

				Waiting		
		Isn't				
				a Waste		

THE SURPRISING COMFORT OF TRUSTING
GOD IN THE UNCERTAINTIES OF LIFE

MARK VROEGOP

FOREWORD BY JEN WILKIN

“Years ago a friend said to me, ‘The only thing worse than waiting on the Lord is wishing you had.’ Most of us, in varying degrees, don’t like to wait. But all of us will wait, and we will wait on God. His timetable doesn’t always sync with ours. What do we do while we wait? Mark Vroegop teaches us that waiting on God is living on what we know to be true about God when we don’t know what is true about our life. Thank you, Mark, for sharing with us how and why to wait and doing so in such a clear, biblical, transferable way. What a treasure!”

Crawford W. Lorritts Jr., speaker; radio host; author; Founder and President, Beyond Our Generation

“*Waiting Isn’t a Waste* is full of timely and practical encouragement for every reader. Instead of trying to avoid waiting at all costs, this book will help you embrace it as a good gift from God.”

Ruth Chou Simons, *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author; artist; Founder, GraceLaced

“Waiting is one of the most difficult parts of life, yet also the most common. Most of life involves waiting. The speed of modern life tempts us to view all waiting as a waste. Mark Vroegop helps us develop a biblical framework for waiting on God, inviting us to see times of waiting as opportunities for worship and growth. Viewed rightly, waiting provides pathways to contentment and calmness—a healthy, nonpressured embracing of life as God intended it. This timely, readable book will be edifying to everyone who reads it.”

Gavin Ortlund, President, Truth Unites; Theologian-in-Residence, Immanuel Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“Waiting fills the gap between our current reality and our unrealized expectations. While we may feel stuck, forgotten, disappointed, and confused, Mark Vroegop’s new book *Waiting Isn’t a Waste* faithfully reminds us that God is purposefully at work in transformative ways. This book is a helpful and needed encouragement to live in the truth of what we know about God when we don’t understand his plan for our lives.”

Melissa B. Kruger, author; Vice President of Discipleship Programming, The Gospel Coalition

“I had no idea the Bible said so much about waiting. As someone with a terrible reputation for being impatient, this is not surprising. This book is a godsend to me and others in our day. How desperately we need to hear the biblical and practical wisdom it contains.”

Daniel L. Akin, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This is an important book for all of us who think that waiting is unproductive and annoying. Whether in the doctor’s waiting room or at a red light or, worse yet, in a life crisis that makes us vulnerable to the dark riders of fear, anxiety, and doubt, waiting is rarely thought of as a friend. Thankfully, Mark Vroegop has given us a fresh biblical perspective that radically changes our view of waiting. With practical steps forged through his own experience, Vroegop leads us into a new appreciation for the ‘waits’ of life as we place our trust in our God who is at work for our good and his glory when our lives seem stuck on pause.”

Joe Stowell, Bible teacher; special assistant to the President, Moody Bible Institute

“It is hard to think of a less requested yet more urgently needed project than a rehabilitation of our practical theology of waiting. Packed with insight into the intersection of waiting and hope, waiting and intentionality, waiting and the trustworthiness of God, waiting and building enduring Christian community, this book is laden with distillations of Scripture that I sincerely pray will change how you and I live every day for the rest of our lives.”

J. Alasdair Groves, Executive Director, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation; coauthor, *Untangling Emotions*

“I stink at waiting. I really do. In recent days, I have been reminded of this. This is why I was thankful to know this rare, timely book had been written. *Waiting Isn’t a Waste* was exactly what I needed to press against my impatience and remind me how much waiting is a part of God’s good plan for all of us. Everything Mark Vroegop writes is clear, biblical, practical, and thoughtful, and this book is no exception. Whether you are a pastor, church member, or simply someone looking for hope in the waiting, this book is definitely for you. I know of nothing like it.”

Brian Croft, Executive Director, Practical Shepherding

“With Mark Vroegop as your guide, learning to wait can be one of the greatest journeys you will embark on. He invites us to see what we experience as annoyances and long seasons of anxiety as opportunities to discover who God is and his tender care of us. Vroegop does not ask us to ignore the challenges of waiting or trivialize the anxiety we feel. Instead, *Waiting Isn't a Waste* encourages us to embrace waiting because when we do, we will find ourselves on the path to flourishing.”

