

## What Are You Waiting For?

Psalm 40:1-11

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

January 20, 2008

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*I waited patiently for the Lord.*

The first words of this psalm point to one of the most important qualities of being a person of faith: waiting patiently.

You know, patience is not a minor matter. It actually makes Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians where he says:

*[T]he fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. [Gal. 5:22-23]*

Fruit of the Spirit represents the qualities that develop in our lives as the Spirit of God grows the character of Christ within us. Of all those great qualities in Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—patience might just be the one some of us are the worst at.

I know just a couple of weeks ago I took Sam to the eye doctor for his yearly eye exam. We walked in, went to the front desk where two people were working, and signed in. Nobody said a word to us. All the workers were just talking to each other.

We sat down. We sat there for about 15 minutes; nobody ever said anything to us. So I said to Sam, *You ready to go?*

He said, *Sure* (he hates getting his eyes checked anyway). And we got up and left. My wife can testify that is a common behavior for me. Patience is a tough one.

How are you at standing in a long line at the grocery store, and the tape runs out on the cash register? Peacefully relaxing in your car until the traffic jam clears up? Going to get your driver's license?

When we first moved here to Memphis, Heidi went to get her Tennessee driver's license. She waited and waited. You know how long that process is. You sit there and watch the numbers light up, waiting for your turn.

After about two hours, she had gone through the whole process and was waiting for them to print out her new license. The computer went down. So she waited and waited. Finally they said, *You'll have to come back tomorrow.* She came back tomorrow, waited in line again, got her license. Later that week her purse was stolen out of her car during a soccer game. She had to go back a third time and start all over.

Waiting patiently. How are you at that?

Being able to wait is very important. Daniel Goldman in his book, *Emotional Intelligence*, talks about a research project done back in 1960 by psychologist Walter Mitchell. It was an experiment with four-year-old children of Stanford graduates and professors.

He would bring a four-year-old into a room, put a marshmallow on a table and have the four-year-olds look at the marshmallow. He told them, *If you can wait and not eat that marshmallow while I'm gone, I'll give you two when I get back.*

The experiment shows how the children wrestled with the tremendous challenge to their patience and their ability to wait for gratification. Do they eat it now or do they wait and get two? Mitchell's reflections on what the children did were fascinating.

Some of the children covered their eyes, as if not looking at the marshmallow would help them not eat it. Some of the children rested their head in their hands, as if somehow they could keep their hands busy by keeping them close to their heads. Some of the children talked to themselves and told themselves stories, keeping busy while the person was gone. Some of the children broke into song and sang as they waited for the person to come back.

It was as many as twenty minutes before that happened. That's a long time for a child and a marshmallow.

Some played with their fingers: counted them and did multiplication problems with them. Some tried to fall asleep to ignore it. One particular child decided he couldn't take it any longer so he started licking the table in hopes to absorb some of sweetness from the marshmallow. One third of the children couldn't wait; they grabbed it and ate it within a matter of seconds. The researchers went back fourteen years later to check on the same children when they graduated from high school and did some follow-up research. The researchers discovered that the children who could not wait had a completely different kind of character than the children who did wait.

The ones who could not wait as four-year-olds—now eighteen—were impulsive, more troubled; they shied away from contact with other people. Many were stubborn and indecisive, easily upset by frustrations in life and more preoccupied with their own needs.

They thought of themselves as bad and unworthy. They were immobilized by stress and mistrustful of other people; resentful about not getting enough in life and prone to jealousy, envy, sharp temper... on and on.

In other words, those who could not wait patiently were in trouble.

Lewis Smedes, Professor of Ethics at Fuller Seminary, says that waiting is the hardest work human beings will ever do. Waiting is our destiny as creatures who cannot by themselves bring about the thing they hope for. We wait in fear for a happy ending we cannot write. We wait for a "not yet" that feels like a "not ever."

*[Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle, "Patience," The National Presbyterian Church, January 16, 2005]*

The issue of waiting patiently is not just found in this psalm. It is repeated over and over again in scripture. Listen:

*Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!* [Ps. 27:14]

*Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him; do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices.* [Ps. 37:7]

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

*The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.* [Lamentations 3:25]

This is one - most of us will remember:

*[Those 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]*

Here's the secret. It is not simply *waiting* that we are about, but rather it is *waiting upon the Lord* that builds us up spiritually and gives us a sense of peace. Every one of these passages of scripture talks about *waiting on the Lord*.

