

Waiting on God's Presence

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 00] Waiting on God's presence. You know, this autumn we've been following a series, and it's the last in that series today, where we've been thinking about what it means to live with a sense of the presence, the supernatural presence of God in our everyday lives.

But one question which I'm not sure we've really dug deep into throughout all of this time, and I think it's perhaps a really important question, is what about those times, those experiences, where we don't feel the presence of God?

What about those experiences where that can actually be quite agonising at times? When we cry out, God, where are you? When are you going to move on this? When are we going to see some action?

When is the presence of God going to become really apparent? And so today, as we round off this series and we move into Advent next week, we're thinking about that theme, waiting on the presence of God.

What does it mean to wait on God's presence? I don't know if you've seen the film *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*. Anyone seen that film? Great film. If you haven't seen it, go and watch it.

[1 : 26] But there's a line in that film. It's often actually attributed to John Lennon. It goes like this. It says, everything will be all right in the end.

And if it's not all right, it's not the end. That simple one line carries an enormous weight of theological significance.

And I'm quite sure that if it was John Lennon and I said it, or the writers of that film, never actually really kind of intended, but it's there anyway. Everything will be all right in the end.

And if it's not all right now, it's not the end. And in a roundabout very different way, that's what the message is in that passage that we just had read to us a moment ago.

When we sense that feeling of where is God, we're waiting on the presence of God. We believe in it. We want to believe in it. And our prayers are praying with that sense of anticipation.

[2 : 31] But somehow it doesn't seem to match our experience. We need to revisit these basic tenets of Christian belief that talk about that sense of the presence, but the not yet presence of God.

So when we look at the Christian worldview, we see it very helpfully captures that ambiguity in a way that actually I think makes the Christian gospel and all its claims all the more compelling. Because it engages reality. First, it tells us, the Christian gospel tells us God created the world. That affirms the reality of the presence of God as we experience it in life.

But the Christian narrative tells us that we live in a broken world, a fallen world. God gives us freedom and we reject that freedom and we've turned our back on him. We have the reality of sin and brokenness and death and dying in the world.

God gives us an experience of God. This experience of, well, where is God? He seems to be absent. And yet it's that the Old Testament points forward to the coming of Jesus and that the gospels tell us how Jesus has come to us, God has come to us in him.

[3 : 44] It tells us that God is with us. He is present. And yet the gospels then finish by saying that Jesus has returned to be with his father with the promise that one day he will return and make all things new.

And so we sense that kind of absence of God. And yet God is an absence because he's here by his Holy Spirit and he gives us that promise that one day the end will come and we don't know how or when or what that will be but it's there in scripture that one day God will bring history to conclusion and all will be well.

And therefore we live in that place of tension between the already of God's presence and what God has done through his creation, through his coming to us in Jesus and with the Holy Spirit present among us, the already of God's presence and the not quite yet of God's presence.

And it's in that place of tension that we wait upon the presence of God. He is present and yet there's a sense in which he isn't in all his fullness yet.

So our calling then is to live in the light of that promise as we wait on God to live in the light of that end which is coming which isn't yet here but one day will be.

[5 : 05] So what might that look like in practical terms? Well I want you to imagine a picture as we unpack this in a little bit more detail. I want you to imagine that we walk into a restaurant and as you walk into that restaurant you can see three different types of waiting that are going on.

The first type of waiting is I want you to imagine that you've gone into this restaurant but you've got limited time. Perhaps you've got tickets to a show that you're going to see in an hour. You've got an hour to order your meal, eat your meal, get out the door and get to the theatre.

And as you go in, you sit down. Nobody's said hello to you. You can't even see any members of staff around. You're waiting. You have a look at the menu. You know what you want. You just want something that's quick. But there's nobody there.

So you're waiting to be served. And in that place of waiting, it's agonising. You're looking at your watch. You haven't got time. You're getting impatient, frustrated, angry. You start to think, am I just going to give up on this place, walk out and go somewhere else?

I want to suggest that that sense of waiting is very much a part of our Christian experience. When, Lord, are you going to intervene in this situation? I've been praying about this for ages.

