

L E A D E R ' S G U I D E



Learning to
Thrive During
Life's Delays

J o s e p h B e n t z



BEACON HILL PRESS
OF KANSAS CITY

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By Joseph Bentz and Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City

Printed in the
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Introduction to the Leader's Guide

What Is *When God Takes Too Long* About?

One of the most frustrating aspects of the Christian life for me has been, why does God take so long to accomplish His purposes in my life? Why do I always seem to be waiting for things to happen? Why do I so often feel that the most important events of my life are just beyond my reach? It would be less frustrating if they were completely out of reach because at least then I could accept that and move on. But I keep feeling that I'm ready to move before God is and am constantly praying, *I'm ready, God. Let's go!*

In the course of researching my book, *When God Takes Too Long: Learning to Thrive During Life's Delays*, I've talked to dozens of other people who feel the same way. I've seen people who have followed the Lord's leading in their lives but still end up in dead-end jobs. I've seen couples who felt called to be parents but struggle for years with infertility and failed adoptions. I've seen people who had dedicated their work to the Lord wait in confusion and disappointment as their work seems to yield no fruit.

How This Guide May Help You

When God Takes Too Long is well-suited for use in small groups and Sunday School classes. I have had the pleasure of teaching the book twice in small groups at two separate churches, once while I was writing the book and once after it was published. I have written this guide to help you lead your own small group through these issues of waiting and God's timing that almost everyone grapples with. **The book itself contains discussion questions at the end of each chapter, but this guide provides additional suggestions for activities, questions, and examples that are not included in the book.**

When God Takes Too Long is divided into two parts. The first half emerged from my reading of the entire Bible with the issue of waiting in mind. Before I did that study, my impression of the lives of people in the Bible, such as Moses, Joseph, Abraham, David, and Paul, was that their lives were characterized by action-packed episodes of God's movement and power, not the kind of stalling around that I was used to.

As I read, I quickly discovered that even in the lives of the biblical figures we think of as most adventurous and full of miracles and God's power, there were almost always long periods—some-

times decades—when they were left waiting, when nothing seemed to be happening. As I studied their stories, I looked for patterns. I wanted to know—what principles of how God works in the lives of His followers can be drawn from these people? What can how He worked in their lives tell me about how I might expect Him to work in mine? From the lives of those biblical heroes emerged 10 “Principles of Waiting on God.” In this section you and your small group will be able to bring to the surface your own frustrations and questions about God’s timing, challenge misconceptions about how we should expect Him to work in our lives, and find new ways of making the most of the seasons of (seeming) delay and waiting that everyone experiences at some point.

The second half of the book focuses on time and our perception of it. Is God slow, or is He fast? How do we define those terms? How does our own perception of time differ from His? How can we learn to “embrace the moment” and not wait our lives away? How can we prepare ourselves to stay the course and take hold of the discipline of waiting? What would happen to us if we caught a glimpse of how far beyond our own tiny perceptions and agendas God’s plan for us really extends? These are some of the issues you will help your group confront as you study the second part of the book together.

Some Points to Consider as You Begin

The ways that various groups use *When God Takes Too Long* may vary widely depending on the size of the group, the amount of time available, and other factors. Here are some issues to consider:

- The chapters do not have to be studied in order. For some groups it may work better to do the second half of the book first. Even the 10 principles that begin the book can be studied out of order, although one feature of those chapters is that they follow Moses’ story in roughly chronological order.
- This guide is based on the expectation that a group will do one chapter per session, but that time frame is flexible. In one group in which I taught this book, we spent two to three half-hour class sessions on each chapter. In a different group, we were limited from the outset to a five-week series, so I chose to teach only my favorite chapters. For one of those sessions, I combined two chapters.
- Because this guide contains some questions and other information that are not in *When God Takes Too Long*, you may want to print copies of the guide for your group to use.

Invitation to the Reader

Introduction

Part 1: Principles of Waiting on God

One

PRINCIPLE 1

Expect some frustrating detours if you're going to follow God.

Key Questions and Activities

As you begin your series on *When God Takes Too Long*, one of the most important objectives is to see how this topic connects to the lives of the people in your group. A good way to start is to summarize one of the examples of a “detour” from the first chapter of the book. Tell the story of Moses getting stuck for forty years in Midian, Joseph getting sidetracked into slavery and prison, or Jill spending years preparing for ministry only to find herself waiting for a place to serve. Then lead into this question:

- *Put yourself in Joseph's shoes (or in Moses' or Jill's shoes, depending on which story you highlight). God gives you a dream for a bright future, but then you get tossed into a pit, sold into slavery, and unfairly imprisoned. How would you hold on to your hope and trust in God?*

Next, move to a more personal question:

- *Describe a time in your own life when you felt you were on a “detour,” when you were most frustrated or bewildered by God's timing. How did you work through that frustration? What can we learn from Moses, Joseph, and Jill about how to make the best use of those times of waiting?*

Other Issues to Consider

As time permits, you may want to lead your group through a discussion on some of these issues:

FOCUS: Time-sickness

On pages 7 and 8, the book describes the malady of “time-sickness,” the obsessive belief “that time is getting away, that there isn't enough of it, and that you must pedal faster and faster to keep

up.” Do you agree that we are a time-obsessed people? What examples of time-sickness can you think of in your own life or in the lives of those around you? What is the cure?

FOCUS: The ceramic chicken

In one class in which I taught this book, I brought in a ceramic chicken that I borrowed from a writer friend of mine. Sometimes the writing projects she is most passionate about get sidetracked or don't find a publisher, while other projects prosper. When this happens, she has learned to put the languishing project underneath the ceramic chicken. Like an egg waiting to hatch, the project waits under the chicken until its proper time. Recently she sensed that the time had arrived for a book manuscript that was under the chicken, so she pulled it out and found a publisher after two years of rejections.

Some people in your class might benefit from this ceramic chicken concept, even if they don't literally use a chicken! A person might be blocked from completing a dream or goal or calling on his or her life. The calling might be real, but the timing might be wrong. Perhaps it needs to go under the chicken for a while, and with prayer and time and God's leading, it will hatch when the time is right.

