

A Big Promise Takes Time—Don't Give Up

Most Christmas pageants focus on the principal characters of the nativity story—an innocent Mary, a bewildered Joseph, awestruck shepherds, mysterious magi and a sleeping baby Jesus. Then we throw in nonbiblical extras such as the Little Drummer Boy to spice things up. But I've yet to see a play or a movie of the Christmas story that includes Simeon and Anna, the two Jewish intercessors who prophesied over Jesus a few days after His birth.

This Christmas, I'm thinking more about Simeon and Anna—not because I've reached their age bracket yet (we know Anna was 84), but because I have more appreciation these days for people who wait patiently for God's promises.

While most of Israel was clueless about God's plan of salvation, and angry about Roman occupation, Simeon knew Jesus was coming—and the Holy Spirit told him he wouldn't die until he saw the Messiah. When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple to be dedicated, Simeon took the boy in his arms and declared that He was the “light for revelation to the Gentiles” (Luke 2:32).

Simeon finally got his prayers answered after decades of waiting. Then Anna walked into the scene. She had been praying and fasting continually in the temple, asking God to send the Savior. She looked beyond the bleak circumstances and dared to ask God for a miracle.

Like Simeon, she immediately recognized Jesus as the answer to her prayers and began telling everyone that their long wait was over.

At that point she probably thought: *“I can die and go to heaven. God has heard my cries.”* She reminds us that God

openly rewards those who pray in secret.

I imagine both Simeon and Anna held their hands in the air—and perhaps even shouted—as they welcomed the fulfillment of ancient Messianic prophecies. But what we don't see in this happy occasion are the decades of painful groaning that these old saints endured. The joyful moment of Jesus' birth did not come without a price.

God's promises, like the birth of a child, requires a gestation period—an agonizing season of waiting. Most people in the Bible who claimed big promises did not get instantly downloadable answers. Like the childless Hannah, or the heirless Abraham or the imprisoned apostle Paul, they travailed. And groaned. And waited. And travailed some more.

Waiting is often the key to faith. And groaning is an aspect of prayer that we rarely teach about today. Yet Romans 8:26 reminds us that Spirit-directed prayer involves “groanings too deep for words.”

Are you praying for something that seems totally beyond your grasp? Are you holding onto a promise from God, yet it is painful to pray because you see no evidence of His hand at work?

Take courage and keep groaning.

In the animal kingdom, big creatures often have the longest gestation periods. A baby whale is in his mother's womb for 18 months, and a baby giraffe waits 15 months. And some species of elephants are pregnant for two years. The rule, it seems, is clear:

The bigger the baby, the longer the wait.

If you are carrying a big promise, you should be prepared for painful delays.

I watched my wife give birth to all four of our children. Yet

how quickly I forget that prayer is often compared with childbirth in the Bible. In this painful process we must press through the darkness of doubt and lay hold of God's sure promise, especially when we feel like giving up.

Many of us today are at the most intense stage of the birth process—the transition phase—in which a pregnant woman feels confused, irritable and restless. We endure similar feelings of desperation in our walk of faith. We ask ourselves, *“Did God really promise me that? Did I hear Him wrong?”* Everything inside us wants to quit believing.

I'm sure Simeon and Anna considered quitting during their years of prayer. The headlines in Jerusalem were depressing. The economy was awful. The political situation was demoralizing. Why pray when everything looks so depressing?

Yet these two faithful prayer warriors didn't go into retirement. They found the grace to press on. Though their hands grew feeble, their faith grew strong. They felt barren, but they shouted anyway.

And finally their groaning paid off—until they truly had something to shout about. They not only witnessed the Christmas miracle; they also got to hold the baby Jesus in their arms. As you enjoy Christmas with your family and friends, I pray the faith of Simeon and Anna will inspire you to hold tightly to all God has promised you.