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John 11:1-16

23rd Message

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THE DELAYS OF LOVE

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

I want to talk this morning about one of the most painful problems in the Christian life. How do you respond when God does not act in the way you have been taught to expect? At times it appears God is unfair. He seems silent, hidden. What do you do when you pray and there is no answer?

Has your view of God been changed through difficult circumstances? Once there was a window in your heart through which you could see him. The window was clear and your view of him was crisp. But suddenly, the glass was cracked by a pebble of pain. Perhaps the pebble struck in childhood. Your parents may have abandoned or abused you. Maybe it happened in adolescence or adulthood. As a parent, you may have gotten a phone call saying, "We have your daughter at the station. Please come down." Perhaps you found a letter from your spouse saying that he or she no longer loved you. Maybe you heard a frightening diagnosis from your doctor. Whatever form that pebble took, the result was the same: a shattered window. Suddenly it was hard to see God. Your view of him became distorted. Confusion set in. God would not allow something like this to happen to you, would he?

Maybe these words are hard for some of you to identify with. You may never have had to redefine or refocus your view of God. But most of us have. We know what it feels like to be disappointed by God. At times we have looked for him but failed to find him.

Why does God sometimes disappoint those who love and trust him? If you have ever felt that way, this story from the 11th chapter of the gospel of John, the account of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, is for you. Today we will deal with just the introduction to the story. We have already seen that John's gospel is built around seven great miracles ("signs" is what John called them). The miracles of Jesus, as we have already learned, were material witnesses, as it were, to underlying spiritual truths. They were designed to evoke faith. The raising of Lazarus is the last and the most conclusive of those signs. In addition, these signs were evidences that Jesus was the Messiah. John reports that Jesus did many signs, but those which he chose to put in his gospel were intended to lead people to the conclusion that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. This last sign then clearly would be the most conclusive and persuasive.

The Jews believed that when Messiah came he would raise the dead. On the occasion when John the Baptist asked for proof of Jesus' authority, our Lord reminded him that the blind had received sight, the lame walked, lepers were cleansed, the deaf heard, and *the dead had been raised* (Matt. 11:5). This last sign was the final and ultimate proof that Jesus was the Messiah.

The four main characters in the story are introduced in the opening verses.

Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, of the village of Mary and her sister Martha. And it was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. The sisters therefore sent to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick."

This is a story about four friends: Jesus, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (or Eleazer, in Hebrew). The theme of friendship resonates throughout this passage. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived in the village of Bethany. The word for "love" in verse 3 is normally the word used to express companionship or warm affection. It speaks of the bond that drew these friends together. In all likelihood this was the home where Jesus retreated to when he was in Jerusalem. (The city was only about two miles away, a short walk across the Mt. of Olives from Bethany.)

Mary is identified as the woman who had anointed Jesus' feet with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair. These events took place a bit later (Jn. 12:3), but the writer makes reference to them here because he wants to clearly identify this woman as there are several Marys mentioned in the gospels (the name was quite common at the time). Another reason John identifies her is because he wanted to emphasize her love for the Lord.

Mary and Martha are identified in other sources, too. Apparently, Martha was the older sister. She was more outspoken and aggressive than Mary. She was an outgoing and forthright person. Mary appears to have been more quiet, shy, and less direct in her relationship with the Lord. She was perhaps a bit mystical. She was, however, a deep and devoted disciple of Jesus, and she had profound insight into his words and works. As we will see in a later study (in chapter 12), she seemed to understand Jesus better than any of his male disciples.

The point that John makes clearly here and throughout the rest of this chapter is that these four, Lazarus, Mary, Martha and Jesus, had a special bond: they were *good* friends. They had a deep affection for one another. Think of the best friends you have — those you vacation with, your most intimate companions. This was how these four felt about each other.

This is a beautiful picture of a home filled with love. It was a welcome haven for our Lord during his troubled earthly ministry. Remember that Jesus had left Jerusalem and gone to the Jordan River, to the place where John the Baptist carried out his ministry. Today, this is just about the place where the Allenby Bridge connects Jordan and Israel. It was here that Jesus received word that his dear friend, Lazarus, was sick.

Notice his remarkable response. 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."

