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READY! SET! WAIT!

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SYNOPSIS

An interesting term found in the Bible is the word *wait*, especially as in the phrase *wait on the Lord*. The majority of the uses of this particular word are found in the Psalms, but the concept is actually found in the many passages in both Testaments that provide glimpses of godly living. Godly people wait on the Lord. In my study of the uses of this term, I have formulated this definition: In the midst of difficulty, “waiting on the Lord” is a movement of the heart away from (a renouncing of, repenting of, or destruction of) taking matters into our own hands and a movement of the heart toward (an embracing of, affirmation of, or confidence in) the person and work of the Lord (i.e., putting the matters into His hands), even though the difficulty may not subside.

Synthesizing the various passages under study, this definition is then developed into four points: (1) There is the presence of something unwanted. (2) The person has concluded what it is that will bring him relief or deliverance and then pursues it, or wants to pursue it. It is simply assumed that to do so is the way of humanity. (3) When you are in the midst of difficulty from which you want a way out, “to wait on the Lord” is to evidence a movement of the heart away from taking matters into your own hands. (4) To put matters into the hands of the Lord is to turn away from what one might be naturally inclined to do and instead to turn toward the Lord. This involves remembering who He is and then, in a response to His goodness, doing good to our neighbors and even to our enemies, trusting the Lord to deal with our own situation.

The Bible often uses terminology that does not make much sense to us. The use of the word *wait* in *wait on the Lord* is one such example. Does this mean we lock ourselves in our prayer closet and “wait” for the Lord to do something? Does it mean that we twiddle our thumbs and pace the floor until He answers?

Think for a moment about the word *wait*. It is generally a negative word. In many ways, it is “nothing time.” We even try to soften the word by saying, “Wait just a minute.”

What is waiting? It is an undefined time period imposed on you when you are experiencing the presence of something unwanted and the absence of something wanted. This negative experience can range from slight discomfort (i.e., waiting in line to get postage stamps; something unwanted, the line; something wanted, the postage stamps) to extreme difficulty (i.e., fighting for one’s life while waiting for a heart transplant; something unwanted, fighting for one’s life; something wanted, a new heart). Generally, we do not like to wait!

Putting aside the negative feelings of the word, it is important to note that waiting also carries with it the anticipation of satisfaction—that the presence of something unwanted will be removed, and the absence of something wanted will be remedied. This anticipation can range from minor satisfaction (i.e., we finally get our turn in line and complete our transaction for postage stamps) to major satisfaction (i.e., we quit fighting for our life when we receive a new heart). So we have sayings such as, “It will be *worth* the wait.” In these examples, the focus of waiting is positive because it allows for the anticipation of something good. The waiting is not “nothing time”; instead it is the building of excitement. So waiting is a complex term, arousing various emotions, depending on one’s perspective.

I want us to consider the word *wait* from a biblical perspective. How do we learn to wait in our lives as believers? What does the Bible teach us?

DEFINITION OF “WAIT ON THE LORD”

There are numerous uses of “wait on the Lord” in the Old Testament.¹ Consider Proverbs 20:22 and Psalms 25:3; 37:9, 34. There are also examples of not waiting, like Psalms 106:13–14. From my study of the word *wait*, I would like to propose the following definition: *In the midst of difficulty, “waiting on the Lord” is a movement of the*

heart away from (a renouncing of, repenting of, or destruction of) taking matters into our own hands, and a movement of the heart toward (an embracing of, affirmation of, or confidence in) the person and work of the Lord (i.e., putting the matters into His hands), even though the difficulty may not subside. I think this best expresses the biblical concept of waiting on the Lord. To help clarify this more fully, I have developed this definition into several points that I hope will help you understand this important biblical teaching.

POINT 1: In each passage, there is the presence of something unwanted.

This is a fundamental aspect of what it means to wait. Either a wrong has been committed, which has put someone in a difficult position, or a person has simply encountered a difficulty in life. The people in those situations want what each of us would want: relief or deliverance from their present unwanted experience.

