

‘Wait’ on the Lord: A Theological Conundrum

“Those who wait for the Lord will mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31

Isaiah 40:21-31
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It has been nine years since I last preached on this Old Testament passage from Isaiah 40. An interesting thing happens when you preach year after year – if you go back far enough you can see in the written record how your own theological position changes through the years.

This is something that occurs big time for most folks when they first enter seminary. What happens is that most of their pre-critical understandings of biblical interpretation and church doctrine gets thrown under the bus. That's often referred to as “hitting the wall of faith,” when one comes face-to-face with having to either turn back and hang on onto beliefs held since childhood, or try to scale that wall and see what's on the other side. **It's remarkable what a scholarly approach to faith does to one's long-held beliefs. And it is never comfortable, especially when it messes with your understanding of the nature and character of God.**

For those of us who have gone down that path, there is often a fearful reality that we have to face. Part of that fear comes with the understanding that not everything we were taught in Sunday school and church is necessarily true. But there's an even bigger fear. That's **the fear of not knowing what to replace those previously held convictions with.**

In time, most of those questions find new answers, especially in the realm of biblical interpretation. But what happens if your understanding of God, once a safe place of relative certainty, is now unsettled to the point where you realize that God actually is a great big Mystery, with a capital M?

All this is a long introduction concerning one of my personal long-held beliefs about God that is brought out by this particular passage in Isaiah. In my previous understanding of the sovereignty, providence, omniscience, and omnipotence of God, I had no problem with the verse that clearly states, “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (Isa. 40:31).

I still firmly believe that as persons of faith, we can indeed find strength when we find ourselves weary and faint. My problem now comes in the phrase, “wait for the Lord.” If you haven't thought about it before, a statement such as that presupposes

that God constantly works behind the scenes to guide (or perhaps even control and manipulate) all of life so that things always and eventually get better. That's certainly the understanding of the prophet in Isaiah.

There's a growing number of Christians in our day and age, however, that no longer believe that the nature and character of God involves intervening in the created order of life in such a straightforward fashion. Saying that, I still believe that **a majority of Christians want to believe in a God that at least controls life to the extent that we can look back and see the intervening hand of God working in our lives. The conundrum of that line of theological thinking forces us into a position, however, of making judgment calls of why God seems to intervene at some points in life and not in others.**

I no longer believe in the simple platitude that is often given as a response, "God's ways aren't our ways," or, as is the answer in this biblical passage "It's all in God's timing." Both of those ways of thinking rely on the understanding of a God "out there" somewhere who has such control over the universe that everything is almost pre-determined or at least re-directed by a God who intervenes in our lives in specific ways. But if one *doesn't* believe that God intervenes to that degree, then to tell someone simply to "wait on the Lord" may actually do more harm than good. The result is that if a person doesn't find their strength renewed, or like they have wings like eagles, or can run without getting weary, then it must be God's fault, because it's obviously not in God's timing, or that we haven't done whatever we think we need to do in life in order for God to be on our side to make transformation come to pass.

I can see, however, why the ancient Israelites needed to believe in such an interventionist God. Isaiah 40 begins the middle section of this book. Modern biblical scholars call it "Second Isaiah." They believe, without question, that a second prophet, one who came after the original prophet named Isaiah, wrote this portion of the Book of Isaiah. The first prophet warned the people of Judah to change their ways or risk being destroyed. It came pass when the Babylonian Empire attacked them in 587 BCE. The conquerors destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and carried the ruling elite off into exile in Babylon.

It was during this time of exile in a foreign land that Second Isaiah came to them with a word of hope. In beautifully poetic language, the prophet reminded the people that God is the creator of all that is, who "sits above the circle of the earth." And he reminded them that all people are simply, "inhabitants that are like grasshoppers." In the prophet's understanding, it is a word of hope only when they grasped God's awesome power and their powerlessness. **To become hopeful in such a time of despair and crisis began with remembering the remarkable works of God in Israel's history.**

For the exiles, captivity in Babylon was a painful reality. They were forced from their homes, scatted as the temple was laid to waste, and became refugees from the very land that held promise. They were indeed weary and had grown faint. In the ancient world, they could have concluded that the gods of Babylon were stronger than their God, or that God really didn't exist at all. But their conclusion is that they are simply "disregarded" by the One who sits above the circle of the earth.

With God located at this remote and powerful distance, we may conclude that God is only transcendent – beyond all of us. But the prophet also reminds us that God is immanent – existing not just "out there," but also close to us. As Isaiah recited, the Lord God who sits above the circle of the earth is, at the very same time, the Shepherd who

gently claims, gathers, names, and carries us (vv. 10-11). The scriptures are filled with this dual understanding that God is both transcendent and immanent.

My primarily theological question is just how does that work? Does sovereignty mean that we sit back and do nothing because God has it all under control, and that everything happens for a reason, and that it's all simply a matter of God's timing? I am at a point in my own theological understanding of the nature and character of God that I answer those particular questions with a "No," or at least, "**I don't think so.**"

And yet, I still find good news in this poetry from Second Isaiah. The good news is that there is a way for the exhausted, faint, powerless, and weary to renew their strength, mount up with wings like eagles, run without growing weary, and walk without fainting. The way, according to the poet, is to *wait* for the Creator who names and gathers the lambs and does not faint or grow weary in doing so. But is God really in charge of the universe in that kind of controlling way?

Is it heresy to even question the sovereignty of God – if by sovereignty one means complete control over all that happens? Therefore, if something doesn't happen it's simply not God's will, or in God's timing.

It is with issues like this that I mightily struggle and find it hard to preach. For **with this preacher you will not get easy answers to life's problems**, no simple statement that the cure for your weariness, for instance, is simply to wait on God to act or intervene, which is what I use to believe when I preached on this passage nine years ago.

Let me be clear, that doesn't mean that God doesn't provide us with strength and power, with renewal for our bodies, minds, and spirits. I'm just not absolute anymore in how.

In the meantime, I'd like to quickly suggest something that has helped me, something I don't think the ancient prophet had in mind. I like to approach the statement "wait on the Lord," from a different angle.

What if we define "waiting" not as doing nothing, but rather as doing what a waiter or waitress does? Like in a restaurant, a person who waits on you is someone who serves you. What if we "wait on the Lord," in a way that serve's God, and therefore, other people?

As a remedy for our despair and weariness, instead of doing nothing by waiting for God's timing, if there even is such a thing, **what if we wait by engaging in ministries of compassion, hospitality, justice, peace and love?** What if we follow Jesus' teachings and take action on Jesus' commands to love God, our neighbor as ourselves, and even our enemies? Perhaps that kind of waiting on the Lord is the best way to mount up with wings like eagles.

Yes, College Hill is a safe place where you can bring your struggles and doubts and questions about what you have been taught about the nature and character of God. I do.

Amen.