

“While I’m Waiting”: A Theology of Suffering And God’s Timing

“Until the time came to fulfill his dreams, the Lord tested Joseph’s character.” (Psalm 105:19, NLT)

I was 21 when I decided I was mature enough to begin dating in order to get married. I was almost 36 when my wife and I began dating. What transpired in the 15 years in between occupied over 200,000 words in a journal I kept to record my thoughts and prayers to God in this time where I tried over and over to get married and failed.

I truly believe the American church does not deal enough with what it means to wait on God. That could be said about several topics, but this one seems to go under the radar despite the fact I have talked with and counseled dozens of people who were struggling with waiting on God.

It’s not just my experience, though. The Bible makes it clear that God’s will is often about timing (Gen. 18:14; Hab. 2:3-4; Acts 17:26; Romans 5:6). And that means waiting when God’s timing is different than ours. Abraham was told he’d have descendants like the sands of the sea or stars of the sky and then waited 25 years for one child. Joseph had a dream that went unfilled for 20 years, with 13 of them spent as a slave or in prison or both. David was promised to be king as a teenager, only to have to wait half his life to finally become king, after years of being on the run from Saul, hiding in caves, once pretending to be insane, and all manner of undignified circumstances. In Habakkuk 2:3-4 God basically admits he seems slow to us sometimes.

This is why the more than 60 lament psalms in the Bible get to me. They help understand what some of the people in the Bible felt while they waited on God. It sounds harsh when someone says, "Arouse Yourself, why do You sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not reject us forever. Why do You hide Your face and forget our affliction and our oppression?" Or "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far away when I groan for help?"

Yet, I get this. Better than just about anything else, this part of the Bible resonates with me. Those 200,000 words I wrote were dark and extremely emotional at times. **Many** times I wrote things like this:

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I have said before in this very journal that my inability to get a woman that I like to also like me could be what wrecks my faith. I thought about that earlier as I was praying. At one point I just stopped because I feel like it does no good. I go back and forth, too. I think for a while that the fact I am single could be an evidence that there is no God or that he is not sovereign or that he just doesn't care. 13 years and thousands of prayers have had zero affect on him. None. Praying seems useless.

I don't know if Joseph ever felt this way. But some people in the Bible did. David wrote lament psalms. Abraham and Sara tried to force God's will 11 years into waiting. Habakkuk accused God of not listening when he cried for help. And while I don't know her words, I do know that Hannah prayed with bitterness for God to give her a son before Samuel was born.

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paralyzed with grief. I thought about death. I thought that anything would be preferable to the pain I was in.

But beyond the journal entries, there were times as I was waiting on God that my pain was so intense and overwhelming that my world was crushed by darkness and desperation. I want to use words like “depression” and “anxiety” to describe some days. But I don’t even think those words do it justice. I can tell you this: there were nights I was so dead inside I could not sleep. Nothing brought me even an ounce of joy. I once slept five hours total over four nights. One time stared at a wall for hours because I had no motivation to do anything else. There were times I was so disquieted all I could do was walk around my church, not being able to be still or think about anything for more than a second, feeling completely paralyzed with grief. I thought about death. I thought that anything would be preferable to the pain I was in.

And one thing I learned, again from the Bible and reality, is that when you think God is just about done making you wait, the situation may get worse. Read the first few chapters of Exodus. After waiting 430 years for God to deliver his people from Egyptian slavery as He promised, God finally sends his rescuer to save his people. And they are saved, right? No. Exodus 5 happens. Read Genesis 22. After those 25 years of waiting for one son, God asked Abraham to sacrifice him. When Hannah finally had a child, she gave him back to God. In my personal life, Kayla and I got together in March 2014 and my journal proves that February of that year gave me one of my biggest steps backwards in all the 15 years of waiting.

I’m not writing this for sympathy. I have gotten more of that than I’ve deserved in my life. I also confess that this isn’t all righteous suffering. I contributed to a lot of it. But I’m writing this because people need to know that both the Bible and human experience prove that waiting on God can mess with your mind in disturbing ways. It can rip your soul apart. It

can challenge how much you trust God. Yet for so many people, it is God's will that they wait.

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When I was at my worst, there was nothing that I could do to alleviate the pain. But there were many times I was struggling but could sense hope and purpose in what God was doing. Those times I would listen to ["While I'm Waiting"](#) by John Waller or ["You Know Better Than I"](#) from the movie *Joseph: King of Dreams*. Those songs with those lyrics communicate the truths that I want to communicate now: that no matter how bad it gets, waiting on God is essential to knowing him because without faith it is impossible to please God. He has to teach us that He is in charge, that He knows what he's doing, that His way and His timing is much, much better than ours. And that he is worthy of our worship when we do not understand. Isn't that the point of God's "answer" to Job in Job 38-41?

Kayla proves that God does know better than I do. I have no regrets. And regardless if I had never gotten married, God still knows best. I used to read and meditate on Hebrews 11:38 that says some died without having received what was promised. That may be the end truth for some. I have friends who waited over a decade to be able to conceive to have children. And have friends who never had them. But the bottom line is that even though darkness causes us to feel like God may not know best, He does. One of the most important statements of the thousands I wrote in my journal was: *"What I feel and what is true may be two totally different things."* I think God gave us the lament Psalms and Habakkuk to teach us that.

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I don't talk to people in cliches. Suffering and waiting have beaten those out of me. And I try to remember that when someone is in the abyss, hearing "God knows what he's doing" may be the right medicine at the wrong time. Today you may need my journal entry from above. Or Psalm 88. But at some point we all need to recognize that even in our suffering that God is God and we are not. And the only thing to do while waiting is to worship Him. Because He deserves it.

I remember once while in my car waiting for a right turn, but the car ahead of me would not go. I got so mad. I was ready to lay on the horn and yell at the top of my lungs for them to get out of my way. But I soon discovered that the car was waiting because a child was in the road. A child I could not see.

God always sees. And waiting has a purpose, whether you ever learn it or not. So for the single, the childless, the suffering with no end in sight, this is for you. The church will always teach on marriage and parenting. We need more teaching on waiting on God. Because so many of his saints in the Bible had to. And so many of his saints today have to. I thank God for May 30, 2015, the day I stood at an altar and promised forever to a woman I waited for my whole adult life. But I'd be a fool not to thank him for the 15 years, 200,000 words and sleepless nights before that. They both were God's plan. And they both are a part my theology.