

Love Waits

Loving The Way Jesus Loves

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The old man and his wife sat together in the front seat of the car out in the garage. They had often sat talking together over the course of some 60 years of marriage, but now the wife had Alzheimer's and her thoughts often returned to her teenage years when, as a young girl, her mother died and she would take care of her father often turning on the lights at the house so that the house would be ready when he returned, setting food out on the table if he was hungry when he came home from work or, as was often the case, from the local bar. And tonight she was insisting on going back home to take care of her father.

"Now, sweetheart," her husband said to her kindly, "Do you know what I am going to say to you?"

"Yes," she said. "You are going to tell me that dad died 50 years ago. But somehow I feel in my heart that he will be waiting for me. I am not getting out of the car until you take me home."

"But, sweetheart," her husband said, "We are home. We have a nice apartment here with our son."

"No," she said firmly. "Not here. Home."

And so the conversation went until finally their son came out to the garage and found them sitting there talking.

"Dad," he said, "How long have you been out here?"

"Oh," he said, "About two hours."

Now Carroll Wynn shared that story with me a few weeks ago as an illustration from the life of his own family of what it means to be patient. Many of us would hardly have the patience to explain something to someone for two minutes, let alone to explain it over and over again for two hours. But such is the patience of love.

Now the apostle Paul began his portrait of love that he drew for the Corinthians by saying, in these simple words. You see them in your order of service this morning.

“Love is patient.”¹

That is a lesson it takes many people a lifetime to learn if they ever learn it at all. And the biggest challenge for us in this verse is not so much to understand what Paul meant, as it is to do what he said.

I am reminded of Mark Twain’s famous comment. “It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand me that bother me. It is those parts that I do understand.”

And here is one of those parts that is easy enough to understand.

“Love is patient.”²

I want to show you that patience exemplified in the life of Christ and also empowered in our own lives by the Holy Spirit. But first I do want to say a few words just about the meaning of this phrase to make sure that we do understand it.

According to the King James version, “Love suffereth long.”³

A translation that points to one very legitimate translation of the biblical word for patience. Love is long suffering. Patience is that ability to put up with frustration, the frustration we face in a fallen world any time we have a relationship with someone who is at least as flawed and as fallen as we are.

A good synonym is forbearance.

Anthony Thistleton would like to use the word “long tempered” here and wonders why we don’t have that word in English. Presumably because so many of us are short tempered that the idea of being long tempered hardly ever occurs.

I think it helps in thinking of the translation of this phrase to remember that all of the virtues here are active verbs. They are not merely nouns or adjectives. Paul is talking here about an active and practical patience.

I wonder if we might do well to translate the verse like this. “Love waits patiently.”

And in telling us this, the Bible is simply telling us to imitate the character of our God, how patient he is with us, not holding our sins against us including all of our sins of impatience, but with great forbearance, waiting patiently for us to come to him and confess those sins, always waiting to give us a chance to repent.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:4.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

And Paul had experienced that kind of patience in his own life. You may remember he was a man who had rebelled against God. He hated the gospel. He was persecuting the Church and yet rather than destroying him, God patiently waited for that moment in his life when the Holy Spirit revealed to Paul the risen Christ and he came to faith and offered his life for gospel service.

So it is not surprising that when Paul testified to the work of God in his life, as he does, for example, in 1 Timothy chapter one, he attributed it all to the perfect patience of Jesus Christ, the kind of perfect patience that leads sinners to eternal life.

I wonder if you have experienced that patience in your own life. If God has not yet condemned you for your sins it is simply because he is showing forbearance. Don't let that longsuffering cause you to presume upon the patience of God, but let it compel you to commit your life to Christ. Come to him for forgiveness and to do it now while he is still giving you the opportunity.

And then after that, having done that, obey God by being patient the way that he is patient.

Do I need to remind you how hard that is for us? Do I need to work hard this morning to convict you of the sin of impatience? Probably not. I think what we really need here is not so much more conviction of our sin, but more help of the Holy Spirit.

But just in case you may think that you have already succeeded in learning how to be patient, I want to repeat just a few of the questions that John Sanderson asks about the frustrations of life.

Why is it, he asks, that tires go flat when we are in a hurry to keep an appointment?

Why does the vacuum cleaner stop working on the day when company is coming?

