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## QUESTIONING GOD'S LOVE AMID DELAY

By Layton Talbert

John 11 demonstrates the trustworthiness of God's words about His compassion for us, even when it may begin to look to us like He doesn't really care.

When Lazarus fell ill, his sisters sent an urgent appeal to Jesus: "Lord, behold, he whom you love is sick" (Jn 11:3). This was no seasonal virus. Clearly, they were concerned. Jesus, on the other hand, seemed not to be. His response was so casual that we might suppose He felt no particular attachment or obligation to this family. But John counters that misimpression: "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (Jn 11:5). And yet, knowing that Lazarus is ill and loving them as He does, He stays put (Jn 11:6). For two more days! John offers no defense; he doesn't suggest that Jesus would have gone immediately but other

pressing business prevented Him. Jesus just decides to delay.

Jesus loved ... and yet ... He stayed? Those two statements seem to clash. That's why I connected them with the phrase "and yet." But that's not how John connects those two verses. Look at the conjunction he uses in 11:6. (And if you think conjunctions are insignificant, think again! Even a conjunction can carry significant theological freight.) John's choice of conjunction seems awkward, unnatural, counter-intuitive—which is additional evidence that it was deliberate, not accidental. John's connector between verses 5 and 6 is not a contrastive term like "yet" or "despite" or "nevertheless"—as though Jesus' action was somehow paradoxical to His love. He uses a matter-of-fact term of explanation: "So [therefore, consequently, for this reason], when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was" (Jn 11:6).<sup>\*</sup> Until He knew that Lazarus was dead (Jn 11:14). Jesus' delay was prompted by His love. He didn't delay despite His love; He delayed because of His love. "Now Jesus

loved [them] ... therefore ... He stayed two more days in the place where He was.”

That juxtaposition of thoughts is jarring. True love always acts immediately and races to the rescue, doesn't it? Not necessarily. Not omnipotent love. Not love that is also in complete control. My sense of grief or loss is not the measure of the rightness or wrongness of God's actions, or God could never send illness or take life. There are higher concerns than my immediate pain, and greater needs than my immediate relief.

Jesus' love prompted His delay—in this case because He intended to do something far greater for this family than merely raise Lazarus from a sickbed. Others needed the impact of this incident as well: “I am glad for your sakes that I was not there,” He told the disciples, “that you may believe” (Jn 11:15). But our focus here is on the sisters.

It is no stretch to draw a parallel between this passage—Martha and Mary appealing to the absent Jesus via a messenger—and prayer. Especially the kind of prayer that can't seem to break this world's gravitational pull, and finally lies on the ground lifeless and silenced by lack of reply. What answerless questions hounded their thoughts during those interminable days before Jesus finally arrived, four days too late? Don't you think they talked about that around their lamplit kitchen table every night after the messenger returned, and Jesus didn't come? You can hear the echo of those late-night talks when both of them,

independently, greeted Jesus' arrival (finally!) with the same words: “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died!” (Jn 11:21, 32).

The unasked question that hangs in the air when those words are uttered—“if You had been here”—is a question about timing. They had no doubts about His power (“my brother would not have died”). But they could not fathom His timing. They'd sent for Him. Why had He not come sooner? And what else did that delay at least seem to imply?

There is some dispute over exactly where Jesus was when He received the message from Bethany. Some say He was only a day's journey away, just across the Jordan in Perea, and therefore that Lazarus must have died even before Jesus received word of his illness. Others believe He was in the northeast trans-Jordan region of Batanea, as much as four days away so that even if Jesus had left immediately He would still have arrived after Lazarus's death.

Both explanations seem eager to exonerate Jesus for His delay. The fact is, we are given Jesus' whereabouts in such broad terms (Jn 10:40) that even scholars cannot dogmatize or agree on exactly where he was. I'm all for background data and exegetical precision, but sometimes we can be so clever and complicated that we miss a text's simple point. The structure of John's account seems specifically calculated to call attention to the issue of timing, without relying on abstruse and uncertain computations of exactly how far away

Jesus was.

