

# LIFE. DEATH. VICTORY.

SIX SERMON/DISCUSSION OUTLINES  
PREPARING FOR EASTER



The mission of CTA is  
to glorify God by providing purposeful products  
that lift up and encourage the body of Christ!

because we love him.



## **LIFE. DEATH. VICTORY.**

*Six Sermon/Discussion Outlines*

*Preparing for Easter*

Steven H. Albers

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# WANT TO ENCOURAGE SPIRITUAL GROWTH THIS EASTER SEASON?

**Think *Life. Death. Victory.***



It just makes sense. When people immerse themselves in God’s Word, when they think about it and talk about it throughout the week and not just on Sunday, when families share a common experience in encountering that Word, everyone grows in faith.

It just makes sense. And recent research confirms it! But how do busy leaders in busy churches support their members in doing it—especially during one of the busiest times in the local congregation?

*Life. Death. Victory.* materials will help you answer those questions in an encouraging, clear-cut way. This product line includes value-priced materials for every member and visitor:

- † The *Jesus’ Victory* block set includes activities that can be spread out over the six weeks leading up to Easter or used on just one day (Palm Sunday or an Easter fair, for example). It’s designed to help younger children learn what Jesus has done for them in his death and resurrection—and to share it with others.
- † The *Life. Death. Victory. More Than a Story* cube will intrigue older kids and teens, helping them review the facts and the meaning behind our Lord’s crucifixion and resurrection. And it provides a natural way to share the message.
- † Adults will find the *Life. Death. Victory.* guide, “Preparing Our Hearts for Easter,” helpful as they immerse themselves in appropriate Scriptures and as they journal and pray in response to the texts they have encountered. In addition, the *Life. Death. Victory.* magnet and key fob will provide a daily reminder of everything Jesus means for us.

Free downloadables available on CTA’s Web site will help congregation leaders and members invite neighbors and friends to join your church in preparing for Easter and celebrating Christianity’s highest festival, Resurrection Day!

It just makes sense to help God’s people focus as intentionally as possible on our Savior’s life, death, and victory during this holy season. It just makes sense to involve everyone in your circle of influence in exploring this meaningful, uplifting, unifying theme. It just makes sense to spend intentional time cultivating spiritual growth. And it just makes sense that your partner in ministry, CTA, would provide busy leaders and pastors with loads of resources to help you do all this as effectively as possible!

God bless your Easter preparation and celebration!

# LIFE. DEATH. VICTORY.

## WEEK ONE

### The Jesus Story Philippians 2:5–11



#### Notes

Life. Death. Victory. Those three words sum up everything Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, has done for us—by his holy life, through his innocent death, and in his glorious resurrection victory! For Christians, all roads lead to Calvary and then past Calvary to our Lord’s empty tomb. That’s particularly true as we prepare our hearts to celebrate Easter.

For the next six weeks, we will explore “Life. Death. Victory.” using each word in the title to help focus our thoughts and prayers. Today, we will begin by focusing on the Jesus Story. In coming weeks, we will investigate these topics:

- † The Story of My Life
- † The Story of My Death
- † The Crucifixion Story
- † The Resurrection Story
- † The Story of My Victory

It’s a wonderful story that you and I know because the Holy Spirit has been at work in our hearts. We know that Jesus was and is true God from all eternity. We know that he took on human flesh and blood, being miraculously conceived in the womb of a virgin named Mary. We know he lived all his life without sin, that he performed awesome miracles, and that he preached powerful sermons. We know he called thousands of people to repentance and discipleship—and that many came! We know he was immensely popular, and yet also ridiculed, betrayed, denied, and beaten. We know he died a lonely, cruel death on a Roman cross. We know he rose from the dead and, forty days later, went back to heaven. And we know he did all this for us!

*Jesus lived a perfect life—  
and gave that life to me.  
Jesus died a gruesome death  
alone on Calvary.  
Jesus left the empty grave,  
his might, my victory.*

The story doesn’t end there. Jesus also promised to come again, this time in glory, as the great Judge of all people. He will rescue the faithful, taking us to live with him forever in his Father’s house. That chapter in the Jesus Story has yet to be written, but it will be! This story is no fantasy. It’s no “wouldn’t it be great if . . .” fable. This story is real. It really happened. It’s really true! And that makes it all the more wonderful!

This entire story of Jesus is laced with love, mercy, and compassion. In it, God tells us of his determination to save us; it's the story of our redemption. From the beginning, actually from before time itself began, the Father planned to send his own and only Son, Jesus, into the world—a sinful world—for us. From all eternity, God the Son knew he would suffer the pain and loneliness of hell on the cross so that we would never need to suffer those things.

### **The Jesus Story—Forgiveness**

The Jesus Story is a story of forgiveness. Many times the Gospel writers describe people seeking God's forgiveness from Jesus and Jesus granting it. In fact, our Savior's first words from the cross were a plea to the Father for those who had crucified him: "Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

The issue of forgiveness marked our Lord's ministry again and again. The apostle John describes a woman who had been caught in adultery. Some Pharisees brought this woman to Jesus, hoping to pit what he would say against what the Law of Moses had commanded. That Law, you see, said that she should be stoned. Saying nothing, Jesus simply "bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger" (John 8:6).

