

We're in a series right now, as we prepare for Christmas, called the Thrill of Hope. This season is Advent, a time to prepare, to wait. And throughout this series, we've been asking what it means to wait well. Because for people who follow Jesus, there's a hard link between Christmas and the End of the World (I know, it doesn't make a lot of sense at first, does it?). [Bring back the timeline from last week] But Christmas is the first time Jesus came, and the End of the world will be the Second Time he comes. And right now, we're stuck between those two comings, waiting for the second, for the End.

Our waiting is similar to the waiting God's people did for Jesus to come the first time. They anticipated that first Christmas the way we anticipate the Second Coming. God's arrival was good news for them then and his return will be good news for us as well.

If you were here last week, you know we spent a good bit of time talking about what the End will be like. How - contrary to popular opinion - the End isn't all bad. That what we're anticipating is the End of injustice, evil and death. That good and truth and beauty will survive the End and that we can participate in that world without end. The End isn't the end of all things, but only the end of evil things.

But in the meantime, we're waiting. And it's that waiting I want to dive into this week. Because last week, Peter told us that waiting looked like this:

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. -- 2 Peter 3:11-12

We're to live "holy and godly lives". That's pretty abstract. And last week, I suggest that looked like "Love God and Love people," that our waiting is to be an active waiting. We're waiting to be transformed, to become the kinds of people who thrive in the new world Jesus is bringing about.

But *how*? What does actively waiting on Jesus' return *look like*?

[This could be a sort of portrait/timeline... a stick guy, an arrow to a ? and then an arrow to a stick guy with a halo. So O >--< --> ? --> OO >--<] But what does "live holy and godly lives" look like?

[Then here, a bible and prayer hands replace the ?] I can tell you what I was told it meant growing up (I grew up in a Church, so I heard about this all the time). Growing up, the "church answer" was "read your bible and pray." That's how you know what God wants for you.

And here's the thing: I was *good* at reading my bible and praying. Like *really* good. If I tried really hard, I could read 50-60 chapters in a week (most books in the Bible aren't even that long!) And people asked me to pray all the time because I could use big flowery words. I would say things like, "Dear heavenly father, we are unspeakably grateful that in your boundless mercy you have gathered us today that we may partake of the good gifts of your Holy Spirit."

Sounds pretty impressive right?

But may I confess something to you? I didn't get anything out of it. Sure, I could read my bible and pray so well that even the adults in my church bragged about how spiritual I was, but I didn't actually *feel* any kind of connection.

If I'm being totally honest, I read the Bible fast because I read all books fast. And I didn't understand at least half of what I was reading (especially in the Old Testament!). And sure I could string fancy words together - but I did that at school, on papers too.

No despite all the "read my bible and praying" I did, I didn't experience God very often. And more specifically, when I *did* experience God, it didn't feel like reading my bible or praying had anything to do with it. It would be in conversation with other Christians or in a musical worship experience. But not in reading my bible or praying.

I know I'm not the only person in here who knows what I'm talking about. I've talked to countless people who have given reading the Bible or prayer a good shot and just... don't get it.

They start in Genesis and at first it's fun - you recognize all the stories of Adam and Eve and Noah, but then it starts getting weird. For every Abraham and Jacob and Joseph story that's familiar and easy to understand, there're two that are weird or frankly disturbing. Moses comes on the scene in Exodus and for about 20 chapters everything's cool again, and then you hit all the laws. Laws upon laws upon laws, about building tabernacles and what to do when oxen fall in holes and how to manage slaves and what not to eat and this goes on for four books. Four. Books.

Very few make it out alive.

And prayer is no better... once we graduate from "God is great. God is good. Let us thank him for our food," or "Bless us oh Lord for these gifts which we have received from thy bounty," we're not sure where to go next. We're reduced to "Help me's." As in, Help me get that job. Or, Help me get well. Or, Help me get that parking spot.

Not bad, as prayers go. But frankly, they seem a little selfish, and besides... how do we know if anyone's listening on the other end? Is that really all there is to prayer?

[The timeline is back] And these questions are really about a deeper question: how do these practices (reading my bible and praying) help me to wait well? Are they actually transforming me into a person who is ready for Jesus' return? How can I tell if I'm becoming a person who's fit to live in God's new reality?

That's an important question.

And I want to share an answer I learned with you: For a long time, I was doing it wrong. A lot of us approach God wrong. Here's what it looks like:

[How do we illustrate the difference between these two ideas?] We reduce spirituality to *information*. But God is interested in *transformation*.

What does reading your Bible mean? We're completionists, right? The Bible is a textbook. It has information we need. So we read it. Read it all. Read as much of it as possible - we have about 1,000 different "Read the Bible in a Year" plans. Why? Because we assume that reading the whole thing is the point. And if we can knock it out in 12 months, all the better (in fact, there are now "Read the Bible in 90 Days" plans, for you competitive types).

