

When God delays

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- [0 : 00] In the autumn, I almost said the fall, four years in the States has done things to my vocabulary, that in the autumn of 1962, a man, a pastor, a minister called Tom Carson made a vow.
- Tom was serving in pastoral ministry in Quebec in Canada. And over the past 12 months, nobody in the church family, no one who had come to the church, had put their faith in the Lord Jesus.
- There was no conversions. There'd be no new believers. And so along with his wife, Marge, he vowed that if there were no conversions in the following 12 months, if nobody came to trust Jesus in the following year, then he would resign his charge and he would leave his job and leave the church.
- They had been waiting upon God and they would continue to wait upon him for the next year, waiting, longing for conversions, for people to come to trust the Lord Jesus.
- And so let me ask you this question this afternoon. Where in your life are you waiting on God? Where in your life are you waiting on God?
- [1 : 17] Or let me ask the question in a slightly different way. Where in your life does it feel like God has delayed? Maybe it's like Tom Carson.
- Maybe it's waiting upon conversion. On someone in your family, a mom or dad, a son or daughter, a brother or sister, a best friend, whoever it is. I've been praying for them for a year, five years, ten.
- And perhaps some of you in this room praying for someone for 20 or 30 years and they still don't know the Lord Jesus. Maybe it's I thought I would be married by now, but I'm not.
- Maybe I thought we'd have kids by now, but we don't. Maybe I thought this sickness would have passed, but it hasn't. Or this job would have arrived and it's not yet here.
- Where in your life has God delayed? Delayed. And what do we do in life when it feels, it appears to us that God has delayed? For God does delay, or at least from our temporal, finite vantage, it looks like he has.
- [2 : 23] And from this short passage, that's what I want us to focus on. What do we do when God delays? Look at verse 6 with me again, right there at the end of the passage.
- Did you see the surprise? Look at verse 6. So when he, Jesus, heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed. He stayed two days longer in the place where he was.
- Do you see it? Do you hear the surprise? Jesus hears his friend Lazarus is sick and he delays two days. He stays where he is.
- He remains where he is. Do you get a sense of the shock or the surprise of that? But Jesus hears his friend is sick and he stays right where he is. I wonder if we only had before us verse 5.
- What would we expect? Look at verse 5. Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. And then just at the start of 6, so when he heard that Lazarus was ill, stop there. Imagine if that's all that we had.

[3 : 20] What do you think would happen next? I don't know if the program still runs. Four years in the States has put me out of touch with British TV. But when I was growing up, we used to watch Question of Sport.

And it was Ali McQuist and Sue Barker. And one of the segments on Question of Sport, if you ever watched it, was What Happens Next. And so they'd have the little sports clip. I'm sure you've seen it.

They'd run a little bit of film. And there would be somebody kind of skiing, you know, 100 miles an hour down a hill. Or somebody rowing. Or maybe a way to play golf on a golf green or something. And they hit pause.

And everybody has to guess, well, what happens next? And, you know, it wasn't ever kind of ordinary. They'd be playing golf. And it would be in Florida. And the next thing is an alligator would come and eat the ball or eat the person or something. I don't know.

Okay. Or down the hill and off they fall to the side. Something like that. Right. And they had to guess what it was. Well, if we only had verse 5 and the start of 6, Jesus here, Lazarus is ill. What happens next?

[4 : 15] We would think he would run. He would make haste. He would be there as fast as he could. But he stays. If you called for an ambulance this afternoon, 999 for an ambulance, someone is hurt.

Someone's in a lot of pain. And they say, okay, we'll come in two days. You wouldn't be very happy, would you? Okay. That's not what we want. You'd have questions. But here, Jesus hears.

Lazarus is sick. And he stays where he is. We'll all face seasons in life when it feels like God delays. And maybe we do the right thing, right? Like Mary and Martha, what did he do?

They send for Jesus. And what do we do? We come to the Lord in prayer every day, month upon month, year upon year. We come to the Lord in prayer and we wait.

