

Preparing the Way for the LORD

by Pastor Marty

Salvation can be a complicated thing to explain to people. Pronouns can get muddled, depending on a person's theological position. If I say, "I asked Jesus into my heart," it stresses free will and personal responsibility, which is good, but it focuses on me instead of God; if I say, "God drew me to Himself," it stresses grace and sovereignty, which is also good, but it may also imply that God did not draw other people. I like what C. S. Lewis wrote in *The Silver Chair*: Aslan told Jill, "you called to Me because I was calling you," which very much lines up with what Jesus said: "Many are called, but few are chosen." God is always speaking to us, but we are not always listening to Him.

God is always speaking to us, but we are not always listening or hearing Him.

Personally, I try to avoid debates about sovereignty and free will. There are times when neither side can fully explain all the issues. God chose to make Abram into a great and mighty nation *before* he had done anything, which is indicative of His sovereignty; on the other hand, it was *after* Abraham obeyed and was prepared to sacrifice Isaac that God promised to make his offspring beyond counting and to bless all the nations through them—saying, "because you have done this..."—which reflects free will. The entire Bible is full of stories that reflect the same tension. However, there is a logical fallacy to the entire argument if we believe that it has to be "either-or" instead of "both-and." In actuality, we see God over and over again revealing His will to do things with His people instead of just to them or for them. I suspect that some of our prayers may not be answered because God is waiting on us—such as we see in Exodus 14:15. Sometimes, all He needs is obedience, a mustard seed of faith, and somebody actually "doing the stuff."

Repeatedly, God does things with His people—not just to them or for them.

Nevertheless, this month's newsletter is not specifically about salvation—at least not as it is understood in terms of initiation into the family of God. My focus is on the principle that much of the time when we are waiting on God, He is actually waiting on us. However, I am not at all saying that God does not *initiate*. Leanne Payne, using language from C. S. Lewis that put eternal concepts in terms of gender language, stated that "God is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to Him." Her point is that even the most masculine man on the planet can never become anything greater than the bride of Christ; the most assertive human on the face of the Earth will kneel in full humility before Father; and the most proactive person in the world could never be more effective than by learning to listen and respond to the Holy Spirit. In that respect, God always initiates before we respond (though I do wonder about Mark 5:25-34, in which Jesus did not initiate). Nevertheless, the rest of the process—the fulfillment of the promise—is almost always conditional in some way. This can be seen—if one takes the time and effort to look—throughout the entire Old and New Testament.

Although God initiates, the fulfillment of promises is almost always conditional.

If this premise is accurate, then we will be able to see it in operation throughout both the Old and New Testament. If we start at the very beginning, God created Adam and Eve to rule over everything on the face of the earth. However, there was a condition—or at least an exclusion—within this plan: they were not to eat from one tree in the garden. We can say that obedience was a condition here. Still, there is still more in this passage that relates to this

concept. God brought all the creatures before Adam in order for him to name them. It would have been simple for God to tell Adam what each animal was named, but that was not how He wanted to do it; He was waiting on him. A few chapters later, we read about Noah and the flood. God had no choice but to wipe out most of the life on the earth because sin had infiltrated and mutated it beyond repair. (Have you ever wondered how things could get that bad in such a short period of time? Read Romans 1:21-32). However, God chose Noah to build an ark to save every species. In this story, it is clear God waited until Noah had completed his job before sending the rain; He was waiting on a man to complete his part of the process. Here in the antediluvian earth, we see evidence of God working in cooperation with people.

God repeatedly seems to wait on people to complete specific parts of His plan.

In the patriarchal period, God often seems to wait on specific people to complete His instructions before proceeding to the next step. God planned to make Abram into a great and mighty nation, but he had to leave the land of Haran before that could occur. Throughout His dealings with Abram, God required him to obey and believe—his part of the covenant. As we see in Genesis 22, Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac was pivotal in God’s promise to bless all the nations through his seed—Jesus. There is strong theological evidence that Jesus being sent was the “reaping” of what Abraham “sowed” back then; in other words, God called Abraham to do what was necessary in order to prepare the way for God to do what He did—to become a blessing to the entire world. The entire history of Israel is filled with continuous examples of God calling His people to act and then responding when they did. The surety of God’s promises to His people never exempted them from following His directions to them.

