

“Faith That Works”
(Level III: Trusting God’s Ways)
When God Says Wait
December 21, 2014

PRELUDE – Angels We Have Heard on High
Worship Songs – Hark the Herald Angels / This I Believe
Feature Song – Sitting, Waiting, Wishing

Drama – “I Wanted a Dog”
Video – “Psalm 13”

As Ladell said, today we are continuing in our series – actually, we are *concluding* our series – “Faith That Works.” And we are dealing with what is probably the most of difficult of all challenges when it comes to trusting in God’s ways of working in our lives – the challenge of *waiting for Him to work*; the challenge of living in the tension between believing – *knowing* – that not only does God truly have our best interest at heart but that He is actually going to do something (or empower us to do something) to bring about those good intentions ... and the fact that He has not yet done so.

That space between knowing that “God *could*” and experiencing that “God *did*” can be one of the loneliest places in all of human existence – at least, for those of us who have faith in Jesus of Nazareth as our savior. So, I think this is probably a fitting conclusion to this series because this is the highest point of the high bar of faith.

And as you know, if you’ve been here over the past several months, there really is a high bar of faith for Christians because faith, as it is illustrated for us in the scriptures, is actually comprised of at least three layers or levels with each building successively upon the other.

As we saw in the first part of this series ...

... the foundation of Christian faith is a firm trust in God’s Ultimate Word – Jesus of Nazareth.

And Jesus is called the ultimate Word of God because He is the exact representation of who God is. When you know and understand Jesus – what He said and what He did – you know and understand God.

And faith at this level trusts that in His birth, His life, His death and His resurrection on the third day – everything that we sang about earlier in the “I Believe” song – God has accomplished something for us that we could never hope to accomplish on our own:

Jesus lived the perfect life that you and I should live (but don’t) and then died the death that we should die as those who have rejected and rebelled against God.

He took our place on both counts and because we trust in His goodness instead of our own, we are made completely righteous and holy before God (“it is by faith you are saved” Paul tells us) ... which is why this is at the foundation.

The second level of faith, we discovered, builds on that foundation with trust in God’s Wisdom ...

... as it is revealed in the teachings of Jesus and his Apostles as well as the writings of the Old Testament.

This kind of faith leads us to align and arrange our lives according to what God says instead of what we think is right or our culture says is right. And if that doesn't happen to some degree – if God's ideas don't begin to affect our ideas – then something is very wrong with our faith. We're missing something along the way.

And then, finally, Christian faith trusts in God's Ways.

It has confidence that God is somehow directing and influencing our lives both for our good and for His greater purposes. As the Apostle Paul put it in one of his most noteworthy statements:

We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. Romans 8:28 (NLT)

And because of that confident knowledge ...

- This kind of faith doesn't quit when what God is doing doesn't make sense to us at the time (which is what we saw in the story of Mary and Joseph).
- This kind of faith is also willing to take a risk and "go" when God says to go (like the Magi from the East just took off and followed the star for six months or so at great expense to themselves).
- And this is also the kind of faith that is patient when God says, "great things I have planned for you ... but not just yet. You must wait." It is able to make the leap from the first half of Psalm 13 to the second half of Psalm 13. Remember what the first part said – what we saw in the video at the beginning? "How long O Lord? Why aren't you doing anything?"

But by the end it became "I trust ... I rejoice ... I sing ... I am thankful for Your goodness to me ... *even though* I am still waiting; even though what you have promised has not yet been received."

That kind of response is what faith looks like at the highest levels.

The Waiting Game

And that's what I want to talk about this morning but, again, I want to say that this is probably the most difficult kind of faith to have in large part because there are so many places in the Bible ...

... where Jesus says things like ...

*"I assure you, even if you had faith as small as a mustard seed you could say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move. Nothing would be impossible."
Matthew 17:20 (NLT)*

On another occasion, he said ...

"Anything is possible if a person believes." Mark 9:23 (NLT)

Those are not unsubstantial promises. It's hard to misinterpret what Jesus is saying: faith of the right kind at the right level can make things happen.

So, when we do what He says – when we ask in faith and do *not* receive; or we believe and speak the word of faith and the mountain in our way does *not* move – we naturally wonder *why*.

“I have faith,” we think, “so why isn't God doing something right now?”

And that's a very fair question; just not necessarily a profitable one. When you look at the examples of people in the scripture who had to wait, very rarely do you see God answering their “why” questions. Very rarely does God tell people why He does (or doesn't do) what He does (or doesn't do).

