

"UP FROM DARKNESS" by Pastor George Spencer  
Presented at CrossRoad Church, Jacksonville Florida, October 17, 2010

VIDEO FROM Jesus of Nazareth – The Raising of Lazarus

One of the big questions in life for me is how do we deal with what happened when Jesus walked this earth and what's happening now as WE walk the earth.

One of the ways I deal with things is to find humor in anything I can.  
A good friend sent me this email with funny things kids in church say.

KIDS IN CHURCH (from the internet):

1. 3-year-old Reese prayed: 'Our Father, Who does art in heaven, Harold is His name. '  
Another 4-year-old prayed:  
'And forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets.'

2. A mother was preparing pancakes for her sons, Kevin 5, and Ryan 3.  
The boys begin to argue over who would get the first pancake.  
Their mother saw the opportunity for a life lesson, so she says:  
"If Jesus were sitting here, He would say,  
'Let my brother have the first pancake, I can wait.'"  
Kevin turns to his younger brother and said, 'Ryan, you be Jesus!'

3. Another little boy was overheard praying:  
'Lord, if you can't make me a better boy, don't worry about it.  
I'm having a real good time like I am.'

4. And finally, this one. After the baptism of his baby brother in church,  
young Jason was crying all the way home in the back seat of the car.  
His mom asked him: Jason, what's wrong? Jason says: "Nothing."  
Mom asks again: Jason, something's wrong. What is it?  
Jason says: "Nothing."  
The third time, Dad asks: Jason, tell me what you're upset about.  
Finally, Jason says:  
"Dad, the pastor said he wanted us brought up in a Christian home,  
but I want to stay with you guys!"

With the way life is, it would be a lot worse, wouldn't it, if we didn't laugh?

First, the bad news.

The economy is in shambles, everything costs more, people are working longer hours to keep their job while earning less, a foreign government holds much of the currency, the infrastructure of the country is falling apart, the government has taken over private businesses and enacted laws to tax the rich, so they're not investing their savings to create jobs; the poor get poorer because they can't work, because jobs are not being created; taxes are rising; fear and uncertainty are widespread; and the government has even made rules that preachers cannot speak about political issues.

That's what's going on in the nation that Jesus Christ came into 2,000 years ago – the nation of Israel. Some things don't change, do they? And yet, Jesus and His disciples and the people who followed Him made it through the tough circumstances, and so can we.

In this past week, there were the 33 miners nearly a ½ mile deep in the darkness of the earth for over two months. What was so compelling about that is we all know what it's like to feel trapped, physically or emotionally or spiritually, don't we?

Then there's the stuff that I am privileged to hear and to help with in any way I can, for you and your neighbors and friends here at church, and it starts with the words: Pastor George, can you help me?

And I want to thank all of you who asked the questions in this message and to you who answered them from God's Word and from your own experience.

My 39 year-old daughter died last night.

My wife is having back surgery because she's been in pain for 2 years.

My sister just took her own life.

I've been dating a man for over 10 years, and I don't know what to do now.

My son is in the military in Fort Knox KY, and we have no way to get there for his graduation.

My daughter is dating someone I don't think is good for her. (3 of those)

My wife just left me.

I've been having pain for 2 months, and I don't know what it is.

My father-in-law is in critical care.

My mother is back in the hospital.

My father is back in the hospital and they're moving from treatment to comfort care because they say he's terminal, and may have only a few days to live.

My mom had a stroke, and it's not looking good.

My sister is bleeding internally again.

My daughter seems depressed – can you talk with her?

My husband is out of work – can you help him? (2)

I'm out of work – do you know of any jobs? (3)

I can't make the rent – can somebody help me?

I can't pay the mortgage – can somebody help me?

I don't want to lose my family – can you recommend a counselor?

My friend's baby just died – can you call and talk to them?

My mother just had a stroke, my father is her primary caregiver, but he had to put her in a nursing home, because he was just diagnosed with cancer.

My friend is going for another chemo treatment.

Can you help me help 2 parents deal with their son who wants to run away?

One of the kids I care for on Sundays ran away from home.

I don't know how much longer I can stand this pain.

One of my church members here in Kansas has a daughter in the Baymeadows area who is dying.

Can you help the mother with a place to stay and transportation?

Well, that was my week. How was yours?

