

# In the Mess

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## THE WAITING GAME

Ok, I have a confession: I am not good at this one. I am not good at waiting. There are circumstances and situations in which I am extraordinarily patient. When I was teaching, I was pretty good at being patient for the children – particularly the less able. I have on occasions found myself at an airport and been delayed and I was fine – just waited patiently. However.... I would have to say that I'm not really very good at waiting.

I have this theory, which I am convinced is true, that whichever queue I join, regardless of where it is or what the queue is for, it will, in fact be the slowest of all the queues on offer! If you ever you see me in a queue – don't join it!

We went to Chessington over Easter and as you know you have to spend most of the day in a queue waiting to get on a ride! Meghann wanted to go on a particular ride and when I discovered the waiting time was 1.5 hours, I persuaded Zac that we should do something else instead! My problem is that once I know what I want to do, I just want to get one with it. The worst part of playing football was waiting for the game to start. The worst part of playing golf is hanging around waiting to tee off the 1<sup>st</sup> tee. But there are things that are much harder to wait for.

When I was growing up, I always had a sense that I would one day end up doing full time Christian work. I didn't know what it was and I had some really crazy ideas at different times. When I trained as a teacher, I still had a sense that it wasn't what I'd do for the rest of my working life. With the help of others and this church community I felt it right to apply to train for the Baptist Ministry. For me it had been quite a long process of discovery and discernment. I'd applied for

a couple of other things which hadn't come to anything – even though on one occasion my referee told the interviewing panel I was the guy for the job!

So it was a bit of a shock when I was turned down by the ministerial recognition committee – partly because in their opinion I had applied a little hastily! Now I had to wait!

I had lots of questions: how come the church supported me and people I didn't know, and who didn't know me, didn't? What should I do now? Do I apply again? What if I'm wrong – what if God is not calling me to Baptist Ministry? What does that say to me? How do I handle that? And if not this then what? How come I've lots of people telling me they think I was right to apply?

I didn't do very well with the waiting.

Actually my initial reaction was – right then I'll give up if that's what they think! I decided I wouldn't preach anymore, or lead services and I wouldn't go to other churches either! I had been so convinced in my heart that this really was God's calling that I didn't know how to respond! To top it all I received a card from someone which really annoyed me! It annoyed me first because it had flowers on the front! But inside was written these words: "Take time to smell the flowers." Perhaps they were saying: don't despise the waiting time! Looking back I wonder if God doesn't do some of his best work in the waiting time. To me it was a bit of a mess.

Maybe God saw it differently – maybe he sees things we don't. David has been anointed King, he's won a massive victory over Goliath ... but he's still in the waiting time, and for David the waiting time is anything but easy.

"After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return to his father's house. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt. Whatever Saul sent him to do, David did it so successfully that Saul gave him a high rank in the army. This pleased all the people, and Saul's officers

as well. When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistines, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lutes. As they danced they sang: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands." Saul was very angry; this refrain galled him. "They have credited David with tens of thousands," he thought, "but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?" And from that time on Saul kept a jealous eye on David. The next day an evil spirit from God came forcefully upon Saul. He was prophesying in his house, while David was playing the harp, as he usually did. Saul had a spear in his hand and he hurled it, saying to himself, "I'll pin David to the wall." But David eluded him twice. Saul was afraid of David, because the Lord was with David but had left Saul. So he sent David away from him and gave him command over a thousand men, and David led the troops in their campaigns. In everything he did he had great success, because the Lord was with him. When Saul saw how successful he was, he was afraid of him. But all Israel and Judah loved David, because he led them in their campaigns. Saul said to David, "Here is my elder daughter Merab, I will give her to you in marriage; only serve me bravely and fight the battles of the Lord. "For Saul said to himself, 'I will not raise a hand against him. Let the Philistines do that!' But David said to Saul, "Who am I, and what is my family or my father's clan in Israel, that I should become the king's son-in-law?" So when the time came for Merab, Saul's daughter, to be given to David, she was given in marriage to Adriel of Mehlah. Now Saul's daughter Michal was in love with David, and when they told Saul about it, he was pleased. "I will give her to him," he thought, "so that she may be a snare to him and so that the hand of the Philistines may be against him." So Saul said to David, "Now you have a second opportunity to become my son-in-law." Then Saul ordered his attendant; Speak to David privately and say, 'Look the king is pleased with you, and his attendants all like you; now become his son-in-law.' "They repeated these words to David. But David said, "Do you think it is a small matter to become the king's son-in-law? I'm only a poor man and little known." When Saul's servants told him what David had said, Saul replied, "Say to David, 'The king wants no other price for the bride than a hundred Philistine foreskins, to take revenge on his enemies.'" Saul's plan was to have David fall by the hands of the Philistines.

