

WEEK 7
07.16.17

THE DISCIPLINE OF WAITING



FOCUS VERSE

Isaiah 40:31

But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.

LESSON TEXT

Genesis 12:1–4

1 Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee:

2 And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing:

3 And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.

4 So Abram departed, as the LORD had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran.

Genesis 17:15–22

15 And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be.

16 And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her.

17 Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?

18 And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee!

19 And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him.

20 And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation.

21 But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year.

22 And he left off talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.



FOCUS THOUGHT

We develop
patience and
perseverance when
we learn to wait on
the Lord.



CULTURE CONNECTION

A Shortcut to Paradise?

In January 2016, the US Powerball lottery reached the stratosphere. Three individuals split the \$1.6 billion jackpot. After the government got its half of the loot in taxes, the three winners were each sentenced to a lifetime of carrying a \$267 million burden, unless their neighbors, close family members, long-lost family members, old friends, new friends, Lamborghini dealers, money managers, and schemers successfully unburdened them first.

The lottery is a tax on the poor. Many lottery-ticket buyers live on welfare, disability, or Social Security. They spend a disproportionate amount of their tiny incomes on the scheme, tossing much-needed \$5, \$10, \$100 bills into the wishing well of life. They have a better chance of being struck by a meteor. Twice.

The lottery is even worse for those who have the misfortune of winning it. The nature of most of their relationships change,

especially if they were poor before winning it. When they were poor, their friendships were built upon nothing more than friendship. But new lottery winners grow suspicious every time someone smiles at them. They wonder, *Does this person like me or my money?*

The point is that the lottery is a perfect symbol of the struggle to reach the paradise all of our souls seek. We yearn for the unclouded. But the wise man understands that this kind of peace comes only after years of disciplined trust. The lottery mentality, however, tries to leap over the years of developing patience and land directly in a land without care. But to arrive magically in a good place without having the discipline it takes to get there is to miss the point. Living in paradise is not the point of our lives. Life on earth is designed to make us the kind of people who could enjoy paradise. And this takes patience.

OUTLINE

- I. TIME
- II. A POSITIVE EXAMPLE OF PATIENCE
 - A. Joseph, the Just
 - B. Joseph's Family Trait
- III. SOME NEGATIVE EXAMPLES
 - A. Abraham
 - B. Saul
 - C. Judas

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Patience is not only a virtue but also a fruit of the Spirit. Patience is not an end unto itself; instead, patience is the fruit of an underlying spiritual principle. We are creatures caught in time, but we do not seem to have been designed for time. In some ways, we are alarmingly ill-equipped to deal with time. Our bodies do not hold up well through the years; without the strength and vigor of robust youth,

we quickly succumb to what Abraham Lincoln once called the "silent artillery of time."

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. TIME

Living in this world seems to take such a toll upon our bodies that to temporarily recover enough strength to manage another day, roughly eight out of every twenty-four hours should be spent sleeping. That means we spend approximately one-third of our lives recuperating from the onslaught of time.

Moreover, our minds tend to have difficulty reconciling the passage of time. When reflecting upon a memory, an individual may have the distinct impression that that past event, at one and the same time, seems to have taken place just yesterday but also a long time ago. When cataloging past events in the memory, the mind seems to file the same event in two different folders: the distant past and the recent past.

Time is strange. One instance of its strangeness to the human mind can be seen in the following scenario. When a man boards a train in St. Louis, headed for Seattle, he will first be taken northeast to Chicago before heading west to Seattle. The trip northeast to Chicago is particularly strange in terms of time because while the man is moving farther away in distance from his destination (Seattle), he is, at the same time, getting closer in time to his arrival in Seattle. How can a man get closer to his destination at the same time he is getting farther away from it? Our language and experience have difficulty relating to time.

Another quirk of time relates to its movement. Whereas we are able to navigate space, turning left, right, moving up and down, and retracing our steps to come back to a place we were before, time allows no such liberty within its laws. Time moves in one direction, takes everything with it, and allows nothing to move in any direction except forward. Once we leave the present moment and it becomes the past, we could sooner arrive, after a very long journey, at the edge of the universe than we could journey into the past we just left.