Let's consider again Proverbs 20:22. You have to read between the lines to get the situation here. This proverb is a warning to one who has been wronged. This warning ("Do not repay evil") is given because a human being would have a natural inclination to repay the wrong that has been committed against him. Evil: how bad is it? We do not know. But it is the type that could be felt. In fact, one would be inclined to do evil because of it. That is why the warning is offered. Whatever the wrong is, it has put the person in a place of difficulty. The longing, which would seem so legitimate, would be to "repay" the person who has committed this evil. The goal would be to "feel better." It is a way out of the difficulty. One's deliverance, so to speak, is to get back at the person. The heart's cry is, "You have put me in a bad place, but I can get back at you." Or, "If I could just _____, then it would be made right, and I would feel better. That would bring me relief." The logic is that this revenge will bring satisfaction because the wrong will have been righted. That is foolish thinking, but it is often the way we operate.

Note the last part of the definition: "Even though the difficulty may not subside." If we make deliverance our primary goal, we are walking in foolishness. We cannot control the difficulty...it just happens; it just is. We can only control how we respond to it. We must embrace it. The difficulty may not subside, but we can live in a way that honors the Lord. So, in light of this, how do we "wait on the Lord"?

POINT 2: In each passage, the person has concluded what it is that will bring him relief or deliverance and then pursues it, or wants to pursue it. It is simply assumed that to do so is the way of humanity.

Instead of looking to the Lord for deliverance, the response to difficulty is to bring about one's own deliverance, whatever it takes to "right" the world. In other

words, there is a commitment *to take the matter into one's own hands*. The person has a clear sense of what will make his world better. The attitude is: "If I just had _____, then...." Or "If I just did _____, then...." He looks to whatever fills in that blank and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god." Isaiah 44 calls it idolatry.

Our lead passage, Proverbs 20:22, demonstrates this so clearly. The "deliverance" would be to "repay evil," to get back at the one who did the wrong. It is to take matters into one's own hands rather than leave it to the Lord. The conviction and commitment of the heart is, "I can fix this on my own." And, having established the direction of perceived deliverance, one pursues it with passion. "I want deliverance, and I want it *now*."

Psalms 106 provides us with a number of wrong directions of the heart as it summarizes the history of Israel. Verse 14 states they had a "wanton craving in the wilderness." "Wanton craving" is a craving without regard for what is right. In other words, it is an action without any regard for the Lord. It is living as if the Lord does not exist.

The NASB translates it as "craved intensely." It is simply taking matters into one's own hands. But what did it "look like" to have this "wanton craving"? Note the wide variety of ways one can take matters into one's own hands: v. 16, envy; v. 19 and 28, idolatry; vv. 24–25, despising God's provision and grumbling against Him; v. 32, provoking the Lord by not trusting Him; v. 34, failing to obey His command to destroy the people of the land; vv. 35–39, becoming like the nations instead of living holy lives unto the Lord.

The context of this list of wrong reactions is a situation of difficulty. Israel encounters a problem and then looks for a quick solution, one that does not involve the Lord but rather themselves, taking the matter into their own hands. Simply put, it is living as if the Lord does not exist.

POINT 3: When you are in the midst of difficulty from which you want a way out, to "wait on the Lord" is to evidence a movement of the heart away from taking matters into your own hands.

The teaching is to *turn away* from such self-directed action, as reasonable as it might seem in the moment or as natural as it is to move in such a direction. Proverbs 20:22 states, "Do not say, 'I will repay evil' —*oh, turn away from that!*—"wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you." The writer of Proverbs is warning, "Do not have that kind of heart," the kind that extends evil toward another, the kind that takes matters into your own hands. The plea is to *turn away from that*—and do what? "Wait for the Lord, and he

will deliver you.” The opposite of being a person who repays evil is to be a person who waits on the Lord. Consider the same teaching in Psalm 25:3: “Indeed, none who wait for you will be put to shame; they will be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.” Don’t live without regard for what is right, which is unrestrained, excessive, malicious, and unjustifiable. Turn away!

When in the midst of difficulty for which we want a way out and the natural inclination of the heart is to take matters into our own hands, “to wait on the Lord” is also a movement of our heart toward (an embracing of, affirmation of, or confidence in) the person and work of the Lord, even though the difficulty may not subside.

