

John 11:1-36

Rightly Reading Divine Delays

When he had heard therefore that he was sick, he abode two days still in the same place where he was – v. 6.

When the Lord delays His answers to our heartfelt cries, our patience has a tendency to become sorely tried. Mary and Martha demonstrate this for us when they both say on separate occasions *Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died* (Martha – v. 21). Then Mary a short time later in v. 32 where we read: *Then when Mary was come where Jesus was, and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying unto him, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.*

Their heartfelt emotional cries notwithstanding, the reader of this chapter can't help but notice the limiting factor they place on the Lord Jesus. Their faith certainly doesn't measure up to the great faith of the Centurion who besought the Lord not to come but instead said to Him *speak the word only and my servant shall be healed* (Mt. 8:8).

J. C. Ryle makes an insightful remark on this 11th chapter of John when he notes: *In no part of our Lord's history do we see him so distinctly both man and God at the same time: man in sympathy, and God in power. ...Like each of the few incidents in our Lord's ministry related by St. John, it is placed before us with peculiar minuteness and particularity. The story is singularly rich in delicate, tender, and beautiful expressions.*

It's striking to behold the Lord's empathy when in this setting of the death of Lazarus we read how Christ asks them where they laid him and in that sad setting of mourning the death of a loved one we further read that *Jesus wept* (v. 35). This show of sympathy was so heartfelt on the part of Christ that it moved others in the crowd to say *Behold how He loved him* (v. 36).

And then a short time later we behold such power in Christ that ought to have been enough to convince the strongest skeptic that this man must be God as we see Him demonstrate His power even over death when He commands Lazarus to come forth and the man who had been dead for four days responds by coming out of the grave. Jesus certainly proved on that occasion, didn't He, that He truly is *the resurrection and the life* (v. 25).

What I want to draw your attention to this morning, however, is the way Christ very deliberately delays going to Lazarus once He gets word that the man He loved was sick. Look at what it says in v. 6 *When he had heard therefore that he was sick, he abode two days still in the same place where he was.* This is not the way ordinary men people respond to this kind of news. Usually when we finite beings get word that someone is seriously ill and about to die the thought that strikes us is that we'd better get there quick if we want to see that loved one one more time before they cross Jordan. And so we set aside other things, no matter how important they may be, that we may hastily throw some things together and hit the road with all due diligence.

Jesus, however, is no ordinary man. And if these opening verses in Jn. 11 teach us anything, they teach us that Christ's timetable is not the same as our timetable and that Divine delays are very often a part of God's providential rule over His people. Think about it for a moment – how often do we find God delaying the dreams and visions that He gives others.

I'm reminded of the promise to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. And yet God delayed for the longest time any manifestation of the fulfillment of that promise to the point that Sarah felt she had to take matters into her own hands by giving Abraham her handmaid, Hagar that he might bare children by her. And it wasn't until they were both well beyond childbearing years that at last a single child, Isaac, was born.

Or how about the dream that was communicated to Joseph that his brothers would bow down to him. His brothers thought they had effectively made such a dream impossible when they sold Joseph into slavery but all they really did was set the stage for the fulfillment of Joseph's vision. And while Joseph was in Egypt so much time would pass that he would name one of his sons to commemorate his forgetfulness of his father's house. So we read in Gen. 41:51 *And Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh: For God, said he, hath made me forget all my toil, and all my father's house.*

And then you have the example of David. Years passed between the time he was anointed to be king by Samuel and the actual time that he ascended to the throne and the long interval between his anointing and being crowned was a time of intense trials and afflictions as King Saul sought him relentlessly in order to keep him from the throne.

When you consider these samples (and I'm sure we could add more to the list) it becomes easy to conclude that Divine delays are a regular part of God's providential rule. And when I say *Divine delay* – I'm speaking from a human perspective. From a Divine perspective these aren't really delays at all. God is never early or late but is always right on time even though it may not seem that way to us.

But let's bring this matter to where we find ourselves today. There are things that we long to see God do. There are young people in this church that I'm sure must have social longings that are very natural and you long to see God raise up a God-fearing, Christ honoring spouse. And yet there seems to be from your perspective a long delay. And there are parents and grandparents here that have deep longings on their hearts to see children and grandchildren saved. And like the Psalmist we cry out *How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily?*

And what about our desire to see God move with revival power and blessing in order to turn back the flood tide of iniquity that's come upon our land like a flood? We're anxious and we're impatient and we find our love challenged because where iniquity abounds the love of many grows cold, Christ said and here again God delays the answer to our prayers.

