

“Precious in the Sight of the Lord is the Death of His Saints: A Powerful Truth Revealed in the All-Too-Brief Life of Missionary Harriet Newell”

Psalm 116

Intro. 1) In her book *A Path Through Suffering*, Elizabeth Elliot asks, “Did the earthly life of our Lord appear to be a thundering success? Would the statistics of souls won, crowds made into faithful disciples, sermons heeded, commands obeyed, be impressive? Hardly” (p.39).

2) These words do not only apply to our Savior. They also apply to one of his choice servants, a precious teenage lady who would die at the tender age of 19 on the way to a mission field she would never see. And like our Lord, her death would not be in vain but as was said at her memorial service, “will certainly turn to the advantage of missions” (p. 261).

3) In so many ways the life and death of Harriet Atwood Newell is a marvelous reflection of Psalm 116, the 4th of the “Hallel Psalms” (Pss 113-118) that were sung at Passover celebrating the Lord’s salvation of the Hebrews out of Egyptian slavery. Our Lord would have sung this song with His disciples on the night His passion of suffering began. It is a personal psalm of gratitude and thanksgiving for the Lord’s deliverance from trouble, a trouble so great that it nearly led to death.

- 4 times the psalmist speaks of “calling on the Lord” (vs. 2, 4, 13, 17).
- 3 times allusions are made to death (vs. 3, 8, 15).
- 2 times the author promises to fulfill his vows to the Lord “in the presence of all His people” (vs. 14, 18).
- The personal pronouns “I,” “me,” and “my” occur in every verse of the psalm but 2 (vs. 5, 19). The psalm is deeply personal, reflecting on what God has done and continues to do for us, and what is our rightful response. I suspect it was this biblical

truth that enabled Harriet to write in her journal at the age of 18, a little more than a year before she would die on the Isle of France, these powerful words: “O that I had a thousand pious relatives well calculated for the important station of missionaries...I would say to them, ‘Go and let the destitute millions of Asia and Africa know there is compassion in the hearts of Christians. Tell them of the love of Jesus and the road to bliss on high’ (p. 136).

4) I want to highlight 7 truths from this wonderful Psalm for your careful consideration, truths beautifully reflected in the life of Harriet Newell.

I. Such Servants Have a Passionate Love for the Lord. 116:1

1) The Psalmist begins by proclaiming his love for the Lord. You can feel his emotion and excitement as he declares, “I love the Lord” (Yahweh). And why does he love the Lord? “He has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy.” I love a God who hears and answers prayers unlike the dumb idols of Psalm 115:5 that “have ears but do not hear.”

2) Harriet Newell was born October 10, 1793 in Haverhill, Mass. She had a deep and passionate love for her Lord. She took great delight in referring to Him as her “Immanuel.” This is not surprising as she lost her earthly father on May 8, 1808 when she was 14 years old. Dying of tuberculosis, he left behind a wife and 9 children.

3) Harriet believed with the psalmist that God her Father heard her voice and pleas for mercy.

- Praying for a lost friend: “I have just formed a solemn resolution of devoting one part of every day to fervent cries to God for a near and dear friend. Who knows but my Father in heaven will lend a listening ear to the voice of my supplications and touch her heart with conviction and converting grace” (p. 82).

- Confident in His discipling hand: “I think I am willing to bear whatever God sees fit to lay upon me. Let my dear Heavenly Father inflict the keenest anguish, I will submit, for He is infinitely excellent, and can do nothing wrong” (p. 94).
- Captivated by His love: “How condescending is God to permit hell-deserving sinners to commune with Him at His table. What on earth can equal the love of Jehovah! He treats those who are by nature His enemies, like children” (p. 104). Such love moved Harriet to passionately love her Immanuel in return.

II. Such Servants Continually Call on the Lord for Help. 116:2-4

- 1) Verse 2 naturally flows from verse 1 and then moves into one of the main themes of the psalm: the theme of death. Because the Lord hears our voice and cries for mercy, we can be confident that we have His ear (“He inclines His ear to me,” v. 2). So, as “long as I live,” and length of life is not specified, “I will call on Him” (vs. 2, 4).
- 2) The psalmist then recalls a specific time in his life when he especially needed the Lord’s help. He describes it as a time when “the snares (*NIV*, “cords”; *HCSB*, “ropes”) of death encompassed (*HCSB*, “surrounded”) me; the pangs of Sheol (*NIV*, “torments of the grave”) laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish.” Eugene Peterson paraphrases it this way in *The Message*: “Death stared me in the face, hell was hard on my heels. Up against it, I didn’t know which way to turn.” So, like Jonah sinking in a sea that was about to drown him, the psalmist “called on the name of the Lord” and prayed, “O Lord, I pray, deliver my soul” (v. 4)
- 3) Flat on his back, he could only look up! At the “end of his rope,” he looked to the one who held the rope and cried, “Lord, save me.”

