

The Difficulty of Waiting Patiently for the Lord

Psalm 40:1-11; John 1:29-42

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I didn't know it in 1982, but a disappointment Kelly and I experienced that year would turn out to be very beneficial. I was in seminary, and like most of the young preachers at the seminary I wanted to pastor a church. Of course, there were a lot of young preachers and only so many small, rural churches willing to take them. I finally got an invitation to preach at Swallowfield Baptist Church, a small congregation a couple of hours drive from the seminary. They needed a pastor. The people were most gracious. I preached in the morning service, we went to lunch with church members, and as Kelly and I drove back to Louisville, we discussed how well it had gone. I just knew this was going to be the one.

Later in the week I received a call from the chairman of the Pastor Search Committee. I listened with bated breath. He said that they enjoyed my sermon, they liked Kelly and me, but in addition to a pastor, they also needed a pianist. So what they were looking for was a pastor whose wife played the piano. Since Kelly didn't play the piano, they would have to continue their search.

My poor wife was heartbroken, thinking that she had prevented me from getting to do what I passionately wanted. I assured her that the Lord would provide, and guess what? The Lord did provide.

I became a volunteer chaplain at a nursing home: Lyndon Lane Nursing Home, not far from the seminary. My responsibilities were to lead a weekly worship service, visit residents, and turn in a monthly report of my visits. Being the overly organized person that I am, I still have all those reports in a file. I took it out last week and made a pleasant walk down memory lane. I forgot that I had this picture of Viola Katzman, taken March 14, 1982. She was a lovely Christian woman, Lutheran I believe. As I looked through these notes, the names

came flooding back: Margaret Johnson, Goldie Evans, Bessie Hawkins, Daniel Wilkerson, Bobby Suggs and so many others.

People used to ask me if I enjoyed that work. I would say, “No, ‘enjoy’ is not the right word.”

Then they would ask, “Then why do you do it? If you don’t enjoy it, why do you do it?”

My answer was always the same, “Because it desperately needs to be done.”

Some were there because they had no family. They received no visits expect mine, none. Many were battling dementia or a terminal illness. Residents would regularly ask me, “Why am I still here?” They didn’t mean in the nursing home. “Why won’t God take me?” they would ask through tears. Then they sometimes made the most heart rending request of all, “Would you please pray that God would bring me home?”

It wasn’t fun work, no, but it was desperately needed. Now, almost 40 years later, I am grateful for those experiences and still benefit from them. I got to know people who understood what it meant to wait patiently for the Lord.

Of course, ancient Israel had no nursing homes. Life expectancy then was much shorter. But that doesn’t mean that they didn’t experience illness, accidents, and catastrophes. Read through the book of The Psalms, and you will see the suffering of the faithful and their pleas to the Lord for rescue. Psalm 40 has touched a nerve with me over the last couple of weeks. Maybe it reminded me of all those folks back at Lyndon Lane Nursing Home. Maybe it has reminded me of my own difficult times, when all I could do was wait patiently for the Lord.

That’s where this psalm begins. The writer experienced something that laid him or her low. We’re never told what it was, though we may be given some clues. He says that this experience put him in a “desolate pit.” The NIV calls it a “slimy pit.” He also calls it a “miry bog,” or “the mud and the mire.” You may remember in the book of Genesis that Joseph’s brothers threw him into a pit and left him there

to die. Fortunately he was rescued. The prophet Jeremiah's enemies did the same thing to him, where he "sank in the mire," we are told. He too was rescued. So the psalmist may have been saying that he was literally left in a pit to die. Or he may have been using this language figuratively to describe some life-threatening event, an illness or accident perhaps. Whatever happened, all he could do was wait patiently for the Lord.

Some of you have been there, haven't you? You were in a "pit," where all you could do was wait patiently for the Lord. I think of Gunter and Ann Livingston, R. C. and Nancy Darden, and others in our church. They are at a place where they are waiting for the Lord, and they can tell us all that it is difficult.

Others of you have waited. You did what you could do. You went to doctors. You took tests and treatments. Then you waited patiently. Or you talked with your daughter. You tried to get her off the drugs. Then you waited patiently. Or maybe you tried to reason with your son. But he was just hell-bent on destroying himself. You did what you could do. We've got to do that. But then, when that runs out, when there's nothing else we can do, we must do the most difficult thing: wait patiently for the Lord.

Glenn Hinson is one of the saints to arise among Baptists in the south. I don't use the term "saint" lightly here. He was one of my professors at Southern Seminary. He has spoken here on a number of occasions. Before I met him in seminary, Dr. Hinson began losing his hearing. Deafness runs in his family. He knew that loss of hearing would in time mean loss of speech...and possibly the loss of a teaching career.

He writes about the floodwaters that rolled over him. He called out:

Lord, why me? Of all the people in the world to whom this should happen, why should it be me? God, this is me, Glenn Hinson. This isn't just anybody!

Ever felt that way?

He says that he began to resist it, saying that he would grit his teeth and clench his fists and say, “This will not happen to me.”

But it did. He lost most of his hearing. Over time, surrounded by the love of his family and encouraged by student, colleagues, and friends, he began to understand Paul’s “thorn in the flesh.” Remember that story? Paul says that God sent him a “thorn in the flesh.” We don’t know what it was, but some speculate that it may have been poor eyesight or blindness. God never took that thorn away from Paul. God did say to him, “My grace is enough for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.”

Dr. Hinson never recovered his hearing. With the help of a speech professor, he has maintained his ability to speak. He says he learned to accept what is. Here’s how he describes it: it is like a swimmer learning to let himself down into the water to discover the buoyancy that is there. These are his words:

The saints remind us that we live in a sea of love, God’s love, and if we learn how to let down, we will discover a buoyancy that will hold us up. God’s grace is sufficient. (Weavings, July/August, 2003, pp. 11-12)

That is difficult. When we let ourselves down into the love of God. But that is where we experience the buoyancy of that expansive, never-ending love. There we wait patiently for the Lord. We wait until, like the psalmist, we are lifted out of the desolate pit, the miry bog, and are placed upon a rock. Or we may wait until our dying day. I’m still waiting. You may be too. But, thanks be to God, we wait buoyed by something that is greater and deeper than our selves. It is God’s gift, God’s grace, and it is enough.

Closing Prayer

God, incline to us and hear our cries. Draw us up from the desolate pit, out of our miry bod, and set our feet upon a rock. And we will praise your name.