And if we're not careful, then we'll find ourselves tempted to lose patience and either give up on our aspirations or like Sarah and Abraham try to manipulate things ourselves.

What is needed, then, when the answers to our prayers seem too long in coming? What is needed when our patience is sorely tried and we begin to wonder like the Psalmist on another occasion if God has forgotten to be gracious? I would suggest to you that one of the things that is sorely needed is the spirituality to read Divine delays rightly. And these opening verses in John's gospel can be very helpful along those lines.

So that's what I want to focus on this morning – rightly reading Divine delays. That's my theme:

We Must Rightly Read Divine Delays.

How do we do this? – especially when we see such a propensity in our lives to read those delays wrongly? I want to present to you this morning from these opening words in John chp. 11 – 3 things that will assist us in rightly reading Divine delays. Consider with me first of all that if we would rightly read Divine delays:

I. We Must be Aware of Christ's Awareness

You'll notice how in the opening verses of this chapter we have the account of Mary and Martha sending word to Jesus that Lazarus had become sick. So we read in v. 3 *Therefore his sisters sent unto him, saying, Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick.* In the next verse, v. 4 we read *When Jesus heard that, he said, This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God.* Note especially the words *When Jesus heard that* – we're able to see that word did reach Him and He did hear about Lazarus.

This point is stated again in v. 6 *When he had heard therefore that he was sick, he abode two days still in the same place where he was.* This point needs to be emphasized and we need to note that it was His awareness of the situation with Lazarus that led to His definite decision to stay where He was. *When He heard...he abode two days still in the same place where he was.*

It wasn't as if Christ misunderstood what He heard or that whoever brought Him word communicated ineffectively. No – Jesus heard and He understood and He made His decision to stay where He was in the light of what He'd heard. And you can be sure that when you send word to Christ concerning the things that are on your heart or concerning souls that you're concerned about whether your concern is a physical concern or a spiritual concern Christ does hear you when you send Him word.

We're tempted to think otherwise especially when we think we know exactly what we need Christ to do. The hymn writer asks the question:

Does Jesus care when my heart is pained
Too deeply for mirth or song,
As the burdens press, and the cares distress,
And the day grows weary and long?

Now I should note here that Mary and Martha did the right thing by sending to Jesus. Who better to petition under their current emergency? Mary's confession was certainly a good one which is recorded for us in v. 27 *She saith unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that*

thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world. She saw and believed what many didn't, that Christ was the Son of God. Had she thought otherwise it wouldn't have made any sense to send for Him. So even though there was a tremendous sense of letdown and disappointment that Christ didn't arrive until they thought it was too late, they nevertheless did the right thing to send for Him.

And so do you and I do well to send for Him with regard to our burdens and with regard to those that are near and dear to us. His response may not be immediate and it may not be what you think it should be but of this one thing you can be sure – He hears your cry and He knows your burden and He empathizes with you in the burdens you bear. This is why the author of the epistle to the Hebrews could say - *For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities* (Heb. 4:15).

Listen to these words from J. C. Ryle: “The children of God must constantly school their minds to learn the great lesson now before us. Nothing so helps us to bear patiently the trials of life as an abiding conviction of the perfect wisdom by which everything around us is managed. Let us try to believe not only that all that happens to us is well done, but that it is done in the best manner, by the right instrument, and at the right time. We are all naturally impatient in the day of trial. We are apt to say, like Moses, when beloved ones are sick, "Heal her now, Lord, we beseech you." {#Nu 12:13 } We forget that Christ is too wise a Physician to make any mistakes. It is the duty of faith to say, "My times are in Your hand. Do with me as You will, how You will, what You will, and when You will. Not my will, but Yours be done." The highest degree of faith is to be able to wait, sit still, and not complain.”

