



Easter Sunday
A Life and Death Decision
Pastor Ted Cunningham

Happy Easter, we're glad you are here. Today we're talking about *A Life and Death Decision*. We're here to celebrate the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. We want to welcome all of those online and over at the chapel. It's going to be a great, great morning.

Here we are, 2,000 years later, celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. According to Pastor John Ortberg, the Pentecostals are still shouting about it, the charismatics are still dancing about it, the Baptists are still amening it, the Presbyterians are still studying it, and the Episcopalians are still toasting it with sherry. And if I can add, the Catholics are still standing then kneeling, standing then kneeling to celebrate it. And the Jehovah Witnesses are still thoroughly confused over the whole thing. Isn't that terrible? I can't believe we offend so many people so quickly.

I want to start in Deuteronomy because I love how Moses is just putting two options out there all the time: life or death, blessing or cursing, follow God and love him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and have life or turn from him and you'll be scattered and cursed. He gives them this choice. When you get to Deuteronomy 30, he puts it out there clearly. He tells them love the Lord you God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

He gives them the choices and then he says this in Verse 11: ***Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.*** We want you to know that today. What we are talking about in the life and death decision that you make is not beyond your reach and it's not too difficult. He says, ***15 See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.*** These two choices are before you and it's a choice you get to make.

Sadly, according to Proverbs 14, some make the wrong choice. ***12 There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end, it leads to death.***

The last few weeks, we've been talking about death here at Woodland Hills. Romans 5: 23 is very clear. ***For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

Sin brought forth death, bondage, brokenness, and alienation from God.

Today we are talking about life and death, the choice between life and death. Here's what sin has done to us. Sin brought forth death, which is the wages of sin. It brought bondage. Some of you are here today in these sin cycles that you can't seem to break and you don't know why you're not able to move

out of the addiction, out of the brokenness. You have brokenness in marriage, brokenness with Mom and Dad, with siblings. You can't keep a job because you can't have relationships with people and so you get the brokenness. Ultimately, it's alienation from God.

As we talk about sin today, I want to give you a multiple-choice test. I want you to answer one of four. I loved multiple choice in school. You had a 25% shot at getting it right. I loved true/false the most, but I also love multiple-choice. We are going to look at these four choices today. It's just how people respond to sin. When they think about sin, it's their answer to it. We're not going to spend a lot of time on the first one. We're going to touch on that and then spend more time on two, three, and four.

1. "I'm not a sinner."

Have you ever heard someone say that? "I don't have a sin problem." If you ever have a conversation with someone like that, you realize about three to four minutes in that they do have a sin problem. It's there. If you're here today and this is your choice... "I'm good. Everything is good in my life. I'm fine. Let me be. Leave me alone." We want to take you back to Romans 3 where it clearly says **For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.** Genesis 3 explains clearly how sin entered into the human race. **As by one man, sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death has passed upon all men.** Sin is an issue for each and every one of us to deal with in here today. We all have to answer this question: "What do I believe about sin?"

I don't want to spend a lot of time on this one because if you can get someone to say they are a sinner, the next two choices are how people typically deal with it.

2. "It's not my fault."

Some might say, "You say death has passed upon all men. I get that I'm a sinner, but if you only understood the things that have happened in my life and the consequences that I've had to deal with from other people's actions and the situations I find myself in." You spend your entire life blaming other people, living in resentment and bitterness towards others and you won't accept responsibility for your sin.

I want to lead to what I think is one of the greatest country theologians. His name is Chris Stapleton. I think Chris Stapleton has written the perfect country song. It's the perfect country song. It's a man's marriage falling apart. What I love about it is that he takes responsibility for it. I have listened to this song 400 times... It's about time, in country music, somebody takes responsibility for what's going on in their life! Can I get an amen on that one? We get all this mess and it's somebody else's fault. But not Brother Chris.

He goes, "She took down a photograph of our wedding day, ripped it down the middle and threw my half away. And I got nobody to blame but me." We get his plight in life. His marriage fell apart and he said, "It's my fault." Thank you! When's the last time you heard that? "She broke all my fishing rods, put my guns in hock, threw my clothes out in the yard; she even changed the locks." And what does he say? "I got nobody to blame but me."

