

# *A Valuable Death*

**Bible Reading:**  
**Psalm 116**

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His name was Bernie. Met him quite some years ago. Bernie had a bit of a tough edge on him. Tongue could be sharp. It actually put you off a bit when you first met him. Once you got to know him, though, you'd understand. It even got to where I began to admire him, a bit, for how he'd managed to get through life relatively intact.

Bernie parents hadn't been the easiest on him. Didn't give him much of a role model about what home life or parenting should or could be like. He had some rather harsh experiences during World War II. The post-war years weren't much better as he tried, on a laborer's wage, to support his household full of independently-minded kids. Had a call from the police more than once when they were teenagers.

As the years went by, and the kids grew and had families of their own, things settled down some, and there were even a few good years.

Till Bernie developed stomach cancer.

In those days the anti-nausea and pain medications weren't near as good as they are now.

All we could do was watch Bernie slowly, painfully, inch towards the edge of life.

I got to know him better during those months than at any time before. And it was there, in a weak and tired voice, that he confided how he'd come to appreciate the words of Psalm 116. *"I hope someone will read them at my funeral. They say exactly what I have experienced in my life."*

Bernie was a Christian. Had come to Christ when he was young. Watching him was a great reminder that just because you are a believer in Christ, **doesn't** mean you've got everything figured out. And **doesn't** mean that the journey through life is on a magic carpet, or an easy dance over a path strewn with rose petals.

Bernie trudged through life.

With many bumps and bruises.

Through all of that, he'd come to resonate with Psalm 116.

And as the cancer took hold of his body, that became

in deep ways

Bernie's psalm.

As we come close to the end of this summer's wander through that Book of the Soul, the poems from faithful hearts of long ago, let's spend a few minutes with this one -

### **PSALM 116, P.564 (Old Testament)**

Nobody is really sure who wrote this Psalm.

As part of the group of psalms, 113 to 118, it forms the *Great Hallel*, songs of thanksgiving and praise to God used during the Passover celebration.

These poems became the collective praise of the people:

**S** relieved that their lives had been saved from the collective death of slavery in Egypt;

**S** that in their great need, as a simple, unknown, bottom of the heap group of people, God considered their lives as precious; precious enough to rescue.

- S lifting up the Passover Cup of thanksgiving in the setting of temple worship in gratitude for freedom and life
- S grateful, oh so grateful, to be freed from their chains of Egyptian slavery.

And in that way Psalm 116 can be a psalm which we can use as post-Resurrection believers when we gather for Holy Communion:

- S remembering that our lives have been saved from the collective death of sin and hell
- S that in our great need, as bottom of the heap sinners, God still considers our lives as precious; precious enough to send His only Son. As Romans 5:8 says, "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."
- S lifting up the Communion Cup of thanksgiving in the setting of congregational worship in gratitude for salvation and eternal life
- S grateful, oh so grateful, to be freed from our chains of guilt and condemnation.

That's how Israel came to use this Psalm.

And that's how we can use it in collective Christian worship.

Bernie had no idea about any of this, though.

He just read it as it was probably first written -

- a simple, relatively unknown person going through some pretty deep trauma;
- trauma that was dragging him down
- trauma that was strangling the life right out of him

a simple, relatively unknown person who came to see the gracious, righteous compassion of God appear in his life, carrying him through that trauma, and showing him a side of life that was stronger, deeper, more lasting than that struggle.

Staring eternity in the face, that's how Bernie read Psalm 116.

Bernie knew that God heard him.

His cries from the hospital bed in the middle of the night; cries that went out silently from his heart when nobody else was around and when the dark minutes seemed to stretch into hours - those cries didn't go unnoticed.

Which is what Romans 8 reminds us, too, telling us that when we're groaning in ways that we can't even express in words, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us; He prays for us to the Heavenly Father in the most perfect of ways.

When we can't pray any more, He prays for us.

