

In John 11, Jesus is faced with a serious accusation, one that matters more to Him than any clever problem the Pharisees and Saducees could ever throw at Him. It's important, because it comes not from jealousy, but from heartache, and not from His enemies, but from some of His dearest friends. Both Martha, in verse 21, and Mary, in verse 32, and even the crowd, in verse 37, all confront Jesus with the reality that if He had not waited to come to Bethany, Lazarus would still have been alive, and Jesus could have healed Him. The charge against Jesus is that He comes too late.

The reason why this charge is especially *significant* is that it drives a wedge between the *power* of God and the *love* of God. Everyone readily acknowledged that Jesus had the power to save Lazarus, but they reproached Him for not caring enough to hurry to his sickbed. And this represents something that many people believe about God: He is powerful, He is mighty, He is high and exalted, but He does not care enough to listen to our pleas for help; He does not love us enough to come and help us. If this is true about God, then He is not a god worthy of our worship. A god of power without love is not a good god, not one who should be listened to or followed.

The reason why this charge is especially *relevant* is that this is a charge we regularly bring against God ourselves. Every time we are impatient, we are making the same fundamental mistake. Every time we grow frustrated and angry with the way the world is being run, we are implicitly accusing Jesus of showing up too late.

Unbelievers do this when they complain about the problems of evil, suffering, and injustice that affect our world. The war, poverty, and crime that cover our globe are all marshaled as evidence against the character of God, and becomes the basis for rejecting this apathetic, uncaring being.

Believers do this when they complain, or when they attempt to find other solutions to these problems than the ones revealed in God's Word. Many well-meaning believers have chosen to embrace this fundamental divide between the goodness and love of God and His power, and since they cannot accept a god who doesn't seem to care, they start to theologize away His power. God means well, but His hands are tied. He is unable to fix things, either because He lacks the power to do so, or because He chooses to respect man's free will as the ultimate principle of the universe.

So here is the fundamental problem brought forward by the text: Jesus comes too late.

And it's important to see here that this charge is brought forth by people who have their theology right. They say all the right things. They *know* Jesus has the power to heal. Listen to the back and forth with Martha in vv. 23-27. Martha believes in the resurrection, and she believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. On the last day, she will see Lazarus again, and it will be wonderful, but her present grief is not resolved by a future promise. This shows us that it is

possible for you to believe all the right doctrines and still miss the character of God. Martha knows the words, but not the tune.

After she talks to Jesus, Martha turns to go find Mary in verse 28. Verse 29 is heartbreaking – as soon as Mary hears that Jesus is looking for her, she rises quickly and goes to Him. This is what a true friend does, right? Rises quickly. This is exactly what Jesus didn't do, and so Mary tearfully says the same thing that Martha had said: Lord, if you had been here, Lazarus would not have died.

And when Jesus encounters the depth of the grief surrounding Lazarus' death, both from his sisters and his friends, He is deeply moved in His Spirit, and is greatly troubled. This is the first part of the response to the charge: Your grief, your tears, are deeply moving to Jesus. Jesus cares about your pain! It is *not true* to say that Jesus doesn't love you! Your grief is profoundly moving to Jesus, and after asking where Lazarus is laid, Jesus Himself weeps. Jesus wept. One of the shortest and most profound texts in all of the Bible, and it teaches you that the God of Heaven cares about the suffering of His friends. **Never believe, therefore, that God is unaffected by your tears.** You may not draw that conclusion! It is a lie. And so when that feeling steals over you, and you feel abandoned by God, you need to remember that your feelings are *lying* to you. God cares, Jesus cares.

Jesus' actions have convinced the Jews that He did in fact care (see v. 36). But they are confused (v. 37). If Jesus is *able* to heal, and He *loves enough* to heal, then why is Lazarus dead? It still doesn't add up. Jesus knows their struggle to belief, the difficulty they have in fully trusting, and v. 38 tells us that He was deeply moved *again*, this time not by grief, but by *unbelief*. And this is crucially important: Jesus did not come *only* to ease your griefs and heal your troubles, but fundamentally to solve your deepest problem, and your deepest problem is unbelief. And as we've already seen, not unbelief in facts about God – the resurrection, final judgment. What Martha, Mary and all of us struggle to believe is that God cares, and that He cares enough to meet us where we are, not with promises for a distant future, but with present help and comfort.

