

When God keeps us waiting...



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We have all been here

One of the most common prayers of God's people is related to waiting for answers from the Lord. We often have to support and pray with believers who are desperately waiting or longing for answers, direction or relief from painful situations.

Waiting can be one of the most difficult trials we ever have to face. We experience a whole range of emotions oscillating between hope and despair, with thoughts going in different directions. Doubts and fears arise. We can begin to question what we know about God. After all, why is He not answering when He can easily do so? Waiting can involve a lot of suffering and anguish.

A study on waiting: John 11:1-45

The story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead is a useful study on God's purposes in making His children wait. Our circumstances may vary, but the principles are sound and useful to instruct our hearts as we wait for Him. I recommend you read through John 11:1-45 a few times.

The story revolves around a family Jesus was familiar with: Mary, Martha and their brother, Lazarus. As we reflect on this event, a number of points need to be noted.

The unwritten hardship, suffering and anguish of waiting

Did you notice the passage does not mention much of what Lazarus, Mary and Martha went through as they waited for Jesus? After Jesus received the message from the messenger, the narrative remains with Jesus and His disciples, not with how the three dealt with the stress of Lazarus' deterioration. We only get glimpses and hints at what they must have gone through.

This was a desperate situation. Lazarus was sick and getting progressively worse. No doubt the local doctor had been called, but he could do nothing. They then notify Jesus. It seems they do not ask directly for help. They thought it would be sufficient to simply let Jesus know that Lazarus was very sick. The love and care of Jesus would do the rest. The way they refer to Lazarus ('the one whom you love is sick' – vs 3) is very persuasive. How can Jesus not come and help? It would imply that He does not love Lazarus. Yet, Jesus deliberately waits another two days.

Sometimes when we wait for God, questions arise as to whether He is aware of our situation. We know theologically that He knows everything, but doubts arise in our minds. However, this would not have been the case with Mary and Martha. They sent a messenger, and the messenger would have come back and reported that Jesus had received the message.

So this situation is like sending an urgent WhatsApp message, and tracking its progress. One black tick: the message has left our phone. Two black ticks: the message has been received but not read. Two blue ticks: the message has been received and read. If we send an urgent message, we expect an answer any moment. After all, they have read the message and know it is urgent. So, Jesus has

received and read the WhatsApp message, he should respond any moment. But there is nothing.

Why not? Their thoughts were no doubt going all over the place. "Maybe we were mistaken?" "Maybe He does not love and care for us as much as we thought?"

As Lazarus worsened and got closer to death, they would have become more desperate. Perhaps they were looking out the window every few minutes or running down the village path to look for signs that Jesus might be arriving. Nothing. Hope flickers on and off and then finally dies as Lazarus passes away. Why did Jesus not come? Why did He not even send a message?

Mary and Martha go through the trauma and pain of losing a very close family member. They are filled with grief, and they are confused. How could this have happened, especially with Jesus, the great miracle worker, in relative proximity? Why would the Lord do this?

Many of God's children are often in desperate situations, praying and waiting for an urgent answer. But heaven is silent. They get more desperate, pray more and plead more. Why does the Lord seem to rub salt in the wound and aggravate their distress, when He could easily alleviate it in the early stages of their need?

Some reasons the Lord kept Mary and Martha waiting

There are three reasons the Lord kept Mary and Martha (and don't forget Lazarus!) waiting.

(i) For the greater glory of God

Jesus healed many people from many ailments. However, He did not raise many dead people. There are three instances mentioned in the Gospels, and this was by far the most spectacular and public. This astounding miracle has a whole chapter devoted to it. In order to display God's glory in raising a dead person, it means that someone had to die, and a family had to go through the grief of standing by helplessly while it happened.

But the Lord Jesus had greater plans than just healing Lazarus from his illness. He was orchestrating a miracle that would prove that He was the resurrection and life, and so bring magnificent glory to God (see vs 4, 40). A dead person would hear the almighty voice of Christ and respond to it!

So, Jesus had to leave Mary and Martha waiting until Lazarus had died. Jesus knew that this delay would result in greater anguish for the sisters. Yet He never apologized for this. The revelation of the glory of God to man is vitally important, even if the people whom God loved had to go through suffering to achieve it. Similarly, a man was born blind for the purpose of revealing Christ's glory when he was healed (Jn. 9). This man had to endure the hardship of going through all of his early life not seeing any of God's creation. Again, there is no apology from God for this. It was part of God's purposes to reveal His glory to man.

The Lord Jesus could easily have healed Lazarus immediately. Yet, He waits until Lazarus dies, so He brings greater glory to God by raising Him from the dead.

