

The Blessing of Mercy Withheld

By David Harrell

Bible Text: John 11:1-16
Preached on: Sunday, November 2, 2014

Will you take your Bibles and turn to John's Gospel, chapter 11. It is my joy to minister the word of God to you once again. I certainly do not feel equal to the task. Like Paul, I come before you in weakness and much fear and trembling as I open up the word of the living God to you and help you understand better the unsearchable riches of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This morning I wish to speak to you about "The Blessings of Mercy Withheld" here in the introduction of the story of Lazarus and his resurrection. Before we look at the text, I might say that different texts require different approaches for the Bible expositor. Some passages are very technical and they require great exegetical precision in order to do justice to the rich doctrine that God is revealing in his word. Other passages involve intense application in order to be faithful to the imperatives that God has given us. Then there are others that require much historical context in order to fully grasp the intended meaning and lots of times there are passages that require all of those things. But then there are some passages that seem to fall into a category all of their own and many times they are an historical narrative such as we have before us today. Suddenly you will find a word or a phrase that just stops you in your tracks. It's like walking along a mountain pathway and down in the leaves and the rocks you see something glitter and you bend down and pick it up and it's a big nugget of gold. Sometimes there are passages like that where there is some unexpected mysterious truth that just suddenly arrests your attention and causes you to think deeply about some incredible thing that God is saying.

Now, the primary purpose of this overall story is to glorify the Father and the Son through this man's resurrection from the dead and certainly that will be the dominant theme that we will look at over the course of the next few Sundays but within this narrative, we also discover some other unexpected nuggets of gold that just cause us to get lost in wonder and praise. If you have experienced some profound sorrow, some deep suffering in your life in the past, the kind that has caused you, frankly, to just ask God to just remove you from this life, you will find yourself identifying with and rejoicing in what the apostle tells us here today. If you are in the midst of some grievous situation right now, some great trial, you're going to find this text to be of enormous encouragement to you and if you really know nothing of bone-crushing, heart-wrenching anguish of soul, if you don't know that feeling of utter helplessness, of deep mourning and grief where you're on the edge of death itself, then listen very closely, learn well because your day is coming. Only a fool would refuse education in survival skills if he knew that one day his life would depend upon it so for you this is basic training. Listen well, especially you young people. Here we will learn much about how God works in the lives of his own, especially in the context of intense suffering. In fact, we are going to learn more of the idea of having God temporarily withhold mercy in a person's life.

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Many times the relief just doesn't come, right? The disease doesn't end. The sorrows don't stop and in our misery and grief, we can begin to doubt the goodness of God. We can begin to doubt his love and our faith grows weak, our perspectives get distorted and our heart begins to demand answers. We've all been there. "God, why are you withholding mercy? Why the suffering?" You know, many times the relief doesn't come until the rest we experience in glory. Ah, but it will come in that transformation of death. Sometimes it comes before. Well, there are at least two reasons that emerge from this text that we want to look at this morning. One reason why the Lord withholds mercy is that God might be glorified. Secondly, that our faith might be strengthened.

So, let's think of this as we approach this. Remember the context here: Jesus is somewhere beyond the Jordan River where he has gone to escape the murderous wrath and hostility of the Jews at Jerusalem that occurred at the Feast of Dedication in late December and he has actually returned to a place where he was baptized some three years earlier, a region where he has been speaking many parables; he has been training; he has been preparing the 12 for his death and departure and their consequent responsibilities and thus the story of raising Lazarus that we have here before us is going to take place some time in February, about 6-8 weeks before the Passion Week, before the Lord goes to the cross. Now, it's important to understand that by going to this little village of Bethany which is just two miles on the outskirts of Jerusalem, Jesus is intentionally planning on showing the Jewish nation one final, undeniable, thoroughly credible miracle for two primary purposes: one to give them one more incontrovertible proof of his Messianic claims and then secondly, to prepare the nation for his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We will learn more of this in days to come. By the way, after he raises Lazarus from the dead, he's going to retire to a tiny village called Ephraim where he will remain in seclusion with the other 12 for a few quiet weeks until they go up together for the Passover feast at which time he will "finish the work of him who had sent him," he will go to the cross.

So let's look closely at the text here and see what the Spirit of God has for us. Beginning in verse 1 of chapter 11, "Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha." Lazarus is a shortened version of the Hebrew name Eliezer which means "helped by God" and certainly, he is about to be helped by God in a miraculous way and the text reminds us here that this is going to occur in Bethany, again, a little village on the east side of the Mount of Olives about two miles out of Jerusalem. I've been there. It's an interesting little place even to this day. It's on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem.

