

Light on Dark Clouds: Fear of Death

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

John chapter 11, I'm going to begin reading in verse 1. Now, a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.

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

But when Jesus heard it, he said, this illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.

Now, Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

[1 : 17] Then, after this, he said to his disciples, let us go again to Judea. Look down to verse 17.

Now, when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 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.

So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to him, 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. Jesus said to her, your brother will rise again.

Martha said, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life.

[2 : 25] Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?

She said to him, yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who's coming into the world. When she had said this, verse 28, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, the teacher is here and is calling for you.

And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Mary, Martha, had met him.

When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.

[3 : 49] He said, where have you laid him? They said to him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept.

So the Jews said, see how he loved him. But some of them said, could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?

Then deeply moved again, Jesus came to the tomb. It was a cave and a stone lay against it.

Jesus said, take away the stone. Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.

Jesus said to her, did I not tell you that if you believed, that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? So they took away the stone, and Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

[4 : 59] I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may also believe you sent me. When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out!

And the man who had died came out, his hands and his feet bound with linen strips and his face wrapped with a cloth, and Jesus said to them, unbind him and let him go.

May God bless the preaching and the hearing of his word.

Growing up, one of the things my mom used to say is, the only thing you have to do in life is pay taxes and die.

She wasn't a morbid lady, but, or isn't. Two things in life are inevitable, paying taxes, as we all are very acquainted with right now, and death.

[6 : 19] I don't want to talk about taxes, but I do want us to talk about death. Death is often referred to as the great interruption, interrupting our lives and relationships. It's also called the great enemy.

Who doesn't fear death, if even a little? But death is also the great inevitability, the great inevitable. One thing is certain.

You're going to die. There is a 100% death rate. But even though death is inevitable, we don't prepare for it anymore.

We don't live as if it's going to happen. Because of the advances of modern medicine, death is no longer something we see regularly. It's often moved into the margins of our society.

But it wasn't always that way. Consider one example. The British queen Anne, at the end of the 1600s, had 18 pregnancies. Eight miscarriages.

[7 : 18] Five stillbirths. One lived a few minutes. Another, a few hours. Another was born and died two years later of disease.

Another died of a tragic accident. One lived and died at age 11. That's all 16. Modern medicine has wonderfully relieved us of many of the causes of miscarriage and early death.

So much so that most people make it to adulthood without ever watching someone die. But death is also something we're no longer encouraged to face with hope.

In our culture, we're called to measure our lives. We're not called to measure our lives by what we hope to gain in death. But to measure them by the happiness, comfort, and success we gain now. The good life we're supposed to gain in the end is not what we're called to chase.

Death is not the beginning of the good life. Death interrupts the good life. So they say, even Kenny Chesney says, everyone wants to go to heaven. But no one wants to go now.

[8 : 32] Well, I'll raise my hand in protest. I'd like to go right now. Amen. Yes, sir. So mom is right. The only thing you have to do is pay taxes and die. The problem is we have a turbo tax to help with the taxes, but no one is helping us prepare to die.

To face the inevitable. The great enemy. Our greatest fear. The fear of death.

The fear of not merely death, but the cascade of losses that occur in death. The losing everything material. The fear of insignificant.

The fear of being separated from those we love. The fear of judgment. The fear of eternity. So much of our life is bound up in space and time and aging and all these things.

But what is eternity? That alone is enough to make us fear. Well, this morning on this Resurrection Sunday, we come to one of the most important passages on the resurrection. One of the most remarkable, if not the most remarkable, miracles of Jesus.

[9 : 41] And it is light on dark clouds. That's our series, if you're our guest. It's carefully designed to give us light to walk through the darkness of death and to face death without fear.

Main point is the only reality that can conquer the fear of death is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The only reality that can conquer the fear of death is the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Break this out in three points describing our Lord in this passage. The first is Jesus weeps. Jesus weeps. One author says, all the other gospels tell us about what Jesus said and did.

But John tells us about his soul. John tells us about what he thinks and feels and longs for and agonizes.

John shows us the soul of Jesus Christ. And there's no passage where we see the soul of Jesus Christ more clearly than this passage. The passage begins miles away from Jerusalem and from Bethany, from Judea.

[10 : 48] Two of his followers, Mary and Martha. You remember Mary and Martha. One thing is necessary, the Lord said. Martha was serving and Mary was praying.

So they send for him and they say, our brother, the one whom you love is ill. Look down there in verse one again. Certain man was ill. Lazarus of Bethany.

