

Seasons of Le Waiting

WALKING BY FAITH

WHEN DREAMS ARE DELAYED

Betsy Childs Howard

“The Bible and the history of the church are full of stories of God revealing incredible dreams and rescuing men and women in dramatic settings, such as Moses, Mary, John Wesley, and Pascal. But of course, it does not always happen that way—as Hannah, Elizabeth, Jeremiah, and countless other believers through the ages can testify. In *Seasons of Waiting*, Betsy Childs Howard offers hope for the weary traveler wrestling with this tension. Through her own story and those of others, she demonstrates how to wait well upon the faithful One who knows us and loves us and has a plan and purpose for each of us—and who often surprises us with gifts of which we may have never dreamed.”

Ravi Zacharias, Founder and President, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries; author, *Jesus Among Other Gods*

“The thesis of this book is simple but profound: God does not leave us alone in the many ‘waiting rooms’ of life, but uses seasons of pain, absence, and longing to draw us unto himself. Deeply personal and biblically wise, this is a book every Christian should read.”

Timothy George, Founding Dean, Beeson Divinity School; General Editor, Reformation Commentary on Scripture

“We are all in a season of waiting, even in the moments when we think we have arrived. Betsy Childs Howard speaks comforting truth to our anxious hearts, especially when we worry that our waiting will never end. What are you waiting for? Get a copy of this book and ask a friend to read with you!”

Gloria Furman, pastor’s wife, Redeemer Church of Dubai; author, *The Pastor’s Wife* and *Missional Motherhood*

“Betsy leads us with a gentle strength through some of the most difficult seasons of waiting and points us to Christ. This book will be a great encouragement to many. I hope you read it and draw near to your Savior who sees, loves, and cares about you in every situation.”

Jessica Thompson, author, *Everyday Grace*; coauthor, *Give Them Grace*

“No matter who you are, you’re waiting for something. Indeed, Christianity is a waiting religion as we eagerly long for the return of Christ. I don’t know a better book on the topic than this one by Betsy Childs Howard, one of my favorite writers.”

Collin Hansen, Editorial Director, The Gospel Coalition; author, *Blind Spots*

“Waiting is hard and confusing; and oftentimes our longings are for good things, like marriage and children. Betsy Childs Howard has provided an excellent resource to help us wait well. She doesn’t throw out familiar advice like ‘guard your heart’ and ‘be content.’ Instead, she graciously shows us how God is working in our waiting through the parables of Jesus, the stories of others, and the wonderful promises in God’s Word. God has a purpose greater than we could ever hope or imagine and Howard gently takes our hand to help us see this to be true. You will not regret picking this up.”

Trillia Newbell, author, *Enjoy*, *Fear and Faith*, and *United*

“Betsy Childs Howard provides us with a much-needed message to strengthen us in every type of waiting. She transforms our understanding from the belief that we are not getting what we deserve, to hoping in the better life to come that awaits us in Christ. She removes the isolation we feel in our waiting and helps us see that we are all waiting for something in this life, but more importantly, we are all waiting for the return of King Jesus.”

Courtney Reissig, wife; mom; Assistant Editor, The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood; author, *The Accidental Feminist*

“Betsy Childs Howard invites readers to come and connect with real-life stories that are centered on the Bible’s story of redemption in Jesus Christ. In pointing toward the hope of the gospel, this book does not minimize our painful present waiting, it fortifies the waiter and lights up the waiting with the presence of Christ.”

Kathleen B. Nielson, Director of Women’s Initiatives, The Gospel Coalition

“Betsy Childs Howard writes with tender empathy for those who wait with deep, unmet longings. She shows the path away from despair toward unfading hope. A humble heart can hold both contentment and grief together in ways that honor the Lord in their dependence on him, even as they point to Christ’s return when all our longings will be fulfilled in him. Because we inhabit time with a past and a future, we’re always waiting for *something*. Howard reminds us powerfully, from Scripture, that in God’s wisdom, it’s good to wait.”

Candice Watters, Cofounder, Boundless.org; author, *Get Married: What Women Can Do to Help It Happen*

“Betsy has written a warm and winsome book that can be appreciated by people who are waiting on God for a variety of circumstances. Even if our waiting is characterized by painful longing, Betsy encourages us that if the painful longing is anchored in a firm confidence in the goodness of God, we are waiting well. Open this book and you will find much encouragement for how to do so.”

