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GOD, ARE WE THERE YET?
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THIS BOOK IS LOVINGLY DEDICATED
TO THE MEMORIES OF

PATTI WHITEHURST
AND
MIKE NELSON

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“BARRICADE THE ROAD THAT GOES NOWHERE;
GRACE ME WITH YOUR CLEAR REVELATION.
I CHOOSE THE TRUE ROAD TO SOMEWHERE,
I POST YOUR ROAD SIGNS AT EVERY CURVE AND CORNER.”
—PSALM 119:29–30, MSG



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FOREWORD

Every century has its keen observers. Things of life that rapidly pass and the unchangeable characteristics of daily reality are expounded by writers as varied as Mark Twain and Erma Bombeck.

Robert Stofel, like his hero, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, is a member in good standing of this illustrious group. In the vein of Spurgeon, Stofel is not only a superb commentator on the daily scene but is blessed with the God-given talent of applying relevant, practical treatment with great insight to the full spectrum of daily living from a perspective of eternity's values.

Few are better equipped to write about a heavenly approach to the things of life than Robert Stofel. Here is a man that God has molded in the furnaces of affliction and trial. If A.W. Tozer was correct when he said that God could not use a person greatly until he had hurt him deeply, Rob Stofel will be a mighty voice for our Heavenly Father.

I met Rob Stofel shortly after he graduated from high school. His body still bore the effects of drug and alcohol abuse. His mother-in-law told me that when he started to date her daughter, it was a parent's worst nightmare coming true. Yet when he came to a saving faith in Jesus Christ the transformation was miraculous; he was immediately freed from the slavery of substance abuse.

As a husband and father with two small daughters, Stofel formed a small but successful painting company. With the work ethic of a Puritan, he carried a full load of college courses at Middle Tennessee State University. And his grades were good enough to win him acceptance into the master of divinity program at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Stofel never forgets an incident of his childhood in rural Tennessee. He frequently entertains friends and associates by recalling stories and events of saints and sinners who have crossed his path in the journey we call life. Stofel has the unique ability to weave their experiences into lessons of hope that remind us of God's sovereignty and control of our destiny. He is a man who not only loves the Lord but has the God-given gift to take the mundane things of daily existence and develop them into great spiritual truths presented as wonderful stories of lives in progress.

These spiritual anecdotes will deeply affect every reader.

Today, Rob is a seminary graduate, a fine pastor, and a superb preacher. His stories of life with their practical applications have made him a much sought after speaker. It is a cause for great rejoicing that believers everywhere can now enjoy his modern-day parables.

Roy Clarke

Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida

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Thanks to Blair and Sloan, my daughters, who also allow me to write about them, and who sigh only every now and then when they wind up in a sermon illustration. Your unconditional love for people and the church that sometimes wounds is beyond any expectations I may have had of you.

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Thanks to Dad and my brother, Kerry, who planted a love for the art of storytelling in my soul at an early age while we leaned on the counter of J.B. Cook's Auto Parts in Franklin, Tennessee, and who listened to those madcap characters who graced the door and took some time to give us all Southern oral history.

Thanks to my pastor, Bruce Coble, for all the counseling, and for the ride to my first Bible study at the age of nineteen. I knew nothing and you taught me Christ's love.

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Thanks to Dale Earnhardt Jr. You've taught us all how to win.



STOP SIGNS, RED LIGHTS, AND OTHER PLACES TO WAIT

Understanding Why God Makes Us Wait

THE YEAR JOE NAMATH took the Jets to the Super Bowl my dad announced he was taking us on a family vacation. He said, "What we need is a good road trip. We need adventure! We need to see Rock City! I want to stand on that mountain!"

It was a monumental announcement—the dawning of the age of travel for the Stofel family. We'd been to tractor pulls and Saturday-night dirt race-tracks and county fairs and Southern Gospel singings and local wrestling matches. We were well-rounded connoisseurs of entertainment, but to see Rock City Gardens, with its glow-in-the-dark caves, strolling costumed characters, and coin-operated binoculars through which one could purportedly see seven states, raised the entertainment bar. It meant traveling, and traveling was what my brother and I were really after. So we climbed into the green Ford Torino with a euphoria that made us punch each other.

When Dad got into the car, he lectured us about good behavior and not asking questions. We nodded like two angels, knowing it was all a lie. Then he pulled out onto the highway and the tires moaned out a sleepy ballad through an early morning world that was eating its Wheaties while the sun bathed it with a radiant, unabashed yawn that stretched across the horizon. And miles and miles later, when the sun descended the western sky, we popped the hated questions, "Where are we? Are we there yet?"

We'd heard Dad's lecture, but when questions are going off in your mind like fabulous yellow Roman candles in the American night, you have no choice but to let one escape.

He gave us his turned-to-the-side look, where one eye followed the road and the other shot flares that marked dangerous territory.

