests, monks, and nuns were shot during his purge of Christianity. But, though he was the most powerful man on earth, he was powerless to stop the *Grim Reaper* on March 5, 1953. Listen to Svetlana:

The hemorrhage had gradually spread to the rest of his brain. 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 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. His 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 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 of the flesh."

Joseph Stalin cursed death, and we joke about it. Comedian Woody Allen said, "It's not that I'm afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens." Milton Beryl quipped, "There are worse things than death. Have you ever spent an evening with an insurance salesman?" Yogi Berra made us laugh when he said, "Always go to other people's funerals. Otherwise they won't come to yours."

But mostly death is a fearful thing. We have invented terms to avoid the dreaded 'D' word: 'kick the bucket', 'the end of the line', 'the big sleep', 'bite the dust', 'six feet under', 'cash in the chips', and other euphemisms. British anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer says that death has replaced sex as the forbidden subject of conversation in polite society.

Job 18:14 is right when it calls death 'the king of terrors.' The writer of Psalm 116 would agree. He says in verse three, "The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me..." He pulls no punches in describing the physiological terror of his ordeal. We don't know his name, but he speaks for billions of people who have stared death in the face. Somehow he cheated death. But even he only managed to postpone the inevitable. Ultimately we will all face the *Grim Reaper*. How do we deal with it when it comes to us, or our loved ones? I think we can reduce this Psalm to a single principle of life (and death):

**Death is a temporary anesthetic while we get a body transplant.  
For God's children it's stepping from *life* to life.**

There is a stark contrast between the Psalmist's terror when the cords of death entangled him, and God's view of death in verse fifteen: "Precious in the sight of God is the death of his saints." What we view with sorrow, God views with pleasure. Death is not the end of life as much as it is the beginning of eternity. The famous jurist, Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, "There are only three natural anesthetics: sleep, fainting, and death." The New Testament repeatedly uses the word "sleep" to describe the death of Christians. Indeed, death is a temporary anesthetic while we receive a body transplant. As Christians we step from abundant life to *glorious* life. And yet, if life is pleasant and death is peaceful, the transition from one to the other can be scary. So how do we deal with death? This is what Psalm 116 teaches us:

### 1. Death from *our* View

It may be pleasant for God, but not for most of us. In verse five the Psalmist says, "The anguish of the grave came upon me." The Hebrew word for *anguish* has to do with the most extreme terror. The French thinker Rousseau was probably right when he said, "He who pretends to face death without fear is a liar." Hebrews 2:15 says that many Christians "through fear of death are subject to slavery." Even Jesus feared his own death to the point that his capillaries erupted in his extreme panic and he sweat drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane. Why do we fear death?

## 1) Desperation to live

In verses 1&2 he remembers his life-or-death prayer: "...he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy..." The original Hebrew has the sense of screaming; a cry of utter desperation. In verse four he says, "Then I called on the name of the Lord; 'O Lord, save me!'" I think that we fight death because we were made for a life that is captured in Genesis 2:7: "The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." Death is unnatural. At the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus wept. The Gospel uses Greek language that describes Jesus' weeping as angry or frustrated. This wasn't how he had created the world to be. Humans were made in God's image to live forever in a paradise of life and joy, not death and sorrow. But God said to Adam, "In the day that you eat the forbidden fruit, you shall certainly die." Though this sin-sick world kills everything (even the Son of God), there is a stubborn part of us that knows it's not right. Like the Psalmist, we go kicking and screaming to an unnatural grave. And, like Jesus, we weep with angry frustration at the graves of those who go before us.

## 2) Ultimate helplessness

I think that death is the inevitable reminder of our ultimate frailty. In verse three the Psalmist says, "The cords of death entangled me..." This speaks of hunters who have thrown a net over their prey. The victim struggles to get free, but only manages to entangle himself more. He goes on in verse three, "...the anguish of the grave came upon me..." There comes a sudden flash of reality: "I'm a dead man!" It ends with resignation: "I was overcome..." The Hebrew for *overcome* speaks of absolute helplessness. Joseph Stalin boasted that everyone in the Soviet Union depended on him for their next breath. But even he had no control over his last breath. Alexander the Great once found Diogenes rummaging through a pile of bones. The old philosopher stared intently at Alexander and said, "I am searching for the bones of your father Philip. But I cannot seem to distinguish them from the bones of the slaves." Death shows us all that there is ultimately no difference between the most powerful kings and the weakest of slaves.

