

THE WAITING ROOM

Title: Part 1 – “Does God Even Know?”

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Hey, before you say “Hi,” give the worship team some love one more time for setting the table for us today. Thank you guys. Now you can say “Hi” to some people around you.

While everyone in the house is saying “Hi” I want to take a quick second to welcome everyone joining us online or on our app. We consider you a part of our family and we are FOR you. If there is anything we can do to pray for you or serve you, please reach out. AND if this message blesses you, consider sharing it with a friend or giving a financial gift to keep this content coming.

Well, it is good to be back in the house! I had a little time off in June and last Sunday we celebrated at the lake as a church fam, so it’s nice to be back here and in the A/C. If you have your Bible or the Bible app, we are going to be in **Matthew 11** and **John 11** today. Matthew is the first book of the New Testament; John is the fourth one. If you don't have a Bible we will put everything on the screens, so no worries.

Today we are kicking off a brand new five-week collection of messages called “The Waiting Room,” and I just want to read the first part of our main text and then I'll tell you what we are going to be wading into for the next month or so. Matthew 11, starting in verse 1:

After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. ² When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” ⁴ Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

There is some tension in that text, amen? We are going to come back to it in a minute. But first I have to tell you something about myself that's a little embarrassing. Anyone want to hear something embarrassing about me? Here goes... I HATE waiting rooms.

Like, more than is reasonable. More than is healthy. So much so I have actually asked Cheryl to join me. If you are in healthcare, please don't take this personally. But the

moment I walk through those double doors, sign in at the little frosted glass window, and sit down in one of those weirdly uncomfortable chairs that someone clearly designed to discourage you from ever wanting to come back—my chest tightens. My palms get a little clammy. I start pretending to read whatever 2009 issue of “Field & Stream” is on the side table just so my eyes have somewhere to go. My phone has dozens of apps but suddenly I cannot find anything on it that doesn’t contribute to my anxiety. Anyone with me on this?

AND if you've been around here for a while then you know I've battled health anxiety on and off for years. I've talked about it from this stage before, I put it in my first book “Reset.” AND you'd think logically the doctor's office would be the place where I finally get some answers and feel better. But the truth is, the waiting room is worse than the appointment. Way worse. Because in the appointment at least somebody is “telling” me something. In the waiting room, I'm just sitting there with my own brain, and my brain is a terrible roommate when there's nothing else to do.

I've actually been doing some work lately with my counselor, and what I'm starting to understand—and I'm just being honest here—what I'm starting to understand is that my problem with the waiting room isn't really about the waiting room. It goes back further than that. My problem with the waiting room is that it is one of the few places in my adult life where I cannot pretend I'm in control. Because the truth is, I LOVE being in control. We all do! But that need to control didn't show up yesterday. It has roots, from my childhood. Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about.

So, when I sit in that chair, what's REALLY spiking is not just my blood pressure. What's really spiking is the panic of a guy who is about to find out that someone he can't see, in a room he isn't allowed into, with information he doesn't have, is going to walk out and tell him something about his life that he can't change.

I don't know why I went all third person there, BUT I told you that just so I could ask you this:

Where is YOUR waiting room?

Because I bet you have one too. Maybe it's not the doctor's office. Maybe yours is the school pick-up line where you don't know what mood your kid is going to climb in the car with. Maybe yours is the notification from your dating app that hasn't gone off in months. Maybe yours is the front porch every night, waiting on a husband who might come home and might not. Maybe yours is the calendar where the years keep flipping by and nothing keeps happening on the career front. Maybe yours is just the silence in the house at 2 a.m. when you can't sleep and you don't know why. Maybe yours is an actual waiting room as you wait on the results of the biopsy.

We've all got one. And here's what I want us to wrestle with for the next five weeks:

What do you do when there is nothing you can do but wait?

What do you do when you are in a set of circumstances and there is no way forward and no way out? When all the buttons you could push, you have already pushed. When all the doors you could knock on, you've already knocked on. When you have prayed and prayed and prayed, and the only response from Heaven seems to be the sound of crickets. What do you do in the waiting?

I heard a quote one time, and I actually tried to track down who said it and I couldn't, but I wrote it in my journal this way:

"God's purpose is not just to get you somewhere, but to develop you into someone. The journey is as important as the destination. What you become in the waiting room determines what you can handle in the throne room."

That's good stuff, right? AND that is exactly what we are going to be exploring for the next five weeks. The idea that the waiting room is not a hallway you pass through on your way to the throne room. The waiting room is where God does some of His best work on you BEFORE He ever calls your name. What He builds in the waiting room is what you carry into the throne room.

SO, today as we kick this off, I want to preach a message I am calling:

"Does God Even Know?"

