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WAITING FOR OR WAITING ON THE LORD?

- 1) **“I waited patiently for the Lord, and He inclined unto me, and heard my cry” [Ps. 40:1]**
- 2) **“Wait on the Lord, and keep His way, and He shall exalt thee to inherit the land” [Ps. 37:34]**

One special privilege that believers enjoy is summarized in the words of Jesus, “whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in My name, He will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in My name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full” [Jn 16:23-24]. It is not every time we ask that we receive prompt answers [see Vol. 2, No. 17 of 8 July 2001 on “Getting Prompt Responses to Your Prayers”]. Sometimes, we have to wait. But, the expression that I often hear among believers, when they are waiting for specific favours or direction or guidance is “I am waiting on the Lord.” Is that the same thing as “waiting for the Lord?”

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English [New Edition, 1995], to wait on somebody is to act as a servant for somebody, especially by serving food and drink at a meal. The Psalmist says “as the eyes of the servants look unto the hand of their masters, ...so our eyes wait upon the Lord our God, until He have mercy upon us” [Ps. 123:2]. Interestingly, those who attend to customers in a restaurant are called waiters/waitresses. To wait for somebody is to stay where one is or to delay acting or doing something for a specified time, or until somebody comes, or until something happens. When the resurrected Christ was returning to Heaven, He told the disciples that “they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father” and that they would be baptized “with the Holy Ghost not many days hence” [Acts 1: 4-5]. Soon after His resurrection, they all went back to Jerusalem, to the upper room, where they waited until the Holy Spirit descended on them on Pentecost Sunday [Acts 1:12-13].

Certainly, to “wait on” is not the same thing as to “wait for” the Lord. What one sees of believers waiting on the Lord is actually waiting for Him! They don’t behave like waiters or waitresses who are on duty rendering service, who seem to renew their strength all day, who walk and never faint [Is. 40:31]. Many of us who are waiting on the Lord are fretting and anxious, most times running ahead of the Lord to show Him how He should fulfill His promises to us! When our hopes are dashed, we then turn around to doubt Him.

It appears that we cannot successfully wait for the Lord if we are not spiritually prepared to wait on Him. In today’s lesson, we shall examine that theme, using the story of how Abraham waited on the Lord while awaiting the birth of Isaac.

1. Let's observe waiters¹ at work

In the movie, *It Could Happen To You* [1994], Yvonne (played by Bridget Fonda) is a downtrodden waitress in a local New York diner. Her personal life has been miserable. Her marriage has broken down and she has just been legally declared bankrupt. However, she has not allowed her personal problems to affect her work in the restaurant. She is as affable as ever. Customers like her because she serves them well beyond the call of duty. In appreciation, they give her good tips. One day, Charlie Lang (played by Nicholas Cage), a police officer, finds himself short of a tip for Yvonne. So, he promises to give her half the winnings of the lottery ticket he has just bought that day. It is meant to be a joke, but the ticket wins US\$4 million. True to his promise, the cop gives Yvonne half of it!

God has “chosen the weak things of the world to confound things which are mighty” [1 Cor. 1:27]. By examining the relationship between a customer and a waitress like Yvonne in the restaurant, we can learn a great deal about how we can wait on the Lord for best results. Here is what I have found out:

a) *The waitress is on duty to serve customers*

It is the duty of the waitress to render the best service to customers, irrespective of her personal problems. Therefore, whether customers tip or not, she must keep up the welcoming smile and the tireless service, and even accommodate unpleasant customers! Her employers will pay her what they believe is her due entitlement.

The whole duty of man is to “fear God, and keep His commandments” [Eccl. 12:13]. Therefore, to wait on the Lord is to always fear Him and keep His commandments. Since it is our duty, we should not expect any reward, such as hinging our worship on reward from God. In illustrating this concept, Jesus told His disciples the following story:

Which of you having a servant, plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him, by and by, when he is come from the field, go and sit down to meat? And will not rather say unto him, make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink? Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, we are

¹ Every reference to “waiter” is applicable to “waitress” and vice versa.

unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do
[Lk 17:7-10]

b) *It is actually the customer who waits!*

How early a customer leaves the restaurant depends on how fast the waitress serves her. Although her own speed is influenced by the customer traffic and the rate at which the kitchen and the bar fill her orders, the customer puts everything on the waitress! Therefore, as the customer waits, she is observing what the waitress is doing. She is watching for her friendliness, diligence, personal touch, etc. So, even though the waitress is doing her duty, the customer is looking at how much extra she is putting in beyond the call of duty. The amount of tip is determined by the customer's assessment of that extra touch.

In like manner, God is looking at how cheerfully we are serving Him, in spite of the difficulties we may be experiencing. God is watching to see whether we are also meeting our own end of the bargain. Are we walking by faith or by sight? What fruits of the Holy Spirit do we show others in our daily walk, in spite of what we may be passing through? Are we reneging on tithes, offerings and church attendance and shifting the blame to our present circumstances?

After the first round of Satanic attacks on Job, during which he lost all his children and property, Job worshipped God, saying, "naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" [Job 1:21]. Note what God said of Job when Satan came back to His presence thereafter:

There is none like him in the earth, a perfect and upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil, and still holdeth fast his integrity, although thou movedst Me against him, to destroy him without cause [Job 2: 3]

In deed, Job went beyond his duty [fearing God and eschewing evil]. God, our Almighty Customer, noticed Job's faith and cheerfulness in the face of setbacks. The risen Christ has told the churches, "behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me" [Rev. 3:20]. It takes beyond the call of duty to hear His voice, in the midst of our complaints and grumbling, to stand up and open the door of answers to our prayers. Without such steps of faith, we are keeping God waiting in vain!

c) *Nevertheless, the waitress cannot hurry the customer!*

Even though the waitress can influence how much time a customer may spend in the restaurant, she cannot hurry him because he may have other reasons (in addition to the food) for coming to that restaurant. It could be to clinch a business deal, or to save a tottering marriage. Similarly, only God knows why He has delayed granting our request, or why we are passing through an ordeal or trial at that particular point in time.

