

Following

STILL

Jesus

STAND

Even

ING

When

**LINA
ABUJAMRA,
MD**

It Hurts

Introduction

Some people believe in love at first sight. They claim to tumble head over heels in love with someone at first glance. Others swear that love comes softly, unexpectedly, even quietly. My love for Jesus Christ was a little bit of both.

It was a perfect summer night in Wisconsin. The moon was radiant. The ripple of a creek echoed in the distance. The air was warm enough to leave my jacket behind on my bunk, but cool enough to breathe. I was free—it felt like my parents were a million miles away and there was nothing to distract me. It was summer camp at its best.

I don't remember exactly what the preacher said on that particular night, but I can still smell the rock that I stood on as I gazed upward and felt closer to God than I'd ever felt before. It was like color suddenly burst into my life for the first time.

I should note that I was, by no means, new to Christianity. I was born into a deeply faithful Christian family, and I don't remember a time in my life when I didn't know about Jesus. In fact, one of my earliest memories was the night I accepted Jesus Christ into my heart as my Savior. Looking back, I'm sure I did it mostly out of fear—but who can blame a seven-year-old for wanting to escape hell? The truth is, I really did like this Jesus I had heard so much about in Sunday

school, and if He had died to buy my way into heaven, then I was more than willing to sign up.

For years Christ had been quietly but persistently beckoning me to a closer relationship with Him until that night when I tumbled head over heels in love. I was only sixteen but old enough to know that my life would never be the same. For the first time, I gave the reins of my life over to God. I wanted, even longed, for God to lead me where He wanted me to go. I was on top of the world with Jesus as my guide and the future in His sight. I not only wanted to live for God, but, as I stood on that rock, I wanted to climb steep mountains for Him and proclaim His name from the highest peaks for the whole world to hear. I was ready for the adventure to begin. I thought, *With God on my side, what could ever go wrong?*

I'm a pediatric emergency room doctor. My life's work is taking care of people facing sudden and traumatizing crises. And do you know what most people—the parents who've just been told their six-year-old daughter has leukemia, or the fourteen-year-old teenager facing an unplanned pregnancy—say to me, in the bright unblinking light of the ER?

"I didn't see this coming."

Few people predict the turbulence and pain that life will inevitably bring. Lives that are filled with joy today can suddenly become bumpy and hard tomorrow, but few people make plans that take into account the difficult roads that are sure to come.

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As the moon smiled down on my head that night so long ago, little could I have predicted the sin that would continue to plague me and the scars that would one day distinguish me as a follower of Jesus Christ. But

most of all, I could not have predicted the pain of Christ's call. No one plans on a journey through pain, yet pain is often the road that God chooses to purify His children and bring us closer to Himself.

You see, when a person answers the call of the Savior, it is by far the best decision in the world, but also the hardest. Answering the call of Jesus of Nazareth means following the example of the One who poured Himself out for our sakes. When we are laid bare in obedience and suffering like Him, we are more useful to the King. It is this stripping that distinguishes the true saint from the casual observer and that allows us to finally reach a place of abundance in Christ.

Psalms 66:10–12 says it best: “For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid a crushing burden on our backs; you let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance.”

Fast-forward with me to 2002, fifteen years after my life-altering night at summer camp. I was no longer an innocent sixteen-year-old kid, and my heart was far more deeply in love with Jesus than ever before. I wanted to serve Christ in a much deeper, more meaningful way, so I decided to do a three-day fast. Every Christian I greatly admired fasted in order to focus on spiritual things. I figured I should try it too.

By the end of my fast, God had spoken to me. Sooner or later, God always honors our hunger for a divine encounter with an answer—even if it's not the answer we want. So on a quiet New Year's Day, while the rest of the world watched college football, the Lord Jesus Christ called me to full-time vocational ministry. We're told in Habakkuk 2:1 that the prophet stood at the watchpost, looking out to see what God would say to him—and God answered him. And much like the prophet Habakkuk, I had been standing on my watchpost, begging for God to use me somewhere, somehow.

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I felt as if, surely, the worst of life was behind me. I was no longer a beginner Christian. My life for Him was about to really begin. I would finally reap the richness of a life completely dedicated to the risen Jesus; I dreamed of the joys of serving Him full-time. I wondered how God would take an ER doctor and transform her into His full-time servant. I could almost *taste* the fullness of joy that lay ahead.

I'd forgotten, though, that God cares less about our titles and our jobs and more about our hearts and character. I'd lost sight of the fact that the Christian walk is one of refinement, leading to the *total transformation* of the man and woman for Christ. In other words, like all the patients who say the same to me: *I didn't see it coming*. It wouldn't take long for my enthusiastic *Yes!* to become *Why me, Lord? Why did You choose me? Why is this happening to me?*

The next ten years would stretch me and push me to the brink of my faith. At times it felt as if my soul was being defibrillated as God continued to strip layer after layer of gruff and self and carnality from my life. At one point, I didn't even think I'd survive. But deep in my soul was the quiet certitude that I was held by the One who loves me so deeply that He had given His own life for me. In Proverbs 25:4 God says, "Take away the dross from the silver, and the smith has material for a vessel." I had *asked* to be the kind of vessel that God could use for His purposes, and God was answering my prayers.

