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John 11:21 & 32.

IF

John 11:21 & 32, Now Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.

Then, when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to Him, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Our 'ifs' express disappointment with God's timing but Scripture reveals that God is never early, never late, and always purposeful.

Martha and Mary teach us how to bring our ifs to Jesus honestly, and how to trust that beyond them, he is already at work.

Introduction:

There is a word so small it barely takes a breath to say but when it settles in your chest, it can weigh a thousand pounds.

That word is: **if**.

You have said it. Perhaps you said it this today before you walked through those doors. Perhaps you said it last night before you fell asleep, staring at the ceiling, running the tape back, asking yourself and asking God:

"If only the doctor had caught it sooner."

"If only I had made a different decision at that crossroads."

"If only the marriage had held together."

"If only God had shown up when I called."

"If only He had been on time."

We live in a world saturated with ifs.

- Some of our ifs are **pointed inward** — regrets, guilt, the roads not taken.
- Some of our ifs are **pointed outward** — at circumstances, at people, at the hand life dealt us.
- Some of our ifs are **pointed upward**.
- Straight at Heaven.

Straight at the One who we were told is all-knowing, all-powerful, and ever-present.

The if that whispers: "**God, where were you?**"

Two sisters named Martha and Mary had just buried their brother, Lazarus. Jesus their friend, their Rabbi, the one they loved and trusted had been sent for.

A message was delivered to him: "*Lord, the one you love is sick.*" Jesus had not come. Four days later, Lazarus was in a tomb. When Jesus finally arrived, both sisters ran to Him not with worship songs, not with peace but with the same sentence on their lips:

"Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."

John 11:21 & 32

Same words.

Same grief.

Same God.

Two very different encounters and one resurrection nobody saw coming.

We are going to sit with these two sisters.

We are going to examine the if that each of them carried and the God who was not offended by either one.

We are going to look at what Scripture says about God's timing not as a theological theory, but as a living reality woven through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

We are going to learn how to face the ifs of our own lives with the courage of Martha, the honesty of Mary, and the confidence of people who know: **our God is never early, never late, and never, ever surprised.**

"God is never early, never late — and never, ever surprised."

The "If" we all carry

Three kinds of "If"

There are at least three kinds of ifs sitting in this room today.

1. The "If" of Lost Time

This is the if of people who are grieving something they cannot recover.

A person who has gone.

A season that has ended.

Years you cannot get back

Years spent in the wrong relationship, the wrong place, the wrong mindset. You have done the grief work, or at least some of it.

But occasionally, especially at anniversaries or quiet Tuesday evenings, the if surfaces again.

"If he had lived, our children would have known their grandfather."

"If I had left ten years earlier, I might have had more time."

This is a grief if and it is deeply human.

2. The "If" of Unanswered Prayer

This if belongs to those who prayed genuinely, fervently, persistently prayed and the answer they needed did not come.

At least not the way they expected. Not in the window they had faith for.

- You prayed for healing and watched someone deteriorate.
- You prayed for provision and the foreclosure notice still came.
- You prayed for your child to come back to God, and the distance has only grown.
- Your if is not about the past it is about a prayer that is still open, still unanswered, still echoing.

3. The "If" of disappointment with God

This is perhaps the most uncomfortable if, because we are sometimes afraid to name it in a church building.

This is the if that says:

- I believed He would come through.
- I trusted Him.
- I staked my life on Him.
- He was late. Or He was silent. Or He let something happen that I cannot reconcile with a God who is supposed to love me.

This if sits close to doubt.

But I want to say clearly that it is not the same as unbelief.

Martha and Mary were believing women who loved Jesus deeply. Both came to Him with this very if. Their faith was not cancelled by their disappointment. It was refined by it.

Whatever kind of if you are carrying today bring it. Keep it in your hands for this hour. Because we are going to lay it at the feet of a God who already knows it is there.

"Disappointment with God is not the same as unbelief. It is faith being refined."

a) Martha's "If": Faith that Thinks

John 11:17, *So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days.*

John 11: 20, *Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house.*

Who Was Martha?

We have met Martha before in Luke 10, she is in the kitchen while her sister sits at Jesus' feet. She is the one who interrupts a gathering to tell Jesus, *"Don't you care that my sister has left me to serve alone?"*

She is the planner. The executor. The woman who gets things done.

