



Potomac Hills

Presbyterian Church, PCA



By Grace Alone ~ Through Faith Alone ~ In Christ Alone

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John 11:1-16

May 27, 2007
English Standard Version

“The Timing of Christ”

This is the 36th sermon in the series on the New Testament book of John entitled,
“The Gospel of Christ.”

John 11:1-16

*“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. 3 So the sisters sent to Him, saying, “Lord, he whom You love is ill.” 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.**” 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So, when He heard that Lazarus was ill, He stayed 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.” 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.” 16 So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with Him.””*

INTRODUCTION: *Being Good at Waiting*

Much of Today’s message has to do with the subject of waiting, and before we get to our passage in John 11, let’s first take a look at someone else who was good at waiting. The person, of course, was Abraham.

Now if you don’t know your Bible, you can’t appreciate the extent to which Abraham and his wife Sarah trusted God. The two of them had been married for years. She was 65, he

was 75; and if you can believe this, God had said to Abraham that in the latter years of his life, his wife was going to have a baby.

God promised Abraham in no uncertain terms. He swore on the basis of His own integrity that Sarah would have a son. Then, after making that firm promise, God said, “Now you trust Me. You wait.”

Abraham waited a year, and nothing happened. By then, Sarah had turned 66. He waited another 10 years, and by that time she was 76. Still nothing happened. He waited another 10 years — and nothing at all happened. Then, when Abraham was nearing his 100th birthday, which means that Sarah was about 90-years-old, God came back and said, “I’m here again. Guess what? You’re still going to have that baby.”

It’s been 25 years since God first made that promise to Abraham — when you stop and consider all the time that’s passed, you gain a whole new appreciation for God’s faithfulness and consistency. It’s a wonderful story because it proves how trustworthy God is in the waiting period.

Let’s pick up the story in **Genesis 17:15-19**, “*And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16 I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." 17 Then Abraham fell on his face and **laughed** and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" 18 And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" 19 God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him."*

And then we pick up the story again in **Genesis 18:10-12**, “*The Lord said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. 12 So Sarah **laughed** to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?"”*

The name Isaac means laughter in Hebrew. God was telling them something along the line of “you laugh at Me; I’ll laugh at you. I’ll show you when that boy is born that I keep My word.”

Abraham laughed on the outside, but deep down on the inside, he was confident God could do whatever He said and that God was faithful to His promises. **Romans 4:18-21** makes that clear when it says, “*In hope he [Abraham] believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." 19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. 20 No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, **but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.***”

What was the purpose of Abraham waiting all those years?

First, so he would be strengthened in his faith and second, so that glory would be God’s!

Now it’s time to turn to our passage this morning in John 11.

And the first thing we see there is ...

v. 1-6: THE LORD AND HIS FRIENDS ¹

¹ The Exposition of the text is adapted from my sermon “*His Time, His Perspective*,” 8/23/92; *Reflections on the Gospel of John*, Vol. 3 by Leon Morris, pages 401-408; *The Gospel According to John* by D.A. Carson, pages 403-411; *Following Christ ... The Man of God* by Chuck Swindoll, pages 53-54; *Thru the Bible*, Vol. 4 by J. Vernon McGee, pages 436-438; *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Vol. 1 by Warren

Immediately we see that there was a crisis here — they were facing a desperate situation. Verse 1 tells us that Lazarus was sick. He's lying in Bethany on his deathbed, gravely ill. But the Apostle John first wants us to know a little bit about Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. For with them, we see that ...

- **There was DEDICATION**

We're reminded of the incident where Mary showed her love and dedication to the Lord when she poured perfume on His head and wiped His feet with her hair. It's clear that this was a special family to Jesus. The members of this family loved Jesus and showed it without reservation or embarrassment. They were known for their dedication to Jesus.

And I thought, "What a wonderful thing to be known for? To be known for your dedication to the Lord."

