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GOD'S DELAYS

Acts 24:24-27

By

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Acts Lesson 64

God's Delays Acts 24:24-27

A man, toolbox in hand, rang the doorbell. "Good morning, ma'am, I'm the plumber. I've come to fix the pipe."

"But I didn't call a plumber."

"You didn't? Aren't you Mrs. Foster?"

"No, she moved away a year ago."

"How do you like that? They call for a plumber, claiming it's an emergency, and then they move away!"

Sometimes it seems as if God responds to our emergencies like that plumber responded to that call. We're in a crisis and we cry out, "Help, God!" Silence. "God, I need You right now!" No answer. "God? Are You there?" Nothing.

If you have been a Christian for very long, you have experienced God's delays. David experienced them. He wrote, "I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched; my eyes fail while I wait for my God" (Ps. 69:3). Again he wrote, "My soul waits in silence for God only; from Him is my salvation" (Ps. 62:1).

Waiting is especially difficult in light of the shortness of life. The older you get, the quicker life seems to fly by. I'll be 55 in three weeks, and it's amazing to me to think that all our children are grown now. I wonder how all of those years went by so quickly. Some wag observed that life is like a roll of toilet paper: the closer you get to the end, the quicker it goes!

Because life is so short, it's difficult when the Lord makes you wait. Paul must have struggled as he remained in custody in Caesarea. The notice we get seems almost like an insignificant passing comment: "But after two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus; and wishing to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul imprisoned." You can read that comment in a few seconds, but it represents two long years of Paul's life, and he wasn't getting any younger. You'll look in vain for any mention of God in the verse. It sounds so capricious. To gain some political capital, a selfish politi-

cian leaves God's number one apostle to the Gentiles in prison. The preaching of the gospel among the Gentiles will have to wait. As Paul waited and prayed and prayed and waited, he must have wondered, "Why doesn't God get me out of here?"

There are many lessons that we can learn from our times of waiting for God's delays, but I would like to focus on two:

God uses His delays to teach us to trust Him more fully and to submit more thoroughly to His lordship over our lives.

1. God uses His delays to teach us to trust Him more fully.

Paul was a great man of faith, but no one graduates from the Lord's school of faith in this lifetime. Paul had post-doctoral degrees, but there were still more courses to take! This course had at least four lessons in faith that God was refining in Paul:

A. When God delays, we must trust Him by submitting our agendas to Him.

We learn of Paul's agenda in Romans 15:25-29, which Paul wrote just before he went to Jerusalem. His plan was to deliver the gift that he had collected among the Gentile churches and then to go to Rome for some ministry before he headed west to Spain. This was not a self-centered agenda. After all that he had suffered for the cause of Christ, I couldn't blame Paul if his plan had been to retire to a nice seaside resort and write his memoirs.

But Paul was seeking to serve the Lord by spreading the gospel where Christ had not yet been named (Rom. 15:20). That was a *godly* agenda, but it was *not God's* agenda, at least not in the way Paul envisioned it. He would eventually get to Rome, but not as quickly as he had hoped. Maybe he went on to Spain; we don't know for sure. But while Paul sat in prison in Caesarea, he had to submit his agenda to God and trust God to work out His agenda in His time.

There is nothing wrong with godly desires and hopes for the future. We all should dream about what God may do through us in the future. We should plan, as much as we're able, by setting godly spiritual goals for our lives. But after all the planning and goal-setting are done, we have to bow and say, "Lord, not my will, but Your will be done with my life. I trust in Your agenda for me."

B. When God delays, we must trust Him to accomplish His will through us by His power.

As I said, there is no mention of God in verse 27. Paul must have wondered, "Where is God in all of this? Why isn't God answering my prayers?" After all, Paul wasn't trying to get out of prison so that he could go do his own thing. He wanted to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. But here he sat, confined in jail, day after day, month after month, for over two years. As he sat there, Paul had to deepen his trust in God to accomplish His sovereign will in his life through God's power.

