

# John 11:1-27 “The Presence of God in the Face of Death”

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.
- What a joy and delight to worship Jesus, to think about who He is, what He's done for us. I don't know how many of you were here when we started John's Gospel.
- It was 37 years ago and we've made it halfway, which is pretty exciting. But if you were here at the beginning, do you remember when we marveled at where John started?
- That in the beginning was the Word and the Word was God become flesh with life and light and grace upon grace so that we could be a part of God's family, so that we could actually know God Himself.
- And John was about to lay out for us how that developed in real space and time and history. It's been amazing for me to encounter the real Jesus time and time again in John's Gospel.
- [ 1 : 1 6 ] I was talking this week with Allie Trammell, who is the teaching leader for the Women's Bible Study Fellowship class that meets here. And they've been going through the Gospel of John.
- They're a little further along, closer to the end than we are. But we were just sharing together how we have been impacted as week after week we open God's Word here and see who is Jesus and what's He really like?
- And see His glory. I hope you have been too, those of you who've been here, moved to worship Him. Met with comfort in hard things you've been walking through.
- Inspired with hope towards true life and true purpose with Him. That's what God's Word does as we open it.
- And I just want you to know this about the Gospel of John at the halfway mark. It's only getting better and more glorious from here, okay? I'm unlikely to calm down through the end of John 21.
- [ 2 : 2 2 ] Apologies. John 11, where we are this morning, it's about the seventh and final sign that Jesus does here to show us who He is.
- He's been ruling over creation. And some of these signs, water to wine, feeding 5,000, walking on water. And some of these signs, He's been healing people from various diseases, sicknesses they've had.
- But now John 11, He's going to take it up a notch as He raises Lazarus from the dead. And He's also going to tell us what this final sign points to about Himself.
- It's a long story about resurrection. But that means that the problem that hangs over this whole passage is death.
- It's everywhere. So we're going to need to talk together about something that we often avoid talking about or even thinking about.

[ 3 : 33 ] Maybe it seems unknown or uncertain to us. Maybe, for many of us, a source of anxiety. Maybe a source of deep grief to you right now.

Maybe we think of death as the end of all things. Maybe as the great enemy. But regardless, I want you to think this morning how much of life is plagued by the specter of death.

It's really all around us. Socially and politically, debates continue to rage over abortion. Refrostation, the death penalty, euthanasia.

If you read the news, every day, you can click on it any day of the week, there are going to be stories of death. Shootings, murder trials, wars all around the world raging, bridge collapses, natural disasters, there are death tolls all around the world.

And then even more personally, we face painful realities like miscarriage, like the death of loved ones, like cancer diagnoses, and we wait and run tests and wait to learn if it's terminal.

[ 5 : 04 ] Suicide rates increasing. Whether we like it or not, and most of us do not, we are faced with death every day, aren't we?

I'm asking us not to ignore it right now, not to avoid it, even though I know it is really difficult.

And most of you didn't come to church this morning wanting to talk about it. We sense that about death, that it's an interruption in God's good design. But we also hope it doesn't interfere with God's good plan.

So where does God show up in the face of all this death? Where does he fit in? Where could he even show his glory? And how does he help us navigate the darkness, and the grief, and the fear?

We're going to spend three weeks here in this chapter. I promise not staying in death all the time. There's life and there's light. Most of you know that the way this chapter unfolds, near the end, Lazarus walks out of the tomb alive.

[ 6 : 21 ] And there's hope. But along the way, I want us to see in the face of death, three different things. The presence of God this morning.

Next week, the tears of God. And then finally, the ultimate glory of God. We need that full picture, but we're going to take it one step at a time.

Let's pray together this morning, and then we'll read the beginning of the story as we go. God, some of us are hurting almost too much to listen any further.

Some of us are so uncomfortable with this topic as to be right now even shutting off our hearts. It doesn't feel safe. Others of us would honestly just like to believe that we don't need this now.

