

## Patience

### [Psalms 40:1-11](#)

First in the series: Developing Mature Character in the Psalmic School of Prayer

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Let us linger just for a moment before God. And so gracious God, we sing as we wait, for the joy of your presence, through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we begin a series of sermons on the Psalms, recognizing that in the pattern of ancient Israel, people practiced the Psalms to bring them into God's presence. Then they discovered, as they practiced the disciplines of prayer, that God not only answered their prayers, but transformed who they were in the midst of praying. We become like the God who listens to us and addresses us in our prayers.

What happens when we pray? We wait upon God, and God waits upon us so that more and more we learn the nature of God, and we are changed into God's nature. It is a process of character development.

We are not a patient culture in America. We tend to be a watch-watching, short-cutting, fast food, express lane, FedEx-ing, horn-honking, quick-responding, instant-serving, bumper-riding, e-mailing culture.

In his book about the culture and our "geography of time," Robert Levine designates a new segment of time: the honko second. It's the time between when the light changes and when the person behind you honks the horn. It is now the smallest measure of time known to humanity, and that time is getting smaller and smaller the longer I live in Washington, D.C!

Let me give you a bit of a test as to how you measure your ability to wait in a restaurant – when the waiter leaves you waiting to be waited upon. After 30 minutes of waiting, which one of these do you choose?

a. You decide you don't like this restaurant, and you leave. b. You get up to go, and yell at the maitre'd on your way out. c. You take this as a sign from God to fast and pray.

Let me give you another test. This one is more personal. You are in worship today and the theme is on waiting and patience. The preacher is approaching the eleven o'clock hour and is still in the middle of the sermon. (I'm not proposing that I do this, by the way.) However, let's say it happens— what do you do?

a. You breathe a prayer of thanks to God: finally a gently-paced service that does make you rush. b. You begin to plan a conspiracy to get rid of the new senior pastor. c. You think about leaving during the choir response; however, you remember you are caught in the middle of the pew between two tall people and you can't get out. d. You take this as a sign that Jesus will come soon, but you are afraid you may be left behind.

Louis Smeads, Professor of Ethics at my alma mater, Fuller Seminary, says that waiting is the hardest work human beings will ever do. Waiting is our destiny as creatures who cannot by themselves bring about the thing they hope for. We wait in fear for a happy ending we cannot write. We wait for a "not yet" that feels like a "not ever." Psalm 40 simply says, "I waited on the Lord." The implication is, "I continued to call upon the Lord day after day." I kept calling and kept calling.

To practice the Psalms, one has to practice the waiting. What you do while you wait really counts. The Hebrew for "wait" is a wonderful metaphor: the twining of a cord or weaving a wonderful piece of cloth. To wait is the process of being interwoven into the very fabric and nature of God. When we wait for God, he is weaving us into the process of history and into God's desire to accomplish wonderful things. We become part of what God is doing in the world. It's what brings us together into the presence of God and weaves us into God's purpose and intention.

The scriptures are repetitive in their invitation for us to wait. "No one who waits upon the Lord will be ashamed," Psalm 25 "Wait on the Lord and be of good cheer," Psalm 27. Psalm 37: "Those who wait upon the Lord shall inherit the land." Isaiah 40: "Those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Lamentations 3: "The Lord is good to those who wait." Hosea: "Wait upon the Lord continually." At the very end of Genesis in chapter 49, after all the waiting that Jacob does in life for the salvation of God, he finally prays before he dies, "I have waited for your salvation, O Lord," and he dies. Jacob never sees the fulfillment. That's a lot of waiting.

Some forms of intentional waiting could include standing in an airline security line, driving on Wisconsin Avenue, becoming a Presbyterian. We are most notorious among denominations as people who work hard at the waiting process. Entrepreneurs have a difficult time with being Presbyterian.

What is God doing in our prayerful wait? The text reflects some very important things God does while we wait upon the Lord. God inclines to us. God literally stoops down and bows down to us to hear what we are trying to say. God comes to us while we wait. God hears our cry. God does not ignore us. God draws us out of the dark place, the desolate pit, the miry bog. God sets our feet upon solid ground and gives us sure steps to follow in the midst of our wait. God puts a new song in our heart while we wait. God is very present in the waiting process, and God is moving us to change our pattern and our disposition on life. We should not get bogged down in the dark place while we wait.

