

The Waiting Game

(Based on the book of Habakkuk)

All Scripture quotations from *Today's New International Version* unless otherwise noted.

How many of you have a favorite Bible verse? Maybe this is kind of strange, but after all the countless hours I've spent reading and studying and even memorizing Bible verses, I can't say that I have a favorite. I do, however, have a least favorite Bible verse. It's the one that says, "Wait on the Lord." Because I hate to wait.

I hate to wait at those DC traffic lights that last *more* than a minute. And then, when it finally turns green, the guy nearest the light takes eight of the available twelve seconds to snap out of his telephonically-induced stupor and step on the gas. So, now I'm waiting again. And hating it. Hey, I hate to wait for my check in a restaurant. I hate to wait on hold for customer support. I hate to wait in the grocery checkout line behind somebody—probably somebody my age or older—who still writes checks and doesn't even begin to look for the checkbook until after everything is bagged up.

Believe it or not, I've actually mellowed a bit over the years. Yes, even though I hate to wait, I'm learning that sometimes patience is a virtue. Because some people simply can't go any faster. Maybe they're really old or really young or injured somehow. And, then, there are some people who are, let's just say... deliberate. They've got one speed. And it doesn't matter how you feel about it. So, why ruin your day?

There's one kind of waiting, however, that I have not mastered. And that's this whole "wait on the Lord" dynamic. Why? Because God isn't distracted; he's omniscient. God isn't a victim of circumstances beyond his control; he's omnipotent. God isn't slow; he can do anything he wants anytime he wants.

But if your life is anything like mine, you've discovered that quite often this God who isn't slow—isn't so speedy either. He often takes a long time to do the things we're waiting on him to do, and it doesn't seem as if it needs to be that way. But, as we'll discover today, it sort of *does* need to be that way, though perhaps not for the reasons we might imagine.

You might think that if you're totally committed to God, or if you have a lot of faith, you won't have to play this waiting game. But I've got news for you. You can play the waiting game better or worse, but play it you will.

Because we're always waiting for something, aren't we? And when we're done waiting for that thing, we won't be done waiting. We'll just be waiting on something else.

So, then, what's going on with this waiting game? Is this what happens to us when God has something better to do? Is it my lack of faith? What's the secret spiritual sauce here?

Well, I'd like to introduce you to somebody who helped me with this conundrum—the Hebrew prophet, Habakkuk. Let's turn together to the book that bears his name. As chapter one opens, Habakkuk had already been waiting a long time for God to intervene in an increasingly desperate situation. And, he's just about up to here with this waiting game. Let's observe what happens to Habakkuk over the next three chapters and see if we can distill from his experience four lessons that will help us to play God's waiting game more successfully.

As I mentioned, Habakkuk is not a happy camper. In fact, the book begins with him complaining. Take a look verse 2: "How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" Anybody else ever been there? "Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?"³ Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds.⁴ Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted."

Habakkuk is experiencing a full-blown crisis, a moral meltdown, in his theocratic society. Let me paraphrase: "Look, Lord, this whole situation is completely whacked out. The bad guys are winning, the good guys are losing, and you're not looking too good here. So, I call on you to do something about it, but it's like I'm talking to the wall. Are you even listening? What in the world's going on here? And why am I still waiting?"

This time, however, God does answer. And it looks like Habakkuk's waiting game might be over quickly. Notice verse 5: "Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told."

I can just picture old Habakkuk doing an end zone dance and saying, "Can you dig it? I say the word; God does the deed. Do I have the spiritual hookup or what? Now, stand back and brace yourself for some shock and awe!"

But just what was this "something wonderful" that God was going to do for Habakkuk? Look with me in v. 6: "I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people..." And after detailing their fearsome ways, Jehovah calls them in v.11, "guilty people, whose own strength is their god."

In other words, God is going to raise up the really, really bad guys, to come in and take care of the merely bad guys Habakkuk is complaining about. Had the poor prophet had any idea that God was going to do something that crazy, he'd have kept his big mouth shut. Better a hundred times the injustice he's bemoaning than to have these pagan Babylonian baddies mucking around Jerusalem. ABB, Lord! Anything but the Babylonians!

