

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 31, 2014**

WAITING

Psalm 130:1-8

Raise your hand if you enjoy waiting.

Wouldn't you agree that there is something not normal about a person who loves to wait? Waiting is not our favorite pastime. And many of us, *most* of us, don't do it well. We don't like the waiting involved in the almost inevitable traffic congestion we encounter on the Beltway, 95, 395, and just about any other road in this area. We don't like to wait in the drive-through lane at our favorite fast-food establishment, or in the check-out line at the supermarket. We don't like to be kept waiting at the doctor's office. We don't like it when we are put on hold on the phone. We don't like it when someone is late for a meeting or an appointment with us. We don't like it when a meeting or event doesn't start when it is supposed to.

We don't like to wait for things we want right now. Our culture – and, to some degree, every one of us – has mastered the art of instant gratification. Or, rather, it has mastered us. But we have not mastered the virtue of delayed gratification. We have not mastered the virtue of waiting. We want what we want when we want it (which is usually right now), and we don't want to wait. It may even be too mild to say that we don't *like* to wait. We – some more than others – *hate* to wait. We are an “impatient nation” of people who expect answers to our questions and solutions to our problems *right now*. We live life in the fast-lane. At least, it feels like it around these parts. We are always in a hurry, it seems, with places to go, people to see, things to do, meetings to go to, errands to run, projects to complete, and games, practices, lessons, and concerts to attend. And we don't like it when anyone or anything slows us down.

Too many of us, I fear, almost live in a perpetual state of hurry. We exalt “busyness” as one of the highest virtues. But recall the wise counsel of Dallas Willard to John Ortberg that I shared with you a few weeks ago: If you desire to be and to remain spiritually healthy, Willard the mentor told his younger protégé in the faith, “you must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life. Hurry,” he said, “is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day. You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life” (Ortberg, *Soul-Keeping*, 20).

WAITING WITH GRACE

In order to eliminate hurry from our lives, we must learn not merely to wait, but to wait with grace. We *must*. “Slowing down and waiting,” author Luci Shaw confesses, “seem like a waste of time. Yet waiting seems to be an inevitable part of the human condition” (Shaw, *Nouwen Then*). True.

We are always waiting for something. Beyond the ordinary, everyday experiences that reveal the spiritual fruit of patience (Galatians 5:22) in us, or the lack of it, there are other, more

weighty kinds of waiting. An unmarried man or woman waits with longing to be married. (Think of Jacob, who labored seven years for Laban, waiting all that time to marry the love of his life, Rachel.) A childless couple waits with longing for the blessing of a child. (Think of Abraham and Sarah, who were already up in years when God gave them the promise of a son, and then they had to wait another 24 years before the promise was fulfilled in the birth of Isaac.) Heartsick parents wait for prodigal sons or daughters to come to their senses and return home. (See Luke 15:11-32.) An unemployed person waits to learn if he or she got a desperately needed job. At some point, you may find yourself just waiting to die. None of this is easy. It isn't easy to wait for the results of a biopsy or an MRI. Waiting to find out if you made the team or the band, or if you passed your professional exam, isn't easy. It isn't easy to wait for justice to prevail when you have been treated unjustly. It isn't easy to wait for God to answer your most heartfelt prayers. It isn't easy to wait for God to just do something to fix what is wrong with us and what is wrong with the world.

There is a story about Phillips Brooks, the 19th century minister who wrote the words to the Christmas carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Brooks was known as a man with a gentle, unflappable spirit. One day, however, a friend found Brooks pacing back and forth in his study, uncharacteristically agitated in spirit. To say the friend was surprised is putting it mildly. "Dr. Brooks!" he said. "What on earth is the matter?"

"I am in a hurry," Brooks replied, "but God is not!"

Isn't that the way it so often seems in this life?

I spent some time this past week reacquainting myself with a book entitled *Waiting*. It was written by a pastor named Ben Patterson. I'm not sure how many times I've read it or re-read at least parts of it in the 25 years since it was published. Patterson describes what most of us – probably *all of us* – have experienced in one way or other at one time or another: "You desperately want something you don't have, something apparently legitimate and worthwhile. And you're forced to wait for it. There's no end in sight, and the pain [of waiting] becomes a dull, daily ache. And you can do nothing without thinking of what you are waiting for. Do you ever think that God is taking His own sweet time with you?" (Patterson, *Waiting*, 10).