So, instead of focusing on the “why” – which, unless an angel shows up and tells us (like Gabriel did for Mary and Joseph) is almost always going to be speculative – instead of focusing on the why, I think it's better for us to focus on what we *do* know *for sure* from the examples we see in scripture.

And there are two things I think will be very helpful to understand.

1. Waiting is a normal part of the life of faith.

- If you've ever felt like God is leading you to do something but the doors just won't open ...
- If you have ever become frustrated at the fact that you want to obey God, but you continue to struggle with some of the same old sins and weaknesses ...
- If you have ever longed for God to deliver you from a health problem or a difficult relational struggle or a financial crisis, yet deliverance has not come ...
- If you have ever prayed for God's presence but still felt totally alone ...
- If you have ever believed that God was going to give you a spouse or a job or a child and He has not provided a spouse or a child or a job ...

... what you are experiencing is normal. That doesn't make it any easier but at least you know you're not some weird case.

Author Gary Thomas, in his book, “Authentic Faith” (which I think we still have available in our bookstore) helps us understand why this is true.

He writes:

In spite of our [cultural] obsession with instant results, we serve a God whose calendar moves by millennia, not minutes, and who thinks in terms of generations, not seasons. Unless we understand this about God, we will never understand His ways with us.

The apostle Peter is very clear [Thomas says]:

“With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day.” (2 Peter 3:8)

We are obsessed with where we are today and with what's going to happen in the next year, while *God's plans for this world* often take a long-term view.ⁱ

Therefore ...

“The natural state of the Christian,” Thomas concludes, “is a person who longs for what is to come, even to the point of groaning.”

And in that statement Thomas is alluding to what Paul wrote in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Christians at Rome starting in verse 23.

We Christians, although we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, also groan to be released from pain and suffering. We, too, wait anxiously for that day when God will give us our full rights as his children, including the new bodies he has promised us. Now that we are saved, we eagerly look forward to this freedom.

And then he adds this parenthetical explanation:

If you already have something, you don't need to hope for it. But if we look forward to something we don't have yet, we must wait patiently and confidently. Romans 8:23-25 [NLT]

There's no magic prayer to speed up time. There's no magic activity to make God move. God will move – God will fulfill his promises and answer the prayer of faith – when the time is right. And that time may be tomorrow or next month or next year. It might be 20 years from now. It might not be until the very end of our lives or maybe not even until the life to come – which is what Paul was writing about.

A Great Example

A great example of waiting for God (in this life) is found in what happens right after Jesus is born. The Gospel of Luke tells us that eight days after that incredible holy night in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph take him to the Temple in Jerusalem (five miles up the road from Bethlehem) to be circumcised and dedicated to the Lord – as was the custom for all Jewish boys. (This was before the Magi arrived and before King Herod had become aware that a potential messiah had been born in Bethlehem, so there was no danger at this point).

Luke writes that ...

At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, Simeon was there.

He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, "Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised. I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!" Luke 2:30-32 (NLT)

Luke tells us that ...

Jesus' parents were amazed at what was being said about him. Luke 2:33 (NLT)

Then he goes on to say that ...

Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple ... She was very old. Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshiping God with fasting and prayer.

She came along just as Simeon was talking with Mary and Joseph, and she began praising God. She talked about the child to everyone who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem. Luke 2:37-38 (NLT)

Now, what's going on here is pretty obvious: two really old people who have been given a promise that they were going to get to see the Messiah, and who have been waiting for a really long time for God to bring Him. In fact, Simeon has been waiting so long that after he sees the baby Jesus, he says, "OK, Lord. Take me out. I'm done."

You almost get the impression that his physical body was just spent and he was on his last legs, literally! And, at 84 years old, Anna was likely in the same condition. Both of them would have been spared a lot of pain and aggravation if Jesus had shown up 5 or 10 years earlier! How many mornings did they get out of bed hoping that "maybe, today is the day" and praying "O Lord, please! Let today be the day!"

But He didn't. They had to wait ... so long that *they couldn't even die*.

But even though it was hard, their waiting wasn't intended a punishment. I mean, these are two godly people. And waiting was just part of the deal. It's normal.

2. In fact, waiting is as much a part of God's strategic plan as angelic interventions and signs in the sky because waiting develops godly character in us.

I mean, we rightly associate the big miraculous things with God and God's activity that leads towards His purposes. But God's lack of activity on our behalf – God's "not yet" – also has purpose.