John goes on to explain in verse 2, "It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick." This is the Mary of Luke 10 pictured seated at the feet of Jesus to hear his word. Remember, she

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recognized her need to worship and cultivate her spiritual life unlike her sister, Martha, whom the Lord reproved for being too distracted and worried and bothered about "many things" with respect to Christian service and domestic duties and so forth that were really nothing more than issues of the flesh, not of the spirit; things that were unnecessary and, frankly, eternally inconsequential, a snare that continues to trap many people, certainly many women who even serve in the church whose priorities are out of balance, women who will spend much time serving the Lord in the church but yet see no need to cultivate the garden of their heart through private worship and availing themselves of discipleship opportunities and so forth.

Now, that John would say that this was the home of Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair indicates that she was very well known among the early believers. John will not actually recount that story until chapter 12, however, we must remember that his Gospel was written some 50 years after he witnessed Jesus' earthly ministry. Moreover, the saints would have been very familiar with the anointing story from the synoptic Gospels of Matthew and Mark. So verse 3 says, "So the sisters sent word to Him," that means that they sent some unnamed messenger to find Jesus and this person said, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick." The term "sick" in the original language is a fascinating term in that it speaks of a kind of sickness that has with it the idea of just total weakness and helplessness and impotence when a person is on the very verge of death. It's that kind of sickness. Obviously we can see from this verse that Jesus had a special love for this family and these sisters now appeal to the Lord's love and here, by the way, we are also reminded that even those the Lord loves are not immune from severe illness and death.

Verse 4, "But when Jesus heard this, He said, 'This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it.'" Friends, here we discover an amazing truth: God has ordained our afflictions, 1. that he might be glorified, that God might be glorified. So let's look at this. Now, when I say that God might be glorified and what this text is saying here, it's not so much that he might be praised even though that is part of it but it's more the idea that his glory will be put on display, that his glory will be manifested, it will be revealed. So God has ordained this dreadful disease in order to somehow disclose himself through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Later, we see how the Father will glorify the Son through the resurrection of Lazarus and the Son will continue to glorify the Father by doing his will. In fact, later on in his high priestly prayer, Jesus says to the Father in John 12:27, "For this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify thy name," and you will recall the Father responds with an audible voice from heaven saying, "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again."

It's fascinating that all through Scripture we see how both the Father and the Son are mutually committed to the glory of the other. They both seek to reveal their glorious

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attributes and the primary self-disclosure of the Father is seen preeminently in the Son, in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is why John said earlier you will recall in John 1:14, "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." In verse 18, he went on to say, "No man has seen God at any time," but he adds this, "the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him." So if you want to see God, you look at the Lord Jesus Christ. Of course, the ultimate glorification of the Son will come at the moment of his death which was also part of God's predetermined plan. Through his death, of course, God's glory is put on display, his mercy, his grace. Frankly, even his wrath in dealing with sin; his power and so forth and then all who trust in him are also blessed beyond measure. Such will be the case now with Mary and with Martha and with Lazarus later on and with the disciples and with saints down through the ages including all of us.

So in verse 4, "But when Jesus heard this, He said, 'This sickness is not to end in death,'" in other words, death isn't going to be the final end of the story here, "but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it." This, by the way, is reminiscent of the man born blind. Remember in John 9, the disciples asked Jesus, "Why? Why is this man suffering in this way?" and Jesus responded saying, "In order that the works of God might be displayed in him," John 9:3. Folks, we want to remember this. To be sure, God has ordained all of our afflictions that he might reveal himself in some mysterious way, ways that we could never fully understand and for this reason we must never ask why. We already know why to some extent as we've just talked about, to put his glory on display but the rest of God's purposes are, frankly, none of our business. He is God and we are not. Moreover, if he were to try to explain them to us, we would have no ability to even comprehend the infinite mind of an omniscient God so instead, we look beyond the actual sorrow and suffering and rejoice knowing that God's purpose in sending whatever the misery might be is ultimately not only to bring glory to him but result in even greater blessing to us.

