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Waiting

Teach us, O Lord, the disciplines of patience,
for to wait is often harder than to work.

—PETER MARSHALL

People often ask me why I chose to practice emergency medicine. The answer is easy—I hate waiting. If there is one word in the English language that I cannot stand, it's the word *wait*.

I don't like anything about it. I don't like standing still. I don't like not knowing exactly when something is going to happen. I don't like idle instability and open-ended sentences. I'm a "fix-it, get-'er-done" kind of person, through and through.

I hate waiting so much that I'd rather resuscitate people than spend another minute in the waiting room. I'd rather be quickly seated at Denny's than wait around for a table at a hipper restaurant. I'd rather hang up on the customer service rep than get my money back on a big-ticket item. (You get the picture!)

If you look up the word *waiting* in a dictionary, you'll find synonyms like *a period of waiting*, *a pause*, *an interval*, or *a delay*. If you think I hate waiting, let me tell you what I think is even worse than waiting: delays. Anyone who has ever traveled anywhere (and God bless those of you who have traveled with toddlers!) understands

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the frustration of a delay. It's horrific. It's painful. It's inevitable.

So I find it ironic that God not only uses delays in our lives, but purposefully orchestrates them as part of His master plan to shape us

into His likeness. Make a mental list of the men and women that God has used mightily for His glory and you will find yourself staring at a list of folks who became experts in delays and waiting.

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There's Abraham who waited until he was one hundred years old to have his promised son, Isaac. There's Joseph who waited for years until God finally broke open the door of his prison cell to use him. Then there's

Moses who waited for forty years in the wilderness to live out God's call for him, and David who waited in the stronghold before he became king. Even Samson waited until his hair grew back before he could accomplish the job that God had called him to do.

If you think the biblical examples are the only ones we have, you're wrong. For years my friend Beth believed God would give her a child. Instead of giving birth, God has allowed Beth to go through thirteen miscarriages. Lisa, a friend of mine in full-time ministry, believes God has called her to adopt a daughter from Haiti, an orphan. She has pursued adoption plans but has faced several obstacles along the way. The adoption Lisa believed would happen in obedience to God's call has turned into an agonizing time of waiting while governmental bureaucracy drags on. Yes, waiting is part of God's great plan for you and me, yet nothing seems more painful to us than the agony of waiting.

Why is waiting part of God's perfect plan?

If I were forced to pick favorites, I'd still choose the Israelites as my poster people for waiting. Waiting for an hour for your doctor

can stretch your patience, but try waiting for forty years in a wilderness until you reach the promised land. Whoa, Nelly!

The Israelites were slaves in Egypt until God called them out of their place of bondage. They assumed the tough days were behind them, and were more than a little surprised when they found themselves trudging through the wilderness day after agonizingly long day.

It seems counterintuitive that God would go to such great lengths to deliver His people, only to have them land in a wilderness of waiting for forty long and painful years. *Couldn't the God who saved Israel now make the way easy for them? Couldn't the God who parted the Red Sea snap His fingers and make something happen?*

To be honest with you, it's easy for me to sympathize with the people of Israel. When I answered God's call to leave my Egypt, I had great dreams of the life ahead. (I bet you did too.) I packed my meager bags and got ready to hit the road. I looked forward to the better life ahead. *With God on my side, what could go wrong?*

A lot, apparently. When life suddenly comes to a screeching halt and the wilderness threatens to undo us, we look up and begin to question God. We quickly get tired of the same old manna. We feel parched but can't find any water to drink. Our questions turn to frustration and anger. *Did God really call me out of Egypt? Or did I take a wrong turn somewhere? Has God forgotten me? Was I imagining His call? Will the waiting ever end?* Dreams remain unfulfilled. Prayers go unanswered. The silence overwhelms us. A blanket of confusion covers us.

Once in a while on a busy shift in the ER, I'll walk into a room and the patient will greet me like this: "Hey, Doc, I thought you forgot about me." I chuckle. Little do the patients know that back in my corner where I spend most of my time is a computer. On the computer is the exact location of every patient in the ER. I know when they walked in. I know where they're sitting. I know exactly how long it's

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been that they've been waiting for me. I also know something that would set my patients free if they knew it too: when there is a delay, there's always a really good reason for it.

When the waiting gets tedious and I catch myself feeling forgotten by God, I make myself stop and I remember this truth: if God has delayed in answering, then there must be a reason for it.

REASONS FOR THE WAITING

I believe there are four specific reasons why God allows His children to wait.

