

When God Says, “Wait” John 11:1-44

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 9-27-2009

Introduction

One of my favorite Scriptures is from Lamentations chapter 3. It’s the verse that the hymn, “Great is Thy Faithfulness” is based on. In the midst of anguish of spirit Jeremiah could say, **“Through the Lord’s mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning. Great is Your faithfulness.”** But I find the verses that come after that to be a bit more challenging. They say, **“The LORD is good to those who [get this phrase – “to those who”] wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.”** When you keep reading about the pain and weeping that happen while you wait, you realize that there is a lot of meaning packed into that phrase. But it is somewhat counterintuitive: why is it good to wait?

We have a hard time waiting, yet every one of you has likely experienced it even this past week. If you’re anything like me, when you switch lines at the grocery store, you pick the wrong line and end up waiting longer than if you had stayed in the first one. Waiting is hard. Waiting to open a Christmas present can be hard for some youngsters. It evokes curiosity and impatience. Every one of you knows what its like to wait for an extra 15 minutes for someone to come to an appointment – or maybe they miss the appointment, and you wait even longer. We don’t like to wait because it can create uncertainty and stress, and it puts things outside of our control – which may be one of the reasons why God says it is good to wait – we become more dependent upon God. If you are a highly scheduled person, you find all kinds of things that seem like poor timing. The poopy diaper comes at the wrong time. You get spaghetti on your shirt right before an important sales call. During the past two weeks there were a number of things that seemed like poor timing for my schedule, unless of course you are a God who is training Phil Kayser how to handle anxiety and stress. Then the computer crash that loses a bunch of material, and the downed network, and the frantic call from a depressed man are all designed by a perfect God for my good. And He wants me to learn to wait patiently on the Lord.

Now we have a tendency to see these things as chance events, not as the timing of a sovereign God. Things just didn’t go right. But I want to

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challenge you to think of God's timing in your life as being perfect – even when it seems disastrous. Ecclesiastes says, “To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven” (3:1). It says that God has it all perfectly timed out. From hindsight we can see the perfect timing of God in the incarnation of Jesus. But if you were the parents of Jesus, wouldn't you wonder if God's timing was off? Was it good timing:

1. For Mary to get pregnant before she was married? From a divine perspective, yes, but try to put yourself in their shoes.
2. It doesn't seem like good timing for Mary to get pregnant in Nazareth and have to travel all the way to Bethlehem?
3. It doesn't seem like good timing for Rome to require Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem during the last week of pregnancy. Talk about being inconvenient. I think you mothers can relate to every bump that Mary was experiencing on that donkey.
4. It doesn't seem like good timing for there to be no room at the inn when they arrive there late at night, does it?
5. And what about that night? After the exhaustion of a long day of travel, and after lost sleep delivering her baby, it was a little bit inconvenient to have the shepherds show up. Why did the angels invite them that night? Why not the next night?

Today we are going to examine a timing issue for answers to prayer. I think we have all petitioned God for some emergency situation only to find that God was not responding in time, or at least we thought it was not in time. From our perspective He was late.

I. God Sometimes Is Slow in Answering Our Prayers

A. Prayers for Physical problems

In this chapter we see a physical emergency that Martha and Mary faced. Lazarus was sick, and realizing that his case was desperate, they quickly sent a message to Jesus to come. They expected a speedy answer, but instead, He chose to stay where he was for two more days. And meanwhile Lazarus died. This was the most severe example I could find in the Bible of a "wait" answer. From a human perspective it looked like the answer was "No" rather than "wait." And I think that most of you have experienced not only God's "No's" (that we looked at last week) but also His "waits." Perhaps we have prayed for healing, and our sickness kept dragging on for weeks and then finally God brought deliverance. God's

intention was not a "No" so why did He wait so long to answer the prayer? Our first impulse might be to think that it wasn't an answer, and that we just got better on our own. Of course, we as Calvinists know better, right? Every atom of our body is upheld by the Word of His power, and no medication could work if God didn't let it work. God heals with and without means. Another reaction is to beat up on ourselves and to think that we didn't have enough faith. But there are many reasons why God makes us wait. And they are good reasons. And we will look at that in a bit. But I want you to evaluate whether your life can relate to the delay in this chapter.

