

LOVE DELAYED

John 11:1-6

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“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?” (Jn. 11:4).

One of the chief blessings of life is close friends. The ancient Roman statesman, Cicero, wrote, “With the exception of wisdom, I am inclined to think nothing better than [friendship] has been given to man by the immortal gods.”¹ A true friendship is not spoiled by the changing of seasons or the turning of fortunes. The Bible says, “A friend loves at all times” (Prov. 17:17). Especially in times of trouble, friends are close by, comforting with their presence, strengthening with their words, and sympathizing with their hearts.

We might wonder if the Son of God would need friends or if being the Messiah would keep Jesus from human intimacy. But Jesus seems to have enjoyed friendship very much. Perhaps his closest friends, whose company he most enjoyed and whose home was most comfortable to him, were the three siblings who lived together in the town of Bethany: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

John 11 begins the last section of John’s Gospel prior to Jesus’ final entry into Jerusalem. It was an interlude from his public affairs and from his increasing conflict with the religious leaders. It was also a time of ministry to those closest to him, as Jesus sought to strengthen the faith of his friends and disciples prior to taking up the cross.

MARY, MARTHA, AND LAZARUS

¹ Quoted in George Selde, *The Great Thoughts* (New York: Ballantine, 1985), 79-80.

Since we will be spending time with this family from Bethany, it is a good idea for us to get to know them. This family is mentioned in all four Gospels, and they seem to have been personally close to Jesus. We don't know how they met him or how long they had known him. What we do learn is the difference Jesus made in their lives.

First, we might consider Lazarus, whose name is made famous by the miracle recorded in this chapter. Lazarus seems to have been a quiet man; not one of the Gospels quotes him as saying anything. Quiet people sometimes think they make little difference, but Lazarus shows us how wrong they are. Each of us should know how to tell others about Jesus. But Lazarus shows us what a difference we can make simply by showing the power of Christ in our lives.

During this chapter, Lazarus dies and is raised from the dead. Afterwards, his family held a banquet in Jesus' honor. Lazarus was seated with Jesus, and John tells us that a large crowd came to see them both – perhaps hundreds or even thousands of people. So powerful was Lazarus' witness that the hostile authorities decided to kill not only Jesus, but Lazarus too, “because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing on Jesus” (Jn. 12:11). Like him, you may not be a great speaker for Jesus, but, James Boice reminds us, “You should be especially careful that your life demonstrates the reality of that [spiritual] resurrection that Jesus has performed in you so that others might turn to him and believe in him because of what they see.”²

Another family member was Martha, who was made famous by Luke's record of an earlier meeting at their house. Jesus was there and Martha was working hard to take care of things. But her sister, Mary, was sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to his teaching. Martha complained, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me” (Lk. 10:40). Martha was a classic example of someone who serves but is caught up in themselves. “My... me... me,” she complained, just as many people do today. Jesus reproved Martha, pointing out that Mary was doing the more important thing by spending time with him.

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 3:810.

If Lazarus' witness was transformed by his resurrection, it seems that Martha's attitude was also changed. I say this because in the next chapter we see her serving again while Jesus and others recline at the table. But this time there is no complaining! The resurrection of her brother seems to have turned her mind away from her petty problems and directed her service as a joyful gift to the Lord.

Lazarus gave his witness to Jesus, and Martha gave her service. But the third family member, Mary, gave herself to Jesus. Practically every time we see Mary, she is sitting at Jesus' feet. This probably indicates an awareness of his deity, as well as the whole-hearted submission of her life. In Luke 10, Mary is seated at Jesus' feet. In John 11, when Jesus arrives at their home, Mary falls at his feet (Jn. 11:32). And in the banquet that occurs afterward, she washes his feet with her hair. Mary loved Jesus as her Lord and Savior, and she gave him the gift of her complete devotion.

Mary teaches us another important point. The first time we find her sitting at Jesus' feet, Luke says that she was listening to his teaching (Lk. 10:39). It is because she opened her mind to his Word that Mary more than anyone else seems to have understood Jesus. She was the quickest to learn the lesson of his miracles and the most fervent to worship him. Learning the truth from Jesus' teaching, she surrendered her life to him and poured out her most costly gifts at his feet.

OUR PRIVILEGE IN PRAYER

John 11 starts Jesus off where chapter 10 left him, across the Jordan where John the Baptist had begun his ministry. While he was there, Lazarus became ill. So Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill" (Jn. 11:3).

The sisters may have been surprised that this could happen, since they use the word "behold." Some English translations leave this out, but the Greek text reads, "Lord, behold, he whom you love is ill." If this indicates surprise on their part, it should not have, since even those who are very close to Jesus will suffer the trials of this life. People sometimes conclude that an illness or other affliction indicates a separation from God's affection. But the sisters specifically identify

Lazarus as one who was loved by Jesus and yet was ill. Charles Spurgeon comments, “The love of Jesus does not separate us from the common necessities and infirmities of human life. Men of God are still men. The covenant of grace is not a charter of exemption from consumption, or rheumatism, or asthma.”³

But this does not mean that Christians are just like everyone else, because we have the privilege of prayer. Praying involves more than making petitions of the Lord; it rightly includes adoration, confession and thanks as well. But when it comes to asking of the Lord, Mary’s and Martha’s example shows three important points about prayer.

