



IMMANUEL
BAPTIST CHURCH

I AM



SERMON BASED CURRICULUM

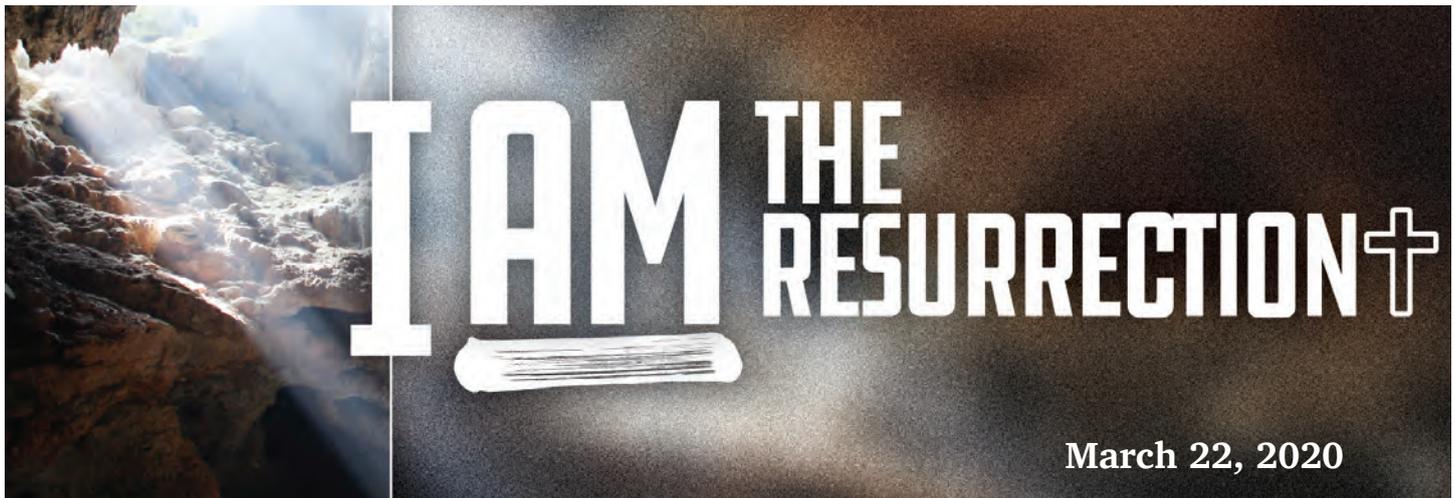
March 1, 2020
The Bread of Life

March 8, 2020
The Light of the World

March 15, 2020
The Good Shepherd

March 22, 2020
The Resurrection
and The Life

March 29, 2020
The Way, The Truth,
and The Life



INTRODUCTION

Q: Describe resurrection. What does it mean? If someone is resurrected, how do they change? How does resurrection happen?

Q: Describe life. What does it mean? Is it more than just the days we have to live on earth? What does it mean to be fully alive? What does it mean to have life breathed into you? What does it mean to bring a story to life? Describe something that feels alive to you.

Resurrection is the opposite of death, the reversal of death. So “the resurrection” and “the life” aren’t two different things; they are two terms that go together. Jesus’s resurrection brings life. Because He is the resurrection, He is the life. Jesus not only raised Lazarus from the dead, He promised that because of His death and resurrection, all believers will be raised again to new life after we die. He also promised that we can have an abundant life now, here on earth, the kind of “new life” we never would have been able to have without His resurrection and His Spirit dwelling in us (2 Corinthians 5:17).

“You were dead in your trespasses and sins. . . [He] made us alive” (Ephesians 2:1, 4). Jesus has the power to make dead things alive. This was long before defibrillators and modern medicine. It was a real supernatural power. We say that doctors who try to control death are “playing God,” because only God really has the power over life and death. Anyone can kill someone, sure, but only God can bring someone back to life—and not with a defibrillator after just a few minutes, but with no medical equipment and after four days. Because Jesus *is* God, the great I Am, He has the power. Do we ever fully appreciate that? Do we take that seriously? We say we are saved. We talk about eternal life. But do we really get what that really means? For our eternal future and for our lives today?

We can have hope in the future. We can look forward to death instead of fearing it because we know we have an inheritance waiting in heaven (1 Peter 1:3–4). Also, Jesus brings abundant life here on earth (John 10:10). Through Him, we have supernatural love, joy, and peace. We walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4). We can experience life on this earth the way He intended, with the mind of Christ and the guidance of the Spirit (Romans 12:1–2; 1 Corinthians 2:10–16).

Q: In what ways have you experienced a new life since you met Jesus? How have things changed?

Q: Describe what an abundant life looks like. In what ways does your life still need to change in order to be the abundant life that God brings?

Q: How is your life in Christ different from the lives of unbelievers around you?

NOTE: Each of the three talking points is connected to one of the three main (human) characters in the story—Martha, Mary, and Lazarus.

TALKING POINT #1:
(Mary) Jesus hates death because of His great love for us.

Read John 3:16–18 and John 11:17–36.

Q: Why did Jesus weep with Mary and the others if He knew He was going to raise Lazarus?

Q: What does it say about Jesus that He was so grieved at the death of someone He loved?

Q: How does Christ's death and resurrection show His great love for us?

This was the same Martha, Mary, and Lazarus who had hosted Jesus and the disciples on several occasions. Specifically, John mentions Mary anointing Jesus's feet with perfume and wiping His feet with her hair, which, in the book of John, is recorded after this story, only one chapter (but several months) later. The other most well-known story of Jesus at their house was of Jesus praising Mary for sitting at His feet and listening to His teaching and telling Martha that her worry about the physical duties of hosting Him (cleaning, cooking, etc.) were distracting her from what was really important (Luke 10:38–42).

Both of these stories allude to the idea that Jesus most likely spent time at their home on numerous occasions, not just these two that are mentioned. At the beginning of our passage (v. 3), the sisters sent Jesus a message about Lazarus—"Lord, the one you love is sick." This was certainly a description of an intimate relationship—the one you love. John used a similar phrase for one of the disciples (the disciple whom Jesus loved), which most scholars believe he used to refer to himself.

There are two other places in this story that John specifically mentions Jesus's love for Lazarus and his sisters. Once narratively—"Now Jesus loved Martha, her sister, and Lazarus" (John 11:5). And then the crowd said it when they saw how Jesus wept much for Lazarus—"So the Jews said, 'See how He loved him!'" (John 11:36). While this story teaches us a deep theological truth and contains the second biggest miracle of His ministry, after His own resurrection, it is also a very personal story. A story of Jesus and three people He deeply loved.