Darby Strickland, Faculty and Counselor, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation; author, *Is It Abuse?*

“In this personal and profound volume, Mark Vroegop points us toward redemption in the waiting of life. With practical advice, theological clarity, and personal warmth, Vroegop presents waiting as a transformational discipline of the Christian life, something that brings peace into our lives through a deeper connection to the Lord. For our generation that is always impatient and ruthlessly driven, this book is a manifesto for the counter-cultural calling of authentic Christian discipleship.”

D. Michael Lindsay, President, Taylor University

Waiting Isn't a Waste

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*The Surprising Comfort of Trusting God
in the Uncertainties of Life*

Mark Vroegop

Foreword by Jen Wilkin

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To Dale Shaw:

*“Those who wait upon GOD get fresh strength. . . .
They run and don’t get tired,
They walk and don’t lag behind.”*

ISAIAH 40:31 (MSG)

Thanks for waiting!

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Foreword

AS I WRITE THESE WORDS, I am waiting. I would imagine you are too. I'm waiting for a child to return from a very long stay overseas, for a friend to get her pathology reports, for a family member to come to faith, and for several forms of grief to subside. I'm also waiting for a repairman who is three days late. And I'm waiting for the heat of an infernal Texas summer to finally give way to the first cold front of fall. I'm experiencing varying levels of success with each of these waits, and not all of my responses to them would make me a candidate for sainthood.

We owe an immeasurable debt to the great theologian Tom Petty for saying what we all feel: the waiting is the hardest part.¹ If ever a truer lyric were set to music, I am unaware of it. And we're not good at it. In fact, we are worse at it than we were when Petty's song was racing up the charts in 1981. Research shows that the average attention span has shrunk from twelve seconds in the year 2000 to eight seconds in 2015. This means our attention span is now officially shorter than that of a goldfish by a full second.²

1. Tom Petty, "The Waiting," track 1, *Hard Promises* (Universal City, CA: Backstreet, 1981).
2. John Stevens, "Decreasing Attention Spans and Your Website, Social Media Strategy," *Adweek*, June 7, 2016, <https://adweek.com>.

We live in a culture of instant gratification, where streaming services deliver our entertainment in seconds, Amazon delivers our packages the same day, and Google answers our questions instantly. Our commute is kept as wait-free as possible by apps that route and reroute according to traffic patterns. And we never endure the nerve-wracking wait of getting lost on the way to our destination. In other words, we live in a culture that doesn't just cater to goldfish; it produces them. Waiting is seen as an evil to eliminate instead of as a virtue to cultivate. And because waiting is seen as the enemy, our anger and frustration flare when our expected timetables are not met.

But here is good news for the Christ follower: if you've been looking for a simple way to shine like a star in a crooked generation, cultivate the virtue of patience in waiting. Admittedly, that is much easier said than done. It's one thing to wait for your coffee drink in a drive-through, and it's quite another to wait for an illness to resolve or a long-overdue apology to be spoken. The sheer number of hard waits we will face in our lifetimes presents both the challenge and the opportunity of growing in virtue, of growing in Christlikeness.

Impatience is all well and good for the unbeliever, but the Christian faith is, by definition, one of delayed gratification. The children of God are, and always have been, called upon to wait. We wait for God's kingdom to come in fullness, but our waiting is distinctly different from that of the unbeliever. No white-knuckled, jaw-clenched waiting will do for those whose hope is anchored in the bedrock of the finished work of Christ. The enthusiastic expression "I can't wait!" is captured in the maranatha cry of Revelation 22:20, but heaven help us if the citizens of the kingdom of heaven

quite literally cannot wait during this life. Patience is the fourth virtue listed in the fruit of the Spirit. If we are progressively being sanctified, we should expect to see it grow in our lives.

