

An interview with Marlo Schalesky, Author of *Waiting for Wonder*



In today's culture, waiting can seem like a constant nuisance. Whether it's waiting in line, at the doctor's office or in traffic, we are often presented with the struggle of not being in control of our own time. Likewise, believing God when a promise is new is easy, but it's hard when the years pass and nothing changes. It's harder still when desperation strikes, plans backfire and God does not seem to fill the emptiness. In *Waiting for Wonder: Learning to Live on God's Timeline* (Abingdon Press), Marlo Schalesky encourages readers to think differently about our waiting periods of life.

Q: You have focused on writing books about the wonder of God. Describe what that means to you.

Do you remember when you were young and would climb trees and run through sprinklers? Do you remember when a simple daisy would capture your imagination and a butterfly would capture your heart? Those days when beauty was not so rare and life was painted with the vivid colors of awe? Too often we lose not only our childlike wonder of the world, but we also lose our wonder of God — that sense of awe, beauty, and catch-your-breath, more-than-I-ever-dreamed sense of who God is. We lose it in the waiting rooms of life.

But what if God is more passionate, more wild, and more wondrous than we ever dared to believe Him to be? What if He is calling us deeper than our dreams? What if He's calling us back to wonder? For me, writing about God's wonder is about pulling back the curtain, just a bit, during the very hardest times of life, during those times when wonder seems the most impossible, so we might glimpse God as we've never seen Him before. In that glimpse, be captured by the wonder of this God who is more than we ever dreamed. I believe our only hope in hard times is found not in more instructions, more rules, more getting up enough faith, but it is found in encounters with a vivid God. It is found in wonder.

Q: What compelled you to write a book on waiting for wonder?

Because waiting is hard. Waiting well is harder, and God's timing is so rarely our own. It's easy to believe God and walk in faith when everything is going according to plan, but it's hard when the years pass and nothing changes. It's hard to keep praying, keep hoping, keep believing when you're stuck in the waiting place and life isn't turning out at all as you thought and hoped and prayed. In the long wait, it often becomes easier to listen to our fears than to hear the promises of God.

Yet God still asks us to wait. I'm convinced it is precisely in the painful, awkward, awful waiting place that God is calling us to more. He is calling us, as He called Sarah, to wonder, to laughter in the face of the impossible, to a blessing that's not just for us but for the whole world.

This is a book for people who want to find God in the waiting room, find Him where He seems most absent. It's a book for people who hate waiting but want to find God in all His beauty and wonder even in the waiting place.

Q: Why do you think we need to learn to wait at all? Isn't it better to do something instead?

Oh, I wish! As I learned through the life of Sarah, Abraham's wife in Genesis, it's a long journey to the Promised Land! When God calls us, we don't instantaneously arrive, which is probably why the Bible mentions waiting in many verses. James tells us, "You also must wait patiently, strengthening your resolve" (5:8). Psalm 31:24 says, "All you who wait for the Lord, be strong and let your heart take courage." Of course Lamentations 3:25-26 tells us, "It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord."

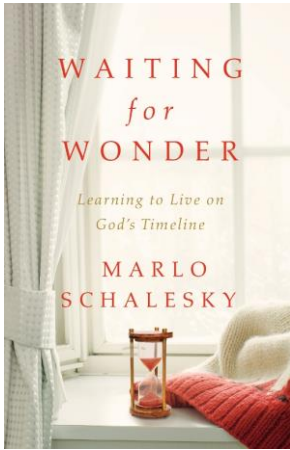
God tells us to wait well, yet when we're waiting for an opportunity, a change, a relationship to be restored, a diagnosis, a call, good news, bad news, I-don't-know-what's-coming news, it is a tough thing to do that without squirming, complaining, trying to make something — anything — happen. But what about when we can't do

anything to bring about what we're hoping for? That waiting place is a scary place. It's a frustrating and hope-threatening place.