In Acts 23:11, the Lord had appeared to Paul and told him that as he had witnessed to His cause in Jerusalem, so he would witness at Rome also. But then, as far as the text tells us, the Lord sort of checked out, as far as any visible or audible messages to Paul. He didn't tell Paul in advance about the plot on his life by more than 40 bloodthirsty Jews. He didn't tell him about the false accusations that would be brought against Paul in Felix's courtroom. He didn't mention that Paul would be incarcerated for two years in Caesarea, and then transported to Rome as a prisoner. He didn't bother to relate the little detail about being shipwrecked in the Mediterranean Sea and spending a winter on Malta. In all of those trials and delays, Paul had to trust God's promise to him and wait on Him to work through His power in His time.

Did Felix's politically motivated injustice of leaving Paul in prison frustrate God's plans for Paul? Of course not! No self-centered, corrupt politician, no matter how powerful, can even put a bump in the road of God's sovereign plan for His people. But, God wants us to trust Him when it seems as if some evil person is blocking our ability to move forward with our plans for serving the Lord. We usually don't understand the reason for God's delays, but we need to trust that He knows what He is doing, and that He is not frustrated in the least by the whims and foibles of wicked men.

C. When God delays, we must trust in Him, not in our circumstances.

Even though we are seeking to trust in the Lord, it is so easy to put our hope in our circumstances instead of in the Lord Himself. Every time that Felix called for Paul (and it was often, 24:26),

Paul's hopes must have soared. Maybe today Felix would trust in Christ and this whole time of imprisonment would finally make sense! Just think of the influence for Christ that this powerful man would have! Paul easily could have thought, "That must be the reason God has me in prison. Felix is going to become a Christian." Or, perhaps when Felix called for Paul and they had an enjoyable conversation, Paul went back to his cell and thought, "Maybe now he will release me so that I can get on with my ministry." But Felix never became a Christian and he did not release Paul.

If we trust in our circumstances, we will have a roller coaster type of Christian experience. When things are looking up, we will be up. When things look down, we will be down. But it was a few years after this that Paul, still a prisoner, wrote that great epistle to the Philippians. The repeated theme of that letter is, "Rejoice in the Lord" (Phil. 3:1; 4:4). In spite of all of his years of trials, Paul was full of joy, not in his circumstances, but in the Lord.

In 1812, Adoniram Judson and his new bride, Nancy, left their familiar and comfortable New England surroundings to take the gospel to far-off Burma. After a difficult four-month voyage, they arrived in India only to hear discouraging reports about Burma and to learn that they could not stay in India. They spent a year moving from India to Mauritius (off the coast of South Africa) and back, to avoid deportation. Finally, against all advice, they managed to get aboard a ship heading for Burma. En route, Nancy gave birth to a stillborn child and almost died herself.

They finally arrived in Rangoon and began the arduous task of learning Burmese. They found the Burmese people to be committed to Buddhism and totally uninterested in and opposed to Christianity. The only other English-speaking couple in Rangoon left, leaving the Judsons alone to struggle with the language and the mission. The birth of a son brightened their lives, but when he was eight-months-old, he became ill. With no medicine or doctors in Rangoon, the baby died. The Judsons buried him in their back yard and plodded on through their tears.

After six years, they finally baptized their first convert. A handful more trickled in over the years, but mostly, they faced fierce opposition from the Buddhist monks and the government. In 1824, the British went to war against Burma, and Judson was

arrested, tortured, and imprisoned on false charges as a spy. The conditions and torture in the prison were terrible. As he suffered with fever in that dark prison, Judson's wife delivered a letter from a friend that asked, "Judson, how's the outlook?" He replied, "The outlook is as bright as the promises of God."

Wow! There was a man who had learned to trust in God, not in his circumstances! Judson later was released from prison only to face the deaths of his wife and his two-year-old daughter. He fought intense depression and struggled against numerous setbacks. But he plodded on in faith until he died at age 62. Today, over 600,000 Burmese Christians trace their roots back to Adoniram Judson, a man who hoped in God.

