

When Jesus Waits

John 11:1-57

By [Billy Dempsey](#)

Father, how we thank You for Your Word. It is rich, it is true, it is sweetness to our souls. Now Father, let us lay aside everything else. We have nothing better to do than sit at Your feet and hear from You and learn of You. We would ask You, as we do so, make our hearts like Jesus'. And when we leave here and go about the business of the week that You have prepared for us in the days ahead, would it be known that we're among those who have been with Jesus. Hear us, as we make our prayer in His name and for His sake. Amen.

Let's give our attention to the reading of God's Word, the whole of John chapter 11:

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." 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."

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. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" 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. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and

many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and

the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.

Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples.

Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, "What do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all?" Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know, so that they might arrest him.

All men are like grass and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever.

We cry, "Help!" oftentimes, don't we? And when we cry, "Help!" we don't mean, "Maybe in a little bit come help me," we don't mean, "Maybe tomorrow come help me," we don't mean, "When it's convenient for you come help me." Sometimes we need help and we say, "Help! Help now! Help right away!" That really is the spirit in which Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus that their brother was dying. Maybe they waited too long, maybe they didn't count on the vagaries of walking travel, but Jesus did not come. Maybe He couldn't have made it anyway; that's not what the Word says. The Word says Jesus did not come. Jesus waited and chose to come later. That's often how He deals with us, isn't it? We call out to Him for help and He waits. He chooses to wait. He comes in His own time, in His own way, and really for His own purposes. And that's really what this passage shows us. This whole chapter shows us that Jesus is pursuing His own purposes with different groups of people as He waits. I want us to look at the purposes He pursues with His disciples, and with Mary and Martha and Lazarus, as well as with the chief priests and the Pharisees. So maybe this sermon will just be the kind of thing that will peak your interest and you will go back home and this week dig more deeply into the things that we're going to be talking about tonight. We lack the time to really, really uncover all the things that are here, but maybe you'll become more interested in this passage and want to go and see how it is that Jesus is dealing with His people and uncover more deeply. I think we learn a lot about the way Jesus deals with us as we see Him deal with these various people.

Let's look at His disciples first of all, and maybe even before we get to the disciples, just one note to make regarding verse 5. Look at verse 5. "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." And I would only say in passing, He loved them but He allowed them to suffer a great deal. He loved them but He allowed them to suffer a great deal.

Let's talk about the disciples. Here they are. We're not sure where they are. They're a least a two days walk from the little village of Bethany, and so they received this message from the sisters that Lazarus is ill, but Jesus waits, He waits for two days. Verse 6 — "He stayed two days longer." And then He says to the disciples, "Let's go back to Judea." The disciples aren't thinking of Lazarus; they're thinking of security and safety. Do you recognize that? They say to Him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now — the last time we were there they were seeking to stone You! Why do You want to go back there? You want to go there again?" He's calling them to leave their security and their safety if they go back to Judea. And Jesus really, in a kind of veiled manner of speech, says to them basically, "My time has not yet come and they cannot shorten the length of My ministry; they cannot shorten the time that God has given Me. That time is not in their hands. They can't decide that. The length of My ministry, the length of My time here, the hour of My departure is in the Father's hands." That's really what He says as He talks about anyone walking in the light, walking in the day. What is that? It's the light that's shaped by the doing of God's will. That person doesn't stumble because he sees the light. If someone walks in the night that person is living a life that's shaped by avoiding God's will. He's going to stumble. The light's not in him. He says, "We're going to walk in the light. We're going to walk in the light of doing God's will. We're going to walk in the light of God's ways keeping us understanding that God has the appointed time, not the chief priests and not the Pharisees." He's calling them to trust. He's calling them to trust.

And He says, as they get to the matter of Lazarus — it's so interesting that they didn't start with the matter of Lazarus but as they finally get to the matter of Lazarus He tells them plainly that Lazarus has died. And as He does so, He says, "I am so glad that we were not there, that I wasn't there, because you need to believe." He's saying to them, "You need a faith-shaping confirmation that I am who I have revealed Myself to be, that I am who you vaguely think I am. You need to see something. It's important for you that we go. It's important for you that we go now that Lazarus is dead because you need to see something amazing." He's calling them not just to follow but He's calling them to believe and He's telling them, "I'm going to give you something. I'm going to give you something as sort of a seal on your faith. I'm going to give you something that you need." He's waited. He's waited in order to give them something that He says their faith needs. Sometimes He waits as you and I call in order to give us something that our faith needs, a confirmation, a nearness, an event. Maybe it's a stunning answer to prayer; maybe it's a stunning act of provision. Maybe it's a stunning ordering of events that we never could have guessed or never could have imagined or never could have orchestrated, and yet He's laid it all out. He

waits at times to give our faith a shape and a form and a confirmation that we so desperately need.

