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Lazarus, Come Forth John 11:1-6

I am sure that all of us who regularly make our needs known to God through prayer have experienced some frustration periodically with the amount of time it takes the Lord to get around to responding to those needs. In fact, I am sure that many of you, if not all of you, may even now be waiting on Him and wondering if He will ever respond to the needs that you have made known to Him.

This weekend I want to encourage you through this message not to become discouraged as you faithfully and repeatedly brings your heartfelt needs before the Lord in prayer. Why? Why shouldn't we be discouraged? The reason is simple. When the Lord delays His response this does not necessarily mean that He will not respond.

This, I believe, will become very clear to us as we begin to study **John 11:1-57** and the Apostle's account of the raising of Lazarus. This was the last and greatest miracle of Christ. It will conclude that section in the Gospel of John that we have entitled the "period of conflict." The difference between the period of conflict and the period of controversy that preceded this was that the period of controversy in **John 5:1-6:71** consisted mostly of arguments arising from the unsettled attitudes of the Jewish people while the period of conflict in **John 7:1** through **John 11:1-57** represents fixed attitudes of the Jewish people at war with one another.

As we begin **John 11** hopefully you remember that Jesus has once again been forced to leave Jerusalem after He clarified for certain Jews in **John 10:38** what He had only implied in **John 10:30**. And what did He clarify for these certain Jews? Jesus clarified for these certain Jews that He was not only the Christ but that He was the Son of the living God and shared the same divine essence. Even though He had been forced to flee and was now ministering in an area outside of Jerusalem, He would not remain there long. And this now brings us to our study of John's account of the resurrection of Lazarus.

We will be dividing this account into four different parts. This morning we will begin to consider: The preparation for the miracle (John 11:1-16).

Let me read these verses for you. **"Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (2) And it was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. (3) The sisters therefore sent to Him, saying, 'Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick.' (4) But when Jesus heard it, He said, 'This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it.' (5) Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. (6) When therefore He heard that he was sick, He stayed then two days longer in the place where He was. (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 seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?' (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.'**

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(11) This He said, and after that He said to them, ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, that I may awaken him out of sleep.’ (12) The disciples therefore 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 was speaking of literal sleep. (14) Then Jesus therefore said to them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead, (15) and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him.’ (16) Thomas therefore, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with Him.’”

As we examine the preparation for this miracle we will see four different sets of characters. This week we will only be able to consider two of those characters. Who is the first set of characters?

The character is the critically ill man (John 11:1-2).

The first character is the critically ill man (John 11:1-2). Let me read for you once again **John 11:1-2** **“Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (2) And it was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.”** So who is the critically ill man? A man named Lazarus was the man who was critically ill. It is interesting to note that his name actually, in a sense, foreshadowed what will happen as this story unfolds. And how does His name do that? The name Lazarus is an abbreviation of Eleazar, meaning “he whom God helped. And what do we learn about this man from these two verses?

First of all, we learn that he was from Bethany. And where is Bethany? The Bethany of Lazarus, or in other words, the Bethany of Mary and her sister Martha was located on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives two miles east of Jerusalem.

Secondly, we also learn that Lazarus was Mary and Martha’s brother (John 11:2). This is made clear to us in **John 11:2** when it tells us that Mary was the sister of Lazarus.

And finally, we learn that the family of Lazarus felt very close to Jesus. We see an allusion to this closeness in John’s reference to Mary’s anointing of Christ (John 11:2). Even though this anointing of Christ by Mary with a very costly ointment has not yet happened, and will not be recorded for us until **John 12:1-8**, it was important to John that his readers would begin to appreciate the special relationship that existed between Christ and the family of Lazarus. Christ liked being in their home. This is clear from the other Gospels. It was a place where He could slip off his sandals and relax. But their relationship with Christ obviously did not spare them from various trials including physical illness and certainly it did not spare Lazarus. He was now critically ill.

So how did Mary and Martha respond to their brother’s illness? Obviously they became very concerned. This brings us to the second set of characters.

The second set of characters is the concerned sisters (John 11:3-6).

Let us once again read **John 11:3-6.** **The sisters therefore sent to Him, saying, ‘Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick.’ (4) But when Jesus heard it, He said, ‘This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it.’**

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(5) Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. (6) When therefore He heard that he was sick, He stayed then two days longer in the place where He was.”