It was the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment. John didn't tell that story until the next chapter. Wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill.

So the sister sent him and said, Lord whom you love, he whom you love is ill. Said it again, verse five. Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

Notice they do not say, he who loves you is ill. They say, he whom you love is ill.

[11 : 51] Now if you're familiar with John's gospel, you know this is a common phrase in John's gospel. John refers to himself as the disciple whom the Lord loved. But its placement here is worth our consideration.

The first followers of Jesus Christ do not so much think of themselves as people who love God. But as people who are loved by God.

And the same ought to be true of us. D.A. Carson writing on these verses says, Those who Jesus has revealed himself to view themselves first and foremost as loved by God.

Not as those who love him. They think of themselves as loved by him. Not first and foremost as those who imperfectly love him.

Now we may ask, is it just, that's just the same thing. I love God. God loves me. I love Jesus Christ. Jesus loves me. Well I beg to say, there's all the difference in the world between the two.

[12 : 54] When I say I love Jesus, all the focus is on me. My response, my desire to put him first. My longing to treasure him above all things. But when I say Jesus loves me, all the focus is on him.

His commitment, his promise, his steadfastness, his affection. And so this verse is underlining a most important reality. God's love for us is not based on our love for him.

As if he waits for us to love him every day to see, are they going to be lovable today? Are they going to rise up, read their Bible, pray today? Are they lovable for me to love them?

No, God's love precedes our love for him. Imagine how freeing it is.

Mary and Martha write to him with all confidence, because he whom you love, Lord, is ill. So how do you view yourself? Someone who loves God?

[13 : 57] Or the more mysterious reality, someone who is loved by him.

People like to say love is a choice, not an emotion. Wonderfully, in this passage, clearly love is a choice.

Jesus chose to shower love on Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He doesn't say Jesus loved everything. He does love the world in the sense that he sent the gospel. He preached to all the world.

But he has a particular love for his people. That's what's revealed in this passage. So he chose in eternity past to shower them with love to all who turn to him with his love.

But is love only a choice? Is the love of God a cool, cold calculation? The story continues.

[14 : 56] Look at verse 6. Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. So when he heard Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Now what's going on here? Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. So he stays two more days. Think about this.

I've just told you that they're set free, amazed that he loves them. Can you imagine how they waited for him to come? Can you put yourself in their shoes for just a moment? How many times they looked out the window to see if he was walking up the road?

How many times they reminded themselves, Jesus loves us. He is coming. There's no doubt about it. He is coming. How many times they walk outside to peer over the hill to see if he is coming?

They waited and waited. Jesus waited two more days until finally Lazarus died. They must have thought, I thought he loved us.

[16 : 08] Perhaps no or few greater challenges than the challenges of delay and the purposes of God. But there's something more John wants us to see about the love of Jesus Christ.

Look down there in verse 7. After those two days expired, after this he said to his 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?

Because of his love for Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, Jesus goes back to Judea, back to face the opposition of the religious leaders, back into harm's way.

And when he arrives, we see the depth of emotion in his love for Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. Everyone is gathered into the house. Everyone is weeping because Lazarus is now dead.

Look in verse 32. Mary comes to him. If you had been here, my brother, would not have died when Jesus saw her weeping. And the Jews who had come with her also weeping.

[17 : 13] He was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, where have you laid him? They said, Lord, come and see. And Jesus wept. Now, I want us to take this in.

Now, Jesus is going to where Lazarus is laid so that he can yank him out of the grave. Jesus is going to bring him back to life. Jesus is going to perform his greatest miracles.

But when he sees the sorrow of Martha and Mary, when he sees them weeping, he begins to weep. Now, if I were on the scene and I knew what Jesus knew, I'd say, hey, knock it off.

Like he's about to wipe all your tears away in just a moment. But knock it off. But Jesus does nothing of that sort. He stops.

He listens. He weeps. It doesn't say Jesus cried. It says Jesus wept.

[18 : 21] The scene is unveiling something about the love of God. The love of God mysteriously is not merely a choice, a calculated decision, a cool commitment. The love of God does not remain at an unemotional distance.

The love of God includes deep emotion. Jesus wept. So often we, I think we get caught in between these realities of the love of God.

We say, I know he loves me, but I don't know that he likes me. I know he loves me. I just don't know that he likes me.

And this reality of the deep emotion, the deep love in Jesus' heart is underlined here. So much so, look at verse 36. The Jews said, as he's weeping, see how he loved them.