## 3) Fear of the great unknown

Again, the Hebrew word for *anguish* in verse three has to do with extreme terror. In verse seven he says to himself, "Be at rest once more, O my soul." He is trying to talk himself down off the ledge. We fear death for a lot of reasons. Chief is the pain or loss of dignity that comes when death brings

our house of cards crashing down. We also fear the loss that comes with death. All of our lives we have scrimped and saved to enjoy our golden years, only to have everything stolen by death. Some of us fear meeting God on the other side. Hebrews 9:27 says, "It is appointed unto a man once to die, and then to face the judgment." Many are scared to death of what lies on the other side. Winston Churchill said, "I am ready to meet my Maker. Whether my Maker is prepared for the great ordeal of meeting me is quite another matter." What will God do when we face him? Perhaps we even wonder if there will be a God on the other side. Unless we are secure in Christ, death is a frightening doorway into the great unknown.

#### **4) Sorrow of separation**

Remember his vivid word picture in verse three. He is the helpless prey ensnared in the hunter's net, being dragged away from family and friends. Death snatches us away from everything that is familiar and everyone we love. No wonder verse eight speaks of his crying eyes and stumbling feet. The Hebrew has the sense of crying and stumbling without end. Those of you who have lost loved ones know about this neverending sorrow. Verse nine tells us what he wanted more than anything as he was being dragged away kicking and screaming: "...that I may walk before the Lord in the land of the living." What we know is familiar. Out there beyond the grave are the shadowlands. C.S. Lewis said that if we could go together with the ones we love all at the same time, it would be at least bearable.

#### **5) Disillusionment at death**

In verses 10&11 he shares other thoughts when he was struggling with death, "I believed, therefore I said, 'I am greatly afflicted.' And in my dismay I said, 'All men are liars.'" Death is the ultimate reality check. Sometimes it shakes our faith in God. In verse ten he lets us know that it was his belief that drove him to God in his affliction. But God doesn't always respond quickly to our frantic pleas. So we go into a spiritual tailspin. In verse eleven he says that he was in dismay. The Hebrew word for *dismay* describes an earthquake. Our faith superstructures can fall apart in these massive tremors. He describes total cynicism at the end of verse eleven: "...I said, 'All men are liars.'" All the faith formulas we got from parents, pastors, and friends seem like lies. We've all had times when we have smiled, but inside we wanted to scream at our comforters, "What you are saying to me makes no sense." Everyone, from Abraham to Zachariah, has had these moments of disillusionment. If you are at such a point today, I invite you to do what the Psalmist does and take another viewpoint.

## **2. Death from God's View**

The 15<sup>th</sup> verse has given grieving saints hope for more than 2500 years: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." What we count as great loss, he sees as greater gain. Heaven stands on tiptoe waiting for God's children to come home for at least three reasons:

### **1) God's joy in the homecoming**

I love that phrase in verse 15, "...in the sight of the Lord..." This is the waiting Father described in Christ's parable of the Prodigal Son. He watches for us from his house. In it the Divine Carpenter has built special rooms for each of us. Jesus said to his grieving disciples on the night of his death, "Don't let your hearts be troubled. In my Father's house are many rooms and I go to prepare a place for you." The Father counts the days until we come home. He waits at the gate to embrace us. Today, our daughter Rachael is with us. For weeks we've counted the days until she would be home. We cleaned every inch of our house, stocked the fridge with her favorite foods, and cleared our schedules in order to luxuriate in her presence. How much more is our Father restless to have us home.

### **2) The high cost of the flight home**

What would you give to bring your children home? No airfare would be too high if you loved them the way God loves us. The man delivered from death cries out to God, "...you have freed me from my chains." When the cords of death ensnared him, God untangled the mess. We too were ensnared by death: spiritual, physical, and eternal. But God gave his Only Begotten Son to set us free. He ransomed us by taking our place. Look at the startlingly identical description of this man's near death experience in Psalm 116 with Christ's death in Isaiah 53:8: "By oppression and judgment he was carried away...for he was cut off from the land of the living." When Psalm 116:15 uses the word "precious," it is speaking of something so valuable that a person will pay any price to get it. The price for our flight home cost our heavenly Father everything he had of value.

