

When God

Waits

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J e r o m e D a l e y



WATERBROOK
P R E S S

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Introduction

An Invitation to Intimacy

Four years ago I suddenly resigned my position as worship pastor at a North Carolina church and moved my family to Colorado for a year's Sabbatical in the Rocky Mountains. This move was precipitated by a mounting inner crisis—a crisis of soul, a crisis of spirit, and a crisis of marriage. My life felt like it was coming unglued. My hands were full of random pieces, but I didn't know where they belonged.

Thus began the hardest—and best—year of my life as God began to reveal his blueprints of identity and destiny to my wife, Kellie, and me. After completing that stage of the journey (and writing it into a book), we returned to our home state with our three children, two cats, and very high hopes.¹ This is where our current story begins...and where our season of waiting begins as well.

In my experience, waiting is some of the hardest “work” we get to do. But if it is not merely we but God who initiates this waiting, then deep purpose resides here! My hope in this book is to tap into these purposes and make sense of their effects upon our lives. Ultimately, I am convinced that *waiting is an invitation to*

intimacy...an invitation we can embrace or ignore. Let us together embrace it and come to know him as never before.

Before I launch into our story, I'd like to toss an idea at you. I'm not usually a fan of Christian T-shirts. They are typically trite, culturally irrelevant, and poorly designed. But in the early 1990s there was a T-shirt that proclaimed a bold truth: "Life is hard. God is good. Let's dance!"

Succinct but not trite. And it's all there; everything we really need to know about life and destiny is captured in kernel in this pithy declaration. The sum of our lives...and the sum of this book...is the exploration of those very truths.

This book is about the unrelenting goodness of God in the face of great hardness. It's about a passionate intimacy with God that is forged in the fires of waiting.

If there's one ongoing misemphasis in the Christian world, it's a persistent preoccupation with *principles* at the expense of the *Person*. Christians like lessons that are concrete: biblical keys to surviving the desert or seven steps to discovering your personal destiny. Principles are clean, neat, straightforward, and reassuring. We dissect a biblical hero, perhaps even Jesus, and then distill a set of principles from that person's life and apply it to the entire Christian populace in a one-size-fits-all fashion. But there's more than a hint of a "Job's friends" mentality in such an exercise, which should give us all second thoughts about embracing principles and missing the Person.

When the godly man Job encountered tragedy upon tragedy,

his friends could point only to principles and then conclude that Job must certainly be bearing the judgment that his sins deserved. And yet, after God had broken into the conversation and the dust had cleared, the honesty and authenticity of Job's relationship with God found greater favor than his buddies' principles—even the true ones.²

Yes, there is a collection of timeless truths that frame the lives of Christ followers. But these *principles*, if you will, merely form the border of the painting—the structure that allows us to view the creative uniqueness of the painting itself.

Why do I bring up this interplay between *principle* and *Person*? Because the correct focus will sustain us when we're caught in a season of waiting, when our destiny feels out of reach. When we're desperate, despondent, doubting, that's when we don't need another list of principles. We need Jesus himself. Principles are powerful allies, particularly in keeping you from doing stupid things like releasing your frustration on the gambling table or in an extramarital affair. But it's only the divine Presence that stills the echoes of abandonment that arise as dark whispers in dark moments.

And it's the whispered strategies from the mouth of this Presence that we need in order to wait well. At the end of each chapter that follows, I have recapped the waiting strategy for that chapter through the actual experience of a biblical man or woman. Then I have provided journaling space for your personal interaction with God related to that strategy. Even if you don't like to write, let me encourage you to write in this book. The act of picking up a pen

and capturing your inner musings on paper is powerfully redemptive. It's a way of owning and personalizing these truths into your unique journey. Incorporate your prayers and questions, revelations and frustrations in this section.

I invite you to journey with me into both the hardness of life and the goodness of God, further than either of us has dared venture before. It is my greatest hope that we will come face to face with the kindest and most fearsome Person I know...and be captivated by his passion for us!

Chapter One

Why All This Waiting?

Destiny and the Weakness of Waiting

Being fully present in the now
is perhaps the premiere skill
of the spiritual life.

—BRENNAN MANNING¹

My face was getting tired of holding the smile in place. Kellie and I were visiting friends at a North Carolina beach, and we found ourselves reciting, once again, the reasons why we believed God had brought us back to the Southeast from Colorado. The reasons weren't complicated. We now had an opportunity to build a new ministry. To partner with a new church. To build community with new friends.