God was *calling* me.

The most compelling reason to answer *any* call is directly related to the importance of the one calling. (It's no wonder that most telemarketers don't identify themselves on caller ID!)

In fact, go back with me about two thousand years ago to a small seaside town in Galilee and take a look with me at how God called some of His other followers to His service. It's a regular day and fishermen are doing their usual thing: fishing. A man by the name of Jesus

approaches a cluster of them. Here's how it played out, according to Matthew:

While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. (Matt. 4:18–20)

How could two simple words—"follow me"—so radically change the lives of two grown men with stable fishing careers and comfortable, secure lives? Jesus' command was simple: "Follow me." In return, He made a promise. "I will make you fishers of men." Did Peter and Andrew initially misunderstand the call? Were they hoping that Jesus would turn their local fishing gig into a worldwide highly profitable operation? What would Peter and Andrew have done had they been warned that this same Jesus would one day die on a cross, and that eventually Peter himself, according to tradition, would be killed upside down on the same kind of cross? It's hard to tell, but one thing is certain: Peter and Andrew were forever changed in that moment.

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Os Guinness defines *calling* as "the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service."¹

For Peter and Andrew, the call came on a day like any other while they went about their usual business. God often chooses ordinary life as the setting to call us to Himself. From that point on, their purpose in life became single-mindedly focused on the only One

who mattered, Jesus Christ of Nazareth. They went where He told them to go. They did what He told them to do. They listened when He spoke.

When they put down their nets, their lives became about Christ and for Christ, even though they knew little of Christ yet. And they were in for the ride of their lives. Did they understand the full meaning of repentance from sin yet? Did they see the depth of their own sinfulness and their desperate need for a Savior yet? We may never know, but what we do know is that Peter and Andrew had responded to the call of Christ though they knew little of what would be asked of them in the days to come.

Have you responded to God's call in your life? His call is available to anyone who will answer it. Paul affirms this when he says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13), and John asserts it in Revelation: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:20).

It happened to Paul on the road to Damascus on a warm, sunny, Middle Eastern day. It happened to the Ethiopian eunuch in a carriage on the road to Gaza while reading Isaiah (Acts 8:26–39). And it happened to Samuel, as we're told in the book of 1 Samuel.

Samuel was born to a godly woman who had been unable to have children but who longed to be a mother. Her fervent prayers for a child were heard and finally answered by God; she had a son whom she named Samuel. If anyone was wired to hear God's call in their life, it should have been Samuel. He was a miracle boy, the answer to his mother's faithful prayers. He grew up in God's house. He was prayed over. He was well-trained by a priest. But when the day came and God called him, Samuel didn't recognize His voice. It was nighttime, and Eli, Samuel's mentor, was already asleep. Samuel was lying down in his corner thinking about the events of the day when he heard his name.

Here's what happened, as recorded in 1 Samuel 3: "Then the LORD called Samuel, and he said, 'Here I am!' and ran to Eli and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call; lie down again.' So he went and lay down" (vv. 4–5).

To Eli, it sounded like Samuel was a kid trying to get out of going to sleep. This happened three times. By the third time, Eli finally got a clue:

And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant hears." (vv. 8–10)

Thus was born one of the greatest prophets of the entire Old Testament. Little did Samuel know in that moment that he would someday anoint not only the first king of Israel, Saul, but also the greatest king of Israel, a kid named David. Little did Samuel know what the future would hold for him. Little did he foresee the trials that would come and the stripping process that would follow. Like Peter and Andrew, like me after my fast, like all of us when we answer God's call, Samuel was in for the ride of his life.

People often tell me that they regularly hear God audibly speak in their lives. I have a confession to make: I've never heard God speak audibly. For years I used to think something was wrong with me. I wondered why God would withhold His voice from my life. *Was it something I did? Was it something I said?*

Turns out that nothing is wrong with me at all. If you've wondered whether you've missed God's call because you've never heard Him

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Speak aloud, you need to hear what I'm about to say: God's primary method of speaking to us today is through His Word.

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" . . . So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Rom. 10:14–15, 17)

Let's get one thing straight: God can speak anytime He wants in any way He desires. He's God, after all. But according to this passage

in Romans, He speaks to us primarily through His Word.

Though many Christians understand the life-altering call of Jesus Christ, many of us get stuck or discouraged in a kind of wilderness after answering it.