But all of us need to hear from you. We need to see Jesus. To see in Jesus your perfect image, the word made flesh, the one who is one with the Father, to show us exactly how you feel, exactly what you do, exactly who you are in the face of death.

[ 7 : 54 ] So Father, speak to us by your word, through your spirit, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. As we begin to read this great story, there are a few lessons that we'll see along the way, and they're all brought together by this one main lesson at the end of today's passage.

So we're going to move through the first part of the Lazarus story. We're always at issue here at the beginning is God's presence. Where is Jesus?

It starts with concerns about his presence or absence. Verse 1. Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to Jesus, saying, Lord, he whom you love is ill.

Lazarus is ill, but Jesus is not there. They send a message to him, and when Jesus heard it, he said, this illness does not lead to death.

[ 9 : 22 ] It is for the glory of God so that the Son of God may be glorified through it. The end, the purpose here, is not death.

The illness is actually going to be to the end of God's glory. Now that is true of this particular illness, but the potential is there for that in every illness, every trial, isn't there?

To be about more than meets the eye, more than merely physical. To be about God's glory.

That means to be a situation in which God reveals to us more of who he is. That's what God's glory means in John.

When Jesus says it's for God's glory, he's not saying, well, it may be bad for Lazarus, but it'll be good for God and people will praise him.

[ 10 : 29 ] That's not really what it means. In John's gospel, being for God's glory means showing people who God truly is, especially through Jesus, the Son, through his person.

And that should be our greatest longing all the time, right? Our greatest longing to see God's greatest glory in this relationship with him that impacts eternity, that we would see some of what we've been singing and reading about this morning and to know more of who he is and to share in that even now with him.

That's what we long for, that's what we need. So yes, we pray and we long for healing, for protection, for deliverance, we should, and no matter what, we most long to see God clearly.

Pray that too, right? When you pray, we pray a lot when we long for healing, when we face death, pray also for yourself and for others to see God's glory.

Kids, if you don't know how to pray when somebody is sick or when somebody loved has died, pray that they and that you would see who God is, would know him more, that we would see his glory.

[ 11 : 55 ] Hold that thought for two weeks or so because showing us God's glory is the end of this story and I just got to tell you now, it is even bigger than Lazarus walking alive out of the tomb.

It's crazy glorious. Please don't miss this. That's later. Right now we're at verse five. We're not there yet. Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

The second time, by the way, that Jesus' love is highlighted after verse three, Lord, he whom you love is ill.

friend, your illness is not evidence that God doesn't love you. In fact, Jesus especially loves the needy.

His love is drawn to the weak and wounded, sick and sore. So many of us, as we suffer, we wrestle with this personal problem of evil.

[ 13 : 02 ] could God still really love me if he's letting this happen in my life? Don't get confused by those who say that your sickness means you don't believe enough or you don't pray enough or you don't deserve God's love.

No. No, he loves you. So of course, loving Lazarus and having the power to heal him, Jesus then rushes immediately to his side.

No. So, therefore, because he loved them, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place he was.

Then he says, let's go. And we find out later, Lazarus dies in the meantime. I thought Jesus said that's not where this story was headed.

This delay has puzzled Christians since it puzzled those disciples that first day. We've felt their pain, haven't we?

[ 14 : 24 ] God, where are you? Why aren't you answering? What is taking so long here? I thought you said.

I don't understand. I still couldn't tell you why after the pain of miscarrying our first child, God seemed to delay month after month for so long until we felt like stopping praying and stopping hoping would feel better.

God, are you really present in the face of death? We'll hear concerns about Jesus' presence or lack thereof repeatedly here.

We're going to hear them again from Martha and then from Mary and then from the mourners who have joined them. Why the delay? Things could have gone differently, Jesus?

Well, we often don't know exactly why, do we? But it does seem throughout Scripture that God often delays until we can't comprehend how he could possibly fulfill his promises.

[ 15 : 47 ] Have you felt that before? He's done that in most of our lives. He certainly has something to show us in this situation. But regardless, I want us to note here that God's delays do not disprove his love.