1. The waiting is meant to help us grow.

The people of Israel had a problem. They had spent their whole lives being slaves and were now called to be warriors. They barely knew how to hold a spear, let alone aim it correctly and hit their mark. God was aware of this weakness that the Israelites had, and it was not a minor one. The people of Israel were not aware of it. Remember the passage we looked at in Exodus 13:17–18:

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, "Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt." But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle.

In other words, God purposefully sent His people the long way to the promised land, not because He didn't care for them but because He knew something they did not know: their capacity to fight the enemy was still limited. They needed to get stronger. They needed to learn how to fight. They needed to become a strong nation that would

override the enemy to claim the promised land.

I usually think I know all the answers to my life problems. I get frustrated when God doesn't cooperate by giving me what I want, when I want it. Do you ever feel that way? When God called me to a life in full-time ministry, I thought that accepting His call was the biggest step of faith I'd ever take. I naïvely expected God to "make it all happen" for me right then and there. So when the Christian blog that I started for God's glory didn't explode and reach thousands of readers by its first year, I was puzzled. *Didn't God want me to succeed?* And when the Bible study that I was teaching didn't catch fire, I accused God of messing with my mind. *Didn't You want me to be in full-time ministry? Wasn't this Your idea? What's with the waiting? Why the delays?* I couldn't see then what I see more clearly now: the day that God called me into a life of ministry, I still wasn't ready to receive all that God had for me. I had to grow into the job that God was fitting me for. I had to learn how to write. I had to learn how to teach God's Word.

What I forgot in the waiting is that God is the Potter and I am the clay. He's the one who is shaping me and reworking me into the perfect vessel for His use. All I have to do is trust Him to finish the work in His time.

2. The waiting is meant to protect us.

Read what Deuteronomy 7:22 says: "The LORD your God will clear away these nations before you little by little. You may not make an end of them at once, lest the wild beasts grow too numerous for you."

Wait. Wild beasts? I thought the enemy nations were the only obstacle the people of Israel had to worry about. Who said anything about wild beasts?

Here's something you need to know: God makes a habit of protecting us from dangers we haven't even imagined or predicted.

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A few years ago I was ready to change jobs. I knew God had called me to full-time ministry, but I was still working in an academic medical center with its rigors and demands. I was anxious to move on. I had an online writing ministry that was growing, and I was teaching more and more Bible studies in one of the largest churches in the United States. Instead of worrying about medical grants, I wanted to focus on Bible study facts. I was in a rush to get there.

For two years I thought about changing jobs, until one day I took action. I heard about an opportunity across town that sounded perfect. I applied for it, but the door slammed in my face so hard I can still feel its impact. How could God allow this to happen to me? The next three months were uneventful. I waited. Then one day I got a call. It was from a third hospital across town where some of my friends worked. A position had become available. The call was unexpected; I hadn't gone looking for it, but the job was perfect for me. The pay was higher, the hours less than anything I'd heard of before, and my partners were idyllic. I couldn't have crafted a better fit for myself if I'd tried. That job would allow me to transition into the women's ministry director role at my church because of its flexibility. Ironically, I would later be given the chance to moonlight at the hospital where the door had slammed in my face. It turned out that I hated working at that hospital. Every shift that I worked there was a reminder to me of God's grace in my life. Every shift that I spent there was a reminder that God knows what I need far more than I do.

God never makes mistakes. He knows what's best for His children. And He sometimes allows us to spend time in the wilderness of waiting for our own protection. Won't you trust Him in your season of waiting?

3. The waiting is meant to test us.

So far we've talked about how God uses the waiting to grow our faith and to protect us from unseen dangers. In Deuteronomy 8:2, we're given the third reason for waiting: "You shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not."

I've taken enough tests in my life to know that I don't like them. Yet God often uses the delays in our life to test us. He uses the waiting to see if we will lean on Him in complete dependence or if we will choose our own wisdom instead. The Bible often uses the imagery of refining silver as an example of the way God tests us. In Zechariah 13:9, it says, "I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested."

Refining silver is not easy. It's fierce work. It involves beating the silver and hammering it in the perfect places to make it as pure and refined as possible. It's work that takes time. It's work that involves the searing pain of fire. It's work that will test you until you feel like you're going to crack.

But under the skillful, loving hand of the Master, cracking is never a risk. God's plan is not to crack us but to test us.

Remember Peter, the fisherman turned fisher of men? He understood the importance of testing on the road to living out God's call. He says in 1 Peter 1:7, "So that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

Waiting is a test that every follower of Jesus Christ will have to take over and over again.