Let us look at **verse 3**. **“The sisters therefore sent to Him, saying ‘Lord, behold he whom you love is sick.’”**

Were Mary and Martha concerned about their brother Lazarus and his sickness? Absolutely! They tell Jesus that the one whom He loved was sick.

Now there are several things that are very interesting about the way these sisters of Lazarus approach Jesus in the midst of their concern for their brother Lazarus.

First of all, Mary and Martha, though they were concerned about their brother Lazarus, did not specifically ask Jesus for help. They simply informed Jesus of the need (John 11:3).

Their statement about their sick brother, who was loved by the Lord, was characterized by a humble simplicity. There was no mention of his symptoms. They didn’t even ask Jesus to do anything. Rather, they merely informed Jesus that the one whom He loved was sick. Now certainly there would not have been anything wrong with Mary and Martha asking Jesus to heal their brother. But the point is that they didn’t.

Why? Mary and Martha, because they knew Jesus loved Lazarus, apparently did not feel it was necessary to ask Jesus to heal Lazarus once they informed Him of their brother’s sickness. They apparently knew that they could trust Him to do what needed to be done in light of the information they shared with Him.

This is not such a bad way for us to approach the Lord. Certainly there are times when we may come boldly into God’s presence and make our requests known to Him, which is encouraged in **Philippians 4:6**. But there will be other times when we like Mary and Martha come into the Lord’s presence in prayer and simply let our needs be known, pouring out our hearts before Him, trusting Him, in light of His love for us, to do what He believes is best.

So, what was the first thing that we noticed that was interesting in the way Mary and Martha approached Christ in the time of their need? They in humble simplicity rather than asking Jesus for help simply informed him of the need. But there is something else that is also very interesting about their approach. They also in their approach demonstrated a keen understanding of who should always be exalted when it comes to Jesus dealings with men.

Though Mary and Martha chose not to make a formal request to Jesus, they did remind Jesus of His love for Lazarus rather than Lazarus’ love Him (John 11:3). What did the verse say in **verse 3**? **“The sisters therefore sent to Him, saying, ‘Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick.’”** Now don’t you find this interesting?

Most people when seeking a favor for someone will invariably choose to focus on the positive qualities of the individual for whom they are seeking the favor, but this certainly was not the case here with Mary and Martha.

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They could have said “**Lord, behold the one who loves you is sick.**” But they didn’t, rather they said, “**Lord, behold he whom You love is sick.**”

This was a good thing that Mary and Martha did. They exalted the love of Christ over and against the love of Lazarus and this is exactly the way it should be.

Let me read for you a comment made by a famous Bible commentator named Matthew Henry. He said, “**Our love to Him is not worth speaking of but His to us can never be enough spoken of.**” This thought is reinforced for us in **1 John 4:10**. “**In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.**” Our love for Christ is nothing that we can take credit for. It is simply the fruit of His love for us. What does **1 John 4:19** tell us? “**We love Him because He first loved us.**”

So, what did we notice about Mary and Martha’s approach to Jesus that was so interesting? First of all, we noticed the humble simplicity of their approach in simply informing Jesus of their brother’s illness, and secondly, we noticed how they exalted the love of Christ for Lazarus rather than exalting the love of Lazarus for Christ when they approached Him with this information about their brother.

So, how will Jesus respond to these concerned sisters? Let us now read **verse 4**. “**But when Jesus heard it, He said, ‘This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it.’**”

So, what did Jesus mean when He said, “**this sickness is not unto death?**” Did He mean that Lazarus would not actually die from His present sickness? No! This is not what He meant. When Jesus said, “this sickness is not unto death,” He was not saying that Lazarus would not die, but rather He was saying that his death would not be the final outcome of his illness (John 11:4).

Did Mary and Martha understand the words of Jesus in this way? I am sure they didn’t. In fact, I would think that they believed that Jesus by His words had just assured them that their brother Lazarus would, in fact, get well.

But though Mary and Martha obviously did not understand, based on the words of Jesus, exactly what He might have had in store for their brother, they certainly understood that whatever He had in store had a specific purpose.

And what was that purpose? Jesus told His disciples that what was about to happen to Lazarus would result in God and His Son receiving glory (John 11:4).

