



way
of
life

Peter and Paul absorbed the reality of God that comes from our salvation in Jesus Christ. They worked to translate that reality to the word in a number of powerful sermons in the book of Acts. Through our series, **Way of Life**, we'll be looking at these powerful sermons and how they call us to action. Early Christians were known as "People of the Way," as though they were fighting for a new way of life. They were advocating for a way of life, but that way of life is Jesus Himself. Presenting Jesus as Savior and Lord competes with the alternative ways of life presented in culture. By digging into these sermons in Acts, we will see how the way of Jesus is better than any alternative offered by the world.

LIFE BEATS DEATH • Acts 2:22-32 • Tim McConnell • September 4, 2016

Well this is no light topic today. This morning we talk about death. Nothing better for Labor Day Weekend, I figured, than a good sermon on death. Conversations around the barbecue will be a little different for us First Pres-ers this year. "What was your preacher talking about this morning?" "Oh, death." "Huh." We are looking for the Way of Life found in Jesus. Peter, in his great Pentecost sermon, takes a turn now and makes the point—it isn't just about spiritual wonders, signs, supernatural occurrences (remember from last week). Yes, God is there and God does things. But now Peter turns to talk about the ministry of Jesus. And the ministry of Jesus culminated in his death on the cross. Jesus came to earth knowing that He was going to die; He died intentionally, purposefully, meaningfully on the cross as a knowing sacrifice to atone for our sins. But He also died so that He could overcome death. Jesus died trusting that on the third day He would rise again. He died for us so that we could live for Him. Peter knew on that day as he began to preach, just as I want you to know today, that Jesus beat death. If we don't think rightly about death, we can't think rightly about life. Only when we see death the way Jesus sees it can we live life the way Jesus lives it. In Jesus, life beats death.

Some say we have devolved into a "culture of death." Have you heard that phrase? We have an immature fascination with death. Just try to go buy your kid a skateboard or a snowboard and you'll see what I mean. We have a long standing rule in our house that we don't wear skulls or bones or dead bodies on our clothes! It's not easy to keep. I've been walking by the local record store for many years, and the posters are always the same. There are only two themes: sex and death. Is it still supposed to be shocking? Vampires and zombies and anything dead will sell. "Suicide Squad" is at the top of the box office (I've heard it's terrible—enough for me! Maybe I'll try "Finding Dory" instead). I heard on the radio a few years ago about the company that provides fake dead bodies for television. They couldn't keep up with the demand. We have some kind of unhealthy fascination with death right now. And of course, it's more serious than our entertainment habits. Something in us is captured, fascinated by death and drawn like a moth to the flame. How else can we explain ISIS? ISIS films executions and puts them on the internet—for recruiting. Their leaders don't come out and say, "We are horrified by these acts of cruelty and inhumanity, and we want you to know that these murderers have been held accountable and we will make sure it never happens again." No. They praise the murderers, and this appeals to young men and women, and they are recruited to the cause. "Come join us and become

masters of death." Something very sick creeps into the human heart when we fail to think biblically about life and death.

I know. It's very heavy isn't it? But, you know what? It's something we all face. This is an experience that affects 100% of the population. Death and taxes. As one friend in the church said to me not long ago, it's simple bio-chemistry. The body winds down like a battery. Every organism that experiences the gift of life will eventually reach the end. Do we know how to think about it? Do we know how to talk about it? If we can't look at it the way Jesus wants us to look at it, then we devolve into these immature patterns of our society. We get captured by an immature nihilistic fascination, or we succumb to a fatalistic acceptance (Oh well!), or—and this is the most predominate mood right now—we isolate and sanitize it and classify it as a medical procedure. So long as it happens back there, away from us...

Peter addresses it straight on. He had to. Jesus died. Jesus died very publicly. Jesus died cursed. The Bible says that anyone who hangs on a tree is cursed. That's how Jesus died, so to the reader of the Bible, Jesus by definition is cursed. But Peter still wants us to follow Jesus. Peter says the power you are seeing blow down from heaven, the signs you are seeing, the wonders you are experiencing all come from Jesus—the Jesus who died. Peter has to explain. So let's pick up Peter's sermon where we left off last week. Do you remember? So far he has made the strong argument that his friends aren't drunk, because it's only nine in the morning. Then he quoted Joel, very effectively. But now his sermon begins in earnest, and Peter realizes he is not going to get anywhere at all until he explains the death of Jesus. We all know that Jesus performed miracles—isn't that interesting, by the way? Peter didn't have to convince them that Jesus had done miraculous things; that they knew. They had all seen them—we all know Jesus did miracles, and that these miracles revealed the goodness and mercy of God. But why did He die? And if He died, why do you still want to call Him the Messiah? Peter explains now. Jesus was handed over to death under God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge. Then verse 24: "But God raised Him from the dead, freeing Him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him." (Acts 2:24) Who gets the last word? Death? No.