Carolyn McCulley, filmmaker; speaker; author, *The Measure of Success*, *Radical Womanhood*, and *Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye?*

Seasons of Waiting

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Walking by Faith When Dreams Are Delayed

Betsy Childs Howard

Seasons of Waiting: Walking by Faith When Dreams Are Delayed

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To B.N.,
who was worth waiting for and is a joy to wait with
as together we long for Christ's appearing

Contents

Preface.....	11
1 The School of Waiting	13
2 Waiting for a Bridegroom.....	25
3 Waiting for a Child.....	37
4 Waiting for Healing	51
5 Waiting for a Home	65
6 Waiting for a Prodigal.....	77
7 Sustained While We Wait	87
8 When the Waiting Is Over	101
Conclusion: What Are We Waiting For?	111
Acknowledgments	119
Notes.....	121
General Index.....	123
Scripture Index.....	125

Preface

What does your heart long for?

If you've picked up this book, there's a good chance you didn't have any difficulty answering that question. Most women are waiting for something, but some women are waiting acutely. The thing missing from their lives is in such sharp focus that they aren't sure they'll ever feel complete without it.

If that describes you, you know the truth of the proverb, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick" (Prov. 13:12). It's much easier to stop hoping than it is to have your dream deferred again and again. Of course, those who have been born again in Christ have the sure and certain hope of fullness of joy in God's eternal presence, but we aren't there yet. What do we do in the meantime?

This book is meant to help you answer that question. I hope you will read all the chapters, not just the one or two that apply to what you are waiting for the most. I firmly believe that to flourish in our many seasons of waiting, we need support from women in other stages of life who have different struggles and different strengths. I encourage you to seek out other women who are waiting, to find mutual encouragement and help each other to wait well.

This book talks about "seasons" of waiting, but I fully recognize that your waiting season may not end in this life. Even if

Preface

that is the case, if you are a believer in Jesus, your waiting will still only last for a season, because this life on earth is only the anteroom of your life to come. It is right that we should long for that day. I hope this book will stir in you a desire to wait with eagerness for the return of Jesus and the fullness of God's kingdom.

The School of Waiting

To those who have seen
The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.

W. H. Auden, "For the Time Being"

Betty's husband, a teacher in his early sixties, just lost his job. They aren't financially ready for retirement, but few schools want to hire a teacher who is over sixty. They are praying for God to provide a new job, but they don't know when or where that might be.

Grace and her husband are both eager for a baby. It is taking longer than she would like. She has a history of thyroid problems, and it's possible that this will affect her ability to conceive. She doesn't know whether her longing for a baby will stretch on for years or whether her next pregnancy test will be positive.

Catherine has cerebral palsy. She's been relatively independent for most of her life, but now she is wheelchair bound and

has recurring problems with a wound on her foot that will not heal. She spends her time going to different doctors, none of whom have been able to cure her painful, debilitating wound.

These women are all friends of mine.¹ Their life situations are very different, but they are each waiting on God for something. None of them knows how long their waiting will last or why God is asking them to wait. They are students in the school of waiting.

.....

When I was in school, I was a conscientious student. I tried hard to do my best and learn my lessons because students who learn please their teachers and advance to new assignments.

When it comes to my life, there's a part of me that wants to please God in the same way I tried to please my teachers. When a trial comes my way, I assume that God has sent it and that he wants me to learn something from it before moving on to the next assignment. This kind of thinking helps me trudge forward in the hope that the trial will end shortly if I play the role of attentive student. But this kind of thinking does not serve me well when God takes me into the school of waiting.

You see, for God, the goal of this school is not that I should learn my lesson so that I don't have to wait anymore. God wants me to learn how to wait so that I can *wait well*, even if my waiting continues for the rest of my life. While my plan is to keep a chipper attitude and show God that I'm a good student so he will bring my waiting to a close, God wants something even better for me. Rather than end my waiting, he wants to bless my waiting.

In his book *Waiting on God*, Andrew Murray explains God's gentle instruction:

At our first entrance into the school of waiting upon God, the heart is mainly set on the blessings which we wait for. God graciously uses our needs and desires for help to educate us for something higher than we were thinking of. We were seeking gifts; He, the Giver, longs to give Himself and to satisfy the soul with His goodness. It is just for this reason that He often withholds the gifts, and that the time of waiting is made so long. He is constantly seeking to win the heart of His child for Himself. He wishes that we would not only say, when He bestows the gift, "How good is God!" but that long before it comes, and even if it never comes, we should all the time be experiencing: it is good that a man should quietly wait. "The LORD is good unto them that wait for him."

What a blessed life the life of waiting then becomes, the continual worship of faith, adoring, and trusting His goodness. As the soul learns its secret, every act or exercise of waiting becomes just a quiet entering into the goodness of God, to let it do its blessed work and satisfy our every need.²

God is working in our waiting.

