

The Death of Saints Precious

Charles G. Finney:

"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." Psalm 116:15

The sentiment of the text is clearly expressed, leaving us in no doubt as to what it is. God looks upon the death of his saints as an event of peculiar interest.

In discussing this subject I shall

I. STATE SEVERAL REASONS WHY THE DEATH OF HIS SAINTS IS PRECIOUS IN HIS SIGHT.

II. SHOW THAT THE DEATH OF SAINTS SHOULD BE PRECIOUS TO US.

III. STATE SOME REASONS WHY THIS IS OFTEN NOT THE CASE, AND WHY WE FAIL OF VIEWING THIS EVENT AS GOD DOES.

1. God deems the death of his saints precious because their happiness is very dear to Him. When they die, they enter at once into eternal rest. Death is to them the gate way to perfect blessedness. Of course, He who deeply rejoices in their happiness cannot fail to sympathize with them most intensely in this eventful period of their existence. If God takes the interest in the welfare of his saints that parents do in the welfare of their children, He can not be otherwise than greatly interested in their death.

2. God deems their death precious because He can now receive them home from all their wanderings. If an earthly father would rejoice to receive his children home after a long absence, and especially an absence fraught with many dangers and perils,--how much more shall God rejoice to receive his children home--as much more, as He loves his children better than they do theirs?

3. God has been at much pains, and great expense to prepare them to come home and be happy in his own mansions. Unless He had been at pains to subdue their temper and cleanse them from all their sins, they could not bear to dwell with Him, and of course He could not dwell with them. His labors therefore have been not only faithful and kind, but wise and indispensable. And who needs be told that it has cost Him much painstaking, and great watchfulness to prepare them so that He could receive them again to Himself? How diligent and often how long-protracted is the process of discipline by which He trains them to let loose their grasp on earthly and sensual, and selfish pleasures, and set their hearts supremely on the living God! If an earthly parent had a prodigal son, of wayward temper and estranged affections--one who should be in no condition to return home and enjoy its society; but the father, aware of the case, should with great care and pains and with much wisdom and love pursue a train of measures to restore him to the spirit of a son, and should at length succeed; then would not the day of his return home be one of special rejoicing? Ye who are parents can appreciate this; and I therefore ask you if that day which should restore to your embrace such a son--a son who had thus wandered, but had been also thus reclaimed, would not be most precious in your eyes? O, that day would be long remembered in your house! Deeply would its remembrance be enshrined in your hearts! Why should it not be at least equally so with God when his children come home at last to Himself?

4. In a very important sense, when God receives his children home, He receives the reward of all his labors in their behalf. We are apt to speak only of our reward, when we allude to the joys of saints in heaven; why should we not also think and speak of God's? Has not He deserved a reward for all his cares and sacrifices and labors? And is it not fit that He should receive it? Is it not reasonable that He should rejoice in his own reward, and furthermore, that we should also rejoice with Him?

If the parent, in the case I just now supposed, should prepare his son to return home by a wise and careful discipline, that son would naturally think much of his return and of the reward it would secure to himself. But be assured, that father and that mother would think of it not less than their son does. It is the day of their reward, not less than of his. O, how a parent's great love would gush forth! Hear him say--"Now I am rewarded--now I am more than repaid for all my tears and all my toils!" O, this is a gratification, such as none but a parent can appreciate. Those who love their children can understand this, and you need a parent's love in order to understand it as it is. Parents regard their children as a great treasure, and so does God regard his. He often calls them "his treasure," "his inheritance." In a thousand ways He shows how much He loves his children, and

how He rejoices over them with joy unspeakable, as if they were his greatest treasure. We need not assume that his love of them is measured by their intrinsic value; no, but rather by the depth of his own benevolent heart. He loves them the more because they are fit subjects for his compassion, and because His great compassion has been so drawn out in their behalf. Do not parents love most tenderly those poor unfortunate children who have most strongly enlisted their compassion; nay, sometimes those guilty children, who have most exercised their patience, wisdom and love in reclaiming them to filial virtue? So God rejoices over his children, brought home from all their wanderings, as one who rejoices over great spoil. Can we not appreciate in some measure how great this joy must be? Is it not said that there is joy over one reclaimed more than over the ninety and nine who went not astray?