That's why the book you are holding matters. Mark Vroegop wants to help you to wait like a Christian. He wants to sit with you in your waiting and show you how to endure by practicing time-tested and biblical disciplines. But more than that, he wants you to know that *waiting is itself a help*. We have much to learn from plotlines that are slow to resolve, from dissonance that settles in like dense fog, from circumstances that take longer than we expect and ask more than we can bear. Mark's voice is the voice of a friend and fellow sojourner, calling us to wait well.

The famous seventeenth-century English poet and statesman John Milton lost his sight at the age of forty-two. A man of deep faith and action, he wrestled with his new limit and with the permanent losses it marked. In the first seasons of his blindness, he wrote Sonnet 19, reflecting on his physical inability to serve God as he had, having taken up the yoke of darkness. He notes, “[those] who best bear his mild yoke, they serve him best.” He recognizes that his blindness might yet have purpose, with his heart-stopping final line: “They also serve who only stand and wait.” Ten years later, born from the darkness of waiting, he would publish his greatest work, *Paradise Lost*.

Waiting does not preclude serving the Lord. It just reshapes it. May you find in these pages, as I have, strength and wisdom for the waitings you are ordained to wait. Be they great or small, may God be glorified in your fruitful patience and steadfastness.

Jen Wilkin

Introduction

Wasting Our Waiting

*They who wait for the LORD shall renew
their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.*

ISAIAH 40:31

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT the “gaps of life” and how the Bible calls us to fill the void of uncertainty by waiting on God.

That’s not a new concept.

Waiting on God is an ancient idea found throughout the Bible. However, it’s easy to ignore or dismiss. We might be tempted to write off waiting on God as “old school” or as a spiritual theme relegated to an era of history where Christians seemed a bit too serious. What’s more, most of us don’t enjoy waiting for anything. As a result, we tend to view the gaps of life as something—at best—to be tolerated. Add some stress or pain or time into the mix, and

you probably know what happens. Rather than worshipping our way through uncertainty and experiencing peace, our tendency is to fill the gaps of life with fear, anxiety, frustration, or anger.

For most of us, waiting feels like a waste.

I've been there. I *am* there.

That's why I've written this book.

Confessions of an Impatient Multitasker

Some books are written out of personal expertise. Not this one! I wrote this book because I see a need in myself and in those around me. In full disclosure, not only am I terrible at waiting, but it seems I have a natural bias against it. "Doesn't everyone?" you might ask. That's probably true at some level. But when I say I'm bad at waiting, I mean it. It's been a problem for a long time.

Let's start with my last name. Good luck trying to pronounce it, although it's much easier than you'd think. Vroegop is Dutch. What you probably don't know is that most Dutch last names mean something practical. That's because in the 1800s Napoleon required my forefathers to select a last name. Other families chose names associated with their work: Shoemaker (shoe maker), Bakker (baker), or Meijer (steward). Others identified their kin by a location: Vander Meer (from the lake), Boogaard (the orchard), or Vander Molen (from the mill). What about my last name? Vroegop literally means "early up." To this day it makes me smirk. You see, when my great-great-great-grandparents considered what we would name ourselves, they made a statement about how early we get out of bed. They could have chosen *napper*, *slow*, *Sabbath keeper*, or *loves sleep*. Nope. My last name and its meaning creates an identity: "Mark Early Up." As a child, I remember

my family valuing rising early, being productive, and personal discipline. My mom used to say, “Work hard. Play hard.” This mindset is part of who I am.

Not waiting is literally in my last name.

My personality doesn't help either. I'm decidedly pro-action. I love to work and accomplish things. I like to do things in the right way and fix what's broken. If you are into personality tests, you might not be surprised to learn that I have the Activator talent on Strengths Finder, and I'm probably an Enneagram 1. Based upon the DISC test, I like to see results. A great day off for me is a to-do list with lots of completed tasks. Getting things done energizes me, and I've read a lot of books about productivity. When I attended a Franklin Planner seminar thirty years ago, I was captivated with making the best use of “discretionary time.” In my first professional job, I'll never forget when a vice president at a Christian college commended me for bringing work to do while I waited for an appointment with him to begin. I'm pretty sure that sitting quietly, daydreaming, or engaging his secretary in small talk would not have been recognized. I learned quickly that multitasking and working hard were rewarded. They made me feel affirmed.