I wonder what he wrote. Perhaps it was something like, "Hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5). Whatever Jesus wrote that day, the Pharisees insisted on a response. Finally, the Savior straightened up and said, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7), and then he continued to write.

At that, they left, one by one, humbled and with nothing left to say. When they had all gone, Jesus asked the woman, "Has no one condemned you?" (v. 10).

"No one, sir," she responded.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus said. "Go now and leave your life of sin" (v. 11). Jesus had the authority to forgive sins and to set individuals free from guilt and shame. He has that same authority today. He speaks words of pardon and peace into our own troubled hearts: "Neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin."

### **The Jesus Story—Humility**

The Jesus Story is a story of forgiveness. It's also a story of humility. The cross, of course, was the ultimate story of humility, for it was indeed the ultimate in humiliation! On the night when our Lord's suffering, pain, and rejection began, the night before his death by crucifixion, Jesus spent an intimate few hours with his

chosen disciples. It was a time for fellowship, for sharing the Passover meal, for teaching (and learning) the meaning of humility.

Ever the teacher, Jesus wrapped a towel about his waist and voluntarily began doing what only the most menial servant would ordinarily be asked to do. One by one, gently and lovingly, he washed the disciples' feet! The Gospel of John, chapter 13:2–4, sets this event within the context of Judas' betrayal. Do you think Jesus bypassed the feet of Judas? Not for a second! For Jesus' humility reflects his love. In describing the foot washing, John further contextualizes it with these words:

*Having loved his own who were in the world,  
[Jesus] now showed them the full extent of his love.  
John 13:1*

The next day, that love would take Jesus all the way to the cross for you and for me. What a story!

### **The Jesus Story—Thanksgiving**

The Jesus Story is a story of forgiveness and humility. It's also a story of Jesus' thankfulness. On one occasion, Jesus took five loaves of bread and two fish and fed more than 5,000 people! (Matthew 14:13–21). The text says, "Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he *gave thanks* and broke the loaves" (v. 19, emphasis added). I wonder what else might have been on Jesus' mind at that moment.

Perhaps he was giving thanks to the Father for his call to be the Savior of the world. Perhaps, too, he thanked God for the power to do miracles, for the little boy who had shared his lunch, and for his faithful (if not always discerning) disciples. Perhaps he was giving thanks for the spiritual hunger of this throng of people, for their thirst to hear the Word of the Lord.

### **The Jesus Story—Service**

Forgiveness. Humility. Thankfulness. And finally, service.

Love serves! Toward the end of our Lord's earthly ministry, two disciples from his "inner circle," James and John, asked that they be given special seats of honor in the kingdom of heaven. In response, Jesus reminded them—and us, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45 ESV).

I wonder if as they heard those words, James and John remembered the story Jesus told in answer to a man who wanted to justify himself and the way he was living his life. You may remember it: A man gets beaten and robbed by thieves on the roadside. Two clerics pass by, indifferent to the victim's plight. A hated Samaritan stops, binds

## Notes

WEEK ONE  
CONTINUED . . .

up the victim's wounds, takes him to an inn, and pays whatever expenses the man had already incurred—and leaves an IOU for those he might incur! (Luke 10:30–35). This is service at its humblest and finest. To show kindness to a presumed enemy is not only admirable; it is Christlike.

We could focus, of course, on dozens or even hundreds more characteristics of our Savior's ministry. All of that, together with everything we have remembered today, from Jesus' birth to his resurrection, his ascension, and all that is yet to come in eternity—all of it is the Jesus Story.

Jesus means his story to be our story, too. *When Jesus calls individuals to follow him as disciples, he asks nothing of them that he himself has not already done or said.* In Philippians 2:5–8, the apostle Paul describes Jesus' humility and comments on our response to it:

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:*

*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!*

So, what's your story?

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Notes

**WEEK ONE**  
**NOTES/ SPECIAL PRAYERS**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What parts of the Jesus Story challenge you?
2. What parts encourage you?
3. Where do you see yourself in his story?

# LIFE. DEATH. VICTORY.

## WEEK TWO

### The Story of My Life John 10:10



#### Notes

Life. Death. Victory. Those three words create a great theme for Lent. But they are far more than that. They tell the story of my life! And yours!

We believe and confess that Jesus Christ is our Savior, the one who by his suffering and death on the cross of Calvary has rescued us from the curse and consequences of our sin. We also believe and confess that Jesus Christ is our Lord, the one in charge of our lives, of all we are and have and will be.

Life. Death. Victory. These words are the heartbeat of our faith, the faith that shapes how we approach life—and death. The faith that clings to the eternal victory that is ours—all because of Jesus.

Last week, we began our journey toward Calvary by exploring the Jesus Story. Today, we share the Story of My Life.