Here Peter moves into Psalm 16. A Psalm of David. A Psalm, I should note, that had flummoxed rabbis and theologians for ages. Nobody could really figure out what it meant, but Peter knows. Last week I joked a

little about Peter's choice of Joel 2—we had some fun with that and made the point that our willingness to let the Spirit move us to quote the Scripture at hand is very important. But I want to go back and remind us all, too. You know, Peter did get an education. It was Jesus who taught him. Back in Luke 24, Jesus not only taught the men on the Road to Emmaus how to understand the Old Testament, but he spent time with all the disciples including Peter: "He said to them, 'This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.' Then He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures." (Luke 24:44-45) And Acts 1:3 tells us Jesus met with the disciples over a period of forty days teaching them about the Kingdom of God. Jesus taught Peter.

Can't you sort of hear the gentle teaching of Jesus behind Peter's exposition here? "Peter, look at Psalm 16. See where David is joyful in the face of death? Why is that, Peter?" Jesus might have asked. "Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest in hope, because You will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, You will not let Your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; You will fill me with joy in Your presence." (Acts 2:26-28) I just hear Jesus asking, "Peter, why is David so confident in the face of death? Where does the joy come from? How can a man, about to die, facing the reality of death, how can he say 'my heart is glad, my tongue rejoices, my body also will rest in hope'? What hope? What paths of life are there when you're staring at death? How can David say to the Lord, 'You will fill me with joy in Your presence' Peter?" "I don't know, Lord. Why don't You just tell me?" The key is found in the middle verse. It sounds like David's body wasn't supposed to get buried, David's remains were not supposed to go down to the dust. But they did. "Peter, whose remains would those be if David's bones are right over there in a tomb?" ...asks the resurrected Jesus. And the lights go on.

So Peter tells his hearers: Jesus died, but He isn't dead. Jesus died but He rose again. Jesus let death speak, but He didn't let death have the last word. Jesus lives... and so can you. Even beyond your last day of life on earth. Death doesn't have nearly the kind of authority you thought it did. Death is very serious, very powerful, very painful, but death is not the end. Because of Jesus Christ, life is the end, not death. Are we fascinated by the power of death? Are we convinced that death is the end? Even as Christians, we tend to grow a little confused here. Death is part of our lives right now, but it is not our friend. It is an enemy at the table. It is

always a horrid interruption, and Jesus hates it. In the end, through Christ, death dies and is no more. "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'" (Revelation 21:3-4)

But how does all this play into Peter's sermon? Well, all those people had seen Jesus go under. They saw death take Jesus down. But what they did not yet understand was that Jesus allowed death to take Him under so He could rise up from the depths and open the gates to eternal life. The Bible and Christian tradition both sometimes personify death in ways, as though death is a person at work in the world. This is a way of illustrating death's authority. What authority does death have? Well, it's not a person, but it is a principle. If you are separated from the Author of Life, you will be subject to death. Or as the first half of Romans 6:23 puts it, "For the wages of sin is death." Sin earns death like a paycheck. Death can accuse me of being a sinner, being separated from God. Death has a claim on me. But watch what happens with Jesus. Death grabs ahold of Jesus and tries to take Him down, but there is no rightful claim on Him. Jesus, covered over by all our sins, looks guilty. Jesus looks like the claim of death should fall on Him and have full authority. But at heart, Jesus is without sin in His own nature and cannot be held. Long ago a church father named Gregory of Nyssa described it this way: "the Deity was hidden under the veil of our nature, that so, as with ravenous fish, the hook of the Deity might be gulped down along with the bait of flesh." (Gregory of Nyssa) Death took the bait. And then you know what happened? Death couldn't handle Him, and the grave couldn't hold Him!