If we can learn to wait well, we can, like Sarah, bless the whole world. That's the promise: The world will be blessed through us, through the wait.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about your personal experience with waiting and why you wrote *Waiting for Wonder*?

I wrote *Waiting for Wonder* because I'm bad at waiting, and I had to learn everything the hard way, from scratch. I often say I should have a PhD in the art of waiting because God has given me many long and arduous lessons in it.



Much like Sarah, I too had a 20-year journey through infertility. Even though *Waiting for Wonder* isn't about infertility (I already wrote a book about infertility), that journey for me epitomized what it means to be stuck in a place where there's nothing else you can do to "make it happen." I tried everything, prayed everything, hoped everything and came to the place where there was simply nothing else to be done, prayed, hoped or said. I was not a pretty wait-er. There was a lot of kicking, screaming, complaining and crying. However, God changed me in the waiting place, much like he changed Sarah. He made me into someone new. The waiting place turned out to be a place where God was especially active. In it, I found a place of wonder. Now all I write about is the wonder of God.

That's why I want to invite others to walk with me and walk with Sarah on her journey through disappointment, doubt and detours. I want to share the God both she and I discovered in the "not yet" places of life.

Q: You also say our world, our culture, doesn't help us wait well. What do you mean?

I've never seen a success seminar on the topic of waiting. Instead, we're always told we can do anything we set our minds to, reach for your dreams, get out of that rut or, as Nike put it, "Just do it!"

Our culture is about frantic doing, striving, trying to fix it and solving the problem now. Don't wait; it's all up to you RIGHT NOW. Not only are we not taught how to wait well, but we're told waiting is inherently wrong. Action gets the job done.

There are many instances in life when you have no choice but to wait. Contrary to our culture's mantras, much of life is not in our control. We are not God, and life just doesn't go according to plan.

But as the world shouts that we can only make an impact if we "do do do," God says to bless the world we need to learn to wait, to trust, to act in His timing (which, honestly, I usually find to be too slow!). So learning to wait well? Wow, how do you go about doing that?

Q: You say walking with Sarah, Abraham's wife, will help us learn to live on God's timetable. Why do you think Sarah, given all of her mistakes, should be our guide for waiting well with God?

Yes, she did make a lot of mistakes. Don't we all?! I don't think any of us are born with the waiting-well gene. Have you ever seen a baby wait patiently? I don't think so!

As I studied the life of Sarah, I found she's a lot like me. Neither of us are natural waiters. It took a lot of years for her to learn to wait, to learn what it means to live on God's timetable. It was thirty years from when God first promised Abraham would bear a son to the birth of Isaac. You know Sarah had been trying to have a baby for years, maybe decades, previously. That is one long wait.

However, by studying her life and her mistakes as well as her victories, I realized despite the failures, God did something in her during the long wait that I want too. He made her a blessing for the whole world, both in her

own time and ever since. I want that. I want to see what she saw and be changed as she was changed. I want the promises of God to be fulfilled in me, like they were in Sarah, no matter how much she messed up.

I want that kind of transformation in the wait, and I think only Sarah can lead me there.

Q: Can you give us one tip for waiting well you learned through Sarah's journey?

I learned the key to waiting well is turning to God not only in faith, but also in frustration, fear, anger and every other emotion that comes up as we wait while God does not seem to move or do what we want Him to do. It's not in mustering up the right words or persona of faithfulness that makes us wait well. It's in engaging with Him, encountering Him when we're mad, disappointed, desperate or despairing that allows for deep, significant change. Waiting well is something God does in us, not something we muster up for ourselves.

In the wait, God takes the very things that cause us the most pain and shame and transforms them for His glory, in His time.

Q: Sarah was known for her barrenness — the source of all her shame — yet that is the exact thing God used to change the world. Does God still take the marks of our shame and make them into the signs of His purposes?