The certainty of God’s promises never exempts His people from obeying Him.

As mentioned in the beginning of this newsletter, Exodus is a prime example of this concept. When the children of Israel were stuck between the sea and the Egyptians, they cried out to God—including Moses. God’s response was, “Why do you cry out to Me? Stretch out your hand!” In essence, God was indicating that what He was going to do was contingent on what Moses was going to do; God was waiting on him. The same principle was seen through the time of the Joshua, Judges, and Kings. Time after time, God acted in response to something that someone said or did: the priests stepped, and the river stopped; the people marched, and the walls fell; Joshua commanded, and the sun stood still; Gideon attacked, and the angel slew the enemy; David slung a stone, and the giant fell; Jehoshaphat put forth singers, and an army was routed; Elijah called on God, and fire fell and burned up the sacrifice; over and over, God shows that He chooses to work with His people.

Over and over again, God reveals that He chooses to work with His people.

Even in the New Testament, we see God fulfilling prophecies and doing the miraculous in conjunction with human beings. He speaks to Zechariah and Elizabeth about the birth of the prophet who would “prepare the way of the Lord.” Still, the angel gives specific commands about this prophet: name him “John,” do not let him drink wine or strong drink, etc. When we get to the birth of Jesus, the angel tells Mary and Joseph to name the baby “Jesus,” which in Hebrew is “Joshua” and means “the Lord saves.” They are then told to flee to Egypt for several years and then return and live in Nazareth. All of these works of God, which fulfilled prophecies, were fulfilled in connection with people saying or doing specific things that God commanded. Looking specifically at the

woman with the issue of blood in Mark 5, it is apparent that Jesus Himself did not initiate the healing. Paul clearly points out that Jesus laid aside His Godhood and became “as we are” in order to redeem us; in other words, Jesus lived as a human being on the earth, with the same limitations that we have—needing food and sleep and a continual reliance upon the Holy Spirit of God for guidance and direction.

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If we read through the gospels without assumptions, we see that Jesus was not doing the things He did as God; he was doing those things as a man living perfectly in the anointing and power of the Holy Spirit—with the same limitations we have. He was not lying when He said He did not know the hour of His return; He did not know it, for the Spirit had not told Him that information. He was not omniscient when He was on the earth; He only knew what the Spirit told Him. When He asked “who touched me?” at that moment, it was because He did not know who had touched Him. Why did it happen that way? It was probably to benefit us. I can easily imagine the Holy Spirit prompting the woman to reach out with faith while not telling Jesus ahead of time so that the entire interchange can play out. Likewise, He was not omnipotent when He was on the earth; He could only do what He saw the Father doing, and He did it, as He stated clearly at the very beginning, because “the Spirit of the Lord has anointed me” to do those things. This is why He was able to impart the same abilities to the disciples and told them, “the works I do—and greater works than I do—you will do because I go to the Father (and am sending the Spirit).” Not only did He tell the disciples that they *could* do the works that He did, He commanded that we *should* do those same thing—and for the first three hundred years of the early Church, everybody kept doing them! It was recorded

that healings, exorcisms, and people being raised from the dead kept happening so often that it was impossible to give the names of the people doing them. The Acts of the Apostles were continuing as they were meant to do.

The Acts of the Apostles continued on as God had originally intended them.

