

ALWAYS ON TIME
John 11

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Look at his sisters, as they pace back and forth, staring at the horizon on the dusty road, longing to see the familiar silhouette of Jesus coming over the hillside. To be sure, if pacing and watching could make Him come, He would have been there a long time ago. Why couldn't He be here? Their brother was terribly ill. Oh, he'd been sick before, but never like this. They were scared. They were disappointed. They'd sent a messenger to get Jesus, but He had not come. Every hour, Mary and Martha died a bit inside as they watched Lazarus slipping away from them.

How many times had they uselessly repeated, "Oh, if Jesus were here, He would know what to do. If only Jesus were here, He could heal our brother."

But Jesus did not come.

Why did He turn down their plea for help? They loved Him. He had loved them. What on earth could be so important that Jesus could not come and help in this, their most desperate moment?

Anxious hours dragging into hopeless days, with still no sign of Jesus. The sisters were grief-stricken and frustrated.

Jesus is probably out there, somewhere, performing miracles for total strangers – opening blind eyes, healing the lame. Yes, they were His best friends. And they needed Him. "I just don't understand," they must have said to each other. "I thought He loved us. I thought He cared. Why would He abandon us like this?"

Lazarus died. Still no Jesus. Jesus didn't even show up as they wrapped Lazarus' body in grave clothes and said goodbye to their brother, as they lovingly placed his body in a tomb. At last, Jesus bothered to show up. But He showed up four days late.

There are times in our lives, in all of our lives, that it seems as if Jesus is showing up late – even four days late.

It is said that devotional writer Henry Blackaby contends that Jesus never shows up late, to which his dear wife replied, "But He doesn't very often show up early, either."

Some of you here today are just like Mary and Martha – you pace back and forth, back and forth, and look impatiently up the road as you ponder, "Will Jesus ever come?" You, like the sisters, are

frustrated because of His absence, because He is tardy. His apparent refusal to help really just doesn't make any sense.

What do we make of Lazarus' death? What do we make of Mary and Martha's pacing back and forth? Most importantly, what do we make of a Jesus who won't show up when His friends need Him?

Let's unpack the story.

In verse 5, we learn that Jesus loved Martha, her sister, Mary, and Lazarus.

Everybody has to have those special friends with whom they feel at home. With special friends, you feel like you can be yourself – folks whose company brings you ease instead of stress. For Jesus, it was often these three: Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. They lived in Bethany, only a few miles away from Jerusalem.

The sisters, in verse 3, send a message. "Lord, the one whom you love is sick."

Have you ever really wanted someone to do something, but you hated to ask? You wanted it to be their own idea because you didn't want to impose it upon them – something so big that you really couldn't ask them to do it, to risk it.

I think all of that silent longing stands behind verse 3. They send the messenger to say to Jesus, "Lord, the one whom you love is sick." They never really ask Him straight out to come. Why? Because they know – they know the danger should He go back to Jerusalem. Bethany is so close; the tensions are running so high. The religious leaders, indeed, would have taken note of any miracles Jesus might perform around Jerusalem. They had already tried to stone Him in Jerusalem (chapter 10).

Verse 4

When Jesus heard the news of Lazarus' sickness, He said, "this sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified by it."

The glory of the Father, the glory of the Son are one in the same and always together in John's gospel.

Sometimes God is glorified in our healing, and sometimes God is glorified in our sickness.

What would it be in Lazarus' case?

Look at verse 6. What a reaction! What a response!

When therefore He heard that he was sick, He stayed then two days longer in the place where He was.

That's not the response we expect. If He is really the closest of friends with Lazarus, and if Mary and Martha had sent the camouflaged cry for help, they probably expected He'd even be willing

to risk His own life – Jesus had never been a coward before – to come and save their brother. But He lingers. For two days He lingers, continues His work. In fact, Jesus knew that death had already taken place by the time the messengers arrived.

He makes no preparations to go. He doesn't pack His bags. He doesn't send the messengers back to say, "Don't worry, we're on our way." He just stayed where He was.

And Mary and Martha watched their brother die.

I. Jesus' hand cannot be forced by external forces.

Jesus works on His own time, in His own way – following the will of the Father. John tells us that more than once in this gospel. In chapter 7, Jesus' brothers want Him to go to the Feast of Tabernacles. But Jesus says no, He will not be hurried. And He goes up on His own time.

In chapter 2, He was urged by His mother to take action turning the water into wine. And He tells her He'll do things on His own time, in His own way.

And in this case, the sisters had sent for Jesus. But He tarried.

