

“Waiting on the Lord”

Isaiah 40:27-31

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

*27 Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,*

*“My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God”?*

28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?

*The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.*

*He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.*

*29 He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength.*

*30 Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;*

*31 but they 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 40:27-31, ESV

Introduction: Waiting is the Hardest Part

Few things are harder for people than waiting, especially waiting in a situation where we feel helpless. People put off going to the MVA as long as they can because they don't want to sit around waiting for hours to get something done that should take five minutes. Waiting to register a vehicle or get a drivers' license is one thing. Sometimes God calls us to wait in much harder ways. Waiting for a cancer diagnosis or for a loved one to come home from a military

deployment to a war zone or for a prodigal child to return to the Lord are all very challenging.

For the people of Jerusalem and Judah living in exile in Babylon, they were called by God to wait for 70 years. They were far from home, living in a hostile, foreign, pagan land, and they knew they might die there before they could return home. So, many of them were waiting in hope not for themselves but for their children or grandchildren, hoping that spending decades in exile would not draw their hearts away from the one true and living God and after pagan idols.

Ultimately, this is the kind of faithful waiting we're called to as well. We're living in exile as aliens and strangers in a hostile, foreign, pagan, idolatrous land. And from the time we come to know the Lord and realize we're living in exile until the time we get to go home might be 70 years or even more. And we're called to live and wait faithfully not only for ourselves but also for our children and even our grandchildren or great-grandchildren.

So, these verses speak powerfully to where we are living our lives, too.

When We Think God Doesn't See Us

In light of all that Isaiah has proclaimed as words of comfort to the people of God concerning the tenderness and inconceivable greatness of the Lord, he then puts to them a question in verse 27 –

*27 Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God”?*

Either in their hearts or in their murmuring conversations with one another, the exiled people of God were saying that either the LORD couldn't see their troubles or that He didn't care about the rights of His people.

It's so easy when we're suffering to think that either God doesn't see us or that He doesn't care about us. I had a friend in college who was reluctant to pray because she thought God had more important things to worry about in running the universe than her little problems.

Feeling either hidden from God or disregarded by God is not an uncommon experience for believers.

David opens Psalm 13 by asking painfully, *"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"*

Earlier in the service, we heard David's anguished cry, *"Hide not your face from me. Turn not your servant away in anger, O you who have been my help. Cast me not off; forsake me not, O God of my salvation!"* (Psalm 27:9, ESV)

In our morning devotionals, we wrapped up the Book of Job this past week. The whole book is dedicated to handling the struggle believers feel when facing unjust suffering and feeling either neglected or even hated by God because of the intensity of their suffering.

Job was innocent. David, too, suffered many times unjustly, especially when Saul was persecuting him. The people of God in exile in Babylon were not innocent. They knew they were being disciplined by God for generations of stubborn rebellious sin. And yet, even though God's people were guilty of sin, their Babylonian captors were far more wicked. And so, they wondered whether God didn't see or whether He just didn't care about the justice of their cause.

When We Misunderstand God

But when we feel this way in the situation of our angst, we are fundamentally misunderstanding God. When we think He doesn't see, we're denying His omniscience, His great and perfect knowledge of everything. When we think He is disregarding our right, we are denying His infinite and unchangeable justice. We might say with our lips that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and

perfectly just, but in distressing circumstances, we quickly deny in our hearts what we say we believe with our lips.

And so Isaiah corrects the people of God in their misunderstanding of God:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The LORD is the everlasting God,

the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary;

his understanding is unsearchable.

²⁹ *He gives power to the faint,*

and to him who has no might he increases strength. – vv. 28-29, ESV

The people of God were thinking of the Lord like the gods of the nations, as a limited, man-like, fallible being, one who was capable of blindness or tiredness or ignorance. When people create gods, they make them in their own image, just more powerful but not all-powerful, kind of like superheroes. And, in fact, in the ancient world, people believed that battles between nations were contests between their gods.