And so I have to ask, "Are you known for being dedicated to the Lord? For being His loving friend? For humbling yourself at His feet without concern for what others would think? Without concern for what the gossips would say?"

If you're going to be dedicated to Jesus Christ, then He has to come first in your life. And if Jesus Christ is going to be first in your life, then you can't be first in your life. I like the way Gale Sayers, the great Hall of Fame running back for the Chicago Bears put it in his book, *I Am Third*, which the movie, *Brian's Song* was based on. He writes, "The Lord comes first, my friends come second, and I am third." I think Lazarus and his sisters would've like Gale Sayers book, because they were the type of people who put Jesus first. They were dedicated to the Lord. And because they were so dedicated to the Lord they sent word to Jesus, telling Him that, verse 3, "*Lord, he whom You love is ill.*"

And so we see Jesus' response ...

- **There was a DECLARATION**

Verse 4 tells us that Jesus 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.*"

We ought to note a few things in this verse; first, the end is not death. As we'll see later in this chapter the ultimate end for Lazarus here is resurrection. Just as the end for Jesus would be resurrection. Just as the end of each one of us who believe will be resurrection.

This is the great hope of the Christian faith – what we profess to believe when we recite the Apostle's Creed when we celebrate the Lord's Supper together — "***I believe ... in the resurrection of the body.***"

Sure, death is a reality, death will take place, but it won't have the last word.

Death never has the last word because Jesus conquered death. And because Jesus conquered death, resurrection has the final word. And we need to remember in the midst of our desperate situations that "***this does not lead to death.***"

We need to remember the Christ has promised to raise us up with Him.

We need to remember that resurrection is the final reality.

We also need to not here that these things happen "***for the glory of God,***" that God's glory might be revealed. Lazarus is not going to be resurrected to glorify Lazarus — to glory man — but to reveal God to man. So that man would have a glimpse of God's glory, God's power, God's majesty. And that these things happen "***so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.***"

Because God reveals Himself and reveals His glory, first and foremost, through His Son.

And it's the Son's actions that ensure this ***“does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God.”***

Then we go on to the next verse and we see that ...

- **There was DEVOTION**

The Son's actions need to be taken seriously, because verse 5 tells us *“Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.”* Lazarus' death and resurrection are going to happen not only to glorify the Father and the Son, but **also** are for the good of Lazarus and his sisters, because Jesus **loved** them unconditionally.

As I said earlier, this must have been a special family to Jesus — I think this family was a special gift to Jesus. Here there were three caring, understanding, dedicated friends. Their home was for Him an oasis in a hostile world, a home away from home. And He loved them dearly.

And again, when you're in a desperate situation, in the midst of a crisis event, it's **absolutely crucial** that you remember that **Jesus loves you**. And that He loves you totally, completely, and unconditionally.

When you're trying to run away from Him, He loves you.

When you're not being faithful to Him, He loves you.

When you're doubting and questioning Him, He loves you.

When you're knee-deep in sin, acting like a pagan, He loves you.

Some people say that a Christian should never get sick. Can sickness possibly be in the will of God? I wish Lazarus were here to answer that question. It's clear from this passage that sickness is not a sign that God doesn't love you ... not at all! God loves you when you're sick, He loves you when you're well, He loves you all the time. He loves you whether or not you love Him. You can't stop the sun from shining and you can't stop the Lord from loving you. And because Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters **He waited**, and so we see that ...

- **There was DELAY**

Verse 6 says that when Jesus *“heard that Lazarus was ill, He stayed two days longer in the place where He was.”*

Why?

Can you **imagine** the reaction of Mary and Martha when they heard that Jesus wasn't coming right away? “Why? Lord, the one **You love** is sick. We didn't ask you to just sit back and pray about it. We want You to come **right** here **right** now and **heal** him. Why wait?”