Walter Brueggemann in his book, *Praying the Psalms*, says it's not good for people to be in the pits. In the Psalms, the pits are a bad place to be. It's interesting that God's people find themselves "in the pits" very often. There are the literal pits where Joseph finds himself when his brothers throw him there. This is where Jeremiah finds himself when people are upset and they put him in a pit. Daniel is thrown into the lion's pit. Jesus descends into hell. Paul and Silas are thrown in prison.

The recent Matrix trilogy of films describes the people who are faithful and just as being Zion or in the middle of the earth – in the pits. And it's the machines that run the world. It is not good to be in the pits; we want out.

God realizes that we want out, and God wants to bring us out. But God is doing something with us while we are in the pits. If you look at every example of Old Testament and New Testament experience, you will discover that peoples' lives changed for the better if they listened to God while they were in the pits.

Elijah was in the pits after he had had a wonderful experience of victory, conquering the prophets of Baal. When Mendelssohn sets the libretto to music, he has Elijah singing the solo after wandering off into the wilderness, pursued by Ahab and Jezebel. "I only I, Lord, am left. It is enough, now take away my life." The angels of God come to Elijah, "Rest for awhile, Elijah. Eat, get ready for the next part of the journey. Be still and discover who I really am while you wait." By the way, Elijah, there are seven thousand others out there who are like you, and very faithful. Go build some relationships in community with them.

People watch us while we go through our pit stops. This is one of the measurements the world gives people who are wrestling with our times: they want to see how Christians endure in the pits. It's a form of outreach and evangelism: if God has you in the pits, God will probably surround you with people who watch your behavior while you're there. We don't like that. We get a little frustrated and irritated while we are in the pits. We don't want to be examined. But the psalmist says that people around you will watch how you interact with God while you are in the pits.

I watched how a family dealt with an eight-year-old girl who was hit by a car and was paralyzed. I watched people observe the church and how the church responded to that little girl and her slow recovery process. Waiting and waiting and waiting – the family and church – for there to be some evidence of life. But I heard people who were not connected with the church say, "We are amazed at how patient you are in prayer. We are amazed at how you can hold on to such faith in the face of seemingly no response from God." I heard an atheist woman confirmed as an atheist, say "It's almost enough to make me a Christian when I see how Christians can wait in God's presence for healing."

The Psalms also teach us not to invest in the wrong gods while we are waiting. There are two particular gods I am concerned about today. One is the god of self-gratification. While we wait, we are tempted to make things happen on our own agenda. Abraham and Sarah did this: they were promised a son but they thought God was waiting too long. So they decided to further the process by making a son with Sarah's servant. The false god of self-gratification is right next to the false god of 'God will never come again.' God is not listening to you; God is indifferent; God doesn't care about you. That's also a pagan god.

As an example of the god of self-gratification, Daniel Goldman in his book, *Emotional Intelligence*, talks about a research project done back in 1960 by psychologist Walter Mitchell. It was an experiment with four-year-old children of Stanford graduates and professors. He would bring a four-year-old into a room, put a marshmallow on a table and have the four-year-olds look at the marshmallow. He told them, "If you can wait and not eat that marshmallow while I'm gone, I'll give you two when I get back." This experiment talks about how the children wrestled with the ethical dilemma before them. Do they eat it now or do they wait?

Mitchell's reflections on what the children did were amazing. Some of the children covered their eyes, as if not looking at the marshmallow would help them not eat it. Some of the children rested their head in their hands, as if somehow they could keep their hands busy by keeping them close to their heads. Some of the children talked to themselves and told themselves stories, keeping busy while the person was gone. Some of the children broke into song and sang as they waited for the person to come back. It was as many as twenty minutes before that happened. That's a long time for a child and a marshmallow. Some played with their fingers: counted them and did multiplication problems with them. Some tried to fall asleep to ignore it. One particular child decided he couldn't take it any longer so he started licking the table in hopes to absorb some of sweetness from the marshmallow. One third of the children couldn't wait; they grabbed it and ate it within a matter of seconds.

