

When God Takes Too Long: Embracing the Secrets of Waiting

Invitation to the Reader

Learning to Thrive in the Midst of Life's Supreme Frustration

When I look at the lives of the college students I teach, it's hard not to be envious. Young, full of energy, full of endless possibilities, they live a life that is temporarily free of many of the responsibilities that will later bog them down. They have the opportunity to spend their days studying fascinating subjects, socializing with friends, dating, pursuing interests in other activities like sports, music, or drama, and dreaming of their plans for the future.

And yet, when I recently stopped on a sunny campus sidewalk to talk to one of my top students, her first words were, "Only twenty-seven more days 'til graduation!"

Though in my eyes her circumstances were so inviting that she should want to hang on to every moment, for her, the Now was simply an inconvenient time she had to endure long enough to get to her Real Life, which was after graduation. She rattled off a list of the tests, papers, and other stressful tasks that stood in the way of "getting this semester over with."

I told her, "Someday you'll look back on your time in college and wish it hadn't gone by so fast. You'll wish you would have let yourself enjoy it more."

She nodded and smiled, but I could tell she didn't believe me. I might as well have been saying, "Someday you'll wish you could have spent more time in the dentist's waiting room reading a magazine." The Present moved too slowly for her. Life would begin when the Waiting ended.

I understand how she feels. I, too, spend most of my life Waiting—to get to the next break in the school calendar, to push through traffic, to inch my way toward the checkout counter, to get a phone call returned, to get my food from the waitress.

Social commentator Carl Honore recently wrote that "the whole world is time-sick." He borrowed his definition of "time-sickness" from Dr. Larry Dorsey, who describes the condition as the obsessive belief "that time is getting away, that there isn't enough of it, and that you must pedal faster and faster to keep up."¹

Part of our time-sickness can be dismissed as simply an inconvenient byproduct of living in a fast-paced world. Our frustration builds as we waste precious time waiting for cars ahead of us to move, waiting for the stoplight to change, waiting for pages on the Internet to pop up, waiting for the mail to arrive, waiting to get through lines at the airport, waiting for the plane to stop taxiing around the runway and finally take off, waiting for the phone to ring, waiting for our prescription to be filled, waiting for the doctor to see us, waiting for the microwave to cook our food.

These are small examples of the frustration of waiting, but for a time-obsessed people, even trivial incidents like this can lead to dire consequences. Honore writes of a man in Los Angeles who started a fight in a supermarket when someone ahead of him was too slow in packing his groceries, and of a woman who threatened to kill a delivery man whose truck blocked her way for a few minutes. Describing the "chronic frustration that bubbles just below the surface of modern life," he writes, "Anyone or anything that steps in our way, that slows us down, that stops us from getting exactly what we want when we want it, becomes the enemy. So the smallest setback, the slightest delay, the merest whiff of slowness, can now provoke vein-popping fury in otherwise ordinary people."²

As bothersome as those countless everyday incidents of waiting can be, the time-sickness that I have struggled with goes even deeper and is more disturbing. One of my greatest frustrations as a Christian is that I am always waiting on God to act. This complaint—that God is too slow—is not one that I have frequently stated out loud. It sounds too disrespectful, hints of too much of a lack of faith.

Yet I know that I am not alone in this feeling. How many of us have felt that, for no reason we can fathom, God is dangling the things that are most important to us just out of our reach? We wait, sometimes for years, for our prayers to be answered, for our deepest longings to be fulfilled.

Some devoted Christians get stuck in dead-end jobs even though they feel certain they could serve God in greater ways if only He would open the opportunity. Why doesn't He? Some wait for a godly spouse, some couples wait for the gift of children, some parents wait for years for their grown children to return to the Lord. People who have dedicated their lives to serving the Lord wait in disappointed bafflement as their work seems to yield no fruit.

Often I have watched others move forward so confidently, while I am still waiting for my life to happen. At a time like that, part of me senses God's distant call, remembers his promises, and wants to believe what I've long been taught, that God has a plan for my life and will fulfill it if I trust and obey Him.

But another part of me believes the fulfillment never really comes, that I'm only tantalized with it, and I'll be left discouraged, doubting, waiting. I feel on the verge of a breakthrough, but it never quite gets there. A nagging sense of longing remains.

