



Last Saturday I wrote these words: "I'm at the airport—waiting. I arrived at 7:15 am. It's now 9:40. My 8:38 flight was canceled and I'm waiting for an 11:30 am lift off on a new flight. My waiting is the "no fun" kind of waiting. It's a waiting with uncertainty, for I have no guarantee I'll get out of here at 11:30. I'm surrounded by people who look bored and aggravated. Waiting is always hard, but when you don't know if what you're waiting for will even happen, you wonder if it's worth waiting at all.

"But the reason I'll be getting on a plane in the first place is all about another kind of waiting. My granddaughter is scheduled to be born in three days. We've been waiting for her for over 9 months. She gave us a scare about a month ago, threatening an early arrival. This kind of waiting is hard, too, but it's an expectant, joyful kind of waiting. We know when the time is right, she'll come."

I wanted to read that to you because it's very much the same situation Mary was in. When Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth, he says when Joseph and Mary came to Bethlehem *"it came to pass, while they were there, the days were fulfilled... And she brought forth her firstborn son; and she wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn"* (Luke 2:4-7).

"The days were fulfilled," Luke says. I guess that means after 266 days or 40 weeks or 9 months of waiting, the time was right. I know that means the time was right for Mary, but I wonder if the time was right for the whole world as well. Years later, when the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Galatians, he spoke as if the whole world had been waiting. He said, *"When the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son..."*

If you look for a few moments beyond the story of the manger to the bigger story of what God was doing in the world as a whole, you'll see the time of waiting for Jesus' birth was much longer than 9 months; it was several thousand years.

The time of waiting for Jesus birth was thousands of years

It all started about 4,000 years ago when God appeared to a middle eastern nomad named Abraham. He told him to leave his country and his relatives and all that was familiar and go to a land he would show him. God promised Abraham he would make him into a great nation and from his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3). That "seed" of course

would be Jesus. Abraham believed and obeyed God but he spent the rest of his life waiting for that promise to be fulfilled.

Nothing much really happened for about 600 years. Abraham's descendants were indeed many but they were hardly a blessing. After centuries of multiplying in Egypt, Pharaoh became threatened by their numbers and forced them into slavery. Then God raised up a man named Moses to deliver them and lead them to the border of the Promised Land. One day God came to Moses with a promise: *"I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him"* (Dt 18:18). God raised up many prophets after Moses but through the years people still waited for **the** prophet. Finally, when Jesus came they said, *"This is of a truth the Prophet who is to come into the world"* (Jn 6:14). But Moses died waiting for that prophet to come.

Once in the Promised Land, God's people waited another 400 years until God raised up a king named David. David wanted to build a house for God but God said "No" and offered to build something even greater for David. God said, *"I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom... And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever"* (2 Sam 7:12,16). Jesus would fulfill that promise. When he entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, the crowd shouted, *"Hosanna to the Son of David"* (Mt. 21:15). But David waited and never saw that promise fulfilled.

The fact is, David's immediate descendants made a royal mess of things. Four hundred years later the nation Israel was split in two. Both the northern and southern kingdoms had forsaken God and were in exile, facing possible extinction. It was then God raised up prophets like Isaiah who promised new life for the nation and the coming of One called Messiah who would deliver his people and restore them to glory. Isaiah wrote, *"The Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Emmanuel... For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom..."* (Is 7:14; 9:6-7).

But it wasn't for another 500 years that this prophecy was fulfilled. A remnant of the nation Israel had returned to the Promised Land, but it was hardly a glorious return. They were under the rule of Rome. The memory of the promises made to Abraham, Moses, David and Isaiah were still alive and well in the hearts of many Jews, but they were still waiting.

It was into this darkness that the Christmas event finally came. When the fullness of time finally came, it had been much more than a 9-month wait! God's people had known 2,000 years of anxious waiting. After all these years of waiting God finally sent to earth the One who would bring these promises to pass.