FOCUS: God transforms evil into good

In Gen. 50:20, Joseph says, “While you meant evil toward me, God meant it for good, so as to bring about at this very time keeping many people alive” (Alter). Can you think of other examples, either biblical or from your own life, in which God turned evil intentions into good results?”

FOCUS: Waiting in the Bible

In addition to Moses and Joseph, identify other key figures in Scripture who faced long periods of waiting. What do their stories have in common? What can we learn from how they handled those periods in their lives?

Key Quote

From page 10: “I discovered that I'm not alone in my perception that I spend much of my life waiting on God. Not only do my fellow Christians struggle with God's apparent slowness, but waiting is pervasive in the Bible as well. The Bible is full of great “waiters,” such as Moses, Joseph, Noah, David, Jeremiah, Jonah, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Paul, and others. The truth is that they spent far more years waiting on God than they did parting the Sea of Reeds or building an ark or giving birth to a prophet. How did they endure that frustration? What gave them the wisdom to hold out for those

astonishing breakthroughs that often came only after the darkest and most discouraging periods of silence from God, after most people would already have given up on Him?”

Key Scriptures

- The story of Joseph’s detour—Gen. 37 and 39
- The story of Moses’ detour in Midian—Exod. 2

Two

PRINCIPLE 2

**Assume that God is at work—
even when you don't understand what He's doing.**

Key Questions and Activities

Invite your group to begin the study of the chapter with this activity:

- Think of the period of your life that you consider the longest time when you were waiting on God. It may be a time when you were waiting on a job to open up, or waiting to find the right spouse, or waiting to conceive a child, or another issue. On a piece of paper, describe that period in a few sentences (even if it is a period you are still going through).
- Next, in groups of two or three, describe your feelings about that period to the others in the group. Did you ever feel God had abandoned you, let you down, forgotten you? Did any sense of hope rise up in you in the midst of the waiting? Did your faith sustain you?
- Now, think about that period again. Looking back on it, identify the positive things that God was accomplishing in your life during that time. Are there things that needed to happen to you and in you during the waiting? Are there ways that you are now stronger because of it? After thinking about this, make a list of these positive developments that emerged during your waiting period, even if in other ways the wait was painful. Discuss these in groups of two or three.
- Conclude this activity by discussing these lists as a larger group. We often think of waiting as a passive time, but in fact it is often very active. God is often at work in ways that we never could have expected and in ways that we never could have known to ask Him to work. Now take a look at some examples of how God used waiting periods in the lives of some of His followers in scripture.

FOCUS: Moses makes the most of the 40-year wait in Midian

Review Exod. 2 and pages 32 and 33 of the book about why Moses' "detour" as a shepherd in Midian might have been necessary to prepare him for his leadership role that was to follow. Then discuss this question:

During the long years in the Midian desert, Moses let God do His work in him. Moses made the best of those years—obeying God, marrying, raising a family, doing the work that was placed before him. What if he had not reacted that way to this “detour” in his life? Construct an alternate history for Moses in which he lets disappointment, bitterness, or cynicism have control in his life because of his circumstances. What would have happened to him? What does that tell us about what to do in our own lives when it *appears* that God is doing nothing?

FOCUS: When we wait on God, the crowds don't necessarily cheer us on

Discuss this question: When Joseph was in prison and when Moses was out in the desert tending the flocks, do you think most of the people around them were encouraging about their future and what God was doing in their lives, or do you think many of them would have considered these men washed up or at a dead end? What do you think people said to them? What does that tell us about our response to the naysayers in our own lives?

Key Quote:

From page 33: “What about Joseph? Could he accuse God of not doing anything significant in him during his years of waiting? Certainly not. Contrast the 17-year-old Joseph who tattles on his brothers and speaks to them in self-aggrandizing tones with the wise, mature Joseph in his 30s who ably leads a nation through crisis and extends mercy and forgiveness to his family.

“The difference between the first portrait of Joseph and the later one could not be greater. Joseph did not always see or understand what God was doing. He wanted out of the pit, wanted to be freed from slavery, wanted to be released from prison. But God was doing life-changing work in his life during that time.”

Key Scriptures:

- Moses makes the best of the Midian years—Exod. 2 and 3
- Joseph moves from tattletale to ruler—Gen. 37 and 39
- Even in tough times, God is on the job—1 Pet. 4:12-13, 19

Three

PRINCIPLE 3

Remember your identity in God during the long days of waiting.

Key Questions and Activities

Ask your group members to complete this sentence:

“I am _____.”

Discuss their responses and the various ways people define their identities. Are they most likely to identify themselves by their profession—*I am a teacher, I am an artist, I am an electrician?* Or are their identities tied to their relationships with others—*I am a mother, I am a husband, I am a son?* Or are their identities most tied to their faith—*I am a Christian, I am a Catholic, I am a Nazarene?*

Throughout Scripture, God often calls His followers to move from one identity to another. Ask your group to consider some of the examples:

- Abram becomes Abraham.
- Moses moves from being a shepherd to being a leader of the Israelites who takes them from slavery to a new life in the Promised Land.
- Saul becomes Paul.
- A shepherd boy named David becomes a giant killer and king.
- Jeremiah becomes a prophet.
- Joseph becomes a ruler.
- Mary becomes the mother of Jesus.

Can you think of other examples?

Discuss: *Why were some reluctant to move into a new identity? How did they overcome that reluctance?*

How much faith did it take for these people to move into the identity to which God was calling them? What would have happened if they had refused God’s call? How would that refusal have affected their own lives and the lives of others?

What can we learn from them?

Now think about this issue in the following specific ways:

FOCUS: Our reluctance to move from one identity to another

In our own lives, especially after a time when we have waited on God for a long time, we may be reluctant to let Him move us from one identity to another. Think of a time when the Lord moved you into a new identity or role. What was your initial reaction? Fear? Resistance? How did you work through it?

