

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor  
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## John 11:1-6 “Sickness to the Glory of God”

Intro. So far in the gospel of John we have read of 6 signs or miracles that were selected to demonstrate the deity of Jesus Christ, and to teach us some truth about Christ. Now, as we move into chapter 11, we will read of the 7th great miracle of Jesus found in this gospel. Surely, this is the greatest miracle that Jesus performed.

And what was so great about this miracle? Jesus had raised at least 2 others from the dead. But Jairus's daughter and the son of the widow had been dead only a short while. Lazarus was dead 4 days by the time Jesus raised him up and restored him to life! His body was already decaying. It would take an incredible display of divine, life-giving power to raise *him* from the dead. So the purpose of this miracle, and the timing of it, was not so much to restore the life of Lazarus, nor mainly to show love for Mary and Martha. Instead, the main purpose of the miracle was for the glory of God and His Son. It was the most astounding of all the miracles Jesus had performed up to that point and the greatest manifestation of His glory yet seen.

Next Sunday I will focus on the miracle and the implications of it in reference to Jesus. However, the focus of this message today is will be on the sickness and death that led up to the miracle. How should the family of Lazarus respond to sickness in the life of a loved one? How can we expect God to respond to such a situation? We typically have several members of our church who are facing a serious illness, and now is no exception. Indeed, sickness and disease can strike any time, and at any age. So whether you are young or old, you or a loved one will face a serious illness at some time in your future, and these verses should help you face this situation better. If you will listen to the message this morning, I believe you will gain a greater understanding of what God wants to accomplish through sickness, and how we are to respond to a serious illness in our own lives, or in the life of a loved one.

Now the first point I want to make from our text is not profound, but important to make:

### I. GOD’S PEOPLE *WILL* FACE SERIOUS ILLNESS

Do you believe that *God’s* people should be exempt from illness, especially serious illness? Well, here in this text of Scripture we see an example of the fact that God’s people are *not* exempt from serious illness. V.1 says, “Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha.” We are not told of the exact nature of Lazarus' illness. But the word translated “sick” (*astheneo*) literally refers to someone who has become very weak through sickness. That is often a result of sickness. Whatever it was, it made him so sick he was weak and bed-ridden. It is not at all likely that Martha and Mary would have sent to Christ from such a distance had not their brother's life been in danger.

Now my main point is this: Lazarus was a faithful believer, and even a close friend of Christ, and yet he became sick. He and his sisters were as close to Jesus as anyone in Judea. I really don’t think Lazarus was older than middle age. So clearly, this is a clear example of the fact that God’s people are not exempt from serious illness.

I can give other examples. Job was stricken with a serious illness. The prophet Elisha became sick unto death (2 Kings 13:14). Good king Hezekiah became sick unto death when he was

only 39 years old<sup>1</sup> (2 Kings 20:1). Paul's missionary associate Epaphroditus "was sick almost unto death" (Php. 2:27). So clearly, God's people are not exempt from serious sickness, nor should we expect to be.

Now since it is true that God's people are not exempt from serious illness, then let's consider next:

## II. WHAT TO DO WHEN A LOVED ONE IS SERIOUSLY ILL

Sooner or later, you will probably experience a loved one having a serious illness. And when you do, you should follow the fine example of Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus. First of all, based on their example, I would say that you should:

A. Turn to Jesus - Jesus had healed so many others, and we see in vv.1-2 that Lazarus was sick, so v.3 says, "Therefore the sisters sent to Him...." They decided that they should send word to Jesus, evidently that He might come and heal their brother. As Lazarus became more and more sick, we can picture them saying again and again, "If only Jesus were here!"

They certainly went to the right source for help. Psa. 46:1 says, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." The name "Lazarus" means "God is my help."

However, by the time they sent for Jesus, he died within 24 hours. We know that based on a careful reading of the chronology of the text.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the sickness progressed far more rapidly than they had expected. They tried everything else before bothering the Master. Then, as soon as they realized the seriousness of the situation, they sent for Jesus.

Too many go to the Lord only as a last resort. They try everything else first. And when all else fails, then they turn to the Lord. But what you should do is go straight to the Lord first.

