

Words and Deeds: Uncorrupted
By Jason Huff
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Isaiah 55:1-5; Luke 24:44-49; Acts 13:24-43

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 13:24-43. We ask the Lord's blessing on the reading of His sacred, perfect, holy Word. "[Paul continued to preach, saying,] "Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. As John was completing his work, he said: 'Who do you think I am? I am not that one. No, but he is coming after me, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.' Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people. We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.' The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words: 'I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.' So it is stated elsewhere: 'You will not let your Holy One see decay.' For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: 'Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.'" As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God."

I think about decay a lot. But when I say that word, it's probably not what you're thinking of! As a guitarist, sustain and decay are part and parcel of what you look for in an instrument. Sustain is the steady sound you hear when I strum a chord or note. Decay is the rate at which that chord or note fades to silence. When you're buying a guitar or an amplifier or a piece of equipment, those are key factors to consider. Usually, the more sustain a guitar has, the slower the decay, the better the instrument is. Professional guitarists spend thousands of dollars on instruments and guitar pedals and amplifiers all to get the perfect tone that lasts and lasts and doesn't decay quickly. When I'm playing, I want my notes to ring out, not to die off quickly. But no matter how good your amp, your guitar, your pedal board, no matter how loudly you play, eventually, that note's going to die out.

Everything in this world decays. The leaves are all gone from the trees, and because of this crazy cold snap, a lot of plants have already started their winter cycle (if they haven't truly died from the frost). Those falling leaves decay because they aren't connected to the tree any more. We as people start the road to corruption early, early on. I have lines and gray hairs that prove I'm not in my 30s any more. Many of us have jobs that exist to fight the inevitable aging we go through – your dentist, your doctor, they have work because we're all in this fight! Decay is such a part of life that science has a law called entropy that accounts for it.

We tend to steer clear of discussions about our mortality. Nobody likes to think about it, even though it's inevitable. And yet our belief in Jesus Christ radically alters our outlook on death. We believe that because of His incredible sacrifice on our behalf and His resurrection, we will become like Him. Our hope is that we will be restored, and not just restored, but made perfect. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, at the resurrection of the dead, the body that is sown – our body now – is perishable, corrupting and decayed – but will be raised imperishable, uncorruptable. We will be raised, Paul says, in glory and power. When that happens, Paul says, “death is swallowed up in victory.” That's our hope. And Paul preaches about that here, in Pisideon Antioch, for the first time.

You might remember last week that we began studying Paul's sermon, where he showed us how God is at the center of all the Old Testament stories, how He intends to be the center of our lives too, and how He desires for us to be like David, the man after His own heart. That possibility comes through Jesus. Our salvation doesn't come through David, even though he genuinely loved God and desired to please him. And our salvation doesn't come through John the Baptist, either, as Paul starts today.

Why does Paul bring up John the Baptist? Probably because he was the most famous evangelist of the era. Bigger than Jesus? Certainly not more important. But word of John spread throughout Jewish circles far beyond Israel. The way he dressed and ate attracted a lot of attention – he was a throwback to the ancient prophets of Scripture. His message of repentance leading to baptism stirred a lot of hearts. He also didn't make the enemies Jesus made – he was murdered for calling out King Herod on his adultery, unlike Jesus who was despised by the religious leaders for calling out their hypocrisy. Jesus Himself calls John the greatest man ever born in Luke 7:28. People thought John was so great that they wondered if he was the messiah. He denied it – instead, he pointed people to Jesus. He said Jesus was so beyond him, he was unworthy to untie his sandals – in that culture, where people's feet got incredibly dirty, the lowest job a servant could perform. John sees himself as nothing before Jesus.

John was pointing to the truth: *Jesus* has been sent to us. He is the One that matters. He is the Messiah. To make certain everyone understands, Paul emphasizes that Jesus was the innocent one Scripture talked about that would be slain for us who trust in Him. This was super important – not just His fantastic moral teaching, not just His miracles, but that Jesus fulfilled all the Scripture (being the perfect Savior to come) and was executed despite no proper charge against Him. Jesus' innocence is the lynchpin for everything else. Because if Jesus was just a clever rabbi or a doctor who understood medicine than others in His era, if He was merely just the best man but only a man with human imperfections, we'd all stay home Sunday mornings. If He was not both perfect and innocent, worshipping Him is actually blasphemy against God.