FOCUS: Breaking free from a negative identity

Identify the factors that cause us to get stuck in negative identities (“*I’m the person who always starts things but never finishes them*”). What can we do to defeat these self-definitions and allow ourselves to move into the roles God has opened for us?

Key Quote:

From page 44: “Moses’ reluctance to take on the role that God has for him is understandable. In human terms, he was *not* qualified for the position. Neither was David qualified to slay Goliath or become king. Neither was Paul qualified to become an apostle of Christ. Neither were Jesus’ disciples qualified to accompany the Son of God through His earthly ministry. All these people had to radically redefine their identities once God showed up and said, in essence, *You’ve seen yourself in a certain way for a long time, but now I want to do something completely new in your life. Will you obey Me? Will you stake everything on this new vision and trust Me for the abilities, the resources, the outcome?*”

“He may say the same thing to us. Will we be ready to move when He does, or will we have frozen our identities in place?”

Key Scriptures

- Moses is reluctant to assume a new identity—Exod. 3-4
- Jeremiah is reluctant to assume a new identity—Jer. 1:6
- Isaiah is reluctant to assume a new identity—Isa. 6:5

Four

PRINCIPLE 4

Trust God—even though you’re likely to feel His way is not the best way.

Key Questions and Activities

Throughout this study, we have seen how frustrating and surprising God’s *timing* can be. In this chapter we confront the fact that His *methods* of accomplishing His purposes can be just as hard to fathom.

As the book points out on page 46, “Moses is not so sure God has adequately thought through what He presents to him from the burning bush.” A good way to begin the study of this chapter is by reviewing the objections to God’s methods that Moses presents in Exod. 3 and 4. They are objections that most people in your group will be able to relate to. Examine the objections, God’s responses to them, and the book’s treatment of them on pages 46-49.

Moses’ objections to God include these statements:

- “*Who am I* that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should bring out the Israelites from Egypt?” (Exod. 3:11, Alter, italics added).
- “But, look, they will not believe me nor will they heed my voice, for they will say, “The Lord did not appear to you” (Exod. 4:1, Alter).
- “Please, my Lord, no man of words am I, not at any time in the past nor now since You have spoken to Your servant, for I am heavy-mouthed and heavy-tongued” (Exod. 4:10, Alter).
- “Oh, Master, please! Send somebody else!” (Exod. 4:13, TM).

FOCUS: Is it disrespectful to challenge God’s methods?

We have seen that everyone from Moses to Isaiah to Jeremiah raised objections to God’s timing and methods. How comfortable do you feel doing that? When does challenging God turn into disobedience?

FOCUS: Weakness or strength?

On pages 49 and 50, the book gives examples of characteristics that could be considered weak-

nesses but that actually can become strengths. Review that section, and then discuss this question: Paul said, “So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:9-10, NIB). How can someone be content with weaknesses? Content with hardships and insults? How hard is it to think this way? Can you think of ways in your own life or in the lives of other Christians in which God used weakness in a powerful way?

FOCUS: God avoids revealing the details

In Exod. 3 and 4, God does not get very detailed with Moses on exactly what it will take to get Pharaoh to free the Israelites, or why He is choosing to do it this way, or how long the liberation and the trip to the Promised Land will take. Why do you think He withholds that information from Moses?

Key Quote

From page 47: “Like Moses, I don’t want to disobey God, but I also would like some assurances that if I step out in faith, I won’t be stuck out there on my own. I would like to see the full plan so that I could consider it and perhaps suggest a few changes. Unfortunately, I have to admit that this is an elaborate way of saying that I don’t want to have to rely solely on trusting Him.”

Key Scriptures

- Moses raises objections to God’s methods—Exod. 3-4
- God’s grace is sufficient—2 Cor. 12

Five

PRINCIPLE 5

Wait and obey—even as things seem to get worse.

Key Questions and Activities

What is God doing to me?

Imagine that you are following God as best you know how, doing everything you can to obey Him and fulfill the calling He has placed on your life, and yet you're getting nowhere. Everything is falling apart. Nothing is happening according to the timing you had envisioned. You pray for things to get better, and instead they get worse. What conclusions should you draw?

This chapter deals with that dilemma.

FOCUS: Moses obeys God; things get worse

Although no words can eliminate the frustration, pain, or anger we feel when we obey God and things get worse, we may get some encouragement from knowing that we are not alone. Many of the best-known heroes of our faith have confronted exactly that problem. What can we learn from them?

Review with your group the portion of Moses' story that is told in this chapter.

Some highlights:

- Moses tries to talk God out of choosing him to lead the Hebrew people, but God insists. Then, once Moses reluctantly obeys, his first approach to Pharaoh is a disaster. Not only does Pharaoh scoff at Moses' demands, but he actually punishes the Hebrews and makes their lives far more difficult. They feel betrayed and complain bitterly against Moses.
- When Moses asks God for an explanation, God does not provide one. He simply tells Moses to go back to Pharaoh and renew his demands.

FOCUS: Joseph obeys God; things get worse

Highlights:

- God gives Joseph those amazing dreams about his bright future, but when he tells his brothers about them, where does it get him? **Thrown into the pit and sold into slavery.**
- When he's a slave in Potiphar's house, he lives a life of integrity and refuses to sleep with the boss's wife, but where does he end up? **Tossed into prison.**

- He interprets the dream for the cupbearer in prison, and what is his reward? **He is forgotten for two years.**

FOCUS: Jeremiah obeys God; things get worse

Highlights:

- Jeremiah speaks the words that God tells him to speak, and how is he treated?
- After preaching a sermon, he is whipped and put in the stocks in a gate of the Temple.
- God tells him to make a harness and yoke and harness himself up as an illustration to the kings to whom he has to speak.
- He is thrown in jail.
- He is confined in a cistern, where he sinks into the mud.
- He is put in chains and carried off in exile to Babylon.