You may have picked up this book in the hope that it will help you learn your lesson (and thereby bring your waiting to an end). My hope is that it will help you learn to love waiting, to want to wait well, and to see that God has a beautiful kingdom purpose that he is bringing about through (not in spite of) your waiting.

The Purpose You Already Know About

I doubt that the idea that waiting on God can be purposeful is a new one to you. If you are familiar with the doctrine of sanctification, you know that God can use any experience to make you more and more like himself. For example, in the book of

James, we are commanded to count trials as joy, knowing that the testing of faith produces steadfastness (James 1:2–3). Waiting can certainly be a test of faith, and these verses promise that waiting can produce a steadfast character.

Likewise, the letter to the Hebrews talks about the sanctifying work of God’s discipline. It says that discipline leads to holiness, and that it will produce “the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Heb. 12:9–11). Waiting is part of discipline, isn’t it? The discipline of a little child involves teaching him to wait his turn or to wait for dessert. It is not good for a child to get everything he wants. In the same way, God’s discipline through waiting is good for us and will lead to deeper peace and good fruit in our lives.

Waiting exposes our idols and throws a wrench into our coping mechanisms. It brings us to the end of what we can control and forces us to cry out to God. God doesn’t waste our waiting. He uses it to conform us to the image of his Son.

But sanctification is not the only purpose God has in mind when he takes us into the school of waiting. When we wait, God gives us the opportunity to live out a story that portrays the gospel and serves as a kingdom parable.

Every Story Whispers His Name

Families around the world have grown to love *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, a children’s Bible by Sally Lloyd-Jones. I confess that, though I don’t have children, I have my own copy and have benefited greatly from it. In *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, Sally Lloyd-Jones writes:

There are lots of stories in the Bible, but all the stories are telling one Big Story. The Story of how God loves his children and comes to rescue them.

It takes the whole Bible to tell this Story. And at the center of the Story, there is a baby. Every Story in the Bible whispers his name. He is like the missing piece in a puzzle—the piece that makes all the other pieces fit together, and suddenly you can see a beautiful picture.³

One story at a time, Lloyd-Jones shows how each of the stories found in the Old Testament points in some way to Jesus. Not only does the ram in the thicket provided for Abraham point to the Lamb of God, the Tower of Babel and the healing of Namaan point to Christ as well!

One reason I love *The Jesus Storybook Bible* is that it depicts the Old Testament's future-oriented thrust. Old Testament stories do not stand alone, rather they unfurl like a red carpet rolled out to welcome a king. Jesus is the sacrifice pictured at Passover, the deliverer foreshadowed by Moses, and the King prefigured by David.

Waiting figures prominently in many of the stories of the Old Testament. Moses waited for Pharaoh to let God's people go. Joseph waited in a prison cell. Hannah waited for a baby. These stories are true stories, but they are also small-scale versions of the bigger story: Israel was waiting on God to fulfill his promises.

God fulfilled his promises to send a deliverer, the Messiah, by sending his Son, Jesus. Even so, God did not stop using stories of waiting to tell his story because the waiting isn't over yet. Jesus died and rose again, and then he ascended to sit at the right hand of God where he is to this day. The New Testament portrays the ascended Jesus as the Bridegroom who has gone away but will return (Matt. 25:1–13; Mark 2:20). Our waiting is different this side of the cross. We know now whom we are waiting for, but the waiting isn't easy. There should be a future thrust to our

faith, just as there was a future thrust in the stories that make up the Old Testament.

We are still waiting in the same ways that our favorite Bible characters waited. Some of us are waiting for a bridegroom. Some of us are waiting for a baby. Some are waiting for a home. Some are waiting for a prodigal child or a prodigal spouse. Some await healing and an end to pain. Above all, we are all waiting for the return of Jesus.

Until the Messiah came, Scripture's stories of waiting reminded old covenant believers that all was not right with the world. Marriage covenants were broken. Wombs were empty. Israel needed reconciliation with God.

In the same way, our waiting should remind us and all new covenant believers that *all is not right with the world*. While Jesus has died and risen, he has not yet come again. Paul describes the second coming of Christ this way: "Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Cor. 15:24–25). We are still waiting for that victory.

Shouldn't I Be Content?

If your waiting is characterized by painful longing, you may feel guilty about that. We are supposed to be content with the life God has given us, right? If I am consumed by desire for something he hasn't given me, that must be sinful discontentment, mustn't it?