[6 : 20] I need to see some action. I want to be reassured of something. I feel like giving up. Trying something else. It's a part of waiting.

And these words in 2 Peter that we heard just now were written actually into that experience in that first century. It's the first century of believers who were being persecuted for their faith, whose daily experience is, when, Lord, when are you coming back?

Without wishing to oversimplify Peter's response there, but saying we are called to live in the light of expectation involves patience. Now, that, of course, is one thing to say.

It's a very different thing to do. There are no easy answers, except that we need to know that God has got it in hand because God is eternal, eternal. And God's eternity contrasts radically with our experience, which has only ever been in time and space.

And so it is that Peter quotes back to the psalmist who says that, you know, a day to God is like a thousand years.

[7 : 33] And a thousand years is like a day because God is eternal. He doesn't differentiate between those things, but our lived experience knows of all the difference. And the challenge for us is to come to terms with the fact that God's perspective in his eternity is very different from ours.

You may have heard that old joke about the guy that was having an argument with God one day and said, God, is it true that a thousand years is like a day to you?

God answered him back and he said, yes, that's true. He wasn't expecting that. So he said, so God, is it true then that one second is like a million years?

To a surprise, God answered him back again and said, yep, that's right. One second is just like a million years, a million years but a second to me. Man thought about this and so his next prayer was this.

He said, God, if that's the case, is a million pounds to you just like a penny and a penny just like a million pounds? God said, yep, you're right.

[8 : 42] He said, God, could you give me a penny? God said, sure, just wait a second. That agonizing weight is put into a different frame when we see that God is eternal.

It doesn't suddenly make it easy. It in itself doesn't change things but it does change the way we look at things and that is what Peter is urging us. So there is that type of agonizing weight but there's two other types of weight I want to suggest.

Let's go back to this restaurant scene and I want you to imagine that now you're in a different situation of waiting. You've gone in. You're not in a hurry but you've gone in. You're just looking for a really lovely evening out in this restaurant and the moment you walk in through the door you just love the atmosphere perhaps there's some lovely music playing the smells coming out of the kitchen are just amazing and as you look around and you see food being taken to the table that

others have ordered you think, wow, I cannot wait for this.

The staff meet you on your way in they're super friendly you just love them to bits already and you sit down they take your order and you wait for it. Only this time it's not that agonizing, impatient wait it's that wait for the food to come which as your stomach rumbles there's something quite enjoyable about it.

Living in the light of God's eternity living in the light of God's promises knowing that it's not alright yet because the end hasn't come but we anticipate it knowing it it's that kind of waiting.

[10:32] There's a story about two boys twins and one of them always seemed to be much more hopeful than the other and their parents were always arguing about this and say, he's always so much more helpful and the other said, no he's not yes he is, no he's not so they decided an experiment to try and settle the argument it was Christmas they bought both of these brothers a bike each except the one that was always the hopeful one they hid his bike out of the way so they wrapped up two things they wrapped up two boxes in one box was a bike and that they were going to present to the brother that was always not so hopeful in fact was quite negative in his thinking and in his approach to life in general to the one who was always hopeful they wrapped up the box as I say there was a bike for him but they put it out of the way and as part of the experiment instead of putting the bike in this box they filled it with straw

Christmas morning came brothers ran down the more kind of less hopeful one didn't quite run down more kind of sauntered down ripped open the box pulled out this gleaming brand new bike oh a bike thanks looks like it's raining outside I hope I'm not going to fall off meanwhile the other boy has just ripped open his box and pulled out the straw and he's just shut off and he's looking in all directions mum and dad are getting a little bit worried what's going on so are you okay he said yeah yeah yeah yeah he looks really excited so what are you doing he said I just know there's got to be a pony here somewhere living in the light of God's presence is about hope hope doesn't come easy let's not pretend that but we need to remember that tension that we live between the already of God's presence and that which is to come in all its fullness at the end because

