

Dear brother or sister in Christ,

How do you know that God loves you? If I asked you to tell me how you knew that God was good, trustworthy and loving towards you, what would you say? This may be the most important question you ever answer. How you answer this question in large measure will determine how and for what you pray. This may feel like a strange place to begin when talking about prayer but I would argue that your answer to this question determines everything about how and for what you pray.

I want to begin by thinking about a story in the life of Jesus recorded in John 11 (I am indebted to Dr. John Piper for his insight into this passage). This story begins with a prayer. Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha was very sick. They sent a message to Jesus informing him that his friend, literally, “his beloved one” was sick. Mary and Martha knew that Jesus loved Lazarus and they expected that the one who had healed the blind and the paralyzed would act on behalf of the one he loved to heal him. This is their request.

Look at how Jesus responds to this request from these dear ones whom he loves in vv. 4-6. He tells his disciples that the purpose of Lazarus’ sickness was so that God the Father and the Son would be glorified in and through his illness. The purpose of Lazarus’ sickness was to display the greatness of the eternal, sovereign, Triune God. In v. 5 we are informed again that Jesus loved Lazarus and his two sisters. What we see brought together here is that God’s purpose to love his people and his purpose to glorify himself is not two purposes but one purpose. The highest form of love is to give to your beloved the best thing you can give. God’s love motivates him to give us the best thing he can give us: direct and experiential knowledge of himself through the gospel. He aims to “hallow his name” to his people and in all of creation because he loves us.

In v. 6 we are told that Jesus stays where he is at for two more days. As we read the story we discover that because he remained away for two more days, Lazarus died. Jesus did not go to heal Lazarus because he aimed to manifest the glory of the Triune God out of his love for Lazarus and his sisters. This purpose required that Lazarus die. How did Lazarus die? Dying is not usually a pleasant business. This is especially true for people who had no access to any of the pain killing, disease resisting medical treatments that we have today. What did it feel like for him to die and for his sisters to watch him die? What physical, emotional and spiritual trauma did these three whom Jesus loved experience? Did Jesus letting Lazarus die feel like love to them? Is this what they were asking Jesus to do when they informed him of Lazarus’ illness?

Jesus now tells the disciples that they are going to return to Judea for the purpose of “waking up Lazarus.” He restates the purpose for Lazarus’ death and the inconsolable grief of Mary and Martha. He says that he is glad that he did not prevent Lazarus’ death because he wants the disciples to believe in him. In other words, Lazarus and his sisters suffered so that the disciples would see the greatness and the glory of Christ and so trust in him.

In Jesus' conversation with Martha (vv. 21-27) we discover the glory of Christ that he aims to manifest when he says, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." The love of Jesus for his people required that Lazarus die so that he could display his glory as the Lord of life, by temporarily raising him from the dead (Lazarus, died a natural death sometime later as he is no longer alive.). The resurrection of Lazarus demonstrates that the love of God for his people is most clearly manifested in his revealing himself to us as our Savior who is working to bring us safely to our salvation at the final resurrection.

Again what does all this have to do with prayer? Prayer is asking God to do what God has told us he wants to do. It is not talking God into doing what we want him to do. Mary and Martha had no way of knowing whether or not it was God's will that Lazarus die. What they could be absolutely confident of was that God aimed to manifest his love for them by enabling them to see and revel in the glory of God in the face of Christ, who is the resurrection and the life. What this story tells us, which is confirmed by Jesus' teaching on prayer (see Matthew 6:9-13 & John 14:7-14), is that God's aim is to display the wonder of his love for his people by making us sensible, aware of his great glory as our Savior from sin and for life with him forever. The only way to know that God loves you is to know that you are among those whom he will raise from the dead. If you know that Christ is your Savior then you can always know he loves you no matter what happens. Therefore our prayers are always to be taken up with our asking God to work in and through the circumstances of our lives to make us believe that Christ is glorious and that to be loved by him is better than living a safe, healthy and prosperous middle class life in America. Our prayers are not to be consumed with asking God to remove the miseries of this life and give us a secure, prosperous and healthy life on earth. It is God's aim to make us into people who ask our loving Father to give us his best gift: knowledge of, faith in and delight in the glorious Christ, who is the resurrection and the life.

Praying with you,