If you get nothing else out of today's message, please get this: There are 2 ways to cope with the world and its bad news: with God or without God.

If I didn't have God in my life, I could not do my job. And put this sermon together for today. As a friend prayed for me this morning: God, come and meet us with all of our junk, and transform our lives.

That's exactly why God sent Jesus: to show you and me that we can turn to God and each other, because without God, life would be too overwhelming.

In that video clip from Jesus of Nazareth, which is from our Bible reading today, John, chapter 11, Jesus is out of town, when Mary and Martha send someone to tell Jesus that their brother Lazarus is very sick. Jesus immediately says: "This sickness will not end in death, it's for the glory of God, so that the Son of Man may be glorified by it."

Jesus is famous for speaking in riddles. They're riddles to us, because most of the time, we're not used to looking at life from a heavenly perspective.

What Jesus says here is what his disciple Paul would say later on in Romans 8:28 – "God works everything for good, for those who LOVE Him, who are called according to HIS purpose."

Remember the J-O-Y Pastor Gee told us about last week, that he was reminded of by Alison Hunt: put Jesus first – then Others – then You – that's the key to JOY in our life.

**Vs 5 - "Now Jesus LOVED Martha and her sister (Mary) and Lazarus."**

The word love here is the Greek word *phileo* which means brotherly love.

**Vs 6 – 'So when He heard that Lazarus was sick, Jesus stayed two days longer in the place where He was.'**

When you and I hear that someone we love is deathly sick, what do we do?

Do we say: Well, I'm just going to sit here and relax and watch my favorite TV show and have some popcorn? NO! We get ready to go, we run to the car, and we drive as fast as we can to get there.

But God does things and allows things to happen that are totally different than what we would do, and totally different than we think God should do. That is so crazy, so different from the way we think. But with God, when things are not normal, if you will do it God's way, God will work it for good.

Jesus says: **Vs 7: "Let's go to Judea again."** The disciples are astonished, and say: "We were just there and they were getting ready to stone you to death, and you're going to go there again?"

Jesus responds with another riddle. **"Aren't there 12 hours in the day?"**

**If anyone walks in the day, he doesn't 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."**

Well, what does that mean?

The theme that 'God is light' is all through the Bible.

**Psalm 119:105 – "Your Word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path."**

**Isaiah 9:2 – “The people who walk in darkness will see a great light.”**

**Matthew 5:14 - “You are the light of the world.”**

In other words, if you walk with Jesus, you won't stumble when darkness and evil surround you. When you have Jesus, you'll have The Light of Jesus in you, on you, around you and with you.

Then Jesus says this heavenly thing:

“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, so I'm going to go wake him up.”

The disciples respond with the concrete, earthly words:

‘Well, if he's fallen asleep, he'll wake up.’ Like, what's the problem?

We think from an earthly view, when your BODY is dead, YOU are dead.

But from God's view, when your body is dead, YOU are still alive.

So Jesus speaks their language and says:

**VS 14-15 “Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I wasn't there, so that you may believe, but let us go to him.”**

Lazarus is dead and you're glad we weren't there!? And we're going to see him? So Thomas the disciple says to the others: OK, well, we might as well go too, so we can die with Jesus.'

So they head for the town of Bethany, a couple of miles from Jerusalem.

Mary and Martha have a bunch of family and friends consoling them, and Martha hears that Jesus is coming, so she runs to meet Him, and says:

**VS 21 – “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”**

How many times have you or someone you know prayed to God:

“God, please heal my brother, sister, mother father husband wife, child...’

And it happened! But then what about the times when you prayed, and it didn't happen? And what do we say to God? “God, where were you when I needed you? Where were you, God??”

Isn't that part of what Martha's saying?

But isn't it true that when we cry out to God like that, it's because we actually believe that God IS real and God CAN cure the illness or the disease or keep them from death, so why doesn't He?

Why do we go through suffering? The easy answer is that God gives everyone free will, and that we mess ourselves up, and others too. And I want to tell you that for me, when things are going well, I'm often far from God, because usually we only get close to God when we really need God, don't we?

From our view, death is a horrible punishment. From God's view, death is the big reward.

There's nothing better than going home to our mansion that Jesus is already preparing for us, in a place where there is no more fear, no more sorrow, no more death, no more tears.

That's why sometimes God DOES allow nature to run its course.

