

Are You On God's Timetable?

Whether it's in business, politics, sports or stand-up comedy, experts tell us that timing means everything. Prayer, too, can be a matter of timing.

Failure to understand God's timing regarding a matter we are praying about can lead to spiritual disappointment and missed opportunities.

For any given prayer or undertaking in our lives, we need to discern whether the Lord is saying one of these four things:

- Never
- Always
- At certain times
- Not now

The Bible declares that from before the creation of the world, God intended us to be "conformed to the likeness of His Son" (Rom. 8:29, NIV). And anyone who studies the life of Jesus can't help but be impressed with His unruffled peace and perfect spiritual poise.

No matter the situation, the Lord knew what to say and when to say it. Whether He was healing the sick, walking the dusty roads of Judea, or preaching and praying, Jesus always did the right thing with perfect timing.

This keen understanding of divine imperatives and precise spiritual timing is at the heart of what it means to be mature in Christ. Some things must never be done, while others must always be observed.

At certain times a particular action is the only proper course to take; at other times even good things are inappropriate because the Lord is saying "not now." An inability to understand and obey these principles is a mark of spiritual

immaturity and carnality.

When we fail to believe that God is serious when He says “never,” we suffer the hurtful consequences of our disobedience. The same is true when we respond halfheartedly to an “always” command.

But when God responds by saying “at certain times,” it can be difficult to know what precisely to do, especially when the decision has no obvious moral quality to it. Just as challenging is the ability to hear God’s “not now” response, bidding us to cease an otherwise proper course of action.

GOD’S IMPERATIVES A most dramatic moment in Old Testament history well illustrates these principles. The Israelites had just left Egypt after the Lord had delivered 10 plagues on their enemy.

Following the desert road that led to the Red Sea, they had camped at its edge. But Pharaoh, who had let them go with great reluctance, changed his mind once again, pursuing them into the desert with a host of chariots and soldiers.

As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord (see Ex. 14:10-16). This was the first spiritual test God’s people faced after their emancipation.

As Pharaoh’s army drew near, the Israelites panicked, blaming Moses for delivering them in the first place. In their moment of crisis, they couldn’t muster an ounce of faith in the God who had already proven His love and faithfulness.

It was in this setting that they heard one of the Lord’s most important “never” words, a word that applies to us today. It came through Moses, who boldly declared, “Do not be afraid” (Ex. 14:13).

Whether it's the Israelites at the Red Sea or you and I at the beginning of the 21st century, fear and timidity are never God's will for His people. To be controlled by fear means the death of faith. "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6).

It doesn't matter how many chariots pursued the Israelites then or how many terrorist cells plot mayhem today. Fear is never an option for the children of the living God.

When we ignore God's word, "Do not be afraid," we sadden the Spirit of God and forfeit the blessings He intends for us. In fact, fear is far worse than diseases such as cancer or AIDS because they only attack the body while fear assaults the soul.

In times of doubt and anxiety, Christians must distinguish themselves by their faith and fearlessness. You may protest when looking at ominous headlines and wonder, How can we not be afraid?

Instead of letting the news control your emotions, read what the Bible declares:

"God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging" (Ps. 46:1-3).

We should begin every day by reminding ourselves of this "never" word from God. We will not fear, no matter how bad the news or how dire the world may seem, since God is still in control.

To live in fear is as much a disobedience to God as stealing or lying. The same God who said not to covet also declared that we are never to fear.

God can not only protect us from danger but also rescue us from the nagging fear of what might happen to us. That kind of anxiety creates spiritual chaos in us, robbing us of joy and peace.

Break through into a new confidence in God that dethrones fear and keeps it from ruling our lives. As we walk by faith and not by sight, we can rest in the words of Jesus, “‘Don’t be afraid; just believe’” (Mark 5:36).

FOLLOWING DIVINE DIRECTIONS While making it clear that we must never be afraid, Moses conveyed another of God’s imperatives to the people: “‘Stand firm and you will see the deliverance [of] the Lord’” (Ex. 14:13).

God’s people must always stand firm in faith no matter what happens around them. The basic truth of salvation is that “‘the righteous will live by faith’” (Gal. 3:11).

This same faith should characterize our daily life in Christ. Faith brings stability in times of uncertainty while unbelief causes vacillation.

Always walk by faith in the Lord and be courageous in God. “Trying harder” to do the right thing is not what’s needed. Instead, we must have faith in what God can and will do for us.

