

Sermon Series: “The Good News for Life”
The Great Miracle: Delayed but Determined
Pastor Norwood N. “Woody” Hingle III, Ph.D.
Sunday, September 13, 2020

Have you ever had a delay on something you wanted to happen? No one likes delays! And yet sometimes it cannot be helped. E.g., the Allies must have felt that way during WWII before D-Day. We recall America entered the war after Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941, but D-Day did not happen until about two and half years later, on June 6, 1944; the delay must have been difficult for many leaders in the Allies, but the D-Day invasion was bound to happen, it was determined by the Allies, and it did, and by God’s grace was successful. Sometimes we experience delay on a more personal level. E.g., I recall a Mennonite woman who was in her 50’s and never married, and then one of the Mennonite’s wife died, and after mourning for her he courted the woman who had never married and then married her. She must have thought perhaps her marrying days were over, but the Lord opened this area of her life up to her. Our lives are filled with delays for things that we are determined to see happen, but the waiting can be difficult during the delay, can’t it? We will see that delays also played part in Jesus’ ministry in a very important time in His dear friends’ lives.

READ John 11:1-27 (pp. 104-105)

CONTEXT: Jesus has just explained that He and the Father are one, and the Jewish religious leaders want to arrest Him and even kill Him. Jesus avoids them and goes to the area around the Jordan River where John the Baptist used to baptize people. It is at this time Jesus receives a message concerning a dear friend.

READ vv 1-16. “In this passage we have a fascinating look at Jesus and His beloved friends. Unexpectedly, Jesus delayed His coming to Lazarus’ aid for two reasons: God’s glory (v 4) and for the disciples’ faith (v 15). Cf. Luke 10:38-42.” What is interesting about Jesus and this family is that their relationship is also told in another gospel— Luke— which is independent of John. READ Luke 10:38-42— where Jesus goes to a certain village and visits in the home of Martha, and her sister Mary is there. Martha gets to work in the kitchen preparing the food, while Mary sits at Jesus’ feet and soaks in what He has to say. Martha asks Jesus if He cares that Mary has left all the work to herself while Mary listens to Jesus— He should tell Mary to come help her! Jesus responds that she is worried and distracted by many things— but Mary “has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her.” This is the same family in John 11. Thus it does not surprise us to read in v 5 that Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Have you ever had a family that even though they are not blood family are as close as family? E.g., I know when we visit Monroe we have some dear friends there we usually see and stay at their home, in particular Margaret Ann— in fact, Emily has said when she feels stressed out sometimes she thinks about Margaret Ann’s house and she feels at peace, because that is how she feels there. Jesus seems to have a special bond with this family. But when He gets the news of Lazarus’ illness, He delays. Admittedly, this is somewhat confusing. If Jesus cared for Lazarus and his sisters, why did He delay? We need to remember His delay involved His determination as well— He did not take His eye off the situation, but could see the big picture. What He would do would not only work to God’s glory and His as

the Son of God, but also in boosting the faith of the disciples. Sometimes that is the way God works. E.g., I recall the story of George Müller, who started an orphanage in the 1800's in England and was determined not to ask for any money, but prove God by praying and watching for God's provision. God did provide, but often it was at the last minute. Until after 20 years, Müller knew God's steady provision and he did not have to wait to the last minute to find God's provision. God was glorified through those 20 years of waiting and His provision, and it meant George Müller learned that the orphanage was God's doing. E.g., I think also of Oswald Chambers' wife Biddy; after seven years of marriage she found herself a widow with a small girl to raise, yet she felt called to publish her husband's talks, which she recorded by shorthand. She struggled mightily in her life to make ends meet financially, but she trusted God through all the difficult times. Ten years after Oswald's death, in 1927 she published *My Utmost for His Highest*, a daily devotional book that has *never* been out of print. In an introduction to this book from 1991 it was said, "[it] remains in the top ten titles of the religious book best-seller list with millions of copies in print. It has become a Christian classic." And it has been translated into many languages, even by the time of WWII. Biddy could not see all this happening when in 1917 she saw her life at a tremendous loss, but God made something beautiful from her life, and He is glorified from it. That is what Jesus wants to do in this situation with Lazarus—glorify God and build up the disciples' faith.