#### **That's the Story of My Life**

We say it in exasperation. Or even self-pity. When hail pelts the car . . . when we find out that the company we work for has been sold . . . when the air conditioning goes haywire on the hottest day of the summer . . . we mutter, “That’s the story of my life!”

Well, no, it isn’t. It isn’t even close to reflecting your life’s story—or mine. Discomforts and displeasures and inconveniences are all “fixable.” They are mere blips on the radar screen of life. We often wring our hands over events that will be long forgotten by this time next year.

But that’s not our focus today. Nor will we focus on my life—even though you may have thought this sermon would be autobiographical! Instead, we will focus on you, on your life, your life’s story. If someone asked you to share the story of your life, what would you say?

As you think about that, picture someone in your family or your circle of friends who was or is a master at telling stories, lots of them. We all probably know someone like that—someone whose stories focused, not on self, but on family, tradition, heritage, and faith. If you know someone like that, God has given you a precious gift! Treasure it! (And think about cultivating such a gift yourself as you share with others, especially any children or grandchildren with whom God has gifted you.)

How might a master storyteller approach the story of your life? That depends, at least in part, on the chapter of life in which you find yourself. If you are a twenty- or a thirtysomething, you might very well accent the future, a future filled with promise and optimism and brightness. If you find yourself at midlife, you might talk about how

quickly time has flown and about dreams that have become reality—or that now will remain unfulfilled. If you have lived eight or nine decades, you may find yourself dreaming again as you think of heaven.

### **Your Life's Story Is More Than Stories about Your Life**

Even as you think about telling your life's story, remember that it's more than stories about your life. Nostalgia does not make your story complete—Christ's relationship with you and your relationship with Christ does! In fact, what Christ has done for you has written the first and last chapters of your life's story. What Christ has done for you beautifies every chapter in between.

In John 10, our Lord refers to himself as the Good Shepherd. He also tells us:

*I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;  
**I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.**  
verses 9–10, emphasis added*

Life! To the full! Only in Jesus, the Good Shepherd, do we access this life. Apart from him, we live at the mercy of those forces that would seek to destroy our hearts and minds and wills and draw us away from the Christ. These forces are many, subtle, and destructive. As you think back on your life's story, you can likely identify them. You can probably recall times when the enemies of your soul came to steal, to destroy, to pull you away from the Master's side, setting you adrift. It's a frightening thought!

Jesus' words leave no doubt about the dangers. They leave no doubt about the reality of sin and its eternal consequences. But Jesus is our life! He gives eternal life to us. Life is God's gift, one we receive only in him, and we say so without apology.

### **The Story of My Life Is to Reflect Christ in My Life**

So, then, on the heels of this wondrous Gospel, the incredible Good News of life in and through Jesus Christ, how can the story of our lives *not* reflect that of our Savior and Lord? We simply can't help it! Last week, the sermon concluded:

*When Jesus calls individuals to follow him as disciples, he asks nothing of them that he himself has not already done or said.*

The Jesus Story is a story of humility, of forgiveness, of thanksgiving, and of service. And our own lives reflect these very same things!

† Jesus calls us to live lives of *humility*. I am humbled by the message that God has chosen me to be his child! I am humbled that God loves me, no matter what. I am humbled that God listens to my prayers, that he responds to my every need—and to many of my wants as well! Now, I can lift others up with respect and care. I can

reach out in generous affirmation to others—especially those whom other people have labeled “undeserving.” I can be Jesus in their lives, reflecting his love and acceptance. Humility—it’s the story of our lives.

- † Jesus calls us to live lives of *forgiveness*. It is not at all coincidental that our Lord urges us to pray, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Jesus has forgiven us! He paid the ultimate price to make that possible. Now we can forgive. We can take “I told you so” out of our vocabularies. We can drop the grudges we’re holding. We can leave the bitterness behind. Forgiveness—it’s the story of our lives.
- † Jesus calls us to live lives of *thanksgiving*. Everything that we are, everything we have, comes to us from the hands of a beneficent, loving God—everything! Even when health fails or relationships are severed, our God still gives us strength and courage and hope. No wonder that the apostle Paul says, “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17). Thanksgiving—it’s the story of our lives.
- † Jesus calls us to live lives of *service*. That may mean bathing your elderly parent, now completely dependent on you. It may mean writing a card to someone who is sick or sitting with a family in mourning over the death of a loved one. Jesus said of himself, “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Matthew 20:28 ESV). So it is for us, too. We live with others in mind, reflecting him. Service—it’s the story of our lives.

Humility. Forgiveness. Thanksgiving. Service. That’s life lived to the full, life as Jesus intends!

### **Life Is Precious!**

On Saturday, May 24, 2007, Elijah Moore stood waiting at a suburban St. Louis bus stop with his childhood friend, Toriana Lewis. They were on their way to work. Elijah was seventeen and a leader in his high school. A truck lost control and plowed into the teens, killing Elijah.

Stuffed in his pocket was a poem he had written, titled simply “Life.” It read:

*Life is neither here nor there  
Promised or guaranteed . . .  
For one life we are given  
And that life is precious above all others.*

One life you are given. It is God’s precious gift and the first part of our story—life, death, victory!