The strange thing about Jesus' response is that by the time word reached him, Lazarus was probably dead (although the messengers were not aware of this). The chronology of the story makes this fairly certain. It took one day for the message to travel from Bethany; Jesus delayed two days; and it took one day for him to travel to Bethany. When he arrived there, Lazarus had been dead four days.

The startling thing here is Jesus' seemingly casual attitude toward his friend's serious illness. Although the text says Jesus loved Lazarus, he seemed utterly indifferent to the bad news. The situation was serious — Lazarus was critically ill — otherwise Jesus would hardly have been notified. His reply, however, was the seemingly off-hand comment, "He won't die".

If you telephoned me to say that a member of your family, and one of my close friends, had been taken to the hospital in critical condition and I replied in this fashion, you would question the depth of my affection for him. You certainly wouldn't think I was a very caring man. Yet Jesus did care, as the text plainly says. This was not a mark of indifference on Jesus' part. There was a good reason for his actions: *"but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it,"* i.e. that he might be revealed in all his glory.

The first thing I want you to notice is that sickness can glorify God. Some people, however, say that it is never God's will for Christians to be sick. Many desperately ill people are made even more miserable because they are tormented by guilt and by the notion that their sickness is the result of sin. They can't uncover the sin, or if they have and have confessed it and they continue to be sick, they probably think that God has not forgiven them.

Or they may feel their sickness is the result of their inability to believe that God can heal them. I have been in a hospital room visiting a dying person who was tormented with the idea that his illness was a sign of lack of faith. There may be some among us who are struggling with severe depression and they have to deal with those whose immediate response is to examine their life for the sin that is causing the depression. That is not saying, of course, that there is no such thing as sickness that results in sin. But we must never take the position that all sickness is the result of sin or lack of faith.

Notice how Jesus corrects that unbiblical idea: the sickness Lazarus was suffering from was a result of God's will, and it would end in his own glory and a greater manifestation of the majesty and power of Jesus. How, we will see in a moment.

But now the plot thickens. The real shocker comes in verses 5-6:

Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. When therefore He heard that he was sick, [He immediately said to his disciples, "Let's rush over and see him before he dies!" But it doesn't say that, does it?] He stayed then two days [longer] in the place where He was.

It's hard to imagine how Jesus could delay. Some say he probably knew that Lazarus was dead. That may be true, but what of Mary and Martha? Shouldn't he have hurried to Bethany to comfort them? Why didn't he go immediate-

ly? John tells us why: He didn't go because he loved them! Obviously there is a connection between verses 5 and 6. You might read these two verses as though they said, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, BUT he stayed then two days longer." That is not what the text says, however. The "therefore" indicates a reason: he delayed *because* of his love.

That is hard to take, isn't it? Have you ever gone to God for help you felt you desperately needed, but nothing happened? The heavens were silent; there was no word at all. As the song says, you felt like you were "talking to God from the bottom of the Grand Canyon." Has that ever happened to you?

The point to be made and believed here is that our Lord's delays don't necessarily mean denial. He often delays because he loves us, because he knows that there are things to be done in us that can only be accomplished by delay.

Take Job, for example. He didn't enjoy the box seat we have to the events going on in heaven that generated his suffering. He suffered and waited while God delayed. But in the end, he said, "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees Thee." God's delays strengthened his faith. They made him into a man of God.

I have a dear friend who has struggled with infertility for many years. Last week, she shared with me a letter she had written to her sister who recently suffered a miscarriage. Here is part of what she wrote:

I must say the sad news of your miscarriage left me feeling empty and without words. I know that really I have no idea what your grief and sorrow are for you. I don't know the joy, the miracle of seeing a tiny human growing inside of your own body. But you do. I don't know the marvel of your own baby's birth. But you do. You know the cost of life; at best, I can only estimate it. So why am I writing this letter? Because I do know grief. I do know personal, emotional pain, and I do know the feeling of emptiness. I do know that these valleys are dark and deep, but I never walked them alone. For all the long, lonely hours, for all those tears shed on my pillow, for all the unanswered whys, I would not trade any of these for the intimacy I gained with God. It's a paradox. Every time the door closed, every time the menses came, every time the adoption agency wasn't right for us, the miscarriage, the surgeries, the interviews with the birth mothers, I sank a little lower. The valley got darker, deeper, longer. Yet God was calling me to a higher place in his loving soul, calling me ever so sweetly, ever so quietly, ever so lovingly. And my faith grew. My confidence and reality of God are so big now, it's even unbelievable to me.

