

GOD IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK

Through The Shadowlands

John 11

Created by *Dale Ohmart*

Big Idea: *God is with us in times of loss and death.*

This morning, we are going to conclude our series entitled **God Is Closer Than You Think**. I have really enjoyed this particular series, and several of you have mentioned that these messages have seemed especially helpful at this moment in your life. Today, we're going to talk about connecting with God in times of loss and death. At those times, God can seem especially distant. Focus your attention on the screen and I think you will see what I mean...

VIDEO DVD – *Screenvue*, vol. 1, disc 5. Category: GRIEF. “C.S. Lewis: Shadowlands – Lewis and boy grieve...” Time = 2:22

Death and loss separate us from what we love. It's painful. And it can feel like a separation from God, too. But that is a lie. In times of death and loss, whether we feel like it or not, God is closer than we think.

PRAYER – *Almighty God, our Rock and our Redeemer, across the generations comes the echo of your words, “I am and resurrection and the life.” We pray for those who are in mourning today, for those who are in despair, for those who have suffered loss. Stand with them and soothe the pain they fell. And more than anything else, remind them of their hope. Remind them, Lord Jesus, that You've been here. Remind them that there is more to our existence than this world can hold. Remind them of the stone that was rolled away and the tomb that is now empty. Remind us all that no matter what happens in life nothing can separate us from your love and we can look forward with hope and confidence because the God we worship and the Redeemer we trust for our salvation is ALIVE!*

SONGS

- *My Redeemer Lives*
- *My Glorious*
- *My Hope Is You*

COMMUNION – *Tim Gould*

PRESENTATION

From time to time, I feel compelled to stand before you and bare my soul about secret truths that have been carefully hidden throughout the course of my life. Today, God is impressing upon me the need to take another step in this uncomfortable journey of self-revelation. So, here it is, in all its ugliness...

I am somewhat competitive...just a little bit.

I know this comes as a surprise to most of you, because I smile so calmly when I'm involved in a losing endeavor. Like when my favorite college basketball team lost in the national tournament in the first round.

And take the calm way that I coach my kids in the YMCA leagues, gently instructing them from the sidelines. I keep telling them that the score doesn't matter. Well, not much, anyway. And certainly anyone would think that I have my competitive side under control if they had the opportunity to listen to all those conversations I had with Nathan after we would lose a baseball or a basketball game, and I would repeat over and over again, "Son, you learn so much more when you lose than when you win...you become a better player."

Well, the truth is that I like to succeed a lot more than I like to fail. I like to be the best a lot more than I like to be the worst. I like to win a lot more than I like to lose.

One of the most devastating labels in our culture today is the word LOSER. So much is communicated in these five letters. To be a LOSER means that a person doesn't measure up...a person is inferior...a person to be ridiculed...a person is to be avoided.

But the truth is that we have all been LOSERS at one point or another in our lives.

Russell waited a long time to get married. When she walked out after less than two years, the loss he felt was more significant than the thousands of dollars she had sucked out of his bank account. The dream of "happily-ever-after" had crumbled.

Brad had worked for a certain international airline since he graduated from high school. From handling luggage, he moved up through the ranks to the ticket counter and ultimately into the corporate sales division, handling multi-million dollar accounts. Then, the airline went bankrupt. Ambitious goals for career advancement were instantaneously replaced with the anxiety of unemployment.

We were celebrating Nathan's fifth birthday when the phone rang. Denise and Paul were bringing their baby home from the hospital for the very first time. For the first six months of his life, little Joseph had struggled to survive. Now with thousands of dollars worth of medical equipment installed, the doctors were ready to let his parents try it at home. Four hours after they got through the door, Joseph stopped breathing. Denise and Paul called me from the emergency room. And I sat with them when the doctor said that there was nothing more they could do.

At those times, God can seem very distant. The names in these vignettes have been changed, but these are three very real situations...people who are suffering very real times of loss. People who are walking through the shadowlands. That was the movie title for the true life story of C.S. Lewis and the experience of losing the love of his life, Joy Gresham. I couldn't find out for sure, so I won't tell you exactly where the term *shadowlands* was born, but it reminds me of that phrase from the **23rd Psalm, verse 4:**

...though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me... (KJV¹)

Even though it may feel like He's distant, God promises to be with us there. He promises to be with us while we wrestle with the question, WHY?

Wrestling with WHY ?

Or would it be more accurate to say that we wrestle with Him over the reasons why we have loss? Whatever the case, that question certainly haunts us in the shadowlands. Why did they reject me? Why did he walk

¹ All scriptures marked KJV are taken from the Holy Bible, King James Version. Public Domain.

away? Why did my company go out of business? Why did the person I love have to die? Jesus offers an answer for us, and it comes out of a shadowland experience He had.