We had returned to North Carolina believing this was God's clear leading, but the tale was starting to wear thin. As I spoke the

words to our friends, I wondered whom I was trying to convince. I'd been buffing this vision with the cloth of conversation, trying to make the jewel shine as brightly as it had months earlier. Was I still trying to talk *myself* into this grandiose vision?

Kellie and I returned to our home state from a surreal sabbatical in Colorado Springs. We'd come down from the mountaintop, as it were, to bring our rediscovered souls, family, and God back into a newly commissioned assignment of ministry in Greensboro, North Carolina. It was time, we knew deep in our hearts, to release our revitalized *being* into a new kind of *doing*. With the insights we'd gained during the previous two years, we looked forward to a ministry free of the frenzied and fragmented strivings of years past. Instead, we were eager to enjoy the overflow of God's lavish presence, drawing deeply from his unceasing goodness and living securely and satisfied in him alone.

We both knew God had given us fragments of purpose, direction we could trust, but still we felt subterranean tremors of uncertainty: *can we do this?* The luster of the dream was fading slightly as we confronted the dank reality of this new place: No ministry. No church. No ministry partners. And precious few friends.

It was inevitable, of course, that we would have to field the looming question time and again: "So, what are you doing now that you're back from Colorado?" I realize that normal people have perfectly convincing, validating answers to this question. And then there was me. I vacillated between seeing myself as Spaceman Spiff, the intrepid explorer charting undiscovered territories, and a rather

worse-for-wear jack-in-the-box on the island of misfit toys. Kellie and I were calling our new venture oneFlesh Ministries, and it was our burning desire to write, speak, and lead worship for the purpose of drawing people into greater intimacy with God and one another. But how would we fulfill this dream? How does a person step into destiny? I was tired of offering vague answers to the constant questions.

Our beach friends were gracious and supportive; they knew about launching out on a dream, having moved across the state not long before to pastor a church plant in this coastal community. But as I worked to maintain my confident smile while talking about the future, my soul was being rocked by waves of doubt and fear. Could I really afford to gamble my future on a dream?

And why wasn't it coming together? My first book, *Soul Space*, wouldn't be released for another six months. Our savings were gone, and our income was nil. *Who am I kidding, telling our friends about this dream, this fantasy called oneFlesh Ministries? Kidding myself probably.*

Our vision had been birthed during a year in the stunning foothills of the Rocky Mountains. We had remained a second year to write down the soulquaking discoveries we'd made, to turn those insights into a book. The waiting really began that second year, as we wrote and hoped, prayed and dreamed about what God was making us to be and do.

Since we had taken the plunge to return back east in the summer of 2002, the onus was suddenly on us to put up or shut up,

to make good on all our talk about ramping into a new ministry or just bag it and get a “real job.” So far, nothing was happening. Why do transitions have to be so ambiguous? Couldn’t this just be simple and straightforward for a change? But often, it seems, transition demands that we relinquish the old before the new can take tangible form. If that’s true, then maybe this weightless, unanchored in-betweenness is what transition is all about. Maybe, despite the discomfort, there is purpose in waiting. At least we hoped so.

THE WEAKNESS OF WAITING

Waiting. I don’t like it...that much I have decided. Waiting feels so passive. So impotent. Waiting feels indecisive and irresponsible.

More to the point, waiting feels weak...and I definitely don’t like weak. However, our journey in God frequently involves the weakness of waiting. Can you relate to that? Does it feel as though you’re waiting for someone to hit the button and take your life off Pause? Does your destiny seem to hang out there, clearly visible but remaining just beyond your reach?

Months back I was pondering the rather staggering waiting season that my favorite biblical hero, David, endured. The prophet Samuel had already anointed David king of Israel, but he was nowhere near the throne. Not only was David’s reign over Israel not seeming to move toward reality, but all indications were just the opposite. King Saul was doing his best to kill the shepherd boy who posed such a threat merely because he was breathing. Gradu-

ally it began to dawn on me that David was not an aberration. With a mixture of fascination and dread, I began to review the stories of various biblical leaders—the movers and shakers we go to for inspiration. And guess what I found? Almost every man or woman whose story wound up in the Bible spent significant years doing one thing: waiting!

I'm not talking about waiting for the time they would be called to leadership. These people had *already* received God's call, the dream was in place, the vision had been cast. But still they had to wait—*after* God had spoken a purpose or destiny for their lives. To all outward appearances, nothing was happening. Or in David's case, his life had been a lot easier *before* God decided to name him the next king of Israel.