When Jesus saw Mary and the other friends and family of Lazarus weeping, He wept with them. Even though He knew He was about to raise Lazarus from the dead. The Greek word in this passage that is translated "deeply moved in spirit and troubled" (v. 33) describes a real, heart-wrenching weeping. He knew the story would end with joy and new life, but He still joined with them in their grief.

But His grief came with a sense of anger, which is easy to miss in the English. The Greek word literally means to snort with intense displeasure, anger, or indignation. Lazarus's death and the pain it caused those who loved him made Jesus angry. Death makes God angry. It is not part of His design; it is the result of sin. God hates death and that's why Jesus came to conquer it, to get rid of it—to bring life!

As He said in another "I Am" statement, the good shepherd, which we studied last week, "I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance" (John 10:10). How did He bring life? By laying down His life for us (John 10:11). Just as He had to let Lazarus die in order to raise Him again (John 11:15), He had to Himself die in order to be raised again, in order to accomplish the sacrifice, conquer death, and bring eternal life. God hates death. He hates sin because it brings death (Romans 3:23). Because it hurts his children. Billy Graham said:

We in the church have failed to remind this generation that while God is love, He also has the capacity to hate. He hates sin, and He will judge it with the fierceness of His wrath. This generation is schooled in the teaching about an indulgent, soft-hearted God whose judgments are uncertain and who coddles those who break His commandments. This generation finds it difficult to believe that God hates sin. I tell you that God hates sin just as a father hates a rattlesnake that threatens the safety and life of his child. God loathes evil and diabolic forces that would pull people down to a godless eternity just as a mother hates a venomous spider that is found playing on the soft, warm

flesh of her little baby. It is His love for man, His compassion for the human race, that prompts God to hate sin with such a vengeance. He gave heaven's finest that we might have the best; and He loathes with a holy abhorrence anything that would hinder our being reconciled to Him.

God hates death because it hurts the children He loves so much. And yet, He was willing to go through the very thing He hates in order to save us from it (Romans 5:14–21). He hates death so much that He died to conquer it! This is not only a theological passage about resurrection and eternal life, it is a story of Jesus's great love for his close friends. Lazarus's death made Jesus angry because He loved Lazarus so much. All death makes Jesus angry because He loves us so much.

Q: How does knowing that Jesus hates death and loves life affect the way you think about the fact that we all die one day?

Q: How does it make you feel to learn of the great love between Jesus and His disciples, not just the twelve but all His followers? What does it say about Him? What does it say about God the Father?

Q: How does having an intimate relationship with Jesus like Mary, Martha, and Lazarus had bring life? Not just eternal life, but abundant life today? (See John 15:1–17)

TALKING POINT #2:

(Martha) Faith means trusting in God's plan even if it looks like death right now.

Read: Proverbs 3:5–6 and John 11:17–27.

Q: How does Martha show great faith in Jesus?

Q: When Martha talks about “the resurrection at the last day,” why does Jesus answer with “I am” the resurrection? What does that say about Jesus?

Q: Why is it significant that Jesus makes such a profound and important “I am” statement privately to a woman like Martha?

When we think or talk about Jesus saying, “I am the resurrection and the life,” most of us don't think about (or even know) the context in which He said it. First, He said it when Lazarus had died, just before He was about to raise him. And second, He said it privately to one person instead of announcing it publicly to the world. And not just a person, but a woman, and a rather insignificant woman by the world's standards. Just as the first person He explicitly told He was the Messiah was a woman, but this one is worse than an insignificant woman—an outcast woman, a Samaritan woman, a notorious sinner in her community, and also in a private, personal moment (John 4). Just as He first revealed Himself after His resurrection to another insignificant woman, another notorious sinner and again in a private, personal moment (John 20). It cannot be a coincidence that, throughout the book of John, Jesus revealed these major theological truths to women and to women in private, just the two of them. And He did it, knowing if He told them in private, the only way those truths could be passed along would be if those women told other people. In a culture where a woman's testimony was not considered reliable. Jesus was a revolutionary in the way He treated women.

When Jesus spoke this “I Am” statement to Martha, she had come to Him because she was upset that her brother had died. When she heard Jesus was coming, she ran out to meet Him. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Now, we don't know if she said it desperately through tears, accusatorily in anger, or somewhere in between. Most likely, she had a range of emotions, but at least part of it had to be something like, “Come on, Jesus. Why didn't you save him? I know you loved him! We told you he was sick. Why didn't you come sooner?” She experienced doubt, but not in Jesus or His power, based on what she said next. “Yet even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you” (v. 22) But doubt in His plan, because He didn't come right away. We often do the same thing. We assume if God loves us, He will keep bad things from happening to us. We don't see the bigger

plan—that sometimes it is *through* the bad things happening to us that Jesus is most glorified (v. 4). She didn't understand that if He hadn't let Lazarus die, He wouldn't have been able to raise him.

It is interesting that Mary and Martha came to Jesus with the exact same comment—"If you had been here, my brother would not have died." With Mary, Jesus shared in her weeping. With Martha, He had a theological discussion, perhaps because of the follow-up sentence she added, "Yet even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Not because Martha didn't believe and needed to be convinced, but because she *did* believe. She had the faith, but He gave her the theology. Like His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (discussing real worship in spirit and in truth) and Mary Magdalene (explaining His ascension to heaven), Jesus *explained* resurrection to Martha.

Jesus told her Lazarus would rise again. She answered that she knew he would rise again in the resurrection at the last day. This is interesting because we usually think of Martha as the "woman in the kitchen" and Mary as the one learning at Jesus's feet, but Martha knew her theology. She had also been taught. She had learned the faith. Jesus answered her, "*I am* the resurrection and the life." He was saying, "that resurrection you have been taught about? *I am* that resurrection." Just like He had told them *I am* that bread of life that came down from heaven in the exodus. Just like He told them *I am* the living water that was poured out at the Feast of Tabernacles. Just like He told them *I am* the good shepherd written about in the Psalms. He is the fulfillment of all they had been waiting for from the Old Testament. That is why she answered that she believed He was Messiah, the One the Old Testament had promised.