I yearn to serve the Lord, to step forward and obey Him like the great figures of the Bible—Abraham, Moses, David, Paul—but I am confused, waiting for clear orders, kept at a distance by the invisible barriers of God's silence, His inaction, His dawdling pace. Why would He make me wait so long for the very things He wants for me?

His delays bring doubts in my mind. Is He silent because He's not there? Does He not act because I'm not important to Him? What is the purpose of all this waiting? Does it have meaning? Why would God build this frustrating element into the way His world operates?

As I approached this book, I decided that in order to seek answers to these questions, I first needed to read the entire Bible with the issue of Waiting in mind. I also wanted to find out what other writers and thinkers had said about it, and I wanted to talk to fellow Christians to see what part waiting had played in their lives.

I discovered that I am far from alone in my perception that I spend much of my life waiting on God. Not only do my fellow Christians struggle with God's apparent slowness, but waiting is pervasive in the Bible as well. Abraham's story includes decades of waiting on God to fulfill His promise. The Bible is full of other great "Waiters", such as Moses, Joseph, Noah, David, Jeremiah, Jonah, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Paul, and others. Though we often focus on the most dramatic moments in these people's lives, the truth is that they spent far more years waiting on God than they did parting the Sea of Reeds or building an ark or giving birth to a prophet. How did they endure that frustration? What gave them the wisdom to hold out for those astonishing breakthroughs that often came only after the darkest and most discouraging periods of silence from God, after most people would already have given up on Him?

Another question I wanted to examine was, how does God's sense of Time differ from ours? When we are in the presence of a God who transcends time, what does it mean when we call His actions "fast" or "slow"? How can those terms be defined? I gaze up in amazement at a giant sequoia tree that has taken more than three thousand years to reach its magnificent height, and yet I grow impatient waiting thirty seconds for the traffic light to change. What is fast? What is slow? What is Time?

Over and over I see that God's ways of accomplishing His purposes are so unusual that His eccentricity becomes the norm rather than the exception. Will His timing in our own lives always be unpredictable and seemingly capricious? How can we enter into the flow of God's plans for us even when that stream carries us along a strange, unpredictable route?

When God makes us wait a long time, one of our biggest temptations is to abandon His slow plan and search for a shortcut. Scripture is full of people who tried to "improve" on God's timing and speed things up a bit, with devastating results. How can we avoid that trap?

In a time-obsessed culture, it is easy for our lives to become so future-directed that we never live in the present. We get so focused on what life will be like after some future event—once I get that promotion, once I graduate, once I get married, once I retire—that we lose the present with all its richness and joy and purpose. How can we keep Waiting in its proper perspective? How can we reach toward the future that we long for while also being passionately alive to what God is doing in our lives right now?

These and similar questions guided me as I wrote this book. Many people face the frustration of waiting with a sense of resignation, a belief that life is just that way, and there isn't much you can do about it. Some blame God for being too slow, others assume God has nothing to do with it, while

still others see waiting as so uniquely tied to their particular circumstances that they don't even bother to question it.

As the ideas that I confront in this book gradually emerged, I was able to change not only my perspective on waiting, but also my actions in response to it. As I alter my attitude toward waiting, I feel released from the pressure to make everything happen faster and to force a certain outcome. Instead of resisting God's path or trying to replace it with a shortcut, I am learning to embrace His timing, to settle into the work He has given me to do and to trust Him with where He is taking me and how long it may take to get there.

I am cutting away the needless striving, the constant worry over the future, the second-guessing of God, the destructive spirit of envy and over-competition that makes me believe I need to speed up my life to gain some elusive advantage over those who move at a different pace. I feel freer to enjoy the moment, not ignoring the future, but not sacrificing Today for it either. God works in creative, miraculous, surprising ways, and I don't want to miss a single detail of what He wants to do in my life.

This book is for people who have struggled with a God who seems too slow but who still want to follow His plan in their lives. If you have been discouraged by the fact that that life is mostly a game of waiting, and you want to break the power of that frustration in your life, then I invite you to read on.

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Notes

1. Carl Honore, *In Praise of Slowness: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2004): 3.
2. Honore, 12-13.