

“The Gift of Awakening”

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; Romans 13:11-14

November 26, 2023

In the 1960s, a simple yet profound experiment was conducted at Stanford University, known today as the Marshmallow Test. Children were placed in a room with a marshmallow placed before them and given a choice: eat this one now, or wait a while and receive two. This test, seemingly about marshmallows, delved into the depths of human nature, exploring the concepts of delayed gratification and self-control. The results were as varied as they were insightful. Some children, driven by the urge for immediate satisfaction, quickly grabbed the marshmallow. Others, wrestling with the temptation, found creative ways to distract themselves, focusing on the greater reward promised for their patience. The real genius of the study though, was what happened afterwards. Follow-up studies showed a correlation between the ability to wait and future success in life. This test, in its essence, holds a mirror to our daily struggles, the constant battle between the immediate and the enduring, the fleeting and the everlasting.

As followers of Christ, we find ourselves in a similar test. Our faith journey is marked by moments where the immediate often seems more appealing than the promise of something greater, something eternal. *The Marshmallow Test isn't just about patience; it's a reflection of our spiritual journey.* The Bible, in its wisdom, speaks often of waiting, of the fruits that come from patience, and the blessings of those who trust in God's timing. In **Romans 13:11-14**, Paul writes, *“And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.”* Here, Paul is not merely speaking about physical sleep but a spiritual awakening, an urging to rise above our immediate desires and distractions, to see the dawn of Christ's light in our lives. This scripture is a call to spiritual awakening, to an awareness that transcends the immediacy of our worldly desires and leads us towards a deeper, more meaningful existence in Christ. It reminds us that the true rewards of our faith are not found in the transient pleasures of the now but in the eternal joys of God's kingdom.

As we embark on this journey through Advent, let us embrace this lesson of the Marshmallow Test. Let us learn to wait, not with a sense of burden, but with a heart full of anticipation. For in this waiting, in this period of spiritual preparation, lies the gift of awakening – an awakening to the true essence of Christ's presence in our lives, an awakening to the hope, peace, joy, and love that He brings. In the upcoming sections, we will explore Biblical and contemporary examples of this truth, delving deeper into the beauty and power of waiting in faith and the profound awakening that it brings. Let us open our hearts to this journey, to the lessons it holds, and to the transformative power of God's eternal promise.

Our journey today is anchored in the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, a passage that resonates deeply with the theme of our sermon. Paul writes: *“And do this, understanding the present time: the hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.”* In these verses, Paul encapsulates a profound spiritual truth: the urgency of awakening from spiritual lethargy. He speaks not of a physical waking but of a spiritual one, where our salvation – the ultimate reward of our faith – beckons us closer than ever before. The imagery of night turning into day serves as a powerful metaphor for the transition from a life lived in spiritual unconsciousness to one illuminated by the light of Christ.

To further reinforce this message, let us reflect upon **Isaiah 40:31**, which offers a beautiful promise to those who wait upon the Lord: *“But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”* This scripture speaks to the rejuvenation and strength found in patient trust in God's timing.

Similarly, in **James 5:7-8**, we find a call to patience and steadfastness: *“Be patient, therefore, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of*

the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand." Here, James uses the analogy of a farmer patiently waiting for the harvest, reminding us of the virtue and reward of steadfast waiting.

Together, these scriptures form a tapestry of truth, urging us towards spiritual vigilance, patience, and trust in God's timing. They invite us to embrace the Advent season not just as a time of waiting but as an opportunity for a profound spiritual awakening, a shift from slumber to the fullness of life in Christ. Our exploration takes us back to the Old Testament, to the story of Joseph, a narrative that remarkably mirrors the Marshmallow Test in a Biblical context. Joseph's journey begins with dreams - visions of future greatness where sheaves of grain and celestial bodies bow to him. These dreams, found in Genesis 37, were not mere nighttime fantasies but divine revelations of what was to come. Yet, before the fulfillment of these dreams, Joseph faced profound trials. His brothers, fueled by jealousy, sold him into slavery, leading him to Egypt - far from the destiny he had envisioned. In Egypt, as a servant in Potiphar's house, Joseph encountered temptation. Potiphar's wife, captivated by Joseph, persistently sought to seduce him. Here, Joseph faced his 'marshmallow test.' He could have succumbed to immediate gratification, but he chose integrity instead. **Genesis 39:9** records his resolve, "*How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?*" Joseph's refusal led to false accusations and imprisonment - a seemingly unfair reward for his righteousness.

