

INTRODUCTION

How many of you struggle with impatience, raise your hand. I think the rest of you are liars. Here's a test. You're sitting at one of the four thousand traffic lights in Tyler and you're the second car in line. The light turns green and the person in front of you is obviously looking at their phone. How long do you wait before you honk your horn?

School teachers have to have amazing patience. I heard about a first-grade teacher who had a class of twenty-one children in a school where it had snowed that day. After helping with twenty coats and twenty pairs of boots, she finally came to little Johnny. She stuffed his feet into the boots, and Johnny said, "Those aren't my boots." So the teacher pulled them off his feet. And Johnny said, "Those are my brother's boots, my mom told me I could wear them today." So she pulled them back on his feet. Then she said, "Now Johnny, where are your gloves?" He said, "I stuffed them in the toes of my boots." That's when she went screaming out into the hall.

I came across a short poem that says, "Patience is a virtue; possess it if you can. Found seldom in a woman; and never in a man."

Do you ever get impatient with God? We come to a section of scripture today where Mary and Martha beg Jesus to come help their sick brother. But Jesus intentionally delays. They are puzzled by His lack of response to their request. In the same way, there are times when we ask God to do something, and His answer is slow in coming – or the prayer doesn't seem to be answered at all. We're going to learn an important lesson today that God's Delays are Not God's Denials.

Remember from last week that Jesus had escaped a stoning attempt in Jerusalem and was down near the Jordan River where multitudes were believing in Him.

John 11:1. Now a man was sick, Lazarus from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair, and it was her brother Lazarus who was sick. So the sisters sent a message to him: "Lord, the one you love is sick."

When Jesus heard it, he said, "This sickness will not end in death but is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Now Jesus loved Martha, her sister, and Lazarus. So when he heard that he was sick, he stayed two more days in the place where he was. Then after that, he said to the disciples, "Let's go to Judea again."

"Rabbi," the disciples told him, "just now the Jews tried to stone you, and you're going there again?"

"Aren't there twelve hours in a day?" Jesus answered. "If anyone walks during the day, he doesn't stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks during the night, he does stumble, because the light is not in him."

He said this, and then he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I'm on my way to wake him up."

Then the disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will get well."

Jesus, however, was speaking about his death, but they thought he was speaking about natural sleep. So Jesus then told them plainly, "Lazarus has died. I'm glad for you that I wasn't there so that you may believe. But let's go to him."

Then Thomas (called "Twin") said to his fellow disciples, "Let's go too so that we may die with him."

Have you ever asked God for something and you needed an answer right away? Maybe it was for the healing of a loved one, or the resolution of a problem. And although you were needing an answer quickly, you didn't get it? You were like David who cried out to God in Psalm 69:17, "Answer me quickly, for I am in trouble." We sometime struggle when God delays. But we are going to learn that God's delays are not God's denials. Let's consider our problem and God's purpose.

I. OUR PROBLEM WHEN GOD DELAYS.

A breathless messenger arrives and says, "Quick, come back to Bethany. Lazarus is sick." We expect Jesus to immediately leave for Bethany. But he intentionally delays. That goes against our expectations. I know that Mary and Martha were pacing the floor waiting for Jesus. They were at the deathbed of their beloved brother. Can't you see Him there struggling to breathe? Every time he opens his eyes, Lazarus expects to see his friend, Jesus. Mary and Martha are using cool, wet, cloths to ease his fever. The whole time they're looking out the window expecting to see Jesus arrive as the Savior of their situation. But Jesus is a no show and Lazarus dies. Martha and Mary go into mourning. They lovingly wrap the corpse of their brother in strips of cloths and lay him in a shallow cave and roll the stone across the opening. Still no Jesus. Can you imagine what was going through the minds of the sisters?

There is a good chance you have had the same kind of experience. You were facing a crisis and you begged God to help you. You needed an immediate response. But it seems as if Heaven is silent. When God delays to answer our prayers, it's natural to start asking questions about God. Here are three questions that we often ponder when our prayers aren't answered immediately.

A. Is He ignorant?

When Jesus didn't immediately hurry to Bethany, Martha and Mary might have wondered, "Doesn't Jesus know our need?" Did the messenger get there? And you may think that God isn't aware of all you're going through. But the Bible tells us this about God in Psalm 147:5, "Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit." God knows what you are going through. Our God is omniscient. That means God knows all and sees all. So is God ignorant of your need. No. God knows.

B. Is He indifferent?

Well, if He knows my need and doesn't respond, maybe he is indifferent. He knows, but does He care?

We'll read later in this chapter that Martha went out to meet Jesus. She gave him a piece of her mind. "Lord if you had been her, my brother would not have died." You can hear the accusation in her voice. What she was saying in essence was, "Don't rush to help us, Mr. Savior. It's too late for Lazarus." And as it says so elegantly in the KJV Martha said, "It's been four days, and by now he stinketh!"