But she also said He was the Son of God. Martha knew Jesus had a special connection to God the Father. She called Him, "Lord," the word Jews used for God in lieu of saying His personal name, YHWH, which they did not speak aloud. And she said, "Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who comes into the world." She didn't just believe He was the Messiah. She said "Lord." She said, "Son of God." She got it. She could not have been more on target in her theology. Or in her faith. From the beginning to end of this conversation, she did not doubt or waver. Jesus was speaking not only to one of His dearest friends, but one of His most devout disciples. Though earlier He may have chided her for being worried about physical things that didn't matter, here, she got the "one thing" that really did.

She understood that Jesus was the Son of God, that He was the Messiah. That He was the resurrection and the life. That He and the Father were one. She had come to Him for help *because* she knew who He was, *because* she trusted that He loved her and her brother. And *because* she trusted that He had the power to raise her brother from the dead. She said, "Even now God will give you whatever you ask." That is a statement of incredible faith. Martha had both right belief and faith. Both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Both correct theology and a close relationship with Jesus. She understood what He could do because she knew Him personally.

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me, even if he dies, will live. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26). This sounds like a bit of a riddle. Even if we die, we will live? We may die a physical death, but we will not die the spiritual death, the "second death," as Revelation calls it. "Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will never be harmed by the second death" (Revelation 2:11; c.f. Revelation 20:6-15). So, though we will all die physically (except those who are still alive when Jesus returns), we will not die spiritually. Spiritually, we will live forever. So, we will never *really* die. Not like those who are thrown into the lake of fire. We will have eternal life (John 3:16).

After He said this, Jesus asked Martha point blank, "Do you believe this?" She answers immediately, "Yes, Lord, I believe *you are* the Messiah, the Son of God, who comes into the world." She answers his "I am" with a "you are." She may not get all the finer points of resurrection, what it all means and what happens exactly, but she put her trust in Jesus. She believed in Him. That's what He asked. Not for us to have a PhD in theology, but to have a relationship with Him. To recognize that He is the One. He is the way, the truth, the life, the resurrection, the living water, the Good Shepherd. He is all that we need. He is the way to life. There is life in no one else.

That's the question for us today. Do you believe Jesus is the One? That is the only question that truly matters. In other "I Am" statements, He said, "I am the gate," "I am the way." He is saying here that He is the only way. He is

the resurrection. He is the life. “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). It’s not an *exclusive* statement because, though Jesus is the *only* way, the gate is open to all. Though Jesus is the only resurrection, He died and was raised for all mankind (2 Corinthians 5:15). God desires that all men be saved (Ezekiel 18:23; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). He died for us all. So that every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord (Philippians 2:10–11). That people from every tribe, tongue, and nation would come to worship Him (Zechariah 8:23; Revelation 7:9).

In the Bible, faith isn’t just an intellectual belief in a concept or a theological argument. It is trust *in a person*, the “I Am.” The Greek word for “faith” does not mean intellectual belief. It means trust. In his commentary, J. Nieboer writes, “We sometimes wish the translators had used ‘trust’ more in the New Testament. ‘To believe in’ and ‘to have faith in’ both have the basic meaning of ‘trust.’ ‘Trust’ does not lend itself so well to mere mental assent as ‘believe’ and ‘faith’ do.”

Jesus wasn’t just asking Martha, “Do you believe this?” She had already said she believed He was the one who could take care of the situation, even before He talked theology with her. He was asking, “Do you trust me? Even if things look grim right now, even if it looks like death, do you have faith in me that I have a plan? Are you willing to trust me, to follow me wherever the path leads? Even if it means your brother’s death? Do you trust that I have a bigger plan in mind, long term?”

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding; in all your ways know him, and he will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5–6).

Martha was able to look at Jesus in the midst of her grief and say, “Yes, Lord, I believe.” Yes, Lord, I trust You. I trust in Your plan. No matter what happens. Even unto death. I know you are the resurrection and the life. I know that even if my brother dies, even if I die, it’s okay. Because I have eternal life in you. “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

Q: What would it look like for you to trust in God in all things? Every step of the way? What specific things would need to change in your life?

Q: We know we need to believe/trust in Jesus for eternal life in heaven. But why does a life that trusts in Jesus bring abundant life here on earth too?

Q: How does a personal connection/relationship with the “I Am” of Jesus bring abundant life?

TALKING POINT #3:

(Lazarus) We do not need to fear death, but we can look forward to it with hope.

Read John 11:38–44 and 1 Peter 1:3–9.

Q: Why did Jesus say “I thank you that you heard me” instead of praying aloud and asking God to raise Lazarus right then?

Q: How do you think Lazarus felt after he came out of the tomb?

Q: What was the point of raising Lazarus if he would just die again one day?

Q: Why should we look forward to the afterlife?

It is natural for human beings to fear death. We don’t really know what happens after it; there is no hard, empirical evidence for what happens after you die. There are religious beliefs, revelations from Scripture, and also stories of people’s near-death experiences that all give us some theories, but no one *really* knows. All we see from this side of heaven is that life ends—your body stops working, and you’re gone from this world. No one, apart from the seriously ill, either physically or mentally, *welcomes* death. Unless you know Jesus. The Bible says:

- death is a curse, the result of the fall (Genesis 3:15–19).
- death is a wage, what we have earned with our sin (Romans 6:23).
- death is an enemy that stalks and threatens us (Jeremiah 9:21; 1 Corinthians 15:26).
- death is agony (Luke 16:23–24; Acts 2:24).
- there is a physical death and a spiritual death (Ephesians 2:1–5).
- believers will not experience the second death (Revelation 20:11–15; 21:8).

With Jesus, the whole script is flipped. Down becomes up, death becomes life. Death becomes something we can look forward to. Paul wrote, “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). For the believer, death no longer has any sting (1 Corinthians 15:55–57). We no longer fear death (Hebrews 2:14–15). We no longer grieve as people who have no hope grieve (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18). Because Christ has victory over death.

Have you ever been around a strong believer who was dying? There is a certain indescribable peace about them. It’s supernatural. As if they have no fear. I have heard many hospital chaplains say there is a marked difference between the way believers and unbelievers handle dying. Believers pass in peace and with relative ease, whereas unbelievers are often filled with fear in their last moments. There are even stories of people who see things in their last moments—some who see darkness or some kind of dark creatures coming for them, making them afraid to go. Others see light and peace and beautiful creatures beckoning them in, making them want to go. It is believed that the difference is found in knowing Jesus. Those who know Jesus have no fear in death.