That's the question underneath all the other questions. When you are in one of these seasons where there is nothing you can do but wait, the nagging question is not does God exist, the question that gnaws at us is does He even know or care. Does God hear my prayers, or am I just talking to the ceiling?

And in those moments, my brain starts feeding me three lies. Maybe you've heard these too. The first lie is:

I'll never be happy again.

Anyone ever heard that lie? You look back at some season of your life, that first year of marriage, those first few years of parenting, college, whatever it was—but you were so happy. And you look at where you are now and you think, "That's it, that was the peak. I'll never be happy like that again." Then comes the second lie:

Nothing good can come from this.

There are times when you just feel like you are getting kicked while you are down and the last thing you want is me to tell you some sweet little Bible story about how it all worked out and they all went to Heaven. Right? Sometimes you look around and there is just nothing good that can come from this, so we think. Then the final lie:

There's no point in continuing.

We tell ourselves there is no point in fighting through this. No point staying in this marriage. No point getting up tomorrow. No point in doing the right thing when the right thing never seems to lead anywhere. And sometimes I don't even know if there's a point in continuing to believe.

Now, I won't make you raise your hands, but I'd be willing to bet the majority of you have thought those things, and for some of you in season of waiting right now, you probably told yourself all three this week.

BUT here is the good: If you're a Christian, the Bible speaks directly to this. And the good news if you're not a Christian is, the Bible speaks directly to this. In other words, we are not alone! There were some people who lived when Jesus lived, knew Him, saw Him do some amazing things, and they felt like this too. We are not the first people to have doubts and wonder does God know? Does God even care? Does God hear my prayers?

SO, with all the pastoral care I can muster, I know exactly how you feel, BUT I am here to remind you that NONE of those three lies are true. AND we're going to spend the next five weeks dismantling all of them.

BUT today I want to go to the deepest one, the one underneath all the others. Does God even know?

And here's why this matters, and why we have to start here. If you knew, REALLY knew, deep down in your soul, if you knew that God knew—if you had some kind of assurance that the God of the universe was aware and cared about your particular circumstances, your particular wait, your particular ache—that would almost be enough sometimes, wouldn't it? It wouldn't fix anything. It wouldn't change anything. But if you knew He knew, you could almost endure as long as you had to endure.

In fact, there was a study at University College London—published in “Nature Communications” back in 2016, you can look it up. But they basically took 45 volunteers and put them in front of a computer game where they would turn over digital rocks. Some of the rocks had snakes under them and if you turned over a rock with a snake,

you got a mild electric shock on your hand. That sounds fun, right? BUT here's the part that ties into all this. They tracked the participants' stress levels—pupil dilation, sweat, cortisol in their saliva, the whole deal—and here's what they found. The people who were the MOST stressed out were NOT the people who knew for certain they were going to get shocked. The people who were the most stressed were the ones with a 50/50 chance. Meaning the not-knowing did more damage than the shock itself. Let me say that again, the not knowing hurt them more than the getting hurt.

That is what the waiting room does to you. That's why the wait is so much worse than the diagnosis. Because your brain was designed by God to handle threats. What your brain CANNOT handle well is uncertainty. Uncertainty fries your nervous system in a way that even bad news doesn't. Some of you are sitting here right now and you are not really suffering from your circumstances yet. You are suffering from your uncertainty. In other words, the wait is its own kind of wound.

So, we have to do something with that. We have to put something true in our heads while we wait that's stronger than what our brains are doing to us. And the thing I want to put in your head today is this. We're going to come back to this every single week, and we will unpack this today, but here it is:

Even now, [meaning in the middle of your wait, even now in the middle of the silence and uncertainty, even now... everyone say, "even now"] ***God is not absent; He is present. He is not apathetic; He is attentive. He is not angry; He is filled with affection for me.***

Read that with me out loud... "Even now, God is not absent; He is present. He is not apathetic; He is attentive. He is not angry; He is filled with affection for me."

God is not absent, apathetic, or angry. I want to walk through each of those three with you, because they are not just pithy, positive, platitudes. I spent way too much time coming up with that. But the Bible over and over again affirms all three even while people waited on God, sometimes for years!

SO, let's break down the first part:

1. God is not absent; He is present.

Even when you can't see Him working, even when you can't sense Him, even now He's not absent, He is present. Go back to our text in Matthew 11. We met a guy sitting in a prison cell, does anyone remember who that was? Right. John. Which John? John the Baptist. The guy that baptized Jesus when Jesus kicked off His public ministry. Jesus' cousin. This is family.

BUT do you know what Jesus said about John the Baptist? Five verses after our reading, Jesus says this, Matthew 11:11:

¹¹ Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!

