

The Delays of Love

After a two week break for our missions convention we are back to John 11 and the story of Lazarus' resurrection. I told you we would come back to this story. We will be in Israel and out of the pulpit for the next two Sundays and then three weeks from today is our 75th Anniversary service but trust me, we will return to this story and eventually we will get Lazarus out of the tomb and alive and well again.

Look with me at John 11:5-6. It is this passage that captures our attention this morning. **“Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.” John 11:5-6.**

In his commentary on John's gospel, James Boice borrowed an outline and a phrase from a great preacher of the 19th century, Alexander Maclaren when he talked about the delays of love. I want to talk about that with you this morning.

You have to admit that the Scripture we read this morning takes us somewhat by surprise. It is not what we expect to read. Jesus loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus so when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he rushed to his side to heal him, or he rushed to Bethany to comfort Martha and Mary. That makes sense. That is consistent with what we know and believe and expect about love. Love moves us to action, not inaction, not delay. But one of the lessons we've been learning, one of the lessons that we pointed out two weeks ago, is that sickness and death are not incompatible with Christ's love. Remember verse 3 tells us that the one Jesus loved was sick. Being sick is not a sign that Jesus doesn't love you. And if he delays his arrival, his answer, his help, his solution, then it is not necessarily a sign that he no longer loves you. In fact, it appears from the Scripture that it is precisely because he loved this family that he delayed his coming to them.

Does God delay his answer to our prayers? Does he delay healing, direction, does he delay the removal of some obstacle from our path? It appears that he does. He did in this circumstance. But understand, God's delays are always for a purpose.

God's delays are the delays of love. Jesus stayed where he was two more days precisely because he loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus and because he loved his disciples. He had something greater for all of them than a temporary healing. His delay was the delay of love.

It's hard to imagine this when you are watching a loved one in the pains of death. It's hard for us to see a greater good in the midst of tragic circumstances. The truth is, with our limited perspective and vision it's often unlikely that we can see the bigger picture, the greater plan. We can't see how God's delay can produce a greater good for us or our family. Even if Jesus had made the plan clear and plain to Mary and Martha, I doubt they could have accepted or embraced it, not through their tears and grief. The point is even though we can't see how our situation can possibly work itself for good, the truth is we know that we rest in God's love. We are God's children, redeemed by the sacrifice of his Son on Calvary, so if God chooses to delay the answer or the help, then we know because of his nature and character that it is motivated out of his great love. If God chooses to delay his help, it is the delay of love.

How many of you remember that great movie with Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr, "An Affair to Remember"? If you don't remember the movie, maybe you remember the scene from Sleepless in Seattle. Cary Grant assumed that she didn't meet him that day at the top of the Empire State building because she didn't love him. She didn't care. She didn't know if he showed up or not and he made it sound like he hadn't, that it wasn't that important, he didn't really care. We know the reason she didn't show up. She was on her way, the sun was shining, you were there... and then a car ran over her. We know the purpose for her delay.

What about Lazarus? What about Jesus' delay? What is the purpose for the delay in your circumstances? If God's delays are the delays of love, then we know what that delay is not.

1. The delays of love are not due to indifference. Jesus didn't delay his trip to Bethany because he didn't love Lazarus or because he was indifferent to his trouble. Quite the contrary. He loved him. He cared about him. He had every intention of rescuing him.

If there is a delay in your life, you are wondering why Jesus hasn't shown up, why your prayers haven't been answered the way you wanted, there may be a number of reasons for the delay, but indifference to your need or your situation is not one of the reasons for the delay. God loves you and he cares about you and the situation you are in. Indifference is not a characteristic of God and is not the source of his delay.

2. The delays of love are not due to preoccupation. God doesn't delay his answer or his help because he is too busy running the world or responding to someone else's crisis. Remember the story of Elijah (in 1 Kings 18)? Elijah called the people to Mt. Carmel and challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest. The pagan prophets prepared an altar and a sacrifice and Elijah did the same and then they would pray and the true God would answer by fire. The 450 prophets of Baal prepared their altar and sacrifice and cried out to Baal but nothing happened. They cried louder, working themselves into a frenzy. They even cut themselves and threw themselves upon the altar but no fire. Elijah began to mock them and suggested that their god was preoccupied. Perhaps he was on a journey or meditating deep in thought. Elijah even irreverently suggested that perhaps Baal had gone to the bathroom and that's why he couldn't help them.