Yes, this is still God's specialty: to take the places of our deepest shame, our deepest pain, and transform them into the very thing that brings hope to a hurting world and glory to the Kingdom of God. I see it over and over again, from the mother of a murderer whose son died in prison — her deepest pain, her deepest shame — who now has become the well of love and compassion from which she draws in her ministry to prisoners. From her pain, beautiful hope has sprung. I see it in another friend who was a teen mom and told her life would basically be over if she had her baby. Well, she did, and God has not only given her an amazing son who is now grown, but she uses her experience to give hope to pregnant teens and has made a real difference in the lives of those moms and their babies. I could go on and on and on because this is what God does. This is the very heart of Jesus. He is the One who could transform the most horrific symbol of death and hopelessness of His day — the Roman cross of execution — into what it is today — a symbol of hope and eternal salvation. He can and will do that same thing in our lives. It's who God is. It's what He does.

Q: What advice can you offer for when we don't wait well and mess up by trying to take matters into our own hands?

Like when Sarah got tired of waiting for God to fulfill his promise for a son and gave her maidservant Hagar to her husband? That was a disaster! How about when she mistreated that same maidservant so badly the girl ran away? Waiting can certainly bring out the worst in us!

Waiting can also be very hard on relationships. I discovered something strange when studying Sarah's story.

In Genesis 16, Sarai gives up, blames God and gives Hagar to Abram. Hagar gets pregnant, Sarai mistreats her, and the chapter ends with Hagar bearing a son for Abram. Not for Sarai, for Abram. It ends with the consequences of Sarai's least-finest hour, on the heels of her lost righteousness and her lost hope. Sarai was excluded, barren and had no cards left to play.

Then chapter 17 opens, but it doesn't open with a reminder of Sarai's failure or with scorn or shame. Instead, the very next scene begins with God's revealing a name for Himself that is filled with amazing hope. God gives Sarai a new name too, Sarah.

I find this breathtaking: God follows up Sarai's disgrace not with blame, but with blessing. That means He follows up our failures with grace and blessing too.

So what do we do when we don't wait well, and then we fail? We ask God to restore what we've broken, and we trust Him to do it . . . in His timing.

Q: What encouragement do you have for the person who feels trapped by the dusty dryness of waiting and is struggling to see God?

I have found that it is in the driest places of life, the places where we see God the least, that He is working most intimately in our lives. Those very places where we're sure He's absent is where He's doing His deepest work in us. That's why waiting is important; the deep work is often done there and done where we can't see it or feel it at all. For the person trapped in that dusty dryness, I say, "Hang on." If Sarah and her long waiting in the deserts of Canaan tell me anything it's that waiting holds a secret. We think nothing's happening in the long wait, but the secret is: Waiting sets the stage for joy. Joy is the whole purpose of waiting. Psalm 30 tells us that weeping may last for the night, and it may be a very long night, but joy comes in the morning. So hang on; joy is coming.

Q: What surprises you most about waiting, now that you've walked through Sarah's journey and much of your own?

The true purpose of waiting has surprised me the most. I had assumed God makes us wait to refine us, to help us trust him, to grow us. But here's the shocker when you walk with Sarah: You discover the real purpose of waiting is to birth laughter, to embrace joy.

Can you imagine that? We writhe with impatience, frustration and the pain of waiting. . . . However, the purpose isn't punishment or to learn perseverance; it's to produce joy! Real, true, lasting joy in us.

That's what blesses the whole world.

For me, that's changed everything. Waiting is not the monster it pretends to be. Sarah's journey has revealed the secret that waiting hides. Like a tumbler that polishes stone, waiting is supposed to produce beauty. It is the vehicle for the wonder of God. It's like where I expected to find an enemy, I found a friend. Waiting has become an unexpected friend.

Q: Where can people find out more about *Waiting for Wonder* and your other books?

I hope they'll visit my website at VividGod.com and sign up for my newsletter. I also love to connect with and encourage readers through my [Facebook page \(MarloSchalesky\)](#) or through [Twitter \(@marloschalesky\)](#).