Loneliness, loss and pain are the disciplines that draw us to God's heart of hearts. They enlarge our capacity for him and sharpen our focus on him, transforming us into his grownup sons and daughters. They temper our lives so that we're tougher, but they also tenderize us so that we become sweeter, easier to get along with and better able to understand and minister to others. We become more empathetic and sympathetic with their weaknesses and pain. We become the wounded healers of which Henri Nouwen speaks.

Delay doesn't hurt, it helps us. Delay is not due to God's lack of affection for us; delay comes because God loves us. Delay is good for us; it leads us on to God, resulting in a clearer vision of his power and majesty. The dark nights of

the soul have to be seized and put to use so that we miss nothing of his ultimate intent for us. An understanding of the purposes behind delays will never take away the pain, but it can take away the perplexity.

This is hard for us, isn't it? I wonder what the reaction was in Bethany when the messenger returned with word that Jesus had said this illness was not unto death. Lazarus was already dead. Mary and Martha would not only be grieving over the loss of their brother, now they had to wonder about the apparent mistaken comment of Jesus. This must have clouded their minds and driven their hearts to despair.

But then Jesus acts, once again in a perplexing way. (He often was a puzzlement to his disciples.) Verse 7:

Then after this He said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to Him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?"

A few days earlier, Jesus had fled Jerusalem because the Jews planned to arrest him and put him to death. The disciples were relieved to get out of the city. At any moment all of them could have been dragged before the authorities and put to death. They were happy to get out into the boondocks of Perea. But now Jesus says to them, "Let's go back" — back to Judea where his life (and theirs) would be in danger. The disciples, however, firmly believed that for his sake and theirs it would be most imprudent to go back.

But Jesus was controlled by only one force: the Father's will. He deliberately chose Judea as his destination, because the issue at hand was greater than the situation in Bethany. The greater issue was his ultimate mission — the crucifixion. This was the event that would manifest God's glory and his own to Israel. Nothing else mattered. What happened at Bethany was the means to that end, not the end itself.

Jesus' words tell his disciples (and us) that it wasn't fear that drove him out of Jerusalem; it was the Father's will. The Father was in full control of all the events in Jesus' life, including events leading up to his crucifixion. God had a timetable. He orchestrated the events, as we shall see. Because of his limitations as a man, Jesus didn't always know precisely what that schedule was, but his task was to do what pleased the Father. Earlier, because the timing was not right for the events leading up to his trial and crucifixion (it was not yet Passover), Jesus was told to flee the city. But now the time was right for his glorification. The Father ordered him back to the scene of final conflict, and the Son, always submissive, obeyed.

He goes on to explain this principle to his disciples. Verse 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. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."

This is a proverb, originating with Jesus, I believe, that illustrates a profound idea. This was what guided our Lord, and it ought to guide us. There were, he said, twelve hours of daylight. (Ancients didn't carry timepieces as we do so they were inclined to talk in round numbers.) If you walk around when the sun is up you won't stumble over things, but at night it's a different story: you are likely to fall over

something and hurt yourself.

He doesn't apply the parable but he doesn't really have to. The application is obvious: if you walk in the light, you won't make any mistakes. "Light" here is the light of revelation. God enlightened the Son and he walked in that light, therefore he wouldn't and couldn't stumble; he would make no mistakes.

This explains why Jesus was always doing odd, controversial things. When the disciples thought they had him figured out, he often did something that would upset them. One week he would flee from harm's way; the next he would walk right into harm's arms. It looked like madness, but it all made sense to them at last when they understood that he was simply walking by the light that God gave him every day. Though his actions at times seemed bizarre he was making no mistakes. The parable speaks to us as well. If we walk in the light of God's word, we, too, will make no mistakes — at least none that will adversely affect us spiritually.

Jesus goes on to explain to his disciples what it would mean for him to walk in that light. Verse:

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." The disciples therefore said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. Then Jesus therefore said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him." Thomas therefore, who is called Didymus, said to [his] fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him."

