

Tempered by Trials

Sermon # 11

Martha and Mary – Learning About the Delays of Love

John 11

Sometimes you may think that God just doesn't care about you. The circumstances of your life don't seem to allow for any other explanation. When you are being ravaged by the events in your life, it is very difficult to believe that God's silences and delays are always really evidence of His love. And yet they often are.

Our story tonight begins with a problem. The problem is that Lazarus is dying. This is a problem we can all identify with, for death intrudes into our all our lives and we find those closest to us snatched from our sides by accident, sickness and death.

In such moments, some question the presence or love of God. Others, even those who do not doubt God's love and faithfulness find their faith tested.

What are we to think in such circum-stances? What should we do? There is probably no better example of what we are to do in entire Bible than we find in the story of how Martha and Mary are "Tempered by Trials." So What Did Martha and Mary learn?

First, They Learn That Even Those That Jesus Loves Get Sick. (John 11:1-4)

"Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. (2) It was that Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. (3) Therefore the sisters sent to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick." (4) When Jesus heard that, He said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

He began by telling His disciples that illness of Lazarus would not ultimately prove fatal (v. 4). Our sicknesses also - even our last sickness – will not end in death.

They not only learn that even those that Jesus loves get sick but....

Secondly, They Learned That Sometimes God Is Silent. -The Delays of Love (11:5-6)

"Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. (6) So, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was."

It seems that the sisters have no doubt of Jesus' love for their brother (v. 3). And John adds his commentary in (v. 6) that "*Jesus loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus.*"

Because Jesus loved Lazarus one of the obvious things we should note here is that death comes into every home, even including those in which Jesus is loved. Although Jesus loved Lazarus, that did not prevent his death.

Perhaps even more incredible to us is the fact that although Jesus loved this family he did not hurry to Bethany but rather stayed two days where he was. Likewise, we some times have found ourselves in trouble and fire off a prayer but he does not seem to hear. At those times you may think that God just does not care about you. The circumstances of your life don't seem to allow for any other explanation. When you are being ravaged by the events of your life, it is very difficult to believe that God's silences and delays are really evidence of his love. Was His decision to wait a heartless response to the urgent cry of His beloved friends? No of course not!

Can any set of circumstances, including God's seemingly silences and delays, cause Him to abandon us? Paul reassures us in Romans 8:35, 37-39, "Who (or what) shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... (37) Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. (38) For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, (39) nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God." Our death or of our loved ones, even if it should be sooner than expected, does not reflect unfavorably on Jesus' care for us.

When Jesus told his disciples the news that he had received about Lazarus, at first they misunderstood (v. 13). He then went on to say that Lazarus was asleep and that he was going to awaken him. The disciples were puzzled. They knew that sleep was good for a person who was sick, and they could not understand why Jesus would want to awaken Lazarus. Jesus then plainly told them that Lazarus was dead (v. 14).

In verse fifteen Jesus says something seems unusual, "And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe. Nevertheless let us go to him."

These words seem out of character for Jesus, his friend is dead, the sisters are weeping and Jesus is *glad*. Charles Spurgeon said of this verse, "*Christ is not glad because of sorrow, but on account of the result of it. He knew that this temporary trial would help His disciples to a greater faith, and He so prizes their growth in faith that He is even glad of the sorrow which occasions it... He set so high a value upon His people's faith that He will not screen them from those trials by which faith is strengthened.*" [Charles Spurgeon. The Treasury of the Bible. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962) 2:456]

When Jesus and the disciples arrived in Bethany they were told not only that Lazarus was dead, but that he had been buried for four days (John 11:17).

They Learned Only That Sometimes God Is Silent but...

Third, They Learned That Jesus Is Big Enough To Handle Our Disappointment. (vv. 20-22) – Martha's "If Only's"

When Jesus and his disciple finally arrive in Bethany the family of Lazarus is not at all happy with him. In verse twenty we read, "Now Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house. (21) Now Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. (22) But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You."

The first words of Martha (and repeated by Mary in verse 32) reflect the classic response to a difficult situation, "*If Only.*" We hear these words whenever we are faced with the death of someone we love.

- "*If only*" I had convinced them to go to the doctor sooner.
- "*If only*" they had not been driving that evening.
- "*If only*" they had not had that surgery.
- "*If only*" they had been more careful.

Of course the list goes on and on. But what are we do with our "*if only's?*" We need to do what Martha and Mary did, they took them to Jesus.

Even as Martha expresses her "if only you had been here" the idea is still in the back of her mind, that even yet He could still do something, for she says in verse twenty-two, "But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You."

They Learned That Jesus Is Big Enough To Handle Our Disappointment and...

Fourth, They Learned what It Meant to Lean On What They Said They Believed.

(vv. 23-26)

Jesus answers her by saying (v. 23), "Your brother will rise again." She answers him in verse twenty-four with the fact that she believes is a future day of resurrection, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrect-tion at the last day."