As much as I resist this idea, there appears to be a defining pattern in the plan of God: waiting necessarily precedes fulfillment. I'd love to be wrong on this, but I am becoming more convinced that waiting is inescapable. Waiting 101 is the prerequisite class for Intermediate Ministry, and often Waiting 201 comes before Advanced Serving. And I'm not talking about only those who are called to full-time Christian service. I'm talking about people called to full-time living! Living successfully in the Kingdom of God requires mastering the rare art of waiting well.

HEROES IN THE ART OF WAITING

Consider some of the heroes in Scripture who didn't do a whole lot other than wait before they realized their destiny:

LEADER	CALLING	SEASON(S) OF WAITING
Abraham	father to a nation	25 years
Joseph	leader of a nation	13 years + 10 more
Moses	deliverer of a nation	40 years + 40 more
David	king of a nation	about 17 years + 7.5 more ²
Joshua and Zerubbabel	rebuilders of a nation	20 years
John the Baptist	forerunner of Messiah	1–2 years
Mary	mother of the Messiah	33 years
Paul	witness to the Messiah	3 years

Do those numbers surprise you as much as they did me? Time after time God drops a word of tremendous destiny into the hearts of his people and then does...nothing! *God, what could you be thinking?!* The calling hangs out there, tantalizing, wonderful, visible but just out of reach, and this goes on for years and years. And then, when hope is extruded to a brittle filament, stripped to just one tempered thread of tenacious conviction, fulfillment comes.

Not convinced yet? All right, let's look at more examples.

LEADER	CALLING	SEASON(S) OF WAITING
Noah	salvation from Flood	2–5 years ³
Jacob	return to his homeland	20 years
Joshua and Caleb	conquer Canaan	45 years + 2–5 more

LEADER	CALLING	SEASON(S) OF WAITING
Hannah	have a child	5–15 years ⁴
Esther	salvation for a nation	about 5 years ⁵
Simeon and Anna	testify to Christ	many years
Jesus	salvation for the world	18 years ⁶

DARE WE STILL DREAM?

Are you caught in that long season of waiting? Are you struggling to get into gear so you can pursue what you were made for? Be encouraged: time spent in the weakness of waiting is time that God uses to forge the soul of destiny. It is rare that God’s people stumble into seasons of anointing and purpose without first enduring a great deal of preparation. It’s more true and much more common that God’s people first do a lot of waiting. These are the people God raises up to instigate renewal and action.

God wants us to fully experience the weakness of waiting. And in the midst of this waiting, God offers a word of hope: “[Don’t] become weary in doing good, for at the proper time [you] will reap a harvest if [you] do not give up” (Galatians 6:9). Can you receive that promise into your current place in life? I encourage you to pause right now, close your eyes, and let that word of truth wash over you.

Perhaps you don’t see yourself as a commissioned hero, not a great leader like the biblical men and women I listed earlier. Maybe your sense of calling seems very small—to raise children, to make

a career, to know Jesus better, to serve in the church. Whatever your calling, the dreams that God plants inside you are powerful for the Kingdom of God! And they are yours to be stewarded well.

When I was in college, my friend Jeff used to talk about being a world changer. He said he knew deep down that he was supposed to accomplish big things for God. I admired the overarching sense of leadership that he felt, but I couldn't relate. Jeff was charismatic, winsome, and likable—a natural leader. In contrast, my world felt comfortably small and known. My ambitions didn't rise much above having good friends, encouraging people to know God, and playing in a worship band. To be honest, they still don't! But I'm learning to dream, learning to believe that what God has begun, he will finish in my life. And in yours.

THE GIFT OF DESTINY

When it comes to dreams, there are those few people who reach for the stars. The rest of us are mostly afraid. Afraid to dream, afraid to take risks, afraid to fail and make a fool of ourselves. It feels much safer to go with the flow, to set ordinary goals that we can reach by ordinary means. But like it or not, we were made for more. God designed us for both agonies and thrills, defeats and victories.

Henri Nouwen in his book *Can You Drink the Cup?* reflects on sacred moments around his table as he was growing up, when his father would ceremoniously lift a glass of wine to toast family and

guests. Looking back at the impression those times made upon his soul, Nouwen says this:

Lifting up the cup is an invitation to affirm and celebrate life together. As we lift up the cup of life and look each other in the eye, we say: “Let’s not be anxious or afraid. Let’s hold our cup together and greet each other. Let us not hesitate to acknowledge the reality of our lives and encourage each other to be grateful for the gifts we have received.”⁷

Whether we realize it or not, God has given us the gift of destiny—every one of us. That destiny may be quiet and unnoticed by others, or it may be center stage in the public arena. But one thing is certain: laying hold of our destiny is vital to the interests of God and the satisfaction of our souls.