B. Prayers for Guidance

Perhaps you have been looking to the Lord for guidance and after two weeks of praying you are still as confused about what you should do as you were on day one. An excellent example of this is found in Jeremiah 42 where the king Babylon had appointed Gedaliah to rule over Israel, and there is a small rebel group that kills him along with a garrison of Babylonian soldiers – which was not a wise move. When the Israelite remnant found out about this they were scared to death and came to Jeremiah asking what they should do. They asked, "Should we stay in the land of Palestine and risk getting killed by Babylon or should we flee into Egypt? Well Jeremiah sought the face of the Lord to get guidance, but chapter 42:7 says, "**And it happened after ten days that the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah.**" It's easy for us to read that and say that God gave them the guidance they were asking for and that is that. But if you were in their shoes wondering every day whether Babylon is going to drop the ax and kill you all, the tension is mounting. "We need an answer NOW Lord! Why is the Lord holding off giving this guidance for ten days? Has that happened to you? You think that you've got to have the guidance right now. And God says, "Wait. I'm not going to give it to you right now. You have to trust me. I'm teaching you something through this delay." Another example is Samuel and Saul. God deliberately delayed giving His answer to Saul until the last minute.

C. Prayers for Intellectual Problems

Maybe you are perplexed over a Biblical doctrine or passage. You have studied and studied and cannot seem to understand the problem passage. Yet God does not give you light on that for a week, a month, maybe years and then finally the Lord opens up the treasure house of knowledge on that problem. Why is it that the Lord takes so long in

showing our relatives the doctrines of grace, or eschatology or other doctrines that we have found so beneficial and practical and so comforting?

D. Prayers for Financial or Material Problems

Maybe the problems we have prayed for are financial or material. I don't need to belabor the point. I think most of us can relate to what is going on in this chapter. Before we look at some of God's reasons for those delays, let's look at our inappropriate reactions:

II. And Our Reactions Are Not Always Appropriate. Some Typical Reactions:

A. Questioning His knowledge

The first inappropriate reaction is to question God's wisdom. These sisters may have been tempted to question whether Jesus even knew. "Surely Jesus would have been here by now if He knew how serious things have gotten!" They had sent their messenger and were anxiously counting the hours confident that Christ would come as soon as He heard of Lazarus's condition. They may have wondered if the messenger had not communicated clearly. Yet we know from the account that Jesus knew of the sickness as well as the death. In verse 4 He tells his disciples that this sickness was not for the purpose of bringing Lazarus's death, even though in verse 14 He tells His disciples that death has happened. God did not want Lazarus to be permanently dead yet. He still had a few more years of life and service. But Martha and Mary didn't know that yet.

Anyway, I have talked with Christians who have a hard time believing that God can have a sympathetic knowledge of their situation. Sure He is omniscient. But He's God - how can He understand the struggles I am going through? But God does understand. He came in the incarnation to experience everything that we are going through. His knowledge is an experiential knowledge. So don't question His knowledge or His wisdom.

B. Thinking He is Indifferent

A second inappropriate reaction is to think that God is indifferent to what you are going through. Look at verses 5-6. "**Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Therefore, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was.**" The NIV translation totally misses an important point here because they don't translate this literally. You really need to have literal translations in your hands. The NIV translates it, "Yet when He heard that Lazarus was sick . . ." as if it was despite His love. No, it wasn't despite His love, but *because* of His love that

He stayed. It was precisely His love that made Him wait. We began with the verse in Lamentations – **“It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.”** It’s good; it’s a manifestation of God’s love in your lives. So the New King James translation is better. The Greek says, "Therefore" or "So" or "Because of this." The reason He stayed away for two more days was not because He was indifferent, but because of His great love for them and because He wanted the best in their lives. Love dictated the delay. Let me read that verse again because we have such a hard time with this. **"Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Therefore, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was."**