Obviously baal didn't answer because he is nothing but an idol. Elijah called upon the true God and he answered with fire that consumed not only the sacrifice, but the wood and the stone of the altar and the twelve barrels of water that Elijah had instructed them to pour on the altar. Elijah's God, our God is never preoccupied. If God delays his answer, his help, it is never because he is indifferent or he is preoccupied. If God delays his answer, it must be the delays of love.

3. The delays of love are not due to a lack of power or ability. The reason Deborah Kerr couldn't get to Cary Grant was because of a lack of ability and power. She was in the hospital and unable to walk. (Of course for those of you who remember the movie, in the end, if he could paint, she could walk...) But with God, there is never a lack of power. Jesus could heal Lazarus from wherever he was. Power, time, distance, none of these were a problem then nor are they problems now. With God all things are possible.

If God delays his answer, it is not because he is indifferent, preoccupied, or unable. It's not because he lacks power. That's what the delays of love are not. But we can also say something about the positive nature of the delays of love.

1. The delays of love are purposeful. Love has a purpose. It is always for the good of the one who is loved. We already know that Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters, so we know that any delay is born out of an ultimately loving purpose. I should quickly

point out that it is unlikely that we will always know what God's purposes are in every situation of our life. We aren't always going to have the answers or the insight. His ways are not our ways, his thoughts are above and beyond our thoughts and our understanding. But that is not to say we cannot or should not look to find his loving purposes at work in our circumstances.

We know part of the purpose in this story. Jesus told the disciples the purpose behind Lazarus sickness and death. **“This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it.” John 11:4.** And again he told them plainly, **“Lazarus is dead, yet for your sake so that you may believe, I am glad I was not there.” John 11:14-15.** And again, at the tomb, before he called Lazarus back to life, Jesus gave us another glimpse into the divine purpose for this delay. **“Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.” John 11:41-42**

The purpose of the delay? So that the Son could be glorified, so that the disciples would believe and their faith would be increased, so that the crowds gathered that day would believe Jesus was in fact the Messiah, the One sent from God.

The delays of love are purposeful delays. We can rest in the fact that because he loves us, just as he loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus, then he is going to cause all things to work for our good. But what about the pain and grief that they experienced? I don't want to sound disingenuous. In fact, as I wrote those words about delay being ultimately based upon a loving purpose, I had to stop and think about how I would feel if I was standing at the graveside of one of my daughters and you tried to comfort me with similar sounding words. “Well, you know, we don't know why God delayed his healing, but God will work this for good somehow.” I don't know if you've ever heard a pastor swear, but you might at that moment. But the reason we question his purpose is because we can't see the future. I don't know what is ahead. I can't see the big picture, but we have to trust and believe that somehow this God of love who sacrificed all to redeem us is in fact acting with purpose in our behalf.

We have to believe that somehow the delays of love are purposeful. They are for our ultimate and eternal good and they are for his glory. That's what Jesus said.

This was all happening for God's glory so that God's Son could be glorified through it. Then you ask "what kind of God is this who chooses to be glorified at our expense?" Let me take a moment to comment about that.

Understand that we were created to bring glory to God. His receiving glory, even in the story of Lazarus, is not at our expense. Instead, it is the realization of our highest purpose as human beings. There is no greater fulfillment for our lives, no higher expression of our being than when we give and bring glory to God. John Piper writes in his book, *Don't Waste Your Life*, "God is the one being in the universe for whom self-exaltation is the most loving act. Anyone else who exalts himself distracts us from what we need, namely, God. But if God exalts himself, he calls attention to the very thing we need most for our joy. If great paintings could talk, and they saw you walking through the gallery staring at the floor, they would cry out, "Look! Look at me. I am the reason you are here." And when you look and exult in the beauty of the paintings with those around you, your joy would be full. You would not complain that the paintings should have kept quiet. They rescued you from wasting your visit....Now we see that in creating us for his glory, he is creating us for our highest joy." John Piper

Lazarus found his greatest, highest purpose in allowing his life to bring supreme honor and glory to God. Mary and Martha found their greatest purpose, the greatest expression of joy, in allowing God to bring honor to his Son Jesus through their circumstances. If you don't believe it, read John 12:1-12. They were more in love with Jesus and more at peace after these events than ever before. We have been created to bring honor and glory to God. If God can be honored through a delay, then there is every reason to expect there is a loving purpose behind it all that in the grand scheme of eternity will prove to be the source of our greatest joy and victory.