Jesus was born "in the fullness of time"

A few weeks ago, President Obama stood before the nation and told us that it was the right time for our nation to send 30,000 troops to Afghanistan. Here in Gal 4:4 Paul says, "*In the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son.*" A few verses earlier, he compares the timing of Christ's birth to the time a boy reaches manhood in Jewish society. He says it's only when a young man comes of age that he can really experience the privileges of sonship. So when Paul says God sent his Son "*in the fullness of time*" you might say the world had come of age. But why? Why was this the right time for God to send his Son?

Historians tell us it was the right time politically. The Roman Empire was at its height. While it had its flaws, Rome gave a large part of the world good roads, a fair system of government, and peace. For the first time in history people could travel with ease, making it possible for news to rapidly spread throughout the land. Years later, when the early Christians needed to take the message of Jesus to the far reaches of the empire, it would be easier than any other time in history.

It was also the right time culturally. Greek language and culture brought an element of cohesion to society. More people were being educated and were able to read than ever before. When the New Testament was written, it was written in Koine Greek, a language the majority of people understood. Again, this made it far more possible for the message of Jesus to take hold.

But most of all, it was the right time spiritually. The average citizen of Rome was tired of the same old religion. The mythological gods of Greece and Rome were losing their grip on folks. Even the Jews were hungry for something more. Groups like the Pharisees tried to get their countrymen back to a form of Judaism based on a strict interpretation of the Old Testament. But, deep down, most people knew they couldn't live up to that. It was a time when many people longed for a relationship with God that was authentic and about more than just keeping the rules.

The first coming of Jesus didn't fulfill all God's promises

But here is the strange thing—when Jesus was finished with his life and ministry, on the surface very few things had changed, and in a sense we're still waiting. Really, the whole thing was kind of anti-climactic! Sure, he pulled off a few miracles and had a group of about 120 devoted followers. But think of it from the perspective of those promises God made about the coming of Messiah.

God promised them a land, but when Jesus left, the land still was occupied by Rome. They expected Messiah to deliver them from Roman rule but he didn't. A few years later, even Jerusalem and its temple would be leveled to the ground and God's people again scattered. When it came to the land, they were still waiting.

God also told David that his "*throne shall be established forever.*" Isaiah said of the coming One, "*the government will rest on His shoulders...*" and "*there will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace...*" In another prophecy, Zechariah said "*his dominion will be from sea to sea*" (Zech 9:9-11). But Jesus had come and gone and nothing seemed to change at all. What happened to the promises?

Even the New Testament writers seemed to expect something more to come. Paul said a time would come when every knee would bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord of all (Phil 2). What happened to that? The Apostle John looked to a time when death and mourning and crying and pain will be no more (Rev 21:4). Show me a place like that today! Peter looked to a time when there would be a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells (2 Pt 3:13). Even Jesus encouraged us to look for something more. He spoke often of his kingdom, but it wasn't an earthly kingdom. He taught us to pray "*Thy Kingdom come.*" And he said, "*My kingdom is not of this world*" (Jn 18:36).

It's almost like the fulfillment of his kingdom and his promises come to us in two installments. What we celebrate as Christmas brought the first installment. In this first installment, God sent His only Son, Jesus, our King, the One called Emmanuel, God with us. He lived a sinless life and he offered himself on the cross as payment for our sins. Three days later he rose from the dead. Because of what he accomplished he can offer salvation from sin and death to all who put their trust in Him. This is the gift we celebrate at Christmas. But 2,000 years have passed and we're still waiting for the second installment. It's like God gave us a down payment, but we're still waiting for payment in full. In a way, we're waiting for another Christmas; another arrival of Jesus. And just as God sent his Son "*in the fullness of time*" at the first Christmas, so he'll do so at the second one.