And then, having asked some questions like that, he asks the most important question of all. Why are we so unhappy and frustrated when these things occur?

And it would be easy to add more questions to that list.

Why does my child wait until nine o'clock the night before a major project is due to ask if I can take her to the store and get some poster board?

It would never happen in our house, of course.

Why did the most difficult person to deal with at work get promoted to become my supervisor?

More seriously, why doesn't God hurry up and make everything right with this world?

Well, one good place to learn the patience of love is in the story of Lazarus and the empty tomb. I invite you to turn to John chapter 11. It is on page 897 of the church Bible—a chapter in which Jesus Christ takes, frankly, his own sweet time to let a man die before bringing him back to life. John chapter 11.

And throughout the whole passage Jesus displays his patience and his love and also shows us, I think, why we have good reason to be patient, too.

The story begins with the man on his death bed. It was Lazarus of Bethany, the brother of Mary and Martha. And he was desperately ill and so his sisters sent word to Jesus. You see it in verse three.

“Lord, he whom you love is ill.”⁴

Not simply a statement of fact, of course, but an urgent plea for assistance. They wanted Jesus to drop whatever he was doing and come right away and save their brother. And they had every expectation that he would because as they say here that this was a man that Jesus loved. They are pressing this upon Jesus, the claims of love.

And yet rather than recognizing the urgency of the situation, Jesus gives what seems to be a very dismissive response.

“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.”⁵

But if Jesus meant by this that Lazarus did not have a fatal disease, well, he was dead wrong because Lazarus did, in fact, die. And that becomes clear to us even before we get to Bethany. Jesus says as much in verse 14.

And how exasperating it was, therefore, that Jesus waited for two whole days before going back to Bethany.

I think from a merely human perspective, verses five and six hardly seem to make sense.

Look at verse five.

“Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill...”⁶

Well, how would you finish the verse? He went right back to Bethany? He went right away and healed the brother?

⁴ John 11:3.

⁵ John 11:4.

⁶ John 11:5-6.

No, “He stayed two days longer in the place where he was.”⁷

I mean, if Jesus loved these people why didn’t he hurry up and help them. Instead, he makes this intentional delay which results in suffering and death.

And Jesus seemed to be pretty happy about it, too. Notice what he says to his disciples in verse 14 and 15.

“Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there.”⁸

Well, I don’t know about you, but if I had been one of those disciples I would have been frantic with worry, desperate for Jesus to hurry up and upset that he arrives seemingly to late to rescue Lazarus.

To me the opening part of John 11 is kind of like a scene from a suspense film where one of the characters is so slow to do what desperately needs to be done that people in the movie theater start shouting out telling him to hurry up and do what needs to be done.

John does not tell us whether the disciples were impatient or not, but it is clear that Mary and Martha were. Their reproach is unmistakable.

Jesus arrives at the house. The first words out of Martha’s mouth, notice verse 21, were, “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.”⁹

Meanwhile Mary was still inside the house giving Jesus the silent treatment I think. I mean, she is not going to come out to him, not after what has happened. And when she finally speaks, verse 32, she says exactly what Martha said.

“If you had been here...”

And so for days on end Mary and Martha had watched their brother’s agonizing decline wondering when Jesus would hurry up and get to Bethany. And he failed to show up on time, they let him know exactly what they thought about a delay so costly that it had claimed their brother’s life.

And yet through all of this Jesus is totally unhurried. He waits very patiently for two days before setting out for Bethany. He patiently takes the time to explain to his disciples that he has a plan to glorify God. He patiently takes the time with Martha to tell her why her brother would rise again and calling her to put her faith in him. He patiently comforts Mary as we will see, letting her tears touch his heart with sorrow.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John 11:14-15.

⁹ John 11:21.

And after all of this, after all it is one of the longest miracle stories in the gospels. John really takes his leisurely time to let the whole story develop and by the end of it a whole crowd is gathered at the tomb and they, too, seem to be critical of Jesus for his poor timing.

Verse 37.

“Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?”¹⁰

Yes, Jesus certainly could have kept the man from dying if he had arrived sooner instead of dilly dallying for a couple of days the way that he did.

And yet in the end none of this mattered and Jesus finally stood in front of the tomb and gave the first of his immortal commands. “Take away the stone.”¹¹

Martha told him it was much too late, but if he wanted to do any saving, he had missed his chance.

“Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.”¹²

And yet patiently Jesus responds to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?”¹³

And then he proved it with this second command.

“Lazarus come out.”¹⁴

And by his miraculous power, simply by the voice of his command Jesus raised this man to life. And when he did, what had seemed like a costly delay actually proved to be the set up for a life giving miracle, Lazarus delivered.

And what all of this proves is not just the patience of Jesus, although we see that, but also his love.

One of the remarkable things about this story is the testimonies all the way through it of the love of Jesus.

Notice verse three, his love for Lazarus. What the sister said was true that he really did love Lazarus.

¹⁰ John 11:37.

¹¹ John 11:39.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ John 11:40.

¹⁴ John 11:43.

And not just Lazarus, verse five. He loves Mary and he loves Martha and he loves Lazarus. He loves all of them.

You see his love for his disciples in verse 15. He is talking about what has happened. He says, “For your sake I am glad it has happened this way because I have something I want to show you, something I desire for you to learn.” It was all part of his love for his disciples.

And if we begin to doubt, because of what happens and all of the suffering whether Jesus really did love these people, we believe it when we see the dead man come back from to the grave. And we see that the patience of Jesus really has been an expression of his affection.

I like the way James Boice put it in his commentary on this passage. He said, “The delays of Christ are the delays of love.”

And John 11 does something more, I think, than simply show us the loving patience of Jesus Christ. I think it also helps us understand why we should be patient, patient with God, patient with the difficult troubles of life and patient with one another.

And so let me suggest some of the reasons why love waits.

First because God is in control. From the perspective of Mary and Martha it seemed like everything was out of control. Their brother was dying. Any help that Jesus seemed to be able to give came too late to make a difference. And in the same way our own impatience usually comes when things are out of our control. And so children get impatient with their parents.

“You never let me do what I want.”

Parents get impatient with their children.

“When will you ever learn?”

On the job we get impatient with coworkers who make it harder for us to do our jobs or in the marketplace we get impatient with the incompetence of people who don’t seem to know how to do what they are supposed to do to help us.

The weekend comes. We get impatient with our friends because their interests don’t seem to match our plans. So often it happens when other people fail to meet our agenda. Rather than waiting for God to work, we try to play God for other people and underneath that impatience, I think, is our impatience with God.

Because if you have really surrendered your home life and your school work and your on the job calling and your relationships to the lordship of Jesus Christ, then you are able to wait patiently for him to work things out.

But, instead, so often we are struggling for more of our own control and impatient when we fail to get it.

This is one of the ways John 11 helps us. It shows us that God is in control even if it doesn't seem that way to us.

All the way through this passage, Jesus is totally in control. He knows the end of the story from the beginning.

And so when he first hears that Lazarus is sick, he makes this declaration, that this illness does not lead to death.

Two days later Lazarus is dead, but Jesus is still in control.

He says in verse 11, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him."¹⁵

Other people are saying, "What is the use? Lazarus is already dead."

But here is the Lord of life. He is working his plan even if it will take a miracle to do it, because not even death can challenge his sovereign rule. He is in control.

And this is one of the main things to remember. Whenever we start to get impatient that he is still in control. Love has the patience to see that.

I like the words of Jonathan Edwards.

"Love to God disposes men to see his hand in everything, to own him as the governor of the world and the director of providence and to acknowledge his disposal in everything that takes place."

Is that what you believe about the sovereign God and his control over the world? If you do, it will help you be more patient with the struggles of life.

But now here is something else, a second reason to be patient, very closely related, but takes us farther. Love waits because God is at work. It is not just that he is in control, but that he is at work doing something good in the lives of his people.

At the beginning of this story when Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick he said that this illness—notice this in verse four—had a purpose. It was for the glory of God so that the Son of God might be glorified through it. You see, God was at work. He wasn't just in charge of these things, but he had a purpose in them.

And at the end of the story when we get to verse 40 and Martha, frankly, doubts whether Jesus can raise the dead, he says, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"¹⁶

¹⁵ John 11:11.

“And don’t you understand, Martha, I have been at work all along and now you will see it?”

If people believed, they would see God at work, ready to show his glory.

We see his work here in the lives of the disciples. He is teaching them about the patience and the power of God.