And so Jesus takes decisive action to overthrow this final stronghold of unbelief. He calls for the stone to be moved. At this point, it's almost humorous when Martha cautions Him: "Jesus, there is a problem with your plan – Lazarus' body will be decomposing, and will smell terrible." As the King James version puts it, "By this time, he stinketh." You would think that the bigger problem is that Lazarus is *dead*, not that He stinks. But no one smells too bad to be resurrected!

"Did I not tell you," Jesus said, "if you believed you would see the glory of God?" We've already seen that their faith, their belief, is not strong. But Jesus is not calling on them to exercise a "name it and claim it" kind of faith, where it is the quality of the faith that determines the effect. If you believe more or better, then you get what you want. That isn't Jesus' point. What matters

most is not the strength of your faith, but the object of your faith. The tiniest bit of faith in Jesus is more effective than complete unwavering faith in a false god. This is because the true God is gracious and kind. He does love you, and He responds when you cry out in faith.

And so they take away the stone, and Jesus lifts up His voice in public prayer, beginning with thanks, demonstrating the kind of faith that Mary and Martha need: a faith that treats the resurrection as a present and inevitable reality. “Thank you, Father, for hearing me. I know that you always hear me, but I want everyone else to hear, too, so that when the proof that you hear me comes, they will believe that You sent me.” And the last phrase is important, too. Why does Jesus wait? Why doesn't He solve our problems immediately? Because He is not our servant, sent by us. Jesus is not our lackey, a magic genie who grants us three wishes. He serves God, and is sent by God to carry out God's mission, not yours! When we start to think that Jesus exists to serve us, we will always be disappointed by the things He does. But when we realize that He is carrying out God's perfect plan, we learn to wait with a patient trust.

And here is the important thing: after praying in faith, Jesus reaches into the last days, and brings the future into the present: “**Lazarus, come out!**” With His powerful, life-giving Word, Jesus breaks the chains of death, and Lazarus walks out of the tomb, thousands of years earlier than even those who believed in the resurrection were expecting. This is a prime example of what it means to seek first the kingdom, and all these other things will be added. When our primary desire is to see the glory of God, we find that the fulfillment of *that* desire *includes* the fulfillment of our other desires. When our desires are ordered wrongly, then they will never be met on the right timetable in our minds. But when our desires are transformed by the Word of God, then we are content to rest in the truth that God's timing is perfect, and even better than we could have imagined.

The charge brought against Jesus is that His blessing come too late, but by raising Lazarus early, Jesus shows us that instead, He brings the blessing of the last days into today! If anything, Jesus' blessings come early! This is why, even before God renews heaven and earth, kingdom blessings are filling the world: the sick are healed, the hungry are fed, the naked clothed. Not fully, not completely – just like not everyone was resurrected with Lazarus. But God is working to bring future blessings into the present.

And this is a call for us to shake off our complacency about the state of the world: it's easy to look at poverty and not even get off the couch. It is easy to give up on finding solutions to the problems that arise between men, and between nations. Someday, Jesus will feed the hungry. Someday, Jesus will bring peace. Someday, the nations will believe the gospel. But Jesus calls us to imitate Him in bringing future blessings into the present: When you feed the hungry today, the future kingdom invades the present. When you let go of your grievance against your brother and

seek peace instead, the last-days blessing moves forward to today. When you speak the message of the gospel to someone who is struggling to believe that God really does love the world, then the blessings of the last days become a present reality, and people see the glory of God.

This is the main thing: what we *think* we need is for Jesus to take away our problems quickly – to fix our marriage, to give us financial success, to bring us a spouse, to bring us children, to heal our bodies, to end our loneliness. What we *really* need is to trust that Jesus really does love us, which we see in verse 33. What we *really* need is to believe in God's character as well as His truth.

What we *really* need is to see the glory of God. This is what transforms unbelief in faith. Look at verse 45. When Jesus has restored Lazarus to life, many of the Jews who doubted Jesus believed in Him. This is how Jesus solves the most fundamental problem we have, the problem of unbelief: He shows us the glory of God. This calls on us first to see the glory. See the glory in the story of Lazarus. Recognize in Jesus that God is both able to save you, and willing, even eager to save you. This is the glory of Christ – in the midst of your complaining that Jesus comes too late, He loves you enough to rewrite history by bringing the blessings of the last day to you *today*. So do not doubt the power of God, because you can see it in Jesus. And do not doubt the love of God, because you can see it in Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, the Resurrection and the Life.

- In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.