



On Waiting Well identifies the experience of waiting as a crucial dimension to loving God, having faith, and following Christ. Discover how waiting is integral to God's plans of life and salvation. When we gain that perspective, these seemingly dry times become invigorating opportunities to strengthen our hope in God who is always faithful.

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Chapter 1

WAITING IS MORE THAN A SEASON

Do you enjoy waiting as much as I do? I love to find a long line and a slow cashier for checking out at the grocery store. Doing so gives me an opportunity to contemplate my need for turkey jerky and to read the covers of fascinating magazines. I love to be put on hold when making a phone call—such great music! I love arriving for an eye appointment and being shown to a room, tastefully decorated with high-definition illustrations of cataract surgery, that has been specially designed for me to wait in.

None of this is true, of course, which means you almost certainly do enjoy waiting as much as I do, that is to say, not at all. We find waiting in daily life to be boring, tiresome, and unfortunately inevitable. It's a waste of time, only tolerable if we need or want whatever we're waiting for badly enough. American culture treats waiting as a necessary evil at best and a criminal disaster

at worst. We strongly prefer action, growth, productivity, and progress!

The contemporary world responds to waiting even more negatively than in the past. Science writer Chelsea Wald observed in *Nautilus*:

Slow things drive us crazy because the fast pace of society has warped our sense of timing. Things that our great-great-grandparents would have found miraculously efficient now drive us around the bend. Patience is a virtue that's been vanquished in the Twitter age.¹

How much has the pace of modern life increased? “The speed of communications has skyrocketed by a factor of 10 million in the 20th century, and data transmission has soared by a factor of around 10 billion.”² To take one everyday example:

We now practically insist that Web pages load in a quarter of a second, when we had no problem with two seconds in 2009 and four seconds in 2006. As of 2012, videos that didn't load in two seconds had little hope of going viral.³

What effect does this exponentially increasing fast tempo of life have on us? Wald wrote, “The accelerating pace of society resets our internal timers, which then go off more often in response to slow things, putting us in a constant state of rage and impulsiveness.” This explains, for example, why we find it emotionally challenging to keep pace with a slow walker. According to Wald, this feeling now has a name, *sidewalk rage*, and can

actually be quantified using a “Pedestrian Aggressiveness Syndrome Scale” developed by a psychologist at the University of Hawaii.⁴

In the spiritual realm, we as Christians similarly tend to treat waiting as undesirable—a delay, a detour, a passive blank space on the schedule. Spiritual waiting is a kind of desert or wilderness experience, a barren season of life we must endure. It might feel as though God is silent or absent or withholding what we need. Waiting involves suffering. It’s one of life’s troubles or a test of our faith. The best we can hope for is to find peace during such times and trust the Lord that it will soon be over with. The title of a book by pastor and theologian John Piper says it all: *When the Darkness Will Not Lift: Doing What We Can While We Wait for God—and Joy*.⁵

Rightly conceived, spiritual waiting is a crucial, ongoing dimension of following Christ and loving God.

BIBLICAL WAITING

Waiting is all these things—confusing, difficult, painful—and more. It is the “more” that we tend not to see. It is the biblical “more” that this book is about. While respecting the feelings and realities I described above, I contend that God’s Word presents a larger and qualitatively different picture of waiting. “Waiting on the Lord” is a core metaphor of and experience in our relationship and walk with Him. It is normal, sacred, and can even be spiritually pleasurable.

By any name—attitude, orientation, choice, habit, discipline, virtue, or practice—learning to wait on the Lord is an essential, transformative, and rewarding dimension of spiritual formation. This perspective is countercultural and unexpected: waiting is positive. It is not merely a “dry season” or something we need to escape. Rightly conceived, spiritual waiting is a crucial, ongoing dimension of following Christ and loving God. It’s a vital part of our Christian pilgrimage.

A well-known verse can serve as our introduction to this idea:

They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;
 they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
 they shall run and not be weary;
 they shall walk and not faint. (Isa. 40:31)

I love this verse. Who wouldn’t want to soar like an eagle? to run without weariness? to have their strength renewed by God Himself?

Who receives these remarkable gifts? “They who wait for the LORD.” The sense here is specifically “those who wait for the LORD’s help” (NET), that is, they are waiting for assistance or rescue of some kind. For this reason, other translations change “wait for the LORD” or “wait on the LORD” (NKJV) to “trust in the LORD” (CSB, NLT) or “hope in the LORD” (NIV), and the fact is that the ideas of waiting, trusting, and hoping are all biblically interwoven (as we shall see).

For now, my point is that the key to the blessing of renewed strength in this verse is waiting on the Lord. The text does not say, “They who endure a spiritually dry season” or “They who

persevere through a time of challenges and darkness.” The passage does not conceive of waiting in the same terms as we often do—as a negative experience, the best part of which is when it’s over. Rather, waiting on the Lord here is the pathway to the blessing of having God renew our strength. Waiting is a privilege, a pleasure, a step toward a deeper understanding of God and a richer experience of His boundless love for us.