How would you like Jesus to say THAT about you? To call you the greatest human being ever born. That's what Jesus thought about John.

BUT now John isn't so sure what he thinks about Jesus. And here's why. Where is John when he sends this question? Right—in prison. John had started calling out King Herod and his wife for an affair that had blown up into a full-blown scandal. So, they had him arrested. But not just any prison. Herod's wife (her name was Herodias by the way, it's confusing, everybody in this story is named Herod) but she had him sent to the easternmost edge of the kingdom, way out in the desert, to a fortress called {Muh-Key-Russ} Machaerus. Picture the worst dungeon you've ever seen in a movie. Stone walls, no windows, hot in the day, freezing at night. That's where John was.

Now if your cousin, your family member, the guy that baptized you and announced your ministry, the guy you said was the greatest person ever born—if he got thrown into a desert dungeon, what would you do? Visit, right? Send a care package? Send some guys to break him out? At the very least, show up.

Here's what Jesus did. Matthew 4:12:

¹² When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee.

Specifically, He went to Capernaum. Which may not mean anything to you, but here is the significance of this. Capernaum is on the beach! Capernaum is gorgeous. Picture the Sea of Galilee, palm trees, fishing boats, little umbrella drinks, the works!

So, John the Baptist is rotting in a desert dungeon at Machaerus while Jesus is up at the beach in Capernaum on holiday. Not only did Jesus not go visit, He went in the OPPOSITE direction!

Are you picking up what I'm putting down here? Some of you don't even need the rest of this message because that is exactly where you are right now. You look around and you are in Machaerus and despite all your prayers it feels like Jesus is at the beach. You're sitting there going, "If you really loved me, you would come." But so far no sign of Jesus.

AND it gets worse. Because Jesus sends a message back to John's disciples, and the message basically is, "Hey, go tell John I'm doing great. Tell him all the people I'm healing. Tell him about the lame walking and the blind seeing. Tell him the Gospel is being preached—AKA prisoners are being set free." Uh, maybe don't tell him THAT part, Jesus.

But here is the line that should stop us in our tracks. Jesus says in Matthew 11:6:

⁶ "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

This is huge, hear what Jesus is actually saying. Blessed is the person who does not interpret my silence as my absence. Blessed is the person who, when I don't show up the way they expect, when I don't answer the prayer they prayed, when I head to the beach while they sit in the dungeon, blessed is the person who keeps trusting me anyway.

In other words: **don't interpret God's silence as His absence.**

Just because you don't see Him doesn't mean He's not there. Just because He didn't show up the way you wrote the script doesn't mean He isn't writing one. Jesus didn't forget John's name in Machaerus. He didn't stop loving him. He didn't go cold on him. He was up to something John couldn't see from inside that dungeon.

AND if Jesus did this with the GREATEST man on the planet, then maybe, just maybe, His silence in your life is not what you think it is either. Maybe His apparent absence is not absence at all. Maybe He is up to something that you cannot see from your seat in the waiting room.

Don't stumble on account of Him. Don't walk out on Him because the timing is wrong, the silence is loud, and the beach seems really far away from where you are sitting. Jesus acknowledges how you feel and how it seems and He says blessed is the one who does not stumble.

God is not absent; He is present. Next we see this:

2. God is not apathetic; He is attentive.

So, He's not absent. But what if He's there and just doesn't care? What if He's like a dad who's in the house but never comes out of his office, right?

Turn over to John 11 with me. This is the Lazarus story, and most of you have probably heard it, but I want you to hear it with fresh ears because what's right at the top of this passage is one of the strangest sentences in all of Scripture. John 11, starting in verse 5:

⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ SO when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.

Did you catch it? SO. Jesus loved them, SO he stayed. That's not how the sentence is supposed to go! That's not how love works! In our world, the sentence is supposed to be, "Jesus loved them, so he RUSHED. He LEFT IMMEDIATELY. He dropped EVERYTHING! That's love, right?

No. John (the Apostle not the Baptist) John watched the whole thing happen and he writes it down this way on purpose. He loved them, so he WAITED. In other words, the delay WAS the love. Not the absence of it. The delay was the love itself.

So, Jesus stays put. For two more days. And Lazarus gets sicker. And sicker. And sicker. And then Lazarus dies. And Jesus knew it was happening. He knew the family was wrecked. He knew Mary and Martha were sitting there going, "Where is He? We sent the message. We told Him. Where is He?" He knew, and He stayed.

Now you read the rest of the chapter, and you find out what He was up to. He wasn't going to just heal Lazarus. He was going to raise him from the dead. Something nobody saw coming. A miracle bigger than the one they were praying for. Jesus didn't show up to heal a sick man. He showed up to wake a dead one.