Do you? Of course you do. We all want God to operate on our time schedules. But that is not how God operates. In his classic *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer writes: "Wait on the Lord" is a constant refrain in the Psalms, and it is a necessary word [to us], for God often keeps us waiting. He is not in such a hurry as we are, and it is not His way to give more light on the future than we need for action in the present, or to guide us one step at a time."

God often keeps us waiting. He is not in such a hurry as we are. If this is true – and it is – if God is not in such a hurry as we are, doesn't it follow that He doesn't want us to live such hurried lives? He doesn't want us to be in such a hurry, for hurry is the great enemy of healthy spiritual living in our day. What God wants, instead, is for us to learn to wait for Him and to wait upon Him. What God wants is for us to learn to wait with grace – to learn to wait, Patterson says, with humility and hope (*Waiting*, 12).

“WAITING” IN THE BIBLE

That “waiting” is both necessary and blessed is well-attested in the Bible. Here are a few examples, beginning with the Psalms:

Psalm 27:14:

Wait for the LORD;
be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.

Psalm 33:20-21:

We wait in hope for the LORD;
He is our help and our shield.
In Him our hearts rejoice,
for we trust in His holy name.

Psalm 37:7a:

Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for Him.

Psalm 40:1-2:

I waited patiently for the LORD;
He turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the slimy pit [of my despair],
out of the mud and mire [of my troubles and fear];
He set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.

You probably know that Psalm 119 is the longest of all the Psalms. In fact, it is the longest chapter in the Bible, with 176 verses. If you didn't know it before, you know it now. The psalm is a hymn, composed in 22 stanzas, one stanza for each of the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. It is a hymn both of praise to God for the excellence of His law, and of consecration to God, to glorify Him by living according to His word. Near the end, in verse 166, the unidentified writer of the psalm says:

I wait for Your salvation, O LORD,
And I follow Your commands.

We do not follow God's commandments in order to earn salvation or win God's favor. We obey God's commandments in response to the gift of salvation that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. We live according to His word in response to God's grace, not in order to get grace. And we live according to God's word as we wait for the day yet to come when our Savior returns or in His heavenly kingdom when we will experience the full measure of the salvation Jesus Christ has won for us.

This emphasis on waiting is not limited to the Psalms. There is a beautiful promise in Isaiah 30:18, where the Lord says to His wayward people:

[In spite of your stubbornness and persistent rebellion
against God and His ways]
the LORD longs to be gracious to you;
He rises to show you compassion.
For the LORD is a God of justice.
Blessed are all who wait for Him.

Part of what it means to wait for the Lord is to put your hope or trust in Him, no matter what you may be going through in life. You can see this in Isaiah 40:31, which says:

Those who wait for the LORD
(or, who hope in the LORD)
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

In the Bible, to *wait for the Lord* and to *hope in the Lord* often mean the same thing. The promise of Isaiah 40:31 is that “those who wait upon GOD” and hope in Him “get fresh strength” (*The Message*). It sounds like a good deal to me. Too bad we don’t take God up on His offer more often.

In Isaiah 51:5 the Lord declares that the gift of salvation is meant not just for the Jews, but for people everywhere, even to the far ends of the earth:

The (faraway) islands will look to me
and wait in hope for (me to bring justice and salvation).

Millions, including many of you, I’m sure, have found comfort and encouragement in the testimony of Jeremiah in Lamentations 3:19-26. As he mourns the death of his nation and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians, as he recalls the humiliation and suffering he has had to endure personally, feeling as though he has hit rock bottom, the prophet says:

I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall.
I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me.
Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope;
Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed,
for His compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;

great is Your faithfulness.
 I say to myself:
 “The LORD is my portion;
 therefore I will wait for Him.”
 The LORD is good to those whose hope is in Him,
 to the one who seeks Him.
 It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

What does Jeremiah tell us in these verses about waiting? He does not tell us that waiting is easy. He does not tell us that waiting is fun. But he tells us that it is good for us to wait. It is good to wait for the Lord. It is good to wait quietly for Him to act. It is good to wait quietly in His presence. It is good to wait with hope in God. It. Is. Good.

