

LORD, YOU'RE LATE! (Jn. 11:21)

Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.

Would you ever say to the Lord, “Lord, You’re late! I’ve been waiting for You, where have You been?” ... Would you dare say that to Him? ... Have you ever felt like saying it to Him?

This is a very touching account of a grieving sister whose words spilled out before the Master. ... “Lord, if You would have been here sooner, this would not have happened. I’d still have my brother”. Even though Martha loved the Lord, her faith had been dealt a great blow.

The Lord Jesus had entered the small town of Bethany, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, on the eastern slopes of Mount of Olives, where the two sisters and a brother lived, - Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. They were especially close friends of the Saviour, and the door of their home was always open to Him. We met them previously when Jesus visited Jerusalem, **Lk. 10:38** Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. ³⁹ And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word. ⁴⁰ But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me. ⁴¹ And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: ⁴² But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her. ... This was a real family, - the older sister took charge of feeding their Guest, the younger sister kept Him company, and their brother was probably out working.

Change is part of life though, and sadly the family of three became a family of two. It happens, sometimes after a long illness, but sometimes very suddenly ... and that is what seems to have happened here. Most likely, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were young, but age is no guarantee against sickness and death. The two sisters were understandably devastated and distressed for losing their brother. They had supported each other and any problems which came along, all three faced them together. Because their parents are not mentioned, it is highly probable they had already died so in this male-dominated society, Lazarus was the ‘man’ of the house ... but now he had died too. ... Have you ever been ‘thrown’ into fearful circumstances out of which you could see no way of being set free? ... Like Mary and Martha and Lazarus, you have led an ordinary life ... simply getting on with all that is set before you ... until something calamitous and beyond your control enters without warning.

As a Christian, you look to God and to His Word to find answers. You try to apply for example the words of Peter, to cast all your cares upon God since His Word assures you He cares for you (I Peter 5:7) ... or the words of the Lord Jesus, for all who are heavy laden to come to Him and He will give you rest (Mt. 11:28). ... But, like Martha, even with Jesus literally standing beside her, the heartache remained very real, and the burden so incredibly formidable.

Mary and Martha had sent a message to Jesus to ‘get here quick’ ... and in the meantime, all the friends and neighbours visited their home, to comfort them concerning their brother (v.19). However, it was to no effect ... and even *when* Jesus did eventually arrive after four days, - which must have felt like a lifetime for the two sisters, - there was no immediate relief for Lazarus was still in the tomb. In fact, Jesus wept with them (v.35) ... Was there nothing He could do?!

What difference does belonging to Christ make in such circumstances? ... Does it make any difference?! How? ... Let’s look at it personally and plainly.

First, Martha had **THE PRESENCE OF JESUS** with her. He would have been weary with His various travels. He would have been weighed down with what lay before Him in Jerusalem and yet, no matter how busy He was, or how much He had on His mind, He was with Martha in the graveyard in Bethany.

Four days earlier Lazarus had been ill, and his sickness deteriorated. Mary and Martha knew his condition was worsening by the hour ... *if only Jesus was here, Lazarus would be healed and alive!* ... They sent their message, Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick (v.3) ... Lord, get here as quickly as you can! ... But Jesus remained where He was for another four days! ... “Does Jesus care? ... Oh yes, He cares [*for*] His heart is touched with my grief”. ... Why then did He not come quicker? ... What was He doing for four days? ... Surely there was nothing more important than answering the pleading of Mary and Martha concerning their loved one!

It is natural for us to want the priority. We might say there are always those who ‘have it’ worse than us ... but really what we mean is for Jesus to come and meet our needs instantly, and not a moment later. We want Jesus to answer *now!*

Lazarus had died ... and Jesus wasn’t there. Lazarus had been embalmed ... and Jesus was nowhere to be seen. Lazarus had died and was buried and lying in a tomb for four days ... and *still* Jesus was not there! Where is He? ... Why didn’t He hurry? Why did He go back into Judea *again* (v.7), we don’t understand! ...

What was more important in Judea than being in Bethany with Mary and Martha?! ... “Does Jesus care when my way is dark ... Does He care enough to be near?” In the midst of it all, “I know He cares ... I know my Saviour cares”. ... And ‘deep down’, Mary and Martha knew it too.

How do we know He cares? We know He cares because we belong to His family. ... We know He cares for the Bible tells us He will never leave us nor forsake us, even when we are having to walk through ‘the valley of the shadow of death’, He is with us, - His rod and His staff upholding, supporting, and keeping us (Ps. 23:4). ... **The presence of Jesus** ... and we also see **THE PROMISE OF JESUS**. ... He can neither break His Word nor change His mind. ... We don’t deserve His promises, or His grace, and we don’t deserve to be His children ... but in the same way, He chose you and me as He chose Mary, and Martha, and Lazarus simply because He loved them (v.5).

