

TO DESTROY DEATH AND ITS POWER**HEBREWS 2:14-18**

A family was out at a themed restaurant with TV's all over walls playing cartoons with no sound. The youngest son, four years old at the time, had his eyes glued to the TV screen. He was watching a continuous loop of Road Runner cartoons. He watched as Wile E. Coyote strapped on rocket-propelled roller skates, or shot himself out of a cannon, or launched himself from a giant slingshot in pursuit of the elusive Road Runner. After watching intently for a long time, that four year old had an epiphany. Without taking his eyes off the screen, he quietly announced to his family, "No matter what he does, he's never going to get that chicken." True enough! It's the same with death and dying. No matter how many vitamins you take, no matter how much you exercise and eat right, no matter how many advances we make in medicine, you and I just can't beat death.

Guess what I want to talk about on this Sunday before Christmas Day! Death. You might conclude that's a very odd, if not an inappropriate, choice of message topics. Why get us thinking about death of all things? Because death is very much a fact of life. That's true for me personally. In the first 25 years of my ministry as a pastor, I participated in around 30 funerals. An average of about one per year. In the last nine years, I've participated in 83 funerals. That's an average of 9 to 10 per year. Death is a fact of life. Yes, even at Christmas time. Some of us have lost loved ones around Christmas Day. Probably because our culture builds up the Christmas season as this special time for home and for families to be together, some of us feel the loss of loved ones at Christmas more profoundly than at other times of the year. The Christmas dinner table seems empty without that special person. It's hard to have a merry spirit, when your heart is heavy with the loss of a parent, a spouse, a child, or a close friend.

Death is a fact of life. The Christian faith never dodges any of the difficult or painful realities of life, but meets them head on. The Bible says death is one big reason Jesus came into this world at what we know celebrate as Christmas. It's one reason why He said what He said and did what He did. It's one reason He died on the cross and was raised from the dead. This Advent season we've been looking at what the letters of the New Testament tell us about why Jesus came into the world. Those letters were written by the very first followers of Jesus after He left and went back to Heaven. Some of them reflect on why Jesus came into this world. They didn't invent the word "Christmas." They wouldn't have even recognized it. They didn't decorate their homes, send cards, or exchange gifts on December 25th. All that came centuries later. Nevertheless, Jesus' birth was enormously important to them just the same.

But why? One reason is found in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews. We don't really know who wrote this part of God's Word, but Paul – the great Christian leader in the middle of the first century - has been offered up as the most likely candidate. Let's read it now and see what it tells us about why Jesus came into this world. While verses 16-18 there explain more fully the reason why Jesus became a human being, I want to drill down today on verses 14-15. It's right there we discover that Jesus' coming means

that Jesus has forever broken two very powerful fears common to all human beings. First, Jesus' coming sets me...

FREE OF THE FEAR OF LOSING MY LIFE.

This letter was written to Christians who were from a Jewish heritage and background. In the second chapter, the author – whoever he was – said that the true Messiah had to become fully human. He had to identify fully with the human experience in order to provide salvation to human beings. He entered this world in the way every human enters this world. He was born into it. And He left this world in the human way as well: death. But, of course, there was a far more important reason for Jesus' death than simply identifying with you and me. It was the Son of God who died. His death did something to death itself. His death transformed and forever changed this fact of life we call death. Ironically, the death of Jesus caused the death of death. No, not the reality of death, but its finality, its meaning, and its power.

Do you see what's said here? Jesus was born (Christmas), grew up, taught, healed people, and then died and rose again (Easter) so that He might "...break the power of the devil, who had the power of death." (Heb 2:14 NLT) What's meant there by "the power of death"? Does Satan have the power to kill anybody? Well, you and I have that power, too. Nevertheless, I believe the Bible implies that God alone has ultimate power when it comes to both life and death for human beings. Satan may indeed be able to kill, but never without God's awareness and allowance. Instead, the phrase "the power of death" here refers to the devil's ability to create and to grow fear in you and me about the fact of death. Isn't that what the next verse implies? "Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying." (Heb 2:15 NLT) Yet another translation puts it like this, "...he destroyed the Devil's hold on death and freed all who cower through life, scared to death of death." (Heb 2:15 MSG) Satan does have the ability to intimidate, threaten, and terrorize any and all of us by reminding us of the fact of death. He can fill your heart with fear about losing your life.

The fear of death – the fear of losing your life – is a very powerful fear indeed. It makes people do what they wouldn't otherwise do. Brave soldiers can turn to cowards when the fear of death overwhelms them. Normal, sane people resort to irrational ways of reducing risk in their lives. Do you remember after the assassination attempt on President Reagan years ago that his wife, Nancy, consulted an astrologer? She had become so concerned about another attempt on her husband's life that she resorted to an irrational and spiritually dangerous way of dealing with it. People refuse to fly in airplanes or even drive in cars because they're afraid of being killed. I remember the story of a woman who'd always been afraid to fly who finally worked up the courage to take a trip on a plane. It was pretty much of a "white knuckles" experience the whole way! Sometime later, she was watching the arrival of the late Pope John Paul 2 on TV in some country he was visiting. It was the custom of John Paul to get down on his knees and kiss the ground when he got off the plane. The woman nodded and said to herself, "I know just how he feels!" The fear of losing your life.