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

**WEEK TWO**  
**NOTES/ SPECIAL PRAYERS**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. When have you experienced your life in Jesus as a great adventure, as the story of love God is telling his world through you? Give specific examples and then praise God for what he is doing in you and through you.
2. When have you seen him telling his story of love through those around you?

# LIFE. DEATH. VICTORY.

## WEEK THREE

### The Story of My Death Romans 6:23



Life. Death. Victory. Last week we focused on “The Story of My Life”—the story of your life, the life Jesus has given you. The full and abundant life that reflects Jesus’ very own humility, forgiveness, thanksgiving, and service.

Life is a gift from God. In part, we value it because we live always in the shadow of death. Unless Jesus returns first, all of us will face death. For some, death comes suddenly. For others, death comes later, after a long struggle with illness or pain.

We know neither the time nor circumstance in which we will take our last breath, so we need to prepare now. Are you ready? It’s a question no one likes to hear—or ask. We don’t think about it often, not if we can help it. Yet, we need not fear death. We Christians know that death is not the final chapter. Eternity stretches out before every human being who lives now or who has ever lived—we cannot begin to fathom the glory of heaven or the torments of hell. Yet both are real places where real life (or real death) continues forever when our life here on this earth ends.

Tim McGraw, popular country artist, has titled one of his songs “Live Like You Were Dying.” The refrain reflects the perspective of a man who died in his early forties with most of his life seemingly still before him. He had been warned of his impending death, so he used his remaining time to go skydiving, bull riding, and mountain climbing. More important, he learned to love and to forgive. As the song ends, he wishes listeners the blessing of being able to “live like you were dying.”

In the movie *The Bucket List*, actors Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman face the same prospect. They are both cancer patients with only a year to live. Together, they decide to make a “bucket list,” a list of things they want to do before they “kick the bucket.” They aspire to quite a variety of experiences, even patching up problems in their own families.

I’ve never faced that challenge. I can only imagine what the process of anticipating my own impending death might entail. How about you? What if you knew you had only a year, a month, a week, a day to live? What would you do? How would the Story of Your Death be told?

#### **Death—My Personal Reality**

The Story of My Death, and of yours, begins by acknowledging the awkward reality that we are going to die. It begins by acknowledging the reason behind our death. People often ask questions like: *Why is there sickness or pain or poverty or injustice or indignity or disease? Why is there death?*

Sin is the culprit behind all these realities. Not so much the sins we as individuals

#### Notes

commit, but just plain sin itself. God did not create sickness, grief, or death; the original creation included only harmony and holiness, perfection and peace. We can't blame God when we suffer pain or see a loved one die. If you must point a finger, point it at Adam, and at Eve, too, of course. The apostle Paul does just that in Romans 5:

*Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, . . . in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.*  
verse 12

One chapter later, there is no equivocation whatsoever. "The wages of sin is death," Paul writes plainly (6:23).

As simple, straightforward, and sweeping as that indictment is, we still seek to sidestep our own responsibility. Human beings point the finger of blame outward. Democrats and Republicans blame each other for the latest mess in Washington. The wife beater blames his lousy childhood. A person with lung cancer blames the tobacco industry. Grocery shoppers blame farmers for the high cost of food, and they, in turn, blame oil companies for the high costs of fuel and fertilizer. Everyone has someone or something to blame.

We do sin. We say sin. We think sin. Bottom line: we *are* sin. As one theologian has observed, before Adam and Eve fell into sin, humanity was "able *not* to sin;" in heaven we will "*not be able* to sin." But in the meantime, we are "*not able not* to sin." The apostle Paul, again in Romans, writes:

*I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . . Who will rescue me from this body of death?*  
Romans 7:15, 24

Sin takes its toll on us. We may try to shift the blame, but we can never sidestep our mortality. There is no escape. The sad and sorry consequences of our sin will eventually overtake us. Death comes to all, for all have sinned. No matter how faithful we are; no matter how loving, how kind, how strong a believer, how sacrificial, how generous, how humble; no matter how many years we have served in the church; no matter how much we have done; we're going to die, and we know why!

### **Die Like You Are Living!**

Even so, sin and death will not win. Death does not write the final chapter of your story or mine. A pastor who sometimes counsels the dying writes:

*As people work through the process of dying, many of them share incredible testimonies of faith. I have been privileged to hear some of these. At first, most people fear, not death itself, but the process of death. No one welcomes the pain, the increasing weakness, the likelihood they will become more and more dependent on others. But once they've heard their doctor's verdict, "it's just a matter of time,"*

*every person has said in one way or another about death, “Bring it on!” They knew that death would not have the final word. Death will not ultimately conquer. Instead, death serves as the corridor through which they at last arrive in the presence of their Savior.*

The apostle Paul concludes his first letter to the believers in Corinth with the great resurrection chapter—chapter 15. That chapter rings with comfort and power:

*Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.*

*Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: . . .*

*“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.  
verses 20–22; 51–57*

As a preacher, I can’t wait to share in the coming weeks the story of that resurrection and, through it, our victory. As we meditate on it, we enjoy, even now, a foretaste of the feast to come!

