

Life For a Dying World

December 20, 2020

Gospel of John

Today, we take on the fourth in our series of Christmas messages focusing on that which Jesus came to give us. Our perspective is that He came to give the very things that we needed. He came for times like these. This morning, our focus is on life. He came to give life to a dying world.

Now, I am very well aware that I am likely not going to say anything this morning that you do not already know. Indeed, the idea that Jesus came to bring life is among the most common themes in Scripture, it is at the core of the gospel. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believed in Him would not perish but have eternal life.” There it is, perhaps the most common verse in Scripture centered around the concept of Jesus bringing and giving life, eternal life.

So, nothing I am saying will likely sound new to you. And yet, I ask you to hang with me as I attempt to put it into context for you. It has relevance in this crazy year of 2020. 2020 has reminded me a bit of the days of Vietnam, when the mounting death toll was on the evening news every day. Or, for those of you who are not that old, how about whenever there is some natural disaster, like hurricane, or string of tornadoes, or blizzard. It seems when disaster strikes the news leads with the death toll. That is what 2020 has seemed like to me, we have the mounting and yet disputed death toll. I don't think I have to work too hard to convince you that death has been at the center of the news, the issue on the forefront of people's minds.

So, here we have the clash of two worlds, two worldviews, two diametrically opposed truths. The world is dead and dying, and the Scriptures announce that Jesus came to bring life. How do those two intersect? Answering that is our quest of this morning.

Just as last week I centered on the gospel of Luke concerning healing, this morning I would like to center on the gospel of John concerning life. Life is a major theme for John, whether that is his gospel or his epistles or even the book of Revelation which he wrote. John is focused on life.

So to begin, I would like to read from John's gospel, his prologue, John 1:1-18. In a very real sense, this is John's birth narrative of Jesus. For John's purposes, the beginning of the story of Jesus is not in Bethlehem, with shepherds and a manger. The beginning of the story of Jesus starts when Jesus gave life to all that have ever lived. And He gives eternal life to all who receive Him. Jesus has been bringing life since creation. READ John 1:1-18.

Main point: Jesus uniquely gives life to the dead and dying.

I trust you can see how this follows on the heels of last week's message. Jesus brings healing, He has sovereignty over disease. But still, people die. We all die, even Jesus died. Death is our universal foe, it comes to us all. Sometimes, it comes after decades of fruitful living. But sometimes it come unexpectedly, tragically, in waves. And it is in those days that we cling to the truth that Jesus came to bring life. And as long as we live in this mortal life, He changes the type of life we can live. In other words, His gift of life does not start at our physical death. It starts immediately, it is a life that is abundant and cannot die.

I think I've given you enough to start orienting your thinking in this direction. I trust that this will cause you to contemplate the times in which we live and how it is that we can live above it all. The truth is that we do not have to be bogged down by death. The truth is that for followers of Jesus, the end of this life is a promotion! (3 parts)

I. This world is dead and dying.

Since the very beginning, man's just compensation for his rebellion against God is death.

Let me ask you a trick question: who brought the issue of death into man's existence? God did. Before there was sin, God brought up with man the issue of death. Remember? He placed two trees in the middle of the Garden of Eden, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As long as man lived in obedience to God, he was able to eat freely from the tree of life. But for God's own reasons, He placed another tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He placed it there as a test. And He told man NOT to eat of that tree OR HE WOULD SURELY DIE! So, life was the natural state of man, death was the unnatural state of man, the just compensation or wages for man if he refused to heed God's warning. We were created to live!

And as we all know, both Adam and Eve purposely, consciously, tragically ate from that tree. They believed the lie of satan that they would not "surely die." In fact, satan promised them that eating from that tree would bring a dimension of life they were missing. God was withholding the best from them and they could have it if only they would disobey God. But as we know, the satan is a deceiver. They did die, instantly, spiritually, relationally with God and with each other. Access to the tree of life was cut off, curtailed, restricted. They were kicked out of the garden. And they began the process of physically dying as well. Death was now introduced into the human experience. And sure enough, In the very next generation, death came in a horrific way, a murderous way, an undeserved way when their eldest son, Cain, murdered his younger brother, Abel. So, Adam and Eve not only experienced their own deaths, but also the pain of losing a child. Death became real.

Ever since then, death has come to all of us. We are all in the process of dying. We all will come to know not only our own deaths, but the pain that comes with watching the deaths of others. We mourn the deaths of our family and friends. We all live knowing that death COULD BE right around the corner for us.

We universally condemn the intentional causing of death. Every culture condemns the taking of innocent life. And the power of the state to order such taking of life is the ultimate power of the state. Paul in Romans 13 calls it the state's right to "bear the sword," or put people to death, whether in war or as a punishment for certain heinous crimes.

So, we can seek to preserve life, value life, protect from death, punish for irresponsible causing of death...and we should. But the truth is that we CANNOT prevent death. Try as we may, we cannot prevent people from dying. In fact, Jesus said in Matthew 16:25 that "whoever would save his life will lose it..." In other words, the human attempt to keep yourself from dying will cause your death. We'll deal with the other side of that statement in a bit. But for now, we must face the fact that as mortal humans, we live in a dead and dying world.

Indeed, now, as direct descendants of Adam, we are all dead, born dead, condemned to death from our mother's womb. No wishful thinking, nor human effort can change that fact. So, it ought not surprise us that people are dying. And we are helpless in stopping that. We can curb, delay, protect, minister, but we cannot stop that.

I'm sorry if I am sounding fatalistic or supremely pessimistic here. That is not my intent. I'm not here to depress, trust me. But I am here to paint an accurate picture of the human condition. And the truth is that all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And further, the wages of such sin is death. That is the truth.