But sometimes God does not. But why not?

There are many answers to that question, but there are only two answers that make any sense. The first answer is the one we all come to naturally.

In the accident, why did he die, but I survived?

Why did all those miners in Chile live,

but why did the miners in Kentucky and Utah die?

Why did this child with leukemia die, but that one lived?

Why did this guilty dirtbag escape, but this sweet innocent person died?

Why did this wonderful person get murdered, and the killer is never caught?

The natural answer to all these questions is: "I don't know." But God does NOT leave us there. And here, Martha's faith shines through, when she says to Jesus:

**VS 22 – "But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give you."**

Like Martha, we all know everybody dies. The death rate on earth is 100%.

But we just want to put it off as long as possible.

Some of us are afraid to die, because we don't have the assurance that when we die, we'll go to heaven. We're scared to die, because we say: I can't trust God enough to believe Him, to invite Him to be the ruler, the Lord, the leader of my life. It's scary trusting someone who's invisible, when the world is going crazy around me, but I know I can count on me.

Except...when I'm overwhelmed by the world and I freak out and do something dumb to cope with it, and get myself backed into a corner and everything is upside down in my life, and I can't get myself out.

When you invite Jesus to be your Savior, you CAN have that peace that only comes from God. And then when you learn God's ways, you still get to manage your life but you do it God's way, and you get real peace.

The whole world was watching the drama at the mine in Chile on Tuesday and Wednesday. The miners in Chile ½ a mile under the earth didn't give up. They kept alive with one spoonful of food at a time, sharing stories, laughing, praying, crying, singing, working out, supporting each other. They had the Jesus movie on MP3's and they watched and listened for hours. They were with each other for over 2 months in that mine.

But they believed and they trusted that they would NOT stay in the darkness. And WE can believe and trust that we don't have to stay there either. Not with Jesus Christ, The Light of the world. Did you know that 2 of the 33 miners gave their lives to Jesus Christ?

With Jesus, when it is your turn to die, you will be blessed to have the assurance that the moment your body dies, your soul – your true self - will be carried to heaven by Jesus Himself. That's His promise in John 14.

With Jesus, when you're suffering like Martha, like those miners, like your loved ones, like your friends and neighbors, you should NOT give up asking Jesus to keep you - or someone you love – alive and well.

Some of us who are ready to die, aren't ready to go yet because we've got too much to do. We have children to raise, sons and daughters to get married, grandchildren to enjoy, who need to know - from you - that God loves them.

Jesus says to Martha: "Your brother WILL rise again."

In other words, Lazarus will be in heaven waiting for you when you get there. And Martha responds with faith: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." She believes what Jesus says, but this one time, Jesus is going to do something different.

Jesus says in another riddle: **VS 25 - "I AM the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live, even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"**

Well, do YOU? Any time, anywhere, with any one, Jesus can choose to cure someone of illness, disease, even death. Sometimes He does, sometimes he doesn't. Why? The first answer is: I don't know.

The second answer from God is: TRUST ME. I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS.

God will choose to do what's best for you, for the person you're praying for, and for the eternal salvation of people whose lives YOU will touch. That's incredible, but true.

Job was a man totally blessed by God, but then, he suffered the deaths of several family members, the loss of his wealth, he was racked by disease, and he lost all but a few friends. His own loving wife gave him this saintly advice: "Curse God and die!"

But through it all, Job would not give up praying and talking with God, and then he made this incredible affirmation of faith: **Job 13: 15 - 'Even if God kills me, I will still trust Him.'**

Do you trust God like that?

Near the end of his patience, Job yelled out to God: "What are you doing to me? Why are doing this? Why are you letting this happen?"

And God's response is loud and clear, in a way that humbles Job, and Job repents and give thanks to God, and when you read it, you can't help but be humbled.

(God talking to Job hundreds of years ago shows up in the new movie Secretariat, right at the beginning of the movie. If you love horses, you would love this movie. But even if you don't, if you want to be inspired and encouraged, and watch how God shows up quietly in this true story, you can see how God can work in your life too.)

With Job, at the right time and place and when God's purpose for Job going through all this was fulfilled, God shows us that when Job prayed for his friends, Job was restored to health, and he was blessed again with family and friends, and he was able to build up and enjoy his life again.

Do you believe this? Martha says: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ (meaning the Savior), the Son of God who has come into the world."