In our everyday lives, Martha is the project manager who sends follow-up emails at 10pm.

- She is the mother who holds herself together at the hospital because someone must think clearly.
- She is the church elder who organises the food bank, coordinates the volunteers, and quietly weeps in her car on the drive home.
- She is the person whose faith is strong, but whose faith has a schedule.

When God misses her schedule, the cracks begin to show.

Martha's "If" in daily life

- She had sent the message.
- She had done everything right.
- She had reached out.
- She had informed Jesus.
- She had expected a response.

The silence of the four agonising days that followed Lazarus had slipped away.

When Jesus finally appeared on the road, Martha went to meet him.

Martha did not wait at the house. She did not send someone else. She went herself, to the gate, to the edge of where the living met the road, and she said it directly to his face.

John 11:21, *"Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."*

- **There is accusation in those words.**
- **But there is also faith.**

Because she follows immediately with **John 11:22**, *"But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you"*

- She is disappointed, but she has not left.
- She is grieving, but she has not given up.
- She is confronting Jesus, but she is confronting him as someone who still believes he can do something.

That is the posture of a mature believer in crisis.

Not perfect peace.

Not plastic praise.

But honest engagement with the God she cannot fully understand right now.

What Jesus did with Martha's "If"?

Jesus did not rebuke her.

- ✓ He engaged her.
- ✓ He drew her forward.

John 11:23, *"Your brother will rise again".*

When Martha reached for theological distance.

John 11:24, *Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."*

Jesus brought her back from the future into the present:

John 11:25-26, *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. ²⁶ And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"*

What a question to ask a grieving woman?

Not: "Are you okay?"

Not: "I am sorry I was late."

But: "***Do you believe this?***"

Because Jesus knew that Martha's if was not just about Lazarus it was about the core of her theology.

Did she believe that He was who He said He was?

Her if opened the door to the greatest, I AM declaration in the Gospel of John.

The question was not a detour, but the destination.

"Martha's 'if' was the door Jesus walked through to reveal Himself more fully."

b) Mary's "If": Faith that Weeps.

John 11:32, *"Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'"*

Who Was Mary?

Mary is the one sitting at Jesus' feet in **Luke 10** learning, listening, and worshipping.

She is the emotional and spiritual centre of the family.

She is the one who would later pour out expensive perfume on Jesus' feet and wipe it with her hair an act so lavish, so unguarded, that even the disciples were uncomfortable.

In our everyday lives, Mary is the person whose faith is felt before it is spoken.

- She is the worship leader who can stand before a thousand people and sing with holy abandon and break down weeping in the parking lot afterward.
- She is the intercessor who prays for three hours and still feels God's absence like a physical ache.
- She is the one who journals.

Who weeps freely.

Who processes her faith through her whole body not just her mind.

Mary's "If" in daily Life

When Jesus arrived, Mary stayed in the house.

She did not run to the gate. Perhaps she was still too broken to move.

Then she heard: "*The Teacher is here and is asking for you*" (**John 11:28**). She rose quickly and she ran.

But she did not run to the gate. She ran to his feet.

The same place she always was when Jesus was near.

When she reached Him in front of the mourners, in the public street she fell down.

Prostrate. Broken.

She said the same words her sister had said, but from a completely different posture:

"Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."

- Same theology.
- Same pain.
- But where Martha had arrived at the gate standing,
- Mary arrived at his feet fallen.

Where Martha had spoken with directness and composure, Mary came weeping, wordless beyond that one sentence.

What Jesus did with Mary's "If"?

Mary's if did not receive a theological declaration. It received something else entirely.

When Jesus saw her weeping and the crowd weeping with her Jesus "groaned in the spirit and was deeply moved"(John 11:33)

John 11:35,"*Jesus wept.*"

Two words. The shortest verse in Scripture and perhaps the most important verse in this entire chapter.

This is God incarnate standing at the edge of a grief He is about to reverse and weeping. He knows Lazarus is about to walk out of that tomb. He knows this story ends in resurrection.

Yet He still weeps.

Why?

- ✓ Because the people He loves are in pain right now.
- ✓ Because grief is real even when resurrection is coming.
- ✓ Because God does not ask you to perform peace before the miracle arrives.
- ✓ He meets you in the middle in the four days, in the unanswered prayer, in the sealed tomb.