That's how I read the Bible for *years*. I assumed that it was about how much you could digest. How much I could get down. Information. Just like school, as though in the End there'll be a test and I have to score at least a 70% because even in Heaven, Cs get degrees!

But what if that's not the point of Scripture? What if reading the Bible is meant to be a place where God meets me, and teaches me who I am, what it means to be part of God's people, and who God is? What if the point is to go *deep* into the Scriptures, to savor each bite, not just to consume as much as possible?

And prayer - I approached prayer as information transfer - I had a list of things to tell God and prayer was me getting through my list. Information.

But what if prayer is as much about *listening* as it is talking? What if prayer is actually about meeting God, about talking *with* God, not just talking *at* God?

What if these practices are opportunities to *meet* God, to be transformed, and we *miss* it because we're only looking to be *informed*?

This is the key to waiting well. If we want our waiting to be active, instead of passive, if we want a powerful spiritual experience that echoes into the rest of our lives, we must engage in these practices as someone who wants to be transformed, rather than merely informed.

We'll consider this practically in a moment, but there's a theological reason this distinction matters. What's really at stake here is Who's in charge.

When I approach these spiritual practices - like reading Scripture or praying or even things like serving and giving - as information, I'm really in charge. If reading the whole Bible in a year makes you more spiritual, then I'm in charge of how spiritual I am.

Because I either read my bible in a year or I don't.

If prayer is about telling God what I'm thinking about, then I'm in charge of how spiritual I am. Because I either pray or I don't.

This is the appeal of the check-box spirituality. This is why, even though we all know it's toxic, we keep getting sucked back into it. Because it puts *me* in charge.

It's safe. It's hard. But if I fail, I don't have anyone to blame but myself. The problem is that it *always* fails... so it makes us wonder if there's anything to this whole God thing anyway. If even when I check all the boxes every time, nothing happens, nothing changes, then what's the point?

If I read every single law in Leviticus even if I don't get it, and I don't get anything out of it, then who cares?

If you have a Bible, turn with me to 1 Thessalonian 5. If you grabbed one of our bibles off the table on your way in, you can find 1 Thessalonians 5 on page XXX. And if you don't own a Bible, please keep that one as a gift from us.

As you're turning to 1 Thessalonians 5, this is a letter written by Paul, one of the first followers of Jesus, to a church he started in the Greek city of Thessaloníki. Like the church we heard from last week, these new Jesus-followers had been anxiously expecting Jesus' return. As time passed and Jesus didn't show up, they grew anxious - especially as some in their congregation died. They wanted to know how long they were supposed to wait, and what they were supposed to do in the meantime.

At the close of the letter, Paul gives them some final, important advice on what it looks like to wait well. Let's look at what he says together, beginning in verse 16:

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil.

Now, to this point, this sounds like checklist spirituality. Always rejoice. Continually pray. Be thankful no matter what. Do this, do that. Hold this, reject that.

It's not just checklist spirituality, it's *impossible* checklist spirituality. We're *all* going to fail if this is our checklist. Thanks a lot, Paul. Way to be a jerk.

Except Paul's not done. He goes on to say:

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. -- 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

[Leave the Scripture up throughout this section.] Do you notice who the actor is in the final verses? It's not us... it's God. God will sanctify you. You *will be kept* blameless. The one who calls you is faithful and *he will do it*.

A lot of us get tripped up on that word "sanctify" - it's a church word that comes from the same root as the word "holy". Something holy is sacred. The process of making something holy is "sanctifying" or "sanctification". So Paul is saying that God is the one who makes us holy. And *that's* a fancy way of saying that God is the one who makes us fit to live in God's new world.

Remember when Peter told us to live holy, godly lives? To make every effort to be found blameless? Well now Paul is telling us that *God is the one who makes us holy*.

We're not list-checkers. We're not in charge. We're not doing the work. We're not earning and fighting and striving. God is doing the work. And Paul assures us that God, the one who calls us, is faithful. That we can count on God to finish the work God started.

So which is it? Is Peter right, that we're supposed to make every effort? Or is Paul, and God is doing it? Are we supposed to rejoice always and pray continually and always be grateful? Or are we supposed to let God do the work?

Do we wait, or do we do? Is it God working to make us holy or is it me working to get it done?

I've always found it weird that we insist it be one or the other. As though God working to make us holy somehow negates the fact that I have to act. Or that if I have responsibility, it in some way means God isn't wholly responsible.

But here, at the end of Thessalonians, we see it's both. God makes us holy. But we are called to act.

A car might help us understand (and I hope I'm not heading into blasphemous territory here). Imagine that I got a car, but never filled it with gasoline. That I insisted on driving everywhere under my own power. [Image of the Flintstones car] Do I have a car? Yes. And let's assume I have a license and insurance am a great driver. And I might be working very hard to drive my car (if there's no gas in it, I am *definitely* working very hard). But let's be real: I'm not going to get anywhere. And I'm going to exhaust myself in the process.