Beloved, never doubt the goodness of God in your trials. He's always working in you to conform you into the image of Christ even in great suffering. This is why he saved us according to Romans 9:23, "to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory." It's an amazing thought. You see, when we relax in God's sovereign care, in his sovereign rule, we are able to experience his glory and how he comes to us in the midst of it all and a watching world is able to witness his transforming grace in us because others will see how he has filled us with what Paul said in Philippians 1:11, "with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God." People will see the fruits of the Spirit in us in the midst of our suffering and they will marvel at it and that will be a great testimony to God's transforming work.

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Now, once again, the primary purpose of all that is happening here is to reveal the brilliant light of the glory of the Father and the Son against the black night of Israel's depravity and hatred of Christ so with that in mind, we come back here to verse 4 and we read, "But when Jesus heard this, He said, 'This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it.'" You might add here: "Especially with respect to all of the Jews that are wanting to kill me." Then in verse 5, "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." My, isn't it amazing to think that the God of glory, the uncreated Creator of the universe would love us?

Now, what does this love look like? Verse 6, "So when He heard that he was sick, He took off immediately to get there to help him out." It doesn't say that, does it? "So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was." That's fascinating. Beloved, here we discover another reason why God at times will withhold his mercy in our earthly suffering, not only that God might be glorified but 2. that faith might be strengthened. You see, because of his love for Mary and Martha and Lazarus and his disciples, he deliberately chooses to delay his coming. This isn't because he had some calloused heart, some calloused disregard for their grief, for their mourning, that somehow he was bereft of genuine compassion. No, Jesus' two day delay was motivated out of his love for them and for his disciples. Dear Christian, we must never assume that sickness and sorrow and hardship is an indication of God's displeasure nor the result of God somehow being indifferent to our prayers. Once again, we are utterly incompetent to know the mind of God but we do know this: he has promised to never leave us nor forsake us. We know that he does all things well, that he is righteous in all his ways. We know that nothing he does is capricious or cruel but always perfectly just and always part of a flawless plan. The Psalmist tells us in Psalm 46:1 he is, "our refuge and strength. A very present help in trouble."

Think about it: while on earth, Jesus was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief and yet he's always full of compassion and because of this, the writer of Hebrews can tell us, "Therefore, we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses," which literally carries the idea of one who can actually feel what we feel. I cannot feel what you're feeling. Sometimes we will say, "Oh, I know exactly what you're feeling." No, you don't. None of us really do. We have certain things that we can reference that to and we may have experienced something similar but we do not have a high priest like that. We don't have one that cannot sympathize with our weaknesses but one who has been tempted in all things as we are yet without sin and here's the blessed result of all that, "Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need." So, because of his love for his disciples, because of his love for this family, he delays his coming for a couple of days. He has some great blessing in store. They have no idea what it is. They don't know what's going on just like when we're in the midst of some great trial, we don't know what God is

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up to but we can know this: he's up to something, right? He is up to something good and glorious, magnificent.

Now, let's construct a time line here. We can't be exactly sure where Jesus is. We know that he went back across the Jordan to the east side away from Jerusalem and Judea where John has been baptizing in the early days. This could be a reference to Perea which would have been about 30 miles from Jerusalem or possibly and I think this is for a number of reasons a better idea where he was, probably in the region of Bethania which is over 90 miles from Jerusalem. We can't be sure but if it's the latter and I think it probably is, it would take Jesus about four days to walk back to Bethany. Now, ancient Jews acknowledge what most all of us know to be true to this day, that a healthy man or woman could walk about 25 miles a day, 30 miles max and if you've ever done that, especially out in open terrain, I'm not talking walking around a cork floor on a running track around a gym, I'm talking about getting out in the wilderness and walking. That's about right so if the messenger arrives and Lazarus is still alive which, I should say, when the messenger arrived Lazarus was still alive, Jesus says to him, "The sickness will not end in death." So the messenger arrives and then what we see is after a two day delay, Jesus knows through divine omniscience that Lazarus died and it's at that point that he says, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep." At that point, Jesus and his disciples leave for Bethany, a four day walk.

So four days elapse between Lazarus' death and resurrection. By the way, in verse 17, we read, "So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days." Now I might add that this means that Jesus was not responsible for Lazarus' death as some would assert because, frankly, had he left immediately upon the arrival of the messenger, Lazarus would have been dead two days by the time he got there. But Jesus was obedient to the Father's will and the Father knew precisely when Jesus should leave so that he could arrive there four days after his death. Now why? Well, we believe it was because of a prevalent superstition of that day. You see, some of Rabbis believed that when a person died, the soul would hover over that person for about three days intending to somehow re-enter it but as soon as its appearance changed, in other words, as soon as it recognized decomposition was setting in, then it would depart. At that point, there would be no hope of any resuscitation, therefore, Jesus' two day delay would ensure that Lazarus had been shall we say, irreversibly dead, making his resurrection all the more glorious demonstrating that Jesus is indeed the resurrection and the life as stated in verse 25.