Harriet stared death in the face more than once. In 1810 at the age of 17 she took fever and nearly dies. Still, she called on and trusted the Lord, drawing strength from the hymn by Isaac Watts entitled, “God of My Life.” Often she would repeat the verse,

“God of my life, look gently down,
Behold the pains I feel;
But I am dumb [silent] before Thy throne,
Nor dare dispute Thy will.”

God used this time of sickness to strengthen her faith and prepare her to answer His call to go to the nations. In a series of journal entries dating Feb. 10-25, 1810 she would write,

“What great reason have I for thankfulness to God that I am still in the land of the living and have another opportunity of recording with my pen His tender mercy and loving kindness!”

“Jesus has undertaken to be my physician. He has graciously restored me to health...and brought me to resign my soul into His arms and to willingly wait the event of His Providence, whether life or death. Oh, that this sickness might be for my eternal good!”

“He has again laid His chastising rod upon me by afflicting me with sickness and pain. But ‘I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against Him.’ I have a renewed opportunity of examining my submission to God. And I do now, as in His presence, resolve to devote myself a living sacrifice to Him. I think I can say that afflictions are good for me...”

But I fall infinitely short of the honor due to His glorious name. When, oh when, shall I arrive at the destined port of rest and with blood-washed millions who praise the Lamb of God for His redeeming live? Hasten, blessed Immanuel, that glorious period when all They exiled children shall arrive at their eternal home and celebrate Thy praises when time and nature fail. O for a tongue to sound aloud the honors and glories of the dear, matchless Saviour!” (pgs. 93-95)

III. Such Servants Know the Character of the Lord They Serve. 116:5-7

1) I am convinced that those who know God best will serve Him best. A knowledge of His character, His ways, promote gratitude and provide a motivation to trust Him and serve Him that comes by no other means. In my own life there was a time when I served

Him poorly because I did not know how truly great and awesome He is. I needed the instruction of vs. 5-7.

2)

- In v. 5 we learn 3 things about His character: He is 1) gracious, 2) righteous, and 3) merciful (*NIV*, “full of compassion”)
- In v. 6 we learn of His ways: “He preserves or protects the simple,” i.e., the one who in childlike faith depends on Him. Indeed when brought low (*NIV*, “when I was in great need”), “He saved me.”
- In v. 7 we see our proper response: “Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.” (*HCSB*, “for the Lord has been good to you.”)
- Even as a tender teenage girl, Harriet Newell captured a glimpse of this important truth that must capture each and every one of us if we are to have His heart and see the nations with His eyes.
- ★ Nov. 20, 1810, letter to Sarah Hills: “I still find the promises precious and Jesus unchangeable. Though I am worthless and undeserving, yet the blessed Immanuel is lovely and worthy of the united praises of saints and angels” (pgs. 106-107).
- ★ Feb. 24, 1811 (journal): “I was remarkably favored with the presence of Immanuel. Never before did I gain such access to the mercy seat and entertain such glorious views of the character of God and such humiliating ideas of my situation as a sinner” (pgs. 108-109).
- ★ March 25, 1811 (journal): “God has not left Himself without witness in the earth. No—He is still manifesting the riches of His grace in bringing home his chosen

ones...I cannot but stand amazed to see the salvation of God! ‘ Come, behold the works of the Lord’ (Ps. 28:8)” (p. 114).

IV. Such Servants Trust in the Lord Even in Terrible Suffering. 116:8-11

1) Those who love the Lord and serve Him well are not immune from hardship and suffering. In fact they should expect it as they walk in the footsteps of a suffering servant Savior.

2) The Psalmist could rejoice in God’s deliverance (v. 8) and in the fact that he “walks before the Lord in the land of the living (v. 9). But how did he get here? He had travelled a road that 1) brought his soul to the edge of death, 2) filled his eyes with tears, and 3) saw his feet stumbling to maintain his walk with the Lord. It was not an easy path. Still, as verse 10 testifies, he believed, even as he said, “I am greatly (*HCSB*, “severely”) afflicted.” In contrast to the God he could trust in his suffering, he also saw another truth more clearly than ever and could shout in “alarm, All mankind are liars.” Man in his depravity and sinfulness is perpetually unreliable but my God is not. Men may lie but God only tells truth.