Sometimes He waits in order to make us really think about our faith and examine our faith. I think that's what we see as Jesus has this interchange with Martha. Let's look at verse 17 and following. He comes to Bethany; He finds that Lazarus has already been in the tomb for four days. There are plenty of people there to comfort Mary and Martha and their family. Verse 20 — "When Martha heard He was coming, she went to meet Him, but Mary remained seated in the house." We understand that, as we know a little bit about Martha and Mary — Mary's the doer. Mary's the one to go. Mary's the one to be active and involved. Mary's going to be the one who grieves in a different way. She's going to be the one who grieves off alone, not in public. She buries her grief in doing. And there are many people who do that. Mary, Martha rather, is that one. She buries her grief in doing. And so she goes to see Jesus. Mary's grieving a different way. She's going to grieve quietly, alone, in private. And we'll see her interact with Jesus very differently.

Martha begins to talk. Maybe Martha grieves by talking. She begins to talk. Look how she and Jesus talk to each other. Martha says, verse 21, "Lord, if You'd been here, our brother would not have died. But even now, I know that whatever You ask from God, God, will give You." And the question I would ask Martha is, "Who's power is it? Who's power is it? Is it God's power? Is it Jesus' power?" She says to Jesus in just a few verses, "I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." I think that as Jesus has waited, His exchange with Martha is to call her to examine her faith. "Martha, what do you really believe and do you understand what you believe?" "If You'd been here, my brother would not have died." He says to her, verse 23, "Your brother will rise again," and immediately she gives a great answer. "I know that my brother will rise again. He will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." She lives in the hope of heaven. She lives understanding that there is a day to come when God sets everything to right. She understands that there is a day to come when the grave will open and the people of God will come forth to be identified and known as the people of God. She lives in the hope of heaven without understanding that the substance of heaven's hope is standing there talking to her. And He says to her that very thing, verse 25, "I am the resurrection and the life. It's not just and only a far off, other-worldly event. I am the Lord of the resurrection; I am the giver of life. All that have life have life by My gift. All that are resurrected are resurrected by My power." He's pushing Martha to think about what it means for Him to be the Son of God. He's pushing Martha to think, "What does it mean for Him to be the Christ?" He's gently engaging her. He's not pushing a grieving woman into a theological conversation that she doesn't want to have right now. She's anxious for this conversation. She's engaged in this conversation. And He's taking this opportunity to push her, gently, carefully, to help her examine, "What does she really believe?" When Jesus waits, as He deals with you and me, so many times He's pushing — What do we really believe? What do we

understand of Him? His person and His work? What do we really believe?

Sometimes waiting is like a fire, isn't it? And that fire is molding faith, burning out dross, and we emerge from that fire with a faith that may be stronger and purer and whiter. That is the opportunity that Martha has right here as He's pushing her, as He's pushing her to not only profess faith but to think through what she really believes. He says to her, "Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who's coming into the world." J.C. Ryle says it's a bent reed kind of profession; it's a smoking flax or smoking wick kind of profession. It's not a strong profession and it doesn't last for very long. If you look at verse 39, as Jesus has given the order to take away the stone, it's Martha that pipes up, "Look, Lord, by this time there will be an odor because he's been dead for four days! What are You doing? This is unseemly!" She's made a profession, but she still doesn't deeply understand. He's pushing her. "Martha, understand. Understand what you say you believe." He's not rebuking her. I think that's the point of Ryle's description. You remember in Matthew chapter 12, Jesus is described as the one who's not breaking the bent reed. He's not extinguishing the smoking flax, the smoking wick. Sometimes that's exactly where we are, isn't it, as we deal with Him, as we wait, as we wait for Him, and He bears us up. He bears us up. He takes even the weakness of our faith and uses that experience to strengthen us. As we have to sift through, "What do we really believe about Him and His ways and His purposes? Is He really good? Is He really doing right? Does He really do all things well? Or is He just playing a game with me?" He pushes us to think about our faith, to try to understand, "What do we really believe?"

But that's not all He does. When Jesus waits, sometimes it's in that waiting that we experience uncommon comfort and uncommon grace. Notice the difference in the way that He deals with these two sisters. Of course they're very different people. As I mentioned a while ago, Martha is this busy, active, doer, who processes life by talking. And Mary is this quiet, contemplative person who is grieving away and very emotional and very given to appropriate but sometimes maybe overwhelming emotional demonstration. Remember, already in verse 2 of this chapter, we've been reminded that Mary is the one who anoints Jesus with ointment and wipes His feet with her hair — not quite a common occurrence. Even in Jesus' day, it was an over-the-top display of affection and love and adoration and appreciation. But that's kind of who Mary is, and in this moment, she's overwhelmed, as you can imagine, with the grief of the loss of her brother. Interesting that she begins her conversation with Jesus much the same way that Martha does.

