

Death & Life: The Story of Lazarus 1 - Jesus Waited

Intro

For the next two weeks, we are going to talk about the story of Lazarus, which is a story about death and life. It's not "life and death," because that's mixing up the order. In this biblical account, it's "death and life."

Easter is getting close. Ash Wednesday was last week. Ash Wednesday begins the season of lent which begins 40 days before Easter. As we prepare for Easter we are going to look at this story because this is the last miracle that Jesus performs before he enters Jerusalem and begins the events of Holy Week culminating in his death, burial, and resurrection.

Specifically, for today, we're going to talk about when you need God to show up, but He doesn't. These are times when you expect God to do something, but He doesn't. These are the times when you even ask God to do something, but He doesn't.

There is a very amazing story from Jesus' life here in John chapter 11. Before we get to the second half (which we'll get to next week), we should spend time down in the sad, confusing, depressing, and hard parts of what's happening here. The story, from the perspective of Jesus, may be nice and easy to handle, but I think we get quite a different picture if you put yourselves in the shoes of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. So, I want us to really wrestle with what it would have been like for Mary, Martha, and even Lazarus, as they waited and waited for Jesus – and God kept them waiting.

I think that everyone here can say, "I've had times when God didn't show up. I've had times when I've asked God to show up. I've had times when I've expected God to show up, and He didn't." Think about how you would feel if someone was listening to your story and, as you were telling of the hard times you've gone through, they said, "Why don't you hurry up and get to the happy ending already?"

You'd probably be a little annoyed, because even if there was a happy ending coming, you still wouldn't want to gloss over the struggle that you went through to get to that ending. Our times down in the valleys of life deeply affect who we are and what we believe.

John 11:1-21 pg. 523

1 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."

17 Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. 20 So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Why would Jesus wait?

At the very beginning of the story, Jesus received word that someone whom He loved was sick. You may be thinking: "Well, of course, it's someone He loves! He's Jesus! He loves everybody!" However, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were personal friends of Jesus. They had spent time together before.

This isn't like a regular request where it's just some stranger who had heard about Jesus before but had never met Him, and asks for a miracle. These were His friends who asked for help, but Jesus didn't immediately respond. He stayed where he was. Seriously, Jesus had healed countless complete strangers without any hesitation, but now a friend of His needed Him and He decided not to go?!

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus knew that He had done these things for other people. Can you imagine how Mary, Martha, and Lazarus must have felt waiting for Him to arrive? As each day went by they likely wondered if He would come that day and probably questioned why He wasn't there yet. Maybe they waited by the window and peered out of it every ten minutes to see if they would see Jesus coming in the distance.

So, let's take just a minute to ask: why didn't Jesus go? Why did He leave His friends hanging? If you consider things from our natural, human perspective, I think there are two easy reasons for why it would make sense that Jesus didn't go.

- Maybe was busy... - It is Jesus we're talking about; He had a pretty full schedule after all. Maybe He just couldn't schedule it at that moment.
 - However Jesus had spoken miracles from a distance before.
 - With a word he cast out demons (Mark 7)
 - He healed a Roman Centurion's servant was healed with a word from Jesus (Matt 8)
 - In John 4, an official asked Jesus to come heal His child and Jesus said, "Go; your son will live," and he did! In Matthew 8 and Luke 7, Jesus was willing to go and heal a centurion's

- Even if Jesus was busy, couldn't He have ordered that Lazarus be healed right when the messenger informed Him of the illness? Of course, He could have! But He didn't. Therefore, theory number one isn't what's happening.
- Perhaps Jesus didn't go because He knew that some people in Judea were out to kill Him. In order to protect His own life, because His time had not yet come to die, He needed to stay away from that area.
- The physical threat against Jesus' life was very real. We know that because when Jesus does decide to go there, then His disciples questioned how smart that decision was and reminded Him that there were Jews trying to kill Him. That sounds like a pretty good reason to not come (or at least delay coming).
 - However in Luke 4 and John 10 (the previous chapter) Jesus was right in the middle of a physical confrontation and we know that, "He passed through their midst" or "slipped away" or "escaped from their hands."
 - It seems as though Jesus had some sort of ninja-like skills that helped Him escape at certain times. It was definitely within the realm of possibility for Jesus to do that again—to go see Lazarus and heal him. If trouble came knocking, then He could have escaped.

Basically, there is not a good logical reason for why Jesus did not heal Lazarus right when He is approached on behalf of the sisters – who were His friends. Jesus left them waiting for days.

Jesus loved them, so he waited...

However, when we get to verses 5 and 6, we find something that may completely shock you if it hasn't already: *"Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was."*

This would make more sense if it said, "Jesus loved this family, but when He heard Lazarus was ill..." Or maybe if it said, "Jesus cared deeply for them, yet He needed to stay for two more days..." Or maybe if it said, "Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters, however He waited two more days..." But that's not what it says.

Again, put yourselves in the place of the dying man or the sisters who knew that they have a friend who could make miracles happen with a single word from His lips. They had sent for Jesus and they'd called out for Jesus, and yet, because of His love for them, He waited.

We need to seriously consider what this means, apparently, there are times when Jesus—out of His love for us—does nothing. Jesus, as a result of His close friendship and deep love for these three people, chose to wait. By doing so, He chose to let their pain linger for a while longer.

Jesus, out of His deep all-consuming love for the three siblings, stayed where He was. This is a major statement, because we know that every single one of us will have times of doubt, struggle, grief, and pain. You will have times when you cry out to God and He seems distant. It's easy to say, "If God seems distant, then it's you who moved away, not Him." Maybe that's true 99% of the time.