After examining the stories of these three men, spend some time discussing these questions:

- *At what point in each of these stories might you have been tempted to quit? What kept these men going? What can we learn from them?*
- *The lives of the Israelites get harder because of Moses' obedience to God. What false conclusions might the people have drawn about those circumstances? That God had not really called Moses? That God didn't plan to free them? That God was not as powerful as Pharaoh? What false assumptions might we be tempted to make when we suffer in the midst of serving the Lord? How can we avoid that destructive thinking?*

FOCUS: When God remodels our lives, things get messy

Review the final section of the chapter and then discuss this question:

This chapter mentions home remodeling, surgery, and training for athletic competition as examples of areas in life in which we voluntarily accept short-term suffering to enjoy the long-term benefits. Can you think of other areas of life in which we do this? Is it harder to accept short-term chaos and suffering in the spiritual realm of our lives than in these other areas? Are the comparisons valid?

Key Quote

From page 56: “Even though obedience to God is required in order for His plans to be fulfilled in Moses, Joseph, and Jeremiah, their obedience does not guarantee quick results. They all must wait through long periods of setbacks and challenges first. The same pattern is true of many others we

could look at, such as Abraham, Job, and Paul. They endure short-term frustration and pain in order to fulfill a long-term plan of God that often extends far beyond their own lifetimes.

If all these other people of faith endured times of misery despite the fact that they were following God's call, should I be surprised when it happens to me? If God still worked out a long-term plan for them that was *good*, then isn't it reasonable to think He will do so for me?"

Key Scriptures

- Moses obeys and things get worse—Exod. 5 and 6
- Joseph obeys and things get worse—Gen. 37 and 39
- Jeremiah obeys and things get worse—Jer. 20, 27, 40

Six

PRINCIPLE 6

Have faith that in His good time God will sweep away the obstacles.

Key Questions and Activities

Almost. Not yet.

A good way to begin your discussion of this chapter is by asking:

Which is more frustrating:

When the thing you've been waiting on is so far away that you know it's completely out of reach for the foreseeable future?

OR

When the thing you've been waiting on is so tantalizingly close that you can almost see it and feel it, but it is still being dangled just out of reach?

After seeing how people answer this and discussing their reasons, move to the following related question, which you may want them to discuss in groups of two or three before they share their answers with the entire group.

This chapter describes a time in life when the fulfillment of God's calling in our lives, the answers to our deepest longings, seem achingly close, and yet God keeps us dangling. He doesn't say yes. He doesn't say no. Either of those answers would at least provide clarity. Instead, we twist in the wind. Can you think of a time like that which you have endured? How long did it last? How was it resolved? What would you say to other Christians who are facing a similar struggle?

FOCUS: The danger of diminished expectations of God

Review the “almost, not yet” phase that Moses endured as he waited for Pharaoh to finally be defeated. As the book points out, one of the biggest dangers during a long period of waiting like that is that we may be tempted to lower our expectations of God: “We interpret ‘not yet’ to mean ‘never.’ We begin to believe this vague disappointment with God is a permanent condition. He’ll take us so far, He’ll raise our hopes, but we’ll always be left stranded in the end. We don’t give up exactly. We don’t renounce our Christian commitment and publicly turn away from God. Instead, we believe in

Him, but we don't expect much from Him. We'll continue to call ourselves His, but we don't intend to dream big anymore or put ourselves on the line for Him" (59-60).

How did Moses avoid falling into that trap of lowered expectations of God? How can we also avoid it?

FOCUS: The destination is NOT all that matters

Even during long periods of waiting, the rest of our lives go on. We often don't realize it at the time, but those waiting periods can sometimes end up being as important to our lives as the destination is. As the book points out, "As exasperating as it might have been for Moses to keep pronouncing all those plagues and fighting that battle of wills with Pharaoh, we now look upon this phase as a crucial part of Moses' story. He was *fulfilling* his calling, not just *waiting* to get to it" (63-64).

Discuss with your group: in what ways might the events that happen during a "waiting" period be a crucial part of your calling? What might you miss out on if you only want to "get through" that period to rush to the destination?

Key Quote

From page 63: "The way God chooses to bring Pharaoh to his knees must have seemed frustratingly complicated and roundabout and miserable for Moses and his people. However, there was one important truth they held on to: *"The fact that God takes a long time to accomplish His purposes does not mean He lacks the power or will to move forward."*

Key Scripture

- Moses' "almost, not yet" period with Pharaoh—Exod. 7-12

Seven

PRINCIPLE 7

Remind yourself of what the Lord did for you in the past.

Key Questions and Activities

It is so easy to get caught up in the crisis of the moment, overlooking all the good things God is doing in our lives right now and all the amazing things He has done for us in the past. Making an inventory of those past and current gifts from God is not an exercise in sentimentality or nostalgia. Instead, reminding ourselves of those good things from His hand can give our faith a crucial boost as we confront the current crisis.

FOCUS: Times are tough, but blessings also abound

After reviewing the key points of the first section of this chapter of the book, give your group time to write out a list of all the good things God has put into their lives right now. Encourage them to write down everything they can think of from something as small as an enjoyable cup of coffee they enjoyed that morning to something as important as a new baby that has come into the family.

Once they have been given plenty of time to compile these lists, have a few people read them. Then discuss how this list changes your perspective on what God has done and is doing in your life right now. Why is it so much easier for us to focus on the crises than on the blessings of our lives? What can we do to increase our awareness of God's goodness in our daily lives?

FOCUS: If God brought me through before, He can do it again

Review the final section of this chapter of the book. Notice how important *remembrance* is to God and the Israelites. Look at how, in Exod. 13, all the action stops so that the Passover celebration and other traditions can be established. Why do you think the story is told that way?