When the Israelites were pinned between the Red Sea and Pharaoh’s army, God said to stand firm in faith (see Ex. 14:13). Pharaoh’s chariots came thundering down on a people who had absolutely no military experience, yet God said to trust Him to handle the situation.

This “always” word from God was written for our instruction and encouragement today as we face a post-9/11 world filled with nuclear and biological terror. We must stand firm, be strong in the Lord, and face the future with courage.

Consider the alternative: “‘If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all’” (Is. 7:9). If your trust in God falters, you are flirting with disaster.

No matter what or who threatens us, we must seek the face of God and look to Him in faith. Don’t lose your confidence when others who once clung to Christ fall away. If we shrink back in unbelief, God will not be pleased with us (see Heb. 10:38).

Backed up against the sea with the enemy pursuing, Moses gave an unusual command: “‘The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still’” (Ex. 14:14). That day, God’s people had to let Him do the work while quietly observing His hand of power.

When it comes to being led by the Lord, there are no simple formulas that apply to every situation. We need to learn to follow God’s leading day by day.

When Moses directed the Israelites to stand still and observe the power of God, he was not laying down a principle to be obeyed in all situations. In fact, in the centuries that followed, it was the armies of Israel that God used to overcome the enemies who threatened His people.

In the same way that God instructed Moses to direct the people to stand still, the Spirit of God is able to lead us in every new situation we face. Such cases do not call for simple commands but subtler directions that only the Spirit can impart (see Acts 16:6-10).

Without being Spirit-led, we cannot possibly live victoriously for Christ. Breakthrough timing is all about knowing the exact will of God at a given moment.

God has sent the Holy Spirit to guide our steps in the paths He has marked out for us. We are not talking about resolving moral questions, but about making important decisions at life’s crossroads.

GOD WILL UNFOLD HIS PLAN In the case of the Israelites, each new battle meant discovering what God's strategy for them might be. The Lord's direction for them at the Red Sea was His plan for victory at that particular time; the battle for Jericho would yield a different military strategy.

It is the same for us today. God the Holy Spirit will show us the best path to follow if we are willing to be led by Him.

Nothing produces spiritual results like being led by the Spirit. Sometimes even the best of activities must come to a halt at the command of God so a critical deed can be accomplished.

Prayer is precious to the Lord. But in Exodus 14, God directed Moses to stop praying (see vv. 15-18). God wanted Moses to do something better—to act in faith so that God could deliver his people from Pharaoh's army.

A man I know, George, was almost murdered 40 years ago on a rooftop in the Bronx. Strung out on drugs and desperate for more, George had stolen heroin from a drug dealer. When the enraged dealer, Crazy Joe, and his sidekick caught up with him, George didn't beg for his life. He said, "Do what you have to do—just let me get high."

Crazy Joe's accomplice argued that George's life wasn't worth taking, since he was nothing but a dirty drug addict. Amazingly, the irate drug dealer let George go.

George's brush with death was the experience that finally got the message through his head. Soon after, he turned away from a life of drug abuse and entered a Christian rehab program, where he learned to live victoriously through faith in God.

The change was remarkable. After completing the program, George served on staff for a year and then attended Bible school.

George married and settled down to work at a detention center run by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. His clients were 8-to 15-year-old boys.

George felt the Lord calling him to help hurting people, just as he had been helped in his time of despair. But no matter how hard he prayed and worked, he made little progress with the kids. The program seemed a complete failure.

Things got worse before they got better. Still, George kept praying for direction. His efforts met with only disillusionment and disappointment.

George had gone into social services to help people, but he felt he wasn't making a difference. Had he mistaken God's call on his life, missed some sign from heaven that would have directed his steps another way?

He didn't realize it at the time, but his fervent prayers for direction had been answered with a "not now" word from God. Everything that had happened in George's life was preparation for what he would be doing in the future.

God was about to act. He began by placing a desire in George's wife's heart that soon caught fire in his heart as well.

George Rosado, a former junkie, had married Grace, a pastor's daughter, who years before had received a burden from the Lord to see desperate women's lives restored by the gospel. Together they established New Life, a ministry that has been helping hundreds of hurting women in New England and elsewhere for more than 25 years.

Whenever we pray, it's vital to distinguish among these four different directives from the Lord. Understanding God's imperatives and His timing can help us avoid painful pitfalls and guide us into His perfect will.

There are more wonderful things to come that we can't even

imagine. Beautiful, perfectly timed, life-changing breakthroughs are what God is all about.

Read a companion devotional.

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