First, they made their need known to the Lord. They simply brought the matter to Jesus, as we should do in our prayers. John Calvin says: “We are not forbidden a longer form of prayer; but the chief thing is to cast our cares and whatever troubles us into the bosom of God, that He may supply the remedy. This is how those women act towards Christ. They explain their trouble to Him intimately and look for relief from Him.”⁴ This is the great comfort that any believer can and should seek in times of anxiety, since, as the psalm says, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1).

We are not told by John, but sending this message to Jesus must have brought a great peace to Martha’s and Mary’s soul. No doubt, they were doing everything they could for their brother. A physician would be there, with the sisters close at hand. But we are not doing all we can until we pray to the Lord. Christians should make use of every good and natural means available: in sickness, we should secure the best medical care; when needing a job we should look through the advertisements or see a job counselor; in legal trouble, we should hire the best attorney. But, as J. C. Ryle writes:

In all our doing, we must never forget that the best and ablest and wisest Helper is in heaven, at God’s right hand. Like afflicted Job, our first action must be to fall on our knees and worship. Like Hezekiah, we must spread our matters before the Lord. Like the holy sisters at Bethany, we must send up a prayer to Christ. Let us not forget, in the hurry and

³ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 26 (London: Banner of Truth, 1971), 73.

⁴ John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 5:2.

excitement of our feelings, that none can help like Him, and that He is merciful, loving, and gracious.”⁵

Secondly, we should note the basis on which the sisters sent their prayer: “He whom you love.” They did not appeal to Jesus on the basis of their love or Lazarus’s love for him, but on the basis of his love for them. Not that they did not love Jesus. “They did love him,” Boice writes, “but they knew that their love for Jesus would never in a million years be an adequate basis for their appeal... [This] is the only grounds that any of us can ever have in approaching the Almighty.”⁶

This principle holds in every area of salvation. God did not send his Son because the world loved him. For the world does not love God. But, the Bible says, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (Jn. 3:16). “In this is love,” John says, “not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn. 4:10). Even our love for God stems from his love for us. John adds, “We love because he first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19). Therefore, Matthew Henry says, “Our love to him is not worthy speaking of, but his to us can never be enough spoken of.”⁷

Knowing this will provide a great encouragement to our prayers. We feel distant from God because of our cool hearts and mixed performance. But our prayers are offered not in our own name but in Jesus’ name, that is, on the basis of his perfect life and saving work. Our prayers are accepted because God loves us, a love he has proven once for all by offering his Son for our sins on the cross.

Thirdly, having made their need known to the Lord, Lazarus’ sisters seem to have left the manner of his reply up to Jesus. I do not deny that what they wanted was implied: they wanted Jesus to come immediately. But what they said was simply, “Lord, he whom you love is ill” (Jn. 11:3). The women knew enough about Jesus that they did not weary him with advice or complaints, but simply placed the matter into his loving hands and left it to him.

⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2:258.

⁶ Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 3:816.

⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d.), 4:842.

The better we know God – in his holiness power, wisdom, and love – the more we will do the same. The God who has already sent us his very best in his Son, is certain to work all things for the good of those who love him (Rom. 8:28).

THE LOVE THAT WAITS

Jesus' response to this message is one of the best examples of God's approach to answering our prayers. The first thing it shows is *his perspective* on our trials. "When Jesus heard it he said, 'This illness does not lead to death'" (Jn. 11:4).

At first glance, this statement may seem odd and may seem to call Jesus' competence into question for the simple reason that Lazarus' illness did lead to death. After all, just two days later, Jesus informed his disciples that Lazarus had died. How, then, could Jesus say that Lazarus' illness "does not lead to death"?

The answer is that Jesus knew both his ability and intention to travel to Bethany and raise Lazarus from the grave. The same is true for every believer. Whatever affliction the Lord may be pleased to allow us to endure, Jesus knows that it leads not to death but to eternal life. There is a resurrection awaiting every believer. Even our bodies will be raised in glory. Whenever a Christian dies, fellow believers can and should respond, "This will not lead to death!" "He shall be raised!" This is what Paul said: "What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:42-44). The great doctrine taught in this chapter – the Christian doctrine of the resurrection – is a great source of comfort in affliction and especially in the face of death.

The same might be said of other trials. We may be subject to injustice now, but in the end believers will be justified by God. We may suffer humiliation, but it leads to glorification. We may struggle in poverty, but out of this come heavenly riches. We may be lonely and sorrowful, but by trusting in Jesus – who secured every spiritual blessing for us through his death and resurrection – we will have fellowship with God and with other believers and be filled with joy.

Jesus' words might be engraved on every Christian tombstone and emblazoned on every Christian trial: "This does not lead to death."