John's report of the illness (Jn 11:1), the message sent to Jesus (Jn 11:3), the careful mention of Jesus' love (Jn 11:5) sandwiched between His diagnosis (Jn 11:4) and intentional delay (Jn 11:6), and the words of both Martha and Mary highlighting what could have been averted had He not delayed—all the details coalesce to emphasize that God may be "late" but never too late, His purposes beyond our comprehension, His ultimate answer beyond our expectation, His reasons righteous, and His motivation love, even when it looks to us like anything but love. It's true that they did not question His compassion or His concern like the disciples did on another occasion ("Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?")—at least not overtly. But John, guided by God's Spirit in how he penned this narrative, anticipated that we might. That's why the narrative takes pains to point our attention to Jesus' love for this family, not once or even twice but three times (Jn 11:3, 5, 36). And if we need that reassurance, probably Lazarus's sisters did, too.

We don't recognize delay as merely delay until after the fact. Delay on the front end looks exactly like failure, silence, absence, non-answer; but as Martha and Mary discovered, they're not at all the same thing as delay. Jesus countered Martha's words by grounding her hope not just in an event ("Your brother will rise again") but in Himself: "I am the resurrection and the life!" (Jn 11:25). And

he followed it with a pointed and personal question that you have to answer for yourself: "Do you believe this?" (Jn 11:26).

To say that there is no such thing as unanswered prayer is not a mere truism; it is a truth. Every prayer is always answered, and you know all the possible answers: yes, no, and not yet. Richly colored threads of theology and doctrine are woven into the pattern of this passage. But lying right on the surface of the text, within easy reach of the simplest reader, is an assurance about God's timing in answer to our needs and pleas: God's delays, however painful and disconcerting, are always timely, purposeful, and never at odds with His love. He really is as loving and compassionate and caring as He says He is. Always. His words about His character are worthy of your trust.

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\* Translators and interpreters who ignore the force of this Spirit-directed choice of words do a disservice to the sacred text and short-circuit its theology. Concerned to rescue Jesus from a charge of heartless negligence (knowingly causing grief through delay), some suggestions end up judging God by our priorities rather than judging us by His. The passage calls us to a higher theology, bigger goals (like the good of others, Jn 11:15, 42, 45), and greater concerns (like the glory of God, Jn 11:40).

# FUNNIES

Maya was sitting on her poppa's lap as he read her a bedtime story.

From time to time, she would take her eyes off the book and reach up to touch his wrinkled cheek. She was alternately stroking her own cheek, then his again. Finally she spoke up, 'Poppa, did God make you?'

'Yes, darling,' he answered, 'God made me a long time ago.'

'Oh,' Maya paused, 'Poppa, did God make me too?'

'Yes, indeed, poppet,' he said, 'God made you just a little while ago.'

Feeling their respective faces again, Maya observed, 'God's getting better at it, isn't He?'

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A motorist stopped at a big roadside diner for a bite of supper. His waitress had eight tables to take care of, but only one customer seemed to find fault with the service. He became so noisily abusive, in fact, that the motorist chivalrously volunteered, "If that lout is bothering you, I'll be happy to toss him out on his ear."

"Lay off, mister," the waitress whispered. "That's my husband and we've worked this act down to a science. He makes the other customers feel so sorry for me that they all give me extra-large tips."

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As the elderly man lay dying in his bed, death's agony was suddenly pushed aside as he smelled the aroma of his favorite home-made chocolate chip cookies wafting up the stairs.

Gathering his remaining strength, he lifted himself from the bed. Leaning against the wall, he slowly made his way out of the bedroom, and with intense concentration, supported himself down the stairs, gripping the railing with both hands. In labored breath, he leaned against the door frame, gazing wide-eyed into the kitchen.

There, spread out upon newspapers on the kitchen table were literally HUNDREDS of his favorite chocolate chip cookies!

Was it heaven? Or, was it one final act of heroic love from his devoted wife, seeing to it that he left this world a happy man?

Mustering one great final effort, he threw himself toward the table, landing on his knees in a rumped posture, one hand on the edge of the table. The aged and withered hand quiveringly made its way to a cookie near the edge of the table; feeling the warm soft dough actually made the pain of his bones subside for a moment. His parched lips parted; the wondrous taste of the cookie was already in his mouth; seemingly bringing him back to life.

What, then, was this sudden stinging that caused his hand to recoil?

He looked to see his wife, still holding the spatula she had just used to smack his hand.

"Stay out of those!" she said, "they're for the funeral."