In fact, if we believe the apostles Paul and Peter, death is a good thing, a step up, something to look forward to—the greatest promotion ever! None of the disciples were afraid of death. They were ready to be martyred for the gospel, and all of them except John were, as were many more believers, not just the Twelve. Take just one example from Acts 7. Stephen was preaching the gospel. When the people rose up to stone him, he did not back down. He kept preaching, with no fear, even in the face of death, and then . . . “Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55).

Like other people who have seen light, glory, an angel, or Christ welcoming them, Stephen saw a vision of Jesus, which assuaged any fear he may have had. He may have felt some fear, right there in the very moments before death, but then Jesus appeared to him. Jesus gave him supernatural peace and strength to endure a death of persecution. He had no fear of death and, like Jesus, prayed for God to forgive those who killed him even as they did it. This is supernatural peace. This is a supernatural “no fear” of death.

The Bible doesn’t say don’t grieve death *at all*. We can be sad when those we know and love die. It says we don’t grieve in the same way as people who have no hope. Remember, Jesus wept when He heard Lazarus was dead, even though He knew He would raise him that same day. Real weeping, real sorrow, real grief. It is perfectly appropriate for Christians to be sad when a loved one dies. There is a time to mourn and a time to dance (Ecclesiastes 3). It is okay to grieve, as long as we grieve with hope.

When we get to the point where we really trust that Jesus *is* the resurrection and the life and that there is hope in heaven, we will understand what it means to have no fear of death, and even to look forward to it (1 Peter 1:3–9). The difference between grieving with hope and grieving without hope is like the difference between being sad that you broke your arm and sad that your arm was amputated. The one who broke his arm knows it will be healed again one day. He’s sad, of course, but he’s not devastated. His arm will be restored . It’s not just wishful thinking, he knows. But the one whose arm is amputated has no hope of ever having that arm again. That’s it.

I honestly can’t imagine what it would be like to live that way. To really think this life is all there is, and when you die, that’s the end. You just cease to exist. Imagine if you didn’t have any hope of an afterlife. If this were all there is, you’d be super careful about every single thing you did because you’d never want to risk “the end.” You would be terrified of death.

And how do you comfort someone who doesn’t believe in Jesus after a loved one has died? Imagine two atheists talking about their atheist friend at his funeral. What do they say to each other? What must it be like to be those who have no hope when loved ones die? How must it feel? How did Stephen Hawking feel as he was dying? Not to

mention what it was like after he died and faced the judgement seat. But how did he feel when he knew death was certain? Scared? Sad? Full of regret? Just apathetic? If he didn't believe in life after death, he certainly wasn't looking forward to the next life with the eager anticipation of the believers I know who have been close to death. How tragic.

Death has no sting for those who trust in Jesus. The word for "sting" here means a goad, a sharp point, like a needle that pricks your finger. As believers, we only die the first death, but we are saved from the second. We have hope in the future because our physical death is only temporary. Our eternal fate is life. Therefore, death has no sting for us. It is a temporary state, like falling asleep, as the apostle Paul said. It is not permanent.

Death has no victory. Jesus has the victory over death. To see this, again, we can go back to Martha and Lazarus. "I am the resurrection and the life." It's not only victory for Jesus, it's victory over death for us by proxy. Billy Graham wrote:

Death is the most democratic experience in life, for we all participate in it. We think of it happening only to other people. We don't like to grow old and we don't like to die. The Bible teaches that death is an enemy of man and God. But it also teaches that this enemy, death, will ultimately be destroyed forever; that in fact it has already been defeated at the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Death, for a Christian, brings permanent freedom from evil. It also means the believer will be like Jesus. We shall be like Christ in love. So much of self is involved in what we do here; but one day, in Christ, we will have perfect love. What a glorious time it will be when we get to heaven!

Christ's resurrection brought us victory over death. It ended death's victory over man. It ended the curse of death on man. Thabiti Anyabwile writes:

All the Gospel writers tell us that Jesus died on the cross. Jesus died. The fact is so commonplace it seems strange to even mention it. Almost hollow. Almost as if we've said nothing new or meaningful. But "new" and "meaningful" are two very different things. We're sometimes too accustomed to thinking that meaning comes from newness. Old truths are still true, and therefore still very meaningful. Because a thing is familiar, because we've heard it before, does not mean we can pass it by without reflecting on its meaning.

Jesus died. What can it mean to say the Son of God died? And how should the Christian respond to that news? The death of Jesus Christ means the death of death itself. The death of death in the death of Jesus Christ also means victory over death for those who trust in Christ as their God and Savior.

It wasn't just Christ's death that gave us victory, it was His resurrection. Adrian Warnock writes in his book, *Raised with Christ: How the Resurrection Changes Everything*, that resurrection is the center of the whole gospel. So many preachers and teachers focus on the cross, the cross, the cross, and while the cross is important, it is nothing without the empty tomb. Without Easter Sunday, Good Friday is *not good*. It's tragic. Warnock said:

Without the resurrection, the cross is a meaningless tragedy. Without the resurrection, Jesus could not have been our Savior, and certainly was not divine. Without the resurrection, we have no hope for our future . . . Through prayerful meditation on the resurrection, we encounter the risen Jesus as a real person who is very much alive and active today. When Jesus stops being a departed hero to us and becomes a living friend who has changed our life, surely we will want to share that with others . . . The resurrection also gives us an incredible hope to face the troubles in our lives. This world really is not the end. The day is coming when, with renewed bodies, we will all meet again, and we will see Jesus face-to-face! There will be no more pain, no more sin, no more death.

It's not just our own bodies that will be made perfect, it is the whole world. Because Jesus has defeated death, in the new creation the effects of death will all be reversed. There will be no pain, no sin, no crying. Only life. Resurrection is the opposite of death. It is life. It is the reversal of death. Jesus's resurrection of Lazarus was a preview of what was to come with His own death. Lazarus's resurrection only affected himself—only he was raised—and eventually

he would die again. Jesus's resurrection made it so we all could be raised to life forever with Him in heaven. His resurrection reversed death not just for Himself, but for all who believe in Him (Romans 6:4-5).

This life isn't the end. It isn't all there is. The way we live in this life is like putting a down payment on eternal life. We are investing in our future, storing up treasures in heaven. Not physical treasures, but spiritual ones like joy, peace, patience, all the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5) and the qualities of agape love (1 Corinthians 13). Like long-range financial planning for retirement, we are doing long-range planning for eternity. Resurrection changes everything—the way we die and the way we live. It is the key to our entire faith.

Q: How does it make you feel to know that you have hope in an inheritance in heaven?