And this is true of God's people through the ages. Think of Psalm 130 that we've just sung. One of many places throughout the scriptures where people call upon the Lord. We're waiting. As a watchman on the wall stands for the morning, waiting for you.

[5 : 18] And so simply, this afternoon, from this passage, I just want to encourage us with four things. Four things to remember when a season of waiting comes. And the first one is to remember, then, that God loves you.

Remember God's love for you. Indeed, I think from the passage, we could go even stronger and say it's because God loves you that in some places and at certain times, he delays.

Jesus loves them. And we get it twice in the passage. We have to get told twice that Jesus loves them because the delay doesn't feel like that. But we get told twice.

Look at verse 3. The sister sent to him saying, Lord, he whom you love. And then look at verse 5. Now, Jesus loved Martha and her sister, which is Mary and Lazarus.

We need told that because his response doesn't, in the first instance, seem loving. But he loves them. And therefore, he delays.

[6 : 23] We're currently sleep training our youngest son. It was his first birthday yesterday. I was hoping that we might have been done with the sleep training like 11 and a half months ago, but it doesn't kind of work like that.

He's our fifth child. So you also think you might have it down by that point. But we don't, or at least I don't. My wife has all the patience and skill there. So our youngest son, Luke, we're sleep training him.

And yes, that's just a whole other story. But what happens when you're sleep training? Those of you who have done it or seen others do it, there's 10,000 theories, isn't there?

And we've got five children, and it's been different for all of them. There's 10,000 theories on sleep training a child. But at the end of the day, what do you have to do? At some point, you just have to leave them. And when you leave them, they cry.

And what do you know as a parent? Well, you know that they're safe. You've changed them. They're fed. All the rest of it. You've run through all that list. The list seems to get longer by every child. You've checked everything off.

[7 : 23] And you leave them. And you don't come to them. They start to cry. And you leave, what is it? You leave them for a minute, and you give them a hug. And then it's two minutes. And then maybe it's an hour. No, right. But you work up, right?

It gets longer, doesn't it? You delay. You wait and say, no, we need to train you. You need to learn to get some sleep. I love you. And so I'm going to not come to you right in this moment as you learn to get yourself to sleep.

Well, Jesus loves Martha and Mary and Lazarus. So he delays, even to the point of Lazarus's sickness, sickness unto death. And this reorients us, doesn't it?

It reorients the way that we think. Often we think life is going good, or we can think this way. Life is going good. God loves me. Life isn't going so good. God doesn't love me.

Almost like picking, is it, pedals off a daisy? He loves me. He loves me not. Things are going good. Things are going bad. We think it can ebb and flow like that. And this passage reminds us, no. God's love towards us in Christ is immutable.

[8 : 25] No matter the season, no matter the stage of life we're in, whatever we're facing, in the Lord Jesus, we know God's love for us. And so we need to have our thinking reoriented towards that.

An American, Minister James Montgomery Boyce, says this, We must learn to interpret our circumstances by the love of Christ and not Christ's love by our circumstances. We must learn to interpret circumstances by the love of Christ and not Christ's love by circumstances.

We must wear the glasses, if you like, of Christ's love through our life, knowing that Jesus loves us. And I think that forgetting God's unchangeable love for us in the Lord Jesus in times of waiting, it can be something that knocks us off course.

Like a big gust of wind that comes and takes a frisbee or a golf ball and pulls it off to the side after you've thrown it or hit it. Waiting upon God, feeling like God is delayed, is inevitable from our point of view.

But then, sometimes in life, we don't wait. We're not sure that God loves us. We want to take things into our own hands. And that can lead to shortcuts and can make things start to go wrong.

[9 : 39] Think about Abraham back in Genesis. God gave him a promise for a son. And he waits and he waits and he waits. And what happens? He stops waiting.

Oh, there's Hagar over there. And all the mess that came from that. Think about King Saul. Remember the first king of Israel? King Saul in 1 Samuel 13.