Fellow Christians, if you ever doubt God's love and concern when you go through difficulties; if you are ever tempted to think that He is indifferent to your plight simply because He is delaying His answer to your prayers, then take to heart this verse. Take to heart 1 Peter 5:7 which says of God **"He cares for you"**, and it says that in the midst of fiery persecution that God allowed them to go through. Wise parents delay their child's request for a razorblade until that child is old enough to use it without slitting themselves open. It is their great love that dictates the delay. And the same is true of our prayer life.

C. Thinking He Is Too Involved or We are Too Unimportant

So the reaction to God’s delays should not be to question His knowledge, or to think that he is indifferent. Nor should we think that we are unimportant to God or a lower priority.

Given the incredible danger that Jesus was in, the disciples may have assumed that Christ’s life and perhaps their own lives were a higher priority than going to visit Lazarus. Look at verses 7-9. **Then after this He said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” The disciples said to Him, “Rabbi, lately the Jews sought to stone you, and are You going there again?”** The implication is that “You’re crazy to go visit Lazarus at a time like this. You’ll be walking right into a trap. Lazarus’s life is not as important as Yours or ours. Look at verse 16: **Then Thomas, who is called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with Him.** Thomas thinks the priorities are switched around. Maybe Lazarus *is* more important than any of us. But that was not Christ’s reason at all. In fact, all along, Jesus had a definite plan of action with regard to Lazarus and He was tailoring it perfectly to adapt to the needs of His people. Verse 15: **I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may**

believe. Nevertheless, let us go to Him. No letter addressed to God is unanswered, but some of them are in a file labeled "Pending."

D. Thinking He Can't Handle The Problem

One last reaction could be that God can't handle this problem. You are all good Calvinists and never think this, right? Wrong. Good Calvinists can be tempted with this thought as well. Look at verse 21. **Now Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."** If you had been here. But now it is too late. It is so easy to think that God has met His match with our particular problem. We are going to be seeing in a moment that Martha doesn't make that faulty conclusion. But many other saints have done so. Sarah thought that God had met His match with her infertility. That's why she laughed. We may have given up on trying to promote righteousness in our culture because the problems seem too big. But we need to be convinced that no problem is too big for God to handle. He continues to be a God of miracles.

So those are some of the inappropriate responses that come out of our hearts. And they come because we don't have a God-centered prayer life.

III. But God Always Has Good Reasons For Saying, "Wait." Some Examples:

A. For His Greater Glory (vv. 4,40; 1Pet 4:11)

Here are some of the reasons given in this passage for God's delays. First, of all, God delays on occasion because it brings Him far greater glory. Look at verse 4. **When Jesus heard that, He said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.** And He was. What a testimony Lazarus was after his resurrection. If you knew that God would be glorified far more by answering your prayer next month rather than today, would you not be willing to wait? We want God's glory, right? I think it would make it seem worthwhile if we knew that God would be better glorified through a delay than through an immediate "Yes." Look at verse 40. **Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?"** It's a faith issue. When you look at delays from that perspective, it makes them easier to swallow God's answers of "Wait." So this is a great reason. 1 Peter 4:11 says that our desire should be **that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.** Thank the Lord for His delayed answers because you want Him to be glorified. Right? Our prayers need to be God-centered.

B. For Our Spiritual Profit (v. 15a)

A second reason for God's delays is that they are always for our spiritual benefit. Verse 15 says that Jesus was glad for this delay because it was for their sakes. It was for their benefit. And again, who wouldn't want to wait if you knew that you would be receiving far more benefit by receiving the answer in one year rather than right now? If you had a choice of \$1000 in your pocket right now or \$100,000 in your pocket in one year, wouldn't you take the latter? Some people wouldn't. They are so immature and present oriented that all they care about is what they have in their pocket now. But mature Christians are willing to wait if they know it is for their spiritual benefit.