### **Putting Life and Death into Spiritual Perspective**

The country singer urges us to “live like you were dying.” We are, of course. Death will be the second-to-last chapter of our individual lives. That prospect brings with it the opportunity to put life into perspective. It encourages us to take stock, to consider which parts of life may not be as important as we’ve thought. It urges us to consider which things we’ve neglected, but want now, instead, to affirm.

At the top of that list may very well be your spiritual life, your relationship with Jesus Christ and Christ’s relationship of grace with you. That is *always* in need of evaluation and affirmation!

The Story of My Death is an important story. But to properly assess it, we need to view it in the context of eternity. That’s what we will do next week as we explore Jesus’ death and what it means, as this series continues to build to its climax. Next week, the Crucifixion Story. We die because of our sins. Jesus didn’t sin, yet he still had to die. Why?

**WEEK THREE**  
**NOTES/ SPECIAL PRAYERS**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. When you think of going home to be with Jesus, of continuing the great adventure story in his love forever, how does that make you feel? Why?
2. When you look at life through the lens of God's goodness toward you, what attitudes or actions change? How do they change?

# LIFE. DEATH. VICTORY.

## WEEK FOUR

### The Crucifixion Story Luke 18:31–34



#### Notes

Life. Death. Victory. It is true. Between life and eternal victory stands death—your death, my death—for we have all sinned, and sin takes its toll. That was the focus last week. From the very beginning, from that dreadful day when Adam and Eve first fell into sin, death descended into our universe, corrupting it. God said to Adam, “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19).

At many cemeteries, family members stay at the grave site until the casket is actually lowered into the vault. It takes awhile. The pulley groans and creaks as it lowers the casket to the bottom of the grave. It’s an eerie sound, an eerie sight. Children sometimes move to the edge to peer into the vault. There they see that six feet is pretty deep. From that angle, death looks very permanent. When Adam fell into sin, that fall was significant. Adam fell all the way into death, and with him fell all of his children, including you and me.

Last week’s sermon concluded, “We die because of our sins. Jesus didn’t sin, yet he still had to die. Why?” In one sense, of course, Jesus did not *have* to die. He willingly and sacrificially laid down his life. No one drove Jesus to the cross or forced him to hang there, not really. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he told his disciples to put away the sword they had brought along, because he had at his disposal “more than twelve legions of angels” (Matthew 26:53). The size of Roman legions varied down through time, but credible evidence points to legions of as many as 4,500 warriors and support troops. Imagine, twelve legions—of angels! They could have come to Jesus’ rescue in a moment had he but said the word! No, Jesus didn’t have to die—we say that, we’ve always said that.

Yet sin has taken its toll on all of humanity, and because of that, *someone* had to die! Why? Because God is just. God Almighty will not compromise his Law; he will not negotiate with lawbreakers. “The soul who sins is the one who will die,” thunders Ezekiel the prophet (18:4). Adam. Eve. You. Me.

But for reasons known only in the heart of our gracious God, his intention is not that our story end in a casket in the bottom of a vault. His intention is not that our story end in a crematorium with our ashes strewn. His intention is not that our story end in separation from him forever in hell. God wants us, his children, to come home to live with him in heaven.

That’s why Jesus had to die. Someone holy and without sin had to pay the debt we had by our sins incurred. And there was only one way to do that—through death: a holy man dying an unholy death so that unholy people like you and me need no longer fear the inevitability of death.

**Jesus Had to Die Because *Love Leaves No Choice***

Imagine a child dying of a disease that can be cured only by a transplant—an especially risky transplant—of a parent’s organ. Could a loving parent refuse to risk his or her life for that child? Of course not, for love leaves no choice! This is a human comparison, and it’s flawed. But it opens a tiny window into the enormous love of God for us—for you and for me.

Christ went the way of the cross for you. Whenever you see a cross, a crucifix, a painting of Christ’s suffering and sorrow—as you watch the Crucifixion Story unfold in these weeks leading up to Easter—look at those things within the context of God’s unfathomable love. In a sense, Christ didn’t have to do this for you. Yet in another sense, yes, he did! Someone had to die, because sin takes its toll. Someone who loves us did die for us, because love leaves no choice!

**Jesus Had to Die Because *God’s Word Is True***

Jesus said to his disciples, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled” (Luke 18:31). When he spoke these words, Jesus had in mind all that the Old Testament prophets had written, prophets like Isaiah.

Isaiah wrote about God’s Suffering Servant 700 years before Jesus was born. He described in graphic terms what the Messiah would endure:

*He was despised and rejected by men,  
a man of sorrows, and familiar  
with suffering.*

*He was oppressed and afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,  
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.  
Isaiah 53:3, 7*

We read that and, by the power of the Spirit who works faith in us, we see Jesus Christ of Nazareth in every word! Yet Jesus’ disciples didn’t get it. No fewer than six times before his arrest, Jesus told them of his impending death on the cross. Call it denial, call it whatever you wish, but the disciples “did not understand any of this” (Luke 18:34). On the other hand, had you stood in their sandals, would you have grasped it? If you didn’t hold the New Testament in your hands, would you be able to figure out all this talk about suffering and death?