You can read about it later. He was out for battle. And he's to wait in Gilgal for Samuel to come. And he's in Gilgal and Samuel is not there.

Samuel doesn't appear to be coming. And what's Saul not meant to do? He's not meant to offer sacrifice. That's for Samuel, not for Saul. Samuel doesn't show up. Saul loses patience.

And so he offers sacrifice. And what's the result? A few moments later, Samuel arrives. And he says, because of what you've done, the kingdom will be taken from you.

[10 : 33] Oh, I haven't got this promotion yet. And I'm due it. Maybe if I just massage the sales figures a little bit, maybe that'll help. Or maybe if I just start to talk badly about that other person in the running for this job, that'll help me just get a little bit ahead.

Make them look worse and me look better. Then the job will be mine. How is it for you and for me that we can be tempted in these ways? However, it's not always in the waiting or the supposed delays of God that can lead us to sin or to things that are clearly wrong, like Abraham or Saul there.

Perhaps it just feels like we're going into a headwind and it causes discouragement. It just feels really discouraging. Tom Carson, who I mentioned right at the start, he faced those discouragements.

One year, 12 months on from making that vow, there was no conversions in the church family. No one had come to love the Lord Jesus. And so a year on from making that vow, he resigned and left his church.

Now, many of us don't know the name Tom Carson. His son is a pastor as well. Don Carson, DA Carson. You might have done a Bible in a year with him or read some of his books. He's written a memoir of his dad and it's a beautiful short, a beautiful book.

[11 : 49] It's really moving. And you learn in that book that Tom Carson is just a faithful, godly, ordinary pastor who faced the delay of God. And when God delayed, he decided to move on.

Now, I'm not going to comment on the decision of a faithful man like that. And even his son, Don Carson, is sparse with his words. But it shows you what discouragement can do. When the conversions don't come, when I'm not getting any better, when the spouse hasn't arrived, the child, the job, whatever it is, we must remember to read our circumstances through the love of Christ for us.

And may I encourage you this afternoon to rest in that, to push on and rest in the loving arms of God. And how do we do that? How do we do that? We look to the cross, don't we?

We look to the Lord Jesus. For that's where this is all heading now in John. In John 11, we get the last of the seven signs. And that's where this is all heading, to the cross. The cross looms now in John's gospel.

And it's there we behold the love of God. As the Lord Jesus, the Lamb of God, hangs to take away the sin of the world. If this afternoon you are doubting God's love for you, look to the cross.

[13 : 04] See the Lord Jesus and see his love for you. Our second point then, and we'll be briefer as we move forward this. Remember God's love for you. Remember God loves you.

Second, remember God is working in this world and in your life to bring his own glory. Remember God loves you. Remember God is bringing his own glory. Look with me at verse four. 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. Jesus uses this delay to bring his glory.

One commentator says this, Jesus knows that there are more important things than we should be delivered from sickness, provided with a good job, helped out of any number of trials. Our faith, for instance, is more important.

Our witness is more important. Our attitude is more important. God's glory is more important. That's one of the defining marks, isn't it, of the church, of those who follow the Lord Jesus.

[14 : 05] We want to give glory to God. Will we let that be a defining mark of our lives? Lord, you've not worked in my life as I thought that you would, but my life is yours.

So use this thorn in the flesh. Use this trial, this suffering, this cross that I have to bear for your glory. We long to see your glory. In a few moments after our talk here, we're going to sing these words.

When trials come, no longer fear, for in the pain our God draws near, to fire a faith worth more than gold. And there his faithfulness is told.

The glory of God is our goal, our grounding. It's our comfort in life. Famously in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, the question and answer written about 400 years ago, to teach the doctrine to the church, there's the very famous first question, what is the chief end of man?

What is man's chief end? What is our goal? To glorify God and to enjoy him forever. And you know, we live in an age, don't we? We live in an age and stage here in Scotland and across the West, even throughout the world, where the answer to that question, what is man's chief end?

