

Malvern Mashal 38

The Stature of Waiting



After a long time, in the third year, the word of the Lord came to Elijah, 'Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land.' So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab. 1 Kings 18:1

Try to imagine how Elijah felt during the years he spent in the widow's house at Zarephath. With no official role to play, and no obvious function to fulfil, who could blame him if he began to wonder if God as well as life had not passed him by. After all, he was no nearer to fulfilling his goal than he had been on that distant day, three and more years before, when he had delivered his original word to King Ahab before being forced to flee from the king's wrath.

We have seen enough images on television to have some idea of the desolation three years of drought would have caused. Ordinary life would have come to a virtual standstill throughout the nation. Unlike Egypt, which could be irrigated from the Nile, God had designed Israel to be dependent on regular rainfall. He had also warned that He would withhold the rains if the nation backslid!(1)

God had promised right at the start that He would end the drought through Elijah's mouth. How often in the course of those long three years whether the time had come for him to go back home and release the rains. False hopes abound – especially when they are linked to our own prosperity!

How Elijah's heart must have leapt when he heard that the Lord was promising to send the rains again. It was not that the nation had truly repented of its evil, but rather that He had heard the prayers of His intercessor and was prepared to show His mercy before the drought destroyed everything.

Accompanying the promise, however, was a rather less welcome condition: God would send rain on the land again so long as Elijah was prepared to risk another visit to the king who had vowed to kill him!

I have the feeling that many of us who claim to trust in the Lord are secretly quite happy not to be put to this kind of test. We are also more inclined to rely on our own resources than we care to admit. But there are times when God makes that option impossible for us. Faith has always to be tested.

God's Purposes through Waiting

Elijah's prolonged stay in Zarephath is a reminder that we need patience, as well as zeal, to fulfil the Lord's purposes. Before we set off with Elijah on his all-important journey to Ahab's court, we will do well to consider in more detail why the Lord obliged him to spend so much of his time waiting.

For most of us, our concept of waiting centres around specific dates and desires – in which case all we are really interested in is the arrival of the event: be it a promotion, a holiday, a deliverance from some difficulty or danger – or the arrival of our bus or train!

The Hebrew concept of waiting is far richer, in that it embraces the connotation of entwining ourselves in God.

Do we not usually view waiting times as something to endure, because of all their attendant uncertainty and lack of action? We will fare much better if we can discern in them a purpose and a stature that elevate them into an authentic part of our pilgrimage.

Some years ago I came across a book called *'The Stature of Waiting'* by W.H. Vanstone.⁽²⁾ In a variety of ways Vanstone challenges the idea that people's purpose and dignity consist solely in their outward achievements. Central to his argument is his illustration of the way in which our Lord's ministry changed from being an active one to a passive one.

For most of the gospel narrative we see the Lord Jesus initiating and directing events. The verbs associated with His ministry tend therefore to be 'active' ones. Jesus *healed*, He *preached*, He *cast out* demons, He *walked* from one village to another, He *rebuked* and so on. He warned His disciples, however, that the 'day' during which He

would be able to carry on His work would be of limited duration.(3) The night of darkness began when Judas made his fateful decision to betray His master.

In John 17:4 Jesus declared that He had completed the work that His Father had sent Him to do. In John 19:28, however, He perceived that all things were now completed. Since His work had already been completed, it is obvious that something more than 'work' was therefore needed to save mankind: namely His own suffering and sacrifice.

The Lord Jesus had declared in John 10:17-18 that the reason the Father loved him was because He intended to lay down His life. Without this sacrifice His mission would not have been complete.

From that moment on, everything changes. This is mirrored by the verbs that are used to describe our Lord's ministry. In the portion of the Gospels which we call the Passion, the key verbs switch to what grammarians call the passive voice. In other words, things were done *to* Jesus, rather than *by* Him. Working gives way to waiting as the most appalling injustices and atrocities are inflicted on Him. He *was* betrayed, He *was* arrested, He *was* interrogated, He *was* persecuted, He *was* sentenced by a prejudiced court, He *was* brutally flogged and then He *was* crucified.