Some people go to exactly the opposite extreme. Since life seems so short, so uncertain, so fleeting, they try to live it with a kind of frantic urgency and frenzied pace. They try to stuff as much of life and living in as they can – the more the better, the sooner the better. Why? They're actually afraid of losing their lives. When death comes, they believe, the ability to live will end, so they buy into a "let's eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die" mentality. Often, these folk are on a continual search for the new, the novel, the exciting, and the self-fulfilling. That way of life usually leads to extreme disappointment. What's behind that approach to life and living? The fear of death – the fear of losing your life. How powerful and potent that fear can be! It's a power the devil possesses and he uses at any and every opportunity.

But Jesus' coming at Christmas and then His own death, ironically, and resurrection from the grave changed all of that. How so? The Bible tells us that death was never God's original plan for human beings. Death is the result of our sin and rebellion against God. We all avoid, fear, and loathe death to some extent. Furthermore, the devil was given the power to pump all kinds of fear into human hearts and minds about death. The Bible passage we read never says that the devil himself was destroyed, but rather that his power has been destroyed. What power? His ability to project fear and terror into your heart and mine. That's what's been destroyed? Yes, but not for everyone! The devil's power to project fear is broken and destroyed in the lives of people who trust in who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. By the same token, if you have never surrendered your life to Jesus and become His follower, then you have everything to fear about death. Death really will be the end of you. It will mean eternal separation from God, from Heaven, and from anything having to do with life forever.

It was almost 1:00 in the morning when the phone rang. Dr. Leo Winters, a highly acclaimed Chicago surgeon, was awakened with a start. There had been an accident and his skilled hands were needed for immediate surgery on the body of young boy that had been tragically mangled. His hands were possibly the only ones in the city which were skilled enough to save. The quickest route to the hospital happened to be through a pretty tough area of Chicago. Since time was a critical factor, it was worth the risk. He almost made it to the hospital without incident. Almost. At a stop light, his car door was yanked open by a man in a gray hat and a dirty flannel shirt. "I've got to have your car!" the man yelled, pulling Dr. Winters from his seat. Winters tried to explain the gravity of the situation, but the man wouldn't listen. When the doctor was finally able to get a taxi to the hospital over an hour had elapsed and it was too late. The young boy had passed away 30 minutes earlier. "His dad got here just before he died," the nurse told him. He's in the chapel. Could you please go and talk to him? He's awfully confused. He doesn't understand why you never came." Dr. Winters walked quickly down to the hospital chapel. When he entered, he saw the father kneeling on the floor at the front crying his heart out. He also noticed that he was wearing a gray hat and dirty flannel shirt. Tragically, he had pushed from his life the only one who could save.

In much the same way, so many people push away from their lives the only One who can save them. His marriage was coming apart, but he couldn't find time for the Lord. Her daughter was hopelessly addicted, but turning to Jesus just wasn't an option.

Countless others turn away from the only One who can save them from their emptiness, confusion, hopelessness, and bondage to sin or what sin can do to us. Many are too busy for the only One who can deliver them from a meaningless life. Life could be so different for so many if they would only make time for the One who came to this earth to save us. The angel at Christmas said, “And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (Matt 1:21 NLT)

What’s sad and completely unnecessary, however, is when a follower of Jesus is dominated by, full of, and controlled by the fear of losing his or her life. It’s not necessary and it’s not right. The power of death died in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Now, of course, the fact of physical death is still true for each of us right now. One day, my friend, you will die. One day I will die. The Bible puts it plainly, “Each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment.” (Heb 9:27 NLT) Nevertheless, Jesus has forever changed or transformed death by His birth, by His own death, and by His resurrection. For the child of God, death is the beginning, not the end. For the child of God, death is a blessing, not a curse. For the child of God, death is God’s doorway into eternal life with Him in Heaven, not some kind of a trapdoor into Hell. Hear again what the Bible says, “And now he has made all of this plain to us by the appearing of Christ Jesus, our Savior. He broke the power of death and illuminated the way to life and immortality through the Good News.” (2 Tim 1:10 NLT) It also says, “Yes, we are fully confident, and we would rather be away from these earthly bodies, for then we will be at home with the Lord.” (2 Cor 5:8 NLT) And one day, yes, even the fact of death itself will die. The Bible promises, “And the last enemy to be destroyed is death.” (Rev 21:4 NLT)

The fear of losing your life. That’s part of the devil’s power of death – his ability to project fear into your life and mine by reminding us about death often. Without Jesus, you will be traumatized and terrorized by that fear. With Jesus, you need not fear death in the least for yourself or for those you love who also know and love Jesus. Jesus’ coming at Christmas means that He has forever broken the fear of losing my life. The pop musician, Billy Joel, did something unusual for his daughter’s 12th birthday. She was in New York City, and he was in Los Angeles on business. He phoned her that morning and apologized for his absence. But he told her to expect the delivery of a large package before the end of the day. Billy’s daughter answered the doorbell that evening to find a seven-foot-tall, brightly wrapped box. She tore it open, and out stepped her father – Billy Joel - fresh off the airplane from the West Coast. Can you imagine her surprise? Perhaps you can. After all, your gift came in the flesh, too. His Name was Jesus. But, secondly, Jesus’ coming sets me...

