

HOPEFUL WAITING
Isaiah 40:31

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Sometimes you wonder. Look at all the sadness. Look at all the sickness. Look at all the sinfulness.

Why doesn't God do something? Is He not all powerful? Could He not stop the madness, the pain, the sickness, the sorrow?

How cruel God seems sometimes. If He has the ability to fix it – and we all believe that He does – and yet He refuses to do something, is He not cruel, leaving His own people in a state of sorrow, a state of loss, a state of sin? God, You're not listening. God, You're not acting. God, where are You when we need You the most? Does God keep His promises?

Has He not promised to never forsake His children? Has He not promised to always be faithful to those who are His own?

C.S. Lewis is the author of *A Grief Observed*. If you know that book, you know that C.S. Lewis, perhaps the most brilliant Christian writer of the twentieth century, wrote it after the death of his wife, Joy Davidman. Joy Davidman had been an atheist, a communist, a Jew who came to faith in Christ as a result of Lewis's writings. Then, to be close to him, she and her two teenage sons moved to England, and she served Lewis as his private secretary while he taught at Oxford.

When Lewis and Davidman were married, there wasn't much romance with it. As I understand it, they were married in a hospital room, and the reason that Lewis married Joy was to assure her that if she died of cancer, he would be responsible for her two sons. As God would have it, there was a remission in the disease. Joy Davidman came back to health, and C. S. Lewis and Joy Davidman were actually married a second time in a Church of England ceremony.

They enjoyed several wonderful years together. And then, as suddenly as the disease had stopped, it started again, and after a period of very painful illness, Joy Davidman died. C. S. Lewis, this brilliant Christian writer, in order to come to grips with his grief, wrote his feelings in a series of journals; those journals became the basis of *A Grief Observed*.

The book was first published under a pseudonym. Lewis was afraid that if people knew he had gone through this kind of experience it might badly damage their faith. It was not published under his name until after his death in 1963. But if you know that book, you know that the opening pages are shrill and harsh. C. S. Lewis had certain expectations about how God would work in his life, and when those expectations were not fulfilled, he became angry, confused, and somewhat hostile.

As was Lewis's custom, he turned from his expectations of God to his experience of God. At the end of the book, even though the skies are still leaden and gray, here and there a shaft of hope manages to break through. (Haddon Robinson, *Preaching Today*)

But there are moments in his journal when, in all of his grief, we hear the cry, "Why doesn't God do something?"

Lewis writes, "**Meanwhile, where is God?** This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself and turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be – or so it feels – welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once. And that seeming was as strong as this. What can this mean? Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?

"I tried to put some of these thoughts to C. this afternoon. He reminded me that the same thing seems to have happened to Christ: 'Why hast thou forsaken me?' I know. Does that make it easier to understand?

"Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but, 'So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer.'" (*A Grief Observed*)

Those of us who are Christians move into life's hard experiences with all kinds of expectations. In Isaiah 49 we read that God has our name written in His hand and that our reward is with Him. And then we come to the text of this morning.

Isaiah 40:31.

Yet those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary.

The prophet declares that those in Babylonian exile should wait on God. Isaiah chapters 40-55 answer the questions, the hard questions, the prophet knows the exiles will ask in their displaced crisis. In v. 27, the exiles feel as if they are now – in captivity – outside of God's vision, God's notice. Their cause has been disregarded by God.

"No," (vs. 28-29), the prophets replies. "God has neither forsaken, nor forgotten you (even in Babylon) because the Creator has endless power and wisdom! God is neither 'weak' nor weary!" God knows your situation and He will do something about it!"

To 'wait' on God is not simply marking time. Rather, it is to live in the confident expectation of His deliverance.

The idea is that of hopeful waiting – a call to wait on the God of the ages and His plan will gain strength to rise above the moment, not tire and not faint, but go on and on. The figure of the eagles' wings is apt.

The eagle soars and is born aloft not by His powerful wings, but by the wind's currents lifting his rigid pinions. Just so, those waiting for Yahweh are prepared to be lifted up and carried aloft by the Spirit of God – in his Time, and in His way. But note the text. When God arrives, we don't always fly. Sometimes we run, and sometimes we even walk.

How does God keep His promises? How does He keep His promises to us? How does He break into human affairs? There is not one way that God works, but several.

Haddon Robinson has identified three ways – three different ways that God works.