5. God accounts their death precious, because he really enjoys their joy better than they do themselves. We are wont to think only of the joy of the departed saint; but suppose ye that God has no sympathy with such joy as theirs? When they come home, and He sees how happy they are, does not He enjoy their happiness with most intense satisfaction? You know how a parent in similar circumstances would weep for very joy in sympathy with dearly loved children; how much more shall God rejoice in the happiness of those whom He so greatly loves! And the holy angels too; did you never conceive how they receive the glorified saint--with what intense and hearty welcome--with what a gush of new and heavenly delight? Yea, all heaven is filled with new joy when another glorified saint is added to their number. The glorified saints already there, know how to sympathize most fully. We can in some measure conceive how unutterable their emotions will be.

Let it now be considered that the infinite Father casts his eye over this whole scene. With the most intense sympathy He looks down upon the joyous surprise of the newly-arrived saint--upon the joyous sympathy of every holy angel, and upon the thrill of rapturous welcome that vibrates through every glorified saint around the throne. Is it strange then that the death of his saints is most precious in his eyes?

6. Again, their death must be precious to God because He has so long sympathized with them in all their trials, pains, and sorrows. Whatever has touched them has touched the apple of his eye. Hence, when He sees their trials come to a perpetual end; that their last pang has ceased forever, their last sorrow died away to return no more at all, think you not that this event is most precious in his eyes? He has watched all their labors and sorrows with a parent's most tender interest; He has seen them mourning, broken down with grief and penitence; agonizing in their warfare against sin and temptation; when therefore, He shall see all these trials terminate, to be renewed no more--their physical pains and trials cease--all their wants supplied forever, and the state of want passed forever away; when He sees all this, think you not that He rejoices in it with great joy? No doubt He does. There can scarcely be a more erroneous view of God's character than that which denies to Him the attribute of sympathy and joy in the happiness of his creatures.

7. God has the more joy in their death because He never takes them away from earth without providing against the evil consequences which might otherwise result. He always takes care that their death shall not on the whole be any loss, but rather a gain to his church on earth. Hence his joy is not abated by any actual damage done on the whole by their being taken out of the world.

8. God is greatly glorified in their death. Who could witness such a death as that of our dear sister whose funeral we have this day attended, without giving glory to God for his blessed gospel--glory to God for his abounding grace? And not this case of death only;--how many cases have we seen here in which the triumphs of grace have been illustrious? Their exit from earth did not seem to be death; no, it was rather the entrance of a freed, triumphant spirit into a glorious eternity! With what a spirit of calm and fearless triumph they leaned upon the arm of a present Jesus and passed away as in a cloud of glory from our sight! And do not such deaths greatly glorify God?

9. The death of the righteous is also greatly useful to the living. Often it is one of the most precious instrumentalities which God can employ. What does God ever do which more deeply impresses survivors than this? Let it not then be thought strange that God should deem such an event most precious.

II. The death of saints should be precious in our sights.

1. Because it is so in the sight of God. A daughter whose father was dying, said to her mother--I opened my Bible to read, in my sorrow, and I fell upon this text--"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." I then thought--surely if my father's death is precious in God's sight, why should it not be in mine? Now this was simple and truthful. Why not? Does not God take the right views of things? Can we suppose that His views and feelings are not so correct as ours? Can we demand that He should come over to our views and conform Himself to our notions, and not we to his?

He deems the death of his saints precious; shall we deem it calamitous, grievous, and evil? Why shall we not assume that God sees all events and this one of death in particular, in a far more just light than we do, so that we ought to conform our views to his, and not seem to insist that He ought to conform his to ours? Is not his view more broad and deep and in every way more perfect than ours?

2. It is most obvious that we ought to sympathize with God, both in our opinions and in our feelings. If He regards the death of the righteous as being precious because it is joyous to them, glorious to Himself--because it places them beyond the reach of care and trouble, it is plain that every one of these considerations ought to have no less and no different influence on our minds.