Now of course, Mary, Martha and certainly Lazarus and the disciples, they knew nothing of any of this just like we don't know what God is up to in the midst of our great adversities. But not only that, he knew that this would ultimately strengthen the faith of Mary and Martha and the family of Lazarus, the disciples and of us. Folks, we need to

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learn this: God will often try our patience. How many times have we experienced things that are very, very, very difficult and he just keeps making us wait? Why? Because he loves us. Because he intends to do something that we cannot imagine in terms of blessing us. We may not experience it fully until glory but one day we will experience it so he does things as we say, for our good and his glory.

Notice verse 7, "Then after this He said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.'" Verse 8, "The disciples said to Him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?'" You see, they're horrified at this. They're referring here to the incident that took place at the Feast of Dedication when you will recall they were surrounded by the Jews that wanted to kill him in Solomon's portico. But oh, how the Lord loves to test our faith, right? It's as if he's saying, "Will you trust me even though it doesn't make sense? Will you trust me and do my will even when it goes against your flesh?"

Now, it doesn't say this but I'm sure that the disciples were very nervous. They were probably, their knees were beginning to shake. They're beginning to think, "Oh no, surely we're not going back there because they're wanting to kill Jesus and they'll kill us too." You know, as I think about it and I'm sure you will agree, often the Lord chooses for us a path that we would have never chosen on our own, right? He does this a lot but he does this in order to grow us, to conform us to the image of Christ so that he can lavish his love and blessing upon us. It reminds me of the passage in Scripture in Proverbs 3:5-6, you're familiar with that? "Trust in the LORD with all your heart And do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight." This is what is required here. This is what is required in our life. I might just say as a footnote: when we are told to trust in the Lord, this does not mean to grunt really hard to come up with the deepest conviction you can possibly muster pertaining to your confidence in God. That's not what it's talking about. It's not some mystical thing but rather in context, it literally means to study the word of God; to labor to understand it; to memorize it; to put it into practice; to commit yourself wholly to the truth of God as it is revealed in Scripture. This is what Solomon is saying in that text, therefore, when he says "do not lean on your own understanding," he's saying instead, "lean upon the revealed understanding of the word of God. Abandon every attempt to gain blessing through your own strength, by your own wisdom, because God wants to produce within you a godly character that will put off the deviant character of your fallen nature that tends to reject him and in your foolishness and stupidity, run up in the wrong direction." This is what Jesus is wanting to teach the disciples. This is what he wants to teach us.

So Jesus responds to his fearful and short-sighted disciples in verse 9 and says, "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 anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the

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light is not in him." Now, we must understand that the Jews divided the daylight period into 12 hours which would vary in length according to the season. They worked during the daylight and they would rest at night. Very simple and so Jesus is answering them metaphorically. He's basically saying, "Look guys, my Father has given me a job to do and while there is still daylight in my ministry, he is going to protect me, he is going to protect you from all of our enemies and together we must continue to work until that light is extinguished when I will not be able to work." He's also reminding them that he is the light of the world and as long as he remains, they should perform the work assigned to them. You will recall in chapter 9, verse 4, Jesus said, "We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world." So he's saying, "Guys, trust me. Obey me." As some of my old cowboy friends would say, "Cowboy up. We're going to Judea."

You know, we're all prone to choosing the path of least resistance, the path of pleasure and comfort and we often ignore what God wants us to do because in some subtle way, our flesh is saying, "You know, God is just not as good as he says. You know, sometimes he leads you off in a direction and just leaves you hanging there. You don't want that." And some people, people that call themselves Christians, don't really even want to know what the will of God is much less listen to it and so you see people trusting in their own foolish understanding of how to live and they make no real effort to understand God's perspective and when they hear the word and the will of God, it's like a fly that gets on your nose and you just blow it off. That's how people treat the word of God. Many people are that way. They care nothing about walking in obedience. It's simply not a priority to walk in the unclouded light of the Father's will and so like unbelievers as Jesus is alluding to here even, they walk in the night and stumble because the light is not in them. They have no spiritual discernment so they trip over obstacles that they cannot see because the word is not a lamp unto their feet and a light unto their path. You get the idea. As a result, what you see in people's lives like that is just one choice after another that is not just bad, it's just stupid. It's just foolish and they're constantly in a state of turmoil and spiritual impotence and many times they pass this on to their kids and then those kids pass it on to their kids and you just have generation after generation after generation of idiots, of fools, because they will not listen to the word and the will of God.