Just as believers before Christ was born had to trust God's promises and wait, so must we

But here's my point: we're still waiting, and persisting in that waiting is the true spirit of Christmas. At the end of Revelation, Jesus promises, *"Yes, I am coming quickly."* Believing people say, *"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus"* (Rev. 21:20). And then we wait. And let's be honest, he doesn't seem to come very quickly at all. Just as 2,000 years passed between the promise made to Abraham and the birth of Jesus, so another 2,000 years have passed since Jesus spoke those words. Maybe 2,000 more years will pass, or maybe he'll come tomorrow. But if we're honest, we'll admit that just like saints of old wondered, "Will he really come?" so do we. Peter addressed this problem and said we shouldn't think the Lord is slow about his coming because *"with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like one day"* (2 Pt 3:8). I guess that puts it in perspective, but it's still hard to wait. That's why Paul said, *"we groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons"* (Rom 8:23). Waiting and groaning go together.

One of the hardest things about waiting is we feel so helpless. We can't seem to make it happen any faster. The past few days, to expedite her baby's birth, we took my daughter on long walks, swung her high on playground swings, took her to a masseuse who said she knew just the right pressure points to induce labor, but nothing worked. All we could do was wait.

Years ago, in the days before Christmas, 1943, Dietrich Bonhoeffer sat in prison in Nazi Germany. He was there because, unlike many other Lutheran pastors, he refused to place a picture of Hitler on the altar of his church. During that time, he wrote a letter to his fiancé in which he compared his waiting in prison to the waiting of Advent. He wrote, "A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes, does various unessential things, and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside, is not a bad picture of Advent."

To gain his freedom, all Bonhoeffer could do was wait because the prison door had to be unlocked and opened from the outside. Someone else had to do it. In the same way, the first Christmas didn't come because a bunch of people did something good, it wasn't the successful result of human skill or cleverness. No, it came as a miracle, as a gift to those whose arms we're stretched out in longing; to those who eagerly waited. It will be no different the next time he comes.

Jesus once told a parable about how important this waiting is. He said we should, *"be like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. It will be*

good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night" (Lk 12:36-38).

The point of that story is we should be waiting and watching for Jesus to come, even if he comes at what seems to be a very late hour. But that's not all. Jesus takes it one step further. He also says that good things will come to those who are waiting. Imagine this: the Master himself will dress like a servant and have you sit down at your table and serve you!

We're very much like a child on December 20, five days before Christmas. He suffers excruciating pain from having the hard-can-waits. All kinds of wonderful gifts lie under the tree for him, but he can't have them now. He has to wait for the time to be fulfilled.

That's like us. Wonderful gifts await us in eternity, but we have to endure the drudgery and gloom of a week of winter before we can open these gifts. But like the child who knows that the wait is worth it, don't stop aching for it. Keep hoping in the promise of Life. Keep waiting for Him to come. Make that the most important preoccupation of your life. Be like Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zachariah, Simeon and Anna, shepherds and wise men, who all had their arms stretched out in longing when Jesus came the first time.

Conclusion

Doug Goins tells the story of a woman he met when he was in junior high school. She lived about four doors down the street from him in Seattle. Her name was Helen Lemmel. She was in her nineties. She had been born and raised in wealth in England, and was well-known as a songwriter. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Lemmel probably wrote 70 or 80 Christian hymns and songs that were popular in the 1920s through the early 1950s. You may know the most famous song she wrote:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus.

Look full in His wonderful face,

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim

In the light of His glory and grace.

Mrs. Lemmel had married into nobility, but she was stricken with blindness as a young woman, and her husband divorced her because he didn't want to be married to a blind woman. Years later she ended up destitute in Seattle, living in a tiny room in a home where the rent was paid by the county. She had in her room a little plastic organ on a table. It was like a child's chord organ. She would often play it and cry and sing. She had this vision of getting to heaven and having a mighty, thundering pipe organ. She didn't see the little plastic organ as bad. She saw it as a foretaste of glory; a down payment on what God was going to do for her, and she counted on that. Doug said that whenever they came over and asked her how she was doing she would say, "I am fine in the things that count." And then she would say, "I can hardly wait!"

That's the spirit of Christmas. When Jesus says, "*I am coming quickly,*" it's the spirit that says, "*Amen. Come quickly, Lord Jesus.*" It's the hardly-can-wait spirit; the spirit that perseveres and persists through the winter night, believing that the gifts of the next Christmas will be better than we ever could have imagined!

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