When Mary met Him, she said the same thing, "If you had been here my brother would not have died."

Then even as Jesus approached the tomb, some of the people asked, "Couldn't he who opened the eyes of the blind have kept this man from dying?"

Sometimes when our prayers don't seem to be answered, we want to get in the blame game with God. We say something like, "God if only you had fill in the blank.

But the Bible teaches us in many places that God cares for us. In 1 Peter 5:7 we're told that we should "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

My favorite part of this passage is verse five which says, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." I love the fact that Jesus' love is personal to each of them. We have a general sense that God loves everyone, and that's great, but we must understand that God's love is personal. God loves me.

In 1962 the Swiss Theologian Karl Barth was speaking at the University of Chicago. After giving a brilliant lecture, one of the students asked Dr. Barth if he could summarize all of his theology in one sentence. The esteemed professor thought for a moment and said, "Jesus loves me this I know; for the Bible tells me so."

God isn't ignorant. He isn't indifferent. But still some people wonder:

C. Is He too involved elsewhere?

There are those who think God is too busy keeping the universe running to respond to every individual prayer that is lifted to Heaven. In 2003 there was a movie called Bruce Almighty. I don't recommend it for developing your theology, but there is one scene I remember. In the plot, a guy named Bruce is mad at God, played by Morgan Freeman. So Morgan Freeman makes Bruce God for a while. And one of the problems Bruce encounters as God is that He can't organize all the millions of prayers that are being prayed simultaneously. In one scene, he decides that every prayer should be written on a post-it note—and suddenly every square inch of his room, including him is covered with post-it notes.

But our God isn't too busy to distinguish between the prayers of billions of people praying at the same time. He is omnipotent—yet He cares for you personally. Jesus said, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." (Luke 12:6-7)

In Matthew 10 Jesus said that the Father knows every time a sparrow falls to the ground. To me, it is important that Jesus didn't say God notices when a sparrow flies; He knows when a sparrow falls. Someone has said that God attends the funeral of every tiny bird that falls.

There are billions of sparrows on the planet. They are so numerous they are uncountable. Some consider them to be pests.

In 1958 Chairman Mao in Communist China declared that sparrows were one of the four pests that needed to be eradicated. So on a designated day, Chinese people were ordered to bang pots and pans together to scare the sparrows. With no place to land, the sparrows died in flight and fell to the ground. It is estimated that a billion sparrows were killed in a short period of time. What Chairman Mao didn't understand was that many species of sparrows ate insects. When the sparrows were killed, it led to an ecological imbalance that produced a surge of pests that ruined crops. This produced the worst famine in Chinese history and caused the death of 20 million Chinese who died from starvation.

And the Creator of the Universe knew and cared when every single sparrow died during that sparrow-killing spree. But He cared even more for those Chinese people who died, many of them without the knowledge of Christ. And He cares for you.

God isn't too involved to hear and answer your prayers. The same mighty sun that keeps all the planets in orbit will ripen your tomatoes as if it has nothing else to do. And the mighty Creator of the universe cares enough to number every hair on your head.

II. GOD'S PURPOSE WHEN HE DELAYS

With God, timing is more important than time. And His timing is impeccable. We have our human timetable when we want God to act, but he is following another timetable. In the New Testament, there are two words for time. One is *chronos*, linear time, minutes, hours, days, months. We all live by *chronos*. But there's another word for time that is *kairos*, it means the right timing. For instance, in Galatians 4:4 the Bible says, "When the time (*kairos*) had fully come, God sent His Son."

So God is more interested in timing than in time. There are three reasons why God will sometimes delay the answer to your prayers.

A. To bring the greatest glory to Himself.

Look in verse 4 again. Jesus said, "This sickness isn't going to end in death (it passed through death temporarily, but it didn't end in death.). It is for God's glory and that the sun of God may be glorified in it." In verse 40 Jesus says to Martha, "Didn't I tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" Glory means attention—spotlight. So what would give Jesus a greater spotlight, healing a sick man or raising a dead man? We all know that answer. God will always take the path that gives Him the greatest glory. And He doesn't want to share His glory with anyone.

Think about it, Jesus could have even healed Lazarus from long distance. He didn't even have to be in Bethany. In John 2 Jesus healed the nobleman's son from several miles away. He spoke the word, and the son was healed. He could have done that with Lazarus.

Let me illustrate God's glory. The first house Cindy and I ever built was about forty years ago back in Alabama. The lot was sloped from back to front, so it had some water drainage problems. We basically built it ourselves putting in sweat equity, so we didn't have any landscapers come and level the yard and lay grass sod. I just planted grass seeds and covered it with hay as mulch.

