

The Gospel According to Tom Petty: The Waiting is the Hardest Part

Exodus 32

Sunday, November 15, 2020

Through the Bible, God has much to tell us about the **urgency** of the moment. There are encouragements to “be alert!” There are calls to boldness and action. We find such instructions delivered to Esther when she is to stand for the Jewish people in captivity.

“For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14)

Christians tend to embrace these calls to action. Have you ever been to a youth rally or massive church event? The appeals to action are passionate and compelling. The enthusiasm elevates to the rafters of the building.

The Bible calls us to action. We are to actively live out our faith in Jesus Christ.

The Bible also has much to say about the word “**wait**”. Sometimes the Bible seems like it has even more to say about waiting than it does about action. We see such instructions in the Psalms.

Wait for the Lord;

be strong and take heart

and wait for the Lord.

(Psalm 27:14)

The calls to wait on the Lord are a major theme in the Hebrew Scriptures. This continues into Jesus’ teaching to trust God to provide, and Paul’s frequently repeated calls to patience in the early church.

In Exodus 32 we find a people unable to wait. Their inability to wait led them away from God and into something much darker.

Moses is up on Mount Sinai. He is meeting with God! He is getting the details of the covenant that is to exist between God and his people. The people are at the base of Mount Sinai, and the people are to wait. God is actively revealing himself to the people through his meeting with Moses.

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.” (Exodus 32:1)

Waiting is hard. When nothing is happening the temptation is to do something. Anything! We want everything now! We don’t want it correctly. It’s why we demand election numbers the minute we vote, or why we can’t give the pizza 30 seconds to cool down after it’s been reheated in the microwave.

Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.”³ So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. (Exodus 32:2-3)

When the Israelites left Egypt, the Egyptians gave them supplies and sent them on their way.

³³ The Egyptians urged the people to hurry and leave the country. “For otherwise,” they said, “we will all die!”³⁴ So the people took their dough before the yeast was added, and carried it on their shoulders in kneading troughs wrapped in clothing.³⁵ The Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing.³⁶ The LORD had made the Egyptians favourably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians. (Exodus 12:33-36)

The gold was given to them by the Egyptians as they left Egypt! They now took the reminders of God’s faithfulness to them – the plunder given to them from Egypt – and put it towards something other than God. This jewelry is precious. Not because it’s valuable. It is a reminder of what God has done!

[Aaron] took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”

When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.”⁶ So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. (Exodus 32:4-6)

The gold is fashioned into an image, and that image is worshipped. A whole festival is planned around it. All of this is happening while God is giving Moses instructions for life and worship with God. The people and Aaron make it all up themselves. And it becomes this riotous thing that resembles how other tribes and nations worship their gods, not how God asks to be worshipped and engaged.

The result:

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt.

They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’

“I have seen these people,” the Lord said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.” (Exodus 32:7-10)

Moses is upset; God is upset; this massive rescue plan removing the Israelites from Egypt is in jeopardy.

As I was preparing for this sermon, I came across an idea that I had never considered before. We are used to the idea of the golden calf being an idol; a false god. But what if it wasn't a false god? What if it was a horrible attempt to worship THE God?

There is some dispute about the word that we have read so far as "gods". It can also be translated as "god". So instead of the Israelites asking for Aaron to make "gods" that will go before them, they may be asking, "**Come, make us a god who will go before us.**" (Exodus 32:1)

He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "This is your god, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." (Exodus 32:4)

So the question we now ask is,

Were the Israelites building and worshipping false gods . . .

OR were the Israelites trying to worship THE God in an odd way . . .

Is this a blatant act of rejecting God for something else? Or is this an attempt to worship the true God that is poorly done?

It doesn't really matter. Either . . .

- **They are giving up their God who saved them for something phony**
- **OR they are treating God like the other nations treat their gods**

Everything about God's actions in their deliverance from Egypt screams, "The God of the Israelites is unlike any other God anywhere." When God delivers the Israelites, he systematically destroys any hint of the mighty gods of Egypt. God establishes himself as the God above all other gods.

When the Israelites demand Aaron make them a lustrous golden image out of their plundered jewellery, they are acting as if God can be worshipped and accessed just like the lesser gods they encountered in Egypt. But God will not have it! God is not like these lesser gods, and will be treated entirely differently.