C. To Increase Our Faith (v. 15b)

But verse 15 gives another reason for this delay. Jesus said, **And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe.** This whole event was designed to strengthen their faith in Jesus and to glorify Jesus throughout history. To this day we delight in the doctrine of Jesus illustrated in these chapters – that He is the Resurrection and the Life. If we always got everything we asked the moment we asked for it, there would be no room for faith to grow. But when God delays, our faith is stretched and exercised and made strong. And who among us does not want to grow in faith? We do! We do! Therefore we should welcome those times when God says "Wait." God is for us, and He is pleased by a life of faith far more than by a life of comfort. In Lamentations it says, **"The LORD is good to those who wait for Him."**

D. To Force Us To Live by the Light He has Already Given (vv. 9-10)

Related to this increase of faith is the next point: one of His purposes was to force His disciples to live by the light that He had already given to them. Look at verses 9-10. **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 one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.** He starts with an illustration of limited sunlight, and in verse 10 applies it to inward light. So obviously this is a spiritual metaphor. What He is saying is that no one has light all the time. There are only twelve hours of daylight in which to walk in, and nobody complains about that, do they? We all know that there are times when we can't see well, but we are thankful for the twelve hours of daylight that we do have, and we take full advantage of those twelve hours of daylight.

In the spiritual realm, the same should be true. Our responsibility is to walk within the light that God has given rather than to freeze up during the daylight hours simply because we have stumbled at night. And what a powerful illustration this is. So many Christians refuse to step out in obedience to the Lord, simply because there are some things in the future that they don't have a clue on. And they are scared about those future periods that they are dark on. These disciples didn't know whether they would end up being killed. And Martha and Mary didn't know what the next two days would hold. You know, if my parents had agreed to obey God's call to be missionaries only after they knew every detail of where they would get their money, what station they would be on, what dangers they could prepare for, etc., they would never have been missionaries. That would have been as ridiculous as saying that we won't make a three-day journey unless we have 24 hours of light every day. No one fully knows the future. Yet despite that, we must obey God's call. We must submit to Him.

And God sometimes deliberately waits to answer our prayers for insight and guidance or other forms of help because He wants us to stop worrying about the future and to start obeying the light that we do have now. There is some light and some darkness; some things that we understand and some things that we don't. And if you fail to employ the twelve hours He has given to you, then God will have to move you up north where you get less and less daylight spiritually, and more and more night until you begin by faith walk in the light that He has already given. Hopefully that makes sense.

E. To help us realize that our critical events are not that serious when looked at from an eternal perspective (v. 11-14)

Verse 11 gives another reason for this delay. And that is to help us realize that our critical events are not that serious when looked at from an eternal perspective. We might think: "What could be more critical than a life and death issue?" But in verse 11 Jesus says, **Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.** He is not denying that He is dead. Look at verses 12-14. **Then His disciples said, "Lord, if he sleeps he will get well."** [That's an excuse that springs from fear of the Pharisees. Good. Let's not go. Verse 13] **However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking a rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead."** So why didn't He say so in the first place? I believe it is because He was seeking to bring death into a realistic perspective. For the Christian, death is simply like falling asleep to this world and waking to another world. It's no more frightening than sleep.

We tend to get stressed out by our emergencies, and pray for deliverance. And when God decides not to deliver us, we realize that we were able to make it through after all. It wasn't the all-fired emergency that we thought it would be. In years gone by we have had a couple of people who would sometimes get in a fight late at night, frantically call me for counseling at 10 pm about a marriage that is falling apart and we need to talk to you right now." Let me tell you something: that problem didn't arise in one hour, and a wait till morning will not be the end of the world. And that's the way God treats our prayers sometimes. Martha wanted them there lest Lazarus die. The disciples want to stay away lest they die. They have an anxiety over death. But Jesus is telling them to lay hold of their responsibilities, and they need not fear anything. What was it that Ron Dotzler said when people argued that he was living in a dangerous part of town? He said that the safest place to be is in the center of God's will, and the most dangerous place to be is out of His will – even if you are in safe West Omaha. And sometimes God has to delay answers to prayer so that we will face up to the fact that our emergencies are not really that critical in the overall framework of things. As the Puritans said, "The duty is ours, the outcome is God's." We tend to worry about the outcomes, because they seem like emergencies.