READ vv 17-24. "When Jesus arrived at Bethany (southeast of Jerusalem), Lazarus is dead and Martha meets Jesus and speaks of her disappointment that He did not arrive sooner (cf. 4:46-54) and that she does indeed have faith in Him." Many of the commentators I have read have stressed that Martha is not disappointed in Jesus. F.F. Bruce states about Martha's words: "this is not a complaint; it is an expression of her faith in Jesus' power" (*John*, p. 243). I believe both are true— she is disappointed, there is an element of complaint, and

she expresses faith that somehow Jesus will make it right. I like the way E.C. Hoskyns (*The Fourth Gospel*, pp. 401-402) says, “Martha’s first words express a combination of faith in the power of Jesus with disappointment that it had not been exercised.” But, as we see from what she says later in chapter 11, she does not expect what is to follow. To her mind, her beloved brother Lazarus is lost from this life for good. In the midst of that anguish, if only Jesus could have been their sooner her brother would still be here, she trusts Jesus to make the situation right somehow. Such honesty before God, done with profound respect, expressing great regret and the feeling of abandonment, is what we see at times in Psalms. In Psalm 22:1-2 the writer says, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.” Later in v 21 the psalmist speaks of God rescuing him. In Psalm 69:17 the psalmist cries out, “Do not hide your face from your servant, for I am in distress— make hast to answer me”. And in v 33 we read, “For the Lord hears the needy, and does not despise his own that are in bonds.” Have you ever had to deal with disappointment, where you felt the Lord was not there, with faith in the Lord to provide? E.g., I recall when I was in Scotland I would at times stay up late at my campus office and walk home about a mile in the dark of night, and it gave me a lot of time to think; one particular night my research and writing were not going well, and I was expressing God my frustration and anger, and feeling like he brought me all the way across an ocean only to fail. Where was He? I wondered aloud. I got home and went to bed, and woke up the next morning and trusted the Lord and kept at it. And as I walked by faith and not by sight, and put one foot in front of the other in obedience, He helped me through that dark time and finish my dissertation successfully. READ 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.

READ vv 25-27. “Jesus helps Martha see the big picture by emphasizing to her two well-chosen and profound epithets for Himself: the resurrection and the

life (vv 25-26). Cf. 8:51; 10:10,28.” At various times in this gospel Jesus emphasizes that those who follow Him will never die. He is talking about the critical death, second death. It is amazing when people take hold of the glory of this truth. E.g, I was reading in *Voice of the Martyrs* (September, 2020, p. 8) about a Muslim man in prison in Iran for murder, and he was to be executed, and his brother visited him for one last time to see him, and the brother found a radically changed man; instead of finding a man in deep grief he found a man full of peace! The prisoner told his brother that two days prior to that he met a Christian pastor in jail who told him about Jesus. He told his brother, “Two days ago, I received new life and I am no longer afraid of death. . . I know that the Lord Jesus Christ has accepted me and that I am going to be with Him. So don’t worry about me.” He encouraged his brother also to accept Jesus and ask for forgiveness of sins. Then the guard said time was up, and led the prisoner away to be executed. Because of this testimony, the prisoner’s brother became a Christian!

So as we come to the end of our time together today, I want us to consider this. “Jesus’ question to Martha reverberates to today for you and me: Do you believe this?” If so, are we willing to wait, to trust the Lord, where His answer to our prayer is not “yes” nor “no”, but “wait” or “not now”. Elena and I have talked at times that perhaps a big disadvantage people have who have grown up in the church is that they are “inoculated” to the good news of the gospel— we go through Easter and Christmas every year, we can anticipate that time of year, but the message has become commonplace, trite even. If Jesus is the resurrection and the life, we to trust God in the delays to His answer, and trust in His goodness, power, love, and care for us. When all our prayers are answered, and we are in His Kingdom, the joy will be so great it will blow our minds away! Do you and I believe this?