

**Dr. LEWIS SMEDES** is an author, former seminary professor, and clergyman in the Reformed Church of America. For more than twenty-five years, he was a Professor at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He has written many books, including *Forgive and Forget*, *Caring and Commitment*, and *How Can It Be All Right When Everything is All Wrong*. The last book that Smedes wrote was, *My God and I*. In this moving spiritual memoir, finished shortly before his death in December 2002, Lewis Smedes takes readers through his own lifelong walk with God.

In this article Smedes, again, touches a sore spot of our culture: waiting. We live in a time that is characterized by the need to get what we want when we want it. Solitude, contemplation, quiet place, waiting; these are all foreign concepts to many of us in the Western world. But, Smedes challenges us to discover the wisdom of waiting.

### **The Wisdom of Waiting First** **Lewis Smedes**

I want to talk with you today about something that all of us have to do a lot more of than we want to do. Nobody likes to do what I'm talking about because I'm talking about having to do nothing, nothing, nothing but wait. So let this be our first thought.

### **We All Have to Wait Sometimes**

Waiting, after all, is the price we pay for being limited human beings who do not have the power to make good things happen when we want them to happen. There are a lot of good things that we want to happen right now. We may want them to happen today almost as much as we want life itself. But sometimes there is not a blessed thing we can do to make them happen. We are limited; this is why we have to wait so much. There is something about having to wait that tries our souls.

### **Nobody Likes to Wait**

I've never met a person who likes to wait. Let's say you have made a two o'clock appointment with your dentist and you showed up at quarter to two, but now it's three o'clock and you are still cooling your heels in his waiting room. What kind of person would enjoy that experience?

Waiting is worst of all when you are waiting for the surgeon to come and tell you whether your husband's operation was a success and whether he is going to make it. Or waiting for your own prodigal son to shape up and come to his senses.

When you get right down to it, waiting is just about the most unpleasant thing we ever do. And besides,

### **Waiting Is the Hardest Thing We Ever Do**

Waiting is a thousand times harder than to do something to make happen what we want to

happen. And God knows the media does not make it any easier for us to learn to wait. Somebody is always yelling at us to do something and do it right now: call now, act now, buy now, sell now, get those pills right now that will give you instant relief, right now. Sometimes it feels to me that our whole culture is a conspiracy to make it hard for us to wait.

Some time ago, I was a guest at the home of a very powerful man and his very talented wife. Believe me, this man was in charge of a lot of important things and a lot of people. But once I got over being impressed by him, I began to feel a simmering sadness under the smooth surface of that home. Something felt wrong to me. So I said: "You must forgive me if I am being intrusive but I feel a sadness here in your house, a grief maybe. Am I right?" Yes, I was right. And they told me what the trouble was.

They had an eighteen year old daughter who had left home and was wandering around the country and nobody knew where or how she was surviving. No phone calls, no letters. "What in the world can we do?" this powerful man asked me. "It seems to me," I said, "there is nothing you can do except the hardest thing of all, pray and wait. "Ah," said this man who had so much power over so many important people, "Wait, yes, wait. But it is so hard, so hard to do nothing but wait." He's right.

Let me repeat the essence of what I have said about waiting: we all have to wait sometime, we all hate to wait, and waiting is the hardest job of all.

But there are times when we actually prefer to wait. In fact,

### **Waiting Can Be a Beautiful Experience**

There are some things that we want to wait for. Do you want your little girl to become an instant woman? Aren't you glad that autumn comes in at its leisure--that the leaves do not turn brown and blow off the trees by the first gusty wind of October? Isn't the most fun often in the watching and waiting?

Far as I can tell, God is not in a hurry. Nature is seldom in a hurry. And, most of the time, that is how we like it.

Here is my next thought:

### **People Who Cannot Wait Almost Always Make Things Worse**

People who have never learned to wait are hard to live with. A new boss who struts into a shop and changes everything around as soon as gets there almost always orders things fixed at once that don't need fixing at all.

Fools like Stalin and Mao thought they could create a Utopia at once; by the power of a gun barrel. Foolish rulers rush their people into foolish wars. Foolish parents rush their children into acting like adults before they are ready; foolish children rush into sex before

they are ready. It is a law of life: people who cannot wait usually end up hurting other people. People who know how to wait are effective people at getting things done.

And now I want to tell you that there is also an important spiritual thing about waiting.

### **The Strength to Wait Comes from Faith**

The moment we stop believing, we stop waiting.

I thought about this lately when I was waiting to board a plane at a very small airport in a very small town. Departure time 2 o'clock. I checked in at 1:30. And then I walked over to take a look at the monitor: it said my flight was delayed. Why? Not a clue. How long will we have to wait? Not clue. At 2:30 I checked again: still delayed. Again at 3 and 3:30 and 4--and again at 5 o'clock. Still delayed! So what did I do? I went back to my chair and waited, but what kept me waiting? Why didn't I give up and go back to my hotel? I will tell you the reason I kept waiting was this: I believed that the plane was going to take off sooner or later. If I had not believed it, I would have stopped waiting for it. But I did believe it. So I kept on waiting and my plane did take off.

It is the same way when we wait for God. As long as we have faith that he wants good things for us we will wait for him. Maybe we need faith most of all when we have to wait for God himself.

### **In Fact, Waiting For God Is The Supreme Test of Faith**

I once counted the times that the Bible tells us to wait for God: 53 times. Over and over again, 53 times, we read words like these: "Wait for the Lord; be of good courage... Wait, I say, on the Lord." (Psalm 27:14). The writers of the Bible knew from experience how long we sometimes have to wait for God. Here is the Psalm writer talking about himself: "I keep waiting for the Lord, my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning."

Sometimes it feels as if God has gone on leave of absence and left no forwarding address. And it takes a leap of faith to keep waiting for him to come back. It's easy to have faith when you just feel God very close to you and when he has just answered your prayer. But it is a struggle when it seems as if God just keeps putting us off.

One thing is sure, we cannot force God to follow our schedule. We cannot force him to wake up when our alarm clock rings. But what we can do is make sure we are ready for him when he does come. In fact, keeping ready for God is exactly what faith often comes down to. Faith is like a window that you keep open for the Spirit of God to blow into your life. Or faith is like a cup that you hold out waiting for God to fill. He will come; he will come; just be sure you stay ready for him when he gets there.

There is an old gospel song that speaks to us about waiting for God when our hearts cry out for him to come and help us. Hold on. Hold on. Hold on. Hold on. Don't let go. Don't

let go. Hold on. Hold on. He's coming back. He's coming back. He's coming back. He will come back to you. He'll come back. Keep on waiting for him and make sure you are ready for him when he comes.