"I was just wondering," I said.

"We'll get there when we get there," he said in a prosaic tone.

"I just wanted—"

"I told you, we'll get there when we get there."

But no matter how hard Dad tried to suppress these questions they had a way of popping out and assailing the back of his head about every fifty miles.

Every little boy and pigtailed girl has asked these questions on a family trip. Even as adults we never really get away from them, only now we direct them toward God, making them questions of doubt. "God, are we there yet?" "How much longer will I have to wait?" "Why aren't my dreams being fulfilled?"

These questions reveal the level of frustration that has built up over the years, and as adults we've stopped believing in the joy of the destination. Too much has happened. Too many inexplicable defeats. We feel as though we're headed nowhere. Yet we wait. We hope for passionate joy to be rekindled, creating a holy hush that allows us to hear once again the unrestrained voice, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Rest is what we need. But we are here. Rest is over there. And we don't know how to bridge the gap.

THE JOURNEY THROUGH WAITING

Most everyone is waiting to arrive at some destination. We may desire a certain career, hope for a marriage proposal, long for a healthy body, or crave some other dream that hasn't come true. But something happens when we outgrow the backseat and become the driver in the front. Anxiety enters. Details and circumstances get jumbled. Then there's the terrible ticking of time between departure and arrival. But there's a "passionate patience" to be dis-

covered—a time of rest for weary souls, "because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next" (Rom. 5:3, msg). There's more to come. This is our hope. This is our "passionate patience." But can we wait? That's the question.

THE EXODUS THAT ALMOST FAILED

When God led the Israelites out of Egypt, their newfound freedom was as exhilarating for them as a modern-day teenager with a new driver's license; yet that freedom had its woes. They realized they would be facing danger and formed a militia. Maybe a meeting was called as they lined the Egyptian streets the way they did in the movie *The Ten Commandments*.

I can hear it now: "Okay, men, gather round. Listen up. I don't know what we're facing out there, but I know the Philistines are between us and total freedom. You've heard the rumors of giants and thugs. We need an army."

So they assembled an army, but it was a *Little Rascals* troop, complete with pots for helmets and pans for shields and sticks for weapons. They were a motley bunch, beating their chests and high-fiving each other, never realizing they were inadequately armed for battle..

Then God took Moses aside and said, "If the people are faced with a battle, they might change their minds and return to Egypt" (Exod. 13:17). So God instructed Moses to lead them "along a route through the wilderness toward the Red Sea, and the Israelites left Egypt like a marching army" (Exod. 13:18). I love that imagery. We can picture them marching off to battle in the wrong direction! Matthew Henry says, "They marched like an army with banners, which added much to their strength and honor."¹

The Philistines, who lived by the sword, would have defeated them, and what seemed to be a long wait—a long journey to the Promised Land—was God protecting them. But they never got it. The only thing they got was the way the menu changed. They wanted the same kinds of food they were used to in Egypt. In Egypt they were slaves, but they had choices—marinated meat or fish, and a choice of fruit.²

Now they were running lean in the desert, whining and complaining

about the camp food. They never imagined manna being their sole food, and God seemed to be the God of a one-course meal. It was manna Pop-Tarts for breakfast, Big Manna sandwiches for lunch, topped off with a manna casserole for dinner. They were hungry for junk food when God was feeding them the dew of heaven. And maybe they huddled in their tents at night and designated a runner to go to the south side of Egypt to the late night drive-through at Wendy's. Who knows what they were doing, other than complaining. But the greatest question is, What was God doing? He led them around the long route because He was protecting them from themselves.

I want you to rethink your situation. Maybe God has you on the long route because He is trying to protect you from yourself. He is very aware of the timing of His blessings. And waiting on God's timing is something I tried to teach my daughter when she turned sixteen and wanted a car of her own.

GIMMIE, GIMMIE, GIMMIE

When Blair, my daughter, turned sixteen she wanted a car and would not relent. Then her mother got involved. A few weeks before Christmas, my wife, Jill, said, "You should buy Blair a car for Christmas."

"I don't have the money to buy a car. She'll have to wait."

"Wait" was not a word Jill wanted to hear, nor did Blair, because, two days later, they went up out of their own little Egypt prepared for battle. They had a battle plan to wear me down. They wanted me to call this dealership and that dealership, turning me into the mean guy who continually had to say no. Every time we passed a car lot, it would start. "Honey, why don't we stop and see what they have on the lot?" Jill would whine, and I'd keep both hands on the wheel and my eyes on the road. I'd shake my head and say, "We've already been over this, and the answer is no!" They were no match against my pharaonic nature.

But it didn't deter them. They came at me with a plague of car commercials. While we watched television at night, car commercials would break into our serenity, and the two of them would have a conversation intended for my ears.

