

When the Waiting Drags On

(Luke 1:5-25)

Introduction

1. Shalom (שלום), Bok-ehr Tov (בוקר טוב), Good Morning! Where is Pastor Samuel? He invited me to share my story with you today.
2. Let me introduce myself – My name is Zechariah. My hometown is in Judea, Israel. Have you been to Israel? Come and visit us. It is indeed a land of milk and honey, as our LORD God has promised. (show timeline 5 B.C.)
3. By the way, I am one of the Jewish priests serving in God's temple. Do you know Aaron, the first High Priest during the time of Moses? I am one of his descendants; we take on this honorable role and responsibility of the priesthood that was only assigned to us by God. My wife, Elizabeth, also has the same priestly root. She is also a descendant of Aaron.

Desires – Prayers

4. Ok, about my life story, my encounter with God. Throughout my life, I have had many dreams and desires. I trust you have dreams and desires too. Among all my dreams and desires, I have three important ones. I have been praying, and praying, waiting, and waiting for these three desires for all these years. You may wonder why. Essentially, none of these three desires were fulfilled, and God did not seem to respond to any of these three prayer requests. The waiting dragged on... Let me share them with you.
5. #1 – The first one is about the special task of offering and burning incense before God in the temple. As a priest, I have been desiring and waiting for that once-a-lifetime chance for me to burn incense before God in the temple before I die. You may wonder what is so significant about this task. Let me share with you about our priests' duty system.
 - a. Among us—all the priests—we are organized into 24 divisions along our family lines – structured after the pattern listed for us in the Scriptures (1 Chronicles 23-24). Each division is rotated, so we each get to serve a week. I belong to the Abijah division – named after one of my ancestors [1 Chron. 24:10].
 - b. Now, within the Abijah division, I am one of the approximately 18,000 priests! Within the temple, there are many, many tasks. Each time, a priest will be selected or chosen to perform this honorable task of offering and burning the incense to God in the temple. And he is selected by the casting of lots. You see, the chance for me being selected is just $1/18,000 = 0.0055\%$. In other words, I could be a priest all my life and never be called to officiate the offering and burning of the incense to God in the Temple. For all these years, I have been hoping and praying, but each time, year after year, after the lots were cast, I left disappointed. The waiting dragged on for me.
6. #2 – My second desire is a very personal one. I have been desiring, waiting and praying to have a baby. Both Elizabeth and I love children.
 - a. We have been married for many years, and we have tried very hard, but up till now, we have remained childless. When we had our house, we made sure there were rooms ready for our children. But, after all these years, the rooms remain empty. Each time when we carried our friend's baby or now, grandchildren, our hearts filled with joy

for them, and yet within us at the same time - grief. We pray and pray, wait and wait ...the waiting drags on.

- b. Elizabeth and I wondered - Did God hear our prayers? For us ...the waiting drags on and on
7. #3 – Now my third desire, which is shared among my fellow Jews. I have been waiting and hoping to see the promised messiah.
 - a. It's been 400 years since we last heard from a prophet. And as a result, things have been upside-down in our nation for far too long. General Pompey conquered our holy land and we have been occupied and oppressed by these ruthless Romans. They made us pay taxes – exorbitant taxes.
 - b. Nonetheless, my fellow countrymen and I held tightly to God's promise of a deliverer – a Messiah. A Messiah who will set us free from our oppressors. We will have a King like David, who will sit on David's throne and re-establish a kingdom of righteousness and justice. But,.... it has been so long, and God is still so silent towards us. I am not sure; will my prayer, will my desire to see the messiah happen in my lifetime? When, when will God's promise of a messiah be fulfilled? I have been praying and praying, waiting and waiting, but nothing happens – except injustice and oppression. The waiting drags on ...
8. The waiting drags on ... None of my prayers or desires come true. God has been silent. Was there something wrong with me? I have been searching myself. Yes, there were times that I sinned against God, but when I remembered, I always confessed my sins. I have been faithful in our ministry and walk. Or was there something wrong with my desires, our prayers? I doubt so. But why, why? I do not know or understand. My prayers seem to lead me to nowhere. The waiting drags on.
9. Do you have similar experiences? Your prayers and desires seemed to go nowhere. You could have been waiting to be chosen for special assignments or duties from your teacher, your school, your workplace, or your country. Or you might be waiting for that pay raise or promotion or a breakthrough in your life. Or you could have been praying for the salvation of someone dear to you, and yet nothing seemed to be happening. You continue to pray and wait, and the waiting drags on and on.
10. Brothers and sisters, you are not alone. I would want to encourage you not to lose heart and simply trust God, even when you don't understand. Let me continue my story and share with you what happened to me when I just pressed on with God even as the waiting dragged on.