But that is not the end of the story. What is our theme? Jesus came into this world to bring life, abundant life, eternal life. He came for a world like this at a time like this.

II. Jesus came to bring life.

It is here that I have to focus. This point in this sermon could take up a lifetime of sermons. So, bear with me as I seek to condense and confine my

thoughts to make a specific point. God sent His Son, Jesus into this world to bring life. He brought life into a dead and dying world.

I return to the passage I read at the beginning of the sermon. Again, there is so much to say about John I that I am going to ignore. But I want to make sure you notice that the text begins with Jesus, the Son, the Word already alive. Indeed, He has ALWAYS been alive. He is identified here as the very One who brought everything into existence, into life. Nothing got life from any source other than Him. He IS the life giver.

Notice how John puts it in v. 4, “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.” He is the agent of life, the bearer of life, the Creator of life. Why do you suppose Scripture so often turns to creation to describe who God is? Because creation by its very definition is bringing things to life. I think of the picture from Genesis 2 where God forms man out of the dust of the ground and then breathes into his nostrils the breath of life. He is the Giver of life. Jesus is the One who brings life.

Then we notice in John I that even though Jesus came to give life, many, too many, too many who should have known better rejected that life. They did not receive Him. But to those who did receive Him, who do receive Him, who believe in Him, He gave the right to be called the “sons of God.” Now, what is the significance of that term? There are many, but for our purposes this morning I trust it is clear that being a son of God means your life does not end in death! Is that clear? God doesn’t die. He is eternal. He has always existed and will always exist. So, if we are adopted into His family...we will never die, or live even if we die. Is this making sense?

The word “life” alone is in John’s gospel 47 times. (That doesn’t count the verb, “live”.) The pair “eternal life” is in John’s gospel 17 times. Can you see why I have to boil it down? Which ones do I choose? How about this sampling?

John 3:36- Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

John 4:14- but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

John 5:21-24- For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. 22 Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, 23 that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him. 24 “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

John 11:23-26- Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” 24 Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” 25 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; 26 and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

John 14:6- Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

John 20:30-31- Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

I could go on but I think I’ve made my point. The giving of life is at the center of John’s presentation of the gospel. The raising of Lazarus from the dead is the key miracle that Jesus performed in John’s gospel. The point of the whole book is that people will know how to pass from death to life. That’s why John wrote the book.

Or, how about one of John’s letters?

I John 5:11-13- And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. 13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Or perhaps you'd rather hear it from the Apostle Paul? Again there are many but I choose 1: I Corinthians 15. I Corinthians 15 is all about the importance of the resurrection of both Jesus and of His followers. His basic point is that if there is no resurrection of the dead, if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then we are all just wasting our time. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were to give us hope that there is life after death. Hear these words at the end of the chapter (I Cor. 15:54-57)

When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." 55 "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Yes, I think the Scriptures are quite clear: Jesus came to give life to a dead and dying world. If you have Jesus, you have life, and nothing can separate Him from you!

III. This life is superior in both quality and longevity.

Just as last week, I would be remiss if I did not take the time to highlight both the quality and the longevity of this life. Yes, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead as well as at least two others recorded in Scripture. But this was just a physical raising of a mortal life. When Lazarus was raised, there is no indication that he was given an immortal body. He was simply brought back to physical, earthly life. But that doesn't mean this is the sort of life that Jesus gives. He doesn't just give us a pill so we can live longer. He doesn't just give us some vaccine so we can avoid death for awhile.

No, the life that He gives us is both qualitatively and quantitatively different. The life He gives is a restoring of the relational life we have with God and potentially with each other. We are no longer God's enemies, but His friends. We are no longer in danger of doing something that separates us from Him. Nothing nor no one can separate us from God when we have this Jesus given life, not even death. Do you realize how important this is, how empowering this is?

As we noted last week, there is nothing we can do to make God love us any more nor any less than He does right now. Why? Because He sees us through His Son. Scripture says that the believer has been crucified with Christ. We no longer live, but Christ lives in us. We are clothed with Christ and all the rest. There is no condemnation. We have power over the enemy and his forces. Our prayers have weight to them. There is forgiveness of ALL of our sins: past, present, and future. Isn't this good news? You cannot "outsin" such grace. His gift of life still stands.

That is all about our relationship with God. How about with each other? It allows us to be family with people we don't even know. We are bonded together, brothers and sisters. In this room, even though we are all so different, we are family. Now you may be the crazy uncle or grandma of the family, but we still claim you as family! The life that He gives us here and now is inclusive.

And how about our perspective of life and death? We view life and death in a totally different way. We don't have to "get the most out of life." No! We live knowing there is an even better life coming. This coming life will not have any of the problems of this life: no death, no disease, no pain, no crying, no anxiety. So, we do not fear death. Imagine the unbelieving world trying to wrap their minds around the words of Paul in Philippians 1:20-24

20- as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. 24 but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

Do you think the world understands this perspective? Or how about these words from I Thess. 4:13-18

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. 15 For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Yes, the life that Jesus gives is both qualitatively and quantitatively different. It is eternal, abundant. It is not characterized by fear but by peace. It lasts not for a few more months or years, but instead, “When we’ve been there 10,000 years we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we’ve first begun.” No, the world has no concept of such life. It changes everything. It was designed to change our lives right here, right now. Jesus came to give life for times just like these.

If we believe this is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will put this life and its problems in perspective.
- 2) We will cling to Jesus as the giver of life.
- 3) We will live differently right now.
- 4) We will yearn not for more years of this life but for the life to come.
- 5) We will not fear death.
- 6) We will preach life to a dead and dying world.