God also often uses other people to help us hear His Word. This happened to Samuel through Eli. It happened to the Ethiopian eunuch through Philip. It happened to the early church through the preaching of Peter and Paul. It happened to me through people like my own mother who shared Christ with me as a child. It happened to me later on in my life through

the preacher on that warm summer night at camp.

Though many Christians understand the life-altering call of Jesus Christ, many of us get stuck or discouraged in a kind of wilderness after answering it. It's the reason why so many followers of Christ today seem to be wasting their lives instead of using them for God's glory. Worse yet, many followers of Christ abandon ship at the merest sign of difficulty that creeps up along the narrow road of faith.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus warns the Christian of the difficult road ahead. Take these examples, for instance:

“For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” (Matt. 7:14)

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.” (Luke 9:23–24)

“In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

Though we’re given ample warning of the difficult road ahead, most of us cower in fear at the earliest signs of discomfort.

We’re a lot like the Israelites after they were called out of Egypt. We don’t have trouble leaving Egypt, the land of slavery and defeat, but the minute we hit the wilderness, we panic and want to bolt.

Their life was bad. Their days were long. All they wanted was to be freed from the bondage of slavery. They would have done anything to be free. They cried and prayed and sang about it. They waited hundreds of years for it. Until one day, God saved them. He did it powerfully and magnificently. He did it faithfully and lovingly through His servant Moses. (You may have seen the classic movie with Charlton Heston in it. Or maybe you haven’t.)

It may surprise you, but instead of delivering them out of their slavery into a forty-year vacation, God led the Israelites straight out of Egypt into the wilderness. Yikes. *What kind of God does that?*

To say that the Israelites did not expect the wilderness is an understatement. The wilderness would strip the Israelites of everything, but it was God’s perfect and purposed plan for His people. In Exodus 13:17–18, God gives us His perspective on it:

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When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, “Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.” But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle.

The Israelites should have seen it coming. But instead of accepting and trusting God’s plan, they turned to complaining, fear, impatience, and idolatry. The Israelites missed two very critical facts:

- The first was that the wilderness was part of God’s call and plan. The wilderness was meant to make the Israelites stronger—leaner and better able to fight the battles that God had for them. The wilderness was a time of preparation and a time of purification. The wilderness was the perfect place for the Israelites to become God’s people.
- The second was that God was with them every step of the way through the wilderness. For the Israelites, God’s presence was obvious through a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

God’s plan is the same for His children today. He starts by calling us to Himself. The rest of our life is a journey to become more like Him. It is a journey toward a deeper knowledge of Him and a closer walk with Him. It is a journey into *life*. If you’re a seasoned Christian, you’re probably familiar with the word *sanctification* that God uses for this process. I like the word *stripping*. I like it because, admittedly, the wilderness does not always feel like a perfect place. It’s often a place of pain, and a place of endurance, and a place of doubt. *How could the loving Savior who called us out of “Egypt” really mean for us*

to last in the oppressive heat and dangers of the wilderness? Could this really be part of His plan for us?

You and I wonder why the wilderness is necessary. If you're like me, you've probably been tempted to escape. Like me, you may have wished for a pillar of fire to guide you when the night is dark. The irony is that just like the Israelites we have been given a pillar, but we have lost sight of it more often than we can imagine. Our pillar of fire is God's Word. He is our presence in the darkest wilderness. He is our guide when the storms come, as they most certainly will. We can trust that God never leaves us to fend for ourselves in the wilderness. The hard seasons we experience can lead us to a richer faith and deeper relationship for having been through those experiences.

To my own surprise, I'm still standing. I'm still strong in faith despite going through some pretty hard seasons. In this book, we're going to walk through how this is possible. I have become obsessed with the wilderness seasons in life. Every single Christian will spend a large portion of life wandering in the wilderness. It's time we learn not just to survive the process but to stand strong in it. It's time to move past the pain and find joy in the midst of the wilderness.

Many Christians have a life verse. I happen to have one too. It's Philippians 1:6, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

This verse is a summary of what this book is about. God is up to something. He who called us is faithful and will complete the work He's started. God's promise to us is that no matter how painful the road we're on may seem, the end is sure and secure.

If you're having a hard time connecting with the Lord, I want to assure you that it's not because He's not calling. Perhaps you simply need to get more familiar with His voice. It may be time for you to change your location, as we do when cell service is patchy, and, like

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Samuel, answer the Lord with these words: "Speak Lord, for your servant hears."

It could be, given that we're living in a time of cultural ADHD, you're distracted by all the noise and screens in your life and can't hear God's voice. No matter how good your intentions are, until you actively unplug the distractions and simplify things, you will find that

hearing God's voice will remain a great challenge.

Maybe, too, you are distracted by some of your relationships. The most well-meaning people can stand in the way of God's call for you. It takes a deep sense of conviction to maintain a vertical focus when those closest to you try to dissuade you from pursuing God's call. Listening to God's voice in your life demands your full attention and devotion.