God can easily answer any or all of our prayers of need immediately. If He keeps us waiting, even allowing us to become desperate, it is because He is achieving a greater glory for Himself, and we must

patiently endure the wait. God does not delight in making His people go through hardship, but He has higher purposes than our immediate comfort and relief.

It could be argued that this is selfish of God; He is achieving greater glory for Himself off the back of people suffering hardship. The next sections shows that a greater revelation of God's glory always brings a greater degree of comfort and blessing to His people. They are never deprived of any good when God reveals His glory to them.

(ii) For their greater comfort and strength

The Lord Jesus wanted to reveal His glory not in some obscure way to an empty universe, but to reveal His glory to Mary, Martha and all the people witnessing this resurrection. Mary and Martha were going to see God's glory (vs 40).

They were incredible privileged, even though they had to endure hardship to be blessed by God's revelation. They would hear the words of Christ:

"I am the resurrection and the life; the one who believes in Me will live, even if he dies, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. (John 11:25-26)

Then they saw the indisputable authentication and verification of this claim: their dead, lifeless brother, who had been dead for four days, obeyed the almighty voice of his creator, and came back to life.

Mary and Martha must have been astounded and overwhelmed by this revelation of God's glory and Christ's authority. Their distress, grief and suffering of the last few days must have instantly melted

away as joy and awe flooded their souls. Were they poor victims at the expense of God's glory? Not in the least. They were rich beneficiaries! They beheld God's glory, the most rewarding experience a creature can ever have.

There would also come a time when Mary and Martha would die. Surely one of their great comforts as they faced their own deaths was the claim of Christ to be the resurrection and the life still ringing in their ears. They would still be able to see that awesome moment when their dead brother was raised to life and be comforted. Comforted so much more than if Christ had merely healed Lazarus from an illness.

(iii) For the greater good of the church

The Lord Jesus had even greater purposes in mind when He orchestrated this miracle. In the first instance, He wanted to reveal His glory to His disciples (vs 15). They would later become the apostles, the very foundation of the New Testament church (Eph. 2:20). This was one of the miracles that would progress them to eventually be transformed from eleven common men to the apostles who would help build the New Testament church.

Secondly, many saw this miracle and believed (vs 45). This miracle resulted in the eternal salvation of many who saw it firsthand. This was the fruit of the temporary suffering and distress Mary and Martha had to endure.

Thirdly, has not this account of Christ's great resurrection miracle been a great comfort to millions and millions of Christians throughout the ages as they have faced their own deaths or

martyrdom? So many would take courage from this miracle. It was truly a miracle for the greater comfort of the church.

And lastly, what of you and me as we face our own deaths? Will not one of our great comforts be the power, authority and glory of Christ revealed in this miracle?

When the Lord keeps us waiting, even to the point of desperation, we can be sure He is doing it for a reason. Others around us will be strengthened as they see God working and blessing us in the midst of desperate circumstances.

Mary and Martha's doubts and concerns resolved

We spoke previously of some of the questions, doubts and concerns that must have been going through Mary and Martha's minds as they were waiting. Does the Lord really love us? Maybe we were mistaken in thinking He really cared for us.

In the text we are shown that Jesus knew exactly what was happening with Lazarus, Mary and Martha. He was fully aware of the hardship they would go through, but also the joy that would break through the grief and overwhelm them.

The text repeatedly mentions how Jesus wept and groaned within Himself at the grief and suffering of the family (vss 33, 35, 36 and 38). So much so, that even the crowds remarked how much Jesus loved this family (vs 36).

As Mary and Martha realized what the Lord had done for them, even through the distress of waiting, they were especially made aware of the love and care of the Saviour for them. He was working

out His wonderful purposes in their lives, even through times of deep distress and confusion.

So how should we wait?

The Lord Jesus often makes us wait for Him. The wait can be long, and painful. How should we wait during this time?

Many answers could be given to this, but the words to Martha in verse 40 reveal three principles to help us.

- (i) “Did I not tell you...”: The Lord rebuked Martha for not remembering His word previously spoken to her. Has the Lord left us without any knowledge in His word about His character, love, goodness and purposes as we wait for Him? Are we completely in the dark without any light? Not at all. The Bible is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119: 105), especially in times of darkness. The Lord expects us to remember and reflect on His word. It is there for our comfort and hope.
- (ii) “that if you believed...”: The Lord expects us to trust and believe His word during our times of waiting.
- (iii) “you would see the glory of God”: God’s great purpose in history and in our lives is to reveal His glory. We may not always know the specific purposes of God as He makes us wait for Him, but we can be sure, though He makes us wait even in great difficulties, it will always be to His glory, to our comfort, and for the good of the church.