Q: What would it look like for you to live with an eternal perspective, focusing on storing up treasures in heaven instead of on earth? How does that bring abundant life?

Q: Imagine you were Lazarus, given this second chance at life. How would you live differently? How is that like what we are given as new creations in Christ?

Q: How can you live a life that looks forward to heaven without “being so focused on heaven that you're no earthly good”?

APPLICATION

PRAY

- Thank God for the gift of eternal life.
- That God will help you understand and appreciate just how amazing the resurrection is and how it brings us abundant life.
- That you will live in the abundant life Christ brings by abiding with Him and walking by the Spirit.
- That you can trust God even when His plans look like death to you in the moment.
- That God will give you freedom from fear about death and hope for your eternal future.
- That you will walk in victory and newness of life.

ACT

Live Out Loud. Do something this week that constitutes living *abundantly* in Christ. Not just living life to the fullest but doing so *in Christ*. That may mean taking a day away with God in nature to reflect or just enjoy His creation with Him. It may be spending time in service to others. It may mean sharing with someone the good news of your hope in Christ for eternal life. Or any of a host of other things—however God leads you to celebrate life in Him this week.

¹ Billy Graham, “Things God Hates” *Decision*, Sept 2011 - <https://billygraham.org/decision-magazine/september-2011/things-god-hates/>

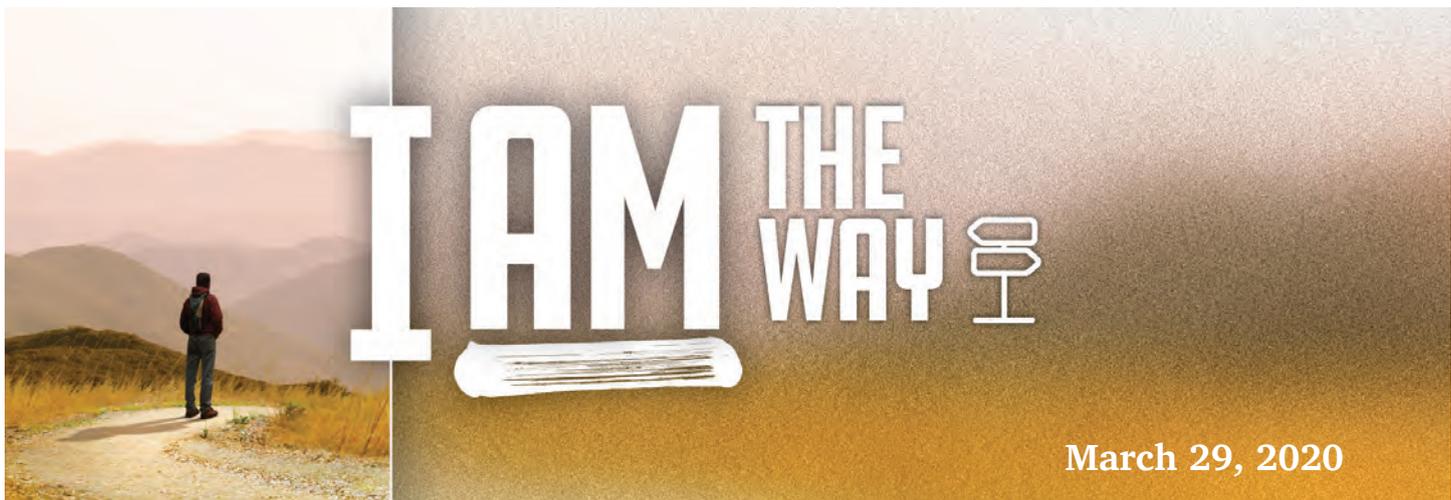
² J. Nieboer, *Practical Exposition of James* (Northeast: Our Daily Walk Publishers, 1950), 199.

³ John Burke, *Imagine Heaven* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2015).

⁴ <https://billygraham.org/devotion/victory-over-death/>

⁵ Thabiti Anyabwile, “The Death of Death in the Death of Christ Means Victory Over Death for Those Who Believe” *The Gospel Coalition*, Apr 5, 2012 - <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/thabiti-anyabwile/the-death-of-death-in-the-death-of-christ-means-victory-over-death-for-those-who-believe/>

⁶ Colin Hanson, “The Resurrection Changes Everything (Interview with Adrian Warnock)” *Christianity Today*, Mar 22, 2010 - <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/marchweb-only/22-12.o.html>



INTRODUCTION

Q: Describe the word way. What are the qualities of the way (or the path) to somewhere? How is the way defined or marked? How do you know when it's the right way? How do you know when it's not the right way?

Q: Describe the word truth. What does truth mean to you? What does it mean to our culture? Does it mean different things for different people? How do you know when something is true? How do you know when something is not true? Can you test truth?

Q: We already talked about the word life a little bit last week. Why do you think Jesus said He was the life again, in conjunction with the words way and truth? What are the connections among these three words?

Have you ever gotten really lost? Maybe you were driving around Lexington in a neighborhood you've been in a thousand times, so you didn't think you needed a GPS but something went wrong. You took a couple of wrong turns and suddenly, you had no idea where you were. How long did it take before you gave up and whipped out your phone to turn on the GPS? And how good did it feel to hear that familiar voice telling you where to turn? Or maybe you were hiking and wandered off the trail or got confused when one trail looked like the right way to go but ended up being a dead end? Maybe it got dark and you started to get scared. Maybe you whipped out your compass or even a GPS. Or maybe you just wandered around until you found the path again. How did you feel when you finally found your way?

In 2013, Gerry Largay, a 66-year-old woman hiking alone on the Appalachian Trail, went off trail to use the restroom and never found her way back. She survived twenty-six days before dying of exposure. She tried to text and call her husband and the police but couldn't get good service. She was thoroughly lost and couldn't figure out where she was. The camp where her body was found three years later was only a thirty-minute walk from the trail, if she had only known the way. For Gerry Largay, wandering off the path led to death, and finding the path would have led to life. Jesus said the same thing about Himself. He is the way and the truth who leads to life.

Q: Do you really believe Jesus is the only way to the Father? If so, how does that affect the way you live? How does it affect the way you talk to people about Him?

Q: What other "ways" or "paths" do people try to take to get to heaven? Why are those ways lacking?

Q: Do you follow Jesus as the way, not just for eternal life and salvation but in daily living? In what ways do you stray from the path?

TALKING POINT #1:

Jesus is the way to the Father's house and the way to know how to live.