What exactly, then, is biblical waiting? What does it involve? We’re hardly prepared to think of *wait* as a real verb. It feels more like an absence than an action. In Scripture we find at least two basic, interrelated meanings of “wait” in play. First, there is *waiting for*, staying in place literally or figuratively until a person arrives or an event occurs. This is the sense in which the people in Isaiah 40:31 waited for the Lord’s help. Second, there is *waiting on*, in the sense of attending to or serving someone. A server in a restaurant waits on customers. A courtier waits on a king, ready to do whatever he commands. When we wait on the Lord in this way, the principal element of waiting is simply being in His presence, which is in itself a delight and an act of worship. At any given moment, He might or might not invite or command us to do some specific action, but at every moment the right thing to do is to wait upon Him. It is more than fitting that we do so, for He is the sovereign King of kings and we have been created for His glory.

In *Waiting on God!*, Andrew Murray eloquently expressed the purpose and pleasure of waiting on the Lord:

The giver is more than the gift; God is more than the blessing; and our being kept waiting on Him is the only way for our learning to find our life and joy *in Himself*.

Oh, if God's children only knew what a glorious God they have, and what a privilege it is to be linked in fellowship with Himself, then they would rejoice in Him! Even when He keeps them waiting. . . .

. . . What a dignity and blessedness to be attendants-in-waiting on the everlasting God, ever on the watch for every indication of His will or favor, ever conscious of His nearness, His goodness, and His grace! . . . God cannot do His work without His and our waiting His time; let waiting be our work, as it is His. And if His waiting be nothing but goodness and graciousness, let ours be nothing but a rejoicing in that goodness, and a confident expectancy of that grace. And let every thought of waiting become to us simply the expression of unmingled and unutterable blessedness, because it brings us to a God who waits that He may make Himself known to us perfectly as the gracious One.⁶

These two senses of waiting—*waiting for* and *waiting on*—are often mingled in Scripture, such as what we find in Isaiah 33:2–6:

O LORD, be gracious to us; we wait for you.
Be our arm every morning,
our salvation in the time of trouble.
At the tumultuous noise peoples flee;
when you lift yourself up, nations are scattered,
and your spoil is gathered as the caterpillar gathers;
as locusts leap, it is leapt upon.

The LORD is exalted, for he dwells on high;
he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness,
and he will be the stability of your times,
abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge;
the fear of the LORD is Zion's treasure.

In this passage, “we wait for you” (v. 2) clearly begins in the first sense. The people are waiting for God to act on their behalf. In a “time of trouble,” they are crying out for God’s “salvation” (vv. 2–4). But then the focus slides seamlessly into the second sense (vv. 5–6). The Lord is “exalted” and possesses an “abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge.” The true “treasure” of Zion is more than just one specific deed (which they’re *waiting for* God to do). It is the “fear of the LORD.” He is at all times an awesome God and worthy of worship. So they’re also *waiting on* Him because of who He is.

From one perspective, it’s difficult for the people to wait for the Lord, because He has not yet acted on their behalf and they’re still in the midst of the trouble. But from another, larger perspective, waiting is not difficult at all. It’s primarily a matter of seeing who God is, both in Himself and relationally, and responding appropriately. The people in these verses strongly desire God to show up and help them in a particular situation, of course, but their deeper and continuous desire is to know Him better and value Him above all. Any hardships incurred in the *waiting for* are far outweighed by the pleasure and wisdom of the *waiting on*.⁷

WAITING AS A SPIRITUAL IMPERATIVE

Another passage that helps us see the biblical core of waiting is Hosea 12:2–10 (NIV):

The LORD has a charge to bring against Judah;
he will punish Jacob according to his ways
and repay him according to his deeds.

In the womb he grasped his brother's heel;
as a man he struggled with God.

He struggled with the angel and overcame him;
he wept and begged for his favor.

He found him at Bethel
and talked with him there—

the LORD God Almighty,
the LORD is his name!

But you must return to your God;
maintain love and justice,
and wait for your God always.

The merchant uses dishonest scales
and loves to defraud.

Ephraim boasts,
“I am very rich; I have become wealthy.
With all my wealth they will not find in me
any iniquity or sin.”

“I have been the LORD your God
ever since you came out of Egypt;
I will make you live in tents again,
as in the days of your appointed festivals.

I spoke to the prophets,
 gave them many visions
 and told parables through them.”