3) Perhaps no event in the life of Samuel and Harriet Newell illustrates this truth so well as the tragic death of their newborn baby girl, who would live only 5 days, die, and be buried at sea. Harriet became pregnant soon after her marriage to Samuel. Their little daughter was a honeymoon baby conceived at sea as they traveled almost 18,000 miles to India. Interestingly, she never once mentions her pregnancy in either her letters or journal, never using the morning sickness and fatigue that hit her at sea as an excuse to complain or question God. In the last letter she would pen she shared these words with her mother:

To My Mother,

Port Louis, Isle of France, Nov. 3, 1812. My ever dear Mother, since I wrote you last, I have been called by God to rejoice and weep, for afflictions and mercies have both alternately fallen to my lot. I address you now from a bed of great weakness—perhaps for the last time. Yes, my dear Mama, I feel this mud-walled cottage shake, and expect ere long to become an inhabitant of the world of spirits. Eternity, I feel, is just at hand, But let me give you some account of God’s dealings with me, which I shall do at intervals, as strength will admit.

On the cabin floor, with no other attendant but my dear husband, we could weep for joy and call ourselves the happiest of the happy. But alas! On the evening of the 5th day, the dear object of our love was snatched from us by death, and on the day following committed to its watery grave. Heart-rending stroke to a parental heart! Mine almost bled with deep anguish. (p. 233-34)

She was never able to finish the letter.

Later, in a letter to Harriet’s mother, her husband Samuel would write her informing her of both the death of his baby girl and his wife. Mrs. Atwood’s daughter. In it he wrote, “Sanctified afflictions are the choicest favors from heaven. They cure us of our vain foolish expectations from the world and teach our thoughts and affections to ascend and fix on joys that never die” (p. 224).

Transition. Such servants trust in the Lord even in terrible suffering.

V. Such Servants Keep Their Word and Serve the Lord Out of Gratitude for Their Salvation. 116: 12-14

1) One of the great dangers to those who have been saved for many years is they can lose the wonder of their salvation. What Jesus did for us on the cross as He bore in His body the wrath of God in our place gets taken for granted. It becomes a “common thing.” The psalmist was acutely aware of this danger and provides a helpful remedy to avoid this debilitating spiritual disease. First, never lose sight of His benefits, His blessings (read v. 12). In other words, day by day ask yourself the question, “What might I do for my Lord given what He has already done and will continue to do for me? Notice that word “all!” It

is crucial. Reflect on past, present and future grace! In his book *Future Grace: The Purifying Power of the Promises of God*, John Piper puts it this way:

...the gospel events of history have an ever-present impact on the believer. Romans 5:8 says it best with its verb tenses. “God *shows* [present tense] his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died [past tense] for us.” This means that the past gospel events mediate the present experience of the love of God. We feel loved *now* by God because of the effect of those *past* gospel events. This profound sense of being loved by God *now* is the way that past grace becomes the foundation for our faith in future grace—that God will fulfill every promise for our good.

2) So reflecting upon “all the good He has done for me” (v. 12, *HCSB*), I will “lift up the cup of my salvation and call on the name of the Lord,” that is I will come to Him to ask and receive even “more” from Him! Charles Spurgeon said it like this:

The best return for one like me,
So wretched and so poor,
Is from His gifts to draw a plea,
And ask Him still for more.

Is this not amazing! We avoid spiritual lethargy and complacency by asking God for more of what He has already given us, is giving us and will give us; a cup of salvation full and overflowing.

Is this not amazing! Jesus took the cup of God’s wrath and in its place gives us a cup of salvation! No wonder the psalmist now, and only now says in verse 14, “I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all His people” (cf. v. 18). Out of a heart overflowing with gratitude I will declare to “all His people” how great is our God! Reflecting on his benefits in saving me, I will not, I cannot, keep this good news to myself.