Moses is bothered by what the Israelites have done. The Lord is bothered by what they have done – to God this is an absolute rejection of Him and His ways.

But God does not abandon this people who refuse to wait for him.

The Lord replied to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. Now go, lead the people to the place I spoke of, and my angel will go before you. (Exodus 32:33-34)

God has been betrayed, but **God's faithful presence** endures. God's faithful presence will still go before them.

However, when the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin." We heard earlier the devastating and deadly consequences for their sin.

And the Lord struck the people with a plague because of what they did with the calf Aaron had made. (Exodus 32:34-35)

There is still a consequence. Moses goes up to Sinai to sort out what exactly this relationship between God and Israel is to be. But the people cannot wait for that. They cannot just sit and be patient. They demand that something be done. There is an emptiness that they know **MUST** be filled, but instead of relying on God to fill that emptiness that force something to happen. They force Aaron into actions that he should never have done. Their haste has bitter consequences.

What they felt as urgent did not require an urgent response. It required patience.

How do we know when something is genuinely urgent? How do we know when something is urgent to the point where we must respond?

How do we know when we need to instead restlessly wait?

We know that **URGENCY** is required when a situation is **life and death**. When it comes to medical concerns, or safety concerns, or matters that will devastate us if we ignore them, urgency is key.

We know that urgency is required when we are tempted by **Complacency**. I have missed many opportunities because I did nothing when I should have acted. I have caused myself problems when I have let slip things that required my attention. So if our general mood is to be lazy and complacent, urgent action is appropriate.

So what things are **NOT Urgent**? When is it that we need to wait?

When we are **trying to make something happen**, that's when we often find ourselves in a bad space. When we try to manipulate the people and circumstances around us, that's often a bad sense of urgency to be in. I have made many mistakes in my life because I felt I needed to make something happen. When I tried to force things to be a certain way, this has had very bitter consequences. Sometimes I have done things that have hurt other people in my haste.

Instead of waiting on God in my restlessness, I'm doing my very best to build golden calves. I am forcing and sculpting something that does not work, and it is a cheap imitation for the real work that God wants to genuinely do in my life.

Not everything is an urgent decision. There are times when urgency cause more damage than good.

Almost everything in our lives requires patience and requires us to wait on the Lord. We wait restlessly, but we trust that the God that has delivered before will deliver in His unique way again.

For many of you, you have listened to me this far. And your response right now is, "**Hey, Mark! Thanks for nothing!**" You have been waiting already! You are in a stuck place. And you have been waiting on something for months, maybe even years. You've tried taking control of the situation and that has yielded zero results. You have tried "Letting go and letting God" and that has yielded zero results! And you are very, very discouraged.

Waiting **NEVER** makes sense at the time . . .

Waiting for Moses and God made zero sense to the Israelites, stranded in the wilderness. **When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.” (Exodus 32:1)**

We, too, end up in this confusing space.

. . . **But God is faithful.** That is all that we can hold on to, this belief that God is faithful. And we continue to wait.

Even if we take the path the Israelites take of reckless action and disbelief, time and time again people have found God to still be faithful. The point is not your faithfulness or lack thereof. The point is that God is a faithful God. And so we wait. We wait restlessly. We wait anxiously. Sometimes we wait patiently! But more often than not we wait in an unsatisfied and often painful place. But God is faithful.

When God wanted to incinerate the whole lot of Israelites at the base of Mount Sinai, Moses persuaded God not to do this. And he did this by reminding God of God’s own faithfulness.

Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.’” (Exodus 32:13)

I don’t know if God actually needed this reminder. I kind of doubt it, really. But Moses appeals to God’s basic character as that of faithfulness.

It is this basic character of faithfulness that we rely on. We look to our faithful God, he hold on to this faithful God, we have hope in this faithful God. Even when everything around us tempts us to believe we are abandoned, we can trust this God. Even when things fail miserably, we can trust this God. This God is present with us. As those around us go through difficult periods of waiting, wait with them. You don’t need to say anything. Just be with them. With your presence remind them they are not alone. Let us remind one another that this God is faithful, and let us remember that this God is with us.