Traditions like Passover commemorate God's work from centuries ago, but in our own lives we can also find encouragement by looking back at all the ways God has brought us through difficulties. Give your group time to consider and discuss the following questions:

- *Go back 10 years and try to remember the issues you were facing at that time. What were you worried about? What difficulties were you dealing with? What were your hopes and dreams? Now trace the various ways God has worked in those situations from then to now. Did He surprise you in any way? Could you have predicted things would turn out the way they have? What does remembering these things show you about how God works?*

Key Quote

From page 70: “Like the Passover celebration and other rituals, the very existence of the Book of Exodus and the books that surround it illustrates how God uses remembrance in the lives of believers. Alter calls the narrative in Exodus a kind of ‘national epic.’ Notice, however, that it does not tell only of heroic deeds. The frailties, sins, complaints, and failures of the leaders and of the people are vividly displayed. The people are commanded to remember all those things. Through every circumstance, good and bad, God keeps working, His story keeps flowing forward.”

Key Scripture

- “Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt” — Exod. 13

Eight

PRINCIPLE 8

Wait when it's time to wait and act when it's time to act.

Key Questions and Activities

After hundreds of years of slavery, after ten plagues, after countless other setbacks and risks, the Israelites are finally free! The hard part should be over. They should be free from Pharaoh for good, right?

Wrong.

As he hears about them wandering around in the desert, he concludes, "They are confounded in the land. The wilderness has closed round them" (Exod. 14:3, Alter). He wants his slaves back! So he sends his army out to get them.

Knowing that Pharaoh's mighty forces are bearing down on them, the Israelites turn on Moses in panic and blame. Rather than responding in the same tone, he speaks these wise words: "Do not be afraid. Take your station, and see the Lord's deliverance that He will do for you today, for as you see the Egyptians today, you shall not see them again for all time. The Lord shall do battle for you, and you shall keep still" (Exod. 14:13-14, Alter).

Ask your group to consider each of Moses' amazing phrases:

- *Do not be afraid.*
- *Take your station.*
- *The Lord shall do battle for you.*
- *You shall keep still.*

Ask, given the circumstances, how would his statements have struck you if you were one of the Israelites? Which of the following responses would you have been most likely to give?

"No problem, Moses. We have already seen the Lord perform many miracles with the plagues and with the securing of our freedom. We have no doubt that, in spite of how bad things look at the moment, He will rescue us once again."

OR

"Are you crazy? Don't be afraid? Keep still? Wake up, Moses! There's an army headed right for us, and that's the best you can do? Shouldn't you at least tell us to grab our weapons? Or better yet, how about just tell us to RUN!"

Invite your group to reflect on this story in the following ways:

FOCUS: Sometimes God says to let Him fight the battle for you

Recall a time in your life when you felt the Lord leading you **not** to act to solve a dilemma in your life, even though you were eager to do so. Were you surprised at first? Did you resist His method? Tell your story and what you learned from it.

FOCUS: Waiting v. Acting

Which is more difficult for you, **waiting** on God to fight your battle for you, or working up the courage, faith, and energy to **act** when that is what the situation calls for? Why?

FOCUS: Being second-guessed

Pharaoh believed the Israelites were “confounded in the land,” when in fact they were following God’s plan. As the book says on page 72, “During long times of waiting on the Lord, those around you often may believe that you are ‘confounded’ even though you’re simply obeying God. Because they don’t yet see the evidence of God’s work in you, naysayers may accuse you—to your face or behind your back—of laziness, lack of faith, lack of talent, or lack of drive. Even well-intentioned friends may urge you to take matters into your own hands, find a shortcut to your goal, force an outcome.”

Have you ever faced such second-guessing? How did you handle it?

FOCUS: When does waiting become an excuse not to act?

God sometimes leads us to keep still and wait so that He can fight our battle for us, but there are other times when we clearly are supposed to act. Have you known people who get those times confused? Can you think of examples when you or others have used waiting on God as an excuse not to act? How can we avoid that pitfall?

Key Quote:

From page 75: “But just as there are times when the Lord calls us to move swiftly, there are other times when the Lord commands us not to act. We must ‘take our station.’ We must remain ready in a place that is a necessary step in our journey, even though it’s not really where we want to be.”

Key Scripture

- Let the Lord fight your battle—Exod. 14

Nine

PRINCIPLE 9

Know your enemies—their names are Restlessness, Complaining, and Disobedience.

Key Questions and Activities

Lead your group into a discussion of this chapter by presenting the following scenario:

Imagine this: *You go to church on Sunday morning and feel the presence of the Holy Spirit very powerfully. In fact, God's presence is so powerful that as the musicians play, brightly colored strands of light shoot out of their instruments and swirl around the room. Later, as the pastor prays to God for the financial needs of the church, \$100 bills float down from the ceiling. "Put some of that money into the offering plates," he instructs the congregation, "and then keep some for yourselves. There's plenty more where that came from!" As he preaches, he is so suffused with God's presence that he floats up and hovers over the heads of the congregation.*

- Ask your group, what impact would such a service have on your faith? Do you think it would cause you never to doubt God's power again?

Although it would seem that such tremendous signs of God's presence would increase faith, evidence from the Bible indicates that even people who experience God so powerfully are still prone to falling into habits of restlessness, complaining, and disobedience.

- Look at the Israelites, for example. From the scriptures discussed in this chapter and previous chapters, list all the miraculous signs of God's presence that the Israelites saw.
- Despite those amazing signs from God, examine some examples of how they moaned and panicked the moment things got difficult. Why would they do that? In what ways are we prone to the same spiritual dangers?

FOCUS: Gripe, gripe, gripe

Consider the following question:

Once the Israelites receive the pessimistic report from the spies who scouted out the Promised Land, they respond with this extravagant complaint: "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt, or in this wilderness would that we had died. And why is the Lord bringing us to this land to fall by the sword? Our women and our little ones will become booty. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" (Num. 14:2-3, Alter).

Talk about how this complaint might be stated by Christians today. Looking at this and similar complaints of the Israelites, do you see any reflections of these attitudes in your own life or in the lives of other Christians? Is complaining contagious? What happens when it gets out of control?

