

GOD'S STRANGE WAYS

by Ray C. Stedman

I want to talk this morning about the hardest problem to handle in the Christian life. It would be interesting to poll the congregation here as to what you think that would be. Your answer might be different than mine. For me, the hardest problem I have to handle as a Christian is what to do when God does not do what I have been taught to expect him to do; when God gets out of line and does not act the way I think he ought. What do I do about that?

We have an occasion like that in the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, found in the 11th chapter of the Gospel of John. We are going to be looking at the introduction to that, not the whole story, this morning. Apart from his own resurrection, this, without doubt, is the greatest of our Lord's miracles. I hope you have noticed that John's witness is built around three great miracles of our Lord. There was, first, in Chapter 5, the healing of the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda; then, the opening of the eyes of the man born blind, recorded in Chapter 9; and now, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, recorded here in Chapter 11.

With each one of these miracles, two remarkable things happen. First, according to the record, when each of these "signs," as John calls them, takes place, many "believe on Jesus." Many are convinced that he does indeed fulfill the predicted miracles and wonders the Messiah would do when he came; he fulfills passages in the prophets that predict the opening of the eyes of the blind, the healing of the lame, and the raising from the dead. But, at the same time, with each of these signs the opposition against Jesus sharpens; it grows harsher and more belligerent, more open in its attempt to silence him; and each time he feels a deeper threat from the powers that were arrayed against him.

This, of course, is always what happens when the gospel strikes. As the Apostle Paul himself said about his own preaching, it is an "aroma of life unto life and of death unto death," {2 Cor 2:16 RSV}. Some people are set free, some are delivered, some are healed, some are brought out of bondage to habits they could not break and are freed; while others are resentful, angry and resistant; they oppose and fight the gospel and try every way they can to suppress the delivering word of the truth. We are seeing this taking place in our society today.

John introduces this last of the great miracles of Jesus in Chapter 11 in these words:

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it." {John 11:1-4 RSV}

In those opening words, John is giving us certain suggestive insights into the nature of this family of Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus. Notice how he puts it: this was "the village of Mary and her sister Martha." In Luke's account of a visit by Jesus to this home in Bethany he says that Mary had a sister named Martha "who received Jesus into her house" -- Martha's house {Luke 10:38}. That is very suggestive. It indicates, as this makes clear, that the village belonged to Mary, but the house belonged to Martha.

This tells us something about these women. Martha was the housekeeper. She loved domestic work and had a reputation as a good housekeeper. She was a forthright, frank woman who spoke her mind. Mary, on the other hand, was more shy, more retiring, more mystical, more deeply understanding of truth. As John tells us here about her, this is the same Mary who anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair. That incident does not take place until the next chapter; John is anticipating it here because he wants us to understand which of the various Marys around Jesus this truly was. But what it indicates, of course, was the love of Mary for Jesus. She deeply loved him and expressed that love in this beautiful way. Yet when these

two sisters, upon the death of their dear brother Lazarus, send the message to Jesus, what they stress is how much Jesus loved Lazarus: "He whom you love is now ill." What John is trying to show us is that this home in Bethany, on the other side of the Mount of Olives from Jerusalem, was a love-filled home. That is the dominant note of this whole scene: a home filled with love. Martha loved Jesus; Mary loved Jesus; Lazarus loved Jesus; Jesus loved them; they loved each other. This was a home filled with love, therefore it was one of the most welcome havens for our Lord during his troubled earthly lifetime.

I believe there is nothing more beautiful on earth than a love-filled home. It is God's masterpiece. That is what every home should strive to be. When that is true of a home it is the most beautiful sight there is. There is nothing more remarkable, more delightful, more pleasant, more encouraging and strengthening than a love-filled home. This is what John presents to us here.

Remember that Jesus had left Jerusalem and had gone to the Jordan River, about a two-day journey from the city. That was where John the Baptist had first begun his ministry. If you have been to Israel, you could locate the spot, just about where the Allenby Bridge, which ties Jordan and Israel together, is located. When the message reached Jesus, this was his remarkable response: "This illness is not unto death, but it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it." The remarkable thing about that is, if you carefully check out the schedule of timing of this event, Lazarus was already dead when the message reached Jesus. It took two days for the messenger to get to the Jordan, so when Jesus returned to Bethany, Lazarus had been dead four days. It is difficult for us to believe that Jesus did not know that because of the insight that the Spirit of God had given him on numerous occasions. But he sees this as a signal from the Father that something tremendous is going to happen in connection with it, thus he sent back this remarkable word, "This illness is not unto death."