I can't tell you what his purpose is behind every situation, every triumph or every setback, sickness or defeat. I don't think we have to know or need to know, but I am certain of the ultimate good of his purposes. I am certain that my greatest fulfillment as a person is tied to his honor and glory being expressed through my life and my circumstances.

The delays of love are purposeful and **The delays of love are timely.** By that I mean, God's timing is different from ours, but his timing is right for us. He is never late

and we can trust his timing. You've heard me say it so many times over the years, that God operates in the fullness of time as the bible calls it. We operate from calendars and clocks, we are motivated by deadlines and desperation. God is operating out of an entirely different understanding of time because he stands outside of time, in eternity, and reaches to help us where we are. How his merciful and loving purposes intersect with the choices and events of our life is beyond all of us, but we know this, he loves us and in the fullness of his time he will bring all things together for our good and his glory.

Don't let the timing discourage you. Don't let a delay cause you to give in to doubt or despair. Think about the timing in this story. Those days for Mary and Martha must have been the longest hours of their lives. Waiting, wondering why Jesus hadn't yet come, watching as Lazarus was losing ground and then died. Four days of grief must have seemed like an eternity to them, but then a trip to the cemetery and the power of Jesus' command to Lazarus to come forth. Lazarus comes bounding out of the grave and I wonder, how long did those days and hours seem to Mary and Martha then? But a moment, perhaps? Just a dream of pain that faded as they stood rejoicing with their brother, each of them overwhelmed as they stood as witnesses to the revelation of the glory of the Giver of Life.

Don't be discouraged about the delays. The delays of love are full of his purpose, they are the catalyst that launch forth the revelation of his glory, they may be the means to a brand new and greater experience of his fullness and joy. That was certainly the case for Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Their lives were forever changed, forever different after this glorious revelation of Christ. Trust him. Believe him. Believe in his love for you and trust his timing in it all.

James Boice wrote, "**Learn to interpret circumstances by the love of Christ and not Christ's love by circumstances.**" **James Boice** I am certain of his love and that reality then is applied to every situation and circumstance and the timing of it all. Nothing changes that. Nothing separates us from the love of Christ Paul said. I am certain that he died to redeem me and his purposes will always be for his glory and for my ultimate good because he loves me.

The delays of love are not due to indifference, nor preoccupation, nor inability or powerlessness. The delays of love are purposeful and timely. But there is one last

thing I should tell you, **His timing is always right.** God may delay his guidance or the changing of your circumstances. He may delay a healing or some other provision, but when it comes to the really important things – when it comes to salvation and a deeper walk with God, there is no delay.

Look at Luke 23:39. It was the day like no other day, the day when God's Son died upon a cross as the sacrifice that atoned for our sins. Crucified between two criminals, one hurled insults at him the bible tells us and said "Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!" "But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.'" Then he said, **'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'** **Jesus answered him, 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.'** **Luke 23:39-43**

There may be times when the answer is delayed, but when you call upon the Lord for his saving mercy and grace, rest assured there will be no delay. When Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two days, but when this dying thief cried out to him and asked for mercy, the response was immediate and certain. This day - today, you will be with me in paradise.

The bible says "whosoever calls upon the name of the lord shall be saved!" There will be no delay when it comes to the eternal things. Call on him today. He is ready to save you, to rescue you, to deliver you. The bible says he is a very present help in a time of trouble. God said through his prophet, "Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear." Isaiah 65:24.

Remember the night when Jesus came walking on the water and Peter said, "Lord if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water." Peter got out of the boat and began walking on the water, but when he saw the waves he began to be overwhelmed and as he started to sink beneath the water he cried out, "Lord save me!" And what does the bible say? You can read the account in Matthew 14:31. The bible says, **"Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him."** **Matthew 14:31.**

There was no time for delay at that moment. Jesus would be glorified by rescuing Peter. And the bible says as soon as they climbed into the boat the wind and waves calmed down.

There may have been some delays in your life. If so, ask God for insight. Ask him to show you any reasons that might exist for the delays. Have you blocked or hindered what God desired to do?

But also remember that sometimes you may have encountered the delays of love. God may be keeping you from something that would prove to be harmful, or preparing you for something greater. For sure he is preparing to reveal his glory in your life as you trust and believe.

Remember you can trust the timing of the eternal and loving God. As the songwriter said, "He's an on time God." He may not come when you want him – ask Mary, Martha and Lazarus, but he will be there right on time – ask Peter and that dying thief on the cross. Trust him, even if the answer is delayed. He will still be right on time.