I. By Direct Intervention

One way in which God keeps the promises made to His people is what we might call the intervention of God. In his model, what God does is reach down into a difficult situation and take us out of that situation, or He reaches down and takes the situation away. It's what we usually mean when we talk about a miracle. That's the intervention of God with His people.

If I were thinking of a biblical example of that model, it would come from Exodus 14:13-16. In that passage, the Israelis have left Egypt, and they are confronted by a huge body of water. They are being pursued by the Egyptian army, and they are squeezed between Pharaoh and the deep Red Sea. In that moment in Exodus 14:13, the people cry out to God in their terror and agony.

Moses stands before them and says, "Stand firm, and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today." In that moment, the sea opens, and the people walk across as though the land were dry. When Pharaoh and his armies try to follow, the waters tumble in, and the armies are destroyed. It was the miraculous intervention of God on behalf of His people. It was a miracle.

That miracle was so great that all through the Old Testament, whenever the psalmists or prophets wanted to prove that Israel was God's special child, they pointed back to that day when God miraculously brought His people out of the land of Egypt, the womb of Egypt, and established Israel as His son. The miraculous intervention of God.

Do you want to see it in the New Testament? You can see it in Luke 18. Jesus comes to the village of Jericho and finds a chap there who had been born blind. When the blind man heard that Jesus had hit town, he kept saying again and again, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus heard the cry and asked that the man be brought to him. In His quaint way, Jesus said to the man, "What do you want me to do for you?"

The man says, "Lord, I want to see."

Jesus says, "Receive your sight. Your faith has healed you."

And that was it. The man was able to see. No making mud and putting it on his eyes. No sending him to an ophthalmologist. Simply the word spoken, and the man could see. The direct intervention of God. (Haddon Robinson, *Preaching Today*)

No doubt in my mind. In the past, God has done miracles, and I've seen Him divinely intervene in the natural order of things for people today. It is a real way that God deals with the problems in our lives. And usually it is the way that we think about God working in our lives.

Maybe, Robinson has suggested, it goes back to our infancy. When we are babies, if we are hungry we made the appropriate noise, and the big people came, put a bottle in our mouth, and the hunger was filled. Maybe our diapers were soiled. We cried and there was deliverance from without.

If you've been to church all your life, maybe it's because the public relations department of the church is always trying to make God look good. All the way through Sunday School and church, we hear about those marvelous miracles of God on behalf of His people. You figure if He does it for them, why not do it for us?

I don't think it's wrong to expect a miracle. In fact, I imagine that we could go around this room this morning, and some of you could tell of times in your life when you experienced the intervention of God – that He reached down and took you out of the difficult situation or reached down and took the situation away. It's not wrong to expect a miracle. The danger is to believe that is the only way God works or that is the major way God works. For disillusionment is the child of illusions. If you live with that kind of illusion, you'll find that you'll still go through life's pain but with a badly damaged faith (Haddon Robinson, *Preaching Today*)

II. Through Interaction With His People

There are other ways in which God keeps His promises. Not only is there the intervention of God, but there's what we might call the interaction of God. In this model, God doesn't perform a miracle, but in this model God reaches down and empowers us to make a difference in our situations – the interaction of God through His people.

If I were thinking of a biblical model, it would be in Exodus 3:10-13. In chapter 2, Moses saw that the people of Israel were captive to the Egyptians. As young men have done for centuries, he resorted to violence in order to try to make it different. He slew an Egyptian, and perhaps he thought in his secret mind that the Israelis might rise up and throw off the oppressor. Huh! Didn't work that way. They rose up and threw him out, and Moses left Egypt and went to Midian and there, on the back side of a desert, took care of a bunch of sheep.

Somebody said you could tell the whole life story of Moses in three acts. His first forty years, he was in Pharaoh's courts, son of Pharaoh's daughter: he came to realize he was somebody. The second forty years, when he took care of those lousy sheep, he was nobody. And the last forty years demonstrated what God can do with somebody who realizes he is nobody.

But in what must have been Moses' midlife crisis, out there in the back of that desert, he saw a burning bush and God spoke to him.

God said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt.”

I’m sure there in Exodus 3, Moses must have thought, “About time. I mean, we’ve been crying for 400 years!”

And God said, “I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians.” I imagine Moses thought, “Now we’re going to see it. God is going to roll up his sleeves, and we are going to see one great miracle!”

