

# When God Says “Wait”

John 11:1-16

Preached by Phillip Kayser at DCC on Sunday, October 19, 2025

I was teaching at the presbytery this past week so I didn't have the time to devote to my next Deuteronomy sermon - which is a bit of a complicated text - and I want to do justice to it. So I thought this might be a good time to address a question I got after I preached the sermon, “When God Says No.” Several appreciated that message, but they had a follow-up question: “What about a sermon on ‘When God Says Wait’? And how do I a wait and a no.” And I thought this was *the* perfect passage to develop that question.

And I'm sure all of you have experienced God's Waits. When I was growing up there were a number of times that I was (quite frankly) disappointed with God for not answering my prayers. And I think there was a good reason - I was not regenerate. But even before I had saving faith, I never doubted that God was a prayer-answering God. And the reason was that I had seen God doing all kinds of miracles in my parents lives, and I certainly saw a steady stream of answered prayers that my parents received. I just doubted that He would answer *my* prayers. I was discouraged. I remember a trivial example when I was very young. My parents were on furlough, and we were visiting the Campbell household in California. I was playing with one of the boys (it was Sam), and I overheard the parents mentioning how this boy had prayed for snow, and it had snowed that night. They never got snow there. Well, I was really impressed, so when Sam and I went fishing, we both prayed fervently to be able to catch the huge fish we could see in the clear water just below us. But nothing happened. We even bumped the worms right up against that huge fish's mouth, but it wouldn't bite. And I remember how disappointed I was in the whole concept of prayer. I thought, “Wow! He won't even answer my prayers when *Sam* is with me!!” Well, since then, I have seen God answer prayers in remarkable ways down through the years. But there are still times when God's answer is not Yes. It is either “No,” or a “Wait.” And that was the situation in this passage.

## I. God is Sometimes Slow in Answering Our Prayers

### A. Prayers for physical problems

Martha and Mary faced a physical emergency that was urgent. Lazarus was sick, and realizing that his case was desperate, they quickly sent a message to Jesus to come. They expected a speedy answer. After all, they were very close to Jesus. But instead, He chose to stay where He was for two more days. And meanwhile Lazarus died. This was the most severe example I could find in the Bible of a “wait” answer. From a human perspective it *looked* like the answer was a “No” rather than a “Wait.” And I think that most of you have experienced not only God's “Nos” but also His “Waits.” Perhaps we have prayed for healing, and our sickness kept dragging on for weeks and then finally God brought a deliverance. God's intention was not a “No,” so why did He wait so long to answer our prayer? Our first impulse might be to think that it wasn't an answer, and that we just got better on our own.

Of course, we as Calvinists know better, right? God heals with and without means. We know that we have to depend upon Him even when taking medicine. Another reaction is to beat up on ourselves and to think that we didn't have enough faith. But there are many reasons why God makes us wait. And they are all good reasons. And we will look at that in a bit. But I want you to think of examples in your own life when God delayed His answer.

### B. For guidance

Perhaps you had been looking to the Lord for guidance and after two weeks of praying you are still just as confused about what you should do as you were on day one. An excellent example of this is found in Jeremiah 42 where the king of Babylon had appointed Gedaliah to rule over Israel, and there was a small Jewish rebel group that killed Gedaliah along with a garrison of Babylonian soldiers – which was not a very wise move. Revolution rarely is. When the believing Israelite *remnant* found out about this stupid action they were scared to death and came to Jeremiah asking what they should do. They asked, “Should we stay in the land of Palestine and risk getting killed by Babylon or should we flee into Egypt?” Well Jeremiah sought the face of the Lord to get guidance. But Jeremiah chapter 42:7 says, “And it happened *after ten days* that the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah.” It's easy for us to read that verse and say that God gave them the guidance they were asking for and that is that. But if you were in their shoes wondering every day whether Babylon is going to drop the ax, the tension is mounting. “We need an answer NOW Lord! Now! Why is the Lord holding off giving this guidance for ten days?” Perhaps that has happened to you. The Lord has in effect said, “Wait. I'm not going to give it to you right now. You have to trust me. I'm teaching you something through this delay.” Another example is Samuel and Saul. God deliberately delayed giving His answer to Saul until the last minute. And Saul didn't pass the test. He went ahead and acted on his own. That particular wait was a test of Saul's heart. And he failed the test. We don't need to fail like Saul did.