It's easy for us to look back on these ancient believers and think how blind and foolish they were to think of God in these limited ways. Yet, how often and in how many ways do we limit God in our thinking and our living? How different would our lives look if we truly lived by faith in the one true and living God who is absolutely, unchangeably perfect in power, knowledge, wisdom, justice, and goodness? How different would our thoughts and emotions and responses be if we truly believed the precious promises of the Lord for His people – *"I will never leave you not forsake you"* and *"If God is for us, who can be against us"* and *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."*

Our God is truly *"the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth."*

Nothing is impossible with Him. He accomplishes all His purposes in heaven and on earth. As Job said in response to the Lord revealing Himself more fully to him: *"I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."*

When We Run Out of Gas

Of course, most of the time, we're not actively thinking that God doesn't see us or has forgotten us or doesn't care about the justice of our cause. Most of the time, if we're honest, we're not thinking about God much at all. We live as practical atheists, making our plans and living our lives as if we're on our own in the world. Of, sure, we might pray before meals or maybe pray for someone in the hospital, but we're not actively and consciously living our lives before the face of God as His dearly loved children who trust His Word and His Spirit. We're just sort of getting through, because we can handle it. We know what we're doing.

But then, we run out of gas. Have you ever run out of gas? When I was a young driver, I literally ran out of gas on a few occasions, neglecting to check my gas regularly and just thoughtlessly pressing on. Failing to put gas in our cars leads to painful consequences. I remember walking to the closest gas station, hoping they would have a gas can I could fill and then carry back to my car.

We run out of gas spiritually, too. We get drained bit-by-bit and our tank runs so low that we're sputtering. Jesus told a parable about 10 virgins waiting for the bridegroom prince to return. Five of them kept their lamps full of oil, but the other five let their oil get exhausted, and they weren't ready when the Master returned. They lost faith, they stopped waiting, they ran out.

The Lord graciously invites us to seek Him when we're out of gas:

*He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength. – v. 29, ESV*

The LORD has strength for the weary, He has power to give us so we can live by faith and not just rely on our own resources. The means of grace, if exercised in faith, renew and restore us in the strength of the Lord. What are the means of grace? The Word of God, prayer, and the sacraments.

So, when we read God's word privately, together with our family, and then read and hear the Word of God preached in gathered worship, God corrects

our thinking of Him and strengthens our faith in Him. When we pray privately, and then together with our families, and then all together as the gathered family of God on the Lord's Day, the Lord hears our prayers and responds in love. Then, when we participate in baptism as the gathered people of God and as we share together in the Lord's Supper each month, we're strengthened by the Lord's grace as He meets with us and feeds our souls on Himself.

But we must exercise these means of grace in faith, trusting in God to speak in His word, to hear and respond to our prayers offered in faith in Jesus' name, and to feed our weary souls in the Lord's Table. We can easily get stuck going through the motions half-hearted, disengaged, not actively trusting the Lord. But when we seek God through the means of grace, when we seek Him by faith in the way He's appointed, He meets with us.

When We Wait on the Lord

If we're serious about meeting with God and receiving His strength by His grace, often we will need to wait on Him. God is not a programmable robot to show up and serve our purposes. We are made by Him for His glory, and we find our purpose and peace in serving and glorifying Him. In His wisdom, He often teaches us humility, dependence, patience, and faith by having us wait on Him –

*³⁰ Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;*

*³¹ but they 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.*

Have you ever watched a toddler or a preschooler play? They go, go, go with seemingly boundless energy until they very suddenly run out of gas and crash. High school cross country runner put in hours of time and mile after mile of practice to get ready for race day. Then, when the day of the race comes, they

start off so eager and fresh and excited, but they cross the finish line absolutely spent, collapsing and gasping.

Verse 31 of Isaiah 40 promises us that those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength. The word translated as “*renew*” here can be translated as “*change*” or “*substitute*.” At our house, we have a coffee frother/whisk that progressively gets slower and weaker as the battery runs low. It happens gradually, so you’re often not aware of how much power it has lost until it is nearly useless. It’s amazing what a difference it makes when you pop in new batteries! Of course, it’s never any stronger than it was the last time it had fresh batteries, and those new batteries start to wear down almost immediately.