B. Ask for Healing with the Right Attitude – They did not make demands of Jesus. In the last of v.3 they simply said, "Lord, behold, he whom You love<sup>3</sup> is sick." Instead of making demands, they simply appealed to the heart of the One in whom they put their trust. Note how they sent their request to Jesus humbly. They addressed Him as "Lord." They acknowledged that Jesus is Lord and Sovereign in this situation. It is not for the creature to dictate to the Creator. And since He is Lord, they did not make demands. They didn't even *ask* Him to do anything.<sup>4</sup> For example, they did not ask Him to come quickly to Bethany. As we see from v.8, it would have been dangerous to do so. They probably knew He could heal their brother from a distance, as He did with the nobleman's son in chapter 4. So they merely informed Jesus that the one He loved was sick, and left it for Him to decide what should be done.

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<sup>1</sup> This is based on the fact that he was 25 when he began his reign, he reigned 29 years, and God had promised him 15 more years after this deadly sickness.

<sup>2</sup> The distance from that village to the probable 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 the 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 [Maclaren]. Lazarus probably died *the very day* the messenger left to contact Jesus! [Wiersbe].

<sup>3</sup> Their statement must not be regarded as a protest; it was not that Martha and Mary were complaining against Christ because He allowed one whom He loved to fall sick.

<sup>4</sup> However, I do wonder if this is an example of female communication that guys need to understand! Women tend to state the situation and expect that the men they are talking to will understand that the clear implication is that the man is to do something about it! We saw a previous example of this in John 2:3, where Mary said to Jesus, "They have no wine." Translation: "Do something about the fact that they have run out of wine!"

How do you talk to God? Do you say, “God, I have a need. Now let me tell You how to work it out.” Do you make demands of God? You must not! just tell Him your need, and humbly ask Him to meet your need in His time and in His way. That's all it takes. There has been too much “Name it; claim it” theology.

C. Base Your Appeal on the Love of God – Again, they said in the last of v.3, “Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick.” Notice they did not say that Jesus should come and heal because *Lazarus* loves Jesus so much. Rather, they made their appeal based upon the love of Jesus for Lazarus. Likewise, Peter says that we should “cast all your cares upon Him, for He cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7).

So we are not to make appeal based on our worthiness but based on God’s character, including that fact that He always loves us. If your love for Jesus activated His blessing on your behalf, you would at best be blessed on an irregular basis. If Christ operated in my life on the basis of my love for Him, I would be in bad shape because my love is inconsistent and at times self-centered. In Revelation 2 Jesus told the Ephesian church that they had left their first love. Jesus is not motivated to come to your aid because you love Him; He helps you because He loves you. 1 John 4:19 says, “We love Him because He first loved us.” So don’t make your request to God based on how much you love Jesus, but based on how much He loves you!

D. Just Trust Him to Do What Is Best - The sisters were well aware of the critical condition of their brother. They appealed to Jesus, and left the problem in His hands. Their response is an illustration of Psa. 37:5, “Commit your way to the LORD, Trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass.” Too many people turn to the Lord and make their requests, but evidently they are not trusting in Him because they worry even after they have prayed to the Lord. Let’s trust in the Lord and leave the matter to Him.

So we understand that sickness happens to God’s people. We see from our text what we are to do when we or a loved one faces sickness. Now let us see:

### III. GOD’S RESPONSE TO OUR ILLNESS & PRAYERS

I can assure you that God is not indifferent to your suffering. God wants to help you. One way He wants to help you is to give you the right perspective concerning what you are going through. I think that is very important. So the first thing He wants you to do is this:

A. Consider His Purpose as Most Important – When God allows a trial or difficulty in your life, He does so for a purpose. I say that based on Romans 8:28, where the apostle Paul said, “all things work together for good....” So we need to recognize His purpose, and work with Him in fulfilling that purpose. In the case of Lazarus, God clearly had a purpose in allowing His sickness. Jesus, in essence, said in v.4, “The purpose of Lazarus's sickness is not death, but the glory of God.” Our Lord did not say that Lazarus would not die. He only promised that death would not be the *ultimate* result of his sickness. Instead, the ultimate result of his sickness would be the glory of God. God allowed a deadly sickness to come to Lazarus, not as a punishment for sin, but for a much higher purpose, that through the sickness God will be glorified. I believe we should seek to glorify God in every situation and circumstance of God. Isn’t the glory of God the ultimate purpose of our existence?