If you are a Mary if your if comes out as tears rather than theology know this: **your weeping moves God.**

Your brokenness is not an embarrassment to Heaven.

The same Jesus who commanded a dead man to rise also stood at a graveside and wept with a woman who had not yet seen what he was about to do.

"He wept before the miracle. He will weep with you before yours arrives."

c) God Is Always on Time.

Why did Jesus wait?

Before we look at the broader canvas of Scripture, we need to sit with a profound and sometimes troubling detail in John 11.

When Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, **what did He do?**

He stayed where he was for two more days (**John 11:6**).

- ✓ He did not misread the message.
- ✓ He was not delayed by circumstances outside his control.
- ✓ He deliberately waited.

When He finally said to His disciples, "Let us go to Judea again" (**John 11:7**), He explained the reason.

John 11:14-15, *Then Jesus said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe. Nevertheless let us go to him."*

I am glad that I was not there.

That is one of the most astonishing sentences in all of Scripture.

Not because Jesus was indifferent to grief we have already seen him weep. But because he understood something that Martha and Mary could not yet see!

- **A delay is not a denial.**
- **A silence is not an absence.**

Sometimes the miracle that was needed was not the one that was asked for.

- Lazarus healed in sickness would have been a miracle for a household.
- Lazarus raised from the dead after four days in a tomb that was a miracle for a generation.

God was not late.

He was operating on a timeline that was larger than the one Martha and Mary had drawn.

d) God on Time — Across the Bible.

This is not an isolated incident. The testimony of Scripture, from beginning to end, is that God acts at precisely the right moment even when that moment is not the moment we chose.

Let us walk through some of those moments together.

Abraham and Isaac — Genesis 22

Abraham had waited **25 years** for the son God promised. **25 years of silence of barrenness, of the impossible** held in tension.

When Isaac finally came, God asked Abraham to give him back. Abraham climbed the mountain. He raised the knife. And it was only in that final, obedient, surrendered moment not a second sooner that the angel spoke: *'Do not lay your hand on the boy.'*

There, caught in the thicket, was a ram. God did not provide the substitute before Abraham's faith was fully proven. He was not early. He was exactly on time. *'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided'* (**Genesis 22:14**)

Not before the mount, Not before the obedience.

Joseph in the Pit — Genesis 37–45

Joseph was seventeen years old when his brothers threw him into a pit and sold him to slave traders. He spent years as a slave in Potiphar's house, then more years in prison on a false accusation forgotten by the cupbearer who promised to remember him. Thirteen years.

13 years of injustice of silence from Heaven, of a dream that seemed to be dying. Then in a single morning Pharaoh called him out of prison and made him second in command over all of Egypt.

Joseph himself would later say to his brothers: *'It was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his house, and ruler over all the land of Egypt'* (**Genesis 45:8**).

Every delay. Every false accusation. Every forgotten promise. All of it was purposeful positioning. Not cruelty but choreography.

Moses at the Burning Bush — Exodus 3

Moses had tried to act as a deliverer at forty years old in his own timing, in his own strength and it had ended in murder, exile, and forty years of desert silence.

Only at eighty years old, after four decades in the wilderness, did God speak from the burning bush. Moses himself asked: *'Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh?'* (**Exodus 3:11**).

He was the same man he had been at forty but now shaped by four decades of humility.

The deliverer God needed could not have been sent at forty. He had to be made first. The bush burned at exactly the right hour.

Ruth and Boaz — Ruth 1–4

Naomi returned to Bethlehem empty. She told the women to call her Mara meaning bitter because the Almighty had dealt bitterly with her.

She had lost her husband and both sons in a foreign land. She was old, bereft, without a future. She could not have imagined that the field her daughter-in-law happened to glean in randomly, it seemed belonged to a man named Boaz who was their nearest kinsman-redeemer.

She could not have known that within one harvest season, the line of David and ultimately of the Messiah would run through the son born to Ruth and Boaz.

God was working in what Naomi called her bitterness. The kindness of the Lord had not ended. It had simply not yet been seen.

Elijah Under the Juniper Tree — 1 Kings 19

Elijah had just called down fire from Heaven on Mount Carmel. He had seen the most dramatic divine intervention of his generation. And then one threatening letter from Jezebel sent him running into the wilderness, collapsing under a tree and asking God to let him die:

'It is enough, Lord. Take away my life.'