Why wait? Because Jesus was waiting for His Father's perfect timing — and with this passage of time there would be **no doubt** in understanding the coming miracle. Jesus' timing is regulated by His Father's will, not by the requests of friends or family. By waiting to leave until after Lazarus had died — Jesus will accomplish two things: He will powerfully demonstrate Himself to be the Lord of the Resurrection, and He will powerfully establish the faith of His disciples, the faith of His friends, and the faith of Lazarus' family.

Jesus was constantly seeking to increase their faith. He knew that soon He would leave them and they would have the responsibility of carrying on the ministry. If their faith was weak, then the work could never be strong. Therefore, it was essential that they understood God's timing.

Jesus delayed because Jesus loved them. Nothing but the purest, simplest love sways Him in all that He does. When He delays, it's always the delay of love. What patience we would have if we recognized that the only reason which moves God in His choice of when to fulfill our desires, when to grant our requests, when to lift away our burden is when it's for our own good.

God always answers **at the best time**, He is never late. **Isaiah 55:8** says, *“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the Lord.”*

And in the same way, our timing is not His timing. His watch is set to matters of eternal consequence, not things of the here and now.

If we remember that God has a purpose for all things, **Romans 8:28**, “*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose*” ... if we could remember **that**, then it wouldn’t be difficult to understand that His delays are delays of love.

But that’s easier said than done, isn’t it?

And that’s what we see here with ...

v. 1-6: **THE LORD AND HIS FOLLOWERS**

They begin to immediately question Jesus and what He’s doing. Because we read next that ...

- **There was a DECISION**

In verses 7 and 8 we see Jesus tell His 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?”*

This was not the decision that the disciples were looking for. Notice that He didn’t say, “Let us go back to Bethany,” where He had friends. But rather, He said, “*let us go to Judea again,*” back to Jerusalem, where He had enemies. The disciples surely didn’t want to face the confrontation they knew would come when Jesus returned to Judea. You can just hear them asking Jesus, “Lord, heal Lazarus from a distance; after all, You’ve done that before. Don’t make us do this hard thing and go back to Judea.”

And so again, I have to ask, “Where is your Judea? What is that hard thing that God wants you to do, but that you don’t want to do?”

Maybe it’s talking to your neighbor about Christ and inviting them to church. Maybe it’s visiting that person you know is lonely, but who’s not someone who’s much fun to be around. Maybe it’s setting aside a time during the day to pray and study the Bible, but you just don’t want to give up the time. Maybe it’s saying no to that new thing you want so that you can take the family out. Maybe it’s making a commitment to be involved even though it’s a lot easier not to.

Where is your Judea? Where is God calling you to go that you just don’t want to go? What is God calling you to do that you just don’t want to do? You see, whenever Jesus makes a decision and whenever He’s clearly revealed His will to us through His Word, then we’re faced with three choices: We can fail to follow His decision and stay in the darkness; We can reluctantly follow His decision and complain about it the whole time, making sure that everyone knows that we really don’t want to be here, thus never realizing the joy and peace that He wants for us; Or we can faithfully follow His decision, trusting that He’s in control and, as Psalm 145 says, watching over all those who love Him.

And this is what Jesus tells His disciples in verses 9 and 10 where we see ...

- **There was DISCUSSION**

He deals with their concerns right away. “*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.”*

He’s letting them know that the light reveals God’s will and God’s presence with us and that the night shows the absence of knowing God’s will and the absence of God’s presence. Remember back in **John 9:4-5**, which was part of our responsive reading this morning, when Jesus said, “*We must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.*” Jesus is reminding

them that they are safe as long as they're carrying out His Father's will and as long as it is still light, as long as His presence is still with them.

It's hard to follow Christ on anything when it's night and you don't know what God's will is or if Christ is with you. But when you're in the light, and you know what God's will is, and you know that God's presence is with you through His Spirit, then you can follow Christ **even in the hard times.**

Jesus is reminding us as well that we too can be involved in doing the work the Father calls us to do as long as it is still light, as long as His presence is with us, as long as we're following His will. Then Jesus tells them why He delayed His decision to go. And so we see in verses 14 and 15 that ...