And God says, “Moses, you go and I’ll go with you.”

And Moses, the Hebrew of Exodus 3, responds, “You’ve gotta be kidding. I know those guys. I’ve been to prep school with them. There isn’t any way two million slaves will go free.”

God says, “Moses, you go and I’ll go with you.”

If you follow that incident in Exodus 3, you discover that’s what happened. God worked. Moses worked. The people of Israel worked, and they became workers together with God. The interaction of God with His people (Haddon Robinson, *Preaching Today*)

Some people think God performs miracles for us every day. You’ve got friends who get at least two or three divine interventions every day. It does something like this: “I was at AC looking for a parking place, and before my very eyes there was an open space in front of the library.” And, then again, during the fall semester that might just be a miracle. Folks who see themselves as the recipients of a couple of miracles each day – they don’t seem to be God’s children; they seem to be His spoiled brats.

Sometimes God does not do a miracle. Sometimes He agrees to work with us, if we will work with Him. And if we don’t, then the task is never completed.

This, for me, seems risky business for God. I think of the task of teaching the good news about God’s love to a lost and dying world. Unless people are willing to work with God to share the good news – to volunteer to spend a couple of hours each week preparing a Bible study lesson – then the task does not get done. God wants to work, but usually He wants to work with us.

III. Inner-Action of God

So, not only does God work by divine intervention, not only does He work by interaction with His people, He also works through a third way which we might call the inner-action of God.

During those times in our lives, God does not perform a miracle, God does not even allow us the strength to get out of the situation. God leaves us pretty much who we are and, yet, does something beautiful in our lives – the inner-action of God with His people.

These times are the most painful, the most difficult times to wait on the Lord. We may wake some morning and feel that He seems distant, our prayers sound like a monologue and our problems look insurmountable. At first we shuck it off, but as it persists we know that God seems so silent when we are needing Him to be so close. So, as the prophet declares, we wait upon the Lord.

Sara Doudney was right:

**There are days of silent sorrow
In the season of our life;
There are wild, despairing moments,
There are hours of mental strife;
There are times of stony anguish,
When the tears refuse to fall;
But the waiting time, my brother,
Is the hardest time of all....**

**We can bear the heat of conflict,
Though the sudden, crushing blow,
Beating back our gathered forces,
for a moment lays us low;
We may rise again beneath it
None the weaker for the fall;
but the waiting time, my brothers,
Is the hardest time of all.
(Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Climbing the Rainbow*)**

If I were thinking about a biblical example of that, it would be in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, where Paul writes about his thorn in the flesh. We don't know what the thorn was. It may have been malaria; more likely it was bad eyesight. But we know it was something that dogged the apostle, and he says in 2 Corinthians 12, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.'"

God didn't perform a miracle for the Apostle Paul. God didn't allow Paul to reach in and somehow pull out that thorn in his skin. He left Paul where he was and did something beautiful in his life. (Haddon Robinson, *Preaching Today*)

A few minutes ago, I quoted to you the words of Isaiah chapter 40, where Isaiah says, "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

Many of the critics believe that Isaiah has destroyed the poetic structure. Isaiah talks about flying, then running, and then walking. You would think it would be the other way around, they say. But I think Isaiah knew exactly what he was doing. They who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength, and, sometimes because of God's intervention, they will mount up with wings as eagles. They will be carried above their circumstances and be able to dance among the clouds.

Other time, there will be the interaction of God in which they will run and not be weary.

And other times, they will be able to walk and not faint. (*Preaching Today*)

God is not silent.
God is not absent.
God, in His way, in His time, for our best, is at work.

Why doesn't God do something?

God has done everything in Christ – in the Christ and in His eternal resurrection.

You ask why doesn't God do something?

Have you not heard? He has done something. He has acted in history.

For He sent His Son, His only Son. He sent Jesus. He nailed His Son to a tree. For that moment, He abandoned His only son that He might come to you, to me. Why doesn't God do something? The gift of His Son – what more could He do?

And you, you can have the promise of eternal life. Now you can have peace, hope, and assurance even when you find yourself waiting, for a time, on the Lord.

For ancient Israel, who finds herself in a strange land.

For us, who find ourselves in an uncomfortable place.

For us, who think God has forgotten.

Hopeful waiting.