

## MARTHA AND THE DELAY OF LOVE

"Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. When He had heard therefore that he was sick, He abode two days still in the same place where he was," John 11:5, 6.

**W**e learn from a previous verse of this chapter that Lazarus had been dead four days when Christ reached Bethany. The distance from the village to the probably place of Christ's abode, when He received the message, was about a day's journey. If, therefore, to the two days on which He abode still after the receipt of the news, we add the day which the messengers took to reach Him and the day which He occupied in travelling, we get four days since which Lazarus had been laid in his grave.

Consequently the probability is that, when our Lord had the message, the man was dead. Christ did not remain still therefore in order to work a greater miracle by raising Lazarus from the dead than He would have done by healing, but He stayed, strange as it would appear, for reasons closely connected with the highest well-being of all the beloved three, AND BECAUSE HE LOVED THEM.

John is always very particular in his use of the word "therefore," and he points out many a subtle and beautiful connection of cause and effect by the use of it. I do not know that any of them are more significant and more full of illumination with regard to the ways of Divine providence than the instance before us.

How these two sisters must have looked down the rocky road that led up from Jericho during those four weary days, to see if there were any signs of the Lord's coming. How strange it must have appeared to even the disciples themselves that He had made no sign of movement, notwithstanding the message. Maybe John's scrupulous carefulness in pointing out that His love was Christ's reason for His quiescence may reflect a remembrance of the doubts that had crept over the minds of Himself and His brethren during

these two days of strange inaction. John would have us to learn, which reaches far beyond the instance in hand, and casts light on many dark places, that **Christ's delays are the delays of love.**

We have all of us, I suppose, had experiences of desires for the removal of bitterness or sorrows, or for the fulfillment of expectation and wishes which we believed, on the best evidence that we could find, to be in accordance with the Lord's will, and which we have been able to make prayers out of, in true faith, and submission, which prayers have had to be offered over and over and over again, and no answer has come. I remember this clearly in my own life while praying on behalf of my wife who was dying of cancer and having received no answer to my prayers.

Now this is a part of the method of providence that the lifting away of the burden and the coming of the desires should be a hope deferred. And instead of stumbling at the mystery, or feeling as if it made a great demand upon our faith, would it not be wiser for us to lay hold on that little word of the apostles here, and to see in it a small window that opens out on to a boundless prospect and glimpse into the very heart of the Divine motives in His dealings with us?

**If we could once get that conviction into our minds how quietly we should go about our work, what a beautiful and a brave patience there would be in us, if we habitually felt that the only reason which actuates God's providence in its choice of times, of fulfilling our desires and lifting away our bitterness is our own good.**

Nothing but the purest and simplest love, transparent and without a fold in it, sways Him in all He does. Why should it be so difficult for us to believe this? If we were more in the way of looking at life, with all its often unwelcomed duty, and its arrows of pain, and sorrow, and all the disappointments and

other ills that it is heir to, as a believer, and were to think less about the unpleasantness, and more about the purpose, of what befalls us, we should find far more difficulty in understanding THAT HIS DELAY IS BORN OF LOVE, AND IS A TOKEN OF HIS TENDER GRACIOUS CARE.

Sorrow is prolonged for the same reason as it is sent. It is of little use to send it for a little while. In the majority of cases, time is an element in its working its right effect upon us. If the weight is lifted, the elastic substance beneath springs up again. As soon as the wind passes over the cornfield, the bowing ears raise themselves. You have to steep foul things in water for a good while before the pure liquid washes out the stains. And so **time is an element in all the good that we get out of the discipline of life.**

Therefore, the same love which sends must necessarily protract, beyond our desires the discipline under which we are put. If we thought of it, as I have said, more frequently as pain and a burden, we should understand the meaning of things a great deal better than we do, and should be able to face them with braver hearts, and with a patient, almost joyous, endurance.

**If we think of some of the purposes of our sorrows and burdens, we shall discern still more clearly that time is needed for accomplishing them, and that, therefore, love must delay its coming to take them away.**

For example, the object of them all, and the highest blessing that any of us can obtain, is that **our wills should be bent until they coincide with the Lord's will, and that takes time.** The shipwright, when he gets a bit of timber that he wants to make a "knee" out of, knows that to mold it into the right form is not the work of a day. A WILL MAY BE BROKEN AT A BLOW, BUT IT WILL TAKE A WHILE TO BEND IT.

And just because swiftly passing disasters have little permanent effect in molding our wills, it is a blessing, and not an evil, to have some sanding fact in our lives, which

will make a continual demand upon us for continually repeated acts of bowing ourselves beneath His sweet, though it may seem severe, will. **God's love to Jesus Christ can give us nothing better than the opportunity of bowing our wills to His,** and saying, "Not mine, but Thine be done." If that is why He stops on the other side of Jordan, and does not come even to the loving messages of beloved hearts, then He shows His love in the sweetest and the loftiest form.

So as believers, if we carry a lifelong sorrow, do not think that it is a mystery why it should lie upon your shoulders **when there are omnipotence and an infinite heart in the heavens.** If it has the effect of bending you to the Lord's purpose, it is the truest token of His loving care that He can send.