In all three cases, Jesus eventually does what was originally requested. He eventually does go to the Feast of Tabernacles. He does, at last, change the water into wine. And He finally does go to Bethany. But our timing is not His timing.

To go up to Jerusalem in this case was to move forward toward the cross and His own death, and his ministry must not be cut short from the timing the Father determined – not even by two days.

Maybe there is that moment in your life when you needed God to act, and He stood still. When you waited like Mary and Martha – and you were wringing your hands and wondering, "If only.... If only.... If only God would act." And God sat on his hands.

Maybe you have "if only" in your heart and your mind right now. Maybe you, too, run off with Martha and Mary. Go meet Jesus. Tell Him your problem. Ask Him why He didn't come sooner, why He allowed the awful thing to happen?

Verse 7

At the right time, at God's time, Jesus decides to go to Judea. But notice verse 8. They disciples protest. They realize what it means. They had been there before. "The Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and You are going there again?"

But Jesus explains that while He has an opportunity, He must do the work of His Father.

II. Jesus defeats death

In fact, Jesus never even sees Lazarus as dead. He says, "Our friend has fallen asleep; but I go, that I may awaken him out of sleep."

In verse 12, the disciples say, “Don’t worry about him. If he’s asleep, he’ll recover.” They don’t want to go to Jerusalem.

But in verse 13, John says that they didn’t understand. Jesus was speaking of his death. So Jesus finally tells them in verse 14, “Lazarus is dead.”

Few things transcend all cultures more than the fear, the anxiety, caused by death. Fear of our own death. Fear of the death of those whom we love. Everybody in this room can relate to Mary and Martha at the death of Lazarus. Everybody in this room has been close enough to death that you know the awful fear, anguish, and emptiness that is left when somebody you love is no longer here.

How empty it is without him.
How lonely it is without her.
If you could just be with him again.

So we weep at funerals because we, too, know the sting of death. We gather around those who experience death, just like the neighbors did – the Jews did to Mary and Martha in verse 19. But when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to Him and said (v. 21), “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Wow. If only.... “Lord, if only you had acted. If only you had been here, all things would be better.”

“Oh, your brother will rise again,” Jesus says. The Jews at this time did, in general, believe in resurrection. Martha thinks He is speaking of the great day of the resurrection of the dead. Perhaps the Sadducees didn’t really believe in the resurrection, but most Jews did. It was the vision of Isaiah 65 and 66 – a new heaven and a new earth. Daniel speaks of a resurrection (12:2).

But Jesus is not saying that. Look what He says in verses 25-26. “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

“Yes,” she says in verse 27. “You are the Christ, the Son of God.”

And look at verse 32. Martha goes back and Mary comes. Jesus had called for Mary. He had seen Martha, and now He wants to see Mary. And Mary said, “If only you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Jesus spoke to the sisters. He’s not just saying that one day there will be a resurrection. Rather, Jesus is the one who brings the future into the present. “The resurrection, Mary and Martha, is not just a doctrine. It’s not just something in the future. The resurrection is a person, and I am the resurrection. I’m the embodiment of the power of the resurrection of God.” He is asking them to change their “if only” to “if Jesus.”

If Jesus is who she is coming to believe He is,

If Jesus is the Messiah, the one promised by the prophets,
If He is God's own Son, the one in whom the living God is strangely and newly present,
If He is a resurrection in person, life comes to life,
If Jesus...then it's possible.

Jesus asks to be taken to the tomb (v. 34). Jesus arrived at the tomb, and (v. 35) Jesus wept. Don't tell me these are not real tears. Paul says we may not grieve as the rest who have no hope, but we still grieve. And grief is bitter. Jesus burst into tears. It's one of the most remarkable moments in the whole gospel story.

You see what it means? Jesus knows our griefs. He bears our sorrows. He knows our disappointments. He is the Word become flesh (John 1:14). And yes, even Jesus can weep like a baby at the grave of His friend.

I was talking to our late pastor emeritus, Dr. Moore, once, and he told me that there was a day and a time – long ago – in country, one-room churches when he would preach revivals with the babies kept on the platform with the preacher. I said, “You don't mean they put the babies on the platform?” (Feather's Chapel, Fayette County, Tennessee)

“Oh yes,” he said. That's how he learned not to walk around when he preached, because he was afraid – in those days, in those places – that he might step on a baby.