F. To make us consciously willing to face danger for Christ (v. 16)

I've already dealt with verse 15, but let me give another purpose in verse 16: to make us consciously willing to face danger for Christ. Thomas would have much rather had Christ speak a word of healing from a distance. He had done that with the Nobleman's son, the Centurion's servant, and with the SyroPhonician's daughter – why not here? It would be a whole lot safer. Or God could have simply kept the illness away from Lazarus. But he has brought these disciples to a place where they were willing to face danger if God would be glorified. Verse 16, **then Thomas, who is called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him."** What a cool testimony. He gets a bad rap as doubting Thomas, but this is a great testimony. Several miles away, Martha has also passed the test. In verse 22 she says, "**Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give you.**" Even now.

Your waits may not be big tests of faith. Sometimes God has to give us baby steps where we learn to face the uncertainty of very difficult futures by facing the uncertainty of little delays first. But sometimes God delays in order to test our willingness to face danger for Him. The disciples passed that test.

G. To produce submission (vv. 21-22)

Another purpose was given in those verses I read: to produce submission. God doesn't want us to get the idea that He is a cosmic bellboy who is at our beck and call. And though He delights in our prayers, He will sometimes sound out our hearts to see whether we have a demanding, petulant attitude, or whether we are submissive. And He does it sometimes by saying "No" or delaying a "Yes." And here we find both the perseverance of Mary in prayer, and yet the submissiveness of willing to abide by His will. She's not demanding. **But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give You.** She's asking, but she's leaving it up to him. She's learned the lesson.

H. To extend His kingdom among men (vv. 37,42,45)

Finally, this delay was designed to draw others to Christ and to extend His kingdom. Who among us wouldn't gladly have a prayer answered by "Wait" or even "No," if it meant that many others would be saved? Look at verse 37. **And some of them said, "Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?"** Here was a huge crowd of witnesses that needed to be challenged that Jesus was the Lord of even death. But even if there had been no resurrection, this still could have been a great opportunity for witness. Out in Ethiopia, funerals were often the largest opportunities of evangelistic outreach since all the neighbors came to a funeral. And when they saw the joy and celebration that the Christians had, it blew them away. At the pagan funerals, the family wailed without hope; they cut themselves and were in despair. They were horrible events to witness since people did not have hope for eternity. And when they saw that the Christians did not fear death, and they witnessed joy at the reality of heaven, and the confidence they had that they would go to heaven, many of those who came believed.

Look at the purpose for Christ's prayer and miracle in verse 42: **And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me.**

"Because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe..." Did they believe? Yes. Look at verse 45. **Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in Him.**

Who of you would not gladly have God say "Wait" to your prayers if your loved ones and friends would come to Christ and experience eternal life? I know I would.

Conclusion

I hope this sermon has been an encouragement not to get frustrated with God when on occasion He is slow in answering your prayers. He has His reasons, and His reasons are good. He wants us to pray, and to persevere in praying. But may we glory in the fact that His answers to our prayers are perfect. Let me end by reading the passage in Lamentations that we began with:

Lamentations 3:22 *Through the LORD'S mercies we are not consumed,
Because His compassions fail not.*

Lamentations 3:23 *They are new every morning;
Great is Your faithfulness.*

Lamentations 3:24 *"The LORD is my portion," says my soul,
"Therefore I hope in Him!"*

Lamentations 3:25 *The LORD is good to those who wait for Him,
To the soul *who* seeks Him.*

Lamentations 3:26 *It is good that *one* should hope and wait quietly
For the salvation of the LORD.*

Lamentations 3:27 *It is good for a man to bear
The yoke in his youth.*

Amen.

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