



Awaiting God's Treasure

Gen 29:15-28; Ps 128; Mat 13:31-33, 44-52; Rom 8:26-39

Waiting is not one of those parts of life we look forward to. It is not a natural thing to desire to wait for the blessings of life that we anticipate. It may be that the anticipation is the best part of a much desired experience. It is not, however, the waiting that we crave. Patience may be a virtue, but it is not the kind of virtue we relish and enjoy. The more important question, however, may be what do we do as we wait? How do we anticipate the blessings of God that still lie in the future?

Jacob was apparently a hard worker. He may have been a trickster, deceitful, and underhanded at times, but he was also industrious. Having fled his brother's wrath and unexpectedly found God at Bethel, Jacob journeyed on to his mother's kin. At a well he found Rachel and went to her father Laban's home. Enamored of Rachel, he sought to have her as his wife, beginning a course of years of labor for the prospect of her hand in marriage.

I don't know about your courtship histories, but in my book, seven years of engagement is a long time. I tried to convince Karen that ten months was too long, but her mind was set. Seven years would have found my patience long exhausted. Then again, that was Laban's seeming intent. He did not want Jacob to marry his daughter Rachel. He wanted an energetic worker like Jacob for the simple cost of room and board. He wanted him to give up on marrying Rachel. He expected to exhaust Jacob's patience and be rid of him. Jacob persevered.

At the end of seven years of labor, Jacob the trickster was fooled by Laban, being given Leah in Rachel's place. This did not deter Jacob, either. I am sure he had a few choice words to say and years of private grumbling regarding his father-in-law's character. Regardless, he saw in Rachel sufficient reason to go through another seven years of labor to count her as his wife. The text is not clear as to the timing of these extra seven years of labor. They may well have come after receiving Rachel as his wife. In any case, Jacob found himself on the receiving end of his own steps in deceiving others. He bowed to the required remaining labor for the treasure of having Rachel as his wife.

The text goes on to speak of Jacob's continued labor and Laban's deceit. Jacob continues to endure with patience all of Laban's stratagems, looking for the reward he would receive at some future point. Living for the moment brought him no profit, but awaiting God's future blessing paid its dividend in full. We would prefer to look at the short term. Patience requires setting aside our limited short term perspectives while trusting God for the future we cannot see. In the meantime, there is work to be done, tasks to accomplish, and trust by which to live. Like it or not, patience is about letting go of our sense of control, to allow God to accomplish His will in His time.

In Jesus' parables concerning the coming kingdom, he speaks of Jacob's kind of industrious character as guiding our awaiting. There is a task to be accomplished, not simply a goal to await with relish. The mustard seed grows through unknown ways into a much more imposing plant than the little seed beginning the process. A little leaven works its way throughout the lump of dough on its mission to permeate that dough, changing its consistency completely. So the man finding buried treasure invests all his resources to purchase the needed property and own that treasure on which he has focused his expectations.

In each case, there is work to be done. Patience is not rewarded on the condition of idly sitting down. Its reward comes in carrying on the task at hand while awaiting results which we cannot control. The timing is not something we can rush or leap-frog. In the waiting, however, there is kingdom work to accomplish. The pearl merchant must bring all his resources into liquidity to gain the pearl on which he has set his heart. The fisherman must throw, drag, and empty the net in anticipation of the catch to be sold at market.

So the kingdom of heaven requires lives invested in kingdom priorities. It requires the industry of bringing our lives, actions, and resources into harmony with the gospel and aims of Christ Jesus. Awaiting the reign of Christ means preparing our lives for the action of God's reign within ourselves. It means investing our all toward the purpose of giving Christ Jesus presence and visibility in our families, community, and world. It is not for idle hands, even if it does not depend of strength of body or mind. The reign of Christ most often expands silently and invisibly as yeast in lumps of dough. Its requirement is purpose, not a visible show of strength.

Paul writes in Romans from a forward-looking perspective of expectancy. He speaks of God's way of operating in the world, often through means that seem the epitome of a lost cause. God works in our weakness at least as much as in our strength—perhaps more. Where we recognize our lack of skill, strength, and resources we depend upon God. This is where faith bears fruit and God's inner working takes over at our lack.

God has a purpose. It is not a meager task to be accomplished with effortless investment of resources. It is rather a grand purpose that would include all of creation. God's purpose is that all of humanity be conformed to the image of Christ Jesus. It is to this end that God took on flesh and faced the cross. It is to this end that we are commissioned by Christ as ambassadors of the gospel to the entire world. We are called into the mystery of God's love and purpose. While we do not yet see the full complement of God's promised transformation, we can rest assured in the surety of God's love expressed in Christ Jesus.

Our calling is great. The task at hand is far beyond the scope of our severe limitations. Yet it is in recognizing our limitations that God is freed to work in us and through us in unexpected ways. To fulfill God's calling requires patience, that quality we so often claim to lack. Patience, however, does not mean negligent waiting. It means industrious investment in the kingdom of Christ Jesus without a clear view of the unrealized results.

It is easier for us to look at mid term goals like Jacob's courting of Rachel. There was a definite endpoint in sight. We may grow weary in our anticipation, but we can see the goal ahead. We can project a timeframe for our waiting. The reconciliation of the entire world to the image of Christ Jesus is far beyond such limited perspectives.

Are we prepared for the true goals of divine patience? Are we ready to invest our all for the purposes of God in Christ Jesus? This is the gospel, after all. This is the treasure truly worth all our work and waiting. If we are not ready to invest our all after the kingdom of Christ, of what use is waiting for something more? Do we truly count the treasure of God's kingdom worthy of our patient labor and the investment of our all?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*