When Moses complained to God that Pharaoh had intensified his wickedness against the people of Israel, in spite of God's word that Pharaoh would let the people go [Ex. 5:22-23], the Lord replied:

But Pharaoh shall not hearken unto you, that I may lay My hand upon Egypt, and bring forth Mine enemies, and My people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great judgments. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord [Ex. 7:4-5].

Therefore, how long it would take Moses to persuade Pharaoh to let the people go was God's timetable, not Moses'. That is why waiters for the Lord are enjoined to "be patient, therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain" [Jam. 5:7].

2. Case study: Abraham the great waiter!

Let us look at a famous waiter in Scripture, Abraham, who waited for 25 years for God's promise of Isaac to be fulfilled. How did he wait on the Lord during such a long period?

a) *What Abraham lacked*

At 75 years of age, Abraham had material wealth and servants [Gen. 12:5]. What he lacked was a child of his own since his wife, Sarah, then 65 years old, was barren. It is not surprising that he brought up his late brother's son, Lot, virtually as his own child.

b) *God's promise to Abraham*

God's promise was not revealed to Abraham at once. At the beginning, all he knew was that God was going to make of him a great nation through which all families of the earth would be blessed [Gen. 12:2-3]. Ten years later, when he drew God's attention to the fact that with the exception of his barren wife and his steward, Eliezer, there was nobody in his household to be his heir, God made it clearer that "he that shall come forth out thine own bowels shall be thine heir" [Gen. 15:2-4]. That has still not suggested that Sarah would be the mother of the said child! It was only

after another 14 years, that is, 13 years after the birth of Ishmael through the Egyptian maid of Sarah's, Hagar [Gen. 16:16], that God finally unfolded His plan that "My covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time next year" [Gen. 17:21]. Abraham waited for 24 years to hear the good news!

c) *Why Abraham was able to wait for the Lord*

Like every one of us, Abraham did make some mistakes, arising from walking by sight. For example, twice, he told half-truths about his marital status with Sarah for fear that he could be killed. He told the Pharaoh, when famine drove them into Egypt, that Sarah was his sister (which was true because she was his father's daughter by another wife- Gen. 20:12) and not his wife (which was a lie). He repeated the same story 14 years later to Abimelech king of Gerar [Gen. 20:1-12]. After God had revealed to him that his heir would be from his own loins, he followed a carnal plan, hatched by his wife, to marry Hagar, her maid, through whom Abraham bore Ishmael [Gen. 16:3-4]. Such failings merely confirm, "it is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed" [Lamentations 3:22]. Abraham was forgiven, so shall we!

In general, Abraham was able to wait for the Lord for so long for the following reasons, among others:

i. *Faith and obedience*

Abraham did not hesitate to leave Syria when God asked him to move to Canaan [Gen. 12:4]. In childlessness, God brought him outside one night to look at the clear skies "and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them," and God assured him, "so shall thy seed be." Scripture says that Abraham "believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness" [Gen. 15:5-6]. At the time the Lord and two angels came to announce the birth of Isaac the following year, "Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women" [Gen. 18:11]. In other words, they were too old to make love! Yet, they believed God, went ahead to do it and conceived. Isn't that a remarkable demonstration of faith and obedience? After the precious son was born and Abraham was asked to offer him to God as a burnt sacrifice, the same child that God had said was the covenant son, Abraham did not hesitate to do it, until God stopped him [Gen. 22:12]. Certainly, these are the steps of a man who fears God.

ii. *A man of worship and thanks offering*

The first thing that Abraham did on arriving in Canaan was to build “an altar unto the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord” [Gen. 12:8]. There, he frequently worshipped and prayed [Gen. 13:4]. On his way from rescuing his nephew, Lot, who had been taken captive, Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek “the priest of the most high God” [Gen. 14:18-20]. When the Lord and two angels came to Abraham in the plains of Mamre as total strangers, he received them as kings even before he knew that they were heavenly visitors [Gen. 18:1-4]. It is not surprising that God was with him throughout the 25-year long ordeal.

iii. *Show of love and forgiveness*

In spite of Lot’s waywardness towards his uncle, Abraham never for once withdrew his love for him. He allowed him to choose the better part of the land in order to avoid further strife between them [Gen. 13:7-11]. When he heard of Lot’s problems with the local rulers, leading to his capture, it was Abraham who went to rescue him. When God was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for their abominable sins, it was Abraham who stood in the gap for Lot and his family who lived in Sodom [Gen. 18:16-33].

From the foregoing, we see that Abraham exhibited the qualities of a true waiter on the Lord. He feared God and obeyed His commandments. He walked by faith that grew over time. He waited for God who was not in a hurry to fulfill His word!

3. Conclusion

We can only wait for the Lord when we learn how to wait on Him. Walking by faith is quite crucial for success. Faith does not have to be there from the beginning because we can grow from “no faith” [Mk 4:40] to “little faith” [Matt. 8:26] to “great faith” [Matt. 8:10]. As faith grows, miracles multiply to water our faith. That builds patience and perseverance in us, fruits of the Holy Spirit [Gal. 5:22]. That is why “they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” [Is. 40:31]. Let us learn from the tortoise. Let us walk slowly and calculatedly by faith because we could be going in the wrong direction if we walk by sight!