We're not being told here just to wait. It's not just, *Grin and bear it*, while the traffic jam clears up or, *Keep a stiff upper lip*, until it is your turn at the cash register in the grocery store.

All of that is not *waiting on the Lord*. It's just waiting. Waiting on the Lord is a whole other thing. In times of stress and tribulation, we can "wait it out" or we can "wait on the Lord."

*[John Jewell, "Waiting and Winning," January 20, 2002, www.lectionarysermons.com]*

Waiting on the Lord is allowing our faith and trust in God to engage our lives at the point of difficulty and to rest in a gentle trust that we are cared for and that God will bring to pass the purpose and meaning in our lives.

The Hebrew word for "wait" in Psalm 40 is a wonderful metaphor: the twining of a cord or weaving a piece of cloth.

To wait on the Lord is the process of being interwoven into the very fabric and nature of God. When we wait for God, God is weaving us into the process of history and into God's desire to accomplish wonderful things in us. We become part of what God is doing in the

world. It's what brings us together into the presence of God and weaves us into God's purpose and intention.

When we wait on the Lord, look what happens, according to Psalm 40:

He turned to me and heard my cry.  
He lifted me out of the slimy pit,  
Out of the mud and mire;  
He set my feet upon a rock  
And made my footsteps firm.  
He put a new song in my mouth,  
A song of praise to our God.  
Many will see and fear  
And put their trust in the Lord.

We all find ourselves in the slimy pit—the mud and the mire—from time to time. A lot of the time it's our own fault. Sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's not fair. But one way or another, we all of us end up in the pit every now and then.

We all know what it's like to have places in your life and in your soul that are dark and deep like a muddy pit. And lonely to be there by yourself.

But that's not all. Because the promise of God is that when you wait patiently on the Lord, you will also know what it's like to have your cry heard, to be lifted up, to have your feet set on an immovable rock, to have a new song put in your mouth.

We know that this is the world, and my life in it, to which God sent a son. And when he was looking for a name, could find none other

than “Emmanuel,” which means: God has come down to the muddy pit to be with us.

And you’ll know you’ve really begun to hear the good news of God when you find yourself in that pit in the mud and you feel pretty alone, but you cry out, and you hear God say: *I’ll come down there.*

You’ll know you’ve really begun to hear the good news of God when you know that being a Christian does not mean that you never fall into the pit but that when you do fall in, there is someone to go with you and wipe the mud off your face and at some point lift you up, set you back on your feet on solid ground.

Do you have that kind of trust? Do you have the trust required to—when you’ve fallen down into the pit— wait patiently for the Lord?

I talked last Sunday about Henri Nouwen, a Jesuit scholar and writer on the spiritual life. In one of his books he tells the story about some of his friends who were trapeze artists. They were with the circus, and their lives had an effect on him. They were called the Flying Roudelas.

One thing they told Henri Nouwen is that there’s a very special relationship between the flyer and the catcher on the trapeze. The flyer is the one who lets go, and the catcher is the one who catches. As you might imagine, this relationship is important – especially to the flyer.

When the flyer is swinging high above the crowd on the trapeze, the moment comes when he must let go. He arcs out into the air, and his job is to remain as still as possible and to wait for the strong hands of the catcher to pluck him from the air.

The trapeze artist told Nouwen, *The flyer must never try to catch the catcher.* The flyer must never try to catch the catcher. The flyer must wait in absolute trust. The flyer, suspended in the air in complete vulnerability must wait in absolute trust. The catcher will catch him; but he must wait.

Do you have that kind of trust? Do you have the trust required to wait patiently for the Lord?

Yesterday we had the funeral service for Hugh Priddy. At his service I was talking about trusting God. And I said something like this:

Over the years hundreds of wannabe songwriters sent their songs to George Beverly Shea in hopes that he would like them and sing them at one of Billy Graham’s crusades. One of the titles of those songs—which Shea never sang—was *God’s Grip Don’t Slip.*

That was neither good English nor good music, but it was good theology. It is in fact the message that permeates the Bible from beginning to end.

No matter what happens, God’s grip don’t slip.

The flyer must never try to catch the catcher. The flyer must wait in absolute trust. The catcher will catch him; but he must wait.

Do you have the trust to wait? Do you have it in you to wait? You know what makes the difference. What makes all the difference in waiting is knowing what you are waiting for. What are you waiting for?

*I waited patiently for the Lord.*