We were made for God's heavenly kingdom, and in that kingdom, as John the Revelator tells us, time will be no more. (See Revelation 10:6.) In the meantime, time is our lot. It is, in a way, our curse. But as we should come to expect of something as strange as time, it is also our blessing. Time is the womb in which God has chosen to fashion and transform us into His likeness.

Time keeps us from being able to see the future. Thus time is a tool that compels us to entrust our unseen and unknown future to someone who "holds the future." By being shrouded in the darkness of the present, we learn to have faith, we learn to trust, and we learn to hope. In turn, this faith, hope, and trust give birth to patience. Patience is the result of an underlying trust. Waiting reveals whether we have acquired patience. Patience allows us to navigate in the darkness of the present. The fool regards the future as either an enemy to fear or an entirely blank canvas that he has to impose his will upon. But the future is neither an enemy nor a "choose-your-own-adventure" art form. Ultimately, God has only good in store for the believer. God knows

that human beings are not capable at most times in their lives of creating a future that is best for them.

The fact that we do not know the future weans us off the habit of following a course of action based on the evidence of our senses. For instance, the obvious action on Judgment Day will be to fall on our knees and beg for mercy. It is easy to be humble in the presence of such overwhelming terror. But who will bow in the present? When the present presses upon us and God seems far away, who will humble themselves and live now in the light of a future Day of Judgment? Only those who, through constant discipline, patiently force the report of the present to take a back seat to a belief in the not-yet-fulfilled promises of God.

A wise person lives in the light of far-off promises. Abraham had to wait decades for the promise of a son to be realized. Did he begin to obey and follow God only after God fulfilled His promise? No. To follow a God who knows "the end from the beginning" (Isaiah 46:10) and who "gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did" (Romans 4:17, NKJV), calls for the believer to go beyond what the senses tell and live in the present according to a reality that does not yet exist.

This is exactly what Abraham understood. Thus Paul said of Abraham, "who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, 'So shall your descendants be.' And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness" (Romans 4:18-22, NKJV).

The patient person's present, it seems, is "larger" than the impatient person's; the patient individual's horizon is bigger. For those like Abraham, the present in which they live does not merely consist of the here-and-now; the present also includes the not-yet-visible future in which God fulfills His promises.

II. A POSITIVE EXAMPLE OF PATIENCE

A. Joseph, the Just

The story of the virgin birth of Jesus is so sacred to us and so thoroughly a part of our culture that we can easily lose sight of how scandalous it seemed to people in the first century AD. To put it another way, the family tree of Christianity has grown to such grand and breathtaking heights that we hardly notice it has a trunk so gnarled that one of its earliest evangelists, Matthew, in what was almost certainly a defensive reaction against those who questioned the legitimacy of Jesus' birth, felt compelled, by way of the genealogy that begins his Gospel, to remind his proud Jewish critics that questionable birth circumstances had long been part of even the noblest branches of the Jewish people.

It must have been embarrassing for those critics when Matthew reminded them that if Jesus was disqualified by the strange circumstances surrounding his mother, Mary, then Solomon was disqualified by his mother, Bathsheba; Jesse, David's father, was disqualified by his mother, Ruth; Boaz, by his mother, Rahab; and Perez, by his mother, Tamar. Let us feel for a moment the sting Matthew must have felt when answering yet another round of Jesus-mockers. But more difficult still, let us try to image what it must have felt like to be Joseph, the man who had entered into a marriage contract with a young woman who was now pregnant—and not by him.

Joseph seems to have first assumed Mary had committed adultery. If that were the case, he had a few options before him. The first was to have her punished according to the Torah: "the man that committeth adultery with another man's wife, even he that committeth adultery with his neighbour's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death" (Leviticus 20:10). The second was to marry her anyway. Scripture provided precedent for this course of action as well; Hosea married an adulteress (Hosea 1:2). The third option was to release her from their betrothal and, with a modicum of dignity left, walk away.