The lofty concept of destiny probably feels far removed from the mundane normalcy of your daily life. It often does from mine. But that feeling is a deception; destiny begins now. Until we accept and hold close our God-breathed vision for life and bring it into today, it remains lost in an unattainable future netherworld. This is why I quoted Brennan Manning’s bold statement at the beginning of this chapter: “Being fully present in the now is perhaps the premiere skill of the spiritual life.”⁸ Compared to all the other outstanding Christian disciplines and skills—prayer, meditation, fasting, study, silence, solitude, and so forth—it seems arrogant at best to elevate this highly intangible goal above the rest.

Nevertheless, over the years I have spent much time contemplating Manning's statement, and its potent truth is gently illuminating my soul. The grace to live fully and completely in *today* brings explosive transformation to our seasons of waiting. Awakening to the full potential of now releases strength from the weakness of waiting. Suddenly, waiting is not a barrier to destiny but the means of it. Waiting is not an enemy to be conquered but a friend to be embraced. Waiting is bursting with potential, overflowing with the abundance of God himself! This call to embrace the now is a divine strategy for unwrapping the gift of waiting and discover-

Strategy No. 1:

*Embrace
the now.*

ing its unique purpose in your journey.

In addition to embracing the now, nine other strategies elevate waiting to its rightful place among the spiritual disciplines. In each of the following chapters, we will look at a different strategy to harness your waiting season toward destiny.

Destiny was on my mind a couple of nights ago when I was invited by a Christian comedian to watch him put on a show for youth on the topic of sexual abstinence. As the lights dimmed and the music for *Mission: Impossible* rolled across the church auditorium, the spotlight followed a bald man in jeans and a T-shirt jogging up the aisle and leaping onto the stage. With the energy of a teenager, this thirty-something guy bounded around the room, walked over chairs, threatened, smirked, snorted, deadpanned, and harassed everyone in the house. But ultimately he kept kids and parents alike laughing and thinking for the better part of ninety minutes.

It was a thing of beauty. In between my own chuckles, I nodded my head contentedly, relishing the satisfaction of God in seeing one of his kids released into his true calling. There is very likely much more to my friend's destiny than what I observed that evening, but watching him clown around while delivering a dead serious sermon elicited in me a deep cosmic happiness.

I expect that most of us have touched the hem of our destiny in similar fashion. Some endeavor makes us feel fully alive on the inside, and we know that we're moving closer to our real purpose. Our hearts soar, and we are all there as we soak up the thrill of knowing God is working through our lives—and working well—as we wait. Something is happening that makes us feel as if we're beginning to be what God has always meant us to be. What greater thrill is there?

THE PROMISE OF DESTINY

Think about this: destiny is good because God is good.

Dare we believe either? Dare we feel the primal stirring of unacknowledged destiny? Can we even consider that the purpose of God for our lives may be much grander and deeper and harder and more wonderful than we have admitted to our closest friends ...or even to ourselves? If that possibility excites you even while it disturbs you, then keep reading. In the chapters that follow, we will journey into this new realm. The realm of possibility. The realm of purpose. And make some sense of the process involved in obtaining our destiny.

What we now see are but the first steps in the progression toward purpose—the first stages in the epic drama of God’s redemptive wildness loosed on earth. If this be so, it changes everything! The mere thought of it expands the scope of our lives exponentially. If it’s true, then passages of scripture that used to be mere rhetoric suddenly burst upon us with opportunity and challenge. Words like “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Matthew 16:25). Verses like “You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). Or this one: “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12). And then there’s a well-known verse few of us know what to do with: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). My own loose translation of that mysterious verse goes like this: “Let go of the smallness of your own pursuits, and join me in the bigness of my Kingdom; our destiny, you and me together, is to bring the very essence of heaven to earth!”

With God cooking up such amazing, miraculous, world-changing potential in our lives, why would he wait? Many times I don’t get it. But we will.

I realize that all this glorious talk may seem far removed from the messy and mundane demands of your daily experience. Truth be told, I find that many Christians shrink from an honest appraisal of both ends of the spectrum: the pain and hardness of

life as well as the glory and hope of our calling. It's easier (and less emotionally threatening) to narrow our expectation of life down to the mindless, single-syllable response given to most casual inquiries: "Fine."