Read Matthew 7:13–27 and John 14:1–6.

Q: What did Jesus mean when He said He is the way to the Father's house?

Q: What does Matthew 7 tell us about the way to the Father's house? How can we tell who will enter the kingdom of heaven?

Q: Why is it important that we don't just hear the words of Jesus but act on them?

The ancient word for “way” can either mean (literally) “road, path” or (figuratively) “manner,” meaning the way people should live. It is used both ways in the Old Testament, and it carries that double meaning here too. Jesus is both the path to heaven and the way we should live. The Hebrew people have classically understood the Torah as laying out “the way” in which Israel might experience human flourishing. The first Christians were called followers of “the Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9–23; 24:14–22). The term “Christian” didn't come until later.

The context of this “I Am” statement is Jesus's teaching the disciples at the Last Supper, giving them His final instructions. After He washed their feet, He told them about Judas's and Peter's betrayals. Then He gave them His final instructions and reiterated His most important teachings, the things He really wanted them to remember. The first thing He said was that they shouldn't fear, because when He left them He was going to prepare a place for them in God's house, and they would follow Him later. He had just told them He was about to die, about to go away, but He gave them hope.

Jesus began the passage by saying, “Don't let your heart be troubled.” The word translated “troubled” is used in the Gospel of John to describe the deep sorrow of heart Jesus felt when He stood at the grave of Lazarus (John 11:23), when He was faced with the cross (John 12:27), and when He contemplated the betrayal of Judas (John 13:21). But Jesus gave them hope. Though many horrible things would happen, they did not need to be troubled. They could trust and hope in Jesus. The only reason He was leaving them was to go prepare a place for them in His Father's house.

Thomas, always a literal thinker, asked how they would know the way to where He was going. Jesus used a play on words when He said they already “[knew] the way” because they knew Him. “*I am the way.*” Jesus doesn't just know the way to heaven, *He is the way.* As with every other “I Am” statement we have studied, people were looking for a physical dimension, and Jesus said it's deeper than that. They asked Jesus to give them the bread and water that would give them eternal life, and He said, “I am the bread of life,” and “I am the living water.” It's not about what Jesus can give us, it's about who He is. Our faith isn't about what God can do for us, it's about a relationship with Him. The way to heaven is not physical, as if you could find the right highway to get there. The way to heaven is spiritual, through Jesus. Jesus *is* the way. “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Jesus doesn't just show us the way, He is the way. The way isn't a path at all but a person. It's all about knowing Jesus. As Paul wrote, everything else is garbage compared to knowing Christ (Philippians 3:7–11). This is the deep truth John teaches through the “I Am” statements. It's not about Jesus's teaching or preaching or healing or ministry. It's about Jesus Himself. It's not about what He can do for us, it's about having a relationship with Him. Jesus didn't come to teach us about God; He is God. He didn't come to tell us how to receive eternal life; He is life. He didn't come to show us the way. He came and died to *make the way.*

This is why Thomas's question is so interesting. It's one I think we all ask in one way or another when we are trying to understand Christianity— “How do we get to heaven?” What path do we follow, what steps do we have to take, what rules do we have to follow, or what deeds do we have to do? But Christianity says there is nothing you can *do* to get to heaven. No matter how many good deeds you do, no matter how well you follow His rules, you can't be good enough to get to God. That's why He came to us. Though we do follow Jesus's commandments and His lifestyle, getting to heaven is not about *how well* we follow them. It's simply about whether we know Him. That's how Jesus could tell the disciples that they already knew the way.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus delivered a hard truth to the crowds who were following Him, listening to His teaching. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name?’ Then I will announce to them, ‘I never knew you! Depart from me, you lawbreakers!’” (Matthew 7:21–23).

These people claimed to know Jesus and even did all the right “religious stuff,” even amazing supernatural things like miracles and exorcisms, but they didn’t actually *know* Jesus. It’s about relationship. When Jesus asked His disciples, “Who am I?” (Matthew 16), he first asked them, “Who do *the people* say that I am?” Then He moved to the personal, “What about *you*? Who do *you* say that I am?” This is a reminder that our God is a personal God. He wants relationship with us. He wants each of us to *make our own decision* to follow Him. It’s not enough to be part of the crowd—or even be part of the church—that confesses that Jesus is Lord. Each of us must personally confess and follow. It doesn’t matter who “people” say Jesus is. What do you say?

The other side of this is what Jesus said in Matthew 7:21—“He who does the will of my Father.” Not everyone who calls Jesus “Lord,” who calls on the name of Jesus, who claims to be a Christian will enter the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do God’s will—those who don’t just say they love and follow Jesus but also live it out. Jesus said it’s not enough just to hear and believe His words. We have to act on them (Matthew 7:24–27). Jesus is the way. The way is a person, not a path. If we really believe Jesus is our Lord, we will follow Him as our role model. We will live the way He lived. Jesus is saying, “Yes, the only way to heaven is through knowing me, but people who *really* know me and love me will follow my commandments” (John 14:15).

So what are those commandments? And what does it mean to do God’s will? We know it’s not the examples Jesus gave—prophesying, casting out demons, and miracles—the “religious stuff,” even the supernatural, amazing religious stuff. This truth would have been pretty shocking for Jesus’s audience to hear. It is natural for us to look at people who perform miracles or prophesy and think they must *really* know Jesus, but He makes it clear that those things aren’t the litmus test. The crowd had gathered to hear Jesus preach *because* He had done amazing miracles. But Jesus said that even if you do all the amazing things, but you don’t really know Him, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Some people do those amazing things, but it’s really for their own glory, not for Jesus. It’s not because they know and love Him.

Just before this, Jesus had warned them to beware of false prophets (Matthew 7:15) who could be known by their fruit (7:20). Paul says that the fruit of the Spirit isn’t miracles, healings, prophecy, and speaking in tongues. It’s love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That’s how we will know people who *really know* Jesus. In His final words to His disciples, Jesus said, “Everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). In that same teaching, He said those who really loved Him would obey His commandments (John 14:15) and His commandment is simply to love one another as He loved them (John 15:12). When He commissioned Peter after the resurrection, Jesus said that if he really loved Him, to take care of His sheep (John 21). We can identify those who *really* know Jesus by the way they love His people. Paul used similar examples when He talked about how important love is.

“If I speak human or angelic languages
but do not have love, I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal.
If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains
but do not have love, I am nothing.
And if I donate all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body in order to boast
but do not have love, I gain nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:1–3).