Suppose someone whom you deeply love told you, “I have invasive cancer and three

months to live.” How would you respond? Most of us would likely say something like, “No! Tell me that’s not true, that this is a bad dream, that the medical staff has it all wrong!” These disciples loved Jesus. They had spent three years with him. They had hung on his words. They had seen his miracles of healing and even watched him raise people from the dead! Surely his life would not end on a cross! Oh, they would eventually understand—after the Easter and then the Pentecost event. But for now, they couldn’t—not wouldn’t, but couldn’t—understand.

Even so, their failure to understand it wouldn’t stop it. Nothing, not even the disciples’ misguided intentions to protect their Jesus, would stand in the way of Jesus’ trek to Jerusalem and to the cross. Jesus simply had to die, because God’s Word is true. That Word says, “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

### **Jesus Had to Die Because *the Die Was Cast***

Scripture says, “The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet they could not find any way to do it, because *all the people hung on his words*” (Luke 19:47–48, emphasis added). That’s the part of the Crucifixion Story I’ll never understand. Given Jesus’ popularity, how could the chief priests have carried out their plan to kill Jesus just three short days later? How could the tide of public opinion have turned so quickly and, it seems, quietly?

*The die is cast.* I’m not sure of the origin of that phrase, but it means that there’s no turning back. Whatever will be will be, and what would be would be the suffering and death of Jesus.

I can’t imagine that people would ever hate enough to kill someone. Yet it happens all the time. But it’s why the Crucifixion Story happened when and as it did.

Actually, these words take us back to last week. The die was cast when sin entered into the world. The die was cast when God promised Satan that he would bruise the heel of the woman’s offspring, but the woman’s offspring would crush Satan’s head (Genesis 3:15). The die was cast when all other hope for our deliverance from sin’s clutches disappeared. At that point, the Savior, Jesus Christ the Lord, became our only hope.

Now, because of the Crucifixion Story, even in the midst of hatred there is forgiveness, there is grace. Thus, our Lord called from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Even then, he was praying for the ones who had plotted his death and gotten their way. Even then, he was praying for each of us. We stand judged. We stand loved. We stand in the shadow of the cross. The die was cast, because love leaves no choice.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

**WEEK FOUR**  
**NOTES/ SPECIAL PRAYERS**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. An old hymn asks, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Reflect on that question, answer it, and then explain your answer.
2. List one or two people with whom you can share the story of God’s love this week. Tell how you’ll do it.

# LIFE. DEATH. VICTORY.

## WEEK FIVE

The Resurrection Story    Mark 16:1–8; 1 Corinthians 15:17–19



### Notes

Life. Death. Victory. The Jesus Story. The Story of My Life. The Story of My Death. The Crucifixion Story. We have explored each of these, and now we have come to the Resurrection Story.

Maybe that seems a bit premature. After all, Easter hasn't yet arrived. We're still in that season of preparation some Christians call Lent. Even Christians who do not observe Lent often use the days leading up to Easter as a time for maintaining a thoughtful, reflective heart and mind. On the other hand, we dare never confine the Resurrection Story to a single day or to just one season on the church's calendar. In fact, every Sunday is for Christians a "little Easter."

When the early church created the season of Lent, it counted backward forty days from Easter to determine when to start the season of preparation and penitence. Why forty? Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai as God prepared his people to receive the Ten Commandments. Jonah preached to a sinful Nineveh, and God gave the city forty days to repent. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness, praying as he prepared for his earthly ministry. Forty is a significant number, biblically speaking. That's why liturgical churches decided to observe forty days of preparation and penitence before Easter.

However, the Sundays *of* Lent were never included *in* Lent, because as I said earlier, every Sunday is a "little Easter," a little reminder of the Resurrection Story. That's a good thing, for many reasons. For one, sometimes all the festivities of Easter keep us from focusing on the real message of Easter. In many places, Easter worship has become very elaborate. We decorate beautifully with lilies, festive flowers, and banners. We complement our regular music with brass and timpani. The choir is in full dress and has practiced fervently.

That's understandable, for the day of Easter culminates the holiest week of the entire year for us! Yet in all the excitement, it's possible to lose sight of what we're celebrating. In truth, the Resurrection Story didn't happen amidst a lot of pomp and fanfare. All four Gospel writers describe it in ways that are both simple and complex, all at the same time. Focusing on repentance and renewal creates a perfect opportunity to reflect on the Resurrection Story, quietly and ever so personally.

### **Listening Quietly to the Sounds of Resurrection**

Each of the four Gospels in the New Testament tells the Resurrection Story in a similar, yet unique way, and together, they make the story complete. Only in John's Gospel, for example, do we hear about Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene. At first, she didn't recognize him, but then he called her by name—tenderly, quietly. In that moment, she saw who he was, and it made an eternal difference (20:14–16).