And know beyond all doubt that Jesus knows and that He hears you when you send to Him. Don't think for a moment that He's forgotten you, or that He doesn't care about you, or that He's punishing you. Our text shows us that Jesus is very deliberate. Notice what He says to His disciples in vv. 14,15: *Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead. 15 And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him.*

He was glad that He was not there! He doesn't say, does He, that He regretted not being there but He was glad that He was not there. His awareness was complete wasn't it? We don't have any account of others bringing Him word that Lazarus was dead but only that Lazarus was sick. But He knew because He knows everything. And His delay was deliberate and was for a definite purpose *to the intent ye may believe.*

So that's the first thing we need to keep in mind if we would rightly read Divine delays. Know beyond all doubt that Christ is aware of your burden. Make sure you send to Him. Even though He's aware He wants to hear from you. And even though the answer is slow in coming, don't think that He's been somehow caught off guard. He knows. And to the degree that you are aware that He's aware, to that same degree you'll be enabled to patiently wait and not lose hope and continually send to Him.

So that's the first thing, then, for rightly reading Divine delays. But not only must you be aware that He's aware, but next:

II. We Must be Assured of Christ's Affection

It's pretty hard to miss from this narrative the affection that Christ felt for Lazarus. When Mary and Martha sent for Christ, their message to him went like this: *Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick* (v. 3). And then John himself as the author of the gospel notes in v. 5 *Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus*. And when Jesus at last arrived on the scene, seemingly too late, and had Mary and Martha take Him to the tomb where Lazarus lay we can't but help catch the very strong emotions of vv. 33-35 *When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled, 34 And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see. 35 Jesus wept*. And in this very strong emotional setting we read in the very next verse, v. 36 *Then said the Jews, Behold how he loved him!*

So in the space of these verses you find Mary and Martha asserting the love of Christ to Lazarus; you find John, the author of this gospel stating the love of Christ for Lazarus; and you find the mourners that are gathered around Mary and Martha taking notice of the love of Christ for Lazarus. It's pretty hard to read these verses and miss that everything that's happening is in this context of Christ's love.

And it's Christ's love in particular that's mentioned by John in connection with Christ's delay to go to Lazarus. Look again at v. 5 *Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus*. Now with this love of Christ in mind look at the words of v. 6 *When he had heard therefore that he was sick, he abode two days still in the same place where he was*. In your analysis of this text you need to ask yourself – *what is the word therefore pointing us to?* And the simple answer to that question is that it's pointing us back to the statement in the previous verse that tells us that Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. In other words it was Christ's love for them all that led to Christ's very deliberate delay in going to them.

Jameson, Faucett, and Brown say this about Divine love and Divine delay:

“When he heard he was sick, he abode two days still ... where he was — at least twenty-five miles off. Beyond all doubt this was just to let things come to their worst, in order to display His glory. But how trying, meantime, to the faith of his friends, and how unlike the way in which love to a dying friend usually shows itself, on which it is plain that Mary reckoned. But the ways of divine are not as the ways of human love. Often they are the reverse. When His people are sick, in body or spirit; when their case is waxing more and more desperate every day; when all hope of recovery is about to expire — just then and therefore it is that "He abides two days still in the same place where He is." Can they still hope against hope? Often they do not; but "this is their infirmity." For it is His chosen style of acting. We have been well taught it, and should not now have the lesson to learn. From the days of Moses was it given sublimely forth as the character of His grandest

interpositions, that "the Lord will judge His people and repent Himself for His servants" — when He seeth that their power is gone (De 32:36)."

There's a sense in which you and I have an advantage over Mary and Martha. You and I understand today that the strongest manifestation of God's love is in the sending of His Son to die on Calvary's cross for your sins and mine. No one among Christ's followers really knew and appreciated that at the time that Lazarus died.

And so Mary and Martha yielded to the temptation of limiting Christ's love to the circumstances of this world. It's rather interesting to contemplate, isn't it, what all can be found behind the words of v. 35 *Jesus wept*. Jesus undoubtedly entered into their mourning with them but I can't help but wonder at the same time if there was an added dimension to Christ weeping. Christ would have known, you see, that when the spirit of Lazarus departed from his body it had gone home to paradise. Just as surely as Christ said to that thief on the cross beside Him that he would be with Christ that day in paradise and just as surely as Paul would later write that to be absent from the body was to be present with the Lord, just as surely can it be said that the soul of Lazarus had gone to glory, but must now come back to this sin-cursed world. Do you suppose that Christ's sure knowledge of that fact contributed to His weeping?

