

# Why Is the Waiter Called a Waiter When It's the Customer Who Waits?

Sermon, June 25, 2017

Texts: Isaiah 40:27-31; I Corinthians 9:24-27

Thirty-six years ago, in the year 1981 (*and even as I say that, I'm thinking "Yikes! Has it been THAT long?!"*), I was accompanied by a young lady friend to a little artsy movie theater near the Philadelphia waterfront that was (*rather grandiosely*) named "The Ritz." The Ritz specialized in screening unfamiliar new releases as well as independent, foreign and other avant-garde flicks. If memory serves, my date had heard the movie being screened that evening would be well worth seeing ... and was she ever correct! That film would go on that year to be nominated for seven Academy Awards and winning four, including Best Picture. The movie? **Chariots of Fire**, a British film released in the USA in October 1981 that went on to be a smash hit worldwide. The film was based on the true story of British athletes competing in the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris. The main character, Eric Liddell, was the child of Scottish missionaries, born in China, now a student at Edinburgh University and planning to return to China as a missionary; he was also on the rugby and track teams while at Edinburgh. Eric Liddell was heavily favored to win the gold medal for the 100 meters in the 1924 Olympics, but he withdrew from the race when he learned it was to be run on a Sunday; his strict Scottish Presbyterian religious scruples forbade his competing on the Sabbath. Despite pressure from the Prince of Wales and the British Olympic committee, Liddell simply refused to run. To remedy the sensitive issue, Olympic teammate Lord Andrew Lindsey traded places with Liddell. Lindsey would take Liddell's place and represent Great Britain in the 100 meters, and Liddell would take Lindsey's place in the 400 meter race the following Tuesday.

Early in the film, Liddell is shown working with his sister Jenny in a mission in Edinburgh as they are preparing to go to China. In his free time he is off running like the wind over the heather-covered hills. His sister is troubled by his devotion to running; she's afraid this running is detracting from his devotion, afraid that it is taking time away from preparations for the mission field. Trying to reassure her, he takes her by the arms, looks into her eyes and says (*and I won't try to imitate the Scottish accent and the rolling r's*), "Jenny, God made me for China, but God also made me fast ... and when I (*rrr*)run, I feel His pleasure." Jenny is afraid her brother's use of this gift will somehow detract from his devotion to God; he's convinced otherwise.<sup>1</sup> He's convinced God delights in seeing His people use and enjoy and exercise and grow the gifts they have been given. He believes with all his heart that God endows us with unique gifts, gifts He wants us to use and exercise and employ as we live in this world in the time that we have.

One of the more memorable scenes of the film is where Liddell, instead of running that Sunday morning in the 100 meter race, reads the Scripture during worship at a Scottish church in Paris. His text is from Isaiah 40, which includes our passage this morning and the theme verse of the Presbyterian Women this year (*specifically, Isaiah 40:31*). Throughout Isaiah 40 the prophet asks in grand and sweeping rhetoric if people have heard of the great works of God (*"Have you not known? Have you not heard?"*) and then closes with that magnificent flourish, "... but those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." While Liddell is reading this passage, the movie cuts away in dramatic fashion to scenes of the world's greatest athletes who ARE running and growing weary ... falling over hurdles, tripping in the steeplechase, being splattered with mud and generally being overcome by the sense of their own finitude and limitations. Well, Eric Liddell was renewing his strength that very morning by being in worship that Sunday and reading from that pulpit. Liddell is in that pulpit reading those words because he won't cause his God displeasure by misusing God's good gift in a way that he believes dishonors God's prescribed Sabbath. "*God made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure.*"

Just as a bit of an aside, I much prefer the KJV translation that reads "... *wait upon the Lord*," rather than our pew Bible's translation of "... *hope in the Lord*." I usually prefer the NIV translation in just about all other areas, but I really don't know where this particular translation "hope" comes from. The literal definition of the Hebrew root "qavah" that is being used here in the original text is "*to bind together, perhaps by twisting*." There is another Hebrew word which can be translated "*wait expectantly*" or "*hope*;" that is the Hebrew root word "*yachal*" ... but that's not the word used here. Again, the literal definition of "qavah" is to bind together, as in twisting ... think of a rope, or a braid. The process of making a braid or a rope involves twisting or weaving (binding) t strands together to form a stronger bond.

Many of you know I frequently use this same imagery in wedding homilies. I point out that obviously there are two people uniting their lives to form a marital bond in this ceremony, but it's important to recognize that in a Christian marriage it takes three to give that marital bond real and lasting and cohesive strength. We've all seen

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<sup>1</sup> Not depicted in the film is that Liddell did indeed go on to the mission in China after the Olympics and after graduation from Edinburgh; he wound up dying in a Japanese interment camp in China in 1945. Another interesting bit of trivia is that there was some effort made by China to claim him as their first Olympic champion, as he had been born and raised in China, not the UK! For additional information, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chariots\\_of\\_Fire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chariots_of_Fire)

the braid of a young girl's hair. It appears there are two visible strands interwoven together, but we all know there is a third, "invisible" strand interwoven with the other two. Without that third strand, the braid can easily come unraveled. It takes three to weave the braid of a good marriage; marriage needs to have a Divine center, something (*someONE*) greater and stronger holding the two together, that invisible Strand around Whom two visible people weave their lives. I then implore the couple to weave their lives around Jesus, to make certain to honor Him in all they do, to make certain our Lord is at the center of their marriage, and to make certain He is always a welcome guest in their home ... for without that third strand, the braid of marriage can easily come unraveled.