Whatever they may mean, whatever they may feel like, Jesus delays because he loves. Don't let Satan convince you otherwise.

That's not what you're experiencing right now. Brother or sister who's wondering if it is time to give up, have I waited or endured this long enough?

I think that perhaps he's quit loving me. No. His love never fails. No one can snatch you out of his hand.

And his delay in your life, as painful and awful as the circumstances of it may be, it may be specifically because of his great love in a way more glorious than we can imagine.

[ 17 : 01 ] He delays, but after delaying, Jesus says, verse 7, to the disciples, let us go to Judea again. The disciples said to him, Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you and are you going there again?

Jesus not safe over there. Remember the stones? Let's not do that. Can we go somewhere else? Jesus answered, are there not 12 hours in the day?

If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles because the light is not in him.

Now, this seems pretty cryptic, doesn't it? I think, in fitting with some of the things he says here and elsewhere, Jesus is telling us to have hope because we are with him.

He's saying, walking anywhere with me is safer than walking on your own. Trust me, walk with me in the light, even walking into the jaws of death.

[ 18 : 21 ] Better to be with me than to try to figure a way around it on your own, your own wisdom, your own strength. It's another invitation from Jesus to trust, to follow, to rest.

Verse 11, after saying these things, he said to them, our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him. the disciples said to him, Lord, if he's fallen asleep, he will recover.

There's another way out, right? Maybe we don't have to go there after all. Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought he meant taking rest and sleep. So Jesus told them plainly, Lazarus has died, and for your sake, I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe, but let us go to him.

It seems an awful turn, doesn't it? Lazarus has died. A reality that we know already and especially we'll see next week grieves Jesus deeply.

But there's hope in Jesus. There's hope specifically for the disciples' faith, right? The good of their seeing God's glory, seeing more of who he is.

[ 19 : 43 ] Jesus so values our belief. He so loves to build our faith in him. And he says, let's go to him, Lazarus.

Even to a dead man, Jesus is coming. His presence, his showing up is hopeful. Thomas hears this reminder to trust Jesus even to death.

So Thomas called the twins, said to his fellow disciples, let us also go that we may die with him. Now listen, doubting Thomas gets a bad rap later in the story, okay?

But he is consistently a realist, isn't he? He's very practical. No sugar coating the situation. If Jesus is going to die, and he is, let's go die with him.

Do we follow Jesus like that? There's a lot of faith there. Verse 17, now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days, very much dead.

[ 21 : 00 ] Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. Jesus has arrived in the vicinity, but someone can't wait for him to get all the way there, hoping, longing for his presence.

She's been looking forward to this. Verse 20, so when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. And Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

But even now, I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you. If only you were here, Jesus. But now you are.

And I don't really know what that means. I mean, the concept of an immediate resurrection of her brother from the dead after he's been buried four days doesn't even seem to be on Martha's radar.

But Jesus, I'm going to throw myself at your feet. I'm going to trust that your presence means my blessing. Martha's faith here in a Jesus who has delayed, whose delay has in the meantime brought grief upon grief to her.

[ 22 : 17 ] Her faith is remarkable, isn't it? She must really know this Jesus. She must have been following the signs he's done already and to know that he and God the Father are one, that blessing flows from his very presence, that he is worthy of her trust.

Because then, when you know Jesus like that, then nothing makes more sense than trusting him. Even when, humanly speaking, it makes no sense.

Nothing then, don't you know that experience? Where from a human perspective, you look at your circumstances and say, it doesn't make any sense to trust Jesus right now, but I know Jesus and nothing makes more sense than to trust Jesus.

It doesn't make sense. Lazarus is dead. Game over. The end. Except, Jesus is here.

Trusting him, hoping in him always makes sense. Verse 23. Jesus said to Martha, your brother will rise again.

[ 23 : 37 ] Martha said to him, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. Martha has hope. There's a Messiah and a kingdom when all who follow him will rise at the end of time to reign with him.