During the course of His life, Jesus drew close to many people. One family included a man named Lazarus and his two sisters. On more than one occasion, significant things happened when Jesus went to have dinner at their home. And people began to sense a special bond between these two men. One day, as Jesus' ministry was moving toward its climax, a message came...one of those devastating interruptions that people get. Only in this case, it wasn't an interruption. This actually served the flow of Jesus' purpose.

John 11:3

"Lord, the one you love is very sick." (NLT²)

This wasn't a casual call across the neighborhood. There was distance involved. It took effort to communicate. So everybody knew that this sickness was more than a common cold or a flu bug. But Jesus didn't respond.

His friends were probably a bit relieved. After all, the last time Jesus has been in Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders had tried to kill Him. There was no evidence to suggest that they had changed their minds.

So, after a couple of days, when Jesus announced that it was time to go to Lazarus, they were plenty afraid. Especially when they heard that Lazarus was already dead. Why go now? It makes no sense. The explanation Jesus gave them is timeless. It reaches toward our questions all these generations later.

¹⁴Then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵And for your sake, I am glad I wasn't there, because this will give you another opportunity to believe in me..."

Death – at least *this* death – is an opportunity to believe? Isn't that what the Lord seems to be saying? I'll bet we can all think of less painful, more pleasant ways to build our faith. Get me out of debt overnight...now, that would be a great way to build my faith! Transform LifeSpring into the equivalent of a Pleasant Valley Baptist Church or a Northland Cathedral...that would be a great way to build my faith! Let the Royals win the 2005 World Series...that would absolutely cause people to believe in God!

That all sounds pretty good, doesn't it. But real faith doesn't exist when God is only a genie in a magic lamp in our eyes. And we don't wake up to certain realities without the pain of loss and death.

When Jesus got back to Lazarus' neighborhood, his sisters came to Him in tears. If only Jesus had come a few days earlier, everything would be alright.

²⁵Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. ²⁶They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish..."

Could it be that the only way to fully experience the presence of Christ is to walk through the shadowlands? If Jesus is the resurrection...if that is part of His identity...it seems logical then to say that you can't fully know Him or experience Him without loss and death. That's why Jesus didn't rush back to keep Lazarus from dying. Lazarus and his sisters may have thought they knew Jesus before, but after this they would realize a deeper level of relationship than they had ever thought possible.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptures quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation copyright © 1996 by [Tyndale Charitable Trust. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers.](#)

⁴³Then Jesus shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴And Lazarus came out, bound in graveclothes, his face wrapped in a headcloth. Jesus told them, "Unwrap him and let him go!"

One author³ suggests that Jesus' followers need to continue obeying His instructions to "unwrap him." All around us are people who are bound and blind. Their wrappings are the clothes of death...the habit of thinking about their existence only as it relates to the world that is measured by our five senses. Are you one of those who are trapped? Are the things that are valuable to you the same things that are valued by the culture around you? Is there any difference between the goals you have and the goals of your neighbor who doesn't give a split-second's worth of thought about God? Do you need to wake up to some new realities?

Waking up to NEW REALITIES .

God doesn't look at our existence the way we naturally do. His values are different. He is working to accomplish a different set of goals. He's calling us to experience a reality that goes way beyond what we measure with our eyes, our ears, our nose, our mouths and our fingertips.

C.S. Lewis sums it up like this: "You don't have a soul. You are a Soul. You have a body."⁴ Do you understand? We put the emphasis in our existence on our bodies. We talk about our souls as if they were like our appendix. We know that it's there...we just don't know what it's for. And if it gets diseased, well, we can get along without it. So we spend all our time and energy nurturing our bodies. Lewis is trying to tell us that our thinking is backwards. It is our bodies that are disposable, not our souls. And indeed, one day these tents of flesh (as they are called in the Bible) will be as useful to us as screen doors on a submarine. Our souls will simply leave them behind.

So it is our souls that ought to be nurtured. That should be more important to us than nurturing our bodies. In fact, we should use our bodies in an active way to nurture our souls.

It may be possible for us to learn this truth without the experience of loss, but I suspect the vast majority of us would not. So we experience death...we experience defeat...we experience disillusionment with this world and the people in our lives...both because it is inevitable and because it is beneficial. As painful as it may be, these shadowland experiences introduce us to a new level of intimacy in our relationship with He who is the resurrection and the life.

Resurrection³

If you don't mind, I want to refer back to another quote from C.S. Lewis, who once said, "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next."⁵ That's the type of Christian I want to be...so focused on the next world that I make a difference in this one. That is the power of resurrection at work. In fact, I'll call it resurrection to the third power because I can see three specific areas where it works in our existence.

1. Resurrection power transforms unresolved issues into new adventures.

Imagine a young college drop-out, unmotivated and sleepwalking through life. She gets a job to appease her folks and put an end to their ceaseless prodding. So she's standing on the street during her lunch break when

³ "Dead Like Me." From HomileticsOnline.com, John 11:1-45, 3/13/2005.

⁴ Copied from www.brainyquote.com.