Unfortunately, pastoral ministry and theological education made my aversion for waiting worse. I gravitated toward verses about life stewardship (“To whom much was given, of him much will be required,” Luke 12:48) and redeeming the time (“ . . . making the best use of the time, because the days are evil,” Eph. 5:16). The endless demands of ministry created a spiritualized “fifth gear” in my drive. When I learned that a respected leader or a Puritan slept only four hours a day, I found another justification for passionate activity. Upon reading *Don't Waste Your Life* by John Piper,

I deeply resonated with the theological vision of living passionately for the glory of God. I was determined not to waste my life.

But in the process of not wasting my life, I wasted something else: my waiting.

The last few years surfaced a deep deficiency in how I think about and practice waiting on God. The global pandemic that we thought would last a few months dragged on for two years. Cultural divisions and church controversies created countless no-win decisions. I can't remember a time when I was more aware of the massive gaps in life. I felt powerless all the time. When my old patterns of overworking, overthinking, and overplanning didn't work, I found myself filling this canyon of uncertainty with anxiety, fear, and frustration. While I knew how to lament the grief I felt, I didn't know how to wait on the Lord with this massive tension.

I needed to stop wasting my waiting.

I still do.

The Aim of This Book

I wish this journey was complete, but it feels like it's just begun. I've got a long way to go. There are a lot of gaps to consider. Life is full of uncertainty. I expect you agree. In fact, you may have picked up this book because you're in a season of waiting. Perhaps it relates to your career, singleness, marriage, pregnancy, health, relationships, or some conflict. The list could be even longer because we're always waiting. Maybe you've noticed a higher degree of simmering frustration, pervasive anxiety, low-grade anger, or a concerning cynicism in your life, and you'd like to change. Perhaps you sense that waiting isn't a strength, and you're curious about how to grow in this area. Or God may be preparing you for a season that's around

the corner, and this book is one way to get you ready. Regardless of the circumstances, I'm glad you're considering this topic.

Everyone waits.

I don't think we do it very well.

The aim of this book is to help us take steps in learning to wait. My goal is to unpack this definition: *Waiting on God is living on what I know to be true about God when I don't know what's true about my life.* And I hope that by the time you are finished, you'll no longer waste your waiting; I hope you'll see waiting as redemptive, something helpful.

How Do We Wait?

This book assumes that we will wait. The question is: How can we learn to wait on God in a way that leads to transformation and peace?

As we'll see along this journey together, waiting is a theme throughout the Old and New Testaments. Probably the most well-known verses are found in Isaiah 40. They're promises given to God's people as they faced national uncertainty and personal pain. Israel wondered if God had forgotten them and if there was no hope in things turning around. Isaiah reminds them about who God is and then offers the promise of renewed strength:

Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
"My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God"?
Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary;
 his understanding is unsearchable.
 He gives power to the faint,
 and to him who has no might he increases strength.
 Even youths shall faint and be weary,
 and young men shall fall exhausted;
 but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;
 they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
 they shall run and not be weary;
 they shall walk and not faint. (Isa. 40:27–31)

That's an amazing promise! I want to understand and embrace this biblical vision. I yearn for the kind of power, strength, and perseverance that's promised in this text. Don't you? I'm tired of wasting my waiting. Aren't you? I want to learn how to wait on God.

If you look ahead, our path is marked out by six chapters. I've chosen a characteristic for each one because the issue isn't *if* we wait, but *how* we wait.

So, how do we wait on God?

- Honestly: waiting is hard
- Frequently: waiting is common
- Thoughtfully: waiting is biblical
- Patiently: waiting is slow
- Intentionally: waiting is commanded
- Collectively: waiting is relational

Waiting is not just part of our humanity; it's vital to Christianity. That's why the Old and New Testaments talk about it so often. Like

many other things, including suffering and the crucifixion, God aims to transform what is painful and confusing. That's also why believers are commanded to wait. From God's perspective, it's good.

But that doesn't mean it's easy.