We certainly see him at work in Martha’s life, don’t we? If you know anything about Martha you may remember there was a time in life when her impatience got the best of her.

Do you remember that scene in the kitchen and in the living room at Bethany, Mary out at the feet of Jesus listening and learning from him, Martha in the kitchen banking all the pots and pans wondering why her sister wasn’t helping and then going right out into the living room and telling Jesus everything that was wrong with her sister?

We don’t see that here, do we? We see her ready to learn from Jesus and able to grow in faith.

She says to Jesus in verse 22, “Even now...” Even now, you see, that her brother is dead, “I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.”¹⁷

God is at work here in Martha’s life. It is through the very difficulties that she is learning to trust God and pray to him.

She also learns from Jesus about the resurrection. She thinks that the raising of the dead is only something for sometime in the future, but Jesus wants her to know that he himself in his own living person holds the power of death.

“I am the resurrection,”¹⁸ he says to her.

And then these great words in verse 26, “Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.”¹⁹

And God is at work in Martha’s life. She responds with a great confession of faith. I wonder. Are you able to make the same confession?

“Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”²⁰

¹⁶ John 11:40.

¹⁷ John 11:22.

¹⁸ John 11:25.

¹⁹ John 11:26.

²⁰ John 11:27.

You see, God is at work here. He is in control of the whole situation and because he is in control he is able to work in the lives of these people. He is at work in Mary's life. He is showing her his compassion. He is at work in the lives of these mourners who are gathered at the tomb. God is working in their lives, too. He is showing them his glory through one of the greatest miracles that Jesus ever performed.

Look at what Jesus is doing all the way through the passage. He is working in this life and he is working in that life. He is working in another life. He is always at work. God is in control, yes, but in control he is working to show us his glory and to help us know him as he is.

And that is something to remember when you are starting to get impatient.

Even if we do not understand what God is doing, we can know that he is at work. And it happens every day.

I just think of examples I have heard from the life of our own church, a couple having car trouble on a lonely beach, stuck for a whole day. I mean, who wouldn't be impatient about that? And yet over the course of the day they befriend someone who has never heard the gospel and they have a chance to share their testimony of faith in Christ.

I think of a mother and daughter going from store to store frustrated that they can't find the right school supplies, but at the last store they end up in line next to a woman who is anxious about her son's new school and needs encouragement.

This is the way that God works.

And through all of that he is working in our own lives as well. So often we are in a hurry for God to work in someone else's life or to fix some situation. He is busy wanting to do something in us.

And so rather than getting impatient with our problems and with those problem people, if you have any in your life, what we need to do is practice the presence of God, recognizing that he is in the situation and that we can call to him for help.

And so we pray like this. "Lord, I am so impatient right now I can hardly stand it. But deep down I know that you are in this situation not outside of it and maybe just possibly you might be doing something good here. Help me to see what it is, or, if I can't see it yet, help me to know and believe that you know what you are doing."

You see, God is busy doing more spiritual good than we know, bringing more glory to his name than we can ever imagine and so we have every reason to wait patiently for him to do his work.

But now I need to tell you that knowing that God is in control and even believing that he is at work does not mean that we will not suffer. And this is another lesson John 11 teaches us about patience, that love waits even through suffering.

And remember the way that we can translate this word for patience, “Love suffers long.”

In fact, this is one of the reasons why we need to be so patient, it is because there are so many sufferings in life. We certainly see some of the worst sufferings here, illness, death, sorrow and we see this in the life of Lazarus. We can sympathize with him, particularly any of us who have suffered diseases from the body, his physical illness.

We can certainly sympathize with these sisters watching their brother die and with the sorrows of this grieving community we have all suffered loss in life. And these people suffered these things in spite of the fact, indeed, given what Jesus says at the beginning, I think we could say because of the fact that Jesus loved them.

And notice this as well, that no one suffered any more than Jesus. We see this in the way that he relates to Mary. What an extraordinary verse this is.

Verse 33.

“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.”²¹

Here is a Savior whose heart is touched by the sorrows of his people. In fact, the vocabulary indicates extremely intense emotion, great sadness.