Waiting on the Lord here is not only for a particular need, occasion, or season, but rather it is a constant orientation or an ongoing imperative: “Maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always” (v. 6). What’s the context? The Lord had charged Israel with sinfully abandoning her covenant responsibilities and Him (v. 2). Fraud and injustice were being practiced, and the rich seemed to think that money could conceal their sin (vv. 7–8). Jacob had similarly sought to deceive others for his own advantage, as well as to negotiate or struggle with God, and his descendants were following in his footsteps (vv. 3–5). Given the nation’s history and God’s revelation in the Law and the Prophets, they should have known better (vv. 9–10)!

Verse 6 presents a contrasting standard of righteousness, that is, what God’s people should be doing. What must they do in order to return to Him and restore the relationship? Their spiritual priorities should be love, justice, and waiting on the Lord. Faithful love (*hesed*) is at the heart of the relationship between God and His people. Justice is also a well-known attribute of God and a significant moral duty for His people (see Amos 5:24; Mic. 6:8). The surprise on this list is the third item—“wait for your God always” (NIV) or “wait on your God continually” (NKJV). Waiting on the Lord is here made equivalent with pursuing love and justice! As in Isaiah 40:31, spiritual waiting is also biblically intertwined with hope and trust, to the extent that this phrase has also been translated as “always depend on him” (NLT) and “always put your hope in God” (CSB).

As we can see, then, waiting on the Lord is an essential part of our relationship with Him, but we do not generally regard it as dramatic or heroic or in any way pleasurable. We might tolerate it, muttering stoically or angrily to ourselves that “God is in control,” but in fact we feel waiting is a waste of time, a dead space in our pilgrimage storyline. What we tend to enjoy most about it is when it’s over. Like the world, too often we regard waiting as a necessary evil at best and a criminal disaster at worst.

In *Small Faith—Great God*, N. T. Wright explained how waiting often makes us feel:

Christians get frustrated that they do not see anything spectacular going on in their lives, such as they read about in the “Christian success story” kind of books. They have to walk by faith, not by sight [2 Cor. 5:7], and they get disappointed. Have another look at those success stories: behind the spectacular moments there usually lie weeks, months, years of patient, undramatic waiting on God, reading the Bible, learning to pray, worshiping with fellow Christians, finding out how to live for God in the little things of life. Not the sort of stuff you write a book about.⁸

I can only hope Wright is wrong about his last observation, for my purpose here is exactly that—to write a book delving into what it truly means to wait on the Lord.

WAITING AS EVERYDAY SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Since waiting is a universally shared experience, you may think you already know what it is and what it means. As you proceed through this book, however, I urge you to set aside your cultural and personal preconceptions, especially those related to productivity and the fast North American pace of life, in order to be more open to the biblical meanings and implications of “waiting on the Lord.”

Let’s focus instead on waiting as a kind of everyday spiritual formation. We can think of “spiritual formation” as the process of growing to maturity in our faith, and “everyday” suggests ordinary. In other words, biblical waiting is part of our walk with the Lord that always applies and that we should always be doing.

Along the way, we might find it useful to sort our experiences of waiting into “small w” and “big W” categories. “Small w” waiting consists of specific times or seasons. For example, we wait for the dentist to finish working on our teeth, we wait for the newborn to start sleeping through the night, or we wait for the Lord to help us through a toxic situation at work. These times and seasons begin at a definite point in time and (thank God!) will one day end. “Big W” waiting, on the other hand, refers to the worship-filled experience of waiting on the Lord and delighting in His presence as a way of life. This kind of waiting begins when we trust Christ for salvation and continues for eternity.

In a Venn diagram, “small w” waiting would be a small circle entirely contained within a larger circle, “big W” waiting. This small circle is often filled with negative experiences and emotions. These are real and can be quite painful. I’m not

recommending that we live in a state of spiritual denial or saying that Christian faith requires us to be “inside, outside, upside, downside happy all the time.” This is untrue. But we need not dwell only in the small circle. At all times and in all seasons, the larger circle exists and the positive experiences and emotions we find there can be even more real and more powerful. To help us do that, we need a better understanding of this biblical truth, which will put our experiences of waiting into this proper context.

A word of encouragement: spiritual formation takes time. Merely changing our minds about waiting will not in itself be enough. A fuller understanding of waiting can over time transform both our beliefs and our practices—and thus our experiences and our feelings about those experiences. It might also work in the other direction, that is, if we take a stand on what the Word says and act as though waiting on the Lord is important and fundamentally pleasurable, waiting will begin to feel pleasurable and thereby transform our beliefs. Whether the flow is from biblical beliefs to our actions, or from biblical actions to our beliefs, this is all likely to be a slow change.

Really, though, what’s the hurry?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Did any ideas in this chapter surprise you? Which one or ones? In what way?
2. What is a “small w” that you are waiting for right now?
3. Have you ever thought about waiting on the Lord as a way of life? What might that look like for you today?
4. What do you hope to learn or accomplish through reading this book?

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