Life is full of gaps, moments or seasons when we are invited to wait. But if we're not careful and thoughtful, we can fill those gaps with spiritually unhelpful responses. Over the chapters that follow, I hope you'll discover how to fill the gaps of life with what's true about God—to wait on him. What's more, I'll show you a process for worshiping your way through seasons of uncertainty and resisting our typical temptations. I want you to see waiting as more than a delay; our journey will help you (and me) learn the surprising comfort of waiting on God and how it leads to peace.

Waiting isn't a waste.

Let's learn why and how—together.

Reflection Questions

1. What is your disposition and attitude toward waiting?
2. Describe the reasons you picked up this book.
3. What are a few lessons you hope to learn or some questions you want to answer?
4. Describe a season when you waited on the Lord with some measure of spiritual success. How about the opposite?
5. Write out a prayer expressing your desire to learn to wait on the Lord.

Honestly

Waiting Is Hard

*I am weary with my crying out;
my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim
with waiting for my God.*

PSALM 69:3

LET'S START WITH SOMETHING OBVIOUS: waiting is hard.

You probably picked up this book because you know this to be true. Perhaps you're living through a season where you've been forced to wait, and you're learning how challenging it is. Maybe you started out strong in a time of uncertainty, but you've noticed a nagging sense of anxiety or frustration begin to set in. Whether we consciously know it or not, we have an internal sense of how long things should take. When this is challenged or when our expectations aren't met, we soon discover a rising level of tension.

Waiting is usually a lot harder than we realize—or care to admit.

I think it's safe to say that most people dislike waiting. Do you know anyone who celebrates it? “Oh good, we get to wait.” That feels weird or fake, doesn't it? Imagine meeting a friend and asking about her weekend. What would be your immediate response if she said, “I spent three hours waiting on Saturday”? You'd probably groan, right? Waiting feels like a gap in time that's annoying at best and aggravating at worst.

Most of us have a negative bias against it.

Our society makes it worse. In our fast-paced, instant-answer, and quick-results culture, less waiting is a benchmark for success. It's a status symbol. Ever visited Disney World? Purchasing a FastPass affords you the privilege of skipping the line. The next time you visit the counter of a fast-food restaurant, look above the window of the drive-through. You'll probably see a running clock capturing the time to serve each customer. Look closer and you might see a time goal written on a white board. Employees are rewarded for reducing wait times. Airports even started moving baggage claims greater distances from the terminals because customers are willing to walk farther than wait longer at an empty carousel. How many seconds are you willing to wait for a website or video to load before you click somewhere else? Our patience for the “buffering wheel” is decreasing. Efficiency and immediacy are the hallmarks of success in our society. Time is money, right?

Waiting isn't valued in our culture.

This context is important to understand as we learn about the spiritual value of waiting. There's a strong natural assumption, internally and externally, that delays and uncertainty are bad. But

as you'll see in the chapters that follow, waiting is commended as something valuable. Waiting is good. What's more, waiting is commanded. Let that sink in.

The Bible commends and commands something that everything in us and everyone around us usually sees as negative.

We've got some work to do.

Waiting Defined

Before we go too far, let's start with a preliminary definition of *waiting* in the Bible. In the Old Testament several Hebrew words are used. In the next chapter, we'll unpack the nuances of different words. But the common thread between them is looking for something or someone with eager expectation.¹ In other words, waiting is a space to be filled. A gap emerges, and we look or hope for something to fill it. From a spiritual standpoint, God fills that gap with himself, his plans, or his promises. Ben Patterson affirms this when he writes, "To wait is to journey in faith toward the things God has promised."²

When you find the word *wait* in the Bible, it's important to look for the words it's pointing toward. A few examples:

I waited patiently *for the LORD*. (Ps. 40:1)

My eyes grow dim
with waiting *for my God*. (Ps. 69:3)

1. John E. Hartley, "1994 קָנָה," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 791.
2. Ben Patterson, *Waiting: Finding Hope When God Seems Silent* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 12.