Well, the good news of the Gospel is that those who wait on the LORD exchange their strength for a strength far greater than they ever had, a strength that is never exhausted but is always new. In Philippians 4:13, Paul says, “*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*” Then, in verse 20, he assures us, “*And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*” Now, verses like this can be taken out of context and misapplied. God is not promising us the strength to become one of the best NBA players of all time or to be incredibly successful and influential.

And yet, just because verses like this are often abused, that doesn’t negate what they’re telling us. What God calls us to do, He equips us to do in Christ, with the strength of Christ.

At the end of Colossians 1, Paul says, “*Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.*” (Col. 1:28-29, ESV) Paul would be very clear in telling us that he could never have done all that Christ had called him to do if he had labored in his own strength. He would have burned out disastrously. Paul’s strength was limited; he was weak. What’s more, he even boasted in his weakness. In

fact, God even burdened him beyond his ability to crush his reliance on his own flesh and teach him to wait on and rest in the Lord.

One great example of this is Paul's "thorn in the flesh" in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 –

⁷So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

As long as we are conceited, insisting that we are strong and that we can handle it just fine, we will fail. But Christ in us is the hope of glory, and Christ established in our hearts by faith is the strength we need to live as followers of Christ in every circumstance and situation He has called us to.

People sometimes say that God will never give us more than we can handle, but that's not true. The thorn in the flesh was something Paul couldn't handle on his own. And it's not the only example of this in his ministry life. Reflecting on an earlier mission trip, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 –

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. (ESV)

Conclusion: How Can We Wait Well?

Taken together, the message of Scripture is very clear: We need to wait on the Lord and not rely on ourselves. On our own, we will run out of gas and be left exhausted and frustrated. But if we wait on the LORD, He will exchange our limited strength for the strength of Christ through Whom alone we can do all things.

But how do we wait on the LORD? How can we wait well? We looked earlier at the means of grace as means of how we seek the LORD, but what does it mean to wait on Him and to rely on His strength and not our own.

Well, one common misconception of this is that we are supposed to “Let go and let God,” as in “Jesus take the wheel.” Let me just say this very clearly: If you’re driving on the highway late at night and your strength is low, please do not “Let go and let God.” Please don’t just pray “Jesus, take the wheel” and then take a nap – even if you are driving a Tesla on AutoPilot.

We are called to wait faithfully and obediently. So, in order to wait well, we need to ask ourselves some questions:

1. What does the Word of God say about my situation?
2. Is this something God has called me to by His express Word or by His providence, or is it something I’m just trying to make happen by my own will?
3. What is the Lord teaching me in this trial?
4. How am I worshiping Him and seeking Him through this situation?
5. How am I stewarding the gifts and opportunities He gives me to serve and love God and others while I am waiting.
6. Have I sought wise godly counsel about the situation I am in?
7. Have I leaned on the church community as the body of Christ called to *“bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ”*?

And as we examine ourselves and our situation with these questions, we need to wait faithfully –

1. Wait in the Word. The harder things are, the more we need to be diligently in the Word daily and weekly.
2. Wait in prayer. Seek the Lord. Don't let your trial drive you from God to a god-substitute idol, but let it drive you to your knees.
3. Wait in worship. Praise the LORD for who He is and what he has done for you in Christ.
4. Wait in the community of the church family God has given. Don't miss church. Don't stay away from your spiritual family who loves you.
5. Wait in service to God and others. Do what God has called you to do as an active member of the body of Christ.
6. Wait in wise counsel. Walk with the wise and grow in wisdom.
7. Wait in gratitude and in expectant hope. Thank God for what He has already done and what He is doing, even as you wait to see what he will do.

It was in the bitterness of exile that the Lord raised up the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel, that He used Daniel and his friends to be a powerful witness to three great kings across two empires, that He broke His people of their addiction to idols, that He strengthened the scribal tradition of the Levites, and so much more. As they were waiting to be restored, God was actively working for His glory and the good of His people. God is always at work for these two goals, and we can always worship, give thanks, and participate in His glorious kingdom work.