

Weary with Waiting:

A (Christmas-themed Theology of Waiting based on a) Meditation of Isaiah 40:31

By David Prairie

“...they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength...” (Isaiah 40:31)

The old and dying father gathered his sons around his bed and spoke to each of them one last time. He knew his time was short, but he made sure to address each of the twelve younger men in turn. His purpose to them was clear: “Gather yourselves together, that I may tell you what shall happen to you in days to come. Assemble and listen, O sons of Jacob, listen to Israel your father” (Gen 49:1).

Some received much attention, others less. A few were given clear insight, while many heard sayings more veiled and mysterious. Near the middle of his speech, the aged patriarch directed his words to one who was not seen in the room, but whom Jacob had decades prior acknowledged “has been with me wherever I have gone” (Gen 35:3). Now, with dim eyes and failing voice he said to the God he had once wrestled, “I wait for your salvation, O LORD” (Gen 49:18).

Certain hints about this coming salvation are present in Jacob’s deathbed speech, particularly in his messages to Judah (49:8-12) and Joseph (49:22-26). It is almost as if, while describing it, Jacob expressed his anticipation for its arrival. In another sense, Jacob would experience the Lord’s salvation a matter of moments after this declaration since he would breathe his last and be gathered to his people (49:33).

It is with this statement that Moses introduces a theology of waiting. Later Old Testament poets and prophets would pick up on this theme and expand upon it. Perhaps the most familiar to many of us is Isaiah's proposition that "they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength" (Isa 40:31). Consider four questions raised by this brief sentiment.

1. Who is waiting?

The way that Jacob waited for the Lord's salvation seems to set an expectation for the way that the Lord's people after him would also wait for him to accomplish his work among them. David taught Israel to sing to the Lord, "Indeed, none who wait for you shall be put to shame" (Ps 25:3), therefore he prayed, "...for you I wait all the day long" (25:5, 21). He also commanded his hearers, "Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!" (Ps 27:14), knowing that "those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land" (Ps 37:9, 34). His waiting caused him to ask, "O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you" (Ps 39:7), and he was able to answer his own question with "I waited patiently¹ for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry" (Ps 40:1).²

Certain prophets acknowledge the importance of waiting for God's salvation, just as Jacob did. Jeremiah observed for those in exile, "The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD" (Lam 3:25-26). Hosea—noting how Jacob's life began with deception but then was changed when God met him and spoke to him—gave this application to the nation that came from Jacob: "So you, by the help of your God, return, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God" (Hos 12:2-6).

¹The literal reading of the Hebrew text is something like, "I waited with waiting." The verb for "wait" is repeated.

²There are additional Psalms that could be cited here. But my attempt is to be representative rather than exhaustive.

Isaiah, from whom we receive the primary text under consideration (40:31), spoke of the appearance of the Lord at Mount Sinai as though the people of his day had been there. “When you did awesome things that we did not look for [wait for], you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him” (Isa 64:3-4). Isaiah equates the lack of waiting that was true of Moses with his own before confirming that God “acts for those who wait for him.” Moses’ situation applied also to Isaiah, and then Isaiah applies it even more generally to all of God’s people. In doing so, Isaiah is consistent with the way that we have seen David, Jeremiah, and Hosea also project this pattern of waiting upon God’s people throughout the ages. Thus, we can confidently take the force of Isaiah 40:31 and understand it to bear weight for us. Therefore, we pray with Isaiah, “O LORD, we wait for you” (26:8; 33:2). And we realize that we will be among the multitudes on the last day who say, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation” (25:9).

2. What does it mean to wait?

The word translated “wait” in Isaiah 40:31 and many other passages we have already examined is also frequently translated as “hope”³ or “to look/long for”⁴ in the ESV. It carries the sense of expecting, enduring, lingering, and anticipating.⁵

Waiting is an act of faith. We are rarely more childlike than when we are forced to wait. Children know that Christmas is coming but wait eagerly for that day to arrive. We (like

³See Job 3:9; 6:19; 17:13; 30:26; Ps 69:6; Isa 8:17; 59:9, 11; 60:9; Jer 14:19, 22; Lam 2:16.

⁴See Job 7:2; Ps 69:20; Isa 5: 2, 4, 7; 51:5; 64:3; Jer 8:15; 13:16.

⁵BDB, 875.

children) want our needs to be met now. We demand instant gratification. The evidence of scripture suggests that these demands ought not to characterize God's people. Think of Noah building the ark, Abraham awaiting a son, Joseph sold by his brothers, Moses leading the wilderness wanderers, David fleeing from Saul, and the prophets whose messages went unheeded. Each of them was waiting upon God to fulfill certain promises, but many of them faced years (if not decades) of waiting for the realization of those promises. When we find ourselves waiting for the Lord to come through in times of loss or uncertainty, we find ourselves in good company.

