

## “Waiting For God?!”

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Acts 1:6-14 + The Ascension

**W**hat are you waiting for?

Many years ago, when I was just a boy, I remember a singular moment driving around Pampa Texas running errands with my Grandfather. Like most such moments, it creeps up on you, surprising you when most unexpected.

We were travelling west on 21<sup>st</sup> street and Grandfather saw an old friend whom he had not seen nor spoken with in decades. The friend was quite bent with age, rake in hand exuding a bitter lemon aura. The man moved with a slowness borne of pain. For that reason alone grandfather would have felt compelled to stop. They conversed for a little. I remember most distinctly this older gentleman’s reply to my grandfather’s simple open-ended greeting, “How are you doing?” He replied with emotion: “Just waiting to die.”



What are you waiting for? “Just waiting to die?” Or with Bob Dylan, are you waiting for ‘the ship to come in?’ Are you waiting for the rain to fall. Waiting for your luck to change? Waiting for the market to turn? Waiting for the tide to rise and float all boats? Waiting for the economy to be restored? Waiting for Godot?

**H**ow do you wait? Even if you are not quite sure what you’re waiting for, how is it you wait?

- Patiently, or anxiously? Like little children on any car trip do we keep asking “Are we there yet?” Is that how we wait? Is that how you wait?

- Do we wait for something important with patience or with anxiety? Fidgeting, with stoic resignation or joyous anticipation? How do we wait for the LORD? How do you wait for God?

**J**esus starts out by telling us how not to wait. In our text today from Acts, Jesus takes his leave from us and ascends into heaven. The gathered disciples, tired of waiting and missing the point as usual, asked a classic waiting-with-impatience question:



**“LORD is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”**

Jesus parries perfectly. He has told us many times before.

**“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the father has set by his own authority.”**

Jesus’ voice rings out with an authority we haven’t yet heard ~ he speaks from the other side of the grave, the only one ever to experience death and return. He instructs us. He shocks us out of our spiritual complacency. We too ask Jesus our classic waiting with-impatience questions, including of course: **“LORD is this the time when you will restore God’s world wide web on earth?”** **“LORD, when will you return?”** You know we ask that very question. Harold Camping thought he had answered it on May 21<sup>st</sup>. Not to make too fine a point of it – but he is wrong.

Jesus makes it crystal clear. We are not to wait that way. Things will not happen according to the way we think they should. Things will not happen by playing numbers games with Holy Writ. The unfolding of events will happen at the time of God’s choosing. Let go of our desire to control the unfolding of these world-changing events. Let go of our desire to predict the dates and times.

**W**hich bring us to the recent familiar attempt to do just that. Harold Camping is not the first nor will he be the last.

- William Miller believed the world would end on October 22, 1844.
- Jehovah's Witnesses have predicted the end of the world in 1914, 1915, 1918, 1920, 1925, 1941, 1975 and 1994. 8 times, count them, and I regret to say, all wrong.
- Charles Wesley predicted the world would end in 1794. Also regretfully mistaken.
- Famous forecaster Nostradamus predicted doomsday would happen in July 1999.
- English mystic Joanna Southcott predicted the world would end on October 19, 1814, when she would give birth to the Messiah.



This was the second time Harold Camping said Jesus would return – in 1994 and now in 2011. To state the heart-breaking obvious, he and all these others have been and are more than mistaken, they are misleadingly wrong. They are all well-meaning but unfortunately and sadly, Camping fulfills the Biblical definition of a false

prophet. What does Scripture say about telling the difference between the true and false prophet:

**<sup>21</sup>You may say to yourself, “How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?” <sup>22</sup>If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.**

[Deuteronomy 18:21-22]

Not only do not be frightened by such, but just two verses earlier it prescribes the death penalty for all false prophets, those who say an event will happen in God's time and it does not. Moreover, Camping disobeys the direct command of God, the very word of Jesus, when he foolishly seeks the unknowable knowledge. We all know this verse:

**“But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. [Matthew 24:26]**

Perhaps the easiest way to say all this is Camping just misses the point of Scripture and fundamentally misunderstands Biblical Prophecy. A lot of Christian leaders misunderstand Prophecy as well. So pay attention, as an insightful church leader (Joel A. Barker) has rightly said:

≈ “the ultimate purpose of the prophet is not to tell the future ~ but to make God’s future happen.”

To put it simply, trying to predict the date and times is not the way the LORD intends for us to ‘wait for God.’ But that begs the question of exactly how does God actually desire for us to wait?