She's got that hope. And this is where Jesus changes everything. It is certainly a great comfort to know that there is a resurrection to eternal life coming one day someday.

I am so grateful for that. I hope you are. But what Jesus wants you to see here is something that is even better, even more glorious, even more hopeful than that.

If you can imagine, Jesus is going to teach us something about his identity here that shatters Martha's categories and most of our categories. When he is present, something amazing is taking place.

He's about to speak his fifth I am statement of self-disclosure here in John. Who is Jesus? Martha speaks of the resurrection to come and Jesus replies, I am the resurrection.

[ 24 : 57 ] The Sadducees at that time said no resurrection. The Pharisees and others like Martha said, resurrection in the Messiah's eternal kingdom one day, someday.

Jesus says, resurrection immediately, always, with me, the Messiah who brings the kingdom.

look, Martha, watch what I'm going to do. I am dragging the resurrection from the future, from that future hope you have, I am dragging it back into your present reality right here where I am with you.

That's what he's saying to us. There is a coming physical resurrection. Jesus is about to display the certainty of that by bringing Lazarus back to life here. Right here in his presence.

When you trust in Jesus, he is the resurrection, that means even though you die, yet you shall live. Who? Whoever believes in him, he is the resurrection.

[ 26 : 06 ] But what's more, he explains, Jesus is the life. And he says what that means, those who live spiritually, who believe in him, that's the kind of living, shall never really die spiritually.

It's not that you're going to die and then you're going to wait years or millennia for eternity to begin. No, as Paul tells us, it is absent from the body, present with the Lord.

Instantly, death is undone in Jesus. He is the resurrection and the life. He's saying the reality is that true life found in relationship with me in my presence will never stop.

See, true life is not stuff. It's not experiences. It's not success. It's not comfort. No, it is God and knowing him.

It is Jesus himself. Jesus as the resurrection and the life is so much the essence of life. That when you are united to him, you will never ever be separated.

[ 27 : 25 ] Not even for a moment. Never will you be separated from Jesus, the resurrection and the life. Which means, and don't miss this, that means if you're now connected to him, that the worst thing that could ever possibly happen to you will never, ever happen to you.

You know what that worst thing is? The worst thing that could happen is you being separated from God. Jesus says, never, never will you ever experience that.

I have come that you may know life with me. Jesus drags that future hope into our present reality. He's saying, you've been singing about one day, someday this morning.

You've been reading about a day where you meet me in the air and you're with the Lord forever. And I am here with you, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Southwood, to say I have brought it to you now.

Yes, there's a fulfillment to come, but I am here with you now. We ache for those we love who go before us, don't we?

[ 28 : 38 ] When they die, we miss them. But for them, it is not true that their life ends, that it ends early.

No, it continues truly. The truest life, deeply, relationally, with the God of heaven. It never stops.

They're never separated. And one day, physically, it continues in his restored creation with us. Praise the Lord for that hope. That is the promise of God.

God, that the presence of Jesus, the resurrection and the life, makes certain. Jesus brings resurrection life from the future into our present.

See, resurrection is not simply something Jesus does. Like, he raises Lazarus from the dead. That's true. He does that, but that is merely a sign, right?

[ 29 : 37 ] It's pointing to who Jesus is. He is the resurrection. That eternal life in the Messiah's kingdom where Jesus is. He wants his disciples and these sisters that he loves and you whom he loves to see it and believe it.

That's what he says to Martha. Do you believe this? And she said to him, yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.

That there is life in him, not just bread, not just healing from sickness, but life from death. The glory of who God is in Jesus is coming into the world.

His presence coming to you. There is life. Friends, do you believe this?

See, that's the difference in facing death. And we face death. It's the difference in facing death with Jesus.

[ 30 : 47 ] When Jesus shows up, where, oh death, is your sting? The sin, the sting of death, sin that so deeply has defined us, that so dangerously has separated us from God, that so completely has defeated you, sin is defeated once for all, done away with, forgiven forever by Jesus.