I wait *for the LORD*, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope. (Ps. 130:5)

We find the same thing in the New Testament. Waiting is linked to other words and ideas connected to the activity of God:

We wait eagerly *for adoption* as sons. (Rom. 8:23)

. . . waiting *for our blessed hope*. (Titus 2:13)

. . . waiting *for* and hastening *the coming of the day of God*.
(2 Pet. 3:12)

Putting this together, we can see that biblical waiting is connected to what we're looking for or where we place our trust. In this way, the gaps of life present an opportunity for faith. Sometimes the translators use "hope" for the same word translated as "wait" in other verses (see Ps. 69:6; Isa. 8:17; Jer. 14:22). That's because waiting and hope are overlapping ideas.

To wait is to look with hope.

Andrew Murray wrote one of the best books on this subject in the 1800s. Remember what I said about "old school"? He divided *waiting on God* into thirty-one devotional chapters, a chapter for each day of a month. It's a goldmine of biblical truth and time-tested counsel. You'll find a lot of Murray quotations in my book, because I think his passion needs to be recovered. Additionally, this classic work shaped my understanding of waiting on God more than any other. Here's a great summary of his main message: "This is the blessedness of waiting upon God, that it takes our eyes and

thoughts away from ourselves, even our needs and desires, and occupies us with our God.”³ As I said in the introduction, I’m going to point you toward this vision of waiting: living on what you know to be true about God when you don’t know what’s true about your life. When practiced correctly, it means embracing the gaps in life as an opportunity to place our hope in God.

Biblical waiting looks to the Lord.

Unfortunately, our waiting doesn’t always lead us that direction. We often fill the gaps of life with something else. This struggle with waiting shows us where we place our trust when we’re not in control.

Waiting reveals what we hope in. That can be good or bad.

And it’s usually hard.

Wasted Waiting

The Bible gives us examples of wasted waiting, and it’s connected to times that are challenging. The psalmist made this summary statement:

They soon forgot his works;
 they did not wait for his counsel.
 But they had a wanton craving in the wilderness,
 and put God to the test. (Ps. 106:13–14)

Notice the connection between the failure to wait and misplaced desire.

There are several biblical examples from which we can learn, but let me highlight two of the most famous. Both take place just

3. Andrew Murray, *Waiting on God! Daily Messages for a Month* (New York: Revell, 1896), 54–55.

after the exodus. They show us the difficulty with waiting and give us some hints as to why it's so hard.

“Why Did You Bring Us Here?”

The first example is at the shore of the Red Sea. What's remarkable about this moment is not only the lack of faith but how quickly it happened. There's nearly a revolt against Moses's leadership. The people faced a major spiritual crisis.

In Exodus 7–12, the Bible records the miraculous deliverance through the ten plagues. The Israelites witnessed God's awesome power. They experienced his divine protection. God kept his promise. They saw it firsthand. But their confidence didn't last long.

In front of them was an obstacle that appeared to be impossible—the Red Sea. Behind them was a threat that seemed certain to destroy them—the fast-approaching Egyptian army. After Pharaoh's rage-filled change of heart, he pursued the people of God. In the distance they could probably see the dust cloud of a massive army approaching. They were trapped. It didn't look good.

That's when the accusations started flying:

“You're going to get us killed!”

“What were you thinking?”

“We told you this wasn't a good idea.”

“This was a mistake. We should go back.” (See Ex. 14:11–12)

These statements were unfair, loaded, and foolish. But I'm sure you're familiar with them. They're common when emotions are running high. You can probably think of a time in your life when waiting led you to say things that were rash and spiritually

immature. Panic often creates sinful responses. I have a lot of examples, and I'm sure you do too.

This moment in Israel's history became a classic example of a failure to wait.

You may know the rest of the story. God parted the Red Sea, delivering his people and destroying Pharaoh and his army. It became a signature moment of divine deliverance. But before the waters parted, Moses famously rebuked the people: "The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent [or wait]" (Ex. 14:14).

For the purposes of this chapter, I'd like for you to think about those unfair statements hurled at Moses. They were formed in the gap of living between an impassable Red Sea and certain destruction at the hand of Pharaoh. Where do you think those accusations were coming from? In other words, what's the motivation? Try to diagnose what's behind their verbal assaults. What kind of loss of control do you think they felt? We might not be able to sympathize with the pressure that the Israelites were under, but think about what's behind their response. While you are pondering your answers, there's another classic failure to consider.