Another thing to remember when you're feeling stuck: Satan takes great joy in discouraging Christ's followers. He does it through tempting you to sin and through discouragement and doubt. He does it daily. He does it deceptively. But he does it as *you* allow him to. God has already overcome Satan and given us victory over him, but until you open your eyes and recognize Christ's victory in your life, you will remain pummeled by Satan's ploys. I pray that this book will give you the ammunition you need to win the battle against him.

This book is my attempt to describe the sanctifying process that every follower of Jesus Christ must go through in order to become more like Christ and to answer His radical calling. Look, I've answered many calls in my life: the call to personal purity, the call to full-time ministry, the call to start a blog and to write a book and to lead the women's ministry at my church. Each season in my life has been unique in its own right, but none can compare to the most

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important call in my life that undergirds all others: the call to follow Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.

Many times I almost quit. I'll tell you more about it in this book. I wondered at my sanity; I doubted God's call and His love for me. But not for a moment has the Savior forsaken me. The very hand that refined me has also been the hand of my loving Father that has held me near to His heart. He has always seen far more in me than I ever could have seen, and has had more in mind for me than I ever could have imagined. He's the reason I'm still standing.

According to Ephesians 2:10, God created you for good works that He's prepared before for you to do before the world began! Whether your calling today is to be the best mom you can be to your toddlers, to glorify God as a single professional in the midst of a bustling city, in full-time ministry, or in one of so many other ways, I hope you're ready to hang on for dear life as you enjoy the ride in pursuit of the Savior. As I said at the very start of this Introduction, I know you will find Him worth every bit of pain you feel in the process as you, like I am, continue to fall more deeply in love with Him.

Now . . . are you ready for your adventure to begin? Let's go!

Part One

THE REFINING PROCESS

Waiting

Teach us, O Lord, the disciplines of patience,
for to wait is often harder than to work.

—PETER MARSHALL

People often ask me why I chose to practice emergency medicine. The answer is easy—I hate waiting. If there is one word in the English language that I cannot stand, it's the word *wait*.

I don't like anything about it. I don't like standing still. I don't like not knowing exactly when something is going to happen. I don't like idle instability and open-ended sentences. I'm a "fix-it, get-'er-done" kind of person, through and through.

I hate waiting so much that I'd rather resuscitate people than spend another minute in the waiting room. I'd rather be quickly seated at Denny's than wait around for a table at a hipper restaurant. I'd rather hang up on the customer service rep than get my money back on a big-ticket item. (You get the picture!)

If you look up the word *waiting* in a dictionary, you'll find synonyms like *a period of waiting*, *a pause*, *an interval*, or *a delay*. If you think I hate waiting, let me tell you what I think is even worse than waiting: delays. Anyone who has ever traveled anywhere (and God bless those of you who have traveled with toddlers!) understands

the frustration of a delay. It's horrific. It's painful. It's inevitable.

So I find it ironic that God not only uses delays in our lives, but purposefully orchestrates them as part of His master plan to shape us

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into His likeness. Make a mental list of the men and women that God has used mightily for His glory and you will find yourself staring at a list of folks who became experts in delays and waiting.

There's Abraham who waited until he was one hundred years old to have his promised son, Isaac. There's Joseph who waited for years until God finally broke open the door of his prison cell to use him. Then there's

Moses who waited for forty years in the wilderness to live out God's call for him, and David who waited in the stronghold before he became king. Even Samson waited until his hair grew back before he could accomplish the job that God had called him to do.

If you think the biblical examples are the only ones we have, you're wrong. For years my friend Beth believed God would give her a child. Instead of giving birth, God has allowed Beth to go through thirteen miscarriages. Lisa, a friend of mine in full-time ministry, believes God has called her to adopt a daughter from Haiti, an orphan. She has pursued adoption plans but has faced several obstacles along the way. The adoption Lisa believed would happen in obedience to God's call has turned into an agonizing time of waiting while governmental bureaucracy drags on. Yes, waiting is part of God's great plan for you and me, yet nothing seems more painful to us than the agony of waiting.

Why is waiting part of God's perfect plan?

If I were forced to pick favorites, I'd still choose the Israelites as my poster people for waiting. Waiting for an hour for your doctor

can stretch your patience, but try waiting for forty years in a wilderness until you reach the promised land. Whoa, Nelly!

The Israelites were slaves in Egypt until God called them out of their place of bondage. They assumed the tough days were behind them, and were more than a little surprised when they found themselves trudging through the wilderness day after agonizingly long day.