Paul wrote:

Suffering produces endurance, and endurance, character, and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint. Romans 5:3-5 (NIV)

I think part of the reason Simeon and Anna were such godly people was that they had to wait. Their enduring over time served to develop character in them that could not have been accomplished in a shorter period of time. There are simply some things we cannot learn and some levels of maturity we cannot reach unless we wait.

The Lessons of Waiting

So, the obvious question at this point is ... what is it we can learn? What lessons come from waiting? What kinds of character qualities are developed?

We could probably talk about that all day but I'll give you four very quickly that I see not only in the scriptures but also

in my own life and in the lives of others who are Christians – though all of us are, obviously, still works-in-progress.

Waiting Lesson #1. It's *not* all about me.

When our three girls were little, they all went through a phase where they would sometimes throw a temper-tantrum because they didn't get their way. It was a demand that Jetta or I stop whatever we were doing at the time and immediately do what they wanted.

At first, it really bothered me because I took it as a sign of disrespect ... and you just don't do that to your parents. But eventually, I realized that by not responding to the tantrums or whatever demand they were making ... by allowing them to wait, we were teaching them that it wasn't all about them. There were other people in the family that they needed to consider. That's just part of growing up and maturing. As Jetta's father used to say "they came to live with us; we didn't come to live with them."

Now, here's how that works spiritually: we think we are adding God to our lives. We think he has come to live with us. But what is really going on is God is adding us to His. We're coming to live with Him. He was here first. He has an agenda already and he has allowed us to come and join him. Sometimes the only way we can get that through our heads is for us to wait ... and realize that it's not all about us. It's about Him.

Waiting Lesson #2. Contentment regardless of circumstances truly is possible.

We're such an instant society as Gary Thomas wrote that we almost believe that if we don't get our way – and now – we can't be happy. But God wants us to realize that contentment is not a product of what we have or don't have. It's a product of who we are and how we are connected with and relating to Him.

I have experienced times of need and times of abundance. In any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of contentment, whether I go satisfied or hungry, have plenty or nothing. Philippians 4:11-12 (NIV)

And one of the best ways for God to get that message across is to say "wait." Practically speaking, God may want you to have a really good job and a really nice home. Or he may want you to be married and have a family. But more importantly than that, He wants you to know that your contentment is not dependent on those things. And so he may delay those things in your life.

Waiting Lesson #3. God is more defined by His character than by what He does for me.

And this is a really hard concept for a lot of us to master because, as I've mentioned several times in this series, we live in a culture in which the dominant religion – or, at least, the predominant spiritual mindset – is Moralistic Therapeutic Deism ... which says that

- There is a Deity. There is a God or a Divine Power.
- And this God is mostly concerned with me feeling good about myself (that's the Therapeutic part)
- And that all of us act nice and get along (that's the Moralistic part).

And when I need help in those two areas, He (or She or It) shows up and lends a hand and then recedes into the background until I need him/her/it again.

But that is not the God of the Bible. That is not the God of Christianity – the one true God of Israel. And sometimes the only way God can break us of that mentality – that MTD kind of thinking – is to say to us, “I’m not your personal Divine Butler. Wait.”

And when God does not immediately provide my every request, guess what? If I’m going to have a relationship with Him, I will have to learn to appreciate Him for who and what He is *apart* from me and my world and my immediate needs. By the way, when that finally happens to us, we call it worship. And worship is a great sign of maturity. It’s different from being thankful. Thankfulness is about what’s happened (or not happened) to me. Worship is about God and who he is with me nowhere in the picture.

And you can see this in the example of Simeon and Anna. Where were they when Jesus finally showed up? In the Temple ... worshipping. For more years than either of them could remember God had been saying “wait, it’s not time.”

And so they couldn’t say “Oh, God is so great because of how He just fulfilled another promise in my life.” Instead, they learned to say, “Even though I have not yet received the promise, God is so great because of who He is and how he was fulfilling promises long before I arrived on the scene and how He will be doing so long after I depart.”

Waiting produced an awe that was more defined by God’s character apart from them than by God’s actions towards them.

One more lesson – and this one really is extra credit. This one really is hard to grasp and even harder to experience. It’s an evidence of great maturity.

Waiting Lesson #4. Love for God must eventually surpass faith *in* God.

When you know that God could act (and in many cases has promised to act) and yet God doesn’t act ... and even remains inactive for a long-time (like, maybe, 84 years), there’s only one reason you stay with God. And that is, you have been so awestruck by His character – by who He is apart from anything He does for you – you are so awestruck by His character that you simply love him.