J.C. Ryle says, it shows us him who is able to feel as he is to save. If there's anything we didn't know about the character of God, or at least tempted to doubt, based on all that Scripture has revealed to this point, it would be his emotions and feelings, the maker of all things, entering into human sorrow and shedding human tears.

[19 : 45] One of my heroes is a lady named Johnny Erickson Tata. When she was 18 years old, she dove into shallow lake water and was paralyzed from the neck down.

That was 55 years ago. For 55 years, she's lived as a quadriplegic with unworldly joy.

But the first days were dark. She was angry. She was bitter. She was depressed. She was not walking with the Lord, could not imagine life without the use of her legs and her arms.

She tells this story, though. Late one night, and I quote, when visiting hours were over, when it was dark and the nurses at the stand were on break, I got a surprise visit.

In the dark, while my five roommates were asleep, I saw this silhouette of a person standing in the doorway. This strange visitor got down on its hands and knees and crept into the room quietly to not wake my roommates.

[21 : 03] I almost called out, as we'd all be tempted to do, but when this dark figure came up beside my bed, I recognized it was my high school friend, Jackie.

She slowly stood up and lowered the guardrail, climbed onto my mattress, and snuggled up close to me. I couldn't feel her next to me.

I couldn't feel her hand holding my hand. But when she did get next to me, she began softly singing, man of sorrows, what a name.

For the Son of God who came ruined sinners to reclaim. Hallelujah.

She continues, at that moment, something changed. Someone had reached out and found me.

[22 : 09] Jackie had made Jesus the man of sorrow seem so near and that he understood. That night, I realized that Jesus reaches where no medication can reach, where no doctor can go, where no surgery can heal.

That's what's going on in Mary and Martha's life. Immediately, they realized this one is weeping with her, and it's the wonder we're all invited to discover Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today, and forever.

He listens, and he prays, and he gives mercy. The man of sorrows was left alone in his suffering so that you never would be in your own. Point two, Jesus rages.

Jesus rages. In this passage, Jesus does not just weep. Jesus rages. Look in verse 33.

When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit, greatly troubled.

- [23 : 23] Verse 38. Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. Now, this word is difficult to translate, some translations, translated groaning, greatly disturbed, deeply angry, moved with indignation, but none of those are precisely it.

B.B. Warfield, the great Presbyterian scholar, said, Jesus approached the grave of Lazarus in a state not of uncontrollable grief, but of irrepressible anger.

anger. So, it's just this wonderful window into the emotional life of our Lord and in a moment, I mean, we see him weeping, but what drives him to the grave is not uncontrollable grief, which drives so much of our lives at times, but irrepressible anger.

Jesus approaches the grave of Lazarus with irrepressible anger, with nothing less but than rage. Now, this is not the picture of Jesus we're used to seeing, you know, the blonde-haired, blue eyes, meek and mild, kind-hearted and compassionate, safe for the whole family sort of Jesus.

This Jesus, this Jesus with rage might not be one in which we're familiar. Why is Jesus suddenly angry?

- [24 : 48] Why is he suddenly gripped with rage? Is he angry at the weeping of Mary and her friends? Both of them.

Twice they said, if you'd been there they wouldn't have died. Is he angry with their failure to be patient and to trust God? I don't think so.

Is he angry that they doubt? Does he think their faith is too weak, that they should be facing death with greater courage? No. I don't think so.

What is it, what is it that fills him with anger and rage? It is nothing less than the tyranny of sin and death. See, when God created the world everything was good.

Nothing in the world was not good. Man and woman were created to live before the face of God in fellowship with him enjoying the good life that he had prepared for them but man and woman rejected God's rule and demanded to go their own way and sin entered the world and brought slavery and slavery brought death.

- [25 : 59] Genesis 5, the first genealogy in the Bible hammers this reality home with in a poignant way. Adam lived 930 years and he died.

Seth lived 912 years and he died. Enosh 905 years and he died. Kenan 900, I don't know what number of years he did but and he died.

Mahalel he died. Jared he died. Methuselah he died. Lamech he died. The wind blows in one direction. Apart from the intervention of God there is no escape from the tyranny of sin and death.

Everyone who sins which is all of us and everyone who sins is a slave to sin and therefore enslaved to death itself and so the wind is blowing everything that direction that's the curse over all humanity and all this Jesus knew.

There's no surprises for the all-knowing God. He numbered all our days before there was one. He knows all about the painful reality of death but now Jesus knows the reality of death by experience.