The word for trouble more accurately, I think, could be rendered in terms of rage or anger. Jesus is angry by the effect that death has on the human race. He is seeing it first hand and it has a powerful response in his soul, a response emotionally that takes its natural physiological course. We see that in the Bible’s shortest verse, also one of its most remarkable, verse 35.

“Jesus wept.”²²

And the reason for his tears was not lost on those who were gathered at that tomb. They say, “See how he loved him!”²³

And then, of course, none of this would have been necessary had Jesus simply returned to Bethany the moment he heard that Lazarus was sick. But Jesus was waiting, waiting patiently, waiting for the glory of God, even though suffering, a delay that was not just costly for others, notice, but costly for him as well.

²¹ John 11:33.

²² John 11:35.

²³ John 11:36.

But, you see, love waits even though suffering. And seeing this, seeing Jesus suffer in this way, I think, helps give us more patience in our own sufferings. Here we are waiting for our suffering to come to an end, waiting patiently, perhaps, or at least knowing that we ought to wait patiently. And all along we are covered by the love of Jesus who understands, who knows what it is like to have in his own life a costly delay that brings him through suffering.

And so when we are called to wait patiently through suffering God sends us a Savior who can help us and comfort us, a Savior who understands and knows what it is like to go through that kind of experience.

This is something to remember whenever we get impatient. Jesus knows and cares about our earthly struggles and in the end, they will all come to an end.

There is a final reason to be patient because God will make sure that everything turns out right in the end.

Love can keep waiting and waiting and waiting patiently because there is a day coming when God will make everything right.

I think this raising of Lazarus is one of the Bibles clearest signs that God has the power to do that.

Of course Jesus could have performed some kind of miracle right away, the moment he heard that Lazarus was sick, but then it only would have been a miracle of coming back to health, not a miracle of coming back to life.

God had this plan to make a more complete display of his mighty power. And so Jesus waits all the way through the passage, waiting on his Father with totally trusting faith. And when the time was right, the glory of God to be revealed, Jesus did what he does in verse 41 and he lifts his eyes to heaven and having prayed for a miracle, he thanks the Father for hearing the prayer and then commands Lazarus to come out from the grave, not the man's final resurrection, of course, because Lazarus would die again. But it was a sign of God's power over death, a testimony that on the last of all days the children of God will rise up with immortal splendor and that we will never die again. This is the gospel hope that Jesus confirmed by his own resurrection from the grave, first dying on the cross to pay the price for our sins, but then rising up from the dead with the power of eternal life for everyone who believes in him.

This is the miraculous power demonstrated, first in the miracle of Lazarus, but more completely and finally and permanently in the resurrection of Christ.

And when Jesus comes again the dead will be raised and everything will be made right. Every injustice will be rectified. Every kindness will be rewarded. Every sin that is confessed and carried to the cross will be forgiven. Everybody laid in faith in the grave

will be raised up in immortal splendor and everything will turn out better than we ever expected or imagined.

And I believe that when that day comes, it will be hard even to remember our earthly sufferings or how long we had to wait for Jesus to come again.

I think we see that here in John 11. It must have been the way it was for Mary and Martha.

Alexander MacLaren imagines how long the delay must have seemed to them while they were waiting desperately for Jesus to come and help. Two whole days, he says, eight and 40 hours. They seemed like an eternity while the heavy hours crept by and they could only say, "It is very weary. Jesus cometh not."

And then after that long days of grief, Mary and Martha laying their brother in the tomb, mourning his passing. But how long did it look to them, MacLaren wonders, when they got Lazarus back?

I think then they discovered the truth of the words of the psalmist that, "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning."²⁴

And when the morning comes with all of its joy, the pain is only a memory. And we are now caught up in the joy that God brings to life. And this, too, is something to remember when we grow weary and impatient with the troubles of life. God will make everything come out right in the end.

Jesus is never early. He is never late. He is always right on time and he will be right on time with the great day when everything is made right, when there is a new heavens and a new earth, when we will see the glory of God fully revealed and we will know then that God was in control all along, that he was at work doing something good even through suffering and we will know that there was never any reason ever to be impatient at all.

Our Father in heaven, we pray for grace to be more patient through the troubles of life, Lord, to wait for you to do your work. Strengthen us with more faith and be patient with us as we learn to be patient as you are patient in Jesus' name and for the sake of his glory. Amen.

²⁴ Psalm 30:5.