There just comes a point where the issue of trusting God to do the right thing by you is not even a question anymore. You’ve hung in there so long with God (and He with you) that your relationship moves beyond trust (although it’s still there) and hoping (though it is still there, too) to love.

I think it’s fascinating that Paul writes that ...

These three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.
1 Corinthians 13:13

... which echoes what Jesus said when asked what was the greatest commandment in the Law of Moses. He said it was “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”
(Mark 12:30-31)

There’s nothing higher than loving God.

I think it's even more fascinating that the word for love in the Greek manuscript here is *agape* – which means love without conditions; love “just because.” We typically (and correctly) associate that word with God's love for us but it's also the kind of love we're to have towards him. God should be loved in the same way He loves us – unconditionally.

We love Him, the Apostle John says, because He first loved us. We receive love and therefore we can give love. Love at some point surpasses faith. And the way that happens more often than not is through waiting.

What Now?

Well, those are a few of the lessons that can be learned during the “Divine Delays” of our lives, some of which can be learned *only* through waiting.

But knowing that waiting produces maturity doesn't necessarily make it any easier. So, if you're in waiting mode, what should you do? How do you handle it? How do you avoid becoming like the people in the dramatic reading – bitter, jaded and disillusioned?

- For one thing, I think you start praying for God's patience to characterize your life. Obviously, God is patient as he does not seem to be in any kind of rush.
- For another, I think you focus on what God is trying to do *in* you instead of for you and you try to cooperate with that. Obviously, if you're waiting for Him to act and He has not acted, clearly your personal growth and development is part of his agenda.
- Finally, I think you ask God to help you take the long view on things: specifically, what He has done before you arrived on the planet and what He's going to be doing after you depart. Even though He has chosen not to do anything in your present time, he has still done great things in the past and has great things planned for the future ...

... which brings us back to Level I faith: what God has already said and already done in Jesus of Nazareth in the past and because of that, is guaranteed to do in the future.

At the very beginning of this series, you may remember I said that what happens to a lot of good Christian people – and I've seen it over and over through the years – is that we get messed up because all we're trying to do is figure out our present circumstances, “what is God doing?” And, it's just so subjective and so often so speculative. Now, sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's clear. But a lot of times it's just, “I don't get it!” And it's easy to get discouraged and disillusioned, which is why we always need to go back to Level I clarity about who Jesus is and what he has done.

As one commentator puts it:

Jesus is not Lord because he rescues people from cancer. He is not Lord because he saves the depressed or fixes finances. He is Lord because he rose from the dead. It's that simple.

The Apostle Paul doesn't hang all of Christian faith on whether or not things work out the way we think they should today or tomorrow. He hangs it on whether or not Jesus really did rise from the dead because that is the event that changes everything for the future. Jesus began the renewal of all things in his resurrection and because of that we can

have confidence and faith that the current state of our lives, even of this whole world, is not God's final answer.

Waiting, for those of us who believe, is not blind hope of someone who has no other option. Instead, it is a confident trust that eventually God is going to set all things right even if it's not within our preferred timeframe.

And I hope you have that confidence this morning. Let me pray to that end.

<PRAYER>

Feature – Walk By Faith

CLOSING COMMENTS

Two things before we leave ...

1. Schedule reminder:
 - a. Christmas Eve 4:00 or 5:30
 - b. Next Sunday
 - i. One service only at 11
 - ii. Pancake breakfast at 9:30 - Cris Cakes
 - iii. Sign up for pancakes – tear off now and put in offering basket as we leave.

2. Offering at door ... Excellence Challenge Update

Project info

“I’m not sure why this matters, Rick”

See Haggai chapter 1:9 complaint God made against his people:

“My house lies in ruins,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, “while all of you are busy building your own fine houses.”

Translation: you’re concerned about excellence in your stuff but not mine.

“Go up into the hills, bring down timber, and rebuild my house. Then I will take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the Lord.” v8

Status info

Goal	\$155,000
Given	\$71,059 (46%)
Remaining	\$83,941

Matching info

Thanks to a generous donor, all contributions towards the Excellence Challenge that are received by Christmas will be MATCHED. That means if you were planning to give \$50, it just became \$100! \$200 just became \$400! \$1000 just became \$2000! \$4,000 just became \$8,000!

If you're planning to support us in this endeavor and take advantage of the matching offer, make sure to mark your contribution clearly this Sunday or at one of the Christmas Eve services. (If you're not able to attend either of those, you can always donate online by clicking below. Make sure you fill in the correct box for the Excellence Challenge once on the page!)

Endnotes

ⁱ Gary Thomas, Authentic Faith, pg 43.