### **3) A Father's compassion**

The Psalmist was full of dismay during his death struggle. But he finally discovered in verses 5&6, "The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The Lord protects the simple hearted. When I was in great need, he saved me." As much as God wants us home, he still

understands our struggle with death. He knows that we are *simple hearted* kids. As an earthly father has compassion on his children when they come into daddy's bedroom scared of the dark, so our heavenly Father understands our fears. We are precious in his sight, even when we're not strong saints. So he pulls back the covers of his love and lets us climb into bed with him, snuggled up in his fellowship until the dark night is over.

### 3. Death from *Others' Views*

We not only should see death from God's view, but the view of others who are going through trouble. We should never forget the grace in verses 5&6. A compassionate God comforts us in our struggles. In the same way we should comfort others. St. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:4, "...we comfort those in trouble with all the comfort we ourselves have received from God." There's no handbook with failsafe formulas on showing mercy. But we've all had a visit from the sweet Christian who tries to dull our pain with plastic platitudes that ring hollow.

I think that godly compassion requires this: 1) **Be there**. Sometimes the hardest thing we will ever do is to show up when we are scared that we will say or do the wrong thing and make matters worse for the grieving person. 2) **Be real**. Don't fake your feelings. If you feel like crying, do it. If you don't have anything to say, be quiet. If you don't have answers, be honest about it. 3) **Be quiet**. Most people just want a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on. 4) **Be supportive**. I remember a widow who said that the best comfort she received was from a little girl who climbed up into her lap and cried with her. 5) **Be available**. Lots of folks will flock to the funeral. But precious few are those who will remember the grieving person in the months and years to come. Joe Baylys lost three children over the course of a few years. In his book, *A View from the Hearse*, he wrote about the time one of his kids died:

I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God's dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly. He said things I knew were true.

I was unmoved, except to wish he would go away. He finally did.

Another came and sat beside me. He didn't talk. He didn't ask me leading questions. He just sat beside me for an hour and more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply, and then left.

I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go.

#### 4. Living in the Light of Death

After God saved him from death, he asked the only question that matters in verse 12, "How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?" Maybe you have never stared death in the face. But every breath of life you take is a gift from the God who sees you as precious in his sight. How do you pay it back? This is the great question. Everyday I read the obituaries in the newspapers. I love to tromp through graveyards and read the inscriptions on the tombstones. I think that one of the best uses of our time is to go to funerals. In Ecclesiastes 7:2 the wisest man who ever lived wrote, "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting." In other words, it is better to go to a funeral than an all-you-can-eat buffet or the comedy club. Why? Because at a funeral we remember that this life is a moment in the light of eternity. One day, family and friends will gather to talk about us. Will we leave a legacy worth remembering? More importantly, when we cross over to the other side will God say, "Well done good and faithful servant!"?

As we close, look at the four ways he lived life in the light of death: 1) **A saved life.** In verse 13 he says, "I will lift up the horn of salvation." A horn blows a message. It sounds warning. By his life and words he will let others know that eternity beckons and God offers a way of salvation. 2) **A servant life.** He says in verse 16, "O Lord, truly I am your servant." We are not our own. We have been purchased by a price. We live only because we live in Christ who has redeemed us. Everything we do is for his glory. 3) **A sacrificial life.** Several times he repeats what he says in verse fourteen: "I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of his people." When he faced death he made a bargain with God. He doesn't tell us what it is. But if his redemption costs God something, his life will cost him something. He will do something of significance to show God that he is thankful. And everyone will see it. What are you doing for God that is sacrificial? 4) **A celebrative life.** He sums up his life in the final verse: "Praise the Lord!" Every moment of this life should be lived as a thank you to God for his grace. Unless Jesus comes first, death will find us when we least expect it. But we can face death best when we have lived life well.

Perhaps no one said it better than Leonardo da Vinci: "As a day well spent brings happy sleep, so does a life well spent bring a happy death."

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