But can you imagine what happened the first big rain we had? All the grass seed and much of the hay washed down to the bottom of our back yard. I talked to some of the men who were helping us and one of them said, "Water will always take the path of least resistance; you can't make it flow uphill." I had to plant and replant the yard several times. We didn't have a lot of grass growing up near the house, but we had a great crop of grass growing down in the bottom of the yard. Water will always flow against the path of least resistance. And God will always take the path that gives Him the greatest glory. He will do whatever will make His name famous. Our job is to give Him glory, and never try to steal His glory.

B. To produce the greatest growth in us.

Jesus told the disciples that Lazarus was sleeping. They thought he was snoozing, so Jesus had to make it plain. In verse 15 Jesus said, "Lazarus has died. And for YOUR SAKE, I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe."

Jesus was saying, "One reason I delayed is because I wanted you boys to grow in your faith. Some of you still don't believe enough about me—well, let's see how much you believe after I raise a dead man."

He was trying to teach His disciples and us, that death is like sleeping. That it's not to be feared any more than lying down and pulling up the covers under your chin to sleep. Jesus took the sting of fear out of death.

I once read a sermon by Peter Marshall, who was chaplain of the U.S. Senate. He told the story of a boy aged 12 who was dying of a terminal sickness. The boy asked his father, "Dad, what's it

like to die?" His father said, "Son, do you remember how many times you would come sit in my lap before the fireplace and I would read you a story? Then you would go to sleep in my arms and I would take you to your bed and tuck you in. Then when you woke up the next morning, you were in your bed, but you didn't remember how you got there. That is that way death is."

What a wise answer. And the Apostle Paul picked up this idea when he wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica. He wrote, "We believe that God will bring with Jesus all those who have fallen asleep in Him."

God will often delay the answer to our prayers so that we will grow. I've said before that God always answers prayer. If the request isn't right, God says, "No." That's an answer. If the timing isn't right, God says, "Slow." If you aren't right with Him, He may say, "Grow." But when the request, the timing, and you are right with God, He says, "Go and claim your answer by faith."

C. To supply the greatest good for us.

Sometimes we ask for something and God doesn't answer because He has something better for us. Like that great theologian, Garth Brooks sang, "Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers. Remember when you're talkin' to the Man upstairs. That just because He doesn't answer doesn't mean He don't care. "Cause some of God's greatest gifts; are unanswered prayers."

Mary and Martha thought that the best way for Jesus to show His love to them was to hurry to their side and heal Lazarus. But Jesus loved them with an everlasting love. There are many definitions of love. Here's one I heard from John Piper not long ago. I like it. Love means giving us what we need most. Then he went on to say that what Mary and Mary and the disciples needed was an endless experience of the glory of God. That's what we need. We need to see a fresh revelation of the greatness and glory of God. And sometimes He asks us to wait in order to see more of His glory.

The Bible says, "Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!" (Isaiah 30:18)

A cardinal virtue is patience. It is the virtue of allowing God to be God in God's own good time. Our lives aren't on our time. We live on God's time not ours.

CONCLUSION

I have a pastor friend who used to tell a story about his bicycle when he was a kid. He was part of a large family and they didn't have money for him to have a new bike, so he collected bicycle parts from scrap heaps until he made his own. He called it his Frankenstein bicycle because he put together an old frame with tires and handle bars he had scavenged from different places. But he didn't have handle bar grips. One Saturday in December, he and his dad went into the Western Auto store and he saw a set of plastic handlebar grips with colorful streamers. He said, "Dad, please, will you buy me these handlebar grips? My hands get sweaty and they slip off the

handlebars and I've fallen and scraped my legs. I NEED these, please dad!" He said that his dad just shook his hand and walked to the back of the store to talk to the owner. He said he stood there angry at his dad and trying to figure out how to get enough money to buy those handle bar grips.

He said a few weeks later when he got up on Christmas morning, he saw a brand-new bicycle standing beside the Christmas tree. His dad said, "Son, the day you asked me to buy those handlebar grips, I was ordering this new bike for you." My friend said, "I forgot all about those handle bar grips because my dad had gotten me something so much better than plastic grips for my Frankenstein bike."

My pastor friend would always say, "And sometimes when God says "no" to your request for handlebar grips, it's because the Father has a bicycle planned for you."

There's a famous quote that has been misattributed to Charles Spurgeon, but it actually first appears in a song written by Babie Mason in 1989. Whoever originated it, it's a powerful truth. "God is too wise to be mistaken; God is too good to be unkind. So when you can't trace His hand; trust His Heart."

OUTLINE

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"Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit." *Psalm 147:5*

B. Is He indifferent?

"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." *1 Peter 5:7*

C. Is He too involved elsewhere?

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B. To produce the greatest growth in us.

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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