And that brings us to our first lesson about playing the waiting game. *The situation you're waiting on might get worse before it gets better.* To which you say, "I'm not sure I like this message any more. Because I've been waiting a long time. But not for things to get worse. Heck, I could do that by myself. I need for God to come and make it all better."

Yeah, I know the feeling. I'm just telling you how God actually responded to Habakkuk's desperate plea. And that I've been there too. And you probably have as well. Full of faith you go to God and say, "Lord, this totally unacceptable situation has been going on for far too long." And you expect your fixer-upper God to fix it up. To come and blow the doors off your problem. But the problem doesn't go away. Instead, the plot thickens. And the waiting game continues.

Of course, it wouldn't be very satisfying to stop right here. But we don't dare skip this first lesson. Because if we don't realize that things might get worse before they get better, we just might give up before we even get to lessons two through four. Or pout. Or throw a pity party. Or take matters into our own hands. And miss what God has in mind with the waiting game.

So, note then the second lesson of the waiting game: *God wants us to engage with him while we wait*. That's what Habakkuk did. He's already made it clear that God's strategy of pitting one evil against another strikes him as unpleasant and ill-fated, but in v. 12 he at least recognizes God's right to do what he chooses. "You, LORD, have appointed them to execute judgment; you, my Rock, have ordained them to punish."

Still hoping, however, that he can change God's proposed course of action—or at the very least come to a better understanding of what's happening—he makes his best case. He tells God what's on his heart. He continues to insist that the character of God ultimately requires a wholly righteous solution and not just this interim juxtaposition of evils: "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?" (v. 13)

His message is this: "Think about this, Lord. Using the greater evil to punish the lesser goes against your character and principles. It makes you look bad." V. 12b: "Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?" He spends the rest of the first chapter insisting that God take care of the foreign oppressors as well.

But notice that he is not just mouthing off. He's conversing with God. That is, he makes his point, but then, as Chapter 2 begins, he sits back to listen for God's response. "I will stand on my watch and station myself on the ramparts, I will look to see what he will say to me and what answer I am to give to this complaint." (2:1)

No, Habakkuk isn't happy. In fact, he's still quite confused. But he doesn't give up. Or take his toys and go home. Rather, he engages with God *in the midst of* his increasingly complicated reality.

And that's one of the reasons why God makes us wait. Because waiting heightens our spiritual consciousness and motivates us to search out the ways of God. There's nothing like unresolved angst to keep us engaged with God in an intensely personal way. Now, obviously, God doesn't need the benefit of our wisdom, but he nevertheless wants us to come to him with our concerns, with our requests—even with our arguments—rather than just walking away because we don't understand or because we just hate to wait.

He likes it when we seek to discover his ways. He wants us to talk to him openly and honestly, rather than just saying what we think we ought to say. But he also wants us to be willing to listen for a response instead of just venting.

Once the prophet is in his listening mode, God begins to explain some of the whys and wherefores of the waiting game. Look at the Lord's answer in verse 2 of chapter 2: "Then the LORD replied: 'Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. ³ For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.' "

God's first response to his troubled questioner is this: "Know that I've got this situation, which is so unsettling to you, well in hand." He assures Habakkuk that his answer is sure. "Write it down Habakkuk. Etch it on your brain. Make it plain. This is not an iffy situation; what I'm about to tell you is absolutely going to happen." And when the time comes for God to act, he will not delay; he will not wait one minute longer.

Cool. But that assurance that God will act on your behalf also has a flip side. And that is that he will do so at the *appointed* time. Because here's the third lesson we need to learn about the waiting game: *The waiting game can be long. The waiting game can be long.* Indeed, this game may go into overtime.

We think that if we could just get our request into God's *Urgent* box, then we'd see some action. But here's a news flash: God doesn't have an *Urgent* inbox. God doesn't do emergencies. He intervenes at the *appointed* time. And he makes the appointment.

We look around us and anxiously begin to extrapolate out. If present trends continue... my life is going to be toast! But God knows that present trends will continue only as long as he wants them to. So, he's not so worried.

