

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 18 May 2014

No. T0833

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Learning difficult lessons with Abraham: Learning to wait

I can remember when the Access credit card was launched in the 1970s. One of its slogans was, "Taking the waiting out of wanting." I suppose since then there has been an increasing impatience with the need to wait. The quicker we can get something we want the better. Waiting just delays our enjoyment. However, there are certain things we don't enjoy doing which we happily put off. I never mind if there is an excuse to delay a DIY job, but I have friends who can't wait to get the Black and Decker hammer drill out of its case!

We don't mind delaying something we don't want to do in order to do something we like. But if we have to wait for something we need or want to do then it's not enjoyable. Queuing is a good example of this. Queuing suspends us in a place of inactivity over which we have little control and prevents us doing something enjoyable or productive until we reach the front of the queue, and even then there can be disappointment. Waiting seems to rob of something we cannot replace - time!

But when we look into the Bible we discover that the practice of waiting is woven into the spiritual experience of every godly man and woman. It is presented not only as being important but being a necessary feature of our relationship with God.

To explore this further we need look at the different aspects of waiting and how these add to our spiritual development and maturity. Waiting is often used in the New Testament in the sense of expecting, often eagerly, something to happen.

In Romans 8:19, Paul's speaks about both creation and Christians eagerly waiting for the complete fulfilment of redemption. In Romans 8:19 he writes, *"For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God."*

Then in Romans 8:23 he adds, *"Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance."*

Paul's writing frequently refers to eagerly awaiting for the return of the Lord Jesus,

- *"So that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1 Corinthians 1:7).
- *"For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith"* (Galatians 5:5).
- *"For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ"* (Philippians 3:20).
- *"So Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation"* (Hebrews 9:28).

This eager waiting for the return of Christ is something which, as we shall see, should stimulate Christian worship and service.

There is practical demonstration of how waiting time can be used when Paul waits for his friends in Athens in Acts 17:16: *"Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols."* As Paul was expecting the arrival of Silas and Timothy he observes Athenian society and responds to it by communicating the gospel. This event and Paul's teaching about eagerly awaiting combine to teach us about the positive aspects of waiting. The waiting period is the time we have to live for God. Paul demonstrates this in his letter to the Romans when he goes from describing the glorious future and blessings of God's love in Romans 8 to the sacrificial lives to be lived in Romans 12, *"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God,*

that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Romans 1:1-2).

At Athens, Paul demonstrates this principle by using the time he spends waiting for his friends to bring the gospel to the then cultural capital of the world. He writes later in Ephesians 5:15-17: *“See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”*

And again in Colossians 4:5-6, *“Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.”*

If we go back to our experience of queuing we can either spend our time getting more and more frustrated with the delay or simply enduring it or we can read a book, start a conversation, plan the day etc. The whole thrust of waiting eagerly for the return of Jesus Christ is that it characterised the people of God and shaped their thinking and behaviour. You could say God has made us into a waiting people. Evidence for this is in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, *“For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.”*

In 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10, Paul describes fundamental features of the people of God.

1. They are saved, *“You turn to God from idols”;*
2. They live to serve God, *“To serve the living and true God”;* and
3. They wait, *“To wait for His son from heaven.”*

But, as I have just explained, the waiting is not a passive waiting but the period of life a Christian has to demonstrate newness of life and a service of love.

This is perhaps best described by the parable told by the Lord Jesus in Luke 19 about the nobleman who gives his servants a mina each. A mina was worth about three months' salary. *“Now as they heard these things, He spoke another parable, because He was near Jerusalem and because they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately. Therefore He said: ‘A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return. So he called ten of his servants, delivered to them ten minas, and said to them, “Do business till I come,”’”* (Luke 19:11-13).

I like the words, *“Do business till I come.”* Essentially the servants were in a waiting period. It lasted from the time the nobleman left them until the time he returned. This was to be a time to do business and to make profits in anticipation of their master's return. Before we start thinking capitalist thoughts we need to remember the Lord Jesus was using trading expressions to convey spiritual values. The Lord Jesus was to return to heaven but He promises to return in the future. In that intervening waiting period His people have one life in which honour and serve their Saviour.

This characteristic feature of the Christian life has perhaps become obscured by the age we live in. Our present age is often obsessed with the here and now and increasingly focused on materialistic values. The present isn't seen as an intervening period but as the only period. The challenge to Christians is to live by faith in such circumstances. The key to meeting this challenge is to understand what it means to learn to wait. We have already explored the overarching principle for all Christians, that we live for the Saviour whilst awaiting His return. Now let's look at some of the other aspects of learning to wait.

In the Old Testament there is a common theme running throughout the lives of the outstanding men and women of God. They were all taught patience. Noah waited a long time before the flood came. Abraham and Sarah waited a long time for Isaac was born. Jacob had to serve 20 years in the House of Laban his uncle. Joseph learned to wait upon God as a slave and as a prisoner. Moses waited 40 years before returning to Egypt and leading the people of God out of slavery.