- [27 : 23] He doesn't know it theoretically any longer. He knows it by experience. He's seeing the wreckage the sorrow. He's seeing how it's ripped apart families and communities.

He himself has his friend Lazarus ripped away from him so he weeps but he does not just weep he rages. He's not the great therapist.

Like he's not the all-powerful therapist in the sky coming to soothe your sorrows. It is wonderful that he does that. It's wonderful that he weeps with us but that is not in the end helpful in the final day.

He is the great rescuer coming to deliver us from sin and death. Hebrews 2 tells us this truth in this way the son of God himself partook of flesh and blood that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death that is the devil and might deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

So he's bound in this moment not merely by weeping but bound in this moment by rage. There's a book I read in college called the Helion.

[28 : 45] You can go search it on Google but it's basically the Germanic tribes had gathered together all the gospels and kind of tried to articulate it. Now these guys were wild men.

These were warriors. These were like take the hill kind of guys and kill everybody in the way kind of guys and so they gathered together the gospels and sought to articulate the gospels in a way that could be preached in the bars and different things like that.

There's several things that are fascinating about it but one of them is at the last supper They said Jesus took up his cup you know we think about these little thimble sized cups and drink them and Jesus took up his cup he chugged it down to the dregs and slammed it on the table.

He's not meek and mild he's going to rage against the rager the one who has imprisoned the world in sin and death and so Jesus approaches the tomb of Lazarus because he is our champion our ally our hero he's the true and better Moses who's come to command the one who holds the power of death let my people go he's the true and better David who's come to slay the great giant whose shadow is long and the fear of him terrorizes the people of God he's the true and better prophet who sees the dead dry bones around him and says live he's the true king who's come to deliver his people from every fear including the fear of death but is it good is it really good that God is angry that Jesus is angry you know we think of anger as this emotion that we must avoid at all cost in the movie the father the bride George Banks describes the anger problem in his family to his daughter's fiancé that's played by Steve

Martin which is fabulous but he says Annie is a very passionate person and passionate people tend to overreact at times Annie comes from a long line of major overreactors me I can definitely lose it my mother a nut my grandfather stories about him are legendary the good news however is that this overreacting tends to get proportionally less by generations so your kids could be normal do we want to get we want a God who's so passionate that he overreacts is that what this is an untethered God the reality is we should not want to worship a

[31 : 33] God who's never angry we confuse the scriptures when we say the God of the Old Testament is God of wrath God of the news God of love we misunderstand the way the Bible fits together it would be wrong for Jesus to stand at the tomb of Lazarus and not get angry if Jesus was not angry at sin and death he'd be unworthy of our worship so he takes his anger takes his anger out on sin and death to rescue us from the wrath we deserve point three Jesus raises the dead Jesus raises the dead what does Jesus do with all this anger Jesus goes to the tomb look at verse 38 then Jesus deeply moved again came to the tomb it was a cave and a stone lay against it much like our

Lord's tomb Jesus said take away the stone Martha the sister the dead man said to him Lord by this time there'll be an odor for he's been dead for days every detail in this story is carefully told one detail is the timing so so Jesus is told that Lazarus is ill and he waits two more days when he arrives at the tomb tells him to open the door they say it's been four days why is this underlined because Jews believed after four days the body passed on to Sheol he already had that separation of body and spirit nevertheless Jesus steps forward and says take away the stone and he prays to God thanks God for hearing him as he always does look at verse 33 when he said these things he cried out with a loud voice

Lazarus come out the man who died came out his hand and feet bound with linen straps his face wrapped in a cloth unbind him and let him go Jesus says Lazarus is raised from the dead it's such a fascinating scene because he's he's bound like all the way down his hands and feet and his face so he bounces out he's like sack race jumps out of the tomb what a fascinating way he doesn't run out he hops out like we do at the fair something like that he hops out of the grave what a wonderful triumph he's hopping out of the grave just like we will be set free to leap with joy and so Jesus raises Lazarus as a sign for all who believe that's what's going on in this passage in the gospel of

John Jesus does not perform miracles he performs signs he running through the gospel are sequences signs pointing to who he is as the son of God so the first sign Jesus turns water into wine the second sign Jesus heals the official son the third sign Jesus heals!

