

## ***When Jesus Delays***

*John 11:1-16*

Beginning this morning we are spending 5 Sundays studying John 11. This chapter records the crowning miracle in Jesus' ministry. On Easter morning we will see that after Lazarus had been dead four days, Jesus had the stone rolled away and called Lazarus out of the tomb by name. This was a very public miracle that Jesus **knew** would lead to his arrest and crucifixion and resurrection. John makes it clear that Lazarus being brought back to life foreshadows Jesus' resurrection.

The stated purpose of the gospel of John in John 20:30–31 (ESV)

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

The miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead was written so that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we may have life in his name. The verb “believe” is found 98x in the gospel of John and 9x in this chapter alone. Throughout this 5-week series, we will be talking about the importance of faith; we'll see that it's a matter of life and death. Jesus will say that it is only those who believe who have eternal life.

This first paragraph in John 11:1-16 emphasizes how Jesus “delayed” when he heard that his friend Lazarus was sick. Instead of rushing to rescue Lazarus, he delayed. We'll see that Jesus had a couple of specific reasons for doing so. Before we dig into this passage I wonder if you can identify a circumstance (a current circumstance, if possible) in which Jesus is delaying. Instead of rescuing you immediately and answering your prayers, it seems like God is silent and idle. Perhaps you're asking God to heal your body or your mind or your soul in some way. Perhaps you asking God to mend a relationship, but nothing has changed yet. Perhaps you've asked God to make clear what you should do in the future, but everything is still murky at best.

Keep that situation in mind as we go through today's passage.

***Jesus' Delay and God's Glory (11:1-6)*** These verses establish the plot of this chapter. John introduces us to two sisters, Martha and Mary, and their brother, Lazarus.

1 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill.

Since there were several Marys associated with Jesus, John wants the reader to know that this Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair. As we learn in John 12 (and Matthew 26 and Mark 14), this was an extravagant expression of love for Jesus. We're even told that unbeknownst to her, she was anointing Jesus for his burial. This is the first of several veiled references to Jesus'

death that we'll see in today's passage. John wants us to know that this is the Mary whose love for Jesus was extravagant.

A greater emphasis in this chapter is Jesus' love for Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Notice how the sisters referred to their brother who was sick:

3 So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."

Jesus had a special affection for Lazarus and his sisters. Verse 5 explicitly tells us, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." In verse 11 Jesus refers to Lazarus as "our friend." In verse 36 when people saw Jesus weeping at the tomb where Lazarus had been laid, their comment was, "See how he loved him!" Jesus loved Lazarus.

His sisters sent messengers with an implicit request: "Since you love our brother Lazarus, please come and heal his sickness." That logic rings true for us, doesn't it? If you love someone and if you have the power to alleviate their suffering, you should do so. Throughout the gospels, Jesus' love for people compelled him to do just that. He healed people immediately, on the spot. Sometimes he healed people from a distance (see John 4:46-54).

But on this occasion Jesus didn't. It turns out that Jesus wanted to do something much deeper and more profound than heal Lazarus from his illness.

4 But 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."

The NIV translates Jesus' statement with "This sickness is not to end in death. . . ." Lazarus would die, but death would not have the last word. Rather, his illness would ultimately reveal how glorious God and his Son really are.

We see something similar in John 9 when the disciples saw a man blind from birth. They wanted to know, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" In what has been called "retribution theology," they believed that there was always a cause and effect between sin and suffering: if you were suffering, it is because you've sinned. Jesus' reply was basically neither; his blindness was an opportunity for "the works of God" to be displayed.

In the same way, Lazarus' illness was an opportunity for people to see the glory of God. When people see just how glorious God is, they believe; the glory of God leads to faith.

Verses 5 and 6 need to be read together.

5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So [or therefore, because he loved them], when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Because he loved them, he delayed. Jesus' delay in going to Bethany was motivated by love, not apathy or busyness or anything else. Because he loved them, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was (see 10:40 - "across the Jordan" where John had baptized).

When we read the rest of the chapter, a very interesting timeline emerges. First, down in verse 11, after two days had passed Jesus says, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep," meaning that he had died. Jesus waited for Lazarus to die before he left for Bethany.

As well, we read in verse 17 that when Jesus and his disciples got to the village of Bethany, Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. That's about how long it would have taken to walk from "across the Jordan" where John had baptized down to the village of Bethany. This means that even if they hadn't delayed two days, they wouldn't have gotten to Bethany before Lazarus died.

So why did Jesus wait until Lazarus died before leaving? Why didn't he leave immediately and raise Lazarus from the dead after he'd been in the tomb 2 days instead of 4 days? We can't know for sure, but the best explanation involves a teaching that was popular in that day. Apparently, some rabbis taught that when a person died, their soul hovered over the body for three days and then departed when the body visibly decayed.

It's not that Jesus believed that view, but that Jesus wanted the miracle of raising of Lazarus from the dead to be undeniable. He didn't want anybody to suggest, for example, that Lazarus had merely appeared to be dead or been in a coma when Jesus arrived and brought him out of the tomb. If Lazarus had been in the tomb four days, the glory of the Son of God and his Father would be on full display when Lazarus walked out of that tomb.

Jesus' delay was prompted by his great love for Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Only if he delayed would they see his glory and believe that he had power of death. Jesus was willing to allow Mary and Martha to experience the anxiety of Lazarus' illness and the grief of Lazarus' death because of the glory they would witness when he came out of the tomb. Down in verse 40, just before he called forth Lazarus from the tomb, Jesus reminded Martha, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" He wanted to do something that would be more valuable to them than Lazarus recovering from his illness. Prompted by his great love, Jesus delayed.