Then Mary comes to Jesus and says the same thing Martha said:

**"Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died."**

Jesus looks at her and she's not just crying, she's WEEPING, and her friends and neighbors are WEEPING. And Jesus says: Where have you laid him? She says, still WEEPING: "Come and see."

And then it happens. The most incredibly profound and surprising thing from Jesus, in the shortest verse in the Bible. Jesus is so deeply moved. And we read these two words:

**VS 35 - "Jesus wept."**

When YOU are going through the tragedy, JESUS WEEPS WITH YOU. God shows us in the Bible and in life, God is right here going through it too – with you. God was weeping when Jesus was hanging on the Cross in agony, dying there for you and me. Jesus WEEPS with you in your loss.

When I was talking about this message with two of my friends this week, one of them said: "When we're in the middle of grieving, it feels like you're all alone. It feels like everything that's happening, it's just happening to you. It's tempting to think you're all alone, but Jesus prays out loud to God, for everyone to hear, to show us that we're not alone. We need to hear that." She's right.

The second friend said: "We have a culture that encourages us to go through things alone. But what makes us unique and strong is the fact that others CAN walk through it with you. I remember going through it when my wife and I were experiencing infertility. People shared their stories with us. And for some reason, God blessed us with a baby, but I don't know why." And then he went on to say: "Hearing stories of what others go through shows us that when we're willing to share our stories, when we feel the need to be there for others, there IS light, there IS hope." He's right.

We don't know why God does things or allows things, but one thing is clear to the people around Jesus. Everyone says: 'See how Jesus loved Lazarus.'

When you're going through a tough time, all you want to know is: "Does someone care?" And Jesus shows us loud and clear: "I care."

Jesus was so moved, he wept and came to the tomb where Lazarus was buried and said to the men around: **"Remove the stone."**

Whatever is an obstacle between you and God, get it out of the way.

And Martha says:

'Lord, by this time there's going to be a stink...he's been dead 4 days.'

Jesus turns to her and says: **VS 40 - "Didn't I tell you that if you believe, you WILL see the glory of God?"**

Then Jesus prays this out loud:

**VS 41-42 - 'Father, I thank you that You have heard me. I know that you always hear me, but because of the people standing around, I'm saying this so that they may believe that You sent Me.'**

So this time, Jesus will speak these words to raise someone from death, not to make Himself look good, not for Lazarus, not for the weeping sisters, not for the weeping family, but for ALL the people around, for ALL the people who would hear it down through the centuries, and for YOU and me here today –

“LAZARUS, COME FORTH!”

Can you imagine what would have happened if Jesus had just said:  
“Come forth!” Every body in that tomb would have walked out of there.

And Lazarus who had died came forth, still bound with the funeral wrappings, from his head and his face, all the way down to his toes. After 4 days. In a closed tomb. Sealed by a stone. It’s impossible. But what’s impossible with God? Nothing.

Jesus did this, so that you could believe Jesus and trust Jesus.  
You can believe that God can – and will - raise you and me – and your loved ones - from death to new life, when our body dies.

Remember you are NOT an earthly body with a soul.  
In God’s eyes, you are a soul with an earthly body.

God raised Lazarus from death, and his self, his soul, re-entered his body.  
Which means that heaven is close to us, only a prayer away.

And the last thing that happens is that Jesus says:  
**VS 44 - “Unbind him and let him go.”**

Did you see the first miner who came out of the tomb? He hugged everyone, but there didn’t seem to be any light on his face or in his eyes. But did you see the second guy? He was smiling and laughing and hugging everyone. He hugged the President of his country 3 times.  
Yes, they will all go through a lot to adjust to the real world again, but they’re up from darkness, and they’re alive.

Are you still bound by your earthly wrappings and trappings?  
Are you still trapped in a mine that’s not your fault, or in a cave of your own making? You need to let Jesus unbind you and let you go, to come up from darkness and to become the heavenly being having an earthly experience that God created you to be and to have.

I’d like to share with you some of The Light that you shared with me in this past week:

My 39-year-old daughter is in heaven and her body will be donated to science, her organs will be donated to people in need, and the remains will be transported to us at no charge.  
The medication I’m taking is working.  
I know that my sister is in God’s loving arms no matter what.  
My family and I are closer because of what happened.  
Every 3 months I get checked, and all the tests came back clear – there is NO cancer, where there was cancer three years ago.