Here is an insight into death that may be new to you. Death is like going to sleep. We think of it as the ultimate tragedy, the final farewell, but Jesus says it's a matter of going to sleep.

This reminded me of the time when our oldest son Joel was an infant. On nights when he couldn't sleep we would often get in the car and take a drive because the motion of the car always put him to sleep. When we got home, I'd take him to his room and tuck him in bed. Next day, when he awoke, he wasn't where he was when he went to sleep. He would have fallen asleep in the car, but he would wake up in a safe place — in his own bed. Death is like that: when you awake, you will not be where you once were. You will be in a place of security, safety, beauty and rest. This was how Jesus described death.

But the disciples missed the point, so he had to explain: Lazarus was dead. These words sound harsh to us, and so they are. How much better to think of death as Jesus first put it: you go to sleep and wake up in his house (Cf. John 14:1ff).

Notice again the startling statement: "Lazarus is dead, and I am glad..." How strange! But again, the point is made: this seeming tragedy was for their sake so that they might believe. Jesus delayed his going both for the disciples and for Mary's and Martha's sake in order that their faith might be strengthened. Though they didn't understand it, though they must have been filled with doubt and questions because of it, it was better for them to wait through the anxious hours until God would do his full and complete work.

This is the lesson of these opening verses. At times I have wondered what God was doing in my life. Things were so bad I could not envision how they could get any worse, but they did! I cried out for God but he didn't seem to hear; he didn't seem to care. Sometimes he seemed to be doing things in the oddest way. It was hard to believe he knew what he was doing. But I know he was at work to will and to do of his good pleasure — to increase my faith, build my character and do his work in this world. It was hard to believe, hard to be patient and wait during those times, but I knew he was doing what was right. There are dimensions to our problems that only he sees, and possibilities and opportunities that only he can conceive of. And sometimes, when things look their very worst, in life's darkest hour, his triumph has already begun. Think of the cross. At the darkest hour, salvation was accomplished. The hour of greatest tragedy was Christ's triumph. But the disciples went away from the cross in despair, not knowing that the world had just been saved through his death.

I identify with Thomas. He said, "Let's go and die with him." Gloomy Gus! He was intimating, "I can't see how any good can come of all this, but we might as well go with him and die." We have to admire his courage, if not his faith. I understand him, however. I tend to have the same outlook much of the time. I often think, "I'm not going to give up being a Christian, but I don't understand what God is doing. I don't think any good is going to come of it." Despite what Jesus had said, Thomas didn't take him at his word. He always had trouble with that.

Thomas is actually not a name; it's a nickname. I don't know what his real name was, but he was called "Twin" by the apostles. He was someone's twin. It is interesting that the twin never appears in Scripture. But, as Ray Stedman once said, "Where is the twin? Look in your mirror. There is where you will find him."

I think he was right. I'm very much like Thomas. I question God's ways (what arrogance!), second-guessing him and giving my counsel to him. But this passage overwhelms and corrects me. I can't understand God's delays, nor can I fathom his ways, but I know he'll never forsake me; he'll

never leave me in the lurch. He loves me. He seeks only the best for me. So I can trust him, no matter how dark the night or desperate my situation. Listen to how my friend closes the letter that I quoted from earlier:

So why this lengthy letter? To share a secret, not to give you sympathy. I'm unable to empathize. What is the secret? That God is real. You know that. God does love you. You know that, too. God is interested in a bigger picture than we can see. Maybe you don't know that. He is more interested in us, calling us to the higher ground, the stuff our faith is made of, than just answering our prayers. So you walk through a long, dark valley, or maybe he will carry you. And the burden is heavy, but God is equipping and equipping still, building your faith, and calling you ever so sweetly, ever so quietly, so lovingly. And in the waiting, there is hope. So rest. Rest in your grief, because right next door is hope, and hope builds faith, and faith is communion with God. God: faithful and changeless. How marvelous for us! Don't waste the experience. Let your intimacy with God grow. Your wait is purposeful.

Ruth Graham's words seem appropriate in closing:

I lay my "whys"
before your Cross
in worship kneeling,
my mind too numb
for thought,
my heart beyond all feeling.

And worshipping
realize that I
in knowing You
don't need a "why."

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