The pallets were laid on the stage. The mothers came up, changed the diapers and everything, right in the middle of the sermon. Dr. Moore said he noticed one thing: Whenever a baby would cry, every time the right mother would get up and tend to her child. Didn't matter which way the baby was facing. Didn't matter where the mother was sitting. Every time a baby cried, the right mother would get up and tend to her child.

The mother knew the individual cry of her baby.

In the same way, Dr. Moore said, “Pastor, God knows the cries of His people.”

God knows because God weeps with us.

And now God doesn't seem so far away anymore, does He? Isaiah said long before, “He has borne our griefs, He has carried our sorrows” (Isaiah 53:4). Jesus is not smug. He is broken. He weeps.

Verse 39

Jesus declared, “Remove the stone.”

“He's already been dead four days now, so long there is a stench already,” Martha protests.

“Martha, I told you, if you believe, you will see the glory of God.”

They remove the stone. Jesus says a prayer to the Father and then gives the command: “Lazarus, come forth.”

This is the dramatic moment in the story of Jesus. He confronts the enemy of death, face-to-face, head-to-head, and shouts with a commanding voice, “Lazarus, come forth.” Literally translated, the Greek text goes this way: “Lazarus, here, outside.”

So many believers (see v. 45)

III. Sometimes God asks us to wait

Waiting time is the hardest time of all. There will be no death for all eternity in the presence of the one who is life, who is resurrection.

But now that we’ve lost family that we love, we have to wait.

On November 17, 2011, Oklahoma State experienced the tragic loss of Coach Kurt Budke and Coach Miranda Serna. Budke was making a recruiting trip to Arkansas. He was going after a blue chip player that everybody wanted – a blue chip player who had shown some real interest in his program.

Budke didn’t even like taking recruiting trips during the season. He wanted to focus on practice, but Budke thought if he recruited this one particular girl, he’d be able to make a run at the Big 12 title.

But even as he left for the airport, his wife, Shelley, remembers he was questioning his decision. He didn’t want to be gone.

Kurt told Shelley he’d be home by 12:30 a.m. She texted him all evening, and he never answered. She texted his assistant coach, Miranda, and she never answered her text either. “I’m really getting worried about you guys. Where are you?”

No reply.

She had troubled sleep that evening, and at 2:00 a.m., she bolted straight up out of bed. Kurt still wasn’t back, and he was never late.

She felt hopeless just sitting there and waiting, so she decided to drive to the airport. At least it was something to do. As she was backing out of her garage, she noticed a bright light coming down the street. A police car. They were coming to tell her that the plane had crashed. Kurt was gone.

All gone. Four in the plane. No survivors.

In the midst of all the pain and the grief, she said, “Kurt was not a guy who would get knocked down. He didn’t pout. It was God, Kurt, and my kids that I wanted to shine through in this. I wanted to make Kurt proud.”

Many days after the crash, she didn't even want to get out of the bed. Then she'd think back to Kurt coaching his first team in Kansas City. You see, Kurt had worked his way up the coaching ranks to a Power 5 basketball program like Oklahoma State. He hadn't always been a coach in the Big 12.

Sometimes at Kansas City Kansas Community College, his team was down twenty or thirty points. Coach Budke had something of a ragtag team of seven players that first year. Shelley remembers when he would call them to the huddle, he'd be celebrating with his players and patting them on the back. This is what he'd say: "I don't care how far down we are. I don't care about the score. All I'm asking you to do is to win the next five minutes." And when they'd win the next five minutes, they'd come back to the huddle, and they'd celebrate again.

"Just win the next five minutes."

Shelley said on those mornings when she didn't want to get out of bed, she would think back to Kurt coaching that first little group of girls at the community college. She could hear Kurt saying to her, "Shelley, you can do this. All I'm asking of you is to win the next five minutes."

Sometimes, congregation, that is all that you can do.

"Kurt," she said, "his voice coached me along."

Shelley felt closest to Kurt at the games at the Gallagher-Iba Arena. She went to every single game that season, and the Cowgirls played so well it was a long season. They made it all the way through a six-game run to the Women's National Invitational Tournament that culminated with a championship on a crisp Saturday last March. And, yes, Shelley, of course, was the last one to climb the ladder, the last one to cut down the threads of the net, to celebrate a championship that her husband had worked for years to win, but never got to see.

Let us pray.

Dear God,

Sometimes You seem late to us. Right now, we're pacing back and forth with Martha and Mary, needing the arrival of Jesus. We know that God not only knows, but also experiences the cries of His people. You put on flesh to be one of us. You died to defeat death. And God, help those who hurt just win the next five minutes, while we wait on You.