If we are going to forsake our own devices and resort to another, then there must be some worth in the “other” toward whom we turn—some hope, some confidence. Who is the one to whom we turn? We must be a people who remember (meditate and dwell on) the person and work of the Lord. We must have times when we sit before His Word and reflect on what He means to our lives. We must get to know Him. Devotions are not “a verse a day keeps the Devil away.” Devotions are a time to get to know God, to talk with Him, to let Him talk with you, and to be in His presence so that He becomes a greater reality for you in your everyday life. We must pound our minds and hearts with truths about Him, and we must fill our lives with time spent with Him. He needs to become an abiding presence in our lives. The point is this: if we know His worth, we will look to Him and wait on Him. Our hearts will move toward Him, trusting, believing. You cannot remember God and then conclude, “Well, He is not to be trusted.” If we look to Him, He will prove Himself faithful.

Once we are remembering the Lord’s greatness and glory, what does it look like to “wait on the Lord”? Do we find a prayer closet and wait? Do we fast and pray? Do we sit in our rooms in silence until He answers or takes away the difficulty? There can be many options for what one could do, but the Bible actually provides pictures of what it means to wait on the Lord.

POINT 4: To put matters into the hands of the Lord is to turn away from what one might be naturally inclined to do and instead to turn toward the Lord. This involves remembering who He is and then, in a response to His goodness, doing good to our neighbors and even to our enemies, trusting the Lord to deal with our own situation.

Interestingly, the Old Testament is more silent about doing good. It is focused on remembering. Doing good is the assumed and natural result of remembering. It is in the New Testament that the “do good” part really begins to take focus. However, we do have examples in both Testaments.

Consider the life of King David in 1 Samuel. King Saul is the reigning king. David has been anointed king. King Saul is jealous and is trying to kill David, who has fled to the wilderness to hide. Twice David is given the opportunity to kill King Saul, who on both occasions is oblivious to his presence. As we read the story, we might find ourselves yelling, “Kill him!” But for David to do that, it would be taking matters into his own hands. He would be “repaying evil.”

David is in constant difficulty because of King Saul. He wants relief. He wants deliverance. David and his mighty men demonstrate repeatedly that they can hold their own against King Saul and his vast army. Yet David does nothing to take matters into his own hands. He could have removed his difficulty by taking King Saul’s life, but he doesn’t. He lets God take care of the matter because that is God’s business.

David models for us what it means to “wait on the Lord.” In the midst of intense difficulty, he is going about his daily routine. Through it all, he honors Saul, his king and God’s anointed, the man who continually wronged him and sought to take his life. He lives out what it means to be a believer. This is “waiting on the Lord.”

Romans 12:14–21 brings further clarity to the life of David. We are to not only refuse to take matters into our own hands but also take the extra step of doing good. We are to love others even when they persecute us. Vengeance is in the hands of the Lord (v. 19). That is God’s business. Loving others, sacrificially laying down our lives, is in our hands. That is our business. That is what it means to wait.

Finally, there is a “big picture” revealed in the New Testament. The New Testament puts all of our difficulty into a new perspective for us. Waiting has both a *micro* and a *macro* dimension to it. The micro dimension is what we have been focused on in this study—a particular situation. We give these to the Lord and continue to live and love in the ways He has called us. We walk worthy of our calling in Christ Jesus as we entrust ourselves to our faithful Creator and heavenly Father.

The macro dimension is the bigger picture of life. We have experienced difficulty, are experiencing difficulty, and will experience difficulty. It is not going away, and we cannot insulate our lives from difficulty. Yet we long for the day when there is no more pain or sorrow, tears are wiped away, and God’s new kingdom is ushered in. This is the ultimate aspect of what it means to “wait on the Lord.”

So what does this macro waiting look like? It is found in our everyday living, which seeks to live for the glory of God, no matter what difficulty we encounter. We leave all of life’s difficulties to the Lord, and we focus on loving Him and loving others as we await the return of Jesus. We live in the tension of “already/not yet.” All of our micro waiting is ultimately focused on our macro waiting. As we endure particular situations, seeking to live for the glory of God, we are waiting for the kingdoms of this

world to become the kingdom of the Lord. “Waiting on the Lord” characterizes our new life in Christ.

A good summary of what we have learned about waiting on the Lord is found in Psalm 27:13–14: “I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living! Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!”

God can be trusted. We can turn away from taking matters into our own hands. We can turn toward God and His goodness, trusting Him to take care of His business while we live in a manner that sacrificially lays down our lives for the sake of those around us, freely giving ourselves to those who have need. May the Lord grant us the ability to wait as we live for Him, trusting His goodness.

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NOTES

- 1 Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible quotations are from the ESV with slight modifications by the author.