There are three main ways that God can be glorified through our sickness, especially a

serious illness.

1. God May Be Glorified through a Miracle. That was the case here. Actually in this case, Jesus would do an even greater miracle than healing. Instead of acting quickly to bring about a healing, He would wait until Lazarus was dead for 4 days, and then raise him from the dead. Thus, this miracle brought glory to Jesus Christ for it pointed to His deity. Jesus had been claiming to be God, and now He gives life. Only *God* can give life. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead so men might recognize Him as God through His display of divine power.

So as you face a great sickness or some other trial, pray that God would do a miracle of healing or deliverance, that He may be glorified through it. The primary reason you should pray for healing is not for your own benefit but for the glory of God!

Now I want to make it clear that a miraculous healing is not the only way God can be glorified through sickness.

2. God May Be Glorified By Manifesting His Grace & Presence in Your Sickness - Consider the apostle Paul. He had a thorn of some kind in his flesh. But God never healed him. Although his infirmity in the flesh was never cured, he was a better man for it. God received more glory by Paul's illness than by his health (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Some patiently endure their sickness as a prime example of the sufficiency of God's grace. God will use their sickness as a witness, and thus God is glorified through their sickness.

3. God May Be Glorified by Building Character in Our Lives through Suffering - Sickness produces suffering, and suffering can produce patient endurance and a stronger servant of God. Rom 5:3-4 says, "we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character..." Jesus said in John 15:8, "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit..." It is not important that we Christians are comfortable, but it is important that we glorify God in all that we do.

Stephen faced the greatest trial of his life. He remained faithful in his witness for Jesus Christ in spite of the hostility he was face. The mob took him outside the city and began to stone him to death. God did not miraculously deliver him from death as He did for Daniel in the lion's den. He allowed Stephen to suffer. Here's one reason why: Probably to everyone's amazement, as he was being stoned, his face began to shine like that of an angel. Even his enemies could see the glory of God shining from his face. He also asked God to forgive his persecutors. He manifested the glory of God's grace in his death. Stephen glorified God in his suffering and death!

B. Understand that God May Delay Doing Anything! – We see this in v.6, "So, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was." How strange it must have appeared to the disciples themselves that He made no sign of movement, notwithstanding the message.

1. A Delay Does Not Mean that God Does Not Love Us – We may doubt God's love when a sickness, or other trial comes upon us. But we are especially prone to doubt God's love if we pray, and God does nothing. But His delay did not mean He didn't love them. V.5 says, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." Yet v.6 literally says, "*Therefore*, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days..." He loved them, therefore He did not come immediately! If we looked at life with all its pain and sorrow as a discipline, and thought more about God's purpose in it all, we would find far less difficulty in understanding that His delay is born of love.

Can you imagine measuring love on the basis of time? You wouldn't say, "God, You have 20 minutes to heal me and if You don't, it's clear You don't love me." That would be ridiculous.

Yet, at least subconsciously, we tend to think like that.

An example of this is found in another gospel. A storm came upon the disciples as they were crossing the Sea of Galilee by boat. The disciples tried to take care of matters themselves. But when they feared that they were going to drown, they went to Jesus, woke Him up and said, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" (Mark 4:38). Just because He did not *immediately* rescue them, they interpreted His inaction as a lack of concern. Jesus was not unconcerned; He was waiting upon them to confess their need.