But He is in fact perfect. The authorities in Jerusalem did not crucify a religious zealot or a rabble rouser. They crucified the Son of God and did everything to Him exactly as laid out in the Scriptures. They had heard about the Savior every Sabbath, but they did not recognize Him when He came. And if He had been an ordinary man, everything would have fallen apart from there. The only thing anyone had to do to disprove any urban legends about Jesus was to produce His body. That's why there were guards at the tomb. Because if there was no resurrection, Jesus' core teachings were false and everything else He said is suspect. There are plenty of religions to follow if you want ideas about how to be "nice." Only one faith promises us a genuine defeat of death. And if Jesus didn't defeat death, He isn't worth listening to.

But the centerpiece of history is not any human war, not a great discovery, not the rise or fall of an empire. The centerpiece of history is the resurrection of Jesus. At least four thousand years of antiquity (recorded in Scripture) point to this moment. At this point in time, death is defeated. Jesus returns from the dead. The fulfillment of every promise to God's people stands alive and well outside the tomb.

Death has no hold on Jesus because of God's justice. If Jesus were to stay dead, having lived a perfect life, having given His life in our place, there would be something so wrong with the universe that it couldn't be fixed. If Jesus had not risen from the dead, there would be no reason to believe that God was faithful, was just, was even moral. When we die, even the youngest of us, even the most pure of us, we've still disobeyed God's natural law. There is justice there. But for Jesus to die and stay dead would have been injustice at its most primal.

But that doesn't happen. God raises His Son from the dead. God's perfect justice demands it. The holy and sure blessings promised to David are given through Christ. As God promised, as was written by David in the Psalms, so it is. With over 500 eyewitnesses, most of whom died as martyrs for the faith, it is an unparalleled event. Even a man such as Paul, who was persecuting the church, saw Jesus for himself, changing everything about his life.

The fact that Jesus does not see corruption – that His body did not decay – means everything to Paul. The history of the world is set on its ear! Because that's the thing everyone knows, everyone learns coming into this world – everything dies. No one lives forever. Everything decays. Everything becomes corrupt. The more we know about our diseases, the more we know this to be true. There's probably no more hated a disease out there than cancer. And what is it? It is corruption of once good cells to bad. What once was good and healthy turns corrupt and attacks itself. Disease destroys, corrupts, decays.

But Jesus doesn't! Jesus promises beyond a restoration – a resurrection. With Jesus, we see a new body, related to the old but perfected. That's stunning. Because when you think about decay, it never goes away, right? When you have tooth decay, what do you do? You get a filling. Nasty even to think about, right? You don't restore the tooth. If it's really bad, you have to get a fake tooth, or even fake teeth – dentures. You can stop natural decay, but not reverse it. Yet the promise of God is that the decay we experience will be reversed – where once there is only death and destruction and rottenness, there will be new life, perfected life, far greater than what we experience now. Death has no victory because even the things that lead in that direction, the inevitabilities of time and stress and suffering, all of those will be reversed!

Our society, our world, cannot imagine death without decay. It can't even imagine resurrection without decay, right? What's the most popular genre of scary movies right now? It's zombie movies. There are so many that you can't even count them all. Two weeks from now, there will be a zombie Christmas musical, I kid you not! Our culture can only think of resurrection as a second version of death, brainless, mindless.

Biblical resurrection that Jesus literally embodies is completely different. In the resurrection, God's design for us will be seen in its flawlessness. What God makes perfect in the resurrection can never be undone. There will be no more sickness, no more death, no more suffering. Through the innocent and uncorrupted Jesus, all who trust in Him will see the reversal of all the damage sin and death have brought on this universe. Our faith in Jesus is not just about life after death, but pure life, uncorrupted life, flawless life, life in perfect harmony with God and with others.