- **There was DISCLOSURE**

"Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe." Jesus is letting the disciples know that it's better that He wasn't there before Lazarus died because He would have healed him instead of raising him from the dead. Healing him, and not raising Lazarus from the dead, would have robbed the world of a remarkable illustration **of the truth of the resurrection.**

There would not have been the display of dramatic power which served to strengthen the faith of the family, and to strengthen the faith of each one of us. It's better that Jesus' power over death is displayed so that everyone can know that he can not only raise Himself but that He can raise all those who trust in Him. He says that this is done ***"so that you may believe."***

Not coincidentally, the theme of the Gospel of John.

Jesus wants their faith to grow. He wants their faith to be greater, to be stronger. Jesus is saying that what happens here will enable them to grow in faith, to believe more fully, to trust Him more firmly.

Jesus has taught His disciples a great lesson here:

Now that the decision has been made — even though it may be a hard one;

Now that the discussion has been had — so you know the importance of the decision;

Now that the disclosure has been given — so you know why the decision was made when it was made;

Now that you have been able to see things from Jesus' perspective;

Let us go ... and carry it out!

But, only at the end, only after the decision has been made, but before it is implemented, we learn that ...

- **There was DANGER**

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

Thomas thought that if Jesus were to go back to Judea, He would die.

Thomas was right. Jesus went back ... and there He died.

But just as Mary and Martha didn't see how Lazarus' death could result in greater glory to God and a strengthened faith for them, so also the disciples didn't see how Jesus' death could result in greater glory to God and a strengthened faith for them.

You see, the human perspective focuses

... on the immediate, not the ultimate;

... on the urgent, not the important;

... on our good, not God's glory.

But His perspective brings eternity into the equation and changes the focus from the immediate to the ultimate; from the urgent to the important; from our good to His glory. And

like Thomas, when we understand His timing and His perspective, then we will go with Him. Thomas spoke better than he knew — his words have become the trumpet call to Christians of all ages to take up their cross daily and follow Christ.

And therefore, sometimes we simply need to ...

CONCLUSION: *Think Biblically, Not Logically*

So when you hit those times when you doubt God's love;
 When you doubt God's purpose;
 When you doubt God's promise;
 When things haven't worked out as you hoped they would;
 When the bottom drops out;
 When your hope starts to wear thin;
 When you receive a no instead of a yes or a yes instead of a no;
 When God tells you to wait;
 When human logic fails to make much sense;
 That sometimes God says **wait**.
 And He doesn't tell you **why**.

I spent some time over 15 years in ministry with people in hospital rooms, trying to figure out why they were here. Why their baby was here. Why their spouse was here. Why this bad thing happened to them!

I've heard several families get told by doctors that your kid is going to die, and I've only seen one of those kids recover. Most of you who are parents would gladly give up an arm or a leg, **literally**, to save the life of your kid.

Most of you who are kids need to know that your parents would give up their life to save yours ... without hesitation ... my life for yours.

But most of the time in this life **you don't get that choice**.

And so you're left in the hospital bed ... you're left crying on the living room floor ... you're left walking around trying to figure it all out ... you feel like you're running into a stone wall ... and **you have just entered God's waiting room**.

When you just can't figure out what's happening or why — then stop trying to think logically and think Biblically. Remember Abraham ... remember Lazarus. When you come to that hard stone wall of **Why**, know that the answer is **Who**. God is in control. He knows all things. He's in charge of all things.

Know that God has a purpose — know that God has promised — know that God still loves you. And when you're able to understand His timing and His perspective, then you'll understand that He allows all things to happen (just as He did with Abraham and Lazarus) to bring glory to God and to strengthen your faith, ***"so that you may believe."***

You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

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Psalms 27:13-14

“I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living! Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!”