I think Isaiah is making the same point here ... those who "*qavah*" the Lord, those who *bind themselves* to the Lord by weaving every aspect of their lives around Him, *those* are the ones who gain new strength. The "rope" of our lives gains strength by being twisted or woven or bound together with the triune God. The more we weave our lives and all aspects of our lives in relationship with God, the more strength He gives. And how do we do that? Well, by active and intentional **waiting upon** the Lord. I like to think of "waiting upon" in terms of a waiter at a restaurant. In this sense, to wait upon someone is to actively engage with and serve that person! A good waiter gives his or her customer excellent care and attention by checking in often, learning their desires, attending to them, engaging them, serving them. Waiters are not idly sitting by meditating, they are active ... clearing and setting tables, running back and forth to the kitchen, dealing with finicky chefs (*as an aside, sometime check out a YouTube of super chef Gordon Ramsay training his waiters ... you'll have to turn a deaf ear to his unnecessarily crude language, but he is determined to instill in waiters all the skills "waiting upon" a customer entails, and how the waiter's waiting reflects on the chef, the restaurant, the meal experience ... everything!*), memorizing menus, dealing with finicky customers (*and often multiple finicky customers at the same time*) and so on. "*Waiting upon*" implies action, it implies working and engaged and proactive attentiveness to the desires and wishes of the one being waited upon! "*Waiting upon*" is an active, serving, attentive, disciplined, skilled kind of waiting; it is not the "*wait for something*" kind of waiting. The "*wait for something*" kind implies passively sitting back and doing nothing while *being* served or while you wait for something to happen. The sermon title: "*Why is the Waiter Called a Waiter When It's the Customer Who Waits?*" was inspired by a question on the popular online forum "quora.com", a social media site where people can ask questions and others provide answers ... not always accurate answers, but answers. The short answer is there are two kinds of waiting, one very active, one somewhat indolently passive.

Isaiah is talking about activity! With active words in this verse like "soaring" and "run" and "walk", and with the end result of the waiting being "gaining new strength", which you don't get by sitting around letting others serve you! You must exercise and move to gain new strength; your body is weakened by sitting around and doing nothing. The Hebrew word signifies a proactive waiting. I've mentioned this before, but a mark of Christian maturity is when we realize God is not our celestial bellhop awaiting our beck and call to serve us, but that we are to be His bellhops at His beck and call, attentively awaiting our opportunity to serve Him! This is how we renew and gain new strength. This is how we rise up to loftier heights with wings like eagles. This is how we run through life and not get weary. This is how we walk through adversity without fainting. By binding ourselves together with the Lord. <sup>2</sup>

Back to **Chariots of Fire**. Soon the film shows Liddell running that 400 meter race, and he is running it with absolute delight. He begins with head down, eyes focused on the track, legs and arms pumping, his breath forcefully expelled. Then, he straightens up, rounds the turn, throws back his head in his inimitable style (*which was one of his running quirks when he would really kick in with speed*) ... and he breaks into a huge smile, a smile so broad and deep that one can imagine that as he runs he really is feeling the pleasure of his God enlivening him, empowering him, giving him wings, leading him to victory. You instinctively get the feeling that his exuberant joy comes not from the fact that he is winning, but that he really is feeling God's pleasure, the God upon Whom he waits, the God to Whom he has bound himself heart and soul, the God who gave him a good gift and Who delights in seeing him use this gift well. As mentioned, I saw this film long before it had become such a huge international sensation, soon after its release ... during this scene the whole theater spontaneously broke into loud cheers and applause, as other audiences went on to do in theaters throughout our nation that year. I'm convinced it was because for one brief moment, audiences witnessed the timely and disciplined use of a God-given gift coinciding with the once in a lifetime opportunity to excel. As we watched that film we sort of froze that moment in our minds, knowing that something good and true and inspiring and uplifting and even *noble* had been presented to us.

As so well portrayed by the story of Eric Liddell, classic Christianity has always been about God endowing His people with good gifts, and about God delighting in seeing His people use and enjoy and exercise and grow their gifts in service to Him, thus binding themselves to Him. God makes us as we are, endowing us with both common and unique gifts to live in the world, gifts He wants us to use. Where might God be calling you to action in your life? Where and how is God calling you to wait upon Him?

Be attentive to your calling, "wait upon the Lord" ... then go on to feel God's pleasure!

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<sup>2</sup> For an insightful devotional on this insight, see <http://www.spwickstrom.com/wait/>