The researchers went back several years later to check on the same children when they graduated from high school, and did some follow-up research. The researchers discovered that the children who could not wait had a completely different kind of character than the children who did wait. They were impulsive, more troubled; they shied away from contact with other people. Many were stubborn and indecisive, easily upset by frustrations in life and more preoccupied with their own needs. They thought of themselves as bad and unworthy. They were immobilized by stress and mistrustful of other people; resentful about not getting enough in life and prone to jealousy, envy, sharp temper... on and on. In other words, when we worship the god of self-gratification, we don't grow emotionally. Wait for the Lord.

The other god is the god who doesn't show up when we pray. It's the god in the existential movement that will be the god of absurdity and nihilism. There is no God out there. God is not listening to you. Why bother to pray? In Samuel Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*, he illustrates this kind of nihilism. Two men are waiting by a sickly tree on a muddy plateau. They are waiting for Godot to come and meet them. It is never clear what Godot will do, but they know they need to wait and they keep looking. And Godot never shows up. Other people show up and go through the crazy antics of life in terms of mastery and slavery, but still Godot does not come. Humanity is always waiting for God, but God is never going to show up. That's a pagan view of God. Why bother to pray because God is not listening.

In fact, the Psalm is clear that God does respond. God is there to listen. God is in interactive relationship with the person who's waiting. There is an active conversation going on. And God will answer the prayer, albeit postponed in most cases.

There's also a very clear invitation for those of us who are waiting and what we can do in the meantime. I can say, "Here I am Lord. Talk to me, I'm listening. I delight to do God's will while I am waiting." I keep at it. I tell the good news of how God is active in my life and has been active in our lives in the past. I tell the stories of scripture because God has acted faithfully in the past. I don't restrain my lips; I don't conceal what God does. I speak faithfully and continually of God's goodness while I wait. It's active waiting. So in the meantime, don't be mean as you pass the time. Mean what you say and say what you mean and find meaning in the meantime. Discover the means of waiting patiently; overcome the temptation of thinking that waiting is meaningless.

I believe that this is one of the lessons that we are taught by Martin Luther and Martin Luther King: God is participating, and listening, and with us while we wait for change. But our responsibility is to be assertive and non-violent in our writing, preaching, our presence, our demonstration, our marching. While we pray, we act graciously. Acts of an assertive "NO" to injustice are always connected to prayers for an assertive "YES" to God's answer. That's why we call ourselves Protestants: we protest carefully and prayerfully. Patience is not passive. We keep asking, and we don't stop. We keep giving thanks, and we don't stop praying. We keep telling the good stories of a gracious God, even though God has not shown up to answer our particular prayer. We don't sell out to the cheap gods of self-gratification or the absurd belief that God doesn't exist.

We are watchful and, most of all, we enter into singing while we wait. Can you imagine waiting without music, waiting without poetry, waiting without song. Recently, I was given a short documentary film from one of our elders called, Laundry and Tosca. It's the story of a woman named Marsha Whitehead, who is called, she believes in her heart, to be an opera singer. But she works for twenty years in preparation and does not have an audition. She waits and does laundry while she practices, week after week after week. And after twenty years she has an audition with one of the great maestros of the Metropolitan Opera. When the maestro hears her, he says, "Only one in forty women in the world have this kind of voice." And so she spends her time, while practicing and waiting on the opportunity to sing opera, being faithful to God and doing her laundry. But in the midst of that, things change in her life.

When she is preparing her recital of audition, she remembers that her father has never heard her sing The Lord's Prayer and has always wanted to hear that. She invites her father to the recital. He is a man who has not been very demonstrative or affectionate to her; he has been rather standoffish over the years. She ends her recital with The Lord's Prayer. When finished, her father jumps out of his seat, runs down the aisle in front of the audience and gives her the biggest hug she's ever had in her life. In tears, he thanks her for being so persistent when he couldn't support her.

Things change while we wait, if we wait in the presence of God. Yes, God does answer prayer, but God changes us while we wait.

May the Lord Jesus Christ help us to become gracious, prayerful waiters on the goodness of God. Amen.