- Converted at 12 Harriet would write, “I was brought to cast my soul on the Savior of sinners and rely on Him alone for salvation...I was filled with a sweet peace and a

- heavenly calmness which I never can describe. The honors, applauses, and titles of this vain world appeared like trifles light as air, The character of Jesus appeared infinitely lovely, and I could say with the psalmist (Ps. 73:23), ‘Whom have I in heaven but Thee, and there is none on earth I desire besides Thee!’” (p. 78).
- Growing passion to make known this salvation to all peoples
- ★ July 16, 1809: “What am I, that I should be blessed with the gospel’s joyful sound, while so many are now perishing in heathen darkness for lack of knowledge of Christ?” (p. 74).
 - ★ July 26, 1809: “But I think I could say that it was good for me to be afflicted [v. 10]. God was graciously pleased to assist me in calling upon His name, and permitted me to wrestle with Him in prayer...for the conversion of sinners” (p. 76)
 - ★ August 7, 1811: “Providence now gives me an opportunity to go myself to the heathen. Shall I refuse the offer? Shall I love the glittering toys of this dying world so well that I cannot relinquish them for God? Forbid it heaven! Yes, I will go. However weak and unqualified I am, there is an all-sufficient Saviour ready to support me. In God alone is my hope. I will trust His promises and consider it one of the highest privileges that could be conferred upon me to be permitted to engage in His glorious service among the wretched inhabitants of India” (p. 136).

VI. Such servants believe in life or death they are valued by the Lord 116:15

- 1) In Oswald Chambers *My Utmost For His Highest*, the February 5th devotion reads, “ It is one thing to follow God’s way of service if you are regarded as a hero, but quite another thing if the road marked out for you by God requires becoming a doormat under

other peoples' feet. God's purpose may be to teach you to say, "I know how to be abased." (like Paul) Are you ready to be less than a drop in the bucket? To be so totally insignificant that no one remembers you even if they think of those you served? Are you willing to give and be poured out until you are all used up and exhausted-not seeking to be ministered to, but to minister?"

2) Verse 15 comes out of nowhere. In a psalm rejoicing in God's deliverance from death it does not seem to fit, and yet it does. You see the same God who delivers us from death is the God who delivers us through death. And, the death of even one of God's saints is a precious thing to Him. He values highly their death and sees it as a costly thing. The *NLT* says, "The Lord cares deeply when His loved ones die."

3) It is hard for me to imagine that the death of any saint was more precious to King Jesus than that of Harriet Newell. As a teenager newly married, she left her widowed mother and 8 brothers and sisters knowing and accepting that she would never see them again. She was pregnant for most or all of the 4 month journey to India where she and Samuel would be denied permanent residence. On the way to the Isle of France she, with only her husband at her side, would deliver a baby girl they named Harriet, only to watch her die 5 days later. Less than a month later, taken with both tuberculosis and pneumonia, she would die. And yet as the hour of her death approached she could write to Ann Judson, "How dark and mysterious are the ways of Providence....But it is well. Every thing that God does must be right, for He is a being of infinite wisdom as well as power....I think I have enjoyed the light of Immanuel's countenance, and have known joys too great to be expressed" (pgs 222-23). In describing Harriet's death to her mother Samuel would write, "She was by no means alarmed at the idea of death, nor was she

melancholy. She was calm, patient, and resigned. During the last week of our voyage she read through the whole book of Job, and, as she afterwards told me, she ‘found sweet relief from every fear in submitting to a sovereign God, and could not refrain from shedding tears of joy that God should give her such comfortable views of death and eternity...The enjoyment of God was what she expected and longed to find in heaven. Her mind seemed to repose with comfort and delight on the glorious perfections of Jehovah, her covenant God. She spoke repeatedly of the pleasure she took in dwelling on the character of God...When I asked her if she was not willing to live longer she replied ‘Yes, if I could live better than I have ever yet done. But I have had so much experience of the wickedness of my heart, that if I should recover, I should expect the remainder of my life to be much like the past, and I long to get rid of this wicked heart and go where I shall sin no more.’ This thought, that death would be a complete deliverance from sin, she repeated many times with great delight...The day, I think, before her death, I asked her how her past life appeared to her. She replied, ‘Bad enough-but that only makes the grace of Christ appear the more glorious.’ She then repeated these favorite lines:

“Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
 My beauty are, my heavenly dress;
 ‘Midst flaming worlds in these arrayed,
 With joy shall I lift up my head.”

“On the Sabbath of the 29th of November, the day before her death, Dr. Wallich, a friend of ours from Serampore, who had lately arrived in the Isle of France, called to see us. After looking at Harriet, he took me aside and told me he thought she could not live through the next day. When I told Harriet what the doctor said, she raised both hands, clasping them with eagerness, and with an expressive smile on her countenance,

exclaimed-‘Oh! Blessed news!’” Yes, precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints!