Wouldn't it be wonderful if I got into counseling session... Not my counseling session, but one I'm doing for someone else. And Ryan Pannell would love to have a husband sit across the table from him and sing, "I know right where I went wrong. I know just what got her gone. Turned my life into this country song. I got nobody to blame but me." Wouldn't that be nice to hear a husband say? I listened to that song for six months before somebody told it wasn't Travis Tritt. Travis Tritt could learn from Christ Stapleton.

Think about it. We'll talk a little bit. I'll work with you through the consequences of your actions, but let's not live there. If you can admit it's your fault, we're almost done. I'm sorry "She put sugar in my John Deere; I can't even mow my lawn. And I got nobody to blame..." Yeah I'm sorry what happened to your tractor. I feel bad for you on that one, but at least you can understand your part in it. That's a song you'll never hear Donald Trump sing. I just offended 36.7% of you. Don't waste your time excusing your sin or blaming it on others. If you say, "Okay, I'm a sinner, but it's not my fault," would you admit today that you're a sinner and take responsibility for it? Would you admit where you are in life is a direct result of your sin? God doesn't tempt anyone with evil. I have been tempted, I have fallen, I am a sinner.

3. "I'll fix it."

If you can get someone to admit they are a sinner and take responsibility for it, this is where people really get stumbled up. They say, "I'll fix it. I'll take care of it myself." We could spend an entire series on how people try to fix it, but I just want to give you five ways that I think people try to fix it. They even call it salvation.

- **"Be good" salvation.** This is also salvation by addition or salvation by subtraction. "I'll start doing a bunch of good stuff. I'll stop doing the bad stuff." At the end, there's going to be this cosmic scale. "I'll stand before God and he'll put the good on one side and bad on the other side. I'm just hoping that the good wins out."

I hear it a lot around funerals. We celebrated the life of Gary Smalley last Saturday. Let me tell you something. Gary is not with the Lord right now because of the ministry he had upon this earth. That's not the reason he is with the Lord. It's not because he was good or did good things.

- **"Try harder" salvation.** "I'll do good things and I'll do it for a long time. If that doesn't work, I'll just keep going and I'll do more and more." You sin a lot in your 20s. By your 30s, you may have learned a couple of lessons and you're not sinning as much. By your 40s, you're so exhausted of sin that you don't sin as much. By 50, if someone tries to tempt to sin, you're like, "That sounds too dang exhausting; I ain't doing it." But you get to a place where you feel you have some making up to do. If you're in here and your 40, 50, 60 years old and you lived the life of a hellion for your 20s, 30s, and 40s and you're like I've got a little bit of time left upon this earth so I'm going to try my hardest, I'm going to give you some good news in a second. You don't have to try for that salvation because that's not salvation at all.
- **"Attend church" salvation.** I thought Easter Sunday was a good time to throw that one in. I don't want to go after people who are here... But here we go. "I go to church. Doesn't that do

the trick right there?” I know it’s cliché, but standing in a garage doesn’t make you a car. You say, “I’m here and I’m reminded today how I need to be back in church, so we are going to get here as often as possible.” Church attendance is not what fixes your sin problem.

- **“Love others” salvation.** “Isn’t that the golden rule? Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. I’ve done enough for enough people. I think that’s my ticket in. I’m fixing it. I’m taking care of it. I’ve hurt so many people; I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to make up for that.”
- **“Family tradition” salvation.** “My mom and dad taught me good Christian morals, good values; they taught me how to live right and avoid evil and avoid wrong.” I’m telling you... no.

This week, I was thinking about how I loved it when my dad would come home from a business trip. When I was five years old, I used to love knowing Dad was coming home. My brother Andy and I would wait by the door in the kitchen for him to come in. He would come in and drop his suitcase and we would be so excited. We knew there were gifts in there for us. I couldn’t wait for him to open up that suitcase and give us those gifts.

When I was about five, I wasn’t really into Legos and all that. At that time, I was into office supplies. Was anybody else into office supplies at five? I just loved all that stuff. I’d tell him to just clear out the desk at the hotel with all the stuff. I wanted the pad of paper, the letterhead, the pens, the sewing kit, the shampoo, the lotion, the shoe mitt... Whatever came in the hotel, I wanted it all. I just loved it.