Answered Prayer #1

11. One day, while expecting the usual, the unusual happened. The lot was cast and guess what, I have been chosen! Hurray! Hurray! No! no! I should say Hallelujah! Praise the Lord. Wow! Finally, I get to perform the offering and burning of the incense to our God for the coming week. God has heard my prayer! His silence towards me has finally been broken. Wow, you can't imagine the joy I had; My desire, my dream had been answered.
12. I took this special assignment with much pride and caution. I want to give my best to our Lord God. I prepared myself well, following all the cleansing rites carefully, preparing my priestly attire, and going through and rehearsing all the procedures again and again—rehearsal after rehearsal and with so many previews. We have something in common—we just want to get it right and leave no room for error.
13. Then came the time for me to perform this honourable duty. There I was at the temple - it's our most holy place in all the world. I was very excited and yet guarded in my excitement,

so that I do not make any mistake. I was diligent, careful and made sure every step and regulation were followed to the dot.

14. My task was to take the burning coals from the bronze altar in the temple court to the altar of incense and place the coals upon the incense (Exodus 30:7-8). When the hot coals hit the incense, a burst of smoke and smells float up to heaven. This symbolizes the offering of our people's prayer to God. Imagine that I, Zechariah, presenting the prayers of our people before our Lord God.
15. Then something unusual happened. At that moment, as I placed the coals on the incense, a very bright light suddenly appeared, and a voice came out from that bright light saying, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son" (Luke 1:13).
16. When I saw and heard that, I guess that was an angel. I was shocked and gripped with fear. It's not every day that you get to see an angel. And for me, I had never seen any angel in my entire life. But, wait a second...what? Did he say ...My prayer has been heard, and we are going to have a son? Hey, hey, but it's been so many years, I think it's just too late. Or did I hear wrongly?
17. But the angel continued and said, "And you are to call him John. (14) He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, (15) for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. (16) He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. (17) And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to prepare a people prepared for the Lord."
18. I recognized those words: they were from Isaiah 40:3 – and Malachi 4:6. I was so shocked and shaken... and without thinking properly, I blurted out..., "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years" (Luke 1:18). I thought it was a fair question—it's been so many, many years. Don't you agree with me?
19. But that did not go over well at all! (19) The angel gave me that kind of look that made me feel very guilty. He said to me, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. (20) And now you will be silent and unable to speak until the day this happens because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."
20. Oh, no, this is Gabriel! Gabriel – as you may know –is a high-powered angel. He appeared to Daniel when God showed him about the future that would happen in due course. Before I could apologize... Boom. Immediately, I lost my speech. Oh No....
21. Talk about bad timing. You see, when the priest comes out of the temple – after burning incense- he blesses the people. What happened now? I couldn't speak...all I could do was use sign language. Thankfully, the people gathered at the temple that day sensed something unusual had occurred. I couldn't say a word. Tongue-tied. I had to make motions with my hand. I think I looked very shaken to the people. People seemed to figure it out that something must have happened to me when I was inside the temple. I, at that point in time, I just wanted to go home and be with Elizabeth. But I couldn't even talk to her!!! All I could do were hand signals and scribble a few words. I lost my voice. Nothing was coming out. Not a sound. God answered His silence with silence.
22. And then, not long after this encounter with God through the angel Gabriel, Elizabeth announced that she was pregnant. My wife became pregnant just as Gabriel mentioned.

What a joy! It's really happening, just like Gabriel said. I wanted to tell all my friends, but I was tongue-tied.