In the Gospel of Mark, we read about the three women who went to anoint their friend's body. They assumed Jesus' body lay, still lifeless, in the tomb. The angel told them that their friend, their friend who had definitely died, was no longer dead! It left them speechless. They simply stood—and stared! Were they afraid that they would wake up and discover that this was all just a dream? that anything they could say would be hopelessly inadequate?

Listen even now to the sound of resurrection, the sound of life, new life, that emanates from the tomb. The rustling of grave cloths. The ground shaking beneath your feet. The stone scraping against the face of the tomb as the angel rolls it away from the entrance. The clank of armor as the soldiers guarding the grave fall, overcome by the power of God. A beating heart—your beating heart as you consider the new life that belongs to you because of what Jesus has done! Listen, for we who are dying are very much alive as the Spirit works his way anew into the fabric of our souls.

The Gospel writers describe the events so beautifully. They do not so much seek to prove the reality of the resurrection as to evoke a sense of awe and mystery over it. They understate the story as though to emphasize that, indeed, all of this is God's doing! Who can help but tremble and keep silent when confronted with Jesus' open grave? The sheer emptiness of that tomb brings us to absolute, humble dependence upon a great, great God.

### **The Reality of the Resurrection**

Certainly, it is possible to keep the Resurrection Story at arm's length. It is possible that we leave the empty tomb without having been touched by the Good News of life and hope. We can read the story again and again while our lives, hearts, and minds remain unchanged. It is absolutely possible to convince ourselves that this "resurrection talk" is mere religious rhetoric, esoteric and surreal at best and irrelevant at worst!

How about us? Do we keep the Resurrection Story at arm's length? If so, perhaps that's because we are able to keep death at arm's length, for a time—right now, anyway. We just don't want to talk about some things, and at the top of that list is death—until, that is, death invades our own lives, our own families.

Are you afraid of death? I doubt there's a person here who doesn't have at least a few anxious thoughts. How, when, where will we meet the end of life here on earth? How will it impact the people we love? Ask anyone who has confronted a life-threatening illness, anyone who has undergone serious surgery, anyone who's been in a severe accident. Those who have walked for awhile in the valley of the shadow of death can tell you about a gamut of emotions they felt before peace finally settled into their hearts! Why?

We've heard the Resurrection Story many times. We believe in the reality of

resurrection, of life eternal, not only our Lord's, but our own as well. God's promise, the hope he gives, and his proclamation of life sustain us as we face the prospect of dying. These things also put into perspective all our other griefs and sorrows and pain.

### **Proving and Proclaiming the Resurrection Story**

Resurrection! It was the heartbeat of the neophyte Christian church. The women had seen Jesus alive. The apostles had been eyewitnesses. Yet, the early believers lived in a culture no less skeptical than our own. Many who heard the claims of resurrection scoffed. How could anyone with any common sense believe a man who had died on a cross had come back to life? Dead men don't get up and walk out of the tomb on their own. People back then knew this just as well as we today do.

The need to *prove* as well as *proclaim* the reality of the resurrection prompted the apostle Paul to write what is known as "the great resurrection chapter"—1 Corinthians 15. This chapter includes the earliest and the most profound defense of Christ's resurrection ever written. It has been the dominant word on the Story of Victory ever since. Paul writes:

*If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.*

*If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."  
verses 17–19, 32*

If when we have breathed our last, that's the end of us, how empty and meaningless life would be. If we hold to the notion, as many do, that we have only one life to live—this one—how void and vacant it would be, how empty of purpose!

But Paul doesn't stop at a point of futility and self-pity. He adds with clarity and courage, with conviction:

*Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.*

*For he must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.  
verses 20–22, 25–26*

Don't keep the Resurrection Story at arm's length! Embrace it in full faith and hope. Resurrection is not some religious rhetoric, but God's eternal promise. We do not live to die; we die to live—to live forever in heaven. Victory over death is ours because of the reality of Christ's resurrection. The promise is ours. The life is ours.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

**WEEK FIVE**  
**NOTES/ SPECIAL PRAYERS**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. How have you experienced or observed the defeat and hopelessness sin brings?
2. How do you experience Jesus' gift of victory through the cross?