But here's what blows me away. Mary and Martha didn't know that. They were just sitting in the waiting room. And Jesus, watching, knowing exactly what He was doing, said, "I love them too much to come now. I love them too much to do the small thing when I'm about to do the biggest thing."

The point being, don't confuse God's apparent absence for His apathy. He is not slow AND He is up to something.

For some of you, the reason He hasn't shown up yet is not because He doesn't care. It's because what He's about to do is bigger than what you are asking Him to do. And if He shows up early, you get the small miracle. But if He shows up on time, you get the resurrection!

He loved them, SO He stayed. One more, even now:

3. God is not angry; He is filled with affection for me.

I think this is the one that needs to land the most today. Because I have talked to enough of you over the years to know—some of you are in the waiting room and you think you are there as a punishment. You think God is mad at you, and this is what you

get for that thing you did, or didn't do, or said, or didn't say. You're back in church this weekend because you think maybe if you show up, sing the songs, drop something in the offering, God will take His foot off your neck.

I need you to hear me loud and clear. Your wait is not a punishment. Your wait is not a witch hunt. Your wait is not evidence that God is angry with you.

AND the reason I can say that with confidence is because of one verse. Maybe the most famous verse in all of history. John 3:16:

¹⁶ For God so loved THE WORLD that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

For God so loved who? Christians? Good people? People who get it right? No. The world! The angry ones and the bitter ones and the doubting ones and the messed-up ones and the still-figuring-it-out ones. For God so loved the world that he GAVE.

When God sent His Son to a cross, He settled forever, once and for all, whether He knows your name. Whether He cares about your life. Whether He is concerned about what happens to you on a Tuesday afternoon waiting at the doctor's office.

The cross is not just where God forgave your sin. The cross is where God ended the argument about whether He loves you once and for all. He doesn't owe you an explanation in the waiting room. He gave you one on a hill outside Jerusalem two thousand years ago.

C.S. Lewis put it like this famously in his book "The Problem of Pain." He said:

"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Sometimes—and you may not want to hear this today, I get that—sometimes the waiting room is not God punishing you. Sometimes the waiting room is God whispering. And sometimes when whispers don't work, He raises His voice. Not because He's angry. Because He loves you, and the noise of your life had gotten so loud that the only way He could finally get your attention was to take some of the noise away.

And if some of you are honest today, you have not heard from God in a long time, not really, until this season of waiting started. Maybe what you've been calling abandonment was actually invitation the whole time. Maybe what you've been calling silence is actually the most important conversation of your life that you finally have the space to have.

Friend, God's not punishing you! He's pulling you closer! There is a difference between a father's discipline and a father's anger, and what you are sitting in right now is not anger. He is filled with affection for you!

SO, as we bring this in for a landing—and I know this is just scratching the surface, don't miss next week, even if you are traveling catch the message on our app. BUT three things I'm going to ask you to do.

Remember those three lies your brain has been whispering? I'll never be happy again. Nothing good can come from this. There's no point in continuing. I want you to say something else out loud with me right now. I don't care if you believe it yet. I don't care if you feel it yet. Some of you just need to hear yourself say something true in the waiting. Say these with me:

EVEN NOW...

I can be happy again.

Something good can come from this.

There is a point to this wait.

One more time, nice and loud... You don't have to know what the point is yet. You don't have to be able to see it. You just have to know there is one. Because God is not absent. He is not apathetic. And He is not angry. He has not forgotten your name. He is not done writing your story.

AND what He is building in you in this waiting room is what He's going to use you for when He calls your name in the throne room.

If you are here this morning and you'd say you are not a Christian yet, or you're just kicking the tires, I want to give you one next step. Don't walk out on Jesus over His silence. Just don't. The doubt is welcome here. The questions are welcome here. You don't have to resolve every one of them today. Just give Him next Sunday. Come back. Let's keep wading into this together. He is not put off by your doubt. John the Baptist had doubts and Jesus called him the greatest man who ever lived. Your doubt is not a deal-breaker for God.

BUT if you are a believer, and you are sitting in a waiting room right now, somewhere this week, when you feel that knot in your chest, when you feel that 2 a.m. panic rising up, I want you to preach the three "nots" back to your own soul. Out loud, even if it is just a whisper.

Even now, God is not absent; He is present. He is not apathetic; He is attentive. He is not angry; He is filled with affection for me.

In the car. In the shower. Wherever. He is not absent. He is not apathetic. He is not angry.

Renew your mind. Because what your brain is doing to you in the wait is real, and the only thing stronger than what your brain is whispering is what God has already said.

Would you stand with me as I pray for you.

[PRAYER TIME]