"I'm fine." "Things are going fine." "The kids are fine." "Work's fine." And church? "Yeah, church is fine."

Okay, so sometimes we do find ourselves in the domain of fine—things aren't great, and they're not terrible. Life is just okay. But the trouble comes when fine gets too comfortable and we don't want to leave. We choose the perceived safety of fine over the honest tally of our life: "Much of the time my life feels simply hard and broken, but occasionally God brings me into moments of incomprehensible transcendence and is preparing me, I know, for things too wonderful even to give words to."

But I admit that when Kellie and I began setting up our new life in Greensboro, fine was a pretty fair assessment of where we were. I frequently found myself in the place of feeling *emotionally skinny*. Unwilling to verbalize my frustrations with God and sometimes unwilling to take my dreams out of their box and gaze at them again. It was easier to truncate the parts that lay furthest from my control: the extreme bad and extreme good. Fine would do fine.

But the willingness to be brutally honest about our current condition is the very quality that legitimizes our grandest dreams.

As Kellie and I left our friends at the beach, we struggled to wrap words around our conflicting emotions. Sometimes the dream was compelling—exciting us even as we continued to wait.

At other times we lost heart. But ultimately we were committed to walk the road before us, so we reached again for the grace to wait well.

WAITING WELL: HANNAH PURSUES A DESTINY

Hannah's dream was to have a son—not so remarkable as dreams go. But as ordinary as it was, it remained unfulfilled (see 1 Samuel 1:1–2:21). And as she longed for her stomach to grow, the only thing that grew was a gnawing emptiness...an emptiness that became a raging hunger inside her. And on the outside she endured the daily taunts and snubs of the “other woman” in her husband's life. Elkanah had two wives, which unfortunately was not uncommon in ancient Israel, and Peninnah had child after child while Hannah had none.

Her grief and shame overflowed her soul until one day she entered the house of the Lord and collapsed in tearful entreaty, wordlessly mouthing her heart's cry to God. Despairing, yet at the same time unwilling to let go of her hope, she held her destiny before the Father once again. I can almost hear her anguish: “Lord, you know I was created for more than this! Satisfy the ache inside me, and fulfill your calling on my life. Don't let the seasons pass me by and leave me desolate! Make good on the hope you have placed within me. Give me a son! He will belong to you all his days” (see 1 Samuel 1:10–11).

Who knows how many years Hannah had laid such a petition

at God's feet while she waited and prayed. Prayed and waited. Perhaps after five or six years her hope grew faint and she even stopped praying. But the dream didn't die. Maybe it emerged a couple of years later with fresh resolve or desperation and drove her to the house of the Lord on the day that Eli the priest observed her travail. The birthing of the dream in her soul was more exhausting than the birth from her body, which came in eventual answer to her waiting. The right dream, rightly held, will always be rightly fulfilled, even if the wait is long and hard.

Surely Hannah must have wondered, *Am I a fool to keep hoping and waiting and looking? Maybe I should just accept life on its own terms and forget this foolish vision.* Instead, she nourished her hope and stewarded her vision until God answered. And the result of her determination to hope and wait was not only her own redemption as a mother and wife but also the redemption of a nation in sore need of a godly leader. This seemingly ordinary desire—a woman longing to have a son—was in fact a destiny so large it's hard to fathom even in hindsight.

Hannah's son, Samuel, served God wholeheartedly from the time he was a small boy in the Temple until he was a very old prophet. He lived for God both while he served Eli the priest and while he served as God's mouthpiece during a time in Israel's history when the people weren't much for listening. Eventually he set the stage for Israel's greatest leader, King David, to replace one of its poorest leaders.

God used Hannah's years of hope and tears to deliver the baby

who would grow up to be one of Israel's most important prophets. As wonderful as our dreams appear to us, we don't usually see the larger picture of how the fulfillment of our destiny intertwines with the destiny of many others. None of us lives in a vacuum. Our callings affect hundreds and even thousands of other lives—for good or ill—depending largely upon our willingness to endure the weakness of waiting, to go the distance, and to obtain our God-given future!

Strategic Scriblings

Journaling Strategy No. 1: Embrace the now.

Are you fighting the season of life that seems to have you mired in waiting? Or are you uncovering God's purpose during this season? Journal your engagement with this divine strategy of embracing the now.