One day, he stopped bringing gifts home. This hurt deeply. I went to my mom and I said, “Mom, how come Dad doesn’t bring us gifts home from trips anymore? What happened?” I’ll never forget my mom saying, “Ted, it’s not that your dad doesn’t love you. He loves you. It’s not that your dad doesn’t want to give good gifts to you because he does. Ted, the reason your dad does not bring home these gifts anymore is because you’re 29 years old.” Just so you know, that’s comedy, so don’t go ask my dad about it.

How many of you here are 29, 39, 49 and you are counting on the salvation and the faith of your parents, but it’s never become your own.

Bottom line on all of this... **All of your goodness, effort, attendance, kindness, love, and family have absolutely nothing to do with your salvation.**

How many of you remember when we used to start cars by pushing them? How many of you have started a car this way in the last week. Do you remember the scene in Karate Kid? That’s how they started their car. Danielson had to push it for his mom to get the car started.

A couple of Aprils ago, it was April Fool’s Day and we were coming back from our friends’ house. I realized it was April Fool’s Day and the day was getting away from me. I hadn’t done anything with the kids. I see a gas station a few hundred yards up. I started acting like the van was running out of gas.

Without the kids knowing, I turn off the car and put it in neutral. I told them they had to get out and push. We're on Highway 160. Corynn and Carson got out and went to the back of the van. They're pushing a minivan, at the ages of like 7 and 9, down Highway 160. They're moaning and groaning and complaining the whole time. They finally get us into the gas station and I turn the van on and go "April Fool's!" which went over well.

I read the story of a missionary on the mission field who had an old beater car that was given to the ministry. He had to jump-start it everywhere he went. He had to pop the clutch. Whenever he would do ministry around town or in villages, he would have to make sure he was either on a hill or parked by a school that had a playground with kids on it. When he was finished doing what he needed to do, he would just grab some people to help him get it started.

He did this for not months, not weeks, but for years. Then the missionary got sick. A young missionary came to take his place and as he was walking around, showing him what his new post would be. He came up to the car and he started explaining to him how to jump-start the car. The young missionary looked around the car, popped the hood, and looked in. He realized there was just a cable that was loose. He tightened up the cable and the car started right up. The older missionary was amazed.

The power was there all along. It was available to him all the time, but his routine had become to do it the hard way. It's a non-effective way. For some of you who pushed your faith in here today, you pushed what you believe about life and you pushed what you believe... Hopefully, I'm going to get you to stop pushing your belief today. The work has been done. The work has been finished and it happened. The darkest day in human history was Friday. The greatest day in human history is today, Sunday.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul says ***For what I received I passed onto you as of first importance...*** At Woodland Hills, we are uninterested in getting you to change your behavior first. You may have gone to a lot of churches that are constantly telling you how to live. We want to tell you who to receive. Beliefs trumps behavior. Your behavior flows out of your belief. We're not here to clean you up to make you presentable to God. Jesus has done the work for you.

Paul says **3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.** We call this the gospel and it's the fourth choice you can choose today as we talk about sin.

4. "I believe in Jesus."

"I believe in the resurrected Jesus. I believe in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ and I am placing faith in Jesus for my salvation. It's not my church attendance. It's not my mom and dad, not grandma and grandpa's faith. It's not the baptism I had as an infant. I am placing faith in the only name that saves, and it is the name of Jesus Christ."

This is my choice. I choose number four. I have confessed with my mouth and I believe in my heart that Jesus has been raised from the dead and the scripture says with that, I can know I am saved. For you today, we want you to ***know Christ and the power of his resurrection.*** (Philippians 3: 10) The power that

raised Jesus from the dead is the same power that breathes life into your dead soul. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead, according to Ephesians, is the same power that is available to each one of us in this room today.

The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is the same power that will raise your dead marriage. It's the same power that will raise your dead family. Your brokenness, your bondage, your alienation... Jesus took care of it. Jesus is the one. He died and rose again.

There is a lot of truth in 1 Corinthians 15. ***14 And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. 15 More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. 19 If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.***

There is so much truth in there, but I just want to share with you in bullet form four things from that text.