Obviously Jesus does not want this for his disciples so, "Come on, guys. It's still light. There's work to do." Verse 11, "This He said," and there's a comma there and then notice it says, "and after that He said to them." What's going on here? Well evidently, we believe that this indicates there was a period of silence here after he explained to them about the night and the work and the day and all of this type of thing, to give them a chance to process what he had just told them. "After that He said to them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep.'" Sleep here being a euphemism for death. "The disciples then said to Him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he

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will recover." They just didn't get it. "Now Jesus had spoken of his death," verse 13, "but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep." Well, we want to give them the benefit of the doubt here. Obviously they misunderstood Jesus but I would imagine if I had been with the disciples, I would have heard what I wanted to hear. Isn't that typically how we are? "Oh, he's asleep. Oh good, I hope he rests well. You know, he should be doing good here in a day or two that way we won't have to go to Judea and get stoned," right? That's probably more of what's going on here. You know, we tend to look for any excuse we can possibly find to being obedient to the will of God because, once again, there is a part of our flesh that wants to whisper in our ear and say, "God's not really that good. You can't really trust him. Sometimes he asks you to do things that are just insane." So you have to in a very religious and pious way say, "Well, you know, I understand that. You know, I really think I need to go this way."

Well, this isn't what he wants for his disciples. Verse 14, "So Jesus then said to them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead,'" and then he says something fascinating, "and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him." Beloved, here is a profound example of the blessing of mercy withheld. I mean look at this: this makes Jesus glad for their sakes. Not glad that Lazarus died but he was glad because of the profound effect that the resurrection would have on their faith. To be sure, they would need confidence, they would need stronger faith in order to endure the days ahead that were coming. Dear Christian think of this: what a premium God places on our faith. He wants us to have confidence in his goodness and grace and power and promises and wisdom and guidance and out of his love for us, he will go to unimaginable lengths to strengthen it. You see, faith untested may be real but it will always be weak and it's for this reason that God brings trials into our lives so that we can learn to trust him, not trust in ourselves. You see, hardship and sorrow are the friends of faith and we must learn that because in them we are confronted with our helplessness and utter dependency upon the Lord our God and then when he brings some magnificent deliverance, when he joins us in the furnace of affliction in some mysterious way, we are so absolutely overwhelmed and deeply blessed by the glory of his presence that we praise him in the trial for the trial. That's what God is up to.

Let me illustrate this. If you want to raise a fool, keep your child from hardship and sorrow. Let your sons and daughters spend the majority of their time as they want to do these days because every child thinks they need to be entertained every second of every day. Let them spend all their time playing their little games, texting their friends, enjoying their parties. Give them everything they want and they will one day break your heart. But if you love your child, you will raise them in the discipline and the instruction of the Lord. You will monitor their time. You will monitor their activities. You will make them work. You will let them struggle. You will let them experience failure. You will let them experience disappointment and loss. You will never give them reward without

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responsibility because in real life, if you come in last, you don't get a trophy. You will let them feel the full force of failure. Of rejection. Of pain. You will let them see that they are not the center of the universe as they think they are. You will let them discover that life isn't fair because we live in a fallen world. Within reason, you will let them be bullied. Within reason, you will let them be teased. They must learn to live in a real world, learn to defend themselves. And most importantly, dear friends, you will let them experience the miserable consequences of their sin and through these experiences by God's grace, they will see their own sin. They will see the sin of a fallen world and their hearts will become softened to the Gospel of Christ.