"We Don't Know What Happened to Him!"

The second major failure takes place at the base of Mount Sinai. It's the tragic story surrounding the golden calf, an infamous moment of idolatry. Exodus 32 recounts that the people pressured Aaron into creating an idol to worship while Moses was on top of the mountain. The people gave up their golden jewelry that had been given to them as they left Egypt. They built the golden calf and worshiped it by saying, "These are your gods, O Israel, who

brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (v. 4). It’s a bit crazy, considering the deliverance they witnessed a few weeks earlier. But it gets worse. They created a festival and “rose up to play” (v. 6), which is a euphemism for engaging in sexual immorality. The contrast between Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on the mountain while God’s people engage in detestable idolatry is stunning. It’s an egregious example of rebellion.

But it didn’t just happen.

There was a failure to wait.

Exodus 32 is clear: “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 . . . we do not know what has become of him’” (v. 1). God called Moses up the mountain. Forty days transpired, and his absence created a gap, an emotional space that surfaced powerful and problematic emotions. At the Red Sea, they failed to trust in God’s deliverance. But at Mount Sinai, they embraced the unfaithfulness of idolatry—“Make us gods.” They created alternative gods that gave them a sense of control. They filled the gaps in their life with fake gods.

A failure to wait can lead to spiritual decline and terrible choices.

Once again, I’d like you to diagnose the problem. Can you name the emotions and struggles that the Israelites were facing at the base of Mount Sinai? Put yourself into the text. What would you feel if your leader vanished for forty days with no timeline or communication? What sense of control was lost? What “pushes your buttons” when it comes to waiting? When are you tempted to say, “This is ridiculous!”? And where do you turn when uncertainty, fear, or anxiety becomes overwhelming?

As you consider these two examples from the Old Testament and some self-reflection, notice the power of these gap-filling responses. They're not small issues. This is serious stuff. Waiting pushes our limits. Horrible things are said. Regrettable actions follow.

Sometimes we don't get waiting right because we're not prepared for how hard it is.

When Is Waiting Hard?

One of the ways we waste our waiting is not reckoning with how hard it is and why that's the case. Think back to your diagnosis with the previous two examples from Exodus. Consider some examples of waiting in your own life. Let's see if we can unpack when it's hard so we can understand why.

Uncertainty

Waiting usually involves some level of uncertainty, and that's uncomfortable. It's challenging to move forward when you don't know what's going on or when information is not available. Without data or explanation, problems are hard to prevent or manage. That can feel threatening because information creates solutions. It's important to understand, however, that our desire to possess knowledge is more than a passion for learning. You've probably heard that "knowledge is power." It's true. Knowing what is happening is one of the many ways we try to bring order to our lives.

Previous generations were more familiar with uncertainty. We have faster technologies in our pockets than our grandparents could have ever dreamed. All it takes is a quick internet search, and we can have the answers to most of our questions. Social media gives us a constant update on the lives of our friends. Want

to know what's happening around the world? We're only a click or swipe away from instant access to breaking news. All of this creates an unfamiliarity and discomfort with uncertainty.

Waiting for information creates a painful gap. It's hard because understanding what is happening gives us a sense of control.

Uncertainty reveals vulnerability.

Delays

Waiting on the timing of something is also hard. This is probably one of the first examples that people give when talking about waiting. They express audible groans with things like traffic jams, being put on hold, doctor's appointments, airport layovers, or visiting the department of motor vehicles. Our internal clock begins to tick, and we wrestle with why something is taking so long. Add into the mix a slow teller, a demanding customer, or someone trying to cut in line, and it's quite surprising what kind of negative and sinful emotions emerge.

Important and serious moments in life often involve delays, and it isn't easy. Sometimes it's downright scary. I've been a pastor long enough to see the deep tension that develops as people are waiting for a job offer, the sale of a home, college admissions, medical tests, an adoption ruling, or hearing from an estranged family member. These life-altering scenarios usually involve waiting, and it's a battle not to fill the time gap with impatience or fear.