### C. For wisdom in understanding Scripture

Or perhaps you have prayed for wisdom in understanding a Bible passage that has been confusing to you. You have studied and studied and cannot seem to understand the problem passage. Yet God does not give you light on that for a week, a month, maybe years and then finally the Lord opens up the treasure house of knowledge on that problem. Why is it that the Lord takes so long in showing our relatives the doctrines of sovereign grace, or eschatology, or other doctrines that we have found so beneficial, and practical, and so comforting? We want them to have the same comfort, but they just don't get it.

### D. For financial or material problems

Or, maybe the problems we have prayed for are financial or material. The Lord has let us be financially stressed for months on end before answering our prayers.

I don't think that I need to belabor this point. I think most of us can relate to what is going on in this chapter. Before we look at some of God's *reasons* for those delays, let's look at some potentially inappropriate reactions:

## II. And Our Reactions Are Not Always Appropriate. Some Typical Reactions:

### A. Questioning His knowledge (vv. 4,14)

The first inappropriate reaction is to question God’s wisdom. These sisters may have been tempted to question whether Jesus even *knew* what was going on. We aren’t told, but maybe they were thinking, “Surely Jesus would have been here by now if He *knew* how serious things have gotten!” They had sent their messenger and were anxiously counting the hours confident that Christ would come as soon as He heard of Lazarus’s condition. But He didn’t. And they may have wondered if the messenger had not communicated clearly enough. Yet we know from the account that Jesus knew of the sickness as well as of the death. In verse 4 He tells his disciples that this sickness was not for the purpose of bringing Lazarus’s death, even though in verse 14 He tells His disciples that death has happened. God did not want Lazarus to be permanently dead yet. He still had a few more years of life and service. I have talked with Christians who have a hard time believing that God can have a sympathetic knowledge of their situation. Sure He knows all about what is happening – He’s omniscient. But He’s *God*. How can He, who knows no weakness, understand the struggles I am going through? It’s easy for *Him!* He’s omnipotent!

But God *does* understand. God’s incarnation in Christ proves it. He came in the incarnation to experience *everything* that we are going through. His knowledge is an *experiential* knowledge. So don’t question His knowledge or His wisdom.

### B. Thinking He is Indifferent (vv. 5-6; 1 Pet. 5:7)

A second inappropriate reaction is to think that God is indifferent to what you are going through, or doesn’t adequately care about what has happened to you. Look at verses 5-6. “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. *Therefore*, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was.” The NIV translation totally misses an important point here because they don’t translate this literally. You really need to have literal translations in your hands. The NIV translates it, “*Yet\* when He heard that Lazarus was sick . . .*” as if it was *despite\** His love. No, it wasn’t *despite* His love, but *because* of His love that He stayed. *It was precisely His love that made Him wait.* And the New King James translation is better. The Greek says, “Therefore” or “So” or “Because of this.” The reason He stayed away for two more days was not because He was indifferent, but because of His great love for them and because He wanted the best in their lives. *Love dictated the delay.* Let me read that verse again. “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Therefore [or “So”], when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was.” This was not indifference. Fellow Christians, if you ever doubt God’s love and concern when you go through difficulties; if you are ever tempted to think that He is indifferent to your plight simply because He is delaying His answer to your prayers, then take to heart this verse. Take to heart 1 Peter 5:7 which says of God “He cares for you”, and it says that in the midst of fiery persecution that God allowed those saints to go through. And once we look at the reasons for this delay, you will see evidence of that care.

### C. Thinking He Is Too Involved or We are Too Unimportant (vv. 7-9, 15-16)

So the reaction to God's delays should not be to question His knowledge, or to think that he is indifferent. Nor should we think that we are unimportant to God or a lower priority than other things that He is busy with.