Depression does not wait for people who have just seen miracles.

God did not rebuke him, did not lecture him, did not quote a motivational verse at him. He sent an angel with fresh bread

and water twice. *'Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for you.'*

God met his prophet in the exhaustion, fed him, and then sent him forward. The delay in that cave was rest, not rejection.

Elizabeth and Zechariah — Luke 1

They had prayed for a child their whole lives. They were now old the Scripture says Elizabeth was barren and both of them were 'advanced in years.' Their if had presumably been prayed for decades.

Then, at a moment when having a child was biologically impossible, the angel Gabriel appeared in the temple: *'Your prayer has been heard.'*

Not just a child but the forerunner of the Messiah.

John the Baptist could only have been born when he was born. Six months before Jesus.

No earlier, no later. The barren womb, the old age, the decades of unanswered prayer all of it was part of a cosmic clock that no human hand could set.

The Resurrection of Jesus — Mark 15–16

At the centre of all history: The disciples watched Jesus die on a cross. They did not know about Sunday. From their vantage point, everything was over buried, sealed, guarded. The if that

must have thundered through the upper room that Saturday must have been deafening:

'If he was the Son of God, he would not have died. If the kingdom was real, it would not have ended at a Roman cross.'

Three days felt like forever when you are on the inside of the waiting.

But Sunday morning was always coming.

The stone was never the end of the story it was the stage on which the greatest miracle in human history was about to be performed.

Do you see the pattern?

In every one of these stories and we could add dozens more God was not absent in the delay. He was at work in it. The delay was not a failure of divine attention. It was the preparation of a divine stage.

"My Times Are in Your Hands"

***Psalm 31:15**, "My times are in your hands."*

***Ecclesiastes 3:1**, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven."*

***Isaiah 46:9–10**, "I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning... My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose."*

God is not reactive.

- ✓ He is not scrambling to catch up with your circumstances.
- ✓ He did not miss a meeting.
- ✓ He declared the end from the beginning which means He has already seen the outcome of what you are walking through right now.
- ✓ He has already worked it into His purpose.

That is not a dismissal of your pain. That is the foundation beneath your pain.

Martha and Mary's if was real.

Their grief was real.

The four days in that tomb were real and long and terrible.

But God's timing was also real, and it was calibrated to something larger than a healing. It was calibrated to a resurrection that would be witnessed, recorded, and read by millions of people for the next two thousand years.

Their if was not wasted. It was woven in.

"The delay was not a failure of divine attention. It was the preparation of a divine stage."

Application:

How to face Your "If"?

What does it look like, in the everyday in the hospital waiting room, at the kitchen table at 2am, in the middle of a season that seems to have no end to live as people who trust a God who is always on time?

1. Bring your "If" to Jesus — Not Away from Him.

This is the first and most essential step. Both sisters made this choice. When Jesus arrived even in their grief, even with their disappointment they ran toward him, not away.

Every escape route we take from our ifs only extends the pain. The bottle, the busyness, the bitterness they numb the if, but they don't answer it. Only the One who holds your times in His hands can do anything with the if you are carrying.

Run to Him. Say it to His face, like Martha. Fall at His feet, like Mary. But run toward Him.

2. Know which Sister you are — and both are welcome.

Some of us process pain through thinking. We need to understand before we can surrender.

We need a conversation, an engagement, a place to bring our theology and have it tested.

We are Marthas and Jesus meets us at the gate with truth. Some of us process pain through feeling. We don't need answers yet. We need presence. We need to know that God sees us, that we are not invisible, that our grief matters to Him.

We are Marys and Jesus meets us at His feet with tears. He does not ask you to perform a kind of faith that is not yours. Bring what you have. He will meet you in it.

3. Say the "If" out Loud.

There is something about naming what we carry that begins to loosen its grip on us. Many of us have held our ifs privately for years slightly ashamed, slightly afraid that giving voice to our deepest disappointment with God will make things worse. It will not.

- Martha said it out loud, to Jesus' face, in public.
- Mary said it at his feet, in front of a crowd.

- Neither was struck down.
- Neither was abandoned.
- Neither was told they had failed the faith test.

Say it to God in prayer.