Jesus said all of God’s law can be summed up in this—Love God with all you are and all you have and have God’s heart for other people (Matthew 22:36–40). That’s it. Sounds simple and easy, but it needs to be true love, real love, agape love. Not human love, but God’s love.

Paul described becoming a Christian as being made a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Jesus described it as being born again (John 3:3–8). Ezekiel described it as God giving us a new heart and a new spirit (Ezekiel 36:26). People who know Jesus let God transform them, changing who they are and how they love from the inside out. Following “the way” of Jesus is loving God and loving others. Following “the way” of Jesus is living *the way He did*. It sounds cliché, but if Jesus Himself is the way, not a religion or method or checklist of dos and don’ts, then the question we need to ask ourselves, all day everyday, with every decision, is “What would Jesus do?”

It’s all about a personal relationship with Jesus, not a set of rules. Legalistic and moralistic Christians tend to read this text and think of Jesus as a signpost. Jesus has shown you the way, now you have to walk it. The truth is, *none of us* will ever be able to walk in it perfectly. We will all fail. That’s why we need Jesus. That’s why He doesn’t point us to the way. He *is* the way.

Q: Why is it hard to even know what God’s will is, much less follow it? How can we find out what God’s will is?

Q: In what specific ways do you struggle to follow Jesus every day? In what ways are you tempted to walk your own paths?

Q: Read Proverbs 3:5–6. Why is it hard to trust in the Lord and not your own understanding?

Q: If you think about following “the way” as following a person (Jesus) rather than a set of rules, how does that change the way you think about the Christian faith?

TALKING POINT #2:
Jesus is the truth that sets us free.

Read John 8:22–32 and John 18:3–38.

Q: In what ways do the John 8 and the John 14 passages say the same thing?

Q: Thinking deeper than just “knowing Jesus saves us,” how does knowing the truth set us free?

Q: Why did Pilate say, “What is truth?” What do you think he was implying?

We typically focus on Jesus being the way in this passage because of Thomas’s questions about where He was going and how they would know the way and because of the play on words. But in this passage Jesus also said He is the truth and the life.

It is very popular in our culture to argue that there is no absolute truth, that all truth is relative. Famous apologist Lee Strobel, author of *The Case for Christ*, says we live in a post-truth era. He is right; we live in a world of relative truth, of something being “true for me.” Atheistic humanists argue against the existence of absolute truth. Like Pilate said, “What is truth?” Humanism’s exclusion of God necessitates moral relativism. Without God, there is no absolute standard. All men can decide for themselves what is good and right and true. Does that sound familiar? “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did whatever seemed right to him” (Judges 17:6, 18:1; 19:1; 21:25, et. al.).

Yet, when you really think about it, relative truth doesn’t even make sense, even if you’re not a Christian. It’s just not logical. You can’t *logically* argue against the existence of absolute truth. To argue against something is to establish that a truth exists. You cannot argue against absolute truth unless an absolute truth statement is the basis of your argument. Consider a few of the classic arguments and declarations made by those who seek to argue against the existence of absolute truth:

- “*There are no absolutes.*” The relativist declares there are absolutely no absolutes. That is an absolute statement. The statement is logically contradictory. If the statement is true, there is, in fact, an absolute—that there are no absolutes.

- “*Truth is relative.*” Again, this is an absolute statement implying that truth is absolutely relative. Besides positing an absolute, suppose the statement were true, and truth is relative. Everything, including that statement, would be relative. If a statement is relative, it is by definition not always true. If “truth is relative” is not always true, the sometimes truth is not relative. This means there are absolutes, which means the above statement is false. When you follow the logic, relativist arguments will always contradict themselves.
- “*No one knows what the truth is.*” The speaker obviously believes his statement is true. He is claiming a truth, which he has said no one knows. Relative truth is a self-defeating belief.

You can think something is “true for me” all you want, but that doesn’t *make it* true. For instance, I may really think that I can fly. That’s “my truth.” But when I go to the top of my office building and jump off, I’m still going to fall to the ground. That’s *the* truth. Jesus claimed not only to have the truth, the absolute truth; He claimed to *be* the truth. And in John 8, He said that knowing the truth will set us free. Knowing Jesus doesn’t just get us to heaven or give us eternal life, it *sets us free*. Not just free from the consequences of sin (the second death) but free from sin in this life too.

The Bible describes living in sin as living in slavery. We are trapped by our sin, and only the truth can set us free. We are lying to ourselves when we say that things are good, that we are happy, that nothing is wrong. It’s only when we find out the truth that we can see we are living in chains. As when we discussed Jesus being the light, it is only when someone turns on the light and exposes our sin that we can see what darkness we were living in (Ephesians 5:13).

When we accept Christ, we are set free from sin, we are forgiven, we are redeemed. But some people still walk in their sin. They still feel trapped in their old way of life. They may still hold onto sins they know aren’t good for them. They may even feel trapped by their idea of “religion” and the standards they think they have to uphold. But as Christ speaks *the truth* of the gospel to them, as they seek *the truth* of their identity in Christ, they can be fully set free. The Bible says when we accept Christ, we are no longer slaves, we are now sons of the Father. This is the core *truth* at the center of understanding what it means to be free in Christ, that we are beloved children of God.

Not only are we set free from slavery, we are adopted into God’s family. We often skim over this idea because we’re so accustomed to hearing these kinds of statements in church, but we’re talking about a *radical* identity change. It was unheard of for a slave to *become* a son in biblical times. If they worked long enough to pay off their debt—years, decades even—they could be set free. But adopted into the family? And as a son, an heir? Never. In Christ, God didn’t just set us free *from* something. He set us free *into* something. Into a relationship with Him, into a family, into an inheritance. God is not just our Savior and our Lord; He is our Father. He fills us with His Spirit and loves us like His precious children. Again, like all the “I Am” statements, it’s about relationship.

In John 8, when Jesus talked about setting us free, He used the son/slave contrast to explain it. “A slave does not remain in the household forever, but a son does remain forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will really be free” (John 8:35–36). If we have been set free in Christ, we are a child of God. Being a child of God is the source of our hope, the security of our future, and the motivation to live a life that will please Him (Colossians 1:10–12). This identity change is the foundation for our new lives, our freedom in Christ.

As Christians, many of us talk a good game about being children of God, but we still live as slaves. In his book, *Sons and Daughters: Spiritual Orphans Finding Our Way Home*, Brady Boyd writes that *most* Christians don’t really understand what it means to be God’s children. *Most*. Even though we have been set free from sin, we don’t live in this freedom because we don’t really *get* grace. We live as slaves who are trying to work our way into God’s favor instead of living as children who have already been redeemed by the work of Christ.