the paralyzed man at the pool fourth sign Jesus multiplies the raised Lazarus from the dead each of these signs are significant each of them showing us something each of us unveiling the glory of Jesus Christ that he has come from heaven that he is the son of God but the signs don't end with six there's a seventh sign Jesus is crucified the cross is the climax and culmination of all his signs it is the moment in which Jesus is glorified and lifted up so that he might draw all men to himself but beloved if you will there is still one more sign on the eighth day the eighth sign the greatest sign of all the sign that Lazarus is raising was pointing to is that Jesus is raised from the dead Jesus conquers the power of death conquers the sting of death his sacrifice is accepted by the father brings forgiveness and eternal life to all who trust on him and it happens on the eighth day because the first seven signs are the doing away with all that came before and the eighth sign is the introduction of the new creation he was raised on the first day of the week because he came to make all things new the old is gone the new has come he is a name above all

[36 : 37] Jesus raises Lazarus as a sign for all who trust in him look back in verse 23 Jesus said to Mary your brother will rise again Martha said I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day but Jesus said I am the resurrection and the life whoever believes in me though he die yet he shall live everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die the sign is not that Lazarus will rise again on the last day sometimes we think that's what the promise of the resurrection is it will rise again on the last day that's not the sign and the sign is not that

Lazarus is now alive which is a wonderful reality the sign is that Lazarus has been raised the same is true for us by faith when Jesus says I am the resurrection and the life he's saying that by faith in the death and resurrection in my death and resurrection you are raised to new life and given eternal life right now the old has gone the new has come you've been transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his beloved son right now so the sign is not that you'll be raised on the last day the sign is that you'll never have to be raised again that's the truth of the gospel that the new life that is breaking into this world that will suddenly fill this world is a new life to which you already belong and so the tyranny of death is overthrown by the gift of faith the victory of death is defeated the sting of death is removed the power of death is broken the fear of death is conquered the only truth that can conquer the fear of death the resurrection of

Jesus Christ in God's mercy I was able to visit each of my four grandfathers before they died actually not four grandfathers four grandparents however I'll never forget my last conversation with my papa now papa had worked hard and overcome many obstacles in his life child I'm an alcoholic he took a lot of responsibility early paved the way for his younger siblings he quit college to go to the war never able to return worked long hard hours for rest of his life papa though was a hard man rarely expressed love he quickly expressed his opinion very stubborn in his final years we disagreed on some very foundational and important things all this made my last encounter with him most significant and meaningful spring of 2008 papa was dying of cancer my wife kim and i made several trips to see him on one particular trip after greeting my grandfather grandmother!

I entered his room alone it's difficult to look at him cancer had racked his body reducing his large frame down to something like 160 pounds pain was eased with the slow drip of morphine but he was out of it he mostly slept or laid there in silence after a few minutes the nurse said he needed to be adjusted in bed with her help I climbed onto his bed leaned over him to pull up his body I'll never forget looking I still see it looking into his hollow failing eyes he was dying I sat there in silence with this man

I had a complicated relationship with after a while I asked if I could read the Bible to him I flipped to John 11 to read him this story I recited these amazing words as the last words I would ever say to him I am the resurrection life whoever believes in me shall not die and I declared to him the truth that since he had trusted in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of his sins for eternal life he would not taste death he would pass to glory he said to me I know that story I believe the very last words he ever uttered to me where

[42 : 24] I know that story he pointed at my Bible I know that story more than that I believe and so the only belief that will conquer death and the fear of death is a belief like that do you have hope in the face of death face of losing everything do you have confidence of where you'll spend eternity I'm not asking if you were baptized or if you go to church now and again asking are you prepared to die that's the question that our Lord lays out to you are you prepared to die if you're not wonderfully the

Bible says there's room for you to come to Jesus if you confess with your mouth that Christ is Lord you believe that God raised him from the dead not just for him but for you you will be saved if you believe not merely that Jesus is a savior not even merely that Jesus is a great savior but you must believe Jesus is my savior he my savior my savior my savior my you is a possessive pronoun so that you can say not merely that Jesus is a great man a great historical man a great savior of men so that you might say possessively he is my savior he is my resurrection and my life and so I do not fear death because

I'm going to bounce right in to glory let us pray father in heaven cast ourselves completely on you we thank you for all that is wonderfully true of us in Jesus Christ that there is no more condemnation that the spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God and if children then heirs that we have been set free from fear by being given the fear of a son and a daughter to know you cry out Abba father to walk with you we pray God I pray that no one would leave without being sure of where they stand before you in the life to come we cast ourselves on you completely Jesus name!

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