Write it in a journal.

Bring it to a trusted pastor or counsellor.

Give your if a name, because the if that stays unnamed becomes your identity and you are not your worst unanswered prayer.

4. Do Not rush past the Tears.

We are living in a culture that celebrates the comeback story and is deeply uncomfortable with the middle.

We rush to the resurrection testimony and skip over the Saturday the day between the death and the miracle, when there is nothing to report, no breakthrough to announce, and no sign that anything is about to change.

Jesus did not rush past the tomb to perform the miracle.

- ✓ He stopped.
- ✓ He wept.
- ✓ He groaned in spirit.
- ✓ He sat in the middle of the grief before He acted in the middle of the grief.

Give yourself permission to be in the middle.

Grief is not a failure of faith.

Jesus wept and He knew Lazarus was four minutes away from a resurrection.

5. Anchor yourself in the Biblical record.

When your if is loudest when the silence of Heaven feels longest return to the testimonies.

- Go back to Joseph in the pit and remember he became Pharaoh's right hand.
- Go back to Ruth in the barren field and remember she became the great-grandmother of King David.
- Go back to Elizabeth in her old, barren age and remember she gave birth to the forerunner of the Messiah.

These are not fairy tales.

They are the testimony of a God who has a pattern.

His pattern is: He does not waste the waiting.

- **Every delay in the biblical narrative was purposeful.**
- **Every silence was productive.**
- **Every closed door was preparation for an open one.**

Your story is not outside his pattern. It is inside it.

6. Let the "If" become a question — Not a verdict.

The most dangerous thing an if can do is settle into a verdict: God doesn't care. God is not real. God forgot about me. My prayers don't work.

Instead, let your if remain a question a genuine, hungry, directed-at-God question:

"What are You doing here that I cannot yet see?"

"Who are You becoming to me in this season that I could not have known in comfort?"

"What resurrection are You preparing that I cannot yet imagine?"

Martha's if became a question and the answer was: "I am the resurrection and the life."

Mary's if became a posture and the answer was: "Jesus wept."

Both received more than they came for.

Your if surrendered, brought to Him, turned from a verdict into a question is the very thing God may use to show you something about Himself that you could never have found any other way.

"Turn your 'if' from a verdict into a question and watch what God does with it."

Conclusion:

The God who is never late

Two sisters.

One word.

One God who was not offended by either of them.

He met Martha at the gate with a declaration that has echoed through twenty centuries: "I am the resurrection and the life."

He met Mary at his feet with tears that proved the Son of God is not detached from the sorrows of his people.

Jesus walked to a tomb that every mourner in Bethany had already accepted as permanent and He called a dead man back to life.

Your if has not disqualified you from miracles.

Your disappointment has not made you untouchable.

Your unanswered prayer has not exhausted his patience.

The timing you cannot understand has not escaped his design.

He has declared the end from the beginning.

Your times are in his hands.

Every waiting room in your life is also a preparation room.

Every sealed tomb has a stone that he is already preparing to roll away.

He is not late.

He has never been late.

Not for Abraham on the mountain.

Not for Joseph in the prison.

Not for Mary at the graveside.

Not for the disciples in the locked upper room on Saturday night.

Not for you.

Bring him your if.

Say it like Martha standing, clear-eyed, full of questions.

Say it like Mary fallen, tearful, without words.

Say it however it comes.

Because the only wrong way to bring your if to Jesus is not to bring it at all.

He is the resurrection and the life.

He is moved by your grief.

He weeps with you in the middle of what he is about to change.

Reflection

1. What is your 'if' right now? Have you ever named it honestly before God? What has kept you from saying it out loud?
2. Are you more like Martha or Mary in how you process pain a thinker or a feeler? How does knowing Jesus met both sisters differently speak to where you are today?
3. Which of the biblical examples in speaks most to your situation? What is it about that story that feels relevant to what you are walking through?

4. Have you ever confused God's delay with God's denial? Looking back, can you see any place where a delay turned out to be preparation or purpose?
5. What would it mean to turn your 'if' from a verdict ('God doesn't care') into a question ('God, what are you doing here')? What difference might that shift make in your daily walk?
6. Jesus wept before he raised Lazarus. What does it tell you about the character of God that he weeps with us before and while He is preparing the miracle?