Daily life involves challenging delays.

Disappointment

It's hard to wait when good desires go unfulfilled. There's a unique internal battle when you are waiting for something

important, yet you feel the looming clouds of disappointment starting to form. I have in mind a young man or woman who desires the lifelong companionship of marriage or a couple struggling with infertility after years of challenges. There are parents tearfully waiting for their grown children to come back to a relationship with Jesus, and family members who desperately want to see a loved one freed from an addiction because of the havoc it's creating.

This kind of waiting doesn't merely involve information or time. It's connected to dreams and hopes. Often they're honorable desires, and that can make waiting even more challenging. In other words, the fact that it's hard doesn't mean it's wrong.

However, this can quickly devolve. Wrestling with unfulfilled desires or unmet expectations can be deeply painful—even jarring. You might ask, “Why would God make me wait for something that's good?” Betsy Childs Howard writes, “It's much easier to stop hoping than it is to have your dream deferred again and again.”⁴ How true. For some, this can lead to hopelessness.

Waiting is hard when you've been disappointed.

Pain

It's uncomfortable to wait, and that's especially true when you're in pain. This chapter began with a verse from Psalm 69. I hope you didn't miss the phrase “My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God” (v. 3). David expresses a deep weariness as he cries out to God while being overwhelmed, slandered, rejected, and mocked. In verse 29 he says, “I am afflicted and in pain.” The

4. Betsy Childs Howard, *Seasons of Waiting: Walking by Faith When Dreams Are Delayed* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 11.

background isn't entirely clear, but it seems that he's waiting for vindication while being hurt by people. It's hard to wait when you're being attacked.

There are other kinds of pain as well. Many Christians know the challenges related to an illness, a disability, or an ongoing health issue. While medical treatments provide much more relief and healing than in any previous generation, there are still many people waiting for healing. Others are familiar with the slow demise of a loved one. Whether it's the decline with a disease like Alzheimer's or the bedside vigil of hospice care, waiting with a loved one in pain can be heartbreaking. Maybe your pain is related to a relationship conflict, a divorce, a wayward child, or the death of someone close to you.

Waiting for healing—physical and emotional—is hard.

Powerlessness

This is not an exhaustive list, and I'll conclude with the most familiar and applicable category. Waiting is hard when we feel powerless. The gaps of life are really moments with a control vacuum. It might be better to say that waiting is hard *because* we feel powerless.

Therefore, you could easily expand my list into any area where you've lost the kind of control that you want. Information, timing, expectations, and comfort are often able to be managed. When they're not at our disposal, a gap is created, and we have to wait. Can you think of any areas I've not listed? Where do you experience a deep need for control? Consider something that, if missing in your life, creates a significant struggle.

Underneath our disdain for waiting is our longing for control.

Let me be clear on something. That desire isn't fundamentally sinful. Nor is it necessarily wrong if waiting is hard. As we'll see in the coming chapters, gaps in life are part of God's design for the world. They're a common element of our human experience for good reason. Imagine what you'd be like if you didn't have to wait for anything!

We need to wrestle with these questions: When and why is waiting hard?

An Opportunity

Diagnosing when waiting is hard helps us not to waste it. There's an opportunity presented to us that isn't easy, but it's good. And the challenge we experience could be seen as part of the normal Christian life. "The tension you feel as you try to simultaneously hope in heaven while living wholeheartedly in this life isn't necessarily an indicator of sinful discontentment. It may simply be evidence that you are a citizen of heaven living on earth."⁵

The fact that waiting is hard doesn't mean you've already failed.

The simple acknowledgment that it isn't easy, examining why, and then looking to God is the first step of learning how to wait.

Reflection Questions

1. Why do you think this book started with this chapter?
2. Share your diagnoses of the two failures in the Old Testament.
3. Review the list of examples. Which of the five do you resonate with the most? Why?

5. Howard, *Seasons of Waiting*, 107.

HONESTLY

4. Why is it helpful to understand when and why waiting is hard?

5. Describe a situation in your life (past or present) where waiting was challenging. What do you think was/is the main reason it was hard?

6. Can you predict the solutions that will be offered later in the book?