3. Really the entrance of a soul into eternal glory is an event which ought to be regarded as precious in our sight. Before my conversion, and indeed for some little time afterwards, I had had no just conception of the right view to be taken of the death of a saint. But in process of time I had opportunity to witness a most triumphant death. Then I saw its nature and its bearings as I never had before. I could not mourn. Nay, so far was I from mourning over such a death, that I literally held my hands over my mouth to keep myself from shouting. The whole scene seemed to me like celebrating the triumph of a soul ushered into the glorious presence of Jehovah, and not like the gloom of bidding farewell to a friend bound to some unknown clime. You may well suppose that my emotions rose almost beyond control. Many of you perhaps know what it is to have your emotions rise and swell till they seem to be irrepressible. Mine were so when I first came to realize what the death of the righteous really is. Be assured, that death was "precious" to me. It seemed like a precious feast to my soul. So much did I enjoy these views, that I said to my father--then recently converted--"If you were to die to-day, it seems to me I could not mourn, but should rather rejoice in view of the glory upon which your ransomed spirit would enter."

III. Let us inquire, why it is that we sometimes do not consider the death of saints as precious.

To prevent any misunderstanding, let me say here that in a certain sense it can not be regarded as unlawful to grieve over the loss of friends. Christ Himself wept over the grave of Lazarus; surely we too may give scope to our natural sensibilities which cannot but suffer when ties so dear are rent asunder. Christ knew that his disciples would grieve at his death; hence He sought to comfort them; but even this comfort did not assume that it was morally wrong for them to feel afflicted at parting with such a friend. Christians learn by their experience that the outward man may be deeply afflicted, while yet the inward man enjoys great consolation. The sensibilities bleed under the wound; but yet the joy of the Lord is such a strength to the soul that many of its tears are tears of submissive, trustful joy.

But let us now pass on to say,

1. That we often fail to regard the death of saints as precious, because of our own selfishness. The selfishness of surviving friends is so great that they do not look at the great glory and great gain of the departed saint. So much are they absorbed in their own loss, that they seem incapable of looking away to the glory of that dear child of God who has been permitted at last to go home. Of course this must be a very short-sighted view of things. How can we justify it to our minds that we should think only of our own interests, and not of the interests of our dear friends? Why should not their happiness be as dear to us as our own?

2. Sometimes, through unbelief, we do not really appreciate the fact that our deceased friends have gone to eternal glory. I mean that we do not take home this fact to our hearts as a reality. We do not sincerely doubt it; we are ready to prove it against any avowed skeptic; and yet how much we may need one to prove it to our hearts! Nothing is more common than for the mind to hold opinions which yet have not attained their due sway over the sensibilities and the heart. The evidence has commanded the assent of the intelligence, but the mind has not so embraced it, so incorporated it among acknowledged realities, and so learned to act upon it, that it exerts its legitimate influence as truth upon our entire being.

In accordance with this peculiar attitude of mind, mourning friends often act as if they did not believe what the Bible says of the blessedness and glory of the saints in heaven. They may talk of what the Bible teaches on this subject; may theorize upon it, but after all may fail to believe it so that it has the power of a reality upon their hearts. In fact they do not trust their friends with God--do not give their Savior credit for faithfulness in having carefully taken his own loved children to his own bosom in the upper mansions.

3. There is often much unbelief as to its being the wisest and best thing possible for our friends to be taken away just as they in fact are. This is one reason why we do not esteem the death of saints precious. I know it is

generally admitted that God has done the best possible thing; but though they may admit this in theory, they yet may not believe it in heart. It is no small matter in such cases to admit fully and believe heartily that infinite love sought the very best result; that infinite wisdom devised the best means to secure it; and that infinite power could not lack the resources to do the best thing in the best way. To take hold of these truths in their broad extent and precious application, soothes the turmoil of the afflicted soul, and makes the death of a saint seem truly precious. But many fail of this because they do not thoroughly confide in the wisdom and love of God.

4. Often there is much unbelief in regard to the provisions God has made to prevent evil to the church by the death of his servants. We lose sight of the fact that God has been careful to make provision, so that no harm shall accrue to his church. We seem to suppose that the church depends for wise guardianship chiefly upon ourselves, and hence we feel greatly distressed that God should remove important instrumentalities for her prosperity. O, if we only saw that the all-wise God is Zion's best friend, we might quell many of our sad disquietudes. Then no fear lest Zion should suffer, need abate our joy in the precious death of the saints.