23. During that 9-month pregnancy, I was filled with anticipation, but I couldn't get a word out – not one word --- for nine long months. Being unable to talk – I had more time to think and read the Scripture. As I read, I was reminded of other married couples in our Scripture who had a similar experience as ours where they longed for children, but God made them wait:
 - a. Isaac's mother, Sarah (Gen. 11:30; 21:1-2) who had married Abraham
 - b. Jacob's mother, Rebekah (Gen. 25:21) who had married Isaac
 - c. Joseph's mother, Rachel (Gen. 29:31; 30:22) who had married Jacob
 - d. Samson's mother, who was unnamed (Judg. 13:1-3) and had married Manoah
 - e. Samuel's mother, Hannah (1 Sam. 1:5-6, 20) had married Elkanah
24. Have you ever wondered why all these married women yearned to have children? They saw that children were their future.
25. Now, allow me to share with you something about our culture. In our days, it was a big shame for a wife not to bear children for her husband. This was further amplified by what was written in our Scripture. The Law that was given to Moses by our Jehovah God indicates that if the nation were to be obedient, there would not be any childless couples among the people. (Exodus 23:26, Deuteronomy 7:14). It would come across in the eyes of our Jewish community that we who do not have children must have been disobedient to God. We are cursed or punished by God. Look, people would stare at us, assuming we have been disobedient to God. Imagine, both Elizabeth and I had to bear such treatments all these years. It was tough, in fact very tough. It was very difficult. It was the most difficult thing in our lives.

Answered Prayer #2

26. So, when Elizabeth gave birth to our baby son, we truly rejoiced—no words can adequately express our feelings. God had answered our second long-awaited prayer request. Our neighbours and relatives came to share our joy. Our LORD God had shown great mercy to us, removing all the stigma and shame that we had.
27. (59) On the eighth day, we circumcised our baby according to our Scripture (Gen. 17:9-14). Circumcision in our Jewish custom reaffirms God's covenant with our Jewish people. Then came the time to name my baby. Traditionally in our Jewish practice, my baby is named after me or his grandfather. (60) Zechariah is a good name, it means "God remembers." Maybe my son can be called Zechariah Junior. My relatives and neighbors were offering names that are in our family lines. Then, in the midst of all this excitement, Elizabeth spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."
28. What Elizabeth said was a huge surprise to all my neighbors and relatives. There was no one in our clan with the name "John." This naming was, to them, out of the ordinary. It was not something my friends could understand. They turned and signaled to me, wanting to know what my baby boy's name would be.
29. As I could not talk, I asked for a writing tablet, and to the surprise of all—except Elizabeth—I wrote "His name is John" – just as the angel Gabriel had declared, and this time I learned my lesson – just obey what God has instructed through the angel Gabriel. By the way, now I understand and trust that the name 'John' was more appropriate – John means "Yahweh is gracious". Yes, God is gracious!

30. Guess what happened when I obeyed God's word? (64) Immediately my mouth was opened, and my tongue set free, and I began to speak, and praise God!!! Hallelujah!!! (65-67) Then, being filled with the Holy Spirit, I prophesied under the power of the Holy Spirit. (68-79) that God has come to us, his people, to redeem us. Our hope of God's salvation is here; we will be rescued from the hands of our enemies, and we will serve God without fear, holiness, and righteousness. And concerning my son, John, he shall be the prophet of the Most High; he will be the forerunner of the Messiah, he will prepare the way for our Lord. I know the prophecy that I had just made was definitely not from me but from God himself. I was just His instrument to announce the coming of the Messiah, and my son will be the Messiah's advance party.

Answered Prayer #3

31. Hey, wait a minute, wasn't that God's answer to my 3rd prayer request? I had been waiting for a long time, hoping to see the promised messiah. Now, I know the coming of the Messiah is very near. Whether I will see him or not with my own eyes in my remaining time here on earth is no longer important. The important thing is that I know and have been assured that God remembers. God kept His promise, and the Messiah is coming soon.
32. My friends, I would consider you as being more privileged. In your time, our Messiah, our Lord Jesus, has already come. He fulfilled God's purpose by dying for you and me on that cross. He resurrected and has ascended into Heaven. Yes, today, you know that our Lord Jesus Christ is coming back. Jesus will keep His promise. Yes! He is coming back - No longer as a baby. No longer as a Saviour. He is coming back to judge the world and bring all of us back to Him. Maranatha! Jesus is coming back again.