Joseph had to have been deeply wounded by this apparent betrayal. Had he been an angry man, quick to judgment, he might

have chosen the first option. The second option would have seemed merciful and perhaps honorable—except for the fact that Mary would have been forever dishonored in his own eyes, and their marriage would have been one of constant distrust.

"Being a just man," however, Joseph was "not willing to make her a publick example" (Matthew 1:19). Instead, he intended to keep the matter to himself and secretly release her, which would have safeguarded her reputation and enabled her to enter into another marriage contract in the future.

Ancient writers rarely felt the need to include a key figure's inner thoughts in a story's narrative. Having limited access to writing materials and few literate readers, an ancient writer typically stuck to describing a man's actions. Readers wanted to know "what happened," and stories were designed to give readers exactly that. But Matthew broke with this literary tradition. At this point in the narrative, Matthew wrote that Joseph "thought on these things" (Matthew 1:20).

This turned out to be a rather fortunate divide between Joseph's hearing of Mary's pregnancy and his decision to do something about it. It is important to note that exactly here, and not a moment before, the angel of the Lord was dispatched to reveal the truth to Joseph. Matthew let us know first that Joseph, far from being compulsive, waited. That waiting, that patience in thought and deed, was richly rewarded with a message from the Lord.

Why did the angel not come before Joseph heard the shocking news about Mary? Why not spare him this anguish by telling him beforehand? The dramatic pause here in Joseph's pondering the situation served a few purposes. First, it allowed Matthew to inform those who questioned the legitimacy of Jesus' birth that the question had already been put to the highest test conceivable and passed. Who could possibly have had a higher stake in determining the truth concerning Jesus' conception and Mary's purity than the man who was betrothed to her? If Joseph, the man who had the most to lose if he married a woman who had been unfaithful, was willing to believe in Mary's purity and Jesus' divine conception, then it should not be difficult for others to believe these things as well.

Second, and more important for this discussion, the pause dispensed with the notion that action is always the way forward. Sometimes, it seems, God meets us only after we have determined to wait for clarity. Joseph had in mind an option he thought was the right thing to do—releasing her. But it turned out that the “right thing to do” in this instance would have been the wrong thing to do. The salvation of mankind through the babe that was now in Mary’s womb depended upon a man waiting and giving time for thought.

Again, the key piece of information in this story is in Matthew’s description of Joseph as a “just man.” This underlying righteousness bore the fruit of patience. His justness predisposed him to treat Mary fairly. The underlying principle of righteousness, of trust in God and His principles, drove him not to action but to thought.

No doubt there is a place for bold action. But if we look back over our own lives, the weight of our collective experience tells us that many of our biggest decisions in life were the decisions we never had to make. Many problems will simply work themselves out in time without any action on our part.

B. Joseph’s Family Trait

In the end, we are left with the rather impressive fact that Jesus and his half-brothers were raised in a home where patience was a virtue. Jesus, Joseph’s stepson, knew how to be strategically patient. Jesus’ disciples remembered that Jesus once waited four days to raise a man from the dead. If there had ever been a time when Jesus should have been in a hurry, it seems that it would have been then. But instead, He purposely waited because He knew that Lazarus’s resurrection would be “for the glory of God” (John 11:4).

Patience was a trait Joseph shared with the children he was charged with raising. And Jesus was not the only one taking notes from Joseph. Jesus’ brother James told his listeners: “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires” (James 1:19–20, NIV). Because there are a number of men in the New Testament named James, to distinguish James the brother of Jesus from

the others, Christian history has appropriately referred to him as “James the Just.” This is the very description Matthew used when first describing James’s father, Joseph. It is not difficult to imagine James telling his church what he remembered his father teaching him.

III. SOME NEGATIVE EXAMPLES

The Bible is not merely a collection of stories about virtuous men and women. It also includes the sagas of men who failed, and sometimes failed miserably.

A. Abraham

Sometimes the record of biblical heroes looks a lot like the record of biblical failures; some star as both heroes and villains; at times they show remarkable trust and patience, but at other times they demonstrate equally breathtaking moments of impatience. Abraham, though he was otherwise a man of great patience, once stepped out of character. And it cost him dearly. Because his wife was old, he decided to try to fulfill God’s promise for a son without Sarah. The child Ishmael was the result.

