

The Death of Lazarus: When God Delays – *John 11:1-16*

Introduction – We come to the context of the seventh and final sign in John’s “book of signs” (chapters 1-11). The central theme of this sign is Christ revealed as the resurrection and the life (11:25-26). But the glory of resurrection and life must be displayed by way of contrast. Death is an enemy, justly brought upon our race because of the guilt of our sin. It is not natural. It is not something we are to get use to. The manifestation of death’s final defeat will occur at the second coming of Jesus (1 Cor 15:26).

Every death, and therefore every affliction, is another declaration of God’s sovereign delay. While death, and every affliction, is an enemy, the signs of John’s gospel are given *that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing we may have life in His name* (John 20:31). That *life*, including victory and glory over every affliction, even death, is our hope. And it is our hope even as we wait during those afflictions, even in death, as He sovereignly delays.

When God Delays (vv1-6) – There are delays of God’s perfect and powerful works of salvation, healing, and resurrection, in everyone’s life in numerous ways. And these delays cause deep trauma, pain, separation, physical and mental anguish, and spiritual doubts. We are right to wonder what these three close friends of Jesus whom He loved (v5) would be wondering and worrying over as they sent word to Jesus and then He delays His coming to them (v6). The deep truth is that the two-day delay was motivated by Jesus’ love for Martha, Mary, and Lazarus.

When God makes us wait, it is a sign that He purposes to bless, but in His own way. And His delay and our waiting so often appear so wrong. Yet, we are not to interpret God’s love through the lens of our afflictions. Quite the opposite. We are to interpret our afflictions through the lens of God’s love. *“The dealings of the Father’s hand must ever be looked at in the light of the Father’s heart”* – Pink.

As He delays, we are forced to wait. And as we wait, He invites us to cry out to Him (Psalm 13). And as we wait on the Lord (that is, with faith) we will be strengthened and renewed (Isaiah 8:17, 40:31).

When God Moves (vv7-10) – And now the disciples are tested. They may have rested in the fact that Jesus didn’t get up and go to Bethany (which was in Judea). Imagine “MOST WANTED” posters of your leader all over the county – and you right there with him. Jesus had, it seemed, only barely escaped alive from Judea (7:1, 10:31, 39). But in irony, His quest to go back to bring life to His friend will bring forth the Sanhedrin decision to put Jesus to death (11:53). Jesus knew the Father had given Him a work to do and that nothing could stop that work from being done – any more than the night can stop the twelve hours of the day (v9). Then, in response to their timidity, Jesus reminds them that to not follow Him in such times is to walk in the night, a place of great stumbling (v10). When aides to Stonewall Jackson commented on his lack of fear amid the flying bullets, Jackson replied, *“Captain, my religious belief teaches me to feel as safe in battle as in bed. God has fixed the time for my death. I do not concern myself about that, but to be always ready, no matter when it may overtake me. That is the way all men should live, and then all would be equally brave.”*

God intends to use your life for His glory and the salvation of others. Do you hold lesser agendas more dear? Not only that, His sovereign afflictions are always for your good (Rom 8:28). Faith is the natural response to the faithfulness of God and in the darkest times that faith keeps us leaning into the mysterious twists and turns of God’s story with hope.

Sleep and Death (vv11-15) – Sleep is a figure of speech used frequently in the Old and New Testaments. Moses was told he would sleep with the fathers (Deut 31:16), as was David (2 Sam 7:12). Believers are said to sleep until the resurrection (1 Cor 15:20, 51). This is more than a simple metaphor; there is a deep reality here. Sleep comes as a welcome relief after our work. It is a time of rest. Good sleep shuts out the sorrows of life and fits us for the duties of the next day. And so with death.

For the believer, the events leading to death can be one of this life’s most difficult trials. But having passed through that gate, we are promised that our souls are immediately brought into the presence of Jesus while our bodies rest in the grave (Eccles 12:7, 2 Cor 5:8).

Stoic, Resigned, Unhopeful Discipleship (v16) – Thomas, the Eeyore of the group, hints at his growing doubts in Jesus' words and actions. He does not abandon Jesus but is far from believing something grand and glorious will come from Jesus' decisions. He will later be well known as “doubting Thomas” after the resurrection (John 20:25). But Thomas would be present at Pentecost where the Holy Spirit came upon him as well, and church history teaches us that Thomas would lead the apostolic work of church planting all the way to southern India (and possibly beyond). This is just a side-note: God works with melancholics too.

“God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform.” - Every death, and therefore every affliction, is another declaration of God's sovereign delay. And every delay is always for one reason only – *the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it (v4)*. For every Christian, in every affliction the Lord may be pleased to allow, He knows that it leads not to death but to eternal life.

It would be wrong of me not to also say that for the one who dies outside of Christ's forgiving grace, death does not deliver him from the sorrows of this life, but will introduce him to a fearful place where there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. For such it is important that you do not become comfortable with your impending death. You must flee now from the wrath to come. Seek the Lord while He may be found, for there is no hope beyond the grave.

But for the believer, while death is a true enemy, we proclaim hope: *“So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body”* (1 Cor 15:42-44a).

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