⁵ *Ibid.*

pieces of the burned-up MIR Space Station begin raining down from the sky and she is instantly killed by...the toilet seat. But she doesn't realize that she's dead. As a crowd starts to gather around her, a kindly stranger named Rube introduces himself and enlightens her, pointing to her physical remains lying there on the pavement. Rube is the leader of the Pacific Northwest chapter of grim reapers – people who, like this young woman, have died with unresolved issues and now must learn lessons that they failed to learn in life for one reason or another.

I've just described for you the premise for a cable TV series called *Dead Like Me*. As I understand it, from what I've read, the show uses its characters to raise some pretty compelling questions about life and death. It represents the hunger for more than what life has to offer. It also represents the frustration of our generation with answers that fail to truly solve the struggles of life.

Maybe you have some of those struggles, and you are either too afraid or too tired to take them on. Maybe you have a sinful habit that is defeating you. Maybe you have a situation you have been trying to control and it is resisting you. Maybe you have a problem that refuses to be solved. I listened this past week as the radio broadcasters for the Royals talked about a friend who was in the hospital fighting a terminal illness, and how that struggle makes the problems of baseball seem suddenly far less urgent.

Let's take that thought one step further. Knowing that we are connected with the One who has the ability to undo death should remove all the intimidation away from every other threat we might face. That doesn't mean that our issues will be resolved overnight. But as we trust that there is life with God beyond the grave, we can learn to trust that God is working in the struggles of this life...and those struggles become adventures to see what He is going to do.

Matthew 11:28-30

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly. (MSG⁶)

2. Resurrection power treasures relationships.

You've probably heard this before...I know that I've said this before, but it is worth saying and hearing again. No dying person has ever wished he had more time with his date book or his PDA. He doesn't worry about whether or not he made his goals for this quarter. She doesn't fret over whether or not the house is clean. OK...maybe there are some women who would, but not most people. When a person is lying on his or her deathbed, the main concern is family. *Will I be able to see my children one last time? Is my spouse nearby? Am I ready to meet my God?*

Isn't it a shame that our primary concern when we are traveling through the shadowlands has to take a back seat to other interests throughout most other times in our lives. The movie *It's A Wonderful Life* doesn't show how George Bailey lived after his Christmas visit in the nightmare called Pottersville. But we do know that the only thing he could think about when he got back to Bedford Falls was to get home to his family.

⁶ All quotations marked "MSG" are taken from *The Message*. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002 by [Eugene H. Peterson](#)

Relationships are the real treasure of life. Everything else is just decoration. The only thing we will carry from this world into the next is our relationships. So invest everything you can in them now...your relationship with God, your relationships with your family, your relationships with friends, neighbors, co-workers...everybody.

3. *Resurrection power puts the fire of purpose in our souls.*

Does anyone know what today is? Has anyone every heard the word “Pentecost”? According to the calendar, this is kind of like the birthday of the church, in a sense. Of course, everybody knows that the BIG day was when Jesus rose from the dead. But those first fifty days were kind of a whirlwind...with Jesus making appearances all over the place and people trying to figure out exactly what was going on. Then, Jesus left, telling His followers to wait for a certain power to come from God. Then they would know what to do. So they waited there in Jerusalem, and on Pentecost, here’s what happened...

Acts 2:2-4

Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm in the skies above them, and it filled the house where they were meeting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.

And, to make a long story short, the apostles hit the streets and Peter preached a sermon the brought about three thousand people to be baptized. Man, I wish we had more of that type of fire in our souls today! Maybe we would if we didn’t have so much of our attention focused on this world. Shadowlands experiences remind us that there is more to our existence than this life has to offer. Resurrection power helps us see across to that other world, and see how desirable it really is.

Looking at life through the lens of DEATH.

Have you ever been in a group where the leader asks you to imagine what you would like the epitaph on your tombstone to read? What do you suppose the goal of that exercise is? The most natural thing I can think of is that if we want that epitaph to be true, we have to live like it between now and then.

Today, I’m wondering if there might be another way of applying some of these ideas. Because as we dream about the type of people we would like to become, and as we think about moving from this world into the next, I suspect there are certain aspects of our lifestyles that might be a bit out of place. Maybe we have habits that don’t belong. It’s not just that they don’t help us become the person we want to be, they actually are in conflict with that image. Or we might have some ambitions that are getting in the way and distracting us. If that is true, those habits and those ambitions and whatever else we might be wrestling with need to be put to death themselves. The longer they live, the stronger their grip will be on your life and your heart. Don’t give them any more of your energy. Don’t put your hope in them any longer.

Instead, emerge from the tomb they have created and take off the clothes of death. Discover and begin living in the new realities God made you to enjoy.

Dear Lord of Life, show us how to live right now. We hear you calling us from the shadows into what is really real. Free us from our fears, our doubts, our arrogance, our apathy. Breathe love and acceptance into our souls to erase the rejection we have felt. Nothing this world offers can compare to the purpose you can give our lives. Show us now the next step we need to take in our journey with you.