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4. The waiting is meant to purify us.

Once in a while, the waiting in our life is extended because of our own sinfulness. Malachi 3:2–3 explains this kind of waiting: “For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD.”

God’s Word in Ezekiel 22:19–20 is even stronger:

Because you have all become dross, therefore, behold, I will gather you into the midst of Jerusalem. As one gathers silver and bronze and iron and lead and tin into a furnace, to blow the fire on it in order to melt it, so I will gather you in my anger and in my wrath, and I will put you in and melt you.

Ouch! Sadly, the Israelites became well-versed in the purification process. The Israelites could have entered the promised land earlier on in their journey, but their own sin in the wilderness prolonged their waiting from a long weekend to an extended-stay vacation. As you consider your own life, ask yourself whether it is your own sin that is keeping you in the land of waiting.

I’m so grateful for God’s commitment to my purification. I’m so thankful that He won’t allow the dross to accumulate in my life. But I’ve often wondered how much of my time in the wilderness has been caused by my own sin and stubbornness.

This is a great time to discuss the common temptations we face in times of waiting with the hope that we will avoid falling prey to them.

TEMPTATIONS WE FACE IN THE WAITING

Let’s review a bit. God called the people of Israel out of Egypt. They were to go to the promised land. They soon hit the wilderness. The

wilderness was there for a reason. It was meant to make them stronger and to protect them. It was meant to test them and to grow their faith. It was a time of purification.

But instead of seeing God's provision for them in the waiting, all the Israelites could see was the tragedy of their plight. Instead of being thankful for God's presence along the way, all they could do was focus on what they thought were horrible circumstances. Instead of looking upward to the pillar of fire, they looked inward at their own unmet cravings.

They just didn't get it.

By the time we get to Exodus 32, we have a pretty good idea of the kind of people the Israelites were. They were fickle, fair-weather people. They didn't deserve God's goodness, yet God never gave up on them. He had made an unconditional promise to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob, and He was committed to the people He had called to Himself.

One day, Moses went up on the mountain for an extended meeting with God. The meeting lasted forty days, but for the people of Israel it felt like a lifetime. Here's how it rolled in Exodus 32:1:

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."

Wait. What just happened? The people of Israel, tired of waiting on God, made four drastic mistakes, giving us a perfect example of what *not* to do when delays come our way.

1. Don't take matters into your own hands.

Tired of waiting for Moses to come back, the people of Israel figured they didn't need God or Moses. They could make things happen

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on their own. If you've ever tried this before, you know that it's not a great plan.

When I first became the women's ministry director at my church, I had a huge learning curve ahead. Though I knew the position was part of God's call on my life, I had a hard time adjusting to church life. I was an ER doctor used to getting what I wanted when I wanted it. One particular month, things got pretty bad. I prayed. When God didn't answer me in a minute, I decided to take matters into my own hands.

I quit.

I really did. It was dumb. It was selfish. At first, I felt vindicated. I'd showed them who was boss. I woke up the next morning and realized that I'd just made the biggest mistake of my life. God had called me to a life in ministry but the moment things didn't go my way, I bailed. I was really doing a great job of proving to God that I was the right candidate for His work. (Yeah, right!)

When the Israelites decided to take matters into their own hands, things didn't turn out well for them. By the end of that day, twenty-three thousand of them would die.

By God's grace, my suffering was small compared to the Israelites. My job was restored, but I had to learn some humbling lessons in the process. I was beginning to learn a critical lesson that every follower of Christ must learn: choosing to take matters into your own hands, when God has called you to wait, is a big deal. Waiting for Him to act will always yield joy.

2. Don't turn to others for approval.

Let me tell you about a man named Aaron. He was the head priest, God's guy. He was Moses' brother, and he'd been around since the beginning. He had seen all God had done for Israel up close and personal. God had used him mightily. Moses trusted him. The people respected him. But when faced with a delay, Aaron did what we're all

tempted to do when faced with the same situation.

He looked to others for approval. He valued people's opinions more than he honored God's. He caved to the pressures around him instead of standing strong in the Lord. The people of Israel offered to put him on a bit of a pedestal. They made him feel more important than he really was. And he fell for it hook, line, and sinker. The next thing you know, Aaron was making a golden calf for the people of Israel in a desperate effort to please them.