The way to that perfected life that Jesus embodies is through the forgiveness of our sins that Jesus purchased for us. That is what we proclaim – God in Jesus has made a way for us to overcome death. Because it's sin that gets in the way. Sin, our disobedience and rebellion against God, breaks everything. It not only breaks our relationship with God, it breaks our relationships with one another. The thing is, to choose sin is to choose death. God Himself is life – He is the giver of life, the sustainer of life, the One from whom all life comes. To rebel against God is to be in rebellion against life itself. The forgiveness of sins is the only way – *the only way* – that death can be overcome. Because our sin has already set us in the court of death. To be brought into God's Kingdom and God's court, sin must be overcome.

Paul tells his audience that it's through Jesus that the forgiveness of sins comes, and not through the law. The law informs us of what sin is, it gave the ancient Israelites sacrifices that would give them temporary, provisional forgiveness, but it gave no permanent solution to the problem of sin. The Old Testament shows God's great grace on the people He had chosen, but the law was, essentially, a temporary fix. In fact, as we studied many months ago in Romans, the law cannot save us because all it does is inform us of the sins we commit. As soon as we have the law, we find we are guilty of breaking it.

But through Jesus, we are justified. Through Jesus, we are declared sin-free. Through Jesus, our judge declares us, "Not guilty." Through Jesus, even the sins that could never be washed away with the blood of goats and lambs are forgiven. What the law was powerless to do, Jesus does. We are forgiven by God and granted that pure eternal life.

Paul warned the crowd, "Make sure not to be a scoffer. Make sure not to be one of those people the prophets warned about, who won't believe even though you've been told the good news." It is hard to believe, a man coming back from the dead whose resurrection signals the end of death's reign and the entrance of God's Kingdom into this world. But that is what we believe. It is that belief that sustains us, and it is that belief that God has implanted in us that brings us into a right relationship with God.

Here's the blunt news: we're all going to die. Even blunter, as I heard a pastor recently put it to his congregation, "Someday, your body will wear out, and we'll put you in a box in the ground and throw dirt in your face and go into the fellowship hall and eat potato salad." Funny, maybe even a little offensive to some people, but truth. Not everybody has to pay taxes any more, but everyone dies. As Paul said, David was buried with his fathers and his body saw decay.

We do everything we can to avoid it, to dance around it. Even the early church did it. When Stephen was stoned earlier in Acts, Luke said he "fell asleep." What euphemism do we say now? They "passed away." We don't like to look death in the face because it scares us. But Jesus faced death head-on in our place. He went to His death in obedience to His Father, to save all those the Father has given to Him. And faced with the perfect man who did not in any way deserve to die, death had to fold its hand. It was beaten. And as co-heirs with Christ in the Kingdom, as His adopted brothers and sisters, through Him we will conquer death too.

Unless Jesus returns soon, we will face death. But you do not have to worry about that another moment if you know Jesus' love for you and trust in Him for your forgiveness and salvation. Because for the believer, death is but a moment, but eternal life is forever. Do you realize that we are immortal beings? God made us that way.

We will die, our bodies will go in the ground, but that is not the finale. When you take eternity in account, author C.S. Lewis said, our earthly life and death will be nothing more than the introduction and the first page to our novel, yet the story will go on and on. And when we know Christ, we know that story will be so much greater and grander and more wonderful and more joyous than anything that has come before.

Friends, we go into the Thanksgiving season and if we're honest, we're not sure we're all that thankful. Sometimes the table conversation is awkward; we don't know what to say to relatives we rarely see. Sometimes there is bad blood or tough experiences in the past that color things. And yet everyone in this room who trusts in Christ can be truly thankful. In this season where the colors fade and the leaves fall and the reality of decay is in the air, we can be assured that we will live forever. We know that death is not permanent – for the faithful, it is the step into eternity where we will meet our Savior and God face to face and not have to be ashamed. For the blessing of this wonderful gift of salvation, and for all the other gracious gifts God gives to us, we can be truly grateful – not just Thursday, but always.