5. Sometimes our darkness of mind in regard to the reasons God may have for his conduct, gives us trouble. We do not consider that we ought to have confidence in God's wisdom and love, without seeing his reasons, and that our faith in Him ought to take the place of perceived reasons. When our ignorance makes us tremble for the ark of God, let our faith counteract our ignorance, and say continually--"Is not my Father at the helm?" We ought to have sufficient confidence in God to believe that He has not removed a saint from earth one day too soon--has not done it without having made all needful provision to supply his place and press forward the labors in which he was engaged.

6. We are often in an unrealizing state of mind in regard to the real happiness of the saints in heaven. We may indeed know enough to constrain us to say--"All is well; I could not wish it were otherwise; I can not have any misgivings in this case about the wisdom or the love of God in this death." Yet we may be quite unable to rise to enter into God's views and feelings, so as to feel it precious to have his saints die. We are in a strait; we feel greatly perplexed and troubled;--I can scarcely express it;--we are benumbed and confounded. It was so with me at the death of my wife. Although I could say I would not have it otherwise, yet it was some days before I could get over the numbness which the dreadful shock of her death gave me. But ere long I came into a state in which I could rejoice in her blessedness. Indeed I think I never had a more perfect sympathy with her in all my life than I had then. It seemed to me that I could understand the state of mind of a saint gone home to Jesus. I could see its elements; and could appreciate in some good measure the amazing depth of their joys and of their peace.

When I stood by the sick-bed of this dear sister, now just gone from us, I remembered how she had often said, "I grow stronger and stronger." And I also recollect one occasion when she said in substance--"I can not conceive how I can think of earthly scenes even when I have reached heaven, and not feel anxiety about them." I told her, faith sufficed for all; she would trust God, and all would be peace. Such a smile came over her countenance as bespoke the presence, already, of the peace of heaven.

When I came to see her die, I could not but think of the blessed words of the text--"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." There she lay, in her last conflict with pain and the ills of mortality. God was just about to receive her to Himself, and to wipe away all her tears forever. O how plain to me then that the death of the saints is most precious!

7. Often we do not allow ourselves to sympathize with God, and enter fully into his views and feelings. If we would only realize how God must regard such an event, we could see why it should be precious in his sight, and consequently why it should be so in ours.

8. Another reason is, we have loved our deceased friends for our own sake. I think this is very often the case. For a few days after my wife died, my sorrows seemed to increase upon me, until it seemed to me that I should go deranged. I had no refuge, and could get no relief only in flying to God as my helper. He seemed to say--Have you not loved your wife for your own sake, and with a selfish affection? If you have loved her only for my sake, you will be willing to let her come and dwell with me. If you have loved her for the churches' sake, you have no occasion to mourn; I will take care of the church; its interests shall not suffer by the death of your wife.

This showed me my great folly and made me ashamed of my immoderate grief and my selfish regard to my own comfort and happiness. I said to myself--Shall I be thinking of my loss and not of her much greater gain? Besides, God has taken nothing from me that was really mine. My wife was not mine; she belonged to God and not to me; or if in a certain sense she belonged to me, yet she belonged in a far higher sense to God, and shall I

grieve because God has taken away what was so properly his own? Can I mourn that she has gone to heaven?

But the loss experienced by the children: shall I not mourn for them? Yet what is their loss compared with her gain? And will not God take care of the children? Does not God care for these children more than I do? Yes, doubtless He does.--These considerations did me immense good.

9. We sometimes fail to see that the death of saints is precious, because we are really unsubmitive. We do not bow to the will of God as revealed in his providences. Often persons are found complaining of what God does in his providences. In such a state of mind, no wonder persons do not see that the death of saints is precious.

Again, some have very low and imperfect views of what death is to a saint. They reverse the Bible order of things. Whereas God says, the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth, they reverse it, and make the day of one's death almost wholly grievous. They have very low conceptions of what heaven is, even though they may really believe in theory what the Bible reveals on this subject.