How easily swayed by public opinion we are. Instead of turning to the Lord for approval and for the answers we need, we take public opinion surveys and poll everyone we know on how we ought to behave. We neglect God's Word and its absolute authority in our lives, and we choose to impress others instead.

Whose opinion is most important to you? Who are you seeking to please in your life?

3. Don't turn to idols for comfort.

The golden calf incident brought the demise of many of the people of Israel. It caused them death. It separated them from God. It delayed them from entering the promised land. It would necessitate a mediator and their heartfelt repentance.

It's easy to turn to idols for comfort during times of prolonged waiting. If God doesn't provide what we think we need, we'll find a way to get it without His help.

I've been single a long, long time. I know all about the waiting. I waited forever for my first date. I waited even longer for my first kiss. And I'm still waiting for my happily ever after. At one point in my life, I felt like I'd waited long enough for the Lord to provide a perfect man for me. When He didn't, I was hurt. Didn't God think I was good enough to get married? Didn't He care about me? Soon my hurt turned to resentment. Could I trust this God who created me

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with a desire for marriage but didn't make provision for my need? It didn't take long for my resentment to turn to sin. Instead of turning to the Lord with my need, I chose to turn to my own idols for comfort. After a while, no matter how hard I tried, it seemed I couldn't get victory over certain sins in my life.

The worst part of my story is that I blamed God for my sin. I was miserable. I was broken. Was this the life that God had called me to? If the cross of Jesus was supposed to change everything, how come it wasn't changing me? Why did I find more satisfaction in my idols than I did in the Lord? Had I missed some basic link in Christianity? What was happening to me?

It took me a long time to understand a very basic step in gaining victory over besetting sins and idolatry in my life. Only God will satisfy me completely, but the only way to get rid of the idols in my life is to destroy them completely and make room for the Lord instead.

In Exodus 32:20, when Moses came down from his mountain meeting with the Lord, it says that "he took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered

it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it."

If you long for freedom more than you long for anything else in your life, you must take an initial step of faith and kill your idols.

There is no other way of dealing with your idols than to utterly and completely destroy them. You can't negotiate your way out of them. You can't keep on justifying them. You can't overintellectualize them or ignore them or bury them.

If you long for freedom more than you long for anything else in your life, you must take an initial step of faith and kill your idols.

Take a hammer and destroy them. Throw them in the fire. Burn away the dross. Fall on your knees in repentance and ask God for mercy.

He always gives it. He's provided a mediator, Jesus Christ, who's already paid the price for your freedom. In your time of waiting, let Him be your joy instead of turning to your idols for comfort. He's the only one who can fully satisfy you.

4. *Don't tell yourself lies about your circumstances.*

The people of Israel told themselves lies about their circumstances. When they looked for Moses and didn't find him, they told each other that Moses was gone forever. They convinced themselves that the only way out was to do it their own way, and they turned their lives into one huge disaster. They believed the lie that God didn't care about them and had forgotten them.

When I'm in the wilderness of waiting, it's easy for me to tell myself lies about my own circumstances: God has forgotten me. He doesn't care about me. If He really wanted me here, life wouldn't be so hard. If His call was for real, I wouldn't feel so weak.

I begin to doubt His love, and I question His promises. I wonder about His goodness. *Can God truly be trusted?*

Nothing will steal the Christian's joy like believing lies about God. It's blasphemous and destructive. We must learn to replace the lies with God's truth.

Do you want to know the worst part about the disaster in the wilderness? In the very last verse of Exodus 31, right before the people of Israel gave up on Moses and decided he wasn't coming back to the camp, we're told: "[God] gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God" (v. 18).

In other words, it was literally right before the golden calf incident that Moses was headed back to the camp armed with the tablets from God. The waiting was just about over.

If only the people of Israel had been willing to patiently wait just

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one more day in the wilderness. If only they hadn't given up. If only . . .

What wilderness are you going through right now? Are you tempted to give up? Has the waiting gone on too long? Are you tempted to take matters into your own hands and escape the waiting that God has trusted you with?

Consider this: there is another way. It's the way of waiting well. Do you want to learn it?

HOW TO WAIT WELL

God had given a vision for Habakkuk's life. I guess you can call it a radical calling. It will fill you with joy when you know that God has called you to do something special for Him. Most of us grab on to that and want to go all out for God in order to fulfill His calling in our life. We feel special. We want to see Him do something bigger than us.

The problem is that we can't accomplish spiritual goals without spiritual strategies, and spiritual strategies typically involve waiting. Here's what Habakkuk 2:3 says: "For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay."

