

Gen 21:8-21.
Matt 10:24-39

Jane Ward-Hall, 21 June 2020

Is it just me? Or do we all find waiting difficult? There seems to be so much waiting in life especially at the moment, as we all wait for lockdown to end. I can find waiting very frustrating. I think because there's a helplessness in waiting that I find really uncomfortable. Does God have a purpose in all this waiting? I know patience is a fruit of the Spirit and I pray for it frequently but I still find waiting hard.

I remember waiting for the birth of my son. He was 2 weeks overdue and I had high blood pressure. As it was Easter I went to Heatherwood everyday for a checkup. But 2 weeks was nothing compared with the 25 years Abraham and Sarah had to wait for their son Isaac. Or those who continued hoping in the 400 year gap between the Old Testament ending and the birth of Jesus.

Abraham means "father of many" and the bible gives us a very condensed version of events during his 25 years of waiting. God first promised Abraham he would be the father of a nation, when he was childless and 75 years old!

Abraham was known for his obedience to God but even he made decisions that got him into trouble and have had consequences to this day. Messy human life, what reassurance it is for us that the bible is full of it!

How did Abraham and Sarah cope with 25 years of waiting? Well, God, in His mercy, kept giving reassuring them. They were told their offspring would be like the dust of the earth (Gen13:16) and like the stars in the sky (Gen15:5) But at that stage, annoyingly, God never explained exactly when His promise would be fulfilled?

Instead of passively waiting for a baby it seems that after 11 years Abraham and Sarah got fed up, the waiting seemed endless, so they decided to take some action! Abraham has a son, Ishmael, by Sarah's maid Hagar. This wasn't such an unusual thing to do in their culture, given the importance of a male heir. But was this the right thing to do?

As children of our loving Heavenly Father we are designed to be creative, made in the image of our Creator. But the question is: how much we wait for God to act or use our creativity looking for a solution ourselves as Abraham did. Do we give up waiting on the promise we believe we have heard? Find ourselves getting frustrated, think God has forgotten about us and maybe think we could come up with a better solution ourselves? Thinking we know better than God, now this is where we can really get into trouble.

I read this quote recently by Eugene Petersen author of the Message bible. "Life's basic decision is rarely, if ever, whether to believe in God or not, but whether to worship or compete with Him".

This shocks me! It's a really challenging thought to realise that we compete with God. Oh subtlety of the sin of pride! Every time we think we are in total control of our lives, when we say "I earned it, or it's my right" we are in fact competing with God.

I think the reason this surprises us, and we don't notice it, is because it's been going on a such long time, since the garden of Eden, and since we were small children fiercely hanging on to a toy saying "it's mine"! Yet the bible tells us that God made everything, and even our very lives, are His gift to us. (...without Him nothing was made.. John1:4).

So why all the waiting? What can God's purpose be? Maybe so that when God's promise is birthed we can be absolutely sure that it is God's gift, a miracle and nothing we have done. The waiting of Abraham and Sarah brought to my mind a New Testament story of waiting. When Jesus heard that his friend Lazarus was dying he waited before he set off for Bethany so that when he arrived Lazarus had been dead 4 days. Is the raising to life of a man who has been dead 4 days and a woman giving birth to Isaac, at 90 years of age, making it clear to us that "nothing is impossible for God"? No human action could bring about these miracles. No wonder we sing "Glory to God in the highest". Aren't the next words "and peace to His people on earth". Is it possible that the more we give God the glory the more we experience His peace? To wait in peace now that would be much better!

What of Hagar and Ishmael; there was a lot of waiting for them too. Were they used and discarded by Abraham when his true heir was born? It sounds that way but as we heard in our reading God stepped into Hagar's desperation giving her hope, promising her that He would " make a great nation of Ishmael" but also giving practical help by providing water. Ishmael did indeed have a great many descendants one of whom is Mohammed, founder of Islam- thus Islam has its roots back to Abraham.

I'm so grateful for all the real life, messy human stories in the bible. Thank you Abraham and Sarah. Now I can see that God uses waiting as a tool to teach me. To help me remain dependent on God and remember that He is infinitely greater than me. To teach me patience, the importance of living life in the present, to trust You Lord, that you know best and in your love you will guide me every step of the way.
Amen.