- Because of the resurrection of Jesus, I am not wasting my time preaching and you are not wasting your time listening. There is value in us gathering and worshipping together and celebrating and learning about the resurrected Jesus.
- Because of the resurrection of Jesus, my life has purpose, it has meaning. My faith means something. It's not me trying to make something out of myself; it's what Jesus has done for me.
- Because of the resurrection of Jesus, I am forgiven. My sins are forgiven and I am not still in my sins because I have placed faith in Jesus.
- Because of the resurrection of Jesus, I do not fear death. It's why I've been able to be kind of jovial about it in past messages. It's something I'm not worried about. This is a special day for the church. This is a day I want to encourage you. You have the opportunity to make phone calls, texts, and email folks who have lost friends or family in the last 12 months. I've spent a lot of time texting people today who have lost loved ones, reminding them of the resurrection of the dead, reminding them of the resurrection of Jesus.

Today, to have that conversation with R.P. in the back. I didn't want to do it over a text because I know R.P. and I go back and forth and we have fun. I wanted to make him have an emotional moment with me. I looked at him and I had to say the words. I said, "R.P., we only have a couple of years left upon this earth." He lost Debbie Sue recently. You can just see it in him. He's holding onto heaven more than he ever has.

It's because we do not fear death. If you're wondering who I'm talking about, he's the one playing the organ. We brought in a B3 for him. If you are in the music business, it's an organ. Some of you saw the

organ and you're like "I'm finally in church." It's called a B3. He's played that organ for four presidents: Lincoln, Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Regan. But it's called a B3 so we are going to create a Star Wars logo of RPB3.

1 Corinthians 15 says **55 "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"** R.P. and I were able to have that moment today, speaking again of Debbie Sue. The resurrection of the dead is because of the resurrected Jesus. **56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.**

When you place faith in Jesus, you're justified and by justification, we mean you are declared righteous. Not because of your works, church attendance, your mom or your dad. You are declared righteous before Almighty God because of Jesus, because he paid your sin debt. Now, after you have been justified, you're being sanctified. I'm being sanctified here upon this earth, freed from the penalty of sin, which is death. Now I'm being freed from the power of sin. I have that power through the resurrected Jesus. One day, I can celebrate because I know I'll be glorified. Glorification is one day being free from the very presence of sin not to deal with it ever again. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory.

Romans 6 says **8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. 10 The death he died, he died to sin once for all...** That's your sin, that's my sin. **...but the life he lives, he lives to God. 11 In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.**

Here are the options again this morning. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Which will you choose? Life or death? If I'm not a sinner – death. If it's not my fault, so I'm not going to deal with it – death. If I'll fix it by attending church, by being good, by treating people nicely – death. I believe in Jesus – life.

I want to talk to the dads for a second. Have you had that moment where you're giving your toddler or infant son or daughter a bath and you turn away for just one second? You turn back around and they have fallen into the tub. It's only been two seconds, but you grab them and before you even check anything, you're looking to see if your wife saw it. You were only in charge of the child for five minutes. But you know that look the child has when they come up out of the water that says "I drowned, I drowned, I drowned!!" Does anybody know what I'm talking about? It wasn't that big of a deal. "It was a little bit of a scare, but you're going to have a lot more trouble in life that that, kid, so start getting used to it." But your first thought was what? *I was here. Maybe for a moment, you didn't think I was, but I was here the whole time.*

We were at a pool in Florida in 1996, right before Amy and I got married. It was my grandma, my parents, my brother and his wife and my two-year-old niece Katelyn. We were all playing at one end of the pool and she pops in on the other side. She goes all the way to the bottom, sitting at the bottom. My brother, her dad, gets to her within three second, maybe four. He pulls her up out of the water. I have forgotten a lot in life and a lot of images and details, but I will never forget that moment. I still have a vivid picture in my mind of Katelyn coming up out of the water totally shocked and horrified. We

were scared at first, but we had it under control and there was nothing wrong. We were there the whole time even though she didn't know it.

Between pushing the car and wondering where God is, listen, your father is there. I'm asking that the Holy Spirit begin calling so many today by name. You've been pushing this car; you've been trying to go at your own way for so long. Wouldn't it be great today to take that loose screw of yours, tighten it down, and go, "Wow, I've been in church my whole life, I've attended church at Christmas and Easter faithfully..."

I can't believe I keep doing that. People tell me I shouldn't do that, but it's just low hanging fruit, if you know what I mean.