But look at this. Look at verse 32. "When Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him" —what did she do? She didn't start talking. Martha started talking. "She fell at His feet." She's overcome by grief. She's overcome by sorrow. She's overcome. She's so glad to see Him. She's so glad He's there. But she's overcome still at the loss of her brother. Maybe the memories of the times that

she and Martha and Lazarus enjoyed with Jesus, Jesus being one that they loved so much, and they know Jesus loves them. It overwhelms her to be in His presence without her brother, Lazarus. We can identify with that kind of grief. But she asks the same question. "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." Actually, she makes the same statement as her sister, Martha. And after that pressing, engaging, theological conversation that Jesus and Martha have, look at how Jesus interacts with Mary. Her faith needs stretching, no doubt; her faith needs examining, no doubt. Her faith will be tested, no doubt, but look at what He does. Look at verse 33. Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her also weeping. He's deeply moved in His spirit. He's deeply troubled. He wants to see where they've laid him. Verse 34 — "Where have you laid him?" Verse 35 — He weeps. He sheds tears. He — I think in the NIV translation, "He bursts into tears," so much so that the Jews who were there to console are commenting to one another, "See how much He loved him?" He's broken hearted. He's moved; He's moved to deep agitation. He's moved to deep grief.

He's not carrying on a theological conversation with Mary. Mary needs theology, Mary needs doctrine, Mary needs to understand the truth, but at this moment, she needs a priest. She needs a priest who's acquainted with her weakness. At this moment she needs a priest who's touched by her grief. At this moment, she needs a priest to bring her comfort. She needs a priest who's sympathetic with her. That's what she receives. As Jesus has waited and in the waiting, now brings uncommon comfort, uncommon sympathy, uncommon community in grief. That's what she needs. That's where Jesus meets her. That's where Jesus deals with her, giving her a comfort, a community, a knowingness in her grief that no one else can share with her. As Jesus has waited, He's bringing her uncommon grace, uncommon comfort.

As we move through the passage, Jesus prepares to do what no one even imagines He's about to do. He calls for that stone to be moved away, He has that exchange with Martha — "He's been dead for four days. There will be an odor." "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God? Martha, do you still not believe? Believe and you will see the glory of God." What is the glory of God? Is it not to reverse the effects of the Fall? Isn't that exactly what Jesus is showing us? This is what it means for Messiah to come. This is what it means for the Son of God to enter human history. This is what it means for the kingdom of God to advance. It is that the power of the evil one, the power of death, the power of sin rolls away, and the world can begin again in the fashion that God has made it. That's our hope. That's our expectation. That's the glory of God expressed, demonstrated, before our very eyes. We see it in bits and pieces now. We see it one by one as we see one come to faith and another come to faith. We see it as one believer or another grapples and wins with sin against the world, the flesh, and the devil. We see it in baby steps now. Jesus shows us a great big bite of it right here as He orders that stone away and He yells out, "Lazarus, come out!" and in the next breath Lazarus is standing at the door. The

glory of God invading space and time! Remember, Jesus loves Martha and her sister and Lazarus but has subjected them to great suffering. Think of Lazarus, undergoing the pain of death. He subjected them to great suffering because He waited, but He's visiting them with great glory right now so that they see the greatness of God and the greatness of the work God will do. They never would have guessed it. Their nearest hope was what Martha expressed — at the great resurrection he'll rise. She never thought it would be this afternoon! She never imagined she's be feeding him supper! "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

Well there's another group of people that we need to make note of as we come to the end of this passage. Of course the Jews are there. Many Jews are there to comfort, and as John relates, many of those Jews believed. But some went back to Jerusalem and they went right to the high priest; they went right to the neighborhood Pharisee. They went right to anybody that would be interested in knowing, "Guess what Jesus did today?" You see, Jesus knows who His enemies are and He's been thinking of them too. Let's not lose sight of the fact that Jesus is the pursuer here. He's not pursued to death by His enemies. Remember He tells us in John chapter 10, "I will lay down My life and no one takes it from Me." He's pursuing His enemies. They think they're pursuing Him. "Oh, we're going to send somebody to arrest Him. As soon as we know where He is, we're going to send somebody to arrest Him. We're not going to have this." No, He's pursuing them. The initiative is His and He's exercising, He's pushing back and pushing back and pushing back. He's winning the day as He deals with His enemies and ours. He's winning the day.

Bruce Catton, in his history of the Civil War, makes note that until 1864, Robert E. Lee controlled both sides of the war because he was leading his troops and he had the initiative and every Union response was a response to his original initiative. It was Robert E. Lee's war. It's Jesus' war. The enemies are responding to His initiative. They think they'll win, but Jesus knows the glory of God. When Jesus waits, often He's calling us, "Follow Me and believe." When Jesus waits, often He's calling us to examine really, "What is our faith? What is our faith made of? What is it shaped by? What informs it? What is the glue that holds it to life?" When Jesus waits, He gives us a nearness and a comfort and a grace that we don't know in any other time. When Jesus waits, the promise is that in someone, in some shape, at some point, we will see the glory of God if we believe.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer. Let me ask you to stand.

Father, Your ways are not ours, You don't respond to our timetable, and Your interest is not in our happiness. Your ways are Your own, Your timetable is Your own, and Your interest is in our holiness and our being like Christ. Make us so. Help us remember. Help us see what our faith is made of. Help us embrace that warm grace and comfort You provide. Help us follow and believe. Hear us, our Father, as we make our prayer in Jesus' name and for His sake. Amen.

Now look up for the blessing of God. Now may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord Himself lift up His countenance upon you and give you His peace both now and forevermore. Amen.

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