In like manner, is it not worth carrying a weight of unfulfilled wishes, and a wearisomeness of unalleviated sorrows, if these do not teach us three things, which are one thing, **faith, endurance, prayerfulness, and so knit us by a three-fold cord that cannot be broken, to the very heart of God Himself.**

SECONDLY, THIS DELAYED HELP ALWAYS COMES AT THE RIGHT TIME.

Don't forget that Heaven's clock is different from ours. In our day there are 24 hours, and in God's time a thousand years. What seems long to us, is to Him just a "little while."

Let us not imitate the shortsighted impatience of His disciples, who said, "What is this that He saith, a little while? We cannot tell what He saith." The time of separation looked so long in anticipation to them, and to Him it had dwindled to a moment. For two days, 48 hours, He delayed His answer to Mary and Martha, and they thought it an eternity. While the heavy hours crept by and they only said, "It's very weary. He cometh not, they said." How long did it look to them when they had got Lazarus back?

The longest protraction of the fulfillment of the most yearning expectation and fulfilled desire will seem but as the winking of an

eyelid when we get to estimate duration by the same scale by which the Lord estimates it, the scale of eternity.

The ephemeral insect, born in the morning and dead when the day fades, has a still minuter scale than ours, but we should not think of regulating our estimate of long and short by it. Do not let us commit the equal absurdity of regulating the march of the Lord's providence by the swift beating of our time frames. God works leisurely because God has eternity to work in.

**But the answer always comes at the right time, and is punctual, though delayed.** For instance, Peter is in prison. The church keeps praying for him, prays on, day after day. No answer. The week of the feast comes. Prayer is made intensely and fervently and continuously. No answer. The slow hours pass away. The last day of his life, as it would appear, comes and goes, no answer. The night gathers. Prayer rises to Heaven. The last hour of the last watch of the last night that he had to live has come, and as the veil of darkness is thinning, and the day is beginning to break, "the Angel of the Lord shone round about him." But there is no haste in His deliverance. All is done leisurely, as in the confidence of ample time, time to spare, and perfect security. He is bidden to arise quickly, but there is no hurry in the stages of his liberation.

"Gird thyself and bind on thy sandals." He is to take time to lace his shoes. There is no fear of the quaternion of soldiers walking or of there not being time to do all. We can fancy the half sleeping and wholly bewildered apostle fumbling at the sandal strings, and the calm angel face looking on. The sandals fastened, he is bidden to put on his garments and follow.

With equal leisure and orderliness he is conducted through the first and the second guard of the sleeping soldiers, and then through the prison gate. He must have been lifted at once clear out of his dungeon, and set down in the house where many were gathered praying for him. But of more significance was the demonstration of the power

which a deliverance so gradual gave, when it led Him slowly past all the obstacles and paralyzed their power.

**God is never in haste. He never comes too soon nor too late.** "The Lord shall help them and that rise early." Senacherib's army is round the city, famine is within the walls. Tomorrow will be too late. But tonight the angel strikes, and the enemies are all dead men.

**So God's delays make the deliverance the more signal and joyous when it is granted.** And though hope deferred may sometimes make the heart sick, the desire, when it comes, is a tree of life.

REMEMBER ALWAYS, AS IN THE CASE OF MARTHA, THE BEST HELP IS NOT DELAYED. The principle which we have been illustrating applies only to one half, and that the less important half, of our prayers and of Christ's answers. **For in regard to spiritual blessings, and our petitions for fuller, purer, and diviner life, there is no delay.** In that region the Law is not, "He abode still two days in the same place." but, "BEFORE they call, I WILL ANSWER, and while they are yet speaking, I will hear."

If you have been praying for deeper knowledge of God, for lives liker to His, for hearts more filled with the Spirit, and have not had the answer, do not fall back upon the misapplication of such a principle as this of our text, which has nothing to do with that region. **But remember that the only reason why we do not immediately get the blessings of the Christian way of life for which we ask lies in themselves, ourselves, not at all in the Lord.** "Ye have not, because ye ask not, because," not because He delays, but because, "ye ask amiss," or because of having asked, you get up from your knees and go away not looking to see whether the blessing is coming down or not.

There is a sad amount of lying and hypocrisy in prayers for spiritual blessings. Many petitioners do not want to have them. They would not know what to do with them if

they got them. They make the requests because their fathers did so before them, and because they are the right kind of things to say in prayer. Such prayers get no answers.

If a man prays for some spiritual enlargement, and then goes out into the world and lives clean contrary to his prayers, what right has he to say that God delays His answers? **No, He does not delay His answers, but we push back His answers, and the gift that is given we will not take.**

Let us remember that the two halves of the Divine dealings are not regulated by the

same principle, though they be regulated by the same motive. And that the love which often delays for our good, in regard to the desires that have reference to outward things, is swift as lightning to answer every petition which moves within the circle of our spiritual life.

"Whatsoever things ye desire," when ye stand praying, "believe that," then and there, "ye receive them," and the undelaying God will take care that, "you shall have them."