Verse 24 again: "But God raised Him from the dead, freeing Him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him." (Acts 2:24) Let's camp on this verse for a minute, friends, and you might just find you want to build your house here. But let's camp. "God raised Him from the dead." Jesus is God, but somehow, and this is a recognized divine mystery, Jesus took our death upon Himself in this venture. Then God raised him, "freeing Him from the agony of death." What's the agony of death? We think of that as the pain of dying, I bet. But Jesus already did that. The "agony of death" is the separation from God past physical death. That's the agony. That's what we should be worried about. That's where Jesus went on our behalf. As John Calvin wrote, "By this we must

face the horrific fact that there is something worse than death itself." But God raised Him, restored Him, brought Him back from that agony worse than death, "because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him." Death did not have the ability, the grip, the power to hold Him down. It was simply not possible. Death wanted to hold Jesus under, you see, but it couldn't. The image I get here is like when you try to hold a basketball under the water in the pool. Have you ever tried that? You might hold it down there for a while, and you try to sit on it, or you try to stand on it, but before long you forget or lose balance or your attention strays and then, pop! Out of the surface of the water it blows—hitting you directly in the nose! I speak from some experience here. That's our man, Jesus. Down under He went, lower. Lower and deeper and further than you or I could ever go or ever will by God's grace. Down into the depths. Down into not only physical death, but the spiritual agony. But, do you know what? Death has no claim on the Holy One of God. Up He comes.

Is death the final answer? Is this life all there is? If you believe that, it will certainly shape your life. How do you handle it when your time is wasted, how do you have any patience at all? If I thought I had eighty or ninety years, and then it's all over, I can't imagine how impatient I would be! I would strangle everybody in front of me at the DMV! How do you look at your job if you believe this is it, this is your one chance to be fulfilled in your soul? How could a marriage survive if you didn't believe there was a life after death where all needs, all desires are deeply and joyfully fulfilled by God? Death is not the final answer, and don't you believe it. "For the wages of sin is death," but don't you know the rest of that verse? "But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23) If you are in Christ, then death may swallow you for a moment but you rise with Christ. You are in Christ. Death can't hold you down, any more than it could hold Jesus down on Easter morning. So with David, with Peter, you and I, if we are in Christ, can look across the culture of death, can look across the tragic pain of death, can look death square in the eye and sing to the Lord, "You have made known to me the paths of life; You will fill me with joy in your presence." (Acts 2:28)

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STUDY GUIDE

"Life Beats Death" • Acts 2:22-32

Start It

Have you heard the phrase "a culture of death" used to describe our times? What might you think that means?

Do you think our culture is fascinated with death? How do most people deal with it?

Study It

- Peter continues his Pentecost Sermon in this passage. He seems to recognize that he will not get anywhere very quickly until he defends and explains the death of Jesus. Why is that relevant to his argument?
- Was Jesus' death an accident, according to Peter? What was the purpose of Jesus' death?
- We get a peek into a great mystery here, particularly in verse 24. How can God raise Jesus from the dead if Jesus is God? How can Jesus die? Does that mean God died? These are great questions to wrestle with, but they all come down to the mystery of the Holy Trinity. God is three Persons but one God. That is beyond our understanding. But we recognize two important points here: (1) Jesus, as the second person of the Trinity, somehow died and experienced a separation from the Father by taking on our sins (this is proven in the cry of dereliction at Mark 15:34). (2) God the Father suffered death in His Son Jesus. God is not a great child abuser in the sky, as some ridiculously accuse. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." (2 Corinthians 5:19) It pained God to see His Son suffer. Somehow. Mysteriously! God took our death into Himself.
- Peter shows remarkable understanding on Psalm 16. Where did he get such insight? Can you recall where in Scripture Peter got trained in understanding the Old Testament?
- Read Romans 6:3-5. If God raised Jesus from the dead, what does that mean for us?

Pray It

Almighty God, You hold our lives in Your hands. Each of us is mortal, subject to death. Death has a claim on us, but You took that claim and laid it on Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Help us to humbly accept every day we have to live for You. Help us not to fear death, or be captured in fascination with the end of life, but to trust that on the day we breathe our last You will come and take us safely to Yourself. Christ is risen, and in Him we rise. Glory to our Lord Jesus Christ forever and ever. Amen.

Live It

Watch for how many times this week death is a subject of entertainment or fascination. In your own mind, through prayer, apply the death of Christ to each instance. Write a letter to Jesus in your journal thanking Him for taking the death we deserved, and for His promise to save us from the agony of death after our bodies pass away.