Jesus then makes it clear that eternal life is possible not after death in the distant future, but through Him, in the present for he said: in verse twenty-five, "'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. (26) And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die....'"

Then he asks her the most important question that any one can ever face.

Jesus made this very personal. He asked in verse twenty six, "... Do you believe this?"

He is not asking,

Do you believe in God?

Do you believe in an life after death?

But rather do you believe this? Do you believe in Me? Do believe that I am the resurrection and the Life.

Martha response is recorded in verse twenty-seven, "She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

She responded, "Yes Lord." And then she went on to explain. She literally said, "*I have believed.*" She uses the perfect tense to indicate a firm and continuing commitment. She had in the past put her faith in Jesus and that is where it remained.

They Learned what It Meant to Lean On What They Said They Believed and...

Fifth They Learned That Jesus Will Not Do For Us What We Can Do For Ourselves (vv. 38-39a)

In verse thirty-eight it says, "Then Jesus, again groaning in Himself, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. (39) Jesus said, "Take away the stone."

Jesus is going to perform a mighty miracle in raising Lazarus from the dead. But Jesus did not take away the stone from the door of the sepulcher, nor did He remove the grave clothes when His resurrected friend came out of the tomb, "bound hand and foot." (John 11:44) Commenting on this fact, J. Boyd Nicholson wrote, "*Standing before the grave of Lazarus, whose body was corrupting, the Lord demanded something of those who longed for a miracle. They might have questioned, 'Lord, You are going to raise the dead; why not move this heavy stone with but a word—a thought?' Herein lies a great principle: The Lord will not do by a miracle what we are to do by obedience. Is there a stone He wants you to roll away? Is there some hard, unyielding attitude; someone you will not forgive; some unconfessed sin; some step of obedience He awaits? It is ours to obey, it is His to do the miracles.*"[Our Daily Bread - www.bible.org/illus/John]

There some things we can do for ourselves and Jesus does not do for us what we can do for ourselves. Jesus could have rolled the stone away by act of his divine will, yet he asks those present to roll the stone away.

They Learned That Jesus Will Not Do For Us What We Can Do For Ourselves and..

Sixth, They Learned That Jesus Is Not Limited To Just What Is Possible.

(v. 39)

In last part of verse thirty-nine, Martha, responds to the Lord's command to remove the stone, and with great logic stated what she thought should be obvious, "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days."

To Martha the removal of the stone was an unnecessary and distressing thing to do. It is possible that the only purpose she could imagine; was that Jesus wished for a last look at his friend. Martha tries to reason with Jesus by pointing out that Lazarus has been dead for four days and decay of the body has no doubt already begun, and what he desired would not be any possible consolation. It was Martha's belief that Lazarus was now dead beyond all recall. But the question that begs to be asked is; *"Would it have been easier to raise Lazarus if he had been dead, for a single day or even for a few hours?"* No, dead is dead and only God can bring the dead back to life.

Sometimes we fail to immediately recognize when our prayers have been answered because we expect the Lord to respond only in a certain way. We have it all planned out just how God must respond to our situation. When we do that we limit God, who desires to do more than we can ask or think.

They Learned That Jesus Is Not Limited To Just What Is Possible and..

Seventh, They Learned Obedience Brings Blessing In Our Lives As Well As the Lives Of Others.
(vv. 40 -46)

First, Jesus connects their believing with their seeing of a miracle. In verse forty Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?" Jesus reverses what we are use to hearing, *"Seeing is believing"* and says *"Believing is seeing."* Their faith and obedience resulted in having their brother restored to them. Am I then saying that if you have enough faith and are obedience God will always work a miracle in your life. No, of course not. But this much you can know for sure without faith and obedience God will not work any miracles of faith in your life.

Verse forty-one says that the stone had been taken away ".... Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. (42) And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me." (43) Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" (44) And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Loose him, and let him go."

Jesus prayed out loud in order to focus the faith of those who stood around him, in order that they might believe.

One of the most amazing things about this miracle is its brevity and simplicity. Jesus simply ordered the stone to be removed and then with a loud voice commanded Lazarus to come forth.

Augustine in the fourth century said that it was good that Jesus called Lazarus by name or else the whole cemetery would have come out of the grave.

The crowd no doubt waited in breathless anticipation, they listened so intently that they heard the sound of their own hearts; then slowly out of tomb, moving with great difficulty because of being wrapped head to foot in grave clothes, came Lazarus – out of the tomb alive.

Again the people are asked to become a part of the miracle, to do what they could do, when Jesus tells them to *“take off the grave clothes and let him go.”* (v. 44)

Secondly, we see that some will believe when they witness a miracle of divine intervention and others will not. In verse forty-five we read, “Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in Him. (46) But some of them went away to the Pharisees and told them the things Jesus did.”

The mourners who had come to comfort Mary and Martha were stunned by the miracle they had witnessed. According to John’s report *“many believed”* (v. 45) but others rushed to report to the Pharisees what Jesus had done.