[15 : 19] It switches around to us, isn't it? Ask anyone on the street outside or out watching the cycling, what will most people say? What is man's chief end? To glorify man, to glorify me, and to enjoy myself forever.

So in some ways, there's no more a counter-cultural way for us to live, is there, in this age, in the West, than to live for the glory of God. Tomorrow at work, someone asks you, what did you do yesterday?

Hey, did you get held up in the bike race? Yes, well, we did get held up in the bike race, and I almost ended up on the bike race. What did you do yesterday? We went to church. Why would you go there?

To glorify God. Because my life is not my own. It's been bought by the Lord Jesus. Now tell me about your Sunday. I think it would create some questions, would it not? What do you do with your life?

Why did you go to church? To glorify God and to live for him. I wonder if some of you might know the name, Johnny Erickson Tadda. She was born in Maryland in the US in the late 1940s, and when she was 17, Johnny, who had been a very athletic, through her middle school and high school age, she was a very athletic teenager, lots of sports, she was in a diving accident, and she dived into some shallow water, misjudged the depth of the water, and did all sorts of things to her neck and spine, and she became a quadriplegic, paralyzed right from the shoulders down.

[16 : 44] And after some years of difficulty and frustration, Johnny Erickson Tadda in 1978 said this, I do not care if I am confined to a wheelchair, so long as I can bring glory to God.

And that is exactly what's happened through her life. If you look, Johnny Erickson Tadda up online afterwards, if you don't know who she is, through her ministry, Johnny and friends and her advocacy work, she has brought hope and the gospel to tens of hundreds or hundreds of thousands of people across the US and across the world.

What a challenge for, certainly for me, as I read those words, I do not care if I'm confined to a wheelchair, as long as I bring glory to God.

Remember, God is bringing his glory. And that is what's happening here. God is bringing his glory through this passage.

And it happens especially, or even particularly in circumstances that we don't expect. And where do we see that the most? The cross of Christ, is it not? It does not appear glorious. But there we see the glory of God as he brings salvation to us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[17 : 56] As chapter 11 goes on, Jesus and his disciples go to Bethany. They find Lazarus, who's been laying in the tomb for four days, and he is raised. And many believe in him.

Many believe in Jesus because of this. God is working all things for his glory. Think of the cross. All for God's glory. Thirdly then, remember God is looking to strengthen your faith.

God is looking to strengthen your faith. If you have a Bible, we'll read a couple of verses from later on in the passage to tell us this. Verse 14 of chapter 11, Jesus told them plainly, Lazarus has died.

And for your sake, I'm glad that I was not there so that you may believe. So that you may believe. Chapter 11, verse 27. When Jesus has been talking to Martha, she says to him, yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.

Would it have been good for Jesus to go quickly to heal Lazarus? Yes, it would have been. Sure it would have. But Jesus was holding out for something better, something greater. There were lessons for Mary, Martha, for the disciples, watching on, things they would never have known unless they had seen Lazarus raised and walk out of that tomb having been dead.

[19 : 19] He's looking for their faith to grow, that they would trust him. And so at the end of the day, Mary and Martha, as this chapter goes on, they get something even better here than getting their brother back.

If you read on the chapter 11, some of you will know the story, Lazarus dies and Jesus raises him, but they get something even better. They don't just get their brother, but they get Christ himself.

Christ himself. If you have a Bible, look at verses 25 with me from chapter 11, and if not, I'll read them. After Lazarus is raised, this is what we read.

Martha said to Jesus, I know that he'll rise again in the resurrection on the last day. Verse 25, Jesus says to her, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet he live.

And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this? Do you believe this? They don't just get their brother, they get Christ himself who stands before them and says, I am the resurrection and the life.

[20 : 24] Those who believe in me shall not die. And so friends, hear that same question put to you this morning. Do you believe? Do you believe that the Lord Jesus is the Christ?

Is the resurrection and the life? Do you believe? If you're here visiting today and you don't believe that, welcome. It's wonderful to have you with us. But let me encourage you, that is why the rest of us are here.