And what does he tell us about God? He tells us that God is good. All the time. He tells us that God loves us in spite of our unloveliness and unworthiness. He tells us that God is compassionate toward us and does not treat us as our sins deserve. He tells us that God is faithful. Always. Before the U. S. Marine Corps ever came into existence, God was, and is, and will always be *semper fi*. Someone really ought to write a hymn about the greatness of God’s faithfulness ☺.

Before I wrap this up for today, I want you to notice these things in Psalm 130.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

The first thing to notice is that the psalmist cries to the Lord “out of the depths” of helplessness. He is overwhelmed by the enormity of his need. There are many kinds of “depths” from which you may long to be delivered at different times or seasons in your life. It could be the depths of depression or discouragement, the depths of heartache or pain or loss or loneliness, the depths of betrayal or rejection or anger or hate, or the depths of anxiety or fear. In this psalm, though, it is the psalmist’s anguished awareness of his guilt before God, the piercing conviction of his complete inability to atone for his guilt that has brought him almost to the point of total despair. He knows the truth about himself, which is that he is a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving God’s displeasure, and without hope for salvation or forgiveness or peace with God, except in God’s sovereign mercy. He knows that he has done many things he ought not to have done, and that he has left undone many things he should have done.

Do you know about the unchurched man who decided, at the urging of a friend, to try church one Sunday? The service had already started when he slipped quietly into the back of the sanctuary. The congregation was praying this traditional prayer of confession in unison: “We have done the things we ought not to have done, and have left undone the things we ought to have done.” The man breathed a sigh of relief and thought to himself: “At last! I’ve found my kind of people!”

I am this man’s “kind of people.” We are *all* his “kind of people.” His “kind of people” is what you see every time you look in a mirror. The psalmist is his kind of people, too. We are

the psalmist's kind of people. We are all guilty of sins of commission and sins of omission. Like the psalmist, our only hope is to cry out to God for mercy.

GOOD NEWS: WITH GOD THERE IS FORGIVENESS

The second thing to notice is the confession of faith the psalmist makes in verses 3 and 4. He declares that God is merciful. If it were not so – if, to the contrary, God were to keep a running score, an up-to-the-second tally of all our sins – not even the most godly person who ever lived (except for Jesus) could stand in God's presence. If this is not intuitively obvious to even the most casual observer, then that casual observer is either deceived or has chosen to deceive him- or herself. If God were to treat me as my sins deserve, it would be unimaginably horrific for me. I would not want to be there to receive what I justly deserve from God. But because Jesus came and suffered and died in my place, taking upon Himself the punishment for my sins, I am forgiven. I am redeemed. So are you, if you have come to Jesus in repentance and trusting faith, looking to Him and Him alone for your salvation. This is the gospel, and it is meant for you today.

With God, the psalmist declares, there is forgiveness. This is good news for a sin-saturated, guilty world. When you realize the depths of God's mercy and grace in saving us and forgiving us, it makes you want to worship Him and exalt Him and honor Him and revere Him more and more. I think that is what the psalmist means in verse 4 when he says to God:

But with You there is forgiveness;
therefore You are feared.

To “fear” God in this context is not to cower before Him or to hide from Him in sheer terror, but to regard Him with the highest reverence and awe, knowing that the Lord our God alone is worthy of the purest praise and fullest devotion. There is no god like God. He is the true and living, loving, compassionate, merciful, gracious, forgiving, faithful, righteous, holy, just, omniscient, omnipotent, and sovereign King of the universe.

This is the God in whom the psalm writer learned to put his hope. This is the God for whom we too must learn to wait, and upon whom we must learn to wait in humility and hope. His thoughts are not our thoughts. His ways are not the same as our ways. The Almighty has His own purposes and ways. He does all that He wills and causes all things to work together for good in the lives of His beloved children, in *His* time.

Next Sunday, we will talk more about waiting and trusting in God. Until then – and always – may you come to Jesus continually and find rest and refreshment in Him. May you wait for the Lord. May you hope in the Lord. May you trust in the Lord. May you rejoice in the Lord always. Even as you wait.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.