Notice also the answer that this response of Jesus gives to the claim by many today that sickness is never the will of God for a believer; that it is wrong to be sick, that it is due to lack of faith, some hidden sin or judgment from God. We have had people in this congregation who have mistakenly taken that position. I have been in sick rooms where someone was dying, and his death was made miserable, and much less than it could have been, because he was tormented by the idea that sickness was a sign of lack of faith on his part. But notice how Jesus answers that in the words, "This illness is for the glory of God. That is unmistakable: "It is for the glory of God." It was not a sign of some sin on Lazarus' part, or lack of faith on the part of Mary and Martha or Lazarus. It was intended, it was sent, for the glory of God. That is not saying, of course, that there is no such thing as sickness that results from sin. Other passages indicate that some sickness does result from sin. But we must never take the position that all illness is a sign of unbelief and a lack of faith. That is an unscriptural, a very dangerous and hurtful position to take. Here the Lord Jesus clearly states that an illness occurred that would result in the glory of God.

In Verses 5-6 we get the real shocker here, however:

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So [therefore] when he heard that he was ill, {John 11:5-6a RSV}

He immediately said to the disciples, "Let's rush over and see him before he dies!" No. it does not say that:

... he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. {John 11:6b RSV}

That is what is incredible to us. It is a tough thing to believe that Jesus deliberately waited. We are so used to critical illness being a signal for immediate action -- mourning sirens, flashing red lights, get him to the hospital -- that it seems incredible that Jesus, knowing that his dear friend was ill, or in this case dead, nevertheless stayed right where he was for two more days. Somebody may well say, "If he knew Lazarus was dead why would he hurry? There was nothing he could do." But remember Mary and Martha's hearts were breaking. This was a dearly loved brother, a younger brother evidently, and his death as a young man was a grievous loss to them. Jesus' presence with them would have been a tremendous comfort even though he never did a thing about raising Lazarus from the dead. Yet, knowing that they needed him there to comfort them, knowing that they longed to have him there to the point that they sent a messenger to let him know the situation, he deliberately remained two days longer at the place where he was.

Why? That is the question we all ask. Why? Well, we ought to believe what John tells us. John says, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Therefore, because he loved them, he stayed two days longer where he was." That is the tough thing to handle. When you have gone to God for help which you feel you desperately need, your heart is breaking over something and you need God to intervene, but nothing happens, the heavens are silent, there is no word at all, that is what is tough. Has that ever happened to you? It has happened to me several times. When that does happen, we always interpret God's delays as God's denials. We say, "He didn't answer my prayer. Prayer doesn't work. What's the use? I've tried it. It doesn't work." This is the usual reaction. With shameful heart, I have to admit that I have reacted the same way. But what this is telling us is that a delay in answer like that is not a sign of God's indifference or his failure to hear. It is a sign of his love. The delay will help us. It will not hurt us. It will make us stronger. So Jesus deliberately delayed because he loved them and knew this would strengthen their faith as they learned the ultimate outcome when God would work.

That is a hard lesson to learn. I have struggled over this many times myself, but it is true. A very wise Christian has written about it this way:

Loneliness, loss, pain, sorrow: these are disciplines; they are God's gifts to drive us to his very heart, to increase our capacity for him, to sharpen our sensitivities and understanding, to temper our spiritual lives so that they may become channels of his mercy to others and so bear fruit for his Kingdom. But these disciplines must be seized upon and used, not thwarted. They must not be seen as excuses for living in the shadows of half-lives, but as messengers, however painful, to bring our souls into vital contact with the Living God that our lives may be filled to overflowing with himself in ways that may perhaps be impossible to those who know less of life's darkness.

Those wise words thoroughly incorporate what this lesson is teaching.