At this point, I have a request to make of you. Can you give me a big thumbs up? Not because I'm in need of some affirmation, but because I'd like you to use your thumb for a little illustration. Okay, first look at me, and then look at your thumb. Which is bigger, me or your thumb? The answer, of course, is obvious.

But if you close one eye and then place your thumb in front of the other eye, you can position it so that it blocks your view of me entirely. Even though nothing has really changed in size. Your thumb didn't get any bigger, and I didn't shrink. It's simply a matter of perspective.

But isn't that exactly what happens when we become wrapped up in our problems, in our circumstances, in our situations? We lose sight of God, because we can't see the big picture. We've got our nose buried so far into our issues that we can't see around them. And that loss of perspective causes us to lose sight of God, who is, in reality, much bigger than our circumstances.

Think of all the things that God did through his elevation of the Babylonian nation that he could not have done if he had granted Habakkuk's plea immediately. He judged the exiled people of Judah. Jehovah showed himself powerful as he over and over again turned the tables on the world's mightiest nation to show up on behalf of his people. He even brought Nebuchadnezzar, the most powerful man in the world, to a repentant recognition of the God of heaven.

God is working on a lot of things that we're not even aware of. And all of those things are inter-related. The plan has a timetable, and sometimes we just have to wait—maybe even wait a long time. But, "Though it linger," says the Lord, "wait for it." The fact that we're playing the waiting game doesn't mean that God isn't doing anything. It just means that he's doing an awful lot that we're not aware of. And that may take a while, maybe even a long while.

But what are we supposed to *do* during what might be a long wait? It turns out that great people are often those who learn how to grow stronger while they're waiting. Do you think Nelson Mandela would have become the father of his country and an inspirational international leader, if he hadn't spent twenty-seven years languishing in prison?

And how about biblical characters? Talk about a waiting game—Abraham didn't even receive the promise of a son until he was seventy-five, and then he had to wait another quarter century before Isaac was born. Moses became concerned about the oppression of his people as a young man, but he wasn't able to do anything about it until after his eightieth birthday. And while a needy world awaited, the Apostle Paul spent most of his final years behind bars.

This matter of what to do during the waiting game brings us to Habakkuk's fourth and perhaps most significant lesson about playing the waiting game: *Waiting can be an active period of growth.* Waiting is not just waiting. *Waiting can be an active period of growth.*

You see, we think we're waiting for God to intervene in our circumstances, but God is waiting to intervene in us through our circumstances. In the latter part of the third chapter, we see this happening to Habakkuk right before our very eyes. What can we learn from his experience that will help us to transform our waiting game from down time into an active period of growth?

The first three lessons have, admittedly, left Habakkuk pretty shaky. When he considers that the situation is going to get worse before it gets better, that he's going to have to continue engaging with God about his concerns, and that this dynamic may go on for an extended period of time—he's got to be more than a bit nervous about the terrible things that might happen before God eventually intervenes. Look with me at 3:16, where Habakkuk admits: "I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled." Yikes!

But in the midst of that fear, in the midst of his existential anguish, he reaches a point of decision. In spite of his fears, in spite of his misgivings, he determines to live in a way that sees beyond his circumstances. He's going to pull his thumb away from his eye.

Look at the end of v. 16: “Yet I will wait patiently for the days of calamity to come on the nation invading us.” Well, he wasn’t waiting patiently at the beginning of this book. How did he get from there to here? How did he go from *hate* to wait to *willing* to wait?

Well, it’s not because Habakkuk’s distress is going to be resolved tomorrow. He just said he’s willing to wait for God’s judgment on the wicked invaders. And, clearly, that’s not going to happen until after God uses those very invaders as his instrument of judgment on the nation of Judah. So, happy days are not exactly here again. Habakkuk is hunkering down for the long haul.

Look at verse 17. “Though the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls...” No, relief is not in sight. Things are not getting better. In fact, they’re getting worse!

So, what’s Habakkuk going to do while he’s waiting? Just continue complaining all the way to doomsday? No. Look at v. 18. What’s he going to do? “I will rejoice in the LORD: I will be joyful in God my Savior.”