Yes and no. Yes, our waiting should be undergirded with a firm confidence in the goodness of God. We should believe steadfastly that God is our loving Father who only gives us what is good (Matt. 7:7–11). We can know with certainty that his

“divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3). Like the apostle Paul, our contentment must be based in the sufficiency of Christ, not in satisfactory temporary circumstances (Phil. 4:10–13).

In spite of these truths, a persistent longing does not mean that you are indulging in sinful discontentment. The same Paul who wrote that he had learned to be content in every circumstance wrote that he had “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” (Rom. 9:2) when he considered his fellow Jews who had rejected the gospel. Waiting well doesn’t mean waiting without pain.

What if Hannah had resigned herself to childlessness instead of pouring out her prayers to God with her tears? What if the father of the Prodigal Son had dried his eyes and moved on, rather than watching and waiting for his wayward one to come home? What if Hosea, instead of grieving over his wife’s unfaithfulness, had proclaimed that this was God’s will and he was probably better off without her?

If these biblical characters had suppressed their pain and put on a happy face, we would be missing the deep bass notes that give the gospel such sweet resonance. If there are no tears, then the promise that God “will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 21:4) would not be necessary.

Your Waiting Is a Parable

In this book, I will talk about five life situations that involve painful waiting. I’ve chosen these five areas because they are prominent biblical themes, but they are also scenarios that are still common to God’s people. If you are waiting for a spouse that has yet to appear, for a pregnancy that you haven’t been able to conceive or carry, for healing that may or may not come, for a home that you never have to leave, or for a prodigal child

or spouse to return, you are living a parable. A parable is a story with a point. The story of your waiting can portray—to you and to others—God’s salvation history, both up to this point and still to come.

If that sounds strange to you, consider some other life scenarios that are commonly recognized as depictions of the gospel. How many weddings have you been to at which the minister told the couple that their marriage represents Christ and the church? This idea comes straight from the Bible itself, specifically Ephesians 5:22–23. Paul tells the Ephesians that the love a husband shows his wife—a love that places her needs above his own—represents the love that Christ has for the church. Conversely, a wife who submits to her husband portrays the church’s trusting submission to the headship of Christ.

Or take adoption. In Romans 8:14–17, Paul explains that those who believe in Jesus have been adopted by his Father into the family of God. We’ve been given the right to call on him, and he has made us his heirs. Adoption gives a child all of the rights and privileges of one who is born into a family. Adoptive parents powerfully portray the love of God by choosing to make their own that which was once not their own. They are a parable of our God who took a people (Israel) and made them his own and who takes people (us) and makes them his beloved children.

Throughout the Scriptures, God uses different analogies and word pictures that portray waiting on the Lord. In the book of James, he compares waiting for the Lord’s return to waiting for a harvest:

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late

rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. (James 5:7-8)

Every time a farmer sows his field, weeds his garden, or waters a crop that is not yet bearing fruit, he is a living picture of how we should wait on the return of the Lord. We must be patient, and we must hope in what we do not yet see.

Farmers generally have an idea of how long it will take their crops to grow. Late rains may delay a crop by weeks, but not by months or years. I have to think that patience is a bit easier when you have some idea of how long the waiting might last. In the seasons covered in this book, we don't ordinarily know how long we will be waiting. That's what makes waiting so hard! It may last for a lifetime. But in that sense, our waiting is an even better parable of what it means to wait for the coming of the Lord. Christ could come tomorrow, or he may not return in our lifetime. A key component of Christian waiting is learning how to keep watch without becoming impatient or cynical.

Parables Can Be Missed

People commonly think that Jesus told parables to make the truth easier to understand. But the Bible presents parables as stories with meanings that can be easily missed. When Jesus's disciples asked him why he taught in parables, he made it clear that they weren't simply illustrations:

And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and

hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.” (Matt. 13:11–13)

You see, parables reveal, but they can also conceal. Those with hearts awakened by the Spirit have eyes to see the kingdom of heaven; they know how to look at an earthly analogy and see the heavenly meaning beyond it. Those with hard hearts can’t see past the analogy. They hear the story but miss the point. They are like babies who stare at a pointing finger instead of at what is being pointed out.

Parables are signs that can be heeded or missed completely. The kingdom of God is hidden unless you have eyes to see it. For those who don’t have ears to hear, both the good news and the hard truths of a parable go in one ear and out the other.

God has given you a parable. Each different kind of waiting shines light on a different facet of the gospel story. Only those who have been given eyes to see and ears to hear can perceive the redemptive picture God paints through our waiting.