Given the incredible danger that *Jesus* was in, the disciples may have assumed that Christ's life and perhaps their own lives were a higher priority than going to visit Lazarus. Look at verses 7-9.

Then after this He said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to Him, "Rabbi, lately the Jews sought to stone you, and are You going there again?"

The implication is that "You're crazy to go visit Lazarus at a time like this. You'll be walking right into a trap. Lazarus's life is not as important as Yours or ours."

Look at verse 16: "Then Thomas, who is called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with Him.'" That shows that they knew the huge danger of going up. On their scale of priorities, they may have initially assumed that Jesus was waiting because going to visit Lazarus was less important than trying to stay alive. But that was *not* Christ's reason. In fact, all along, Jesus had a definite plan of action with regard to Lazarus and He was tailoring it perfectly to adapt to the needs of Martha and Mary and to bring greatest honor and glory to God. Verse 15: "I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe. Nevertheless, let us go to Him." No letter addressed to God is unanswered, but some of them are in a file labeled "Pending."

### D. Thinking He Can't Handle The Problem (v. 21; Gen. 18:12; 2 Kings 6:24-7:2)

One last reaction could be that God can't handle this problem. You are all good Calvinists and never think this, right? Wrong. Good Calvinists can be tempted with this thought as well. Look at verse 21. "Now Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.'" If you had been here. Now, we will see in a bit that Martha still had faith, but it could have been so easy to think that God has met His match with *our* particular problem. Sarah certainly thought that God had met His match with her infertility. And it made her make a huge mistake - to give her handmaiden to Abraham in order to try to fulfill God's promise. We may have given up on trying to promote righteousness in our culture because the problem seems too big. But we need to be convinced that no problem is too big for God to handle. He continues to be a God of miracles. He can abolish abortion. But He does not want us making the mistake of Sarah, and moving towards God's goal in the flesh. Too many proliferators are doing exactly what Sarah did - using compromise to hurry up the process because God's plan seems too difficult.

It is easy for us to give up on prayer just because God does not answer right away. 2 Kings 6:33 shows the king of Samaria praying to God in sackcloth and ashes because they were being besieged and the food had run out. Finally in disgust the king takes his anger out on

Elijah and says, “Surely this calamity is from the LORD; why should I wait for the LORD any longer.” Elijah’s response was that tomorrow the food would be plentiful in the streets, and true to the promise, even though it looked impossible, there was food in abundance. So don’t limit God’s power, willingness, or in any way look to a deficiency in God when our prayers are delayed. Those are all inappropriate responses.

### III. But God Always Has Good Reasons For Saying, “Wait.” Some Examples:

#### A. For His Greater Glory (v. 4,40; 1 Pet. 4:11)

Here are some of the reasons given in this passage for God’s delays. First, of all, God delays His answer on occasion because it brings Him far greater glory. Look at verse 4. “When Jesus heard that, He said, ‘This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.’” And He was. What a testimony Lazarus was after his resurrection. If you knew that God would be glorified far more by answering your prayer next month rather than today, would you not be willing to wait? We want God’s glory, right? I think it would make it seem worthwhile if we knew that God would be better glorified through a delay than through an immediate “Yes.” Look at verse 40. “Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?’” It’s a faith issue. When you look at delays from that perspective, it makes them easier to swallow God’s answers of “Wait.” Who wouldn’t want to wait if he knew that God’s glory would be lifted up in a much higher way? You know, in 1 Peter 4:11 it says that our desire should be “that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.” Thank the Lord for His delayed answers because you want Him to be glorified. Right? Thanking God for His delays takes faith, but it honors God. Our prayers need to be God-centered.

#### B. For Our Spiritual Profit (v. 15a)

A second reason for God’s delays is that they are always for *our* spiritual benefit. It’s not as if God’s glory and our benefit are mutually exclusive. Verse 15 says that Jesus was glad for this delay because *the delay was for their sakes*. It was for their benefit. And again, who wouldn’t want to wait if you knew that you would be receiving far more benefit by receiving the answer in one year rather than right now? If you had a choice of \$1000 in your pocket right now or \$100,000 in your pocket in one year, wouldn’t you take the latter? Some people wouldn’t. They are so immature and present oriented that all they care about is what they have in their pocket right now. But mature Christians are willing to wait if they know it is for their spiritual benefit. And all God’s delays are for our benefit.