In the Psalms, David writes constantly about waiting upon God, for example in Psalm 37:

- *“Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him; Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass” (Psalm 37:7).*
- *“But those who wait on the LORD, they shall inherit the earth” (Psalm 37:9).*
- *“Wait on the LORD, and keep His way, and He shall exalt you to inherit the land” (Psalm 37:34).*

Isaiah, whose ministry stretched over 40 years, writes, in Isaiah 40:31, perhaps the most beautiful description of waiting upon God, *“But those who wait on 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.”*

In these Old Testament lives of faith we have set out for us the principle of waiting upon and waiting for God, waiting upon Him and waiting for Him. Waiting upon God is about walking with God. Enoch perhaps best illustrates this kind of life in Genesis 5, *“After he begot Methuselah, Enoch walked with God three hundred years, and had sons and daughters. So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him”* (Genesis 5:22-24).

These verses simply describe a long lifetime of walking with God until God takes Enoch into heaven. We would recognise this as a daily practice of seeking God’s presence in prayer and communion and learning God’s will through the word of God. Then, in this fellowship with God, meeting all the circumstances of life with an energetic faith and desire to do His will and be a blessing to others.

I think the short story of Mary of Bethany, in the New Testament, is an outstanding example of learning to wait. *“Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus’ feet and heard His word”* (Luke 10:38-39)

When we are introduced to Mary we find her at the feet of Jesus, listening to His words. Mary, from her very first meeting with Jesus, instinctively recognises the importance of His presence and His word and has to put everything to one side. Jesus defends her position with the words, *“But one thing is needful, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her”* (Luke 10:42).

We should not overlook the importance of what Jesus was saying. He teaches us that we need to choose the one thing that is needful. By which I think the Lord was saying, *“Take time to come in to My presence and listen to what I say and everything else will fall into place.”* Mary learned to wait on the Lord and He commended her for it.

I love the character of Martha. She seems to have a similar personality to Peter. She was a doer. But what she had to learn, as Peter eventually did, was that our strength is not in ourselves but is Christ. As Paul writes in Philippians 4:13, *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”*

Returning to the words of Isaiah 40:31, *“But those who wait on 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.”*

This learning to wait on the Lord is further developed when we next meet Mary in John 11 when she and Martha are experiencing the pain of the death of their brother Lazarus. Again the sisters react in different ways. Martha, not surprisingly, goes out to meet Jesus. Mary, surprisingly does not join her but waits until the Lord calls her. *“Now Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house”* (John 11:20). Then in John 11:28, Jesus calls Mary, *“And when she had said these things, she went her way and secretly called Mary her sister, saying, ‘The Teacher has come and is calling for you.’ As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly and came to Him”* (John 11:28-29).

The narrative continues, *“Then, when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to Him, ‘Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.’ Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And He said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to Him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, ‘See how He loved him!’”* (John 11:32-36).

There are some remarkable features to this story which demonstrate what learning to wait means. Mary fundamentally understands that her actions were to be guided by the Lord and she waits to be called by Him. She had learned this by previously being in the presence of the Lord in Luke 10:38-42.

On that occasion her sister, Martha, was doing important household duties and was stressed that Mary wasn’t helping her. What Martha failed to understand, and what could have been her experience, was she too had the opportunity to enjoy the Lord’s company and listen to His words. Do we react in the same way? Are our personalities and work more influential than the Lord’s presence and words. Is it time for us to put aside “the many things” and make time to wait on the Lord. Even in secular society there is today a growing concern that not enough time is given to reflection and thoughtfulness. Effective action is not diminished because we take time to be in the presence of God it is enriched by it. Luther captured the sense of this when wrote, *“I am so busy today, I will have to pray for two hours!”* Would our reaction be the reverse, *“I am so busy today, I don’t have time to pray.”*

The heart and power of Christianity is knowing the Saviour. Paul wrote in Philippians 3:10, *“That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.”*

Mary’s experience of being in the Lord’s presence changed her life. It became a Christ centred life. Learning to sit or to wait in His presence taught her how to deal with the most painful of experiences. That’s why when Jesus came to the place where Lazarus was buried she waited for His intervention. Often we act out of the best intentions outside of the will and timing of God. Christ’s greatest miracle in the life of a human being, the resurrection of Lazarus, was subsequent to the tears of a disciple who fell at His feet. The principle of the outpouring of that power has not changed. It will always work through those who value and follow the Saviour in true devotion and obedience.

The last time we read of Mary, at the beginning of John 12, is one of the most beautiful pictures of true Christianity. *“Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil”* (John 12:1-3).

I say a picture of true Christianity because in these verses there is a simple description of Christ at the centre of His people:

- We have Martha happily serving;
- We have Lazarus seated in fellowship with the Lord; and, finally
- We have Mary, breaking the box of fragrant oil on the feet of Jesus, a picture of worship.

These Christ centred themes of service, fellowship and worship are beautifully described in a gentle setting. After pouring the fragrant oil on the feet of Jesus she wipes them with her hair. Whenever we read of Mary she is at the feet of Jesus. On the first occasion it is to learn to listen to His words (Luke 10:38-42), then it is to learn in obedience about His love and power (John 11), and finally it is to learn to worship to His person (John 12). The few verses at the beginning of John 12 is where we see the outcomes of learning to wait on the Lord Christ, service, fellowship and worship. We have the service of love to God, each other and the world at large. We have fellowship in the power of the Spirit with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ, and we have a worshipping people.

The impact of our testimony will be determined by our willingness to wait upon the Lord, to learn and to know his guidance and wisdom, and to receive the grace needed to follow His will in our lives and to discover, like Isaiah and Mary that, *“Those who wait on 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.”*

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