It seems counterintuitive that God would go to such great lengths to deliver His people, only to have them land in a wilderness of waiting for forty long and painful years. *Couldn't the God who saved Israel now make the way easy for them? Couldn't the God who parted the Red Sea snap His fingers and make something happen?*

To be honest with you, it's easy for me to sympathize with the people of Israel. When I answered God's call to leave my Egypt, I had great dreams of the life ahead. (I bet you did too.) I packed my meager bags and got ready to hit the road. I looked forward to the better life ahead. *With God on my side, what could go wrong?*

A lot, apparently. When life suddenly comes to a screeching halt and the wilderness threatens to undo us, we look up and begin to question God. We quickly get tired of the same old manna. We feel parched but can't find any water to drink. Our questions turn to frustration and anger. *Did God really call me out of Egypt? Or did I take a wrong turn somewhere? Has God forgotten me? Was I imagining His call? Will the waiting ever end?* Dreams remain unfulfilled. Prayers go unanswered. The silence overwhelms us. A blanket of confusion covers us.

Once in a while on a busy shift in the ER, I'll walk into a room and the patient will greet me like this: "Hey, Doc, I thought you forgot about me." I chuckle. Little do the patients know that back in my corner where I spend most of my time is a computer. On the computer is the exact location of every patient in the ER. I know when they walked in. I know where they're sitting. I know exactly how long it's

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been that they've been waiting for me. I also know something that would set my patients free if they knew it too: when there is a delay, there's always a really good reason for it.

When the waiting gets tedious and I catch myself feeling forgotten by God, I make myself stop and I remember this truth: if God has delayed in answering, then there must be a reason for it.

REASONS FOR THE WAITING

I believe there are four specific reasons why God allows His children to wait.

1. The waiting is meant to help us grow.

The people of Israel had a problem. They had spent their whole lives being slaves and were now called to be warriors. They barely knew how to hold a spear, let alone aim it correctly and hit their mark. God was aware of this weakness that the Israelites had, and it was not a minor one. The people of Israel were not aware of it. Remember the passage we looked at in Exodus 13:17–18:

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, “Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.” But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle.

In other words, God purposefully sent His people the long way to the promised land, not because He didn't care for them but because He knew something they did not know: their capacity to fight the enemy was still limited. They needed to get stronger. They needed to learn how to fight. They needed to become a strong nation that would

override the enemy to claim the promised land.

I usually think I know all the answers to my life problems. I get frustrated when God doesn't cooperate by giving me what I want, when I want it. Do you ever feel that way? When God called me to a life in full-time ministry, I thought that accepting His call was the biggest step of faith I'd ever take. I naïvely expected God to "make it all happen" for me right then and there. So when the Christian blog that I started for God's glory didn't explode and reach thousands of readers by its first year, I was puzzled. *Didn't God want me to succeed?* And when the Bible study that I was teaching didn't catch fire, I accused God of messing with my mind. *Didn't You want me to be in full-time ministry? Wasn't this Your idea? What's with the waiting? Why the delays?* I couldn't see then what I see more clearly now: the day that God called me into a life of ministry, I still wasn't ready to receive all that God had for me. I had to grow into the job that God was fitting me for. I had to learn how to write. I had to learn how to teach God's Word.

What I forgot in the waiting is that God is the Potter and I am the clay. He's the one who is shaping me and reworking me into the perfect vessel for His use. All I have to do is trust Him to finish the work in His time.

2. The waiting is meant to protect us.

Read what Deuteronomy 7:22 says: "The LORD your God will clear away these nations before you little by little. You may not make an end of them at once, lest the wild beasts grow too numerous for you."

Wait. Wild beasts? I thought the enemy nations were the only obstacle the people of Israel had to worry about. Who said anything about wild beasts?

Here's something you need to know: God makes a habit of protecting us from dangers we haven't even imagined or predicted.

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A few years ago I was ready to change jobs. I knew God had called me to full-time ministry, but I was still working in an academic medical center with its rigors and demands. I was anxious to move on. I had an online writing ministry that was growing, and I was teaching more and more Bible studies in one of the largest churches in the United States. Instead of worrying about medical grants, I wanted to focus on Bible study facts. I was in a rush to get there.

For two years I thought about changing jobs, until one day I took action. I heard about an opportunity across town that sounded perfect. I applied for it, but the door slammed in my face so hard I can still feel its impact. How could God allow this to happen to me? The next three months were uneventful. I waited. Then one day I got a call. It was from a third hospital across town where some of my friends worked. A position had become available. The call was unexpected; I hadn't gone looking for it, but the job was perfect for me. The pay was higher, the hours less than anything I'd heard of before, and my partners were idyllic. I couldn't have crafted a better fit for myself if I'd tried. That job would allow me to transition into the women's ministry director role at my church because of its flexibility. Ironically, I would later be given the chance to moonlight at the hospital where the door had slammed in my face. It turned out that I hated working at that hospital. Every shift that I worked there was a reminder to me of God's grace in my life. Every shift that I spent there was a reminder that God knows what I need far more than I do.

