

Waiting

“Faith is the substance of things hoped for . . . ” (Hebrews 11:1).

One of the most basic and essential of all the fundamentals of biblical faith is sadly too easily missed. In fact, I can't recall ever hearing any teaching on this aspect of Christianity, although it's implicit throughout the Bible. It's the need to wait. We don't like waiting for anything. Yet waiting is tantamount to exercising faith, the faith that saves. We need to understand this.

In the Garden, the principle was established. In the face of human failure, God made a promise regarding the future. In the future, someone special would come and God would do a great work of defeating evil. The human race would have to wait for that. Wait . . . for how long? Purposely not stated. Just wait. So from that moment on, waiting for God to fulfill what He promised became the principle that controls all Scripture.

Noah was righteous. Now we need to understand that word, righteous. It doesn't mean merely doing what's right with respect to others. It's a biblical shorthand word that encompasses believing God, obeying God, serving God, being committed to God, and fearing God. And though it's not here but will come later on, the word includes loving God and probably even more. And especially, it means being fit to be in God's presence. Because Noah was righteous, he believed God. And he obeyed God building the ark. In this way, he served God, fulfilling His purposes. For a hundred years he labored building a massive boat, all the while enduring the taunts and mocking of his fellow humanity who rightly pointed out that it had never rained in all known history. But Noah faithfully continued his work, because he was righteous. He believed that God would, in the future, fulfill His word. While he waited, he worked. Then, after the great deliverance from that judgment, Noah worshiped God. It was his way of saying Thank You. But, sadly, his life of thankfulness was flawed; it included failure. Noah's life was proleptic of the life of the people to come, Israel and the Church.

After the Flood, things were different. Abraham believed God and so he was declared righteous (Genesis 15). Righteousness means believing God. In spite of circumstances, in spite of known evidence to the contrary, it means taking God at His word. What He has said regarding the future will happen. Just wait. Believing God, being righteous, also means as we read later (Genesis 22), obeying God in spite of all human understanding of things. There were, sadly, lapses and failures while waiting (the episodes with Hagar, for example), but God did fulfill His promise of a son, although the other promises would not be realized until way in the future. What God says is truth and truth demands a response of trust; it demands living based on that truth even if that life is one of waiting.

The children of Israel waited 400 years in Egypt for God to deliver them. They believed God's word about the Passover lamb and so they were delivered. The text doesn't make this explicit but as they were to be in God's presence atop Mount Sinai (Exodus 19), their belief must have made them righteous. Sadly, their life of thankfulness was marked by failure—terrible failure. In the face of failure, Torah explicitly and repeatedly promises both a better time for them in the future and One to come who would bring them a greater deliverance. For that, Israel would have to wait and be faithful in obeying and serving God while waiting. All the O.T. saints mentioned in Hebrews 11 knew the promises, believed them and, while waiting for them to be realized, lived their lives on the basis of them—however much sacrifice and suffering it entailed.

David had to wait decades from the time he was anointed until he was actually crowned king over all Israel. While waiting, he served God faithfully. His offspring all failed, one after another. Even the few so-called good kings failed in some way. So the Nation had to wait, and wait. And in the face of so much failure during the Monarchy, God made more and more promises, explicit promises, regarding the future, regarding the One who was to come, His work, and of a better kingdom. Even after the Hebrew canon was complete, the Nation

had to wait yet another 400 years until the promised One came, all the while nurturing faith and hope in those promises that God made.

When the Son came, embodying the true, righteous Israel, He had to wait until He was 30 years old to begin His work. And then the unexpected, the most unimaginable thing happened: His own people rejected Him. Had Him put to death! And so, the people of Israel have to wait more, 2,000 years now and counting, until those promises God made are realized. And the Son has to wait too. David had to wait from when he was anointed until he was made king, so Jesus the ultimate and greater king waits. Raised from death and ascended to the Father, He waits for the day when He will return and complete His work of making God's promises a reality.

And in the interim, His present people, those who constitute the Church, also wait. Waiting for His glorious Return to establish the Messianic Kingdom, the followers of Jesus—those who believe and are therefore righteous, those who have experienced the promised greater deliverance—must be faithful in obeying and serving. Indeed, their life of thankfulness will be (and sadly is) characterized by failure, but if yielded to the living and exalted Jesus, they can be faithful in spite of all circumstances.

In God's sovereign will, history repeats. The pattern, the principles established long ago in the Hebrew Scriptures, continue to control life today. We're to be people who know the future because God has revealed it and live today in light of those promises. That's what faith is. Believing is not merely agreeing mentally with certain propositional truths in Scripture (although it certainly includes that). Believing is waiting for God to fulfill all that He's promised to do—and pursuing a life based on those truths, those promises, while waiting.

The people of Israel during the era of the O.T. made a colossal blunder. They assumed that, because the Creator, the supreme Ruler of heaven and earth, had taken them as their God, they were secure and could live indifferent to His Word. They were free, free from any responsibilities to God, free to live as their Gentile neighbors lived, free to live as they pleased. And behold, the Church has done (is doing) the very same thing!

I'll be generous and term what the Church is doing a misunderstanding, but it's a blunder far worse than Israel's. We assume that, having been justified (passively), being righteous (passively), having forgiveness of sins, we're immune from future judgments and can live as we please. We ignore the warnings in Scripture just as Israel did. We ignore God—well, except for 2 hours on Sunday morning and briefly, occasionally during the week. As far as the Return of Christ and the promised Messianic Kingdom is concerned, it couldn't be farther from our minds. We're pursuing life in the here-and-now, oblivious to the promised future. We commonly interpret Hebrews 11 as merely argument that the O.T. saints knew that something better was to come. The gripping lesson that we're also to live as those O.T. saints did, is lost on us.

Dear Reader: The New Testament is not merely doctrine for us to know, and that's all it is. What a blunder it is to suppose that! It is instruction to those who follow Jesus in how to live while waiting for His Return. The Spirit has been given to us, not because we're in the New Covenant era but because the Son did His work on earth by the Spirit's power and, as we're continuing Jesus' work on earth, we obediently do His work also by the Spirit's enablement. (The New Covenant has been promised to Israel, not to the Church; Israelites will experience the reality of the Spirit in the future when Israel's Messiah and King return. The Spirit gift and the Church's existence and work only anticipate in proleptic manner the future Kingdom.) In this unique era termed the Church Age, necessitated by the rejection of Christ, an era of waiting, we express righteousness, actively, zealously, by conforming our lives to God's Word. And if we're grateful to God for all He's done for us, and if we desire His glory, we'll do it.