Yes - it's true, Psalm 116:1

*"I love the Lord, because he **HAS** heard my voice and my supplications."*

Sometimes doctors say, "*We'll get back to you*" and you're left dangling, waiting for the phone call. Or they don't really listen when you ask your questions.

Sometimes friends promise to drop by and don't - too busy.

Or say they'll pray for you, and you're left with the feeling that it's really just a polite promise of the moment.

Sometimes even your best friend gets distracted in the middle of listening to you.

But the Lord truly hears.

The Lord *inclines His ear...* (v.2)

As Eugene Peterson puts it, "*The Lord listened so intently as I laid out my case before Him....*"

Verse 3 continues the psalm -

*The snares of death encompassed me,  
The pangs of Sheol laid hold on me....*

Death is like a rabbit snare, waiting along the path, ready to wrap around our neck and strangle life right out of us.

It's waiting ahead.

No way around it.

Staring us in the face.

For some of us it seems rather remote. How often do you wake up thinking about death when you're 21 years old?

Reality is, friends, that the snare is waiting for everyone.

For Bernie, feeling the cancer squeeze the life slowly out of him was a challenge. He didn't have any control. He had no say. Nothing. Completely powerless. A victim.

Sheol - Old Testament people visualized the world after life on earth as a dark, gray place where souls drifted. That was Sheol. A dark, shapeless abyss from which no one could return.

That's what the Psalmist pleads for relief from in v.4: "*O Lord, I pray, save my life!*"

He doesn't want to disappear with a whimper.

Neither did Bernie.

Come to think of it.....

....neither do I!

Know what is such a relief about Psalm 116?

It's so very, very real.

Sometimes people ask me, "*Is it OK to pray about this?*" They're not sure if they can verbalize their doubt. They feel guilty about expressing disappointment or anger to God.

They're not sure what to do with spiritual frustration.

The Psalmist unloads it all before the Lord.

You see some of that unloading also in verses 10 and 11.

*"I said... I am greatly afflicted.... I said... everyone is a liar."*

One of the reasons that the Holy Spirit placed this book in the Bible is to let us know that it's OK to be real in front of God.

God is bigger than our disappointment.

He's not going to be bowled over by our anger.

He will withstand the storm of our spiritual frustration just the way a parent gently and patiently deals with a young toddler expressing itself when facing what seem to be terminal walls to that little ankle-biter.

Being real with God.

Yes.

We can.

In verse 4 we read - "*O Lord, I pray, save my life!*"

The words *I pray* are, in Hebrew, very deep.

*I pray.... or.... please don't really come close enough. It's very intense.*

If you've stood around a death bed, or experienced a time of real sickness, you know that intensity. There's no time for nonsense. No beating around the bush. You cut right to the chase. With each other. With the doctors. And with the Lord..... *O Lord..... save my life!*

And then comes the reminder - v.5:

*Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful*

The word *gracious* in the Old Testament is a description given **only** to God!

He cares

He pours out grace

He is gentle

in ways that no human being could ever begin to approach.

Any graciousness we show is but a reflection of what is uniquely and strongly first of all

His.

Diligent, careful attention and love - that is the *graciousness* of God.

Done in a perfect way - that is the *righteousness* of God.

Never even a hint of error or compromise or foolishness or oversight.

Did Bernie always get that? No.

But, in a moment of real insight, he quietly remarked one day how even his cancer is really a result of human rebellion and the fall into sin.

It's not God's fault.

I remember one member of this congregation responding to someone who said, "*Why? Why should you have to suffer this terrible disease?*" The member responded. "*Why **not** me? I'm as much a part of the human race as anyone else.*"

Until the day when Christ returns and ushers in the New Creation, we **all** will continue to sweat and labour and experience the thorns and thistles of the curse on Eden.

Remember, friends, that God grieves about those pains in His good creation and in our lives **even more than we do**.

That is why, in His grace and righteousness and mercy He sent His one and only son to climb right down into this ruin of Creation;  
to become part of that ruined experience  
to lift the curse onto his shoulders  
to experience the curse of death.