FOCUS: Stepping out in faith

Ask your group to discuss the following question:

After a long period of waiting on God, our fears may make us reluctant to move once He finally opens up the opportunity to do so. We may fear the “giants” who inhabit the “Promised Land” just ahead of us. Consider the following quotation from this chapter:

I know I've been restless and have complained nonstop that God is moving too slowly. I know that I've prayed to God repeatedly to bring me this moment, and yet . . . what if I fail? What if I step out and am humiliated? This whole thing is His fault anyway! He took so long to move that I have kind of gotten used to this wilderness. OK, maybe I am stuck in a spiritual rut. Maybe my life is not producing much fruit. On the other hand, at least I'm not making a fool of myself! I'm not making much progress, but the giants aren't ripping me to shreds, either! It's not all that uncomfortable here. Maybe I'll stay just a little longer.

Have you ever fallen prey to this kind of thinking? Describe such a situation and how you worked through it. Are there other motivations besides fear that may make us reluctant to move to the “Promised Land” once the doors of opportunity are opened?

Key Quote

From page 83: “Or think of a ride in an airplane. I don't know anyone who hopes that the plane will taxi around the runway for two or three hours so they can watch more airplanes take off or have more time to be strapped in their seats munching a bag of pretzels. Everybody wants the plane to *take off* and to reach the destination as quickly as possible.

“Now *imagine what it would be like to taxi around that runway for 40 years.* That's exactly what Moses and the Israelites had to do. It's what many of us feel we're doing also—wandering around in a wilderness and waiting on God, our greatest dreams on hold, our prayers seemingly unanswered. We don't mean to be ungrateful for all that God has done, but even manna dropped from heaven gets old after a while when all we really want is to escape this desert and get to our Promised Land.

“As God leads us on this long trek, we are prey to the same dangers that so often undermined the Israelites. Disobedience leads to devastating consequences. Notice how, for the Hebrews, disobedience always backfires. They hoard manna so that it doesn't run out, but it ends up worm-infested and stinking instead. Later in their journey, *disobedience actually makes their wait longer and ensures that some of them will never live in the Promised Land at all.*”

Key Scriptures

- The Hebrews complain extravagantly—Exod. 16:3
- The Hebrews spy out the Promised Land, lose heart because of giants—Num. 13
- The Hebrews complain some more—Num. 14

Ten

PRINCIPLE 10

**Cling to God’s purposes—
even if you have a quicker plan of your own.**

Key Questions and Activities

As we have seen throughout this book, it can be exasperating to wait on God’s timing, so many of us are tempted to devise shortcuts of our own to get where we think He should be taking us.

The purpose of this chapter is to show the danger of those shortcuts and to illustrate the importance of sticking to God’s methods even when they don’t make sense to us at the moment.

A good way to begin is by establishing how obsessed our culture is with the whole concept of shortcuts. Ask your group to make a list of them. These suggestions may help them get started:

- In what ways does our culture use gambling as a shortcut to wealth? How well does that usually work?
- How many diets, pills, and other methods are you aware of that offer a shortcut to weight loss?
- How do we use debt as a shortcut to acquiring what we want?
- What are other examples of our instant-gratification culture?

FOCUS: What Esau teaches us about shortcuts

Review the story of Esau on pages 90-92 and in Exod. 25. He trades his birthright for a bowl of “red red stuff.” At that fateful meal he lets his appetite take over his whole life and trades away his future for some food that will keep him full for only a few hours. It sounds foolish, but is it completely unfamiliar to us?

- In what ways are we tempted to let our appetites outweigh all other considerations?
- Spiritually, what are some ways that we can abandon long-term growth for the sake of short-term benefit?

FOCUS: What the Israelites teach us about shortcuts

Go over with your group the story of the Israelites and the golden calf that is discussed on pages 92-95 and in Exodus 24 and 32. The only task the Israelites have to fulfill is to wait on Moses to come down from Mount Sinai, where he is receiving a word from the Lord. Sounds easy enough.

They even see the glory of the Lord, which is “like consuming fire” as Moses goes up the mountain. The commandments that Moses receives will change the history of the world.

Even though it might seem that they would be thrilled to be part of this story and would fulfill the undemanding role that they are given, they have no idea how long Moses will be away. They get restless, bored, and scared. In their desire to take a shortcut and force something to happen, they make a horrible mistake.

After reviewing the outcome of the story, discuss these questions:

- As the Israelites waited for Moses to come back down Mount Sinai, doubt and fear began to settle in. Little did they know the magnificent things God was doing! In your own periods of waiting on God, what doubts and fears have you been tempted to indulge? What shortcuts have you been tempted to take to try to force a particular outcome? What can the experience of the Israelites teach you about those?
- When Aaron agrees to make the golden calf for the people to worship, he tries to offset that betrayal of God by declaring a “festival to the Lord” for the next day. Do people today also try to keep a foot in both camps? In what ways? For Aaron, this attempt at having it both ways is a disaster. How does it turn out for people today?

Key Quote

From page 94: “As we wait on God in our own lives, not aware that He is already acting, we get bored. We get scared. We worry, thinking, *what if I’m stuck here forever?* We panic. We make rash decisions. We reason, *If God is not going to work in my life, then I’ll make something happen! I’ll have fun, if nothing else. If holding out for meaning has failed, I’ll settle for pleasure. I’ll fill the void with food, shopping, money, drugs, with anything that makes those long days fly by faster.*

“If I’m in college and that is taking too long, I’ll drop out. If I’m building a church but it’s taking too long, I’ll abandon it. If I’m building relationships with people but I’m running into too much difficulty, I’ll settle for superficiality.”

Key Scriptures

- Esau trades his birthright for some “red red stuff”—Exod. 25
- The Israelites betray God, hatch a disastrous plan—Exod. 24 and 32

Part 2: Perspectives on Time and God's Timing

Eleven

AREN'T WE THERE YET?

Coming to Grips with the Nature of Time

Key Questions and Activities

Is God slow, or is He fast? What *is* slow? What *is* fast?

The purpose of this chapter is to challenge our attitudes toward time. Do we have a healthy and realistic perception of how long we should have to wait for things to happen? Understanding time better may help us to more readily come to terms with God's timing in our lives.