When God delays, we must trust Him by submitting our agendas to Him. We must trust Him to accomplish His will through us by His power. We must trust in God, not in our circumstances. Fourth,

D. When God delays, we must trust Him by doing right, even if we do not reach our goals.

As we saw last week, Paul was a man of integrity who would not use corrupt means, even if they would have accomplished a good end. A bribe would have sprung Paul from prison. It would have freed up this great apostle to get on with his ministry. He had so much to accomplish. Why not just pay off Felix and get on with his great goals?

Why not? Because Paul knew that doing right and not reaching our goals is better than doing wrong in order to reach them. Remember, Paul's goals were godly. He wanted to preach the gospel in the regions that had never heard of Christ. But he would not compromise his integrity in order to reach a godly goal. He trusted God by doing what he knew to be right, even though it seemed at the time to sacrifice his goals for the gospel.

General Robert E. Lee was once offered \$10,000 a year for the use of his name in connection with a state lottery at a time when money was a pressing issue for him. That was a lot of money back then, but Lee's reply was, "Gentlemen, my name is all I have left, and that is not for sale!"

So the first major lesson in God's delays is to learn to trust Him more fully.

2. God uses His delays to teach us to submit more thoroughly to His lordship over our lives.

Yogi Berra used to say about baseball games, "It ain't over till it's over." The same is true of sanctification. It isn't over until we meet the Lord in heaven or in the air. So even if we've yielded our lives totally to Jesus as Lord, there's always more to yield. God's delays often expose areas where we need to yield further to Him.

- A. We submit to God's lordship by acknowledging that He is God and we are not.

Paul told the Romans that he had for many years a longing to come to visit them (Rom. 15:23). Finally, it looked like he would be able to realize that dream. He would just deliver the gift to the church at Jerusalem, and then he would head for Rome. He wasn't doing anything in Jerusalem to stir up controversy or risk a riot. He was just quietly going about his business in the temple when some Jews from Asia "happened" to spot him and start the riot that led to his imprisonment. Suddenly Paul's plans were put on hold for over two years.

We all like to think that we're in control of our circumstances, but the reality is, we are not in control. God is in control. As I said, we can and should make plans in dependence on Him, but as the psalmist said, "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman keeps awake in vain" (Ps. 127:1). When you make careful plans in dependence on the Lord, and the plans get foiled by what seem like random chance (there is no such thing), you have to bow and say, "Lord, you are God and I am not. I submit to You and will wait for You to accomplish Your plans in this situation."

- B. We submit to God's lordship by not grumbling while we wait.

It was while Paul's imprisonment dragged on beyond the two years in Caesarea into his time in Rome that he wrote to the Philip-pians, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing; that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation,

among whom you appear as lights in the world" (Phil. 2:14-15). In his current circumstances, Paul easily could have grumbled, "I obeyed God by preaching the gospel to Felix and his wife and by not bribing them, and look where it got me! I'm still in this prison and my prayers have not been answered." He could have grown bitter and disappointed with God.

But even though Paul's prayers were not answered as quickly as he wished, he learned to be contented in God's sovereign plan for his life. He submitted to the lordship of Christ by not grumbling, even though Felix was wronging him by not releasing him.

If you've been in the military, you're familiar with the phrase, "Hurry up and wait." They get you out of bed at 5 a.m. so that you can stand in formation for 45 minutes to wait for breakfast. Then you march to your class 20 minutes before class starts so that you can stand in line waiting for the other class to be dismissed so that you can go in. Everyone grumbles, "Hurry up and wait!"

Paul says that if we don't grumble, but rather rejoice in the Lord, our lives will shine as lights in this dark world. The world won't be able to figure us out! Grumbling is natural for those who don't know Christ, but it ought to be rare for those who submit to Jesus as Lord. When we grumble, it brings dishonor on the Lord's name. In effect, we're saying to the world, "You wouldn't want to serve my God, because He treats you really poorly!"