Think of the reaction in Bethany as the messenger returned with the news that when he told Jesus that Lazarus was ill, Jesus had said, "This illness is not unto death." Yet when the messenger got back with that message Lazarus had already been dead for two days. What do you think the reaction of his sisters was? How do you think they felt? Not only would there be the heartache caused by the loss of their dear brother, but doubt as to the power and accuracy of Jesus would fill their minds and hearts. Obviously he was mistaken; the illness had already resulted in death. Doubt as to his capacity, his ability, his position must have filled and clouded their minds and hearts so as to drive them close to despair.

But then, according to the account, two days later Jesus acts, and it is the disciples' turn this time to be surprised.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go into Judea again." And the disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If any one walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if any one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." {John 11:7-10 RSV}

Our Lord often used these common proverbs of the day, these aphorisms that were common property, in situations like this. Here he picks up a common saying and answers with this word.

In these verses, from 10 to 16, we have a deliberate contrast drawn between two views of first, danger, and then, death. Here the disciples are baffled by our Lord's actions. They had just left Judea, probably a week or so before, driven out, in their eyes, because of the fear that the Jews were about to put Jesus to death. They must have felt a sense of relief to get out of the city, with all of its intrigue and danger, when any moment all of them could be dragged before the authorities and put to death. They knew that the enemies of Jesus were hot in that intent, so for Jesus to leave must have relieved them. They must have seen it as a prudent action to avoid the fear of being put to death. But now our Lord turns around and says, "Let's go back." That totally baffles them.

Have you noticed the many times in the gospels when Jesus confounds his disciples? They do not understand

his actions. These are those hard moments when God does things we do not understand. We cannot figure them out. They are beyond us. They baffle us and discourage us at times. Yet what they reveal is how little we understand. It is God who is the realist. He never deceives himself. He always acts in perfect accord with what the situation demands. He does not suffer from illusions and fantasies like we do. He does not pursue hopeless aims like we do. He acts in line with reality.

This reveals some wonderful things about the way God thinks:

First, his word here reveals that when he left Judea it was not because of fear. Had he left because of fear he would never be going back now because conditions were even worse. Why, then, did he leave? It was clearly a question of timing. Our Lord himself was in charge of the events that led to his death.

He is orchestrating this whole procedure. He is, if I may use a very crude analogy, like a cook barbecuing steaks. First, he puts them on the fire for awhile until the fat begins to melt and run down. Then the flames leap up and get too hot and he moves the steaks back for a bit. When the fire dies down he puts them back on again. That is what Jesus is doing with himself in this case. He removes himself from the scene because his presence is stirring up antagonism before the time. Jesus knew that God had appointed an hour when he would die. He knew that hour was to be the Passover, the great feast of Israel, when he would become "the Lamb of God, slain from the foundation of the world for the sins of all the world," {Rev 13:8}. He was moving the opposition, stimulating them by his presence at times to greater opposition and then moving away for awhile before coming back again, keeping the fire hot. Therefore it is clear that it is not fear that drives him or motivates him at all. It is a question of timing.

What does Jesus mean when he says, "Are there not twelve hours in the day?" He is referring again to the appointed time of God. There are indeed twelve hours in the day. Our clock has only twelve numbers on it -- not that there are only twelve hours in the day; we know there are twenty-four, twice twelve, but every clock records only twelve hours. Why? Because that is all the time we have to be awake in; the rest we usually spend sleeping or resting. But there are twelve hours appointed for activity.

This wonderful symbol employed by our Lord applies to every one of us. God has appointed a time for each of us, and if we are walking in the light, in the place of his appointment, doing what he sent us to do, there is nothing can shorten it or nothing we do can lengthen it. It is an appointed time for each of us. Scripture everywhere says this. "Our times are in his hands" {cf, Psa 31:15}, the psalmist says, "Help us to so number our days that we shall walk in ways that please the Lord," {cf, Psa 90:12}. When Jesus says, "There are twelve hours in the day," he is saying, "That is true of me. I am walking in God's appointed time. I have nothing to fear. The only danger I have is to walk out of the light: "He that walks in the darkness stumbles."