**J**esus continues. He starts with a promise:

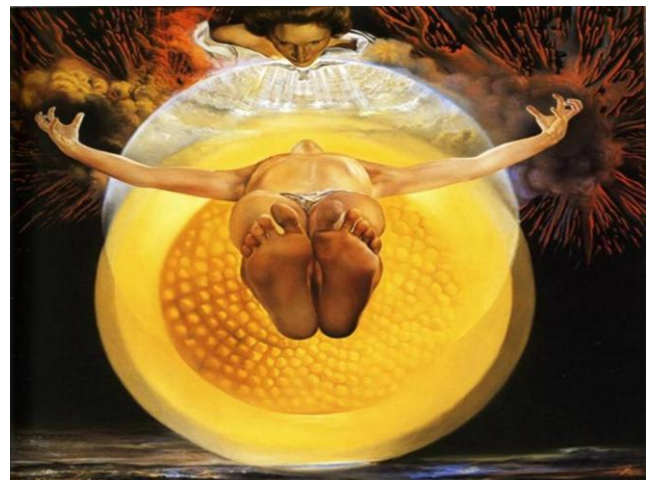
**“you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;”**

Jesus then gives us a commission:

**“and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”**

With this promise and commission, then the only thing we have control over, the only choice we actually have, is our response! How are we to respond to God’s graces and talents, and are we going to take up the LORD’s mission?

The disciples stood there looking dumbfounded, staring at a spot in space where Jesus had just disappeared. They were living in the *in-between times* – in between Jesus’ being taken back to the Father and the coming of the great Spirit giving the gifts needed for carrying the Gospel to the ends of the earth. This is a text for how to wait creatively, for living in the in-between times.



We are just like all disciples in every age ~ we live in *in-between times* as well. We are caught in the time between the first coming of

the Son of God, when God gifted each of us at Pentecost with precisely what we need to carry the Gospel – between those wondrous events in the past and the future return of Jesus again at the culmination God’s great story. We are part of that story and joyously take our place in the LORD’s plan, but like little children, we want so much to skip to the end of the book. To see how it ends. We long for the culmination of the age with sighs too deep for words.

As a great Hebrew Bible scholar and philosopher (Abraham Heschel) has rightly said:

“The Prophet is the one who knows what time it is.” ~ Abraham Heschel

That is of course, the prophet knows what time it is in God’s story. In the words of the song:

“Does anyone really know what time it is? Does anyone really care?”

Do we really know what time it is? Do we know the time in which we are living in God’s story? Do we realize we are in the in-between time? Are we comfortable where God has placed us?

**W**aiting? How are we to respond to the waiting which is the major part of our calling? How do we wait?

Do we wait passively or actively for God? Do we wait impatiently like a child waits for Christmas? Like children on a trip? “Are we there yet?” Or do we wait as adults of mature faith working to make a blessed Christmas happen?

Do we wait like the two characters in the play “*Waiting for Godot*?” Lost in the absurdity of life and overwhelmed by the pain of human existence, do we passively wait, steely cynical and coldly resigned. Do we endlessly debate



while life swirls around us and life happens to us? Do we wait for Godot? Do we passively wait for God to do it all for us: to change our jobs, find us work, change our homes, change our spouses, our partners, change our lives? Is that how we should wait for God?



Or do we wait like the residents of the retirement community in the BBC series *“Waiting for God”* ~ the name a takeoff on the title of that absurdist play? In this retirement community, everyone is expected to be “just waiting to die,” but instead the inmates choose to take over the asylum. We, like those spirited elders, should be making some godly mischief and raising some holy cane

even though the end of our personal existence may be near. We work God’s plan, seek God’s kingdom, even in the absurdity of life ~ especially against the absurdity of life.

We choose to be Jesus’ witnesses to Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. We choose to make God’s future to happen. We take charge of ourselves, our lives and our calling. We commit ourselves to real change.

**D**on’t forget Jesus’ promise => we are to receive power! All the power we need. Indeed, we have already received power at Pentecost. Then how do we wait? We are just those same disciples, standing there slack-jawed, mouth gapping, uncertain expressions on our faces, staring at the space just occupied by Jesus as he was taken up by our Father. And we too are pulled out of our reverie by two white robed strangers.



**“People of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”**

They say to us in these in-between times: “Shut your mouth and get busy!” “Don’t just stand there, make yourself useful!” “Use that talent! or lose it!” A little more politely perhaps, but that’s what they mean. That’s how we are supposed to wait, shocked out of our spiritual complacency, our staves in our hands and our shoes on our feet.

**W**hat are you waiting for? A gold plated invitation? You have already received it:



Indeed we have received the power. Now let us resolve to be the LORD’s witnesses in Judea, Samaria and the whole earth. Even here in this very place.