Because we do believe and we long for you to believe as well. And if you have questions, if you're visiting and have questions about what it means to believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, that he is the Christ, please come and speak to me afterwards or speak to Matt or Robbie, someone here, we'd love to speak to you more about that and for someone from here to follow up with you.

To know what it is that Jesus is the Christ. When God delays, the prize at the end of it is not necessarily the thing in itself, the job, the healing or whatever.

The prize is Christ himself. It's deeper, sweeter, closer communion with God. That is what Jesus wants to give us. He wants to give us himself.

[21 : 27] And so is Jesus then in the weeks that followed, the events of chapter 11. As he goes to the cross, what is he looking at?

He's looking at death. He's looking at being in a tomb himself. But then he knows resurrection is coming. He knows that the spirit is going to be sent and that humanity and God once again will be reconciled, fellowship restored.

He wants to give us himself. And so wherever today in your life it feels like God is delaying, use this as a time for sweeter communion with Christ. Come to him.

Wait upon him as a watchman for the morning and he will, by his spirit, give you more of him to know him more. Lastly then and fourthly, remember that God will come.

Jesus will come. Verse 7, right after where we finished our reading there, what happens in verse 7. And then after this, Jesus said to the disciples, let us go to Judea again.

[22 : 27] Let us go. As you picked up already from these last few moments, these last few points, Jesus of course travels to meet with Mary and Martha and to raise Lazarus from the dead.

His timing was delayed from our vantage point, but it was perfect from his. God created time and God is never, ever late for his appointments.

For those of you that have seen the Lord of the Rings films, I have no idea if this is in the book, but it's in the film, right at the start of Fellowship of the Ring. And don't worry, no spoilers. My oldest is nine and we've started reading some of these books and he doesn't know all the endings yet, so no spoilers, okay?

At the very start or very near the start of the Fellowship of the Ring, remember there's the party for Bilbo and Frodo kind of runs up and Gandalf's arriving and Frodo, what does he say to Gandalf? He says, you're late and Gandalf turns to him and says, a wizard, I won't do the accent, a wizard is never late.

Neither is he early, but he arrives precisely when he means to. Well, I don't know if that's true of wizards or not, but it is true of God. It is true of God.

[23 : 34] All good things happen in God's perfect plan and in God's perfect way and at God's perfect time. God may not come in the way or the means that we expect, but he will come.

Ten years after Tom Carson left Drummondville in Quebec in the 1960s, ten years after that, later in the 70s, revival did come to French-speaking Canada.

I cannot stand here this morning and say all the list of things in your own head, those things at the start that you thought about, those places where you're waiting on God, I cannot stand here and say God will meet them just in the way or just in the timing that you want, but I do know that he will meet you in your need, in the way that is best and good and true and right.

And how do we know that? How do we know that? Well, what did we sing earlier? Jesus said, if I am lost, he will come to me and he showed me that on the cross.

He will come to me. We know Jesus will meet us in the way that is right and best because after the raising of Lazarus, a few weeks later, Christ himself would die. And what does Paul say?

[24 : 47] At the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. And that is the very thing we needed most in our lives, though we did not know it, it's the very thing we needed most for God to become man and to die in our place.

That those who were dead in sins and trespasses would know life again with God, life in all its fullness. That is what we needed most, though in our sin we didn't know it.

And so, dear friends, will God who spared not his only son, who met you in your greatest need of redemption, will he not also care for you, come to you, carry you, love you in all our trials and all we face until we meet him face to face?

He surely, surely will. The hymn that we're about to sing closes with these words. One day all things will be made new.

I'll see the hope you called me to. And in your kingdom paved with gold, I'll praise your faithfulness of old. And so, dear friends, take heart, take heart.

[25 : 53] One day we will see the Lord Jesus face to face. And we will have him who we once thought delayed close at hand forever. And there we will praise his faithfulness of old.

and know that he has always been with us, always been with us, and will be to the very end of the age, forever in glory. He came and me. Amen. Amen.