You can live a shorter life than you ordinarily would have. You can shorten your life by disobedience, by walking in disregard of what God has sent you to be and to do. Do you remember the first promise of the Bible is in connection with that? "Honor your father and mother that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you," {Exod 20:12 RSV}. There is a clear implication that if you fail to learn the lessons of the past that come to you from those who have lived before you, you shorten your time on earth. "He that walks in the light does not need to fear, but he that walks in darkness stumbles because the light is not in him."

In Verses 11-16 we have the view of Jesus and the contrasting views of the disciples, on death:

Thus he spoke, and then he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him out of sleep." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead; and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." {John 11:11-16 RSV}

... the loyal unbelief of Thomas! Notice what Jesus is saying here. When we stand beside a loved one's grave

and our heart cries out, "Why?," heaven's answer is, "What? What is death?" According to Jesus, death is merely a form of sleep. There is nothing final, nothing tragic about it. It is an introduction to a greater experience than ever for our loved one. It is we who say death is a final farewell, a leap into mystery and darkness and silence, leaving us lonely and bereft to wander our way alone. But Jesus says, "No, it is a sleep."

I remember years ago reading a sermon by Peter Marshall, when he was Chaplain to the United States Senate. He told of a boy of 12 who knew he was dying. The boy asked his father, "What is it like to die?" His father said to him, "Son, do you remember when you were little how you used to come and sit on my lap in the big chair in the living room? I would tell you a story, read you a book or sing you a song and you would go to sleep in my arms, and when you woke up you were in your own bed. That is the way death is." When you wake you are not where you were. You are in a place of security and safety and beauty and rest. That, Jesus declares, is what death is. All through the account of the gospels we get this, so that even the apostles pick it up later and say, "Them that sleep in Jesus will Christ bring with him when he comes," {cf, 1 Th 4:14}.

Notice again that Jesus says he was glad he was not there when Lazarus died, "for the sake of the disciples." He delayed his going for Mary and Martha's sake in order that their faith might be strengthened by that delay. Though they did not understand it, though they must have been filled with doubt and questions because of it, it was better for them to wait through the anxious hours until God would do his full and complete work. That is what he says to us, too, as he said to these disciples, "It is better for you that I did not go. For your sake I did not go."

This is the true lesson of these opening verses. I want to tell you there have been many times when I have cried out to God for help and said, "Things are so bad it can't get any worse. Lord, do something. Help us." But no answer came. That is hard. It is hard to believe. It is hard to wait. But I am gradually learning that that is never the end of the story, gradually learning what God said so clearly through the prophet Isaiah, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways are not your ways," {cf, Isa 55:8}. That is what is so difficult. God is sovereign. He is not a man that he should act like we act. There are dimensions of the problems which he sees that we do not remotely imagine. There are possibilities and opportunities in every situation that we cannot conceive of. So we must wait and quietly trust, knowing that he is working out something.

Jesus' words were not wrong, though they must have thought, "Surely he is wrong; he said this illness is not unto death and Lazarus is dead." But Jesus was right, as we will go on to see next Sunday in that wonderful account. I think oftentimes my faith is little better than Thomas' here: "Let us go too so we can die with him." Glum and hopeless, clinging to the end, saying, "I'm not going to give up; I'm not going to stop being a Christian; I don't understand it, and I don't think anything good is going to come of it," despite what Jesus has said. There is a disregard of his word here. Thomas always had trouble with that. He is called here, remarkably, and in other places, "Thomas, called the Twin." ("Didymus," is the Hebrew; it means "the twin.") Evidently Thomas was one of twin boys. But the interesting thing is his twin never appears in Scripture. To the question, "Where was the other boy?" a wise commentator has replied, "Look in the mirror. There is where you might find him."

It is true, isn't it? This is our faith so many times. We cannot believe that God is not going to work according to the logic of the situation as we understand it. The incredible arrogance of the human mind, including my own, that thinks it knows more than the mighty, infinite mind of God never fails to amaze me. But everywhere Scripture drives us back to this: believe his word. Trust his word. It will not fail. It will not leave us in the lurch at last. We cannot understand the delays, but we must never question God's ways or lose faith in his word.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this incident that finds us right there in the same place so many times. Thank you for your word to strengthen our faith, that makes us trust you and not lean to our own understanding. Deliver us from that, Lord. Make us to be godly men and women who walk in the light, that we may not stumble. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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