God never makes mistakes. He knows what's best for His children. And He sometimes allows us to spend time in the wilderness of waiting for our own protection. Won't you trust Him in your season of waiting?

3. The waiting is meant to test us.

So far we've talked about how God uses the waiting to grow our faith and to protect us from unseen dangers. In Deuteronomy 8:2, we're given the third reason for waiting: "You shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not."

I've taken enough tests in my life to know that I don't like them. Yet God often uses the delays in our life to test us. He uses the waiting to see if we will lean on Him in complete dependence or if we will choose our own wisdom instead. The Bible often uses the imagery of refining silver as an example of the way God tests us. In Zechariah 13:9, it says, "I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested."

Refining silver is not easy. It's fierce work. It involves beating the silver and hammering it in the perfect places to make it as pure and refined as possible. It's work that takes time. It's work that involves the searing pain of fire. It's work that will test you until you feel like you're going to crack.

But under the skillful, loving hand of the Master, cracking is never a risk. God's plan is not to crack us but to test us.

Remember Peter, the fisherman turned fisher of men? He understood the importance of testing on the road to living out God's call. He says in 1 Peter 1:7, "So that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

Waiting is a test that every follower of Jesus Christ will have to take over and over again.

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4. The waiting is meant to purify us.

Once in a while, the waiting in our life is extended because of our own sinfulness. Malachi 3:2–3 explains this kind of waiting: “For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD.”

God’s Word in Ezekiel 22:19–20 is even stronger:

Because you have all become dross, therefore, behold, I will gather you into the midst of Jerusalem. As one gathers silver and bronze and iron and lead and tin into a furnace, to blow the fire on it in order to melt it, so I will gather you in my anger and in my wrath, and I will put you in and melt you.

Ouch! Sadly, the Israelites became well-versed in the purification process. The Israelites could have entered the promised land earlier on in their journey, but their own sin in the wilderness prolonged their waiting from a long weekend to an extended-stay vacation. As you consider your own life, ask yourself whether it is your own sin that is keeping you in the land of waiting.

I’m so grateful for God’s commitment to my purification. I’m so thankful that He won’t allow the dross to accumulate in my life. But I’ve often wondered how much of my time in the wilderness has been caused by my own sin and stubbornness.

This is a great time to discuss the common temptations we face in times of waiting with the hope that we will avoid falling prey to them.

TEMPTATIONS WE FACE IN THE WAITING

Let’s review a bit. God called the people of Israel out of Egypt. They were to go to the promised land. They soon hit the wilderness. The

wilderness was there for a reason. It was meant to make them stronger and to protect them. It was meant to test them and to grow their faith. It was a time of purification.

But instead of seeing God's provision for them in the waiting, all the Israelites could see was the tragedy of their plight. Instead of being thankful for God's presence along the way, all they could do was focus on what they thought were horrible circumstances. Instead of looking upward to the pillar of fire, they looked inward at their own unmet cravings.

They just didn't get it.

By the time we get to Exodus 32, we have a pretty good idea of the kind of people the Israelites were. They were fickle, fair-weather people. They didn't deserve God's goodness, yet God never gave up on them. He had made an unconditional promise to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob, and He was committed to the people He had called to Himself.

One day, Moses went up on the mountain for an extended meeting with God. The meeting lasted forty days, but for the people of Israel it felt like a lifetime. Here's how it rolled in Exodus 32:1:

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."

Wait. What just happened? The people of Israel, tired of waiting on God, made four drastic mistakes, giving us a perfect example of what *not* to do when delays come our way.

1. Don't take matters into your own hands.

Tired of waiting for Moses to come back, the people of Israel figured they didn't need God or Moses. They could make things happen

on their own. If you've ever tried this before, you know that it's not a great plan.

When I first became the women's ministry director at my church, I had a huge learning curve ahead. Though I knew the position was part of God's call on my life, I had a hard time adjusting to church life. I was an ER doctor used to getting what I wanted when I wanted it. One particular month, things got pretty bad. I prayed. When God didn't answer me in a minute, I decided to take matters into my own hands.

I quit.

I really did. It was dumb. It was selfish. At first, I felt vindicated. I'd showed them who was boss. I woke up the next morning and realized that I'd just made the biggest mistake of my life. God had called me to a life in ministry but the moment things didn't go my way, I bailed. I was really doing a great job of proving to God that I was the right candidate for His work. (Yeah, right!)

When the Israelites decided to take matters into their own hands, things didn't turn out well for them. By the end of that day, twenty-three thousand of them would die.

By God's grace, my suffering was small compared to the Israelites. My job was restored, but I had to learn some humbling lessons in the process. I was beginning to learn a critical lesson that every follower of Christ must learn: choosing to take matters into your own hands, when God has called you to wait, is a big deal. Waiting for Him to act will always yield joy.