FOCUS: How “velocitization” distorts our perception of time

One of the best ways to begin the discussion of this chapter is by considering the concept of “velocitization” that is described on pages 103-5. Ask your group to define this concept, give examples of it, and then discuss these questions:

As life gets faster and faster, do we begin to build up unrealistic expectations of how long things should take? How does that affect us in our relationships with friends and family? How does it affect us spiritually? How does it impact our sense of satisfaction with our lives?

FOCUS: Why do we live our lives at such a frantic pace?

Ask your group to consider this quote by Carl Honore, which is found on page 103: “In our hyped-up, faster-is-better-culture, a turbocharged life is still the ultimate trophy on the mantelpiece. When people moan, ‘Oh, I’m so busy, I’m run off my feet, my life is a blur, I haven’t got time for anything,’ what they often mean is, ‘Look at me: I am hugely important, exciting, and energetic.’”

Although we may be tempted to equate a frantic pace with success, what biblical evidence is there to challenge that view? (Start with Matt. 6).

FOCUS: What nature teaches us about time

This chapter mentions processes in nature that take a very long time, such as the thousands of years it takes for a giant sequoia tree to grow or the hundreds of thousands of years it takes for a photon that starts in the sun's core to reach us as a beam of light. Can you make a list of other natural processes that take a very long time? What would happen if those processes were cut short? How does that change your perspective of your own life?

Key Quote

From page 103: “What happens when we take this frenzied perception of time and try to impose it on our expectations of God? Will He speed up and conform to our get-on-with-it timetable? Or will we be the ones who will have to change?”

Key Scriptures

- Stop worrying about tomorrow — Matt. 6
- Stop trying to control time — James 4:13-16
- With God, one day is as good as a thousand years — 2 Pet. 3:8-9

Twelve

EMBRACING THE MOMENT

How Not to Wait Your Life Away

Key Questions and Activities

Many of us are wishing—or waiting—our lives away. We put so much hope on what life will be like after some future event—once I get that great job, once I graduate, once I get married, once I retire—that the day we’re actually living gets lost in a blur.

FOCUS: Breaking free from the “get through it” mentality

Review with your group members the “get through it” mode that is described on pages 112-13. Then ask them to recall the previous 24 hours and remember how much of it they spent in that “get it over with” frame of mind. Did they do this even with activities they enjoy? What good things about the day might they have missed because of that attitude?

FOCUS: Waking up to the beauty of “wasting time” and other pleasures

This chapter tries to slow people down so they can enjoy the small, easily-overlooked pleasurable moments of life. The chapter approaches this idea in various ways. Invite your group to take part in these discussions:

- Read Robert Bly’s “Driving Late to Town to Mail a Letter” out loud (page 114). What is surprising about his attitude toward this chore? What might have been a more likely reaction? What other chores come to mind that could be considered annoyances but that could also be turned into enjoyable moments?
- It’s easy to allow our lives to be dominated by crisis management and to forget about the hundreds of small pleasures that fill each day. Pages 116 and 117 include a list of such pleasures. Ask your group members to write their own lists. After they have done so, ask them to share some of those items. Then ask how that list changes their perspective on the richness of their lives.

FOCUS: “Life is elsewhere”: How to be present in your life

Consider Merle Rubin’s quote on page 120: “And who are all those harried souls clutching their cell phones to their ears, whether they’re driving, walking, shopping, or taking their children to the park? One can’t help thinking their motto should be ‘Life is elsewhere,’ for they seem incapable of fully giving themselves over to whatever activity they’re supposedly engaged in.” Ask your group, besides cell phones, what other devices and activities isolate us from our surroundings and keep us from fully experiencing the here and now. What specific actions can we take to allow ourselves to be more present in our lives?

Key Quote

From page 114: “How sad it would be to get to the end of our lives and think, *I never really lived my life because I was always waiting for it to happen*. The excerpt from Ecclesiastes that begins this chapter urges, “Even if you live a long time, don’t take a single day for granted. Take delight in each light-filled hour” (Eccles. 11:8, TM). How can we do that? How can we keep from sleepwalking through our lives and live in a way that’s passionate and fully aware?”

Key Scripture

- Don’t take a single day for granted—Eccles. 11:7-8

Thirteen

STAY THE COURSE

Mastering the Discipline of Waiting

Key Questions and Activities

What difference would it make if we stopped treating waiting as an enemy to be conquered and treated it as a spiritual discipline to be fulfilled?

That is the central question this chapter addresses.

FOCUS: Don't try to get out of anything prematurely

Start your discussion by reading Eugene Peterson's translation of James 1:2-4, which is quoted on pages 124-25. It says:

"Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way" (TM).

Then read the same verses from *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, which says, "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing."

Using material from the book, carefully analyze each of these statements from those verses:

Don't try to get out of anything prematurely.

Let endurance have its full effect.

Consider tests and challenges a gift.

Think of trials as pure joy.

- Our natural inclination is to do exactly the opposite of all of these. On a practical level, how can we embrace these disciplines? How will our lives look different if we do?
- The book shows how these concepts work in the world of athletics. Why is it so much harder to apply them to our spiritual lives?

FOCUS: What should we do when we feel like quitting?

“Let’s face it. No matter how deeply we love the Lord, there are times we want to stray from the Christian path.” That statement appears on page 130. Do you agree with it? Is the desire to quit the Christian life inevitable?

Ask members of your group to think of the time when they were most tempted to quit the race of the Christian life. Why did they want to quit? What finally kept them on course or got them back on course? What advice would they give to anyone tempted to quit?

Study the “stay the course” scriptures on page 131. Do those come across as encouragement, or warnings, or a little of both?

FOCUS: As we wait on God, how can we strip away dangerous distractions?

As the book points out, a time of waiting should not be a time of drifting. Discuss what the book has to say about Heb. 12:1, which states, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (NIB).

What are the distractions that are most likely to knock you off track in your Christian journey? What steps can you take to eliminate them or minimize their effect?