Finally of course, He *was* raised from the dead, by His Father, thereby completing the process by which He redeemed the world. Whereas He only reached a comparatively limited number of people through His active ministry, now, by His Passion on the Cross, the barrier between God and man was taken away once and for all. The way was open for millions to come into the Kingdom.

Beyond our Control

How incredible it is that the salvation of the world should hinge on something seemingly passive – the Lord Jesus 'handing Himself over' to be crucified. It is such an undramatic way to describe so mighty an event.(4) Jesus did more than just 'hand over' His active ministry, He laid down something infinitely more precious: His perfect and unbroken relationship with His Father, as he became a once-for-all offering for sin.

It is obvious that our Lord's sufferings are on an altogether different scale from our own trials and tribulations, but there are enough overlaps with our own experience to point the comparison. When Jesus was handed over to be crucified, He experienced something that is ultimately common to all men, namely, that of being (humanly speaking) no longer in control of His circumstances.

We, too, share in the Passion of Jesus in that we may often find ourselves called to wait rather than to work. Whether this comes in the form of unemployment, hospitalisation, bereavement, retirement or some other major upheaval in our life, events occur to and around us which we would not have chosen for ourselves. There are few things most of us find more disorientating.

If we are to attain to this *stature* of waiting, rather than just gritting our teeth or experiencing anxiety on account of the uncertainties that we face, the first and most precious thing we can give to God is our active trust that He is still in control. The more

surrendered we are, the more the Lord is able to use these seemingly fruitless times for His glory.

Times and Seasons

In one sense, the whole of life is a waiting period: a preparation for eternity. I believe we will find the insights above profoundly precious – so long as we do not become passive during the waiting time. We know that the kingdom of God does not advance by reacting passively, but through determined prayer and decisive action. It is always the *devil's* intention to make us lethargic and passive. That is very different from those times when we have no option but to wait for an illness to pass, or for a 'dark night of the soul' to dissolve into the warmth of His presence.

The fact that Lord Jesus was following a heavenly-decreed timetable is important. The Lord Jesus worked and waited as a carpenter until the moment came to show Himself to the nation, when the Lord as it were "activated" the wonderful prophecies that had been given at the time of His birth. There was a time for Him to lead a hidden life, a time to show Himself to the nation – and then, finally, a time to suffer. Jesus' brothers could not grasp this aspect of calling, but urged Him to show the world what He could do, and convince them He was someone special.⁽⁵⁾ But the Lord steadfastly refused to comply with anyone else's expectations, or to take premature action: He was following His Father's higher plan.

As sailors respect and understand the tides and seasons, and, until recently, navigated by the stars, so we too must seek to be as open as we can be to the timing of the Holy Spirit. If that means waiting patiently while months turn into years, as it did for Elijah in Zarephath, and for Moses during those forty long years in the wilderness, then so be it.

The years of hidden service prepare our hearts and leave us less vulnerable to pride and deception when the full onslaught of temptation comes our way. If we can avoid becoming unduly discouraged during times of prolonged waiting, or overly exalted in those high tides of grace when a great deal is happening, we will have much to offer in the exciting and challenging days ahead.

Delays that Glorify God

Let me ask you: how do you cope with delays? Are you tempted to complain at God? Some of the delays we experience are undoubtedly the direct result of opposing forces. Demonic hindering delayed the answer to Daniel's prayer, and we too will experience the opposition of unseen foes as we wrestle to further the purposes of God.⁽⁶⁾ Determined intercession is the proper response when we sense that demonic forces are involved in these delays.

But there are other delays which God uses for His own purposes. May He give us discernment when to "wrestle", and when just to "nestle" close to His heart.