In every story of righteous waiting, God has hidden the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. Your waiting is meant to be a witness not only to yourself, but to the watching world. Do you have ears to hear? Will you be a willing student in the school of waiting?

What Is God's Story?

A key to seeing your life as a parable—that is, to understand how your story is picturing God's story—is to know what God's story is. His story began before the foundation of the world and it extends into eternity. It is told in the sixty-six books of Scripture that make up the Bible. It's impossible to do the story justice in just a few pages, but here is a synopsis.

God created Adam and Eve in a good world where all of their needs were met. When they disobeyed God, sin entered the world, and along with it came death, disease, and decay. The whole earth was cursed. Each of Adam and Eve's offspring was born with the same cursed nature, so that they were drawn to sin with an irresistible attraction.

God chose one of those descendants, Abraham, and set him apart from all other people. He made three promises to Abraham: to give him offspring, to bless the nations through that offspring, and to give that offspring a land that would be theirs forever.

Throughout the generations, God added to these promises so that it became clear that God's promise to Abraham would be fulfilled not just by offspring in general, but by one very special descendant. God sent prophets to Israel (the descendants of Abraham through his grandson Jacob) who spoke of an anointed one, the Messiah, who would save his people from their sins.

At times the people of Israel believed those promises. At other times, they disbelieved them and worshiped other gods. God gave them the land of Canaan, as he had promised to Abraham, but when Israel served other gods, he

took it away from them for seventy years. Even after the people of Israel returned to the land of Canaan, the prophesied child still did not appear. Finally, even the prophets went silent. The children of Abraham had been waiting for this promised offspring for nearly two thousand years.

Then, after all that time, a woman from Nazareth gave birth to a baby named Jesus. Though he looked like the ordinary son of a carpenter, he was the Son of God, the promised Messiah Israel had been waiting for. He lived on earth, healing the sick and raising the dead. And just when it seemed his ministry was taking off, the rulers of Jerusalem put him to death.

But God's plan was not thwarted. Jesus took the punishment that we deserved for our sins so that those who accept his sacrifice on their behalf will never have to face the wrath of God. It was by dying that Jesus crushed death and broke the curse of sin that Adam's descendants had lived under. He showed his power over death by rising to life again after three days. He stayed on earth for another forty days before ascending to heaven to take his place beside God the Father. He left his followers with the promise that he would return to earth and make right all that is wrong with the world. He would give them a homeland that they would never have to leave, which would be free from death and disease and decay.

We know what the end of the story will be, but we wait for it without knowing when it will come. It may come within our lifetime. No one knows the day or the hour it will come but God the Father himself.

And so we wait.



THE GOSPEL COALITION

The Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

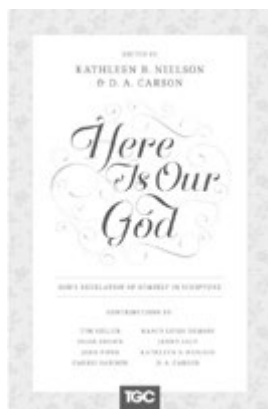
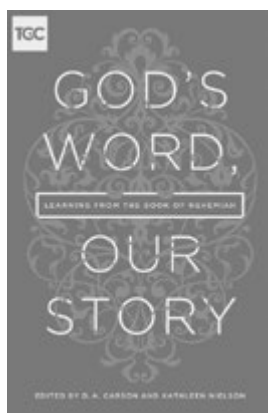
We desire to champion the gospel with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy—gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines. We yearn to work with all who, in addition to embracing our confession and theological vision for ministry, seek the lordship of Christ over the whole of life with unabashed hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform individuals, communities, and cultures.

Through its women's initiatives, The Gospel Coalition aims to support the growth of women in faithfully studying and sharing the Scriptures; in actively loving and serving the church; and in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ in all their callings.

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WE'RE ALL WAITING FOR SOMETHING.

It might be a spouse or a baby. It might be healing or a home. Regardless of what we're waiting for, it's easy to feel discontent when things aren't going as planned and our dreams are delayed—especially when questions of “Why?” and “How long?” remain unanswered.

God uses seasons of waiting to teach us patience and make us more like himself. But sanctification is not the only purpose God has in mind. When we wait faithfully with unmet longings, we become a powerful picture of the bride of Christ waiting for the day when he returns and God's kingdom reigns.

“Through her own story and those of others, Betsy Childs Howard demonstrates how to wait well upon the faithful One who knows us and loves us and has a plan and purpose for each of us.”

RAVI ZACHARIAS, Founder and President, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries

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GLORIA FURMAN, author, *The Pastor's Wife and Missional Motherhood*

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