This is how our heavenly Father works with us, isn't it? When Jeremiah's faith was weak, he complained to the Lord wondering why do the wicked prosper the way they do? To which the Lord replied in Jeremiah 12:5, "If you have run with footmen and they have tired you out, Then how can you compete with horses? If you fall down in a land of peace, How will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?" In other words, if you grow weak in lesser trials and give up, how will you ever survive the greater trials? God had to strengthen him as he has to strengthen us. You see, a man will never develop stamina unless he is forced to run. A man will never be able to survive the ferocious beasts in the thickets of the Jordan if he cannot face the lesser ones in the peaceful times and places in his life. An oak must be strengthened with the storms and the wind. A ship cannot sail without great winds that bend the mast. A muscle will never develop without resistance and the more resistance it gets, the stronger it gets. Beloved, because of his great love for us, he will often allow great trials to come into our life that weigh us down and often he will withhold his mercy in an effort to bring us to a place where all self-sufficiency is abolished and many times I've seen how he leaves those that he loves in that state so that they can be a testimony to others and so he can reveal himself to them in some indescribable way.

I ask you: have you learned to trust God more in times of prosperity or poverty? Have you grown to love the Lord more in times of suffering or in times of blessing? Have you fallen on your face in utter dependence before the Lord your God more in times when all is well or in times when all seems lost? Spurgeon said this, "Trial takes away many of the impediments of faith. Carnal security is the worst foe to confidence in God. If I sit down and say, 'Soul, take thine ease, thou hast much goods laid up for many years'; faith's road is barricaded, but adversity sets the barn on a blaze," he says, "and 'the much goods laid up for many years,' cease to block up the path of faith. Oh, blessed axe of sorrow, which clears a pathway for me to my God by cutting down the thick trees of my earthly comforts!" He went on to add, "When I say, 'My mountain standeth firm, I shall never be moved,' the visible fortification, rather than the invisible protector, engages my attention; but when the great earthquake shakes the rocks, and the mountain is swallowed up, I fly to the immovable Rock of Ages to build my confidence on high."

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Online Sermons: otcr.org/content/sermon/1028/The_Blessing_of_Mercy_Withheld.html

The Blessing of Mercy Withheld

By David Harrell

Bible Text: John 11:1-16

Preached on: Sunday, November 2, 2014

Oh child of God, thank God for mercies withheld. We may not understand what he's doing but know that he is up to something grand and glorious and majestic and the benefits will not only continue to make him glad but make us rejoice. Think how much more effective we are when we've weathered those great storms. I mean, who wants a mountain guide who has never successfully traversed the treacherous terrain? Who seeks the counsel of a man who knows nothing of trusting God in the midst of intense, heartbreaking tribulations? Who seeks solace from a man who has never experienced the ineffable presence of the living God meeting him at the moment of his greatest peril? This is what God wants to produce in those that he loves, in his disciples, in this dear family, in each of us. Folks, don't miss this: the Lord of the universe came to them. He walked four days. He could have just been there. He walked four days and met them in the hour of their greatest grief. Do you not think he cannot do that for you? My friends, never assume that the Lord has left you in your hardship and sorrow because his love for you has somehow grown cold. The exact opposite is true.

"Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him." I love this, "Therefore Thomas, who is called Didymus," which means "twin," "said to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, so that we may die with Him.'" How precious, the slave was willing to die for his Master. I mean, he's clueless as to what's going on. He just thinks, "Okay, it's over. Let's go." You can almost hear him say, "Let's just get it over with." But this one who was later dubbed "doubting Thomas," demonstrates his great love for his Master, his undying devotion, a man of great courage and what a lesson for us. Though we may not understand what God is doing in us, where he's taking us, we follow him because we trust in his goodness and his grace and his wisdom, his love. Oh, the blessings of mercy withheld. And then to be able to tell others about what God has done, how he met you in the darkest night. How he revealed himself to you. What a joy, parents, to be able to tell your children and for those of us that are older, to be able to tell our grandchildren the great testimony of God's faithfulness.

I close with this thought: when we approach life in this way and understand God for who he is in this way, we will be able to say with Jeremiah who learned to run with horses and learned to deal with the great beasts in the thickets of the Jordan, who asked the Lord this, "Remember my affliction and my wandering, the wormwood and bitterness. Surely my soul remembers and is bowed down within me. This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope, the Lord's lovingkindness indeed never ceased for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I have hope in him. The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the person who seeks him," Lamentations 3.

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Folks, I pray that this is your burning desire: to know the Lord in this kind of way and in order to do that, you must trust him come what may and in doing so, you will experience the glory of his presence and his power every day of your life and one day, it will blossom into eternal bliss and all we'll be able to do is gather around the throne and celebrate. Okay?

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for these eternal truths. May they bear much fruit in our hearts for our good and for your glory for it is in Jesus' name that I pray. Amen.

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