**VII. Such servants offer a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord for all to hear
116:16-19**

1) Our psalm comes to a conclusion with the psalmist giving tangible expressions of his “love for the Lord” (v. 1).

- In v. 16 he gladly identifies himself as the Lord’s servant out of gratitude for the Lord’s deliverance from the chains of his afflictions (v. 10).
- In v. 17, he will offer sacrifices and praises of thanksgiving as he again (4th time) calls on the name of the Lord.
- In v. 18 for a second time he pledges to publicly fulfill his vows to the Lord. What I said I will do I will do!
- And in v. 19 he specifies the place of his declaration and offering as the temple courts in Jerusalem concluding with an outburst of worship, “Praise the Lord.” Kidner says the flame of the psalmist love for His God, “is not withdrawn to burn alone. Placed in the midst [of God’s people], it will kindle others, and blaze all the longer and better for it.” (Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, TOTC, p. 411).

2) Commenting on his wife’s death to a friend in Boston, Samuel Newell wrote, “Tell her [Harriet’s mother] that her dear Harriet never repented of any sacrifice she had made for Christ, and that on her dying bed she was comforted by the thought of having had it in her heart to do something for the heathen, though God had seen fit to take her away before we entered on our work” (p. 236). I cannot help but wonder if she somehow knew her sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving would resound for all to hear in her death?

3) Her memorial preacher was right, “Henceforth, every one who remembers Harriet Newell will remember the Foreign Mission from America. And every one who reads the history of this mission will be sure to read the faithful record of her exemplary life and triumphant death...Her life measured by months and years was short, but far otherwise when measured by what she achieved. She was the happy instrument of much good to the holy kingdom of Christ. She died in a glorious cause. Nor did she pray and weep and die in vain. Other causes may miscarry, but this will certainly triumph. The Lord God of Israel has pledged His perfections for its success. The time is at hand when the various tribes of India, and all the nations and kindreds of the earth, shall fall down before the King of Zion and submit cheerfully to His reign. A glorious work is to be done among the nations. Christ is to see the travail of His soul...” (p. 261).

Conclusion: 1) Harriet Atwood died in the arms of her missionary husband Samuel on November 30, 1812. She was only 19 and had been married less than a year. He would carry her to her grave and bury her alone.

2) On her deathbed she pled with her husband to relay to her family, “Tell them – assure them, that I approve on my dying bed the course I have taken. I have never repented leaving all for Christ.” (p. 229).

3) How did she die in such a fashion? Listen well to the heart of an 18 year old poured out to her Immanuel just 8 months before her translation into heaven:

March 26: The sacrifices which I have made are great indeed, but the light of Immanuel’s countenance can enliven every dreary scene and make the path of duty pleasant. Should I, at some future period, be destitute of *one* sympathizing friend in a foreign, sickly clime, I shall have nothing to fear. When earthly friends forsake me, the “the Lord will take me up.” No anticipated trials ought to make me anxious, for I know that I can do and suffer all things, “through Christ who strengthens me.” In His hands I have the direction of every event, knowing that He, who is infinitely wise and good, can do me no wrong. (p. 174)

4) Buried on the Isle of France, a marble monument would be erected over her grave with the following inscription, “Early devoted to Christ, her heart burned for the heathen; for them she left her kindred and her native land, and welcomed danger and sufferings. Of excellent understanding, rich in accomplishments and virtues, she was the delight of her friends, a crown to her husband, and an ornament to the missionary cause. Her short life was bright, her death full of glory. Her name lives, and in all Christian lands is pleading with irresistible eloquence for the heathen. This humble monument to her memory is erected by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.”

5) Biographer Jennifer Adams notes that back in America there was an explosion of little girls being given the name Harriet Newell in honor of this brave and godly teenage missionary (p. 14).

6) At her memorial service she was called “the first martyr to the missionary cause from the American world” (p. 260), and the preacher drove home the point, “The death of Harriet, instead of overcasting our prospects, will certainly turn to the advantage of mission” (p. 261). And, he was right. By 1840, her grave had been visited by many from America. Her memoirs, which she was burning as she was about to leave for the mission field, but were spared by her mother’s request, were published and widely distributed with a new edition being printed annually for the next 25 years. The result: many conversions and people answering the call to go to the nations. And her husband Samuel? He would go on to serve for 7 years in a successful mission in Ceylon. Only 7? Yes, for on May 30, 1821 his life would end before his 30th birthday from cholera. Once more the truth is claimed, “precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints!”