As they waited, the temptations surely increased for them to abandon their reliance upon God and take matters into their own hands. We could recount exactly how this proved to be the case for some of them. Again, like children, our waiting often turns to impatience, particularly as we continue to wait longer than we think is right. It is a difficult reminder that God's timing is so often very different from our own. We are never promised that our waiting will be short or long. Only that it will not be forever.

3. For whom do we wait?

Isaiah speaks of those "who wait for the LORD" (40:31). David fled from Saul while saying to God, "I will wait for your name, for it is good" (Ps 52:9). Later Psalmists confess, "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning" (Ps 130:5-6). Solomon advises, "Do not say, 'I will repay evil'; wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you" (Prov 20:22). And God himself promises through Isaiah, "Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who wait for me shall not be put to shame" (Isa 49:23).

More than anything, God's people wait for God. It may feel like we wait for test results, or job confirmations, or paychecks, or relief from pain and illness, or the wayward to come home, or the repairs to be finished, or questions to be answered, or comfort to come from loss, or restoration to a damaged relationship, or temptations to be removed, or darkness to give way to light. In all these things, we wait for God himself. And to wait for him means that we wait for the day when all these other promises will also prove true. To borrow the words of the scriptures above, to wait for the Lord means to wait for his good name, to hope in his word, to not attempt to repay evil on our own but to trust God's deliverance, and to know that he is the Lord and that we will not be put to shame.

4. What happens as we wait?

Isaiah indicates that the waiting ones "shall renew their strength" (40:31). In the near context, strength is contrasted with weariness and fainting. Those who wait and are strengthened "shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint" because "they shall mount up with wings like eagles" (40:31). This strength comes not from themselves because, "Even youths shall faint and grow weary, and young men shall fall exhausted" (40:30). It comes because "The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength" (40:28-29).

The Lord who strengthens his people as they wait is the same Holy One who "by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power" created the stars, puts them in place, and calls them by name (40:26). His power to create planets is the same power to strengthen weary waiters. And he desires for this to happen for those who are his from across the globe ("let the peoples renew their strength," 41:1). The nations have their strength renewed when, as we

wait for God himself, we herald the good news with voices of strength (40:9), proclaiming that the Lord “comes with might” (40:10). Yet even this mighty God leads his people with the gentleness and tenderness of a shepherd (40:11).

God promises to renew our strength as we wait. Yet it is often the very act of waiting on him that makes us weary. We faint with exhaustion as we continually cry out to him, only to have him respond in silence. How are we to be strengthened by the Lord in our waiting when it is the waiting that causes our weariness?

The answer comes, at least in part, in Hebrews 12:3. “Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” To “not grow weary or fainthearted,” we must consider Jesus. Think about him. Set your mind on him. By considering Jesus we are helped in our ability to wait upon God. Jesus endured hostility from sinners so that we might be able to endure in waiting upon the Lord.

Hebrews 12:4 acknowledges that the believer’s fight against sin is the primary source of our weariness and faintheartedness. “In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” As difficult as it is to fight sin as we wait upon God, it has not yet killed us. As we wait for the Lord, we wrestle against sin, particularly the sin to stop waiting on him! We haven’t yet given our lives to defeat sin. Jesus has. Jesus did resist sin to the point of shedding his own blood. And the author seems to be saying to us, “If you ever did need to resist sin to the point of shedding your blood, you could.” And even in less intense occasions of temptation, you can always resist sin—and wait for the Lord—more fully than you think you can.

Shortly after Jesus was born, the weariness of waiting was lifted for two saints. Simeon was a man “righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25).⁶ Upon seeing the Christ child in the temple, he spoke words reminiscent of Jacob (see Gen 46:30; 49:18), when he said, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation” (Luke 2:29-30). Similarly, Anna “began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38). The Lord for whom they had waited was bringing salvation.

Near the end of Luke’s gospel, we meet one more “waiter.” A man from the council that had condemned Jesus, whose name was Joseph, was “a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for [waiting for] the kingdom of God” (Luke 23:50-51). He gained permission to bury the body of Jesus. And he continued to wait for the Lord and for his kingdom.

And so do we. Like children waiting for Christmas morning, we wait. Not for gifts, but for the Giver. Not for his birth, but for our re-birth. Not for his resurrection, but for ours.

⁶The “consolation of Israel” hearkens back to Isaiah 40 as well (see 40:1).