Jesus' response to Lazarus' illness not only shows his perspective on our trials, but also *his plan* for delivering us from trouble. It is a plan that troubles many believers and causes some to doubt his love. But John 11:5-6 tells us Jesus' plan for responding to this plea: "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."

What a remarkable combination this is: Jesus loved them, *so* he waited for Lazarus to die! Jesus did not wait because he was indifferent to these friends or because he was still trying to figure out how he felt about them. He loved them, so he waited.

This reminds us that the Lord works in our lives according to his timetable and his purposes. He is loving enough not to do what we want him to do but what we need him to do (whether we are aware of it or not!). We see this throughout the Bible. Faithful Joseph was tossed into a dark prison for refusing to commit a sin. There, he prayed for God's deliverance and waited. And waited. He waited for over two years. Then, according to God's own timetable – based on his wonderful plans for Joseph and the way he intended to use Joseph for his larger plans – God delivered him in a marvelous way. It was only afterwards that Joseph could explain to his brothers who had betrayed him: "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). What Joseph saw by sight looking backwards, we are called to see in the present by faith in God and his Word.

But this is often not easy. Kent Hughes eloquently writes:

When a child dies in his mother's arms as she cried to God for help and the ambulance lies stalled two blocks away, we wonder if God cares. When a Christian is falsely accused and pleads with God to bring the evidence to clear him, and it is only after his reputation is ruined that the evidence comes, we wonder if God cares. When we plan some great event for God and the whole thing falls through, we wonder if God cares.⁸

⁸ R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 282.

Such thoughts may have gone through Martha and Mary's minds as they frequently looked out their window or went to stand in the door, expecting to see Jesus racing to their aid. "He will come," they would have assured one another. But all the while, Jesus was waiting for the thing they most feared to happen. Why the delay for those he loved?

The answer is seen in the changes we have already noted about each of these three. Jesus intended for Lazarus to be a witness of his divine glory, and this required Lazarus to be raised from the dead. Jesus intended to transform Martha's attitude. Is there much doubt that she would have been complaining about him and how he had let her down? So Jesus wanted to change her heart. And Jesus wanted to continue teaching Mary, for there were great things about his kingdom that she barely guessed until Lazarus came walking out of the tomb. Jesus also has plans to change, transform, and enlighten us, and those plans inform his timetable in answering our prayers.

In other words, Jesus knows that there are more important things than that we should be delivered from sickness, provided with a good job, or helped out of any number of other trials. Our faith, for instance, is more important and Jesus puts it ahead of our other needs. Our witness is more important. Our attitude is more important. Ultimately, Jesus thinks it is most important that we do what Mary did after his power was fully revealed: he wants us to lay our most costly gifts at his feet, and especially to offer the gift of our very selves.

We see, therefore, Jesus' perspective on this situation, and his plan for responding. But, lastly, he told his disciples *his highest purpose* in the affairs of our lives: "It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it" (Jn. 11:4).

It is the chief end of man to glorify God. This is what truly is highest and best in all things, that the perfections of the excellencies of the glories of God should be displayed in the affairs of earth. It would have been good for Jesus to have come to Bethany in time to heal Lazarus. But the time was short for Israel; the cross lay just days ahead. Others had been healed and the people did not believe. So Jesus did something even better: he waited for Lazarus to die and after he had been buried in the tomb Jesus raised him to life. John

tells us the result: “Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him” (Jn. 11:45).

Are you willing for God to use your life for his glory and the salvation of others? Or do you hold lesser agendas more dear? If we resent God glorifying himself through our trials and affliction, we will miss out on the joy and wonder that ought to be ours. God *will* glorify himself in our lives, for his glory is his chief end as well as ours. How much better for us to rejoice in all situations, knowing that God’s glory is going forth through his sovereign grace for and through us.

THE DEATH THAT LEADS TO LIFE

If you find it difficult to set aside your own will for the will of God, remember that Jesus is not asking anything of you that he did not accept for himself. Jesus himself experienced this in a way that none of us ever will. Jesus was maliciously accused, unjustly convicted, and cruelly put to death. Where was his Father in all this? Did not the heavenly Father love his Son? How could God delay as the crown of thorns was placed on Jesus’ head, as the nails were beaten through his hands and feet, and as Jesus suffered such torment on the cross?

The Bible answers that God had a perspective on the death of Jesus, seeing the open tomb beyond the cross. God had a plan that was higher than merely preserving Jesus from harm – a plan to save sinners like you and me through the blood of Christ. And God had a purpose: that his own glory would be displayed in his Son, crucified as the Lamb of God for the sins of the world.

Yet even Jesus cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt. 27:46). But he persevered in faith, knowing that his was a death that leads to life, not only for him but for all who trust in him. So he prayed, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Lk. 23:46).

Because of that life-giving death, the same will be true for us. To be a Christian means to die to sin, to worldly pleasures, to our own agenda for our lives, and ultimately the death of our bodies. But with Jesus, who conquered death, as our Savior, all of these will lead to

life. And then the love of Jesus, our dearest friend, which once delayed, will be near at hand forever.