Let us once again read the verse. “**But when Jesus heard it, He said, ‘This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it.’**” The glory of the Father and the glory of the Son are inextricably linked so much so that you cannot give honor to one without giving honor to the other (John 10:38).

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We saw this inextricable union in **John 10:38** when Jesus told the Jews in Jerusalem, during the feast of the dedication, that He was in the Father and the Father was in Him. In light of this biblical reality, it certainly makes perfect sense that the Father and the Son will both be glorified in the single act that they have purposed, not in the deliverance of Lazarus from His illness but rather in the deliverance of Lazarus from the consequences of His illness, which we know will be a deliverance from the grave itself.

Let me ask you a question. Why do people get sick? There are a number of different reasons why people get sick. But from this text we can confidently declare that one of those reasons can be the glory of God (2 Corinthians 11:7-10).

Many people who are in the faith-healing movement feel that sickness is always a result of sin. That isn't always true. In **John 9** and now in **John 11** we have seen that a particular illness had nothing to do with sin but rather the glory of God. But faith healers might reply, "But the glory of God is always greatest when there's a healing." This is simply not true. Not only will we see this here with the delayed response of Christ to the sickness of Lazarus but we will also see that there are times when God's greatest glory is achieved when a person is never healed.

Consider the Apostle Paul and his experience with his thorn in the flesh recorded for us in **2 Corinthians 12:7-10**. What did he tell us about it? Let me read these verses for you. "**And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself! (8) Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. (9) And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. (10) Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.**"

God never healed Paul. Although his infirmity in the flesh was never cured, he was a better man for it, a stronger Apostle in God's service. God received more glory by Paul's illness than by his health.

After John tells how Jesus responded to the concerned sisters of Lazarus, he then goes on to speak of Christ's love for Lazarus and his two sisters. Let me read the words of John in **John 11:5**. "**Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus.**" Why would John introduce this thought at this particular time in the text?

The apostle needed, in John 11:5, to establish the love of Jesus for Lazarus and his sisters before recording His delay in going to Bethany after learning of his sickness in John 11:6.

Let us now read **John 11:6**. "**When therefore He heard that he was sick He immediately left for Bethany?**" No, this is not what it says. Rather it says, "**When therefore He heard that he was sick, He stayed then two days longer in the place where He was.**"

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If **verse 5** had been left out and we simply had read **verse 6** we may have wondered if Jesus really did, in fact, love Lazarus and his two sisters. But the apostle did not leave out **verse 5** and therefore we must conclude that He did, in fact, love Lazarus and his two sisters.

But you might say, “That’s a strange love when someone waits two days before going to a dying friend.” But the delay of Jesus did not mean He did not love them, rather His delay was an expression of His love.

Let me ask you a question. Would Lazarus and his sisters have been served better if Jesus had gone to Bethany immediately with the intent to heal Lazarus rather than delaying His departure by two days? And the answer would be, no. They would not have been better served. How do we know this? Let me ask you another question. What miracle would have the greater impact on the faith of Lazarus and his two sisters? The miraculous healing of Lazarus’ illness or the miraculous expression of Christ’s power in resurrecting Lazarus under the circumstances created by Christ’s delay? There can be no doubt about which miracle would have the greatest impact on their faith. The miraculous expression of Christ’s power to resurrect Lazarus under the circumstances created by His delay would have a far greater impact on their faith than a simple healing.

It’s interesting how often God, within our own lives, chooses to not immediately respond when we make our needs known to Him. And I would imagine in those times that you might be tempted to become anxious and perhaps you might be even tempted to question His love for you. Hopefully, during those times you might reflect on the verses that we have just considered.

God doesn’t always immediately come to our rescue. He often times makes us wait before His love becomes visible, and more often than not, He is preparing to provide for us a response that will produce a far better outcome than we could ever imagine.

Let me read for you **Isaiah 30:18**. “**Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the Lord is a God of justice;** [and then He says] **How blessed are those who long for Him** [or more literally wait on Him].”

God does not want to withhold His blessing from those who wait for Him. He longs to be gracious to them. God does not want to withhold His blessing from those who wait for Him. He longs to be compassionate to them.

So as we pray, waiting on the Lord, knowing that the Lord not only knows how to give the very best gifts to those who wait for Him, but He wants to give them His very best gifts.

William Hendricksen cited the following poem in his commentary on the Gospel of John. “His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour; the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.”