That’s *while* he’s waiting! Even when all of the indicators are bad—no crops, no food, no livestock—even when there is no earthly reason for optimism, he’s no longer crying or complaining; he’s *rejoicing*! Not because he’s stupid, but because his outlook has nothing to do with the current trends. Surrounded by worst-case scenarios, Habakkuk nevertheless decides to rejoice—not in his circumstances, but in the Lord. To be joyful in God his Savior.

And just how does he pull that off? It kind of boils down to that most fundamental of spiritual capabilities, the one without which it is impossible to please God and without which it is impossible to play the waiting game successfully. I’m talking about faith.

Right about in the middle of these three chapters, the whole dynamic of the book hinges on this fulcrum of faith. Look at chapter two, verse four, the final phrase. In contrast to the wicked, it says that “the righteous will live by their faithfulness.”

This phrase, of course, is quoted in Romans 1:17 as “the righteous shall live by faith.” And if you remember your Church history, you know that this became a key concept in the Reformation. Here in Habakkuk, some translations render it as “faith” and others as “faithfulness.” The Hebrew word can actually encompass both concepts, and in this context the two, faith and faithfulness, are intimately related. Because the faithfulness in view is nothing more than faith multiplied by time. Faith is believing in what is not yet, and faithfulness is continuing to believe when you have to wait a long time for the object of your faith.

When you can’t see the answer coming, and all you can do is believe that God is going to do what’s right because God is God, then you are faithfully living by faith and not by sight. But how does your faith become faithful? Faithful faith requires... waiting. It can’t happen any other way.

Sometimes we think that if we had enough faith, we could just ask God for whatever is on our minds and tomorrow (or better yet, today) it's a done deal. But think about the faith it takes to ask God for something that you don't see for a week, or a month, or a year, or a decade or perhaps even in your entire lifetime. Note that Habakkuk did not live to see the fulfillment of God's promise. That is faithful faith. That is a completely different stratosphere of faith.

Why does God make us wait? Because that faithful faith muscle is built only by the exercise of waiting. Only by multiple repetitions. I'm not crazy about exercise, but I do it, because as a writer working at home, if I didn't get out and move around I'd turn into a blob. I prefer to exercise outdoors, but when it turns cold I wimp out and move inside—to the weight room at the local rec center.

Now, looking around the weight room, you can tell the difference between the people who have been going there regularly for a long time, and the foul-weather drop-ins like me. Why? Because even though we're doing similar exercises, they've been doing them for a long time. So they're—stronger. Resistance over time, resistance over time, resistance over time builds strength.

The same principle applies in the spiritual world. Faith exercised over time becomes strong; it becomes faithful faith.

That's what happened to Habakkuk. The waiting game became not just a slowdown on the way to wherever he was going; the waiting game became a period of active growth, a crucible of faith. The waiting game became, in effect, its own destination. The growth did not occur when the answer came; the growth occurred in the midst of the waiting game itself.

You see, the waiting game is not some kind of purgatory on the way to glory. The waiting game is not the dead space between God's will and my lack of faith. The waiting game is not some spiritual aphrodisiac designed to make the ultimate victory more exhilarating. The waiting game is not a Satanic obstacle that requires Divine demolition. The waiting game is not some dread disease from which we must be healed. The waiting game is not a curse from which we must be delivered. The waiting game is not a necessary evil. The waiting game is a necessary good.

Waiting, my friends, is grace, because it is the medium through which God enables us to discover him more fully. Waiting is grace, because waiting is the passageway to a faithful faith.

I know you're waiting on something today. So am I. But I challenge you to think about that waiting in a different way. To recognize that what God is accomplishing in you while you're waiting might be just as important or, perhaps, even more important than that thing you're waiting for.

I trust that these lessons we've learned from Habakkuk today will help you as you play the waiting game. That you'll be prepared for things to get worse before they get better. Because

often, they do. That you'll continue to engage with God, even when the going gets tough. That you'll be willing to wait what might be a very long time. And, most of all, that you will embrace the waiting game as a time to grow stronger, because that's what the waiting game is all about.

May God grant you his grace as you learn to wait on him.

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