Paul says in Galatians that Jesus set us free so that we would live in freedom. Yet many of us burden ourselves with a yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1). We put our hope in our own works to save us. We try to earn what we have already been freely given. It would be like if your parents gave you a new car and then you decided you needed to make payments to the car dealership anyway on a loan that didn’t exist. Who would do that? The bill’s already been paid in full! Jesus saved us so we wouldn’t be burdened by the law but live in grace and freedom. Paul describes the law as a yoke of slavery. If Jesus has set you free, don’t walk back into the prison cell. Don’t chain yourself back to the

law. Walk in your freedom. The work of Christ changes our core identity. Because He *is* the truth, knowing Him sets us free. We are not who we once were. We are set free to be something more, the more He has created us to be in Him.

Q: In what ways do you struggle with trusting that what God says is true over what the world may say?

Q: Why is it hard to trust God's absolute truth rather than what you think or what the world says? Why is it so easy for us to believe what is "true for me"?

Q: How does thinking of God as your loving Father affect your desire to live by His rules, to follow what His Word says is true?

Q: How does thinking of God as a loving Father and yourself as a beloved son affect your feelings about your freedom in Christ? How does it affect your trust in Him? Your anxiety about day-to-day life and what the future holds?

TALKING POINT #3: Jesus is the life that lives through us.

Read Romans 8:5–11 and Colossians 3:1–17.

Q: Why is the mindset of the Spirit life, whereas the mindset of the flesh is death?

Q: What does it mean to "put on" the new self and walk in newness of life? How can we do that?

(See the "And let the . . .", beginning in Colossians 3:15. It's not about what *we do*, but what *we let Christ do* in us.)

Again, Jesus' claim to *be* the life, not just to point people to the life, is a claim to be God. Scripture is clear that God alone is the giver of life. "See now that I alone am he; there is no God but me. I bring death and I give life; I wound and I heal. No one can rescue anyone from my power." (Deuteronomy 32:39; c.f. 1 Samuel 2:6). We can go all the way back to the very beginning to see that it was God who brought all things into being. God created man. God breathed life into him (Genesis 2:7). It is God alone who gives life.

In the New Testament, especially in the book of John, especially with these "I Am" statements, we start to see that Jesus *is* God, because Jesus also brings life. From the very beginning of John, we see that Jesus was with God and was God, and "in Him was life" (John 1:1–4). In Him is life. John repeats this over and over throughout his book:

- "For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).
- "Truly I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not come under judgment but has passed from death to life" (John 5:24).
- "But you are not willing to come to me so that you may have life" (John 5:40).
- "Jesus spoke to them again: 'I am the light of the world. Anyone who follows me will never walk in the darkness but will have the light of life'" (John 8:12).
- "I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance" (John 10:10).
- "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish" (John 10:28).
- "God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. The one who has the Son has life. The one who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:11–12).

He *is* the life. So that we can be *truly* alive. We can *really* live. Yes, eternally forever with God in heaven. But also, we can really live here on earth. He came so we might have life and have it *abundantly*—a full, happy, joyful life. He died and rose again so we might live. Really, truly live. It's the spiritual, *eternal* life He is stressing here, and yet the Bible talks an awful lot about what that looks like to live that out, about what it means to walk in newness of life.

The Bible describes the abundant life we can have in Christ when we walk with Him and abide in Him (John 15). When we let His peace rule in our hearts and His Word dwell in us richly (Colossians 3:15–16). When we walk by the Spirit instead of the flesh (Galatians 5). When we set our minds on things above (Colossians 3:1–3). When we follow His ways instead of our own (Proverbs 3:5–6). That’s how all three of these things—the way, the truth, and the life—are connected.

Yes, in John 14, Jesus talked about heaven and us going to meet Him in His Father’s house. He talked about being the way to *eternal* life. But He is also the way to an abundant life here on earth. He is the truth that sets us free from sin in this life. We don’t have to wait until heaven to live an abundant life with Christ. All we need to do is set our minds on heavenly things. Seek treasures in heaven. Let the Holy Spirit work in us and through us. By abiding in Christ and walking by the Spirit, we will experience true life as it was meant to be lived—the life God designed and created, a life of flourishing. God doesn’t want us to just survive this life, He wants us to thrive (Psalm 92:13). Not necessarily to have health, wealth, and prosperity in a physical way, but to thrive spiritually in righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, in the kingdom of God (Romans 14:17). We do that by planting ourselves “by the streams of water”—in the Lord (Jeremiah 17:7–8), by abiding in Christ, by staying connected to the Vine (John 15). When we plant ourselves firmly in the Lord, dig our roots deep into His Word, and let the Spirit have His way in and through us, that is how our lives will flourish and we will bear much fruit.

Q: Do you feel like you are living an abundant life in Christ? If not, what specific things need to change in order for your life to flourish?

Q: Look at Galatians 5:22–23. Which fruits of the Spirit has God been growing in your life lately? How has He been growing them?

Q: What about your life needs to change to set your minds on things above and walk in newness of life? How can you change those things?

Q: What practical steps can we take to abide in Christ, to stay connected to the Vine?

APPLICATION

PRAY:

- Thank Jesus for making the way to eternal life for us.
- For wisdom and strength in following the way of Jesus.
- For the Holy Spirit to work in your life to grow His fruit in you and give you an abundant life on earth.
- For the self-control and passion to stay focused on “things above.”
- That you can know His truth even better as you study His Word and have Him reveal it to you.

ACT:

Intentional Act of Love. Loving God and loving others the way Jesus loves us is how we follow the way of Jesus. This week, think of someone who is difficult for you to love and think of an intentional, tangible way you can show you love that person. It can be anonymous or not, but it needs to be something intentional, something you know they would really need, want, or appreciate. Not just a random nice thing to do for someone. If it's a single mom, maybe you offer to watch her kids or make her a meal. If it's someone at work, maybe you bring them lunch or offer to help them with a project they are struggling with. Something you know they need, a true act of service and love.

¹ Alan Yuhas, “Hiker Who Went Missing on Appalachian Trail Survived 26 Days” *The Guardian*, May 25, 2016 - <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/may/26/hiker-who-went-missing-on-appalachian-trail-survived-26-days-before-dying>



IMMANUEL
BAPTIST CHURCH