#### C. To Increase Our Faith (v. 15b)

But verse 15 gives another reason for this delay. Jesus said, “And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, [and then here comes the third reason for His delay:] that you may believe.” This whole event was designed to strengthen their faith. If we always got

everything we asked for the moment we asked, there would be no room for faith to grow. But when God delays, our faith is stretched and exercised and made strong. And who among us does not want to grow in faith? We do! We do! Therefore we should welcome those times when God says "Wait." God is for us, and He is pleased by a life of faith far more than by a life of comfort.

#### D. To Force Us To Live by the Light He has Already Given (vv. 9-10)

Related to this increase of faith is point D: one of His purposes was to force His disciples to live by the light that He had already given to them. The metaphor may not be intuitively obvious to you, but let me try to open it up. Look at verses 9-10. "Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.'" He starts with an illustration of limited sunlight, and in verse 10 applies it to inward light. So obviously this is a spiritual metaphor. What He is saying is that no one has light all the time. They don't. Don't think you are alone on this. There are only twelve hours of daylight in which we can walk, and nobody complains about that, do they? We all know that there are times when we can't see well, but we are thankful for the twelve hours of daylight that we *do* have, and we take full advantage of those twelve hours of daylight.

In the spiritual realm, the same should be true. Our responsibility is to walk within the light that God has given rather than to freeze up during the daylight hours simply because we have stumbled at night. And what a powerful illustration this is. So many Christians refuse to step out in obedience to the Lord, simply because there are some things in the future that they don't have a clue on. And they are scared about those future periods that they are in the dark on. These disciples didn't know whether they would end up being killed. They were in the dark on that matter. And Martha and Mary didn't know what the next two days would hold. You know, if my parents had agreed to obey God's call to be missionaries only after they knew every detail of where they would get their money, what station they would be on, what dangers they could prepare for, etc., they would never have been missionaries. That would have been as ridiculous as saying that we won't make a three day journey unless we have 24 hours of light every day. No one fully knows the future. Yet despite that, we must obey God's call. We must submit to Him.

And God sometimes deliberately waits to answer our prayers for insight and guidance or other forms of help because He wants us to stop worrying about the *future* and to start obeying the light we have in the *present*. If you insist that God must always answer *now* and give insight *now* for everything that will happen in the future, you are in effect refusing to submit to His pattern of a 24 hour day. There is some light and some darkness; some things that we understand and some things that we don't. And if you fail to responsibly employ the twelve hours of light that He has already given to you, then God will have to move you further and further toward the north pole where you get less and less daylight spiritually, and more and more night until you begin to walk by faith in the light that He has already given. Hopefully that makes sense.

### E. To help us realize that our critical events are not that serious when looked at from an eternal perspective (vv. 11-14)

Verse 11 gives another reason for this delay. And that is to help us realize that our critical events are not that serious when looked at from an eternal perspective. We might think: “What could be more critical than a life and death issue?” But in verse 11 Jesus says, “Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.” He is not denying that He is dead. Look at verses 12-14. Then His disciples said, “Lord, if he sleeps he will get well.” [That’s an excuse that springs from fear of the Pharisees. They are in effect saying, “Good. Let’s not go.” Verse 13] “However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking a rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead.’” So why didn’t He say so in the first place? I believe it is because He was seeking to bring death into a realistic perspective. For the Christian, death is simply like falling asleep to this world and waking up to another world. It’s no more frightening than sleep. We tend to get stressed out by our emergencies, and pray for deliverance. And when God decides not to, we realize that we were able to make it through after all. It wasn’t the all-fired emergency that we thought it was. People will sometimes frantically call a pastor for counseling at 10 pm about a marriage that is falling apart and they feel like they absolutely have to talk right now.” Let me tell you something: that problem didn’t arise in one hour, and a wait till morning will not be the end of the world. And that’s the way God treats our prayers sometimes. Martha wanted them there lest *Lazarus* die. The disciples want to stay away lest *they* die. They have an anxiety over death. But Jesus is telling them to lay hold of their responsibilities, and they need not fear anything. Some of you knew Ron Dotzler. I remember a person asking him why he chose to live in the most dangerous part of town. And I loved his response. He said that the safest place to be is in the center of God’s will, and the most dangerous place to be is out of His will – even if you are in safe West Omaha. And sometimes God has to delay answers to prayer so that we will face up to the fact that our emergencies are not really that critical in the overall framework of things. As the Puritans said, “The duty is ours, the outcome is God’s.” We tend to worry about the outcomes, because they *seem* like emergencies.