God was angry with Israel in the wilderness because of their grumbling. He had dramatically delivered them out of Egypt through the parting of the Red Sea, where He drowned the Egyptian army. He provided His cloud to protect them from the burning sun during the day, and His pillar of fire to keep them warm and to let them see at night. But they grumbled about their conditions and wanted to return to Egypt. Because of their grumbling, the Lord said, "For forty years I loathed that generation, and said they are a people who err in their heart and they do not know My ways. Therefore I swore in My anger, truly, they shall not enter into My rest" (Ps. 95:10-11). If we want God's rest in our hearts, we must not only submit to Him in times of waiting, but submit *joyfully*. We must repent of our grumbling.

- C. We submit to God's lordship by taking advantage of present opportunities while we wait on Him.

The well-known New England preacher, Phillips Brooks, was normally a man of poise and calm. But at times he suffered moments of frustration and irritability. One day a friend saw him pacing the floor like a caged lion and asked, "What is the trouble, Dr. Brooks?" "The trouble is," Brooks replied, "that I'm in a hurry, but God isn't!"

Paul was probably in his mid-fifties at the time of this imprisonment. Speaking firsthand, when you're in your mid-fifties, you often think about the fact that you may not have many years left to serve the Lord. I think about the fact that John Calvin died at 54, Martin Luther at 62, Jonathan Edwards at 55, and Charles Spurgeon at 57. Even if the Lord enables me to serve until I'm 75, it isn't all that far off. So I often ask myself what I need to be doing with the remaining time that the Lord gives me. Spending a number of years in jail isn't part of my vision for the future!

But Paul no doubt used this time for spiritual advantage. He probably met with many visitors from the churches around Judea and used the meetings to instill his vision for reaching the Gentiles. He had many talks with Felix, although it didn't yield any results that we know of. He had time for quiet reflection, communion with the Lord, and for further study of God's Word. I am certain that he studied during this time because during his final imprisonment in Rome, as he awaited execution, he wrote to Timothy, "When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the parchments" (2 Tim. 4:13).

Charles Spurgeon (*Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopedia* [Baker], 11:386) comments on that verse:

He is inspired, and yet he wants books! He has been preaching at least for thirty years, and yet he wants books! He had seen the Lord, and yet he wants books! He had had a wider experience than most men, and yet he wants books! He had been caught up into the third heaven, and had heard things which it was unlawful for a man to utter, yet he wants books! He had written the major part of the New Testament, and yet he wants books!

I would only add, "He's facing imminent execution, and yet he wants books!" Paul used his time in confinement to deepen his knowledge of God through His Word and, perhaps, through other books. We should use times when God makes us wait to deepen our roots with Him.

Luke also probably used this time in Caesarea to research the material that he used in his gospel and the Book of Acts (Luke 1:1-4). Someone has said that the key to patience while you're waiting at a doctor's office or wherever is to have something to do while you wait. I agree. I've watched people just sit there doing nothing! I always take something with me to read if I expect to wait.

So when God brings delays into our lives, we should learn to trust Him more fully and to submit more thoroughly to His lordship over our lives.

Conclusion

A reporter once asked Mrs. Einstein if she understood the theory of relativity. She replied, "No, but I know Albert and he can be trusted." As Christians, we may not understand why God makes us wait at times when it seems that we need immediate answers. But we do know the Lord Jesus Christ and He can be trusted.

David wrote, "I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the Lord" (Ps. 27:13-14).

Discussion Questions

1. Why does God sometimes delay answering prayers that seem so urgent to us?
2. How can we know whether we're supposed to wait for God to act or take action ourselves? See 1 Sam. 13:1-14.
3. How can we keep our focus on the Lord rather than our circumstances, especially when our circumstances seem overwhelming?
4. Is it hypocrisy to rejoice in the Lord even when you feel like grumbling? Why/why not? How do we rejoice in Him when we don't feel like rejoicing? Should we fake it?

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