Key Quote

From page 124: “Olympic athletes understand what we as Christians often forget: To cut short that waiting and preparation time, as we so often want to do, is to cut out the triumph.”

Key Scriptures

- Run in such a way that you will win the prize—1 Cor. 9:24-27
- Let endurance have its full effect—James 1:2-4
- Set aside sin, run with perseverance—Heb. 12:1

Fourteen

CASTING OFF THE BOUNDARIES OF TIME

How God's Desires for Our Lives May Reach Farther Than We Ever Dreamed

Key Questions and Activities

A good question to begin the discussion of this chapter is:

- How would you assess your life right now?

(Is it going well? Is it going poorly? How can you tell?)

- Consider the *methods* and *criteria* we often use to assess our lives. How do we do it from a purely worldly perspective? How much money we have? Health? Achievements?
- From what you read in this chapter, how do those methods of assessment differ from the Christian perspective?

Specifically, how should being a Christian affect the way we consider only our *individual* achievements as opposed to looking how we fit into God's larger story stretching back to people like Abraham and Moses and stretching forward to believers who are not even born yet? (See Heb. 11 and pages 138-40 in the book.)

FOCUS: The ripple effect

- In groups of two or three, ask people to tell each other about someone who had a huge impact on them spiritually *but was probably unaware of it*. Then share a few of these stories with the entire group. What does this tell us about the impact that our own lives may be having beyond what we can measure here and now? How does this make you want to look at your life differently and live it differently?
- Ask each member to write out answers to this question: This chapter discusses the ripple effect of our lives—how something we do today may bear fruit years from now in ways we'll never know. List five deeds from your life—from money you've given to church to Sunday School classes you've taught to relationships you've had—that may have had ripple effects long afterward. Speculate on what those effects might have been and might still be.

FOCUS: Completing the work of others

- Review either the Moses/Joshua story or the David/Solomon story in the book and in scripture and then consider the following question:

What if Moses and David had viewed their roles in God's story only in individualistic terms? Write an alternative history for these men that shows what might have happened if they had rejected any plan from God that did not allow them to lead the people into the Promised Land or build the Temple themselves. What can we learn from this in our own spiritual lives?

Key Quote

From page 147: “When we consider what God is doing in our lives, one of the biggest mistakes we can make is to judge our lives only on what we can *see*, and only on what we can see *now*. But there's a ripple effect that's crucially important but hard to evaluate. Think, for instance, of the money you give to the ministries of your church or to missions organizations. You give it and then move on. You don't trace what happens with each dollar. When that money allows a clinic to be opened or a Bible study to be taught or the gospel to be preached from a pulpit thousands of miles away, you will not be aware of it. At the moment someone's life is being changed, you might be thinking, *My finances are a mess. I wish I had invested my money more wisely*. In fact, you may have already made the most important financial investment of your life without realizing it.”

Key Scriptures

- Joining the story of faith through the centuries—Heb. 11
- Moses and Joshua—completing the work of others—Deut. 31, 32, 34
- David and Solomon—completing the work of others—1 Chron. 17, 22, 28, 29

Fifteen

GOD HAS ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD—AND MORE

An Eternal Perspective on Waiting

Key Questions and Activities

One reason we so often find ourselves frustrated with God’s timing is that we think almost exclusively about what He will do for us in this life. But God has all eternity to work out His plans. As this chapter points out, “In our day many Christians feel uncomfortable thinking too much about heaven, as if doing so somehow means they’re avoiding dealing with the ‘real world’ of the present. But for early Christians, thoughts of heaven and thoughts of the Second Coming of Jesus were not *avoidance* of the present; instead, these thoughts were a way of keeping the present in its proper perspective.”

Discuss with your group:

- Look at the scriptures about heaven and eternity that are included in this chapter. Those early believers had a strong sense of how their present lives connected to eternity. Does it seem more difficult in our day to live with an eternal perspective in mind? If so, why?
- Paul wrote that he did not know which to prefer, remaining in this life or going to be with Christ. Do most Christians today struggle with that choice, or are we more likely to want to cling tenaciously to our present life at all costs?

FOCUS: Concentrating on heaven reminds us that suffering is temporary

Review pages 152-54 of this chapter, which concentrates on how an awareness of eternity can change our perspective toward hardship.

- Give your group time to make a list of those painful things in their own lives that they may never be able to make sense of until they’re in heaven. Ask people to share some of these with the group. How difficult is it to live in the reality of Rom. 8:18, which says, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us” (NIB)?

FOCUS: Encourage each other with the promise of eternity

As the final section of this chapter shows, the early believers put much emphasis on speaking words of encouragement to each other about the promise of heaven. The chapter contrasts that with this attitude: “Whenever I speak words of support to my brothers and sisters in Christ who are going through tough times, I am sorry to admit that I rarely mention the promise of heaven or the promise of Jesus’ Second Coming as part of that encouragement. Why don’t I? I think the main reason is that such hope seems too far away. Instead, I’m searching for something that will help someone *now*.” Ask your group, how can we do a better job of following the biblical instruction to make eternity a regular part of our encouragement to one another?

FOCUS: What we’ve learned about waiting and God’s timing

Since this is the last chapter of the book, this might be a good time to ask the group to reflect on some of the most important insights about God’s timing they have learned throughout this study. What surprised them the most? Where do they want to go from here in their attitudes and actions?

Key Quote

From page 155: “Heaven is the prize that will finally reveal that all our waiting has been worth it. Peter ends his letter with the same idea: “The suffering won’t last forever. It won’t be long before this generous God who has great plans for us in Christ—eternal and glorious plans they are!—will have you put together and on your feet for good. He gets the last word; yes, he does” (1 Peter 5:10-11, TM).

Key Scriptures

- The joyful anticipation of eternity deepens—Rom. 8:19-23
- God puts heaven in our hearts so we won’t settle for less—2 Cor. 5:3-4
- This slight momentary affliction prepares us for an eternal weight of glory—2 Cor. 4:16-5:1