Lessons Learnt

33. My dear brothers and sisters, what are the takeaways from my life encounter with God? Allow me to offer you 3 takeaways.
34. Firstly, as God's children, you and I will not be free from or immune to life difficulties/challenges. Being a child of God does mean everything will be smooth sailing for us. You will still face challenges in your school, your assignments, projects, your work, demanding or unreasonable bosses, difficult colleagues, and staff. As parents, we face challenges in bringing up our child or children, and as children, we may have challenges with our parents. On the physical aspect, there could be some health issues that bother us for a long time. On the financial aspects, we do face real economic challenges – especially if you are in business. On the spiritual front, you may struggle with your personal walk with God.
35. You might have been praying about an issue for a long time. Like me, I had been praying for the 3 issues for a long time. I must admit, at times, I really doubted God heard my prayer or my cries. God seemed to have remained silent to our prayers and conditions. The waiting drags on.
36. But, remember what our Lord Jesus has assured us in John 16:33 "*I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*" Our Lord Jesus knew our challenges, yet we can take comfort that He has overcome the world, He will grant us peace that surpasses our understanding and He will be with us as we go through these life challenges.
37. As God's children, as Christians, remember that you and I will not be free from or immune to life difficulties/challenges. Our challenges are real, and so is our Lord Jesus' assurance. Fear not! We have our Lord Jesus with us even when we go through the valley of death.

38. Secondly, from my experience, from the experience of many of our biblical forefathers before us. Especially from our dear brother Job. The terrible hardship that he underwent, he did not understand why. But we know, through the whole experience, that he knew God much better than before. Likewise, for us, the challenges in our lives are tools that God uses to remind us of our relationship with Him. We must reflect and trust that God does not place difficulties and challenges to torture us or make our lives miserable. God placed life challenges in our lives to help us know Him better and to trust in Him much more than trying to trust in ourselves or others. Our second takeaway is that whatever life challenges we face are meant to help us know and experience God better.
39. Thirdly, how then should we live when we are going through life challenges, when our prayers and cries to the Lord seem to fall on deaf ears, when the waiting upon the Lord drags on? I would like to encourage you to Press On on 3 fronts:
40. Firstly, *press on serving God faithfully*. I struggled with unfulfilled desires; the chance of performing the duties of offering and burning incense was almost zero, the chance of being a father was equally zero, and the chance of seeing the messiah was just another dream. I understand it is easy to be discouraged and even give up on God. My friends, I would like to encourage you to press on serving as I did. When the going gets tough, when things are not going your way, press on serving God faithfully. Do not give up.
41. Secondly, *press on living righteously*. Despite how life treats you, do not give room to do anything that displeases God. Elizabeth and I are indeed honored by Dr. Luke – he described both of us as (v6) upright in the sight of God, observing the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly. I must confess that it was never easy, in fact very tough. Yet, I want to assure you that it is definitely not by our own efforts. The Holy Spirit was constantly helping us to live out our lives righteously, live out our lives for the glory of our God. You, too, my friends, live out your life honoring God in your words, actions, and decisions.
42. In your daily encounter with God, set aside time solely to connect with God. You will be amazed at how He will lead you through life’s winding pathway. Press on living righteously for God. Do not give up!
43. Thirdly, the greatest lesson in this experience of mine – that is to *press on praying trustingly*. Trusting in God’s ways and thoughts – they are often different from ours. Yes, I would want to be chosen to perform the burning of incense based on my schedule, I would expect to have my baby when we were still young and energetic, but obviously God had better plans than I had in mind. His ways and thoughts are much higher than ours.
44. Now even when God was silent, we were assured He had heard our prayers and our cries. He knew exactly what we were going through—the pain, the agony, the frustration, the disappointment. But we must acknowledge that His ways and thoughts are far better and higher than ours. He knows what is best for each of us – He would not give us the second best, but His very best. He has given us none other than our Lord Jesus Christ to die on the cross on our behalf, to redeem us from sin and darkness, and be reconciled in glory with Him. So, press on praying trustingly – even His ‘No’ to us is still the best answer for us.

Summary

45. The 3 takeaways: 1) As Christians, as children of God, we are not immune to life challenges; 2) God has placed these life challenges to allow us to know Him better and trust Him more, 3) As we go through life’s challenges – let us press on serving God faithfully, let us press on living righteously for God and let us press on praying trustingly in God.
46. Let me pray for us.