Again, many are prone to conceive of their Christian friends as gone to the grave, and scarcely think of them as being anywhere else save in the cold ground. Now so long as we take this view of their case, it can not appear precious. An event which should really commit our dear friends to the cold prison of a tomb, and to "corruption and worms," can not be rationally regarded as joyous. But we ought to know better than to think of them as laid in the ground. They are not in the grave, it is only their wasted flesh, which they have done using--which is too poor to be used longer--that is laid in the ground. Why should we mourn the burial of their wasted and worn-out bodies? We might as well gather up their old clothes and bury them with many tears and lamentations because we shall see them no more. No; our dear friends are not in the grave. They have gone to be with Jesus; "absent from the body, but present with the Lord." We are ourselves much more properly in the grave than they.

REMARKS.

1. It is very useful for us to follow the departed saint to the world above. I am sensible that I have greatly failed in this respect. Since my frequent loss of dear friends has drawn me to think of this, it has been greatly blessed to me. Since I came here to reside, you know I have buried my father, my mother, and a sister; a little daughter; my son-in-law--and my dear wife. These repeated deaths have made me familiar with the thoughts of heaven, and with all that appertains to death as the passage thither. My experience has thoroughly taught me the value of such influences, drawing the mind away from earth and constraining it to hold communion with the eternal world. This deep communion with heaven and heavenly things disrobes death of all terror, and makes it look in every aspect of it, glorious. It has been so in my own case. During my sickness more than a year ago, when for some days I was brought to look upon death as probably near at hand, I found that death in all its aspects was not only not dreadful, but was even altogether desirable. If I thought of leaving my friends, I knew God would take care of them. The pangs of dying were no longer terrible. The thought of being dead was wholly pleasant. There was nothing to fear; everything to desire. Not one aspect of death, or anything connected with it gave me a single pang. How it will be with me when I shall come to die, I can not say; but in that sickness, I was able to appreciate how it might seem to look right into the scenes of dying and entering the eternal world. Then I could close my eyes and seem to lose myself--fully aware that not improbably my next consciousness might be in the eternal state.

An experience like this is adapted to be of great service to us, inasmuch as it affords us realizing apprehensions of our approaching state.

2. It is very profitable for us to refuse to pity ourselves and dwell on our own loss. From the time I have alluded to, when the Lord showed me how I ought to rejoice in the perfect blessedness of my departed wife, I refused to pity myself. I said--"Let me rather rejoice that God has saved one whom I so much loved, and has removed her at once and forever away from all pain and sorrow. Shall I not rejoice that she has gone and taken possession of heaven itself? Why not? Could I wish for her greater blessedness than this?[""]

3. If our faith in the gospel be consistent and intelligent, it will lead us to look upon such events as this without murmuring, and without ever counting such events as on the whole sad and painful. Yet let me say, this state of profoundest resignation and this regarding the death of the saints as truly precious, is not inconsistent with human tears and human sighs. Even in repentance there is joy. So when saints die, though we mourn, yet in the depths of our souls we may have the joy of heaven. We may sympathize strongly with our earthly relatives and friends, and yet have the joy of heaven in our souls. Jesus Himself knew how to sympathize with afflicted, bereaved friends, and we may well thank Him for giving us this precious fact on scripture record, for our consolation down through all time. O how many hearts have been comforted by the sweet record of those sympathizing tears at the grave of Lazarus! Our sympathies may be far less deep and pure than his; yet it is

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good even for us to learn how to sympathize with afflicted friends. I have found it to be so. Within a few years I have lost friends in every form of relationship; parent, child, sister and wife; and now I find it a luxury to mingle my tears with those who are in any similar affliction. It seems to renew the bonds that bind us together as social beings, and to renew them, moreover, under circumstances well-adapted to make them more tender and hallowed than ever before.

Finally, if the death of saints is precious to God, let it be also to us. If God is pleased and happy in this event, shall we not sympathize with Him? What better thing could God have done for them than He has done? And now shall we not sympathize with Him, and rejoice also with Him, and bless his name for his great mercies to our friends? Surely not to do so is nearly equivalent to refusing to thank God for heaven! Shall we be so ungrateful as to overlook the great gift of a blessed immortality? Shall we act as if God ought to let us live here forever; or ought to keep our friends here as long as we ourselves live; or ought to have provided some better mode of transit from earth to heaven than death? Let us beware how we take exceptions, even impliedly, to God's dealings!