How, for example, are we to interpret the Lord Jesus's decision to remain where He was, when He was informed that His good friend Lazarus was seriously ill? Humanly-speaking, He stayed until it was too late to be of any help – even though He knew how

much distress this would cause Mary and Martha. He waited, because He knew that *more* glory would come through raising Lazarus from the dead than if He had rushed to heal him.(7)

I heard a story along similar lines concerning a minister, who had battled in vain to teach his large, but complacent, congregation the ways of God. The Lord allowed him to experience such a serious illness that he was forced to offer his resignation. The same night after this had been announced, the Lord visited him. The minister's health was completely restored, and the Church knew that it had come face to face with a miracle. It made a most profound impact on them.

Beyond Waiting

Who would have guessed it possible that waiting is sustainable? A place with its own harvest. Kay Ryan.

Part of the reason that God takes us into times of wilderness and waiting is in order to show us that His eye is constantly on us, even during those times when we are least aware of it. It is not our feelings God requires so much as a response of faith. When we harness our sense of helplessness to the unlimited power of God, we will find that He has been seeking all along the very best way for us.

When the Lord's path is leading us along stretches of very rough white water, however, it is as well to be aware that an easier route may come our way. The question then is whether we will settle for the easier path. Hudson Taylor felt deeply convicted that the Lord had called him to China, but this was challenged by his love for a woman who was unwilling to make the ultimate sacrifice of going with him on the mission field.

I believe that we can trace the origins of the mighty harvest that China is currently experiencing today to the fact that Hudson Taylor put his calling above the longing of his heart. Because Hudson obeyed God in this crucial matter, the Lord led him to another Christian woman while he was in China. His marriage to Maria is one of the great love stories of the Church.

Before the action comes the waiting; before the deliverance, the death of all human hope. When Pharaoh rejected Moses' advances, and made the living conditions of the Hebrew people still more unbearable, Moses was left to face not only Pharaoh's hostility, but something that must have caused him a still sharper sense of pain: being rejected by his own people.

These are the moments of greatest testing, when everything inside us longs to retreat from so painful a calling. In his distress, Moses poured out His heart to God – and once again the Lord reaffirmed His call to him. He had said that He would bring His people out of Egypt and He had not rescinded His promise.(8)

Just as Elijah must have been tempted to return to Ahab to try to bring the drought to an end prematurely, there is always a risk that we will strive too hard to fulfil the visions God gives by our own efforts. It is *sinful* to try to take by force what God would give by grace alone. If we try to force the outcome prematurely we are in danger of making an 'Ishmael' out of a genuine promise of God; and the troubles multiply.

May we become elastic through the waiting times!

The world is waiting . . . for new saints, ecstatic men and women who are so deeply rooted in the love of God that they are free to imagine a new international order.

Henri Nouwen

Waiting stretches our trust precisely because it does not feel as though the Lord is doing anything. Rees Howells, one of the great men of faith of this century, used to say that when we are in the middle of a test, it feels for all the world as though there is no God at all. We are quite wrong, of course, as we always are when our feelings incline us to assume that God has lost interest in us.

True, not everything will come about all at once, but neither does it all depend on our own efforts. There are matters we must pray about, claim even, and then leave to one side until the Spirit prompts again. God will 'activate' the vision in His own good time. For now, it is more important to keep seeking Him from day to day, than straining towards some mythical moment 'when it will all happen.'

I have often pondered St Paul's stated desire to take the gospel to Spain. He never fulfilled, so far as we know, this particular desire. Instead, arrest, and years of imprisonment in far insalubrious Roman jails were to be his lot. A lesser man might well have succumbed to the shock. Had he not set out on a mission for God? Far from bemoaning his fate, Paul seized the opportunity to write letters to the churches he had worked so hard to establish; epistles which now form the backbone of the New Testament.

What a way to redeem a seeming tragedy! If Paul had fulfilled his original desire and ministered to the peoples of Spain, perhaps, at best, a vigorous church might have been established in that one country. As it was, countless millions throughout the world have been strengthened, because Paul overcame his disappointment, put pen to paper, and shared the priceless wisdom the Lord had given him.