"I think you'd like that car," Jill would say.

"No, it's a little too boxy. I want something sporty."

Jill would agree, and when a commercial came on that they both agreed would be the right car for her, Jill would say, "You need to tell your tightwad father to get you one of those."

I learned every jingle known to car dealerships because they turned the volume up, knowing they were getting on my nerves, knowing that those crazy jingles would get stuck in my mind. I never let on that I was singing the jingles at work. If they had known, they would have derived so much pleasure, so I sang them while I walked the halls at church and as I sat in my office with my feet on the desk, head thrown back and hands raised in car worship. Then, just like a good preacher, I attacked them from my recliner pulpit at home. I pooh-poohed every new sale, every rebate, and called them all phonies. I maligned the pretty girls who were slinging their arms, exposing all the new cars the camera could force into one frame.

The week before Christmas, things got worse. The topic of buying a car became a point of contention, and Blair and Jill's argument was justifiable. Blair needed a car. I understood that, but I let them know that this observation didn't change things.

"The timing is not right," I said.

I wanted Blair to patiently wait for her desires instead of whining and complaining and demanding. I wanted to see her persevere in waiting for a car.

THE FLUTTERING OF CHICKEN WINGS AND HER HANDS

The moment came when Jill and Blair surrendered their desire to buy a car. It was what I was hoping for. I was proud of them. They submitted to God's timetable of making Blair a car owner, and Jill decided I should get Blair some other gift to make up for the car that she wasn't getting.

"Well, what about a CD player?" I suggested.

"That will be fine. I'll get her some clothes and a new purse," Jill said with newfound excitement.

On Christmas morning, Blair sluggishly opened her presents. She was happy it was Christmas, but you could tell she still longed for the car. She ripped the paper off a present and looked inside to find a box full of wood

blocks with a note. She pulled the note out, her face contorted in bewilderment, and read it out loud.

“Blair, I know it’s not a CD player, but I thought you’d like this instead. Love, Dad.”

Attached to the note was a matchbox car. She held it up, confused, and then opened it. She discovered a key and held it up in wonder.

“You might want to look outside,” I said, helpfully.

They ran to the front door and flung it open. Then they screamed, danced on the tips of their toes, and fluttered their elbows like chickens in a barnyard. They ran toward a white Honda Civic parked out front and piled in, squealing loud enough to wake the neighborhood, while Blair turned every knob on the dash, her hands trembling wildly between each knob.

Then Jill asked, “How long have you had this car? Where have you been hiding it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ve been hiding it since December 8 in Bobby’s garage.”

“You’ve been hiding it in a garage! You mean you had this car in somebody’s garage the whole time we’ve been begging for one?” Blair asked.

“Yep, the car has been in the garage waiting for this moment. When you thought there’d be no car, it was there the whole time.”

Jill started beating on my chest with her fists, then she hugged me and kissed me.

Now, around our house when one of us is waiting for something to happen, we say, “The car is in the garage!” Knowing this frees us from trying to make it happen. “What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see” (Heb. 11:1).

Maybe you are longing for something to happen in an area of your life. Chances are God has it “in the garage,” waiting for the appointed time when he will present it to you. “So don’t get tired of doing what is good. Don’t get discouraged and give up, for we will reap a harvest of blessing at the appropriate time” (Gal. 6:9). God has an appointed time to bring the plans of our lives to fruition. So ask for strength, and leave the travel time to God, because

the key to surviving an extended time in the desert is to make it a “passionate and contemplative crucible in which new life and spiritual wholeness can be birthed.”³

THE TERRIBLE TICKING IN BETWEEN

The sun was going down on the Children of Israel’s first week of freedom. They’d walked until their feet hurt and their stomachs rumbled. It had been an eventful week. The Exodus became a showdown. And Miriam sang while the Egyptian horses and their riders swirled beneath the sea. It was their first week under the stars, away from Egypt. Big sky country, oval at the edges. They stood in purple darkness, watching their water supply dribble away. The miles to go were long. Their dreams were being dashed against a reality that Moses may have delivered them from slavery only to kill them in the desert. Death had seemed like a possibility at the Red Sea, yet their fears were cast aside as God rescued them. The rumor mill was working again during a three-day march into the wilderness without water. Then God cursed them with forty years of the “terrible ticking in between.” The funerals must have been daunting for Moses. The graves stretched seemingly forever out into the distance of time. And Moses, unnerved by it, sat down before the Lord and started writing what was on his heart: “Relent, O, Lord! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants” (Ps. 90:13, niv). This psalm is a plea for God’s mercy. Probably Moses penned it as a prayer to be used daily by the people in their tents or by the priests in the tabernacle.⁴

It was heavy, this work of God. But “Moses kept right on going because he kept his eyes on the one who is invisible” (Heb. 11:27). So must we. Blessings lie beyond our sight.