

March 22, 2026 – John 11:1-45

*“Lord, he whom You love is ill.”* It's one of the simplest prayers in all of Scripture. No long explanation. No elaborate theology. No attempt to control the outcome. Just a statement. A plea for help. *“Lord, he whom You love is ill.”*

Mary and Martha send this message to Jesus about their brother Lazarus. They don't need to convince Jesus to care. They assume that He already does. They don't need to argue their case. They simply lay the need before Him. The one whom You love is suffering. Please come and help.

That's exactly what Christians do. When someone we love is sick, we pray. When tragedy strikes, we pray. When death looms, we pray. Often, our prayers sound very much like theirs. Not polished. Not complicated. Just honest.

*“Lord, my child is hurting.” “Lord, my friend is in danger.” “Lord, my spouse is suffering.” “Lord, he whom You love is ill.”* We pray this way because we believe two things. First, that Jesus loves the one we're praying for. And second, that Jesus has the power to do something about it. Mary and Martha believed both. That's why they sent for Him.

But what they expected next is what we also expect. We expect Jesus to come right away. We expect Him to act immediately. We expect that his love will move Him to urgency.

But that's not what happens. *“When Jesus heard it, He said, ‘This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God.’ ... So, when He heard that Lazarus was ill, He stayed two days longer in the place where He was.”* He stayed. He intentionally delayed leaving. And Lazarus died.

And this is where Mary and Martha's faith is tested. Because everything Mary and Martha believed about Jesus was true. He did love Lazarus. He did have the power to heal him. He could have spoken a word from a distance, and Lazarus would have recovered. But He didn't.

And we know what that's like. We pray. We ask. We trust. And yet the illness worsens. The situation deteriorates. The outcome we feared arrives anyway. We say, *“Lord, he whom You love is ill.”* And then we watch as things don't get any better. Sometimes, they get worse. Sometimes, they even end in death.

And then we're left with the same words that Mary and Martha speak when Jesus finally arrives: *“Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”* That's not just grief speaking. That's confusion mixed with faith. It's an accusation mixed with trust.

*“Lord, I know who You are. I know what You can do. So why didn't You do it?”* Thankfully, Mary and Martha aren't rebuked for saying this. I say 'thankfully' because their words are recorded for us because they're our words too. *“Lord, if You had acted sooner...” “Lord, if You had answered differently...” “Lord, if You had been here...”*

The thing is, Jesus wasn't absent. His delay wasn't neglect or indifference or reflecting a lack of love. In fact, the text tells us explicitly: *“Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So... He stayed.”* He delayed leaving specifically because he loved them.

And, from the world's perspective, that's a really strange way to show that you love someone. It's certainly not how we normally think love should work. To us, love means you intervene immediate. You provide the quickest relief that you can. Love means you prevent pain.

But Jesus operates with a completely different point of view. He says, *“This illness does not lead to death.”* And yet Lazarus dies. So what does He mean?

Well, He means that death will not be the final outcome. Death won't have the last word here. What looks like the end is not the end. What appears to be failure is actually going to reveal the glory of God.

By the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been in the tomb four days. The decay of his body has begun. Martha even warns Jesus about the smell. This is no near-death recovery story. This is real, ugly, stinking death. The kind we hide away in a tomb, behind a stone, because we don't want to see it, smell it, or go anywhere near it.

But in the face of death, Jesus speaks one of the most important declarations in all of Scripture: *“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die.”*

Jesus has indeed answered Mary and Martha’s prayer. And it’s certainly not the answer they expected. But it is definitely the answer they needed. They had asked for healing. But Jesus gives resurrection. They had hoped for the prevention of death. But Jesus reveals His power over death itself.

Because even if Jesus had come immediately and healed Lazarus, Lazarus still would have died someday. That healing would have only delayed the inevitable.

But what Jesus comes to this earth to give is something greater. He comes to destroy death. He comes to be the Resurrection. Not just for Lazarus, but for all who believe in Him. Including you and me.

Which is why, ultimately, no prayer of a Christian leads to death. It may seem like it does. From our vantage point, we see sickness, age, loss, and the grave. We experience the pain of waiting, the confusion of delay, and the sorrow of death.

But Jesus says, *“This illness does not lead to death.”* Because for those who are in Him, death is no longer the end. It’s not the final destination. *“Though he die, yet shall he live.”* That’s a whole new way of looking at the world. A whole new way of seeing life and death. It’s a new reality, grounded in what Jesus Himself is about to do.

Because the raising of Lazarus is not the final victory. It’s a sign. A preview. A foreshadowing. Not long after this, Jesus Himself will be laid in a tomb. And no one will come to call Him out of that tomb. He will bear death fully. He will enter it completely.

And then, on the third day, He will rise. By His own authority. By His own power. He doesn’t need someone to call him out of the grave, because he is the Resurrection and the Life.

That’s why He delays for Lazarus. That’s why He allows death to occur. So that when He acts, He doesn’t merely treat symptoms. He conquers the disease itself: sin, death, and the grave.

And I hope, maybe, this changes how you pray. Because when you pray, *“Lord, he whom You love is ill,”* you’re not praying to a distant or indifferent God. You are praying to the One who has already entered death and come out alive and victorious on the other side.

You are praying to the One who wept at the tomb of Lazarus. The shortest verse in the Bible, *“Jesus wept,”* shows that His delay doesn’t mean He’s unmoved. He feels the weight of death. He grieves the curse of death upon His creation.

But He doesn’t weep as one who is powerless. He weeps as one who is about to act. He cries, *“Lazarus, come out.”* And the dead man comes out.

That’s where your prayers are anchored. Not in the hope that Jesus will always act according to your preferred timeline. Not in the assumption that suffering will always be removed immediately. But in the certainty that Jesus has already secured the final outcome.

Life. Even when you must wait. Even when the situation gets worse. Even when death comes. You wait in the promise that though we die, yet shall we live.

Because the voice that called Lazarus out of the tomb is the same voice that will call you, and all the dead, on the last day: *“Come out.”* And you will. Body and soul reunited. Death undone. Grave defeated.

So yes, we still pray as Mary and Martha did: *“Lord, he whom You love is ill.”* We bring our requests. We lay them before Him. We ask for healing, for help, for intervention.

And sometimes He grants those requests immediately. And sometimes... He doesn’t. Sometimes He delays. Sometimes He allows us to walk through suffering and even death. But never, never, does He abandon His promise: *“This illness does not lead to death.”*

Because He is the Resurrection and the Life. And that means that for all who believe in Him, death is not the end of the story. It’s the doorway to the life He’s already won. Amen.