# LIFE. DEATH. VICTORY.

## WEEK SIX

The Story of My Victory! 1 Corinthians 15:54–57; Revelation 21:1–4



### Notes

Life. Death. Victory. Those of you who know Christ knew from the start where this series would end—in victory. You are determined, by the grace of God alive in you, to cross the finish line of your life—in victory! Today we will explore the final story in this series, the Story of My Victory. But first, let's review where we've been:

- † The Jesus Story must remain front and center for us always, in every season of the year, every season of our lives. As Jesus' disciples, we recognize that our Lord's birth, life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection are the heartbeat of our lives. The author of Hebrews encourages us: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (12:2).
- † The Story of Life, the story of your life and my own, centers in Jesus. As we learn more and more about his humility, forgiveness, thankfulness, and his life of service, we too yearn to grow more humble, forgiving, and thankful. We proactively look for ways to serve, just as he served. We remember that our "life's story is more than stories about our life." The Story of Our Life is the story of what God has done in us and is doing through us to transform both us and our world.
- † We are going to die. Why? Because we *are* sin and because we *have* sinned, no doubt about it! That fact begins the Story of our Death. Since Adam and Eve rebelled against their Creator in the garden, sin has infected every human life. Sin brings with it terrible consequences. We must die because of sin. But why did Christ have to die?
- † Jesus died because of sin—not his own, but ours. Someone had to pay the penalty we had by our sin incurred. In infinite and unimaginable grace and mercy, our beloved Father determined that we would not spend eternity apart from him, away from him. We needed someone to ransom us, to redeem us. And so the Father sent his own and only Son. The price he paid to win us was his own blood! Because the Crucifixion Story is one of the chapters in the Story of My Life—and yours—our sin is gone. Our guilt is gone. Forgiveness and hope fill our lives as we kneel at the cross and receive—simply receive—God's mercy, his infinite mercy.
- † Sin could not hold the Son of God captive. And neither could death. The first Christians pinned their hope on the veracity of the Easter message. This wondrous truth became their testimony: *Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen, indeed!* That same proclamation sustains us day by day. It prepares us as we face the prospect of our own death, and it puts into perspective all of our present grief and sorrow and pain.

Today then, God writes the final chapter for us: The Story of My Victory! That story belongs to you, to me, to all who cling by faith to our Easter Lord.

## Victories Day by Day

The Story of Our Victory has many chapters; some of these have already been written. Other chapters are being written day by day, hour by hour. The cross and empty tomb of our Savior have made every victory in every chapter possible.

- † Each time that, by the Spirit’s power and prompting, we resist Satan’s temptations to fear, to worry, to pride, to greed, to thanklessness, to selfishness, to sexual immorality, to bitterness, that’s victory. It might not be the ultimate victory, but it is victory, nevertheless!
- † Ah, and there is the victory over a disease; how many of us here today can say in triumph that they have been cancer free for three or five or ten years—and still counting. That’s victory!
- † Then, there are “moral victories,” those in which we simply do the very best we can under the worst of circumstances—for as long as it takes. It seldom feels glorious, but it’s victory, nonetheless.

In sports, there are team victories and individual victories. In music, competitors take first place and second place—and sometimes second place is good enough! Sometimes, though, victory takes on a higher, deeper significance. The seventh game of the World Series or the NBA championships. The culminating match at Wimbledon. The final round in your favorite Olympic event.

As significant as these are, and as great the thrill victory brings us on those occasions, victories here on earth soon become yesterday’s news. In a few short months or years, another champion will “kiss the trophy,” and no one will remember today’s champion. But the championship Jesus won for us is the *ultimate victory*. It has absolutely no parallel! The trophy is *life*! The trophy lasts throughout *eternity*!

## The Ultimate Victory

We have based this sermon series on the final, climactic verses penned by St. Paul in his great resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15. Over the past weeks, we have visited this chapter several times. Verses 54–57 read:

*When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Death will not be the final chapter in the story of our lives! Our bodies will be made alive again! Our resurrection life is even now on its way.

## Notes

As unbelievable as it sounds, we will live again. And the life we live will never end. What will we look like? How old will we be? Many questions like these remain unanswerable, and none of the answers would make much difference, even if we knew them. Instead, we focus on our Lord, the One who has opened up for us life forever in heaven! That's victory! On the last and final day of our great God, who shall come in exaltation and glory to claim us and to call us into his presence—that will be the ultimate victory!

Remember Elijah Moore, the seventeen-year-old who was struck and killed as he stood at the bus stop, waiting for a ride to work? Remember the poem in his pocket?

*Life is neither here nor there  
Promised or guaranteed . . .  
For one life we are given  
And that life is precious above all others.*

The lives we have received from God are precious. And they have come to us with an unchanging guarantee, an unshakable promise: in Jesus, we will live forever!

### **What Victory Shall Be**

The glory and peace of heaven remain unfathomable, incomprehensible right now. After all, who can understand eternity? Who can imagine sitting at the feet of the Lord and enjoying him and one another for all eternity? Who dares to consider rubbing elbows with St. Peter or St. Paul?

The Revelation of St. John gives us just a glimpse of what that life will be:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live 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 21:1-4*

That's victory! There will come a day, an eternity of days, when we will never again face the sorrow and grief associated with death. There will come a day when there will be no more war and none of the loss and maiming of life that goes with it. There will come a day when we will never be alone, feel alone, live alone—when we will no longer grow weary and frail and feeble. There will come a day when sin shall forever be silenced, and so death with it. That's the Story of My Victory!

In Jesus' name. Amen.

**WEEK SIX**  
NOTES/ SPECIAL PRAYERS

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What facets of your victory in Jesus do you most enjoy now?
2. What blessings of that victory do you most look forward to when you enter heaven? Why?