Jesus' promise is that it will be alright in the end and if it's not alright now it's because it's not yet the end and in those moments of agonising wait where we just when is this going to sort out when is this when are we going to see some answers to some prayer when is God going to move in this situation we need to hold to that fundamental truth that's what Peter was telling the early church some 2000 years ago and it's what we need to hold fast to now but how do we do that well let's go back to the restaurant because there's one more type of waiting that I want to suggest and that's to do with as the name more than suggests the waiting that we see taking place with a waiter the old apparently the word the English word waiter comes from variations of the old French and German words meaning to attend to stay awake to be alert to attend to needs to wait at tables means literally to do that to be on heightened awareness ready poised in a posture of ready to serve you see to wait on the presence of God is not just a passive consumerist thing it's not something that we do just to sort of make us feel good to make us warm and fuzzy inside when life's tough that call that invitation is a real practical challenge to wait on the presence of God doesn't mean we sit back and we do nothing and we just wait for God to step in zap it's a call to actually actively engage in service again so without wishing to oversimplify if we're serious about wanting to see God happen in our lives he calls us to be a part of that action part of the kingdom and in a way it will be that the very thing that we are agonizing over when will God intervene in this situation we may not see action in that area but part of that bigger picture as he calls us to serve we see action in other areas and the danger can be that we compartmentalize our lives and we angst and we stress over one area where we don't see God moving but meanwhile there are other areas where he can and he does move don't ask me why he does seem to in some at some points and not in others at other times but if we find ourselves agonizing over the wait a question we need to ask ourselves of what are we doing not just about that situation but about the wider picture to actively engage in the work of God's kingdom see that word the phrase to wait on God comes from the psalm from Psalm 27 verse 14 talks of not waiting for God it talks of waiting on God disciples of Jesus in the 21st century disciples of Jesus in any century are called not to wait for God but to wait on God now ultimately only God will shift certain things but he calls us to be part of that bigger picture that bigger journey that kingdom that he promises that is coming in all fullness that we live in that place of tension between the already and the not quite yet but he calls us to play a part in it to be active to be waiting in an active roll up our sleeves and get dirty kind of way what does that look like in

practical terms well one last story John Patton was a missionary who lived in the 19th century he spent some time in the southwest

Pacific in some islands called the New Hebrides during his time there John Patton sought to translate St John's Gospel into the indigenous language of those islands he lived there and he worked on his translation and he got to know the people that lived in that place and it was a dangerous place incidentally he just couldn't find a word that meant faith or belief or trust or anything like it he found that the people that he was living among seemed to be a people who had no faith and no trust in others they were suspicious of anybody so he had to find a word that somehow carried something about believing in something that's different from yourself beyond yourself trusting believing hoping having faith in that other so one day he came up with an idea and he got some people to come indoors and he sat in a chair and he took both feet off the ground and leaned right back into this chair he said to the people around him he said what am I doing right now and they used a word

[18:13] I don't know what the word was by the way but they used a word that in their own language meant to lean into with your whole self that's the word that went into this translation of St.

John's gospel to mean trusting in God to lean into with your whole self to wait on the presence of God yes at times it will be agonising at times there will be a sense of joyful expectation but let's remember that it's never a passive sit back and do nothing but it's a leaning into with our whole selves we're called to live expectantly waiting on the presence of God in the light of his eternal promises it will be alright in the end and if it's not alright now it's because it's not yet the end let's pray as we think about this theme of waiting as we come to pray

I want to put this question to you and each one of us will probably answer this slightly differently but here's the question what are you waiting for to spell that out in a bit more detail what are you waiting on God for and in response to that question I invite each of us just to build a picture now before God in prayer as to what that is that we're waiting for him on Lord you know that each of us is waiting for different things Lord forgive us for when sometimes we lose the plot we get so impatient and we live lives that are not the kind of lives that you want us to live Lord thank you that you don't look back on the past but you call us to the future that future that one day everything will be made whole and complete we're not there yet but Lord as we pray to you now in that place where we are in tension between what you have already done in

Jesus and what you will do at the end we bring our waiting before you Lord in the midst of the waiting help us to wait in hope and help us to live actively in hope help us to lean on to you and into you with our whole selves help us to do that every day in Jesus name Amen