However, according to John 11, sometimes you can have a relationship with Jesus, come to Him with a need, and not get any response back—not because of anything you’ve done, but because His love for you means that He does nothing for a time. Maybe it is because He’s planning something bigger and greater for your life, but, right now, it means you’re stuck waiting for Him to show up.

Jesus was not late

For two days Jesus did nothing to help His friends. Then, we get to verse 17, and Jesus arrived to find that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. This is interesting, because after four days there is not hope of that person recovering. It's possible a person could become unresponsive or go into a comatose state. However, without the help of IV fluids and modern medical technology there is no way to get their body the things it needs to keep functioning. After 3 days Lazarus would have died from dehydration just as definitively as he would from the illness he had.

We can imagine in Mary and Martha’s minds they must have been thinking while Lazarus was sick, “Where is Jesus? Didn’t He get our message? Why isn’t He here yet?” However, after Lazarus died, for three days maybe there was still a small shred of hope that “our brother is in a coma, if Jesus shows up, He can still make a miracle happen.”

Jesus didn’t show up late here. He missed everything. He missed the sickness, He missed the death, He missed the burial, and He missed the three day window where there was still a very small shred of hope. The picture here in verse 17 is not a picture where Jesus showed up fashionably late. He missed it entirely.

This didn’t happen by accident either. Jesus strategically showed up after all hope was lost for a miracle in Lazarus’ life. Jesus planned to miss all of this, and showed up at a specific time, days after He was first asked to show up and do something.

While you think of your own struggles, you need to know that there may be times when God doesn’t only let you suffer a bit longer and allow you to face trials and persecution for the building up of your character, but sometimes He’ll let things die. We will all face times of, “I don’t see any hope. I don’t see any light at the end of the tunnel. This situation is dead, buried, and gone.”

Sometimes things struggle, sometimes they suffer, and sometimes they die. Apparently, in all three, Jesus can still be present. If things are going from bad to worse—from suffering to death—in your life, God is still in control and still has a plan.

Four days after they put Lazarus in the tomb, with the grieving still present, Jesus approached the sisters who called out for Him days earlier when there was still a chance to not have to go through any pain or suffering. For days they waited for Him. For days they longed for Him to bring hope into their situation. Now, in hopelessness, He showed up.

So, Martha went out to meet Jesus, and here’s where I want to end for this week. She went out to Jesus and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Conclusion

I want everyone here to consider this: what are your “if-you-had-been-here” moments? “God, if You had been here, my family member wouldn’t have died the way they did.” “Lord, if You had been here, my friend would still be following you.” “Lord, if You had been here, my parents wouldn’t be splitting up.” “Jesus, if You had been here, I wouldn’t have to face these addictions that I can’t get past.” “God, if You had been here, my family wouldn’t be struggling the way they are.” “Lord, if You had been here, I wouldn’t be having such a rough time right now.” “Lord if You had been here...”

In the story of Lazarus, there are two stories to be told— a story of death and a story of life. This week is the hard side. This week is about the death in our lives. This is about those times when you are in such lost circumstances where God feels like He’s totally abandoned you; the times when you hear Christian clichés like, “God works in mysterious ways” or “God can use all things for good” and while they may be true, they just fall flat on you.

This is the part that would be easier to gloss over and skip past. However if we do that, then we have a shaky foundation for when “real life” hits us where it hurts. Then, we will never come to grips with a God who may let us suffer or where He may let something in our life die.

While Lazarus was dying, Jesus waited. While the sisters called out for Him, He paused for days. This is not a picture of “just have faith in Jesus and life is easy.” This is a picture of the valleys and chaos that life can throw at you.

However, as we wrap up, let me just suggest to you that we should be thankful that we have a God who we can go to with all of our, “Lord, if You had been here...” moments. As we read, Jesus did not punish Martha for her complaint. He actually listened to her. God allows us to come to Him in our frustration and, then once we’ve laid all of our cards on the table, God can speak.

I encourage you to not hide from those times. Don’t run away, cover up, and pretend like things aren’t going bad. Face them. Grieve, suffer, struggle, and know that you don’t have to pretend like you have it all together. God doesn’t want you to put on a show and deny what’s really going on.

Even when circumstances cause you suffering, even when circumstances cause you to struggle, and even when things about you are dying, Jesus is still there. And He’s still got a plan. Next week we’ll get to the good news! Because from Mary and Martha and Lazarus’ point of view, this story is about death. But, from the perspective of Jesus, this is a story about life.

Small Group Questions

- Is there someone in your life who usually keeps you waiting? (For example, they are late, they don't show up when they say they will, etc.)
- How do you feel when someone keeps you waiting?
- Put yourself in Mary and Martha's position, what might you be thinking about while you watch your brother's condition deteriorate and Jesus still hasn't responded to the message you sent him?
- What thoughts do you think Lazarus may have had as he was getting sicker and waiting for Jesus?
- Do you ever feel like God has kept you waiting? If so, are you comfortable enough to share about it with the group?
- What do you think could be some reasons for why God may keep us waiting?

- Read Romans 5:3-5.

3 Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

- How would you summarize this passage in your words?
- What application could this have for tough moments in life?

- Read 1 Peter 5:6-11.

6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, 7 casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. 8 Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 9 Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. 10 And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. 11 To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

- How would you summarize this passage in your words?
- What application could this have for tough moments in life?

- Have you ever had a "Lord, if You had been here..." moment? Would anyone be comfortable to share?
- Spend time praying for each other.
 - Pray for the hard times of life that we all go through. Pray for those who are currently facing a "Lord, if only You had been here..." moment (even if they didn't share the details).