B. Saul

King Saul knew the rules: only the priest—not the king—could offer sacrifices. But he found himself in a fatal hurry. He needed the priest to bless him and his troops as they went off to battle; but the priest seemed to be running late. Not wanting to go on without a sacrifice, Saul did what he assumed was the next best thing: he offered the sacrifice himself. Saul’s mistake to move forward hastily was the opposite of Joseph’s decision to wait: Where Joseph heard from the angel after he had determined to meditate on what to do, Saul heard from Samuel after Saul had determined to take matters into his own hands. His rush to sacrifice—against God’s rules—cost him dearly; it set him on a path to his and his son’s destruction.

C. Judas

The name *Judas* is almost unrecoverable in our culture. Such a name rivals Hitler for the most hated name in the Western world. But even after Judas’s betrayal, who can doubt that the risen Jesus would have forgiven

him? For all the stigma surrounding Judas, we should remember that Judas did go to the priests after betraying Jesus, begging the priests to take back the silver coins and release Jesus. Think about that for a minute!

First, Judas went to the Temple, which had long been the place for a man to go when he suffered from a guilty conscience. Second, before the priests, Judas called Jesus an innocent man, which by implication meant that Judas was declaring himself guilty of having broken the ninth commandment in bearing false witness against Jesus. Third, and perhaps most significantly, although the other disciples remembered Judas for having loved money more than just about anything, in a dramatic gesture, he threw the money he so loved on the floor of the Temple, desperately hoping that one of the priests would feel pity and release Jesus.

Is it difficult to image a man like Judas, whose final acts are the epitome of self-loathing, being forgivable? Jesus forgave the hardened Christian-murderer Saul of Tarsus even while he was on his way to persecute more Christians. Judas was a much more sympathetic character. What about Peter? While Peter was denying that he had anything to do with Jesus, Judas was in the Temple protesting Jesus' arrest. One man claimed not to know Jesus; the other claimed not only to know Him, but also to know that He was innocent.

So why did mercy not triumph in this instance? Why, in the Book of Acts, is Judas not standing up with his compatriots on the Day of Pentecost? The sad truth seems to be as simple as this: Judas did not wait for forgiveness;

he never gave God the chance. Judas went out and dealt with his own guilt by hanging himself. What if he had waited just three days as Peter did? His guilt was, apparently, too strong for that.

And this brings us full circle, back to the beginning. The patient man's horizons are larger than the foolish man's. For the one who is patient, there is trust that God, even in the bleakest of circumstances (which include circumstances brought on by one's own sin), will, in time, turn defeat into victory. Just a simple delay in acting—especially when one is angry, confused, hurt, or feeling condemned—can mean the difference between going down in history as a Peter or as a Judas. So much can hinge upon waiting. Joseph's pause led to the story of the Messiah. Judas's unwillingness to wait through the pangs of guilt has robbed the New Testament record of what could have been its supreme demonstration of Jesus' forgiveness.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Waiting is never fun. As people raised in a Western culture, we value action. We are taught to admire those who get things accomplished, those who seize the moment and make things happen.

But spiritual maturity cannot be rushed. Patience is not for sale at a dollar store. The discipline of waiting both reveals how much patience we have and helps to develop patience.

In a hurry-up world, learning to wait is not a wasted effort. It can, if we allow it, develop godly patience.

REFLECTIONS

- Think about how many times you have regretted something you said in haste. Now think of how many times you have regretted something you gave a long period of time to thinking about. How much more often did you regret what you said in haste as opposed to what you said with time to think?
- Joseph had made up his mind as to the right thing to do with Mary, but he continued to wait and think. Once you believe you have come to the right decision, do you act upon it right away, or could there be value in simply waiting to act even after you believe you have come to the right decision?
- Time is one of God's ordained "healers." Do you have a policy in life never to make an important decision when you are angry or hurt? If not, you may want to consider developing such a policy.