He loved them with an ἀγάπη love which means His love knew no bounds ... and whether He had stayed away four days or forty days is of no consequence for He came as He promised because He loved them. ... Why is the Lord Jesus Christ coming back for His people? He is coming back for His people, - sanctified and cleansed, - to one day present them as His glorious Bride before His Father, holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:27).

God’s thoughts are not always our thoughts. His ways are not always our ways (Is. 55:8). He does not always work in ways we understand but He is the Creator, we are His creation, and He works all things out ultimately for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28). ... That is His *promise* for He performeth the thing that is appointed for me: and many such things are with him ... *For* he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold (Job 23:14,10).

And Martha had to be reminded God is greater than all our problems, and greater than all our questions. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. There is nothing outside of His will or plan, and His promise to Martha was Thy brother shall rise again (v.23) ... and rise again He did! Jesus promised it, and He keeps His promises!

Understandably though, heartbroken Martha remained confused, ²⁴ Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. ... But Jesus, until then, the body of my beloved brother will decay in the tomb. She had the blessed hope, - in accordance with the Old Testament promises, - there

was a day coming when death could not hold Lazarus, and he would be raised ... but the present reality was that in the tomb her brother lay dead.

The facts cannot be ignored. They cannot be swept away as if they are not there. Reality is real! However, so are the promises of God. When God gives you His word, He will never break it and it is as sure as if it has already happened, regardless of your circumstances. ... Of course, we are only human, and trusting God is not about ignoring our feelings, nor pretending everything is okay when it is not, but trusting God, nevertheless, is having confidence in Him no matter what, as the hymn writer explains, "What though the way be lonely, and dark the shadows fall, I know where'er He leadeth, my Father planned it all". ... There is not a bird that falls out of the sky without His approval ... and you are of far more value!

But Jesus, I'm standing here at the tomb of my beloved brother ... My heart is broken. ... Yes, Martha, and Jesus knew it for He wept with you (v.35). ... But Jesus, she continues, You are four days late, I thought you would have been here sooner, and healed him. Where in God's Word are Christians told we shall not have to endure the sufferings of this world? On the contrary, we are told, ¹ *Cor. 10:13* There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man. ... Christians and non-Christians suffer the same illnesses and conditions. Being a Christian does not keep you sheltered from afflictions, but [*however!*] God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it ... That is His promise for us to receive.

Because God loves you, you can speak to Him about the good and the bad in your life. We have our feelings and emotions and fears ... and He knows all about them, just as He knew how deeply Martha and Mary were grieving. ... Notice here how Jesus was not disappointed or angry with Martha for how she felt because it is only natural to mourn for a loved one, ... but into her situation He brought relief, ²⁵ Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: ²⁶ And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this? ²⁷ She saith unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God.

Our trust in God outstrips anything this world can heap upon us. He cares for you in your hurts and fears, as He gently He pours upon you the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness (*Is. 61:3*).

And do you see what Martha did? ³⁰ Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him ... She did not know exactly when He was coming, but she knew He would, and He did. She did not know the hour of His coming, whether it would be in the morning, or the noon, or the evening, but she knew he would certainly come ... and she was expecting Him.

And Jesus arrived, and went to the tomb, - He knew exactly where to go, - and He called out Lazarus's name (v.43) ... If Jesus had simply called out "come forth", every tomb and every grave would have been emptied ... but Jesus specifically called Lazarus' name, Lazarus, come forth. ⁴⁴ And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go.

The *presence of Christ*, the *promise of Christ* ... **THE POWER OF CHRIST** ... Jesus was four days late, but He was still on time for all the circumstances were subject to Him.

There are many things in life we do not understand, one of them is, why do God's people suffer? ... And yet, being a Christian, we are in this fallen world and we are subject to its constraints as long as we are here ... but there is coming the day when the Lord will lift us out of it, and we shall leave the old body behind and He will clothe us with a new body which will never decay ... and He will wipe away all tears from *four* eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain (Rev. 21:4).

Four days late ... Not to the One in Whose sight a thousand years is but as yesterday when it is past (Ps. 90:4)! He never leaves any of His people, not even for a second, as another hymn writer has recently written,

When He's four days late and all hope is gone
 Lord, we don't understand why You've waited so long
 But His way is God's way, not yours or mine
 And isn't it great, when He's four days late
 He's still on time.