Elizabeth Taylor once said, "It is very strange that the passing years teach us patience - that the shorter our time, the greater our capacity for waiting." If you have grown weary of waiting for the Lord to deliver you from some particular problem, however, or to fulfil a specific promise, remember how Mary pondered in her heart all that she had seen and heard, but made no attempt to act ahead of the Lord's initiative. If the Lord's leading sometimes seems on the slow side, remember that He is testing and training us for all He has in store for us in this life, and in Eternity.

Perhaps a word of warning would be in order to put the balance: there are times when we might instinctively *prefer* to wait, when wisdom lies in acting. Perhaps this piece of advice from *Pooh's Little Instruction Book*, inspired by A. A. Milne may speak to us at such times: "You can't stay in your corner of the Forest waiting for others to come to you. You have to go to them sometimes."

Reflections

There are times when waiting is a better option than either talking or doing something. Does this teaching on the 'stature' of waiting make sense of certain delays in your own life?

Suppose you are squeezing a bath sponge tightly in your hand. No matter how long you immerse it, you will not be able to soak up any substantial amount of water. So it is for us. If we 'tense' ourselves up, we will be unable to receive much from the Lord. But if we are open and still, but eager, the Lord will fill us with all He wants us to receive.

Times of waiting are an excellent opportunity to take stock and reflect.

- **Have we perhaps 'stayed put' when the Lord has called us to move on?**
- **Or moved on before the Lord has truly released us?**

If we have 'missed the boat,' or 'jumped the gun' in the past, all is not lost. The Lord often works circumstances in such a way as to permit us a virtual re-run of situations we handled badly on previous occasions in order to offer us another opportunity. May we fare better this time round!

Selah

Lord, how hard I find it to wait!

Thank You that Elijah refused to return to Israel until You summoned him. Grant me grace to resist the pressure to run ahead of Your leading – and to feel a failure when things do not work out as I had expected. Help me to live in the overlap between promise and fulfilment, without fretting for answers You are not yet ready to supply. Let me find fulfilment in doing things that need to be done right now. For if I am faithful in these matters, You will not fail to lead me into all I need in the future. In Jesus' name, Amen.



Most of us derive a large percentage of our identity from what we do rather than what we are. If we examine our lives we will probably find a heavy emphasis on doing:

- **using this, getting or preparing, the other**
- **achieving goals**
- **doing our best to protect ourselves in whatever way we can;**
- **focusing on the things that need immediately doing.**

All of these things do indeed require both thought and attention, but the sum total of them can lead to our focus becoming decidedly this world orientated.

The language of spiritual desire is rather different. It concentrates not only on specific targets and objectives, but is content to develop our capacity to be.

- **It takes time to see, as well as to do.**
- **It recognizes the need to ponder the meaning of events, and to discern the hand of God in the details of our life.**

- **It emphasizes loving, sharing and caring.**

All this is the beginning of a process of drawing closer to the endless creativity of our Creator God. It is the fruit that lends to waiting its true and finest stature.

References

1 Long before Israel had entered the Promised Land, the Lord had spelt out the calamities that would come upon His people if they chose to turn their backs on Him. 'Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the Lord's anger will burn against you, and He will shut the heavens so that it will not rain and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving you.' (Deuteronomy 11:16-17)

2 I was so impressed by Vanstone's treatment of the subject that I have named this chapter after his book. '*The Stature of Waiting*' is published by Darton, Longman and Todd.

3 John 9:4

4 The same unusual expression is used in Galatians 2:20 and Romans 8:32, as well as in Matthew 24:9 and 26:2.

5 John 7:3-9

6 Daniel 10:12-14

7 John 11:1-44

8 Exodus 5:22-6:10 The Israelites were too discouraged to believe the Lord, however, until both they, and the Egyptians, had seen the mighty displays of the Lord's power.