But alas – poor Mary and Martha. They had caved in to viewing things only from the perspective of what the carnal eye sees. And at that time they didn't know or appreciate that in the near future Christ Himself would very deliberately go to Calvary's cross and there show the greatest manifestation of Divine love that Divine wisdom could conceive. We'll be coming to a text down the road that is one of my favorites in the gospel of John. It's found in 13:1 *Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end.*

He loved His people, in other words, all the way to Calvary's cross. He loved His people enough to die for them. He loved them enough to bear God's wrath for them. He loved them with a love that transcends everything in this world of sorrow and tears. And dear follower of Christ, it's no different for you. Christ loved you unto the end, i.e. He loved you all the way to Calvary's cross.

And you must master the discipline of seeing all the circumstances of life in this present world through the lens of the greatest display of love that God could show in sending His Son to die on the cross for your sins. If you become too tied to this world then you'll be tempted to doubt that love. If you see only through fleshly eyes then you'll gauge Christ's love by how He meets your expectations only within the realm of this world.

You need to ever keep in mind, therefore, the truth that this world and everything in it is going up in smoke. Listen to what Peter says in 2Pet. 3:8-11 *But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.*

The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.

This is why we can't limit the Lord's love to the things of this world. We have to see beyond this world. And we have to see Christ's love through the cross. How then do we read Divine delays rightly? We must be aware that Christ Himself is aware and we must never doubt His affection. His delay in going to Lazarus was governed by His love for Lazarus. So are His seeming delays in response to the things that press your heart governed by that same love.

I'm not now suggesting that we should never know heartache when it comes the circumstances of this world. All I'm saying is what Paul says to the Thessalonians which is that when we sorrow, we sorrow not as those who have no hope. We see through and beyond this world and we measure the love of God and Christ by what Christ has done on Calvary's cross which was to die for our sins.

Rightly reading Divine delays can become all the more doable when we consider finally how:

III. We Must Affirm Christ's Aim to Glorify Himself

The death of Lazarus was indeed a tragedy. Every death in this world is a tragedy. And while it is good to see beyond this world and while it's good to see everything through the lens of Calvary's cross, that does not mean that our sufferings and trials and afflictions and death and mourning over death are not without purpose.

Look at vv. 3,4 again: *Therefore his sisters sent unto him, saying, Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick. 4 When Jesus heard that, he said, This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.* There's the positive purpose to this sad tragedy – for the glory of God and that the Son of God might be glorified.

Are you able to detect a consistency in Christ's ministry? You remember the question of the disciples of Christ back in chp. 9 with regard to the man that was born blind? *And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth. 2 And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? 3 Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.*

It's basically the same concept there with the blind man as we find now in chp. 11 with Lazarus. Both were for the glory of God and that the Son of God might be glorified thereby. The difference between the two events is that the raising of Lazarus proved to be an even greater manifestation of the glory of God. It's interesting to note how the Jews at the tomb of Lazarus recalled the healing of that blind man. *And some of them said, Could*

not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died? (v. 37).

Little did they suspect at that moment what a tremendous display of God's glory was about to take place. But let's face it this morning – what happened with Lazarus does not happen to everyone. And Lazarus himself along with Mary and Martha would all go to their graves and in the case of Lazarus he would go to his grave again. So the purpose of this narrative is not to lead us to expect miracles of this nature although it's worth noting and affirming that what happened to Lazarus will happen to us all when Christ returns.

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, Paul writes in 1Thess. 4:16 with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: 17 Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

Even Martha in her grief was able to affirm the resurrection of the last day in v. 24 *I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.* And what Christ did in calling Lazarus from the grave was to prove that the resurrection of the last day can and will take place.

The point I'm wanting to make now, however, is that Christ's dealings in your life and Christ's delays in responding to your heart cries serve the definite purpose of bringing glory to His name. And as long as you're able to affirm this the better equipped you'll be to read His delays rightly.

So don't cave in to despair when the Lord bears long with you. He is aware of your heart longings. Make sure you send to Him and send to Him often with regard to those matters that press upon your heart. And be assured of His love. He's proven that to you in a way that is too plain and too clear and too full to miss. He loved you all the way to Calvary's cross. And know that His delay doesn't serve the purpose of simply tormenting you with anxiousness. Oh no – His delays serve the purpose of bringing all the more glory to His name.

And if you can keep these things in mind – that He's aware of your burdens and that He loves you with an unfailing love and that His aim is always for His own glory – if you can keep these things in mind then you will be enabled to rightly read Divine delays.