That is why God began the road of Salvation History.  
To restore Creation.  
To restore us.  
Rather than destroy Creation, or us.  
Or just turn His divine back on us and walk away from us.  
Ignoring us.

So we can remember, and we can remind each other that  
S yes, the pain is great, but His love is greater still.  
S yes, the grief is almost impossible to bear, but His love is greater still.  
S yes, the sorrow is deeper than any of us can imagine, but His love is greater still.  
S yes, the tears seem like they will never stop flowing, but His love is greater still.  
S His love is greater still.

Verse 15 tells us:

*Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His faithful ones.*

For years and years, my throat would tighten at that verse.  
I couldn't say it.  
What do you mean "*precious*"?  
Does God love it when one of His children dies?  
Does He look forward to their death?

Eventually, someone explained it to me.  
This verse, 15, means that our lives are incredibly valuable and precious to the Lord.  
He pays intense attention to them. Careful attention. He guards them as we would guard precious possessions in our lives.

You don't leave your diamond ring lying around.  
You don't play catch with it.  
Or toss it to the dog.  
You polish it.  
You check the setting regularly to make sure it is secure.  
You are aware of how you treat it.

God never fails to guard us.  
He can never be accused of divine neglect.  
Not one hair is overlooked. They're all numbered, said Jesus (Mt 10:30).

Or one moment. They're numbered, too (see Psalm 139).  
We're too precious in His eyes.

Bernie was too precious to God.

Yes, even Bernie!

Because Jesus died for Bernie. And Bernie believed in Jesus. In his own rough-edged way, Bernie believed.

And God's gracious, righteous mercy grabbed hold of and claimed Bernie.  
Bernie was viewed by the eyes of God as one of His faithful ones.  
God saw Bernie as a saint.  
For Jesus' sake!

And, for Jesus' sake, God could care for Bernie's life with a plan and vision that could see much, much further than the terribly small limits of our short lifespan on earth.

Beyond that, in the powerful grasp of God's hand,  
beyond the end of this life is **not** Sheol  
not some dark, gray, shapeless void from which there is no escape.

Beyond this terribly short, limited earthly lifespan is eternal life with Jesus.

Beginning in Heaven.

And one day finding fulfillment in the New Creation.

In the hands of God nothing can rip that future away from us.

No one could deny Bernie that future, that certainty, that inheritance.

Every moment of our living matters infinitely to God.

As does every moment of our dying.

The Old Testament Psalmist didn't see it - couldn't have;

couldn't and didn't see the fulfillment of all of this in Jesus.

that had to come later.

All he knew is that in the hands of God he wouldn't fade away from life with a meaningless whimper.

His life and eternity were in good hands.

We are blessed because we see Jesus.

We have the cross and the empty tomb - His death and resurrection.

Death no longer is the stronger.

We are blessed because we can see that.

We can see that death is not as Thomas Hobbs is quoted as saying, "*a fearful leap into the darkness.*" Rather, as the Apostle Paul says in 2 Cor. 5:1, "For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

We can see that and therefore say with Paul:

"Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory?.... Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."  
(1 Cor 15)

Death no longer has the last word.

Christ does as He presents those who are His to the Father.

Some years ago we said, *Bernie died of cancer.*

Jesus said, "*Father, here is my precious brother, your son, Bernie. Grant him the place I have prepared for him in your eternal mansion.*"

And Bernie became part of the great crowd pictured in Revelation 7:

the crowd of those who have died as believers  
now free from any trauma or tribulation  
no more suffering  
no more tears.

Through his last chapter on earth, Bernie was able to keep hold of that, and it brought him peace.

As we laid his tired remains to rest, his family was able to keep hold of that, and it brought them peace.

Friends, as we leave here and begin to trudge our next steps down the road towards our personal and inevitable moment of leaving earth, may we keep hold of that, too.

And may it bring us peace.