This now brings us to the main point of this newsletter: preparing the way of the Lord. What does that mean? Of course, it could mean that praying for God to show up and do things in our lives is often directly dependent on our doing the things He told us to do, and there is significant truth in that conclusion. If we want people to be healed, are we laying hands on them and praying the “so be it” of faith, or do we wait for someone else to do it? If we pray to get out of debt, are we tithing and being as responsible as we can be, or are we applying for more credit cards? If we want to hear God, are we spending time listening to Him, or are we filling our eyes and ears (and imaginations) with MTV and the Game of Thrones? How we live our day-to-day lives directly affects our own personal experience of God in our lives.

How we live our day-to-day lives directly affects our personal experience with God.

However, I want to focus on something more universal than our daily life: His return. I am aware this will step on some toes, but it is an important thing to be addressed. I want to discuss the Rapture—the doctrine that at any point, God is going to suddenly take up all the Christians from the earth. There are a couple problems with this belief *as it is now described*. First, it was never mentioned in the writings of the major theologians throughout all of Church history until the middle 19th century—at least, not as we describe it. Now, that by itself is not proof against it, for there are specific places, both in Daniel and Revelation, where it indicates some things will not be understood

until the time is right. Still, if the disciples of John, Peter, Paul, and the others Apostles understood this to be what Paul meant in his letters to the Thessalonians, you would think they would have written about it. Instead, they describe something different: the idea that the Church would continue to grow and shine and become something to change the world—even in the midst of persecution and destruction everywhere around her. The concept was of a victorious Church that would usher in the Second Coming of the Lord. However, the current description of the Rapture does not really promote this idea; instead, it often leads to the image of the Church hiding and praying for God to come and take us away from all the trouble in this world. This is the second major issue with the Rapture doctrine as it is currently interpreted and expressed: it promotes fatalism and defeat. No longer is the Church trying to be a victorious and powerful city of gold, set on a hill, shining a light of holiness and truth for the world to see, combatting evil and darkness in every place it is found; instead, the Church is shaking its head at the evils of the modern culture, horrified at the works of the enemy in the world, and praying for the Lord to quickly return to save *us*. This is not in itself a wrong prayer, for one of the earliest—if not the very earliest—of the Christian liturgies of the Church was “Come, Lord Jesus!”—and we certainly want Him to come as soon as possible. Why is there such a delay? Perhaps He is waiting on us.

One of the earliest Christian liturgies was “Come, Lord Jesus!” Where is He?

I am suggesting that if God has shown over and over again throughout His Word that He often waits on His people to act before He acts, then perhaps—just maybe—He is waiting for His Church to become that glorious Church without spot or wrinkle before He comes back to get us. Maybe we have a job to do first. Is that a biblical concept? He said the gospel had

to be preached in the whole world before His return, which clearly indicates He is waiting on us to do something; however, maybe we have misunderstood what He means by “preaching the gospel.” Maybe He was not just talking about people hearing some doctrinal message. Maybe He was talking about people seeing the Church walking in the power and presence of the Spirit as they did in the book of Acts and for many centuries after that. Maybe He is waiting for His Presence to cover the earth as the waters cover the seas through His children standing for truth and fighting evil everywhere it is found (even in Government). Maybe not just the creation is groaning and waiting for the children of God to be manifest. Just perhaps, God is also groaning and waiting for the same thing—for us to prepare the way for His return.

Maybe creation isn't alone in waiting for the children of God to be revealed?

God made it very clear to the people of Israel through Moses and Joshua that He wanted them to take possession of the land, but the people had to enter it and take it by force. Perhaps all the passages in the Old and New Testament that talk about the end times will suddenly make more sense if instead of reading them as dispensations, we read them as a process by which the Church prepares His way. This in no way disregards the scriptures describing times of persecution and tribulation; it just asks what the Church will be doing when persecutions happen: will it be hiding in caves and holes in the ground or standing tall and walking in power? In Acts, the greatest miracles occurred simultaneously with the persecutions. For the sake of the argument, what would happen if Christians everywhere stood for holiness and truth, operating in the power of the Spirit? I expect some would run to the Church while others would run from it. People either hated or loved Jesus when He first came; maybe that is what He is waiting for again.