All of this suggests that we need to ***be careful how we interpret what we perceive to be the silence or inactivity of God***. How do you interpret the delays of God? Do you believe the best about God, or do you assume the worst? One interpretation is that God is disinterested in you and doesn't really care whether or not you're languishing. Another interpretation is that God is powerless to rescue you. But John gives us another interpretation, doesn't he. Prompted by his love for you, he is delaying. God wants to do something far deeper than you can imagine.

I have been in tough situations where the only thing I wanted was relief. I wanted the situation resolved so I can get back to enjoying my life. Honestly, I did the things that the Scriptures teach us to do: prayed, got counsel from people, I tried to resolve things with people. It seemed like God was silent and idle. But in retrospect I understand that God was doing something much deeper in me than I wanted or even knew I needed. Specifically, God **convinced of God's love for me**. Sometimes God's love involved disciplining me like a good father does. God's love has always been patient and kind.

Being convinced of the love of God is no small thing. In Ephesians 3:18–19 Paul prayed that the believers. . .

18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

If we don't know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, we won't be filled with all the fullness of God. We won't see how glorious he really is. Sometimes God delays out of love so that we might see his glory. And if we genuinely see God's glory, we will respond with faith. That's the emphasis of verses 7-16.

### ***Jesus' Delay and Our Faith (11:7-16)***

In verse 7 Jesus announces that they (he and his disciples) were going to Judea (the region in and around Jerusalem). When they heard this his disciples immediately voiced their objection.

7 Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." 8 The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now [i.e., recently] seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?"

They were referring to the incident recorded in John 10:31 right after Jesus publicly taught, "I and the Father are one." John writes that "they picked up stones to stone him." Jesus clearly understood the danger of going back to Judea. He answers his disciples' objection in this way:

9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. 10 But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."

For both the Romans and the Jews, a day consisted of twelve hours of daylight and twelve hours of night. During the daylight you could walk around safely, without fear of stumbling and hurting yourself. But if you walk out into the night, you're likely to trip over something, stumble, and fall.

On one level Jesus was likening his public ministry to the twelve hours of daylight. It was late in the day (his death was near), but while it was still daylight Jesus would continue to do his Father's will. And that meant going to Judea. Night (his death) was

coming, but as long as it was light he would be safe because he was doing his Father's will.

On another level, this metaphor applies to Jesus' disciples. Spiritually speaking, Jesus was/is the "light of the world." If you walk around in the light of his life and teaching you won't stumble. But if you reject his light and walk in darkness you will stumble and fall and ultimately perish.

Jesus next explains to his disciples what he will do when he goes to Judea. As was often the case Jesus had to clarify for them what he meant.

11 After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." 12 The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." 13 Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, 15 and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

". . . for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe." This is the second reason for Jesus' delay (in addition to revealing the glory of God): so that his disciples may believe. In the passage we'll consider on Easter morning we will see that Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead (after he'd been in the tomb for four days) with a whole crowd of people watching. Nobody would be able to deny that Jesus had brought a dead man back to life. [Whereas there were all sorts of conspiracy theories about the resurrection of Jesus (see Matthew 28:11-15), the raising of Lazarus from the dead was irrefutable.]

Those who were his disciples would realize that not only had power over the wind and the waves, and that Jesus could not only make a blind man see, and that Jesus could not only feed a multitude with a few fish and some bread. . . ***They would realize that he has power over death!*** They would see the glory of God and they would believe.

Let's consider one more verse. In verse 16 John introduces us to a disciple named Thomas. Here we have yet another reference in this passage to the death of Jesus.

16 So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Here Thomas is bold and confident: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." His comment is a bit misguided because he didn't understand that Jesus was going to Jerusalem to die a unique death on the cross. But in another sense he was speaking "better than he knew" (like Caiaphas in 11: 49-53) because he and almost all of the other disciples would eventually die with Christ in the sense of being martyred. Their faith in Jesus would eventually be so strong that they were willing to lay down their life for Jesus. Raising Lazarus from the dead was one of the building blocks of their faith.

***Jesus' delays reveal the glory of God and build our faith.*** But that doesn't happen automatically. We'll see at the end of this chapter that some believed in Jesus but others wanted to kill him. I wonder about the delays in our lives: will we see the glory of God and believe? Or not?

As we'll see in coming weeks, whether or not we see the glory of God and respond with faith is a matter of life and death: Only those who believe in Jesus will have eternal life. And so ***faith is essential for salvation***. As well, we're told in Hebrews 11:6 that "without faith it is impossible to please [God], for he who comes to God must believe that He is and *that* He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." And so ***faith is also essential for a life that pleases God***.

Therefore, my challenge to each of us is to ***not squander the delays of Jesus*** that we are currently experiencing; the delays of Jesus are ***an opportunity in which God wants to teach us FAITH***. Specifically, how to we respond to the delays of God in such a way that we see his glory and learn faith? The Bible answer would be: ***Wait upon the Lord***. Consider Psalm 25, for example. Notice that there's nothing passive about waiting on God; it's a posture of being teachable and expectant about what God will do.

Psalm 25:1–5 (ESV)

1 To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.  
2 O my God, in you I trust;  
let me not be put to shame;  
let not my enemies exult over me.  
3 Indeed, none who wait for you shall be put to shame;  
they shall be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.  
4 Make me to know your ways, O Lord;  
teach me your paths.  
5 Lead me in your truth and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all the day long.

In your personal life, when God delays, actively wait upon him through prayer and being teachable and expectant.

As a church we are in a season of waiting on the Lord to supply our next Lead Pastor. In case this is one of your first Sundays at Faith, we are in the process of search for my replacement (which you can read about on our web site). We don't know how long the search will take. We're committed to be patient until God supplies. This is a tangible opportunity to see the glory of God (through his provision and his timing). And this is a tangible opportunity to deepen our faith, believing that God exists and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him.