We got here safely. The graduation is tonight, and tomorrow we'll learn where he's being deployed. Thank you!

They were tracking a nodule in my breast, and I'm just leaving my doctor's office, and I had to call you. I don't have to go back for a year, I'm healthy and I'll be around longer to bug everybody!

My daughter is doing better after talking with you.

Pastor George, I got a job! (OK, 4 more to go!)

She got through the last chemo treatment.

The pain is gone.

The girl that ran away came home.

And everyone who said these things also added one of these:

Thank you for your prayers!

Please thank everyone at church for their prayers!

Please keep praying for me! and...

Thank you!

Last Monday night, I sat with a husband and wife for a simple, delicious dinner, and after, the wife shared with me her story. In 2001, the doctors first gave the husband their prediction that his beloved wife would live only days. In fact, her doctors had given up on treatment. But then she prayed, her loving husband prayed, the people who knew her prayed, a nurse came in after her shift and prayed, even the hospital janitor came to her room and prayed.

A few days later, a group of doctors gathered in her room, and the head doctor said: "...we don't know why your wife is alive. We would like to take credit for it, but all we know is...you certainly have a Higher Power." That beloved wife and mother is still living today, nine years later. We don't know why, but God does. For the last five years, she has been praying for you, for the names that are on the prayernet list and my hospital list. Now she is fighting again for her health - I don't know why, but God does.

And then she said this: What if God could not bless you and your life with you going through suffering. What if God could not manage to ripen your life without suffering?

So I'm asking you to pray for her. Her name is Leslie.

And please pray for everyone who is in need of God in their life.

How many among us here have been healed by God, physically, emotionally, spiritually? If you don't believe me, then please believe your friends and neighbors who have been healed.

And those miners? Well, if you were able to live with the suspense, you saw them come out of the mine, one by one. And then the rescue workers.

You saw the men from the company in Pennsylvania with their state-of-the art drill bit, and the people from NASA, who made you proud to be American.

And did you hear the Good News?

Mario Sepulveda - the miners nicknamed him Super Mario - because he was always 'up" and on fire for God - Mario said: "We were walking hand-in-hand with God."

The youngest miner Jimmy Sanchez said: "There were actually 34 of us down there. God never left us."

And God will never leave YOU.  
 And God will inspire you to work whatever is happening to you for good.  
 Like the story behind this next song....

One day, during a church staff meeting, a youth pastor named Steven was praying and he said these words: "Lord, I would give my life today, if it would shake the youth of the nation." Later that night, a friend of the youth pastor named John Mark McMillan was at home sleeping, when his phone rang. The voice on the other end told him that his friend Steven, the youth pastor, had been killed in a car accident that very night.

The next morning John Mark got up and he started to write a song. He says he wrote it (and I quote) "as a celebration of a God who would want to hang with us...despite who we are." The song didn't get a lot of attention at first, and John Mark felt like people had forgotten about his friend Steven, but then suddenly, the song took off. It has become one of the most popular songs on Christian radio and one of our favorites here at CrossRoad.

Here's Melody and the ensemble to sing it....

SONG: HOW HE LOVES

Will you pray with me?

God, we know people will still suffer, people still die, diseases still come,  
 the economy and world events are still out of our control, but You are in control.  
 We KNOW you love us. You hear our prayers and answer them, according to Your will for us, for those You love, and for Your purpose of saving the world.  
 You will come to us when we call, sometimes not right away, but You know what we need.  
 You weep when we weep. You promise to BE the resurrection and the life for US.  
 You promise to raise us up from darkness, And You promise to be with us forever.  
 You are greater than any battle, any sickness, any disease, any obstacle, and nothing can ever separate us from Your love.

You didn't even spare your own Son, Jesus Christ, from death on a cross.  
 You allowed Him to die, to pay the penalty for our sins.  
 You allowed him to be buried in a tomb, closed and sealed with a stone.  
 But on Sunday morning, you raised Jesus from death, in this life,  
 so that people there would see Him in the flesh.

You are the one true living God who is greater, stronger, higher,  
 and You love us so much, You ARE with us always.  
 Bless each person here at CrossRoad, that no matter what,  
 we WILL pray to you and thank you and love you and sing praises to you,  
 in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

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