Death is a mystery to us in so many ways, isn't it? We feel a lot of different things. I think we feel at times trapped, fearful, uncertain, but not Jesus.

He's the resurrection and the life. Listen to his words in Revelation chapter 1. He laid his right hand on me saying, fear not, I am the first and the last and the living one.

I died, he's been there, he has faced death, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and Hades.

Listen, if you are facing death in any way, stay near the one with the keys. You hear me? Stay near him. He is alive forevermore.

[ 32 : 15 ] He has triumphed over death. Jesus lives nevermore to die. If you are, if you're trapped in a dark building behind a bunch of locked doors, right, you've got no way out, and you're going everywhere, you can't figure out how to get through all these locked doors, you're stuck in the dark, stay near the one with the keys.

If there's somebody with the keys to those doors in there, stay with him. Y'all, death all around us can feel like it has us trapped, stuck, dark, confused, afraid, there's no way out, it just, it feels so final to us, time-bound creatures, stay near the one with the keys.

We've always known that that was the key, Jesus' presence with us, right? All the way back to Psalm 23, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.

Remarkable! How? Why? For you, my good shepherd, are with me.

It's your rod and your staff, my only comfort. As soon as I'm absent from this body, present with the Lord, I don't have a moment to realize that something has changed for me, I'm present with you.

[ 33 : 45 ] What comfort that is. It's not something that is merely uncertain, it is something so gloriously uncertain, you can't imagine how wonderful it is. You're never alone, not for a moment.

Wasn't that one of the deepest griefs of COVID in that season? Reading stories of people dying alone, separated from loved ones, isolated from community because we didn't know.

It grieves our hearts to think about that. Perhaps, if you could flip that on its head, perhaps it's a special taste then of God's goodness when you get to be present with someone who's dying.

When you get to bring the presence of God into the life of someone facing death, facing the death of a loved one, wrestling wrestling with the fear of death in their own life, and you, friends, know the one with the keys.

He lives in you. By his spirit, you have life, so you can bring his presence into the room with someone fearfully facing death.

[ 35 : 09 ] life. The resurrection and the life is yours, is living with you. See, staying near Jesus is not some burdensome task that I'm heaping on you this morning when I say, stay near the one with the keys.

No, Jesus comes near to us, doesn't he? In this story, he moves toward Martha and Mary and Lazarus. He comes to bring his resurrection life into our present, into our stories, though it is, we will find out in a way going to cost him his life.

His presence with us in the face of death leads to his death. Spoiler alert. But how else could Jesus ensure that those he loves would never face the worst thing that could ever happen to us.

That we would never be separated from God. He had to endure that separation himself. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

So that you can be assured of his presence with you, especially when the wrongness and the awfulness of death tempts you to feel utterly abandoned.

[ 36 : 42 ] No. No, that's not true. He loves you. Remember? Even in this delay, this long delay of life that we live in as we await his return, he loves you.

He's showing you more of his glory. As you learn that walking with him is safer than walking on your own.

As you trust him, even when it doesn't make sense. Why? Because Jesus is the resurrection and the life who is present with us everywhere, especially in the face of death, to pull out the keys and open for us the gates of life.

That is glorious. If that is not glorious enough, thus far, only the promise of the person and the presence of Jesus still to come, the tears Jesus weeps with us and the glory.

Jesus shows us his glory. Let's pray. Jesus, thank you that we are not alone. Thank you that you have given us yourself as fully and completely as you could, that you've even given us of your spirit that we will never be separated from you.

[ 38 : 17 ] we need that comfort. Some of us would like to think that's true, but it doesn't feel true. Holy Spirit, draw near right now.

Bring comfort. Assure us of your presence. Remind us of your love, Jesus. thank you for meeting us in the hardest places.

Thank you for having the keys. We trust you. We need you. We find life in you, our resurrection and life. We pray in your name.

Amen. For more information, visit us online at [southwood.org](https://southwood.org). law firm, life.

Thank you. describe us on the list.