2. Don't turn to others for approval.

Let me tell you about a man named Aaron. He was the head priest, God's guy. He was Moses' brother, and he'd been around since the beginning. He had seen all God had done for Israel up close and personal. God had used him mightily. Moses trusted him. The people respected him. But when faced with a delay, Aaron did what we're all

tempted to do when faced with the same situation.

He looked to others for approval. He valued people's opinions more than he honored God's. He caved to the pressures around him instead of standing strong in the Lord. The people of Israel offered to put him on a bit of a pedestal. They made him feel more important than he really was. And he fell for it hook, line, and sinker. The next thing you know, Aaron was making a golden calf for the people of Israel in a desperate effort to please them.

How easily swayed by public opinion we are. Instead of turning to the Lord for approval and for the answers we need, we take public opinion surveys and poll everyone we know on how we ought to behave. We neglect God's Word and its absolute authority in our lives, and we choose to impress others instead.

Whose opinion is most important to you? Who are you seeking to please in your life?

3. Don't turn to idols for comfort.

The golden calf incident brought the demise of many of the people of Israel. It caused them death. It separated them from God. It delayed them from entering the promised land. It would necessitate a mediator and their heartfelt repentance.

It's easy to turn to idols for comfort during times of prolonged waiting. If God doesn't provide what we think we need, we'll find a way to get it without His help.

I've been single a long, long time. I know all about the waiting. I waited forever for my first date. I waited even longer for my first kiss. And I'm still waiting for my happily ever after. At one point in my life, I felt like I'd waited long enough for the Lord to provide a perfect man for me. When He didn't, I was hurt. Didn't God think I was good enough to get married? Didn't He care about me? Soon my hurt turned to resentment. Could I trust this God who created me

with a desire for marriage but didn't make provision for my need? It didn't take long for my resentment to turn to sin. Instead of turning to the Lord with my need, I chose to turn to my own idols for comfort. After a while, no matter how hard I tried, it seemed I couldn't get victory over certain sins in my life.

The worst part of my story is that I blamed God for my sin. I was miserable. I was broken. Was this the life that God had called me to? If the cross of Jesus was supposed to change everything, how come it wasn't changing me? Why did I find more satisfaction in my idols than I did in the Lord? Had I missed some basic link in Christianity? What was happening to me?

It took me a long time to understand a very basic step in gaining victory over besetting sins and idolatry in my life. Only God will satisfy me completely, but the only way to get rid of the idols in my life is to destroy them completely and make room for the Lord instead.

In Exodus 32:20, when Moses came down from his mountain meeting with the Lord, it says that "he took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered

it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it."

*If you long for
freedom more
than you long for
anything else in
your life, you must
take an initial step
of faith and kill
your idols.*

There is no other way of dealing with your idols than to utterly and completely destroy them. You can't negotiate your way out of them. You can't keep on justifying them. You can't overintellectualize them or ignore them or bury them.

If you long for freedom more than you long for anything else in your life, you must take an initial step of faith and kill your idols.

Take a hammer and destroy them. Throw them in the fire. Burn away the dross. Fall on your knees in repentance and ask God for mercy.

He always gives it. He's provided a mediator, Jesus Christ, who's already paid the price for your freedom. In your time of waiting, let Him be your joy instead of turning to your idols for comfort. He's the only one who can fully satisfy you.

4. Don't tell yourself lies about your circumstances.

The people of Israel told themselves lies about their circumstances. When they looked for Moses and didn't find him, they told each other that Moses was gone forever. They convinced themselves that the only way out was to do it their own way, and they turned their lives into one huge disaster. They believed the lie that God didn't care about them and had forgotten them.

When I'm in the wilderness of waiting, it's easy for me to tell myself lies about my own circumstances: God has forgotten me. He doesn't care about me. If He really wanted me here, life wouldn't be so hard. If His call was for real, I wouldn't feel so weak.

I begin to doubt His love, and I question His promises. I wonder about His goodness. *Can God truly be trusted?*

Nothing will steal the Christian's joy like believing lies about God. It's blasphemous and destructive. We must learn to replace the lies with God's truth.

Do you want to know the worst part about the disaster in the wilderness? In the very last verse of Exodus 31, right before the people of Israel gave up on Moses and decided he wasn't coming back to the camp, we're told: "[God] gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God" (v. 18).

In other words, it was literally right before the golden calf incident that Moses was headed back to the camp armed with the tablets from God. The waiting was just about over.

If only the people of Israel had been willing to patiently wait just

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one more day in the wilderness. If only they hadn't given up. If only . . .

What wilderness are you going through right now? Are you tempted to give up? Has the waiting gone on too long? Are you tempted to take matters into your own hands and escape the waiting that God has trusted you with?

Consider this: there is another way. It's the way of waiting well. Do you want to learn it?