Even so, if you are not careful, you will interpret God's lack of intervention as either He doesn't care, or He isn't there. God's purpose in our trials takes time to fulfill. And that leads to another truth:

2. God Works on His Own Timetable - Mere human love would have caused Christ to rush and heal his friend. But divine love wasn't in any hurry at all. With God a thousand years is as a day (2 Pet. 3:8). Often His way and time will be different from ours. However, His time is the right time. Why should the omnipotent Christ worry or fret? He knew a resurrection would be better testimony to the people than a healing. He wanted to wait until Lazarus was dead 4 days so that His power might have an even greater impact. The disciples didn't understand the delay, but Jesus did. Besides, as we have noted, Lazarus was probably already dead by the time the request reached Jesus.

It's interesting to see how God makes us wait. For instance, in Acts 12 we read that Peter is in prison (v.5ff). The Church kept praying for him; prayed day after day. No answer. The week of the feast came. Prayer was made intensely and fervently and continuously. No answer. The slow hours passed away. The last day of his life, as it would appear, came and went. No answer. The night came; prayer rose to heaven. The last hour of the last watch of the last night that he was to live came, and it was only then that, "the angel of the Lord shone round about him." Then, just in time, he was delivered.

The seeming delay in God answering our prayer does not mean He does not care. It doesn't mean that God isn't listening. It probably means that God is just operating on a different timetable. So with God, there is still hope as we face our difficult situations.

3. Understand Some of the Reasons God Delays His Answer To Our Prayers – There are several reasons. First, to bring us to a greater point of need. Often God brings man to the end of himself before He comes to His relief. The old saying, "Man's extremity is God's opportunity" applies here. Again, the disciples in the boat did not experience deliverance until they reached the end of their own efforts and turned to Jesus.

Secondly, as we have already seen, God delays to help us grow spiritually. Many times God will require us to wait, for when we wait, we must exercise our faith and patience. God is much more interested in developing our character than in giving us instant answers to prayer. A shepherd's staff is made out of wood and it typically has a hook on the end. Now how did that hook get there? Well, someone did not just take the fresh wood and bend it over their knee in a few seconds and it remained that way? It would snap back much like it was before, or more likely, it would break before it would even bend that much. No, it takes a gradual bending of the wood over time to get it to take on that shape.

Listen, God takes His time to bend you into the person He wants you to be. Don't resist His work. The highest blessing that any of us can obtain is that our wills should be bent until they coincide with God's, and that takes time. Bend your will to His will and He will make something good of your life to His glory.

Thirdly, waiting often results in getting something better from the Lord than we would have

immediately received. Jesus could have healed him before Lazarus died. That would have been a wonderful miracle. But instead He raised him from the dead after 4 days, which was a far greater miracle. Lazarus went down into history as the one who was blessed with experiencing the greatest miracle Jesus performed! Besides, God's delay makes the deliverance the more joyous when it is granted.

So don't settle for second best—wait on the Lord. We can learn from this story that when God makes us wait, it is the sign that He purposes to bless, but in His own way and in His own time. When you worry because God doesn't immediately come to the rescue, realize that He often makes us wait before His love becomes visible. Isa. 30:18 says, “And therefore will the Lord wait, that He may be gracious unto you, and therefore will He be exalted.... Blessed are all they that wait for Him.” Are you willing to wait upon the Lord? Are you willing to exercise patience when you face a trial? Even if death is at the end of your sickness, Paul said in Php. 1:23 that “to depart and be with Christ... is far better.”

Conclusion: I grew up being afflicted with stuttering. I'm sure I prayed and asked God to take it away. My grandmother even wrote to Pat Robertson and asked him and his staff to pray for me. Well, I continued to stutter. Yet after years of stuttering and the mental anguish that went with it, God finally showed me the purpose of my affliction. He called *me* to preach because I would be far more likely to trust in Him than in my own ability. I ended up with something better. God had a purpose in the delay.

What problems are you facing today? Are you willing to turn those problems over to the Lord? Are you willing to patiently wait upon the Lord as you face that problem? Are you willing to submit to God's sovereign will regarding that problem? You need to answer “Yes” to each of those questions to be assured that God will work in your life in a clear way.

Sources: William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955); John MacArthur, Jr., *The Resurrection and the Life: John 11* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1986); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:23] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2012); Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975); Warren W. Wiersbe, “*Be*” Series: *New Testament Volumes 1 & 2, John* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). McGee not helpful on this text.

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