### F. To make us consciously willing to face danger for Christ (v. 16,22)

I’ve already dealt with verse 15, but let me give another purpose in verse 16: to make us consciously willing to face danger for Christ. Thomas would have much rather had Christ speak a word of healing from a distance. He knew that Christ could do that. He had already seen Jesus heal the Nobleman’s son, the Centurion’s servant, and the SyroPhonician’s daughter from a distance – why not here? It would be a whole lot safer. Or God could have simply kept the illness away from Lazarus. But God had brought these disciples to a place where they were willing to face danger if God would be glorified. Verse 16 says, “then Thomas, who is called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with Him.’” What a cool testimony! He was willing to die with Christ. But several miles away, Martha had *also* passed the test. In verse 22 she says, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give you.” Even now.

Your waits may not be big tests of faith like hers was. Sometimes God has to give us baby steps where we learn to face the uncertainty of very difficult futures by facing the uncertainty of little delays first.

### G. To produce submission (vv. 21-22)

Another purpose was given in the verses I just read: to produce submission. God doesn't want us to get the idea that He is a cosmic bell-boy who is at our beck and call. Some of our prayers treat God like a cosmic bell-boy. That's not good. And though He delights in our prayers, He will sometimes sound out our hearts to see whether we have a demanding, petulant attitude, or whether we are submissive. And He does it sometimes by saying “No” and sometimes by delaying a “Yes,” and seeing how we respond. And here we find both the perseverance of Martha in prayer, and yet the submissiveness of willing to abide by His will. She's not demanding. “But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give You.” She's asking, but she's leaving it up to him. She's learned the lesson.

### H. To extend His kingdom among men (vv. 37,42,45)

Finally, this delay was designed to draw others to Christ and to extend His kingdom. Who among us wouldn't gladly have a prayer answered by “Wait” or even “No,” if it meant that many others would be saved? Look at verse 37. “And some of them said, ‘Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?’” Here was a huge crowd of witnesses that needed to be challenged that Jesus was the Lord of even death. But even if there had been no resurrection, this still could have been a great opportunity for witness. Out in Ethiopia, funerals were often the largest opportunities for evangelistic outreach since all the neighbors were expected by cultural etiquette to come to the funeral. And when they saw the joy, confidence in heaven, and celebration that the Christians had, it blew them away. At the pagan funerals, the family wailed without hope; they cut themselves with knives and were in despair. Pagan funerals were horrible events to witness since people did not have hope for eternity. And when they saw that the Christians did not fear death, and they had supernatural joy, and had total confidence they had that they would go to heaven, many of those who came to Christian funerals believed. They wanted to have what those Christians had.

Look at the purpose for Christ's prayer and miracle in verse 42: “And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me” - emphasis on “because of the people who are standing by I said this, *that they may believe...*” Look at verse 45. “Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, *believed in Him.*”

Who of you would not gladly receive a “Wait” to your prayers if your loved ones and friends would come to Christ and experience eternal life? I know I would.

I hope this sermon has been an encouragement not to get frustrated with God when on occasion He is slow in answering your prayers. He has His reasons, and His reasons are good. He wants us to pray, and to persevere in praying. But may we glory in the fact that His answers to our prayers are perfect. Amen.