FREE OF THE FEAR OF LOSING OUT ON LIFE.

Not losing my life, but instead losing out on life. Have you ever been gripped by that fear? Haven’t you had those moments when you realize the years are slipping by? Here we are just 11 days away from the end of another year. Do you remember the moment when you realized that even if you live to be into your 80s or 90s, you’ve already lived most of your life? That’s probably true for most of us in this room. You

can start to feel anxious. You ask yourself, “Have I accomplished everything I want to accomplish? Have I been successful as a person, as a spouse, as a parent, in my profession, or in my career? Have I been successful as a follower of Jesus? Have I reached my goals and achieved my potential?”

The fear of losing out on life is a powerful fear. The devil uses the fear of losing out on life to push people into serious sins and mistakes that make life worse not better. It can cause this person over here to chase money all his life because he thinks it’s the ultimate security. It can cause that person over there to destroy her marriage because there’s a fear her current spouse is holding her back somehow. It can cause yet another person to become dishonest by taking some kind of inappropriate shortcut to success. Satan fills many people every day very effectively with the fear of losing out on life. He encourages them to believe that when you can just do what you want, and when you just get what you want, you will discover life worth living.

It was Jesus who said, “I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.” (Jo 10:10 MSG) It’s Jesus’ coming at Christmas as well as His death and resurrection on Easter that can free us from the fear of losing out on life. Knowing Jesus and following Jesus is life itself and the pathway to life. Abundant life. Real life. Eternal life. Better life than you ever dreamed of. The devil should no longer be able to fill you with fear about somehow losing out on life. If you’re kind of absorbed with this persistent, nagging sense that you’re losing out on life, it can only be for one of two reasons, my friend. On the one hand, it might be because you’re not really a follower of Jesus, and the devil is pretty effective at arousing fear in your heart that you’re missing out on “real life.” On the other hand, it might be because – even as a follower of Jesus – you’ve bought into the devil’s definition of real life. You need to reclaim Jesus’ definition of real life – of abundant life - and realize He’s already provided it. You just need to start living into it and living it out every day!

Abundant life is found when I surrender myself or abandon myself to God and His will. Real life is becoming a lifelong disciple of Jesus. Eternal life is the result of a personal relationship with Jesus. Oh, you may not have everything that other people have or that our culture says you should seek after, but you will have what truly matters. When you get a hold of that kind of life, the devil will have no ability to fill you with fear that you’re losing out on life. How can you lose out on something you already possess? One reason Jesus’ came into this world at Christmas, and then He died and rose again at Easter, was to release you and me from the fear of losing out on life. He did so by giving us abundant life, real life, and eternal life. You can have it today. You can reclaim it today.

Leigh Bishop is a psychiatrist and military reservist by profession. He was stationed at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan on Christmas Eve 2008. Bagram is the largest military base in Afghanistan – the size of a small town. In the dim light of dusk, he watched as a procession of military vehicles approached the airfield, came to a stop, and carefully unloaded a flag-draped steel casket. He knew that somewhere in the United States, a family was going to suffer a Christmas homecoming that no one wanted. It was a

heartbreaking scene for Bishop to take in that night—and one all-too-familiar in war. But then, he saw something else that Christmas Eve night. After watching that casket get unloaded, Bishop found himself walking along the main avenue of Bagram Airfield. He saw soldiers holding candles and belting out Christmas carols with gusto. He saw luminaries brighten the walkway into an auditorium where cheerful groups of uniformed men and women entered for a Christmas concert. Two blocks away, the airfield chapel was filling for the six o'clock Christmas Eve service. He realized again in that land of war that human beings have a hunger for joy and meaning that will not be set aside by even the most difficult of circumstances – not even death itself.

Jesus didn't come at Christmas to provide an occasion to sing carols, drink toasts, feast, and exchange gifts. But we're right to do these things, even as soldiers die and families grieve, because He did come. And in His coming, Jesus brought joy, peace and life. He brought the joy that overcomes our sorrows. He brought the kind of peace that ends all wars because it ends the long war between the human heart and God Himself. And He brought life. Abundant life. Real life. Eternal, everlasting life. Jesus' coming sets me free from the fear of losing my life. Jesus' coming sets me free from the fear of losing out on life. So, yes, joy to the world, and to every celebrating, grieving, or hurting soul in it. The Lord has indeed come!