But you're like "I am in church twice a year faithfully, I try to treat people well, I try to be a good dad, good husband, good wife, good mom" and all your doing is trying to do it yourself. Wouldn't it be great today to let that go and place faith in the resurrected Jesus? Think of the sigh of relief. One of the Hebrew terms for salvation is "room to breathe." You can leave here today and take a sigh of relief.

As a family, we have been praying for another family that just has so much drama in it. To be honest with you, I'm worn out from the drama. I was kind of worked up last night during our family's devotion and prayer time. I said some things. I said, "I'm done! I'm sick of it! Let's pray and tell the Lord... He's sick of it too!"

Amy asked Carson to pray. Carson goes, "Lord, we don't know what's going on, but this family is driving us crazy." We prayed that they would just stop blaming each other. That's what it is. It's all this sin and all this mess in their family. They blame each other. We want them to knock it off. "You've got nobody to blame but you..." Take responsibility for it.

Today, wouldn't you love to be done blaming your ex-husband for being a jerk? "I'm done blaming my ex-wife for being a jerk. I'm not going to have resentment, bitterness, and anger anymore. I'm asking the resurrection power of Jesus to come into my life. I'm placing faith in Jesus. I am a sinner. I take responsibility for it. I'm done fixing it on my own. Jesus, I place faith in you." If that's you, I'm going to invite you to take a next step.

"My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ and I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it." – Brennan Manning.

In April and May, we are doing a brand new series. It called Next Step. We believe every single person in here has a next step to take in life. For some, your next step was coming to a church service and this is your first time in church in your life. Or maybe you're coming from another denomination or another religion or something and you don't know how you got here to Easter. A friend invited you and you know you're supposed to be here. Just coming was your next step today.

For some, you just took your next step. You're done pushing the car and you are placing faith in Jesus. The Holy Spirit has convicted you of your sin, you have confessed your sins and bowed your head and

confessed with your mouth and believed in your heart that Jesus has been raised from the dead and the scripture says you are now saved.

For some, the next step we are going to encourage you to take... I lost count. We were here for quite a bit after the first service because we did spontaneous baptism. We've been planning these spontaneous baptisms for a couple of weeks. When I say that, we don't know of anybody's coming, but what we want to do is give you an opportunity to take the next step, so we wanted to be ready. Over a dozen people in the first service this morning came from the chapel and from in here.

People just kept coming and they said, "I believe in the resurrected Jesus and I'm ready to take the next step of obedience and that is baptism. I'll profess to everyone gathered here today that I am a follower of Jesus." If you do, we are going to put you in one of these shirts. You can get shirts that say *forgiven, cleaned, or dunked*. We even have brand new shorts back there. You'll have a full outfit so you can go home dry. You'll have a towel. If you want to take the next step of baptism this morning.

If that's you, I'm going to ask everyone to bow their heads and close their eyes and we are going to pray together as a church family. As we pray as the worship team begins this morning, I'm going to invite you to go right out that door right there. There will be someone to greet you. Then come right up here on the stage between R.P. and Bobby and say, "I'm ready to be baptized." Let's pray for those who are making decisions and taking a next step this morning.

Father, it's in the name of Jesus that we do come to you and ask that you would continue, through the power of Jesus and through the conviction of the Holy Spirit, to draw men, women, boys, and girls unto you this morning. I pray for those who are making decisions that they would have the boldness right now to stand up, walk down and say, "I will profess faith in Jesus today before those gathered here on Easter."

We are grateful to gather as a family and celebrate the resurrection of Jesus this morning. We are so thankful that we've been able to accommodate all who have attended. I pray this is just a new season our church is launching into as we take next steps. For some it's salvation, for some it's baptism, for some, it's plugging into this body of believers. For others, it's saying I'm not just going to attend or be a member, I'm actually going to serve.

For some it's beyond serving to where they want to lead. For some it's beyond leading to even say, "I want to start inviting neighbors and friends and family." Everybody has a next step to take. I pray that we do it in the power of the resurrected Jesus. The power that's available for us today, for our marriages, for our families, for our jobs, for our careers, for our business... whatever death someone is experiencing today, I pray that today they would cry out to Jesus as their savior. Thank you for this morning and the work you continue to do.

It's in the name of Jesus that everyone agreed and said... Amen.