That's good news and that's bad news, my friend.

It's bad news if you don't like waiting because God's promise to us is that pursuing His calling is a definite time of waiting. Unfortunately, because we as Christ's followers often misunderstand the reasons for the waiting season, doubts and fears arise. Though I've rushed God more times than I can think, by God's grace I'm also learning how to wait well.

1. You must wait on His promises.

Here's a fact: God's promises will always come to pass. Every one of the words He has spoken will take place. God is always true. He is

always faithful. Despite all of Israel's sin, God remained true to His promise to Abraham and was faithful even to the stiff-necked people of Israel. He's incredible that way.

When I was sixteen God gave me a promise: He who began a good work in me would complete it in Jesus Christ. I didn't know how He would get it done, but I was given the promise that He would. It doesn't matter how long God wants me to wait or how many delays come my way, God will remain true to His promise.

God has given me many other promises since that day. He's promised to set me apart for the works that He has planned for me. He's promised to anoint me to bring good news to the poor. He's promised to go with me wherever He commands me to go. He's promised to forgive me when I repent, and He's promised that I am not condemned in Christ. He's given you those exact same promises too!

We don't always have all the details, but we do have all of God's promises. God's Word is what we can hang on to when our circumstances look uncertain. God's Word is our hope when our feelings are erratic. God's Word is our stability in time of trouble. His Word is our hope in the wilderness. His Word is our security when we don't have the answers. His Word is our rest in the monotonous drudgery of the waiting.

Are you becoming more and more familiar with God's Word in your life? Do you spend time in His Word? Do you pore over it and ask God to speak to you through His Word? Maybe it's time to start so that when the waiting comes, you have a solid place to pitch your tent and dwell on the faithfulness of God's promises!

2. You must wait in His presence.

One of the scariest chapters in the life of the people of Israel came right after the golden calf incident. I mentioned that twenty-three thousand people died on that day. What's even worse than this tragedy

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is that immediately following the plague, God sent the people of Israel off into the wilderness with an angel as their guide.

Up until that point, God had been their guide. This was horrible news for the Israelites and for Moses. Here's how God put it: "I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people" (Ex. 33:3).

God was going to remove His presence from the people of Israel. The people of Israel freaked out. It says in Exodus 33:4 that "when the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments."

For Moses, it wasn't even an option. In Exodus 33:12–23, Moses summed up his perspective on the situation like this: God, if You don't lead me, if You don't go with me, I'm not going anywhere. I'd rather die than go without You.

Have you gotten to the place in your life where life isn't even imaginable or possible without God's manifest presence? The key to enjoying God's manifest presence is a total and complete turning away from your sin. Are you living the kind of life that welcomes God's manifest presence, or are you stubbornly holding on to your sin?

It is only in the Lord's presence that the wilderness of waiting becomes a place of great comfort. Are you willing to do whatever it takes to remain in His presence? His presence, after all, is the safest place to live.

3. You must wait for Him patiently.

When we started this chapter, I confessed to you that I don't like waiting. As an ER doctor, one of the worst things to wait for is the lab. No matter when the lab gets the specimen, the answer I get when I call them is that it's going to take five minutes more for the results to come back. *Seriously?*

Waiting on God can feel a little bit like waiting on lab results. It

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always seems to take just five minutes more than we have. Most of us are low on patience. And it feels like forever before we see any results. How long are you willing to wait on the Lord? Isaiah 64:4 says, “From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him.” God doesn’t ignore His children. He isn’t oblivious to our waiting.

He is good. He knows what we need. He sees every bend in the road. He knows every bump on the way. His delays are for our good. He’s like a good father who won’t let his seven-year-old get behind the wheel, because, well, it’s not time to drive yet. He’s like the mother of a thirteen-year-old girl who reminds her daughter that it’s too early to give your heart away, lest it get broken. God knows that there’s a perfect time and a perfect season for everything. He makes everything beautiful in its time.

God hasn’t forgotten you. He isn’t busy solving other people’s problems while neglecting yours. He is always perfecting that which concerns your life. He loves you.

I told you that there’s good news and bad news about waiting on God. I’ve already given you the bad news. But I think it’s time for some good news. Maybe you missed the second half of Habakkuk 2:3. Here’s what it says: “If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.”

The good news is that the waiting will end! Before you know it, the wilderness days will be in your rearview mirror, and you find yourself on the other side of it, still standing.

In the next chapter, we’re going to talk about one of the most critical things that God wants to strip His children of; I’m talking about pride.