A car cannot be what it was truly designed to be until we fill it with gasoline, until it has power.

We are much the same way. We can know all the right information and have all the right skills, but if we are not powered by God, if God is not living and working in our lives, then all the energy we spend working and trying to be who we were designed to be is worthless.

It works the other way, too. If you fill a car with gas but never drive it, then what good is the car? It just sit there as a very expensive lawn ornament. Similarly, if God is present in our lives, but we never do anything to tap into God's power, then what's the point?

It takes both a driver and gasoline to make the car run. So too, it takes our efforts empowered by God's Spirit to be transformed, to become what God created us to be.

But there's the rub. When it's just me... then I can control when I show up. If I have to rely on God, what happens when God doesn't show up? What happens when it feels like my prayers are bouncing off the ceiling? What do I do when the Bible doesn't want to give up any comfort or guidance?

What do I do when I have to wait on God?

This is where the spiritual practices come in. Reading Scripture. Prayer. Acts of Generosity. Fasting. Keeping a Sabbath. Meeting with our c-groups. Worshiping together. These practices don't inform us (well, they don't *just* inform us. They don't even *mainly* inform us). These practices make us available. They make us open. They create spaces in our lives where we can meet with God.

And then we wait. We wait for God to come.

Sometimes our wait is short, so brief it hardly feels like waiting at all. And other times our waiting is long. Years. Even decades, if many of the most godly, holy people in history are to be believed.

But we wait for God to come. Because only God can transform us. We hope that God will arrive. Because only God can make us holy.

And we know that God will show up because God *has* shown up. We celebrate that every year at Christmas, the Advent, the Coming of God into our world. The beginning of the new world is in a manger in a stable in Bethlehem.

God has come. And God will come again.

And we live between the two comings, celebrating the first, anticipating the second. We live and we wait and our waiting is not passive. We are not spectators, watching for God to move and then applauding when we see it.

We are active. We seek justice. We offer mercy. And we engage in those spiritual practices like reading scripture and prayer because we know God will meet us there, and transform us.

What does transformative prayer look like? Well it can look like a lot things. And Christians throughout history have discovered ways that work and ways that don't.

The Prayer of Examine is one prayer that has worked for many Christians throughout history. It's a prayer that still works for many today.

A Prayer of Examine is designed to make us more aware of how God is working around us, to make us slow down and pay attention, to help us be open to what God is doing. It consists of four questions you ask yourself in the morning and in the evening.

Morning

1. Where will I be tempted to resist God today?
2. How can I work with God today?

The evening questions are basically the same, but they're focused on looking back:

Evening

3. Where did I resist God today?
4. Where did I work with God today?

I want to challenge you this week to use this Prayer at least 5 days. To spend five days making space to hear from God, to meet God, to be transformed by God.

[Image: Achievement Badge] Let me be clear: you will not earn a Prayer of Examine merit badge if you do this. You won't be more spiritual if you do six days or less spiritual if you do three or four. A Prayer of Examine is not about earning or achieving.

This is a practice. It helps you to become more open to what God is doing. It's a way of doing your part to wait well, to be ready for what God is doing.

I hope you're as tired as I am of pushing and trying and earning. Of pursuing the information style of spirituality that cares more about what you know than *who* you know.

I hope you're willing to enter into the practice of transformation. It's scary, because it's not up to us. We're put in a place where we have to wait on God. But that waiting is a beautiful place. Because it is a place where we can be truly transformed, where God makes us fit to live in God's new world. Where we find a power and promise greater than anything we'd experienced before. We find, as Jesus described it, the life that is truly life.

So join me in this waiting place. Join me in prayerfully creating space to wait for God, to wait for transformation. God can be trusted to keep God's promises!

Communion Set Up

[Communion Slide] We are closing today with Communion. This ritual is the consummate reminder that God *does* come, and that God keeps every promise. That God *will* transform us and in fact has already begun to change us.

This ritual reminds us of the meal Jesus shared with his disciples the night before he died. During the meal, he broke bread, passed it to them and told them it was his body, broken for their sin. So we take wafers to remember our sinfulness, our need to be transformed.

Later in the meal, Jesus gave them a cup of wine. He told them it was his blood, spilled to initiate a new relationship between God and humanity. So we dip our wafers in grape juice to celebrate that God has met us in Jesus' death and resurrection. This meal points to the basis for our transformation, the downpayment on God's promise to make the whole world new, us included.

This meal is the *reason* we can wait well, the reason we can wait with confidence. Jesus has come, and Jesus will come again. And in the meantime, we wait, together, hopeful and expectant and *active*.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive Communion. If you are willing to wait well, to be open to God's transformation, then you are invited to this table.

I'm going to pray for us. Then, as you're ready, approach the table. Every church does it a little bit differently, so let me tell you how we do communion. Come down the side aisles. Take a wafer, dip it in the grape juice and eat it. Then return to your seats via the center aisle.

Let's pray.