HOW TO WAIT WELL

God had given a vision for Habakkuk's life. I guess you can call it a radical calling. It will fill you with joy when you know that God has called you to do something special for Him. Most of us grab on to that and want to go all out for God in order to fulfill His calling in our life. We feel special. We want to see Him do something bigger than us.

The problem is that we can't accomplish spiritual goals without spiritual strategies, and spiritual strategies typically involve waiting. Here's what Habakkuk 2:3 says: "For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay."

That's good news and that's bad news, my friend.

It's bad news if you don't like waiting because God's promise to us is that pursuing His calling is a definite time of waiting. Unfortunately, because we as Christ's followers often misunderstand the reasons for the waiting season, doubts and fears arise. Though I've rushed God more times than I can think, by God's grace I'm also learning how to wait well.

1. You must wait on His promises.

Here's a fact: God's promises will always come to pass. Every one of the words He has spoken will take place. God is always true. He is

always faithful. Despite all of Israel's sin, God remained true to His promise to Abraham and was faithful even to the stiff-necked people of Israel. He's incredible that way.

When I was sixteen God gave me a promise: He who began a good work in me would complete it in Jesus Christ. I didn't know how He would get it done, but I was given the promise that He would. It doesn't matter how long God wants me to wait or how many delays come my way, God will remain true to His promise.

God has given me many other promises since that day. He's promised to set me apart for the works that He has planned for me. He's promised to anoint me to bring good news to the poor. He's promised to go with me wherever He commands me to go. He's promised to forgive me when I repent, and He's promised that I am not condemned in Christ. He's given you those exact same promises too!

We don't always have all the details, but we do have all of God's promises. God's Word is what we can hang on to when our circumstances look uncertain. God's Word is our hope when our feelings are erratic. God's Word is our stability in time of trouble. His Word is our hope in the wilderness. His Word is our security when we don't have the answers. His Word is our rest in the monotonous drudgery of the waiting.

Are you becoming more and more familiar with God's Word in your life? Do you spend time in His Word? Do you pore over it and ask God to speak to you through His Word? Maybe it's time to start so that when the waiting comes, you have a solid place to pitch your tent and dwell on the faithfulness of God's promises!

2. You must wait in His presence.

One of the scariest chapters in the life of the people of Israel came right after the golden calf incident. I mentioned that twenty-three thousand people died on that day. What's even worse than this tragedy

is that immediately following the plague, God sent the people of Israel off into the wilderness with an angel as their guide.

Up until that point, God had been their guide. This was horrible news for the Israelites and for Moses. Here's how God put it: "I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people" (Ex. 33:3).

God was going to remove His presence from the people of Israel. The people of Israel freaked out. It says in Exodus 33:4 that "when the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments."

For Moses, it wasn't even an option. In Exodus 33:12–23, Moses summed up his perspective on the situation like this: God, if You don't lead me, if You don't go with me, I'm not going anywhere. I'd rather die than go without You.

Have you gotten to the place in your life where life isn't even imaginable or possible without God's manifest presence? The key to enjoying God's manifest presence is a total and complete turning away from your sin. Are you living the kind of life that welcomes God's manifest presence, or are you stubbornly holding on to your sin?

It is only in the Lord's presence that the wilderness of waiting becomes a place of great comfort. Are you willing to do whatever it takes to remain in His presence? His presence, after all, is the safest place to live.

3. You must wait for Him patiently.

When we started this chapter, I confessed to you that I don't like waiting. As an ER doctor, one of the worst things to wait for is the lab. No matter when the lab gets the specimen, the answer I get when I call them is that it's going to take five minutes more for the results to come back. *Seriously?*

Waiting on God can feel a little bit like waiting on lab results. It

always seems to take just five minutes more than we have. Most of us are low on patience. And it feels like forever before we see any results. How long are you willing to wait on the Lord? Isaiah 64:4 says, “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.” God doesn’t ignore His children. He isn’t oblivious to our waiting.

He is good. He knows what we need. He sees every bend in the road. He knows every bump on the way. His delays are for our good. He’s like a good father who won’t let his seven-year-old get behind the wheel, because, well, it’s not time to drive yet. He’s like the mother of a thirteen-year-old girl who reminds her daughter that it’s too early to give your heart away, lest it get broken. God knows that there’s a perfect time and a perfect season for everything. He makes everything beautiful in its time.

God hasn’t forgotten you. He isn’t busy solving other people’s problems while neglecting yours. He is always perfecting that which concerns your life. He loves you.

I told you that there’s good news and bad news about waiting on God. I’ve already given you the bad news. But I think it’s time for some good news. Maybe you missed the second half of Habakkuk 2:3. Here’s what it says: “If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.”

The good news is that the waiting will end! Before you know it, the wilderness days will be in your rearview mirror, and you find yourself on the other side of it, still standing.

In the next chapter, we’re going to talk about one of the most critical things that God wants to strip His children of; I’m talking about pride.