Even in prison, Joseph's faith did not waver. He continued to trust in God's plan for his life. His ability to interpret dreams, a gift from God, became a beacon of hope in that dark place. When he interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker (Genesis 40), he demonstrated not just a spiritual gift but an unwavering belief in God's sovereignty, regardless of his circumstances. Joseph's patience and faith were ultimately rewarded. His gift caught Pharaoh's attention, leading to his release from prison and his appointment as the second most powerful man in Egypt. This elevation, as described in Genesis 41, was more than a mere change in status; it was the fulfillment of the dreams he had years ago. Joseph's story culminates in a moving reunion and reconciliation with his family, as narrated in Genesis 45. It was a powerful demonstration of God's faithfulness to those who remain steadfast in trials and temptations.

Saint Augustine once said, "Patience is the companion of wisdom." Joseph's story is a testament to this truth. His life reflects the essence of waiting with wisdom, the strength found in patience, and the profound understanding of God's perfect timing. His journey from the pit to the palace was not just a trajectory of physical elevation but a journey of spiritual awakening. Joseph's narrative in the context of our discussion on the Marshmallow Test and Christian awakening serves as a vivid illustration of the rewards that await those who, with patience and trust, wait for God's promises to unfold in their lives. It reminds us that the path to spiritual awakening often passes through the valleys of trials and temptations, yet it leads to the mountaintops of fulfillment and reconciliation in God's perfect time.

In our quest to understand the depth and impact of waiting in faith, let us turn our attention to a more contemporary figure: Nick Vujicic. Born without arms and legs, Nick faced challenges and obstacles that many of us could scarcely imagine. His condition, however, did not define his destiny. Instead, it set the stage for a remarkable story of faith, perseverance, and hope. Nick's early life was marked by significant struggles. He wrestled with depression and loneliness, grappling with the purpose and meaning of his life. Yet, in the midst of his trials, he encountered a profound spiritual awakening. He found solace and strength in his Christian faith, which became the bedrock of his existence. Nick realized that his life, though fraught with challenges, was imbued with purpose and potential. Embracing his situation, Nick began to see his condition not as a limitation but as a unique opportunity to inspire and encourage others. He became a motivational speaker and evangelist, traveling the world to share his story and his faith. His message was simple yet powerful: "If God can use a man without arms and legs to be His hands and feet, then He will certainly use any willing heart!" Nick's story resonates deeply on an emotional level. It's a testament to the human spirit's resilience and the transformative power of faith. His journey exemplifies the essence of the Marshmallow Test in a spiritual context - the choice to embrace faith and hope in the face of immediate despair and to find a greater reward in the journey of trust and perseverance. Nick's life serves as a vivid example of how waiting in faith, embracing our trials, and trusting in God's plan can

lead to a profound awakening and impactful life. His story is a powerful reminder that our greatest trials can become our most significant testimonies, shaping not just our own lives but also touching the hearts and souls of those around us.

In the lives of Joseph and Nick Vujicic, we witnessed the profound impact of patience and trust in God. Their journeys inspire us to reflect on how we can embody these virtues in our own spiritual walks. *Cultivating patience and trust is not a passive endeavor; it is an active, daily commitment to living out our faith.*

Central to this endeavor is the practice of daily prayer. In prayer, we open our hearts to God, seeking His guidance and strength. It's in these quiet moments of communion with the Divine that we find the fortitude to endure and the wisdom to wait with purpose. Alongside prayer, meditating on scriptures that reinforce patience and trust becomes a wellspring of spiritual nourishment. Verses like **Psalms 27:14**, which encourages us to "*Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord,*" become anchors in times of uncertainty.

Mindful reflection in our daily lives helps us recognize moments of impatience and seek God's peace. It's in the routine, the mundane, that our patience is often most tested and where small acts of faithfulness can yield significant spiritual growth. The role of our faith community is invaluable in this process. Sharing our struggles and victories, we create a support system that fosters mutual encouragement and growth. Moreover, viewing our challenges as opportunities for growth and deeper reliance on God is crucial. It is often through trials that our faith is refined. As James reminds us, trials are occasions for joy, for they produce perseverance, molding us into mature and complete believers. Trust in God underpins our journey of patience. It's a trust that, despite the ebb and flow of life's circumstances, God's plan for us is one of hope and a future. This trust is not a blind leap but a confident step forward, knowing that God is working in and through our lives, guiding us towards His perfect will.