When the attendants told David these things, he was pleased to become the king's son-in-law. So before the allotted time elapsed, David and his men went out and killed two hundred Philistines. He brought their foreskins and presented the full number to the king so that he might become the king's son-in-law. Then Saul gave him his daughter Michal in marriage. When Saul realised that the Lord was with David and that his daughter Michal loved David, Saul became still more afraid of him, and he remained his enemy for the rest of his days. The Philistine commanders continued to go out to battle, and as often as they did, David met with more success than the rest of Saul's officers, and his name became well known." (1 Samuel 18 v 1-30)

David himself asks the question you may be thinking here: "What have I done? What is my crime? How have I wronged your father that he is trying to take my life?" (1 Sam 20 v 1) You would have thought that Saul would be pleased with David wouldn't you? But, he conspires to have him killed – and that continues in chapter 19. Saul thinks up various plots to lead David to his death and David finds himself in one of the deepest, darkest and longest valleys of his life. He is very much in the waiting time, and the waiting time is a bit of a mess. Truth is David has no idea how painful the waiting time would be, or how long.

God has already got his hand on David, already anointed him as Israel's next and greatest king. But maybe God is going to do his best work in David in this waiting time: honing him, teaching him, sharpening him – and yes, breaking him. But perhaps the greatest blessing at this moment was that God didn't tell David quite how hard it was going to be! So many of us want desperately to know the future don't we? We just want to be sure.... we just want to know.... Because then we would be able to serve God wholeheartedly! But, as we've said before, that's not the way of faith. Faith is counting on God when we do not know what tomorrow holds. In God's grace, not telling us the future, forces us to live one day at a time. Living one day at a time is the life of faith.

Friends, it is especially true when we are, like David, deep in the mess – those long, deep and dark valleys of life - that living one day at a time and being forced to throw ourselves at God is so important.

Four times in chapter 18 we are told that David had great success. The NASB translates this as he “prospered”. The NIV footnote also uses the word wise – in everything he did he was “wise”!

Proverbs 10 v 19 reads: “When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise.” Someone who is wise, who prospers, who has great success is someone who knows how to keep their mouth shut! When they speak they do so with discretion! How do you handle the waiting time?

Proverbs 21 v 11 reads: “When the scoffer is punished, the naive become wise; but when the wise are instructed (same word), he receives knowledge.” The point here is the one who has success – who prospers, who is wise, is teachable! Friends, in the end God can only do his work in those who are teachable. We never, in truth, reach a position where we are beyond criticism, or where we no longer need the help and advice of others. Perhaps there are times when our best lessons can be learned from our enemies. David had success because he was wise and he behaved well even in the mess. However tough it got for him with Saul, David did what he knew to be right.

When things get difficult it is often a lot easier to fight back. Friends, in the waiting time we need to stand fast and not to get tired of doing what’s right. Walking in victory is simply walking in a way that pleases God. David was able to do that – how about you?

I’m guessing that it would have been easy for David to have felt abandoned by God at this time in his life. Perhaps our solution to the circumstances would have been to want God to remove the enemy. And when he doesn’t we conclude he isn’t doing anything. But God had a wonderful gift for David, one that would hold him through this time and through all the challenges of an angry Saul.

God gave David a true friend – Jonathan. God knew that in all David was going to have to face and endure he was going to need a friend to walk with him in the mess. We are told they became “one in spirit” or as the NASB says, “knit together”. What I find slightly staggering about this friendship is that Jonathan is

Saul's son! If anyone stood to inherit the kingdom, surely it was Jonathan? But then doesn't that just make God's gift even more powerful?

Eugene Peterson suggests that friendship is a much underestimated aspect of spirituality.<sup>1</sup> He says friends are as significant as prayer and fasting. He says friendship is something holy. Jonathan risked pretty much everything to become David's friend. But his friendship was essential to David's life and it is highly unlikely that David would have endured his valley without Jonathan's friendship. The circumstances in which this friendship was lived out were anything but easy and Jonathan, it seems, gets little reward in all this! He never saw David again after helping him escape from Saul, he lived in the court of his father which was an anti-David culture. He fought with Saul and maybe even went on David hunts with him. But he never let the circumstances cancel the covenant and God was able to use the covenant of friendship to overcome the circumstance.

God's gift to us in the waiting time is friendship which can overcome circumstances, friendship that is lived in a hostile world in marriages; in families, at work. Without Jonathan, David was vulnerable to giving up – or becoming full of revenge against Saul. Jonathan affirms, encourages and strengthens David. He helps him find the vision and the energy to keep going.

I have my Jonathans, and I need them, and I needed them in the waiting time. We must learn to value those God has graciously given us. Perhaps your prayer today is that God would give you the gift of a Jonathan, someone who isn't looking for someone to use, but who is prepared to find out what's really going on for you. Someone who is secure enough not to exploit your weaknesses or attack your strengths. Someone who will confirm what is deepest within you.

Friends, I want to ask of each of you this question: to whom can you be a Jonathan? Who has God placed in your life to whom you can be the difference for them, helping them keep their vision clear and their energy strong. Friends, perhaps there is no greater thing than to be a friend - a true friend. As the story of David continues we are reminded again that God is at work in the mess.

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<sup>1</sup> Peterson, Eugene: *"Leap Over a Wall": Reflections on the life of David*, HarperSanFrancisco 1997 page 53

Into this part he brings Jonathan, a source of friendship and strength. And he probably did before David had realised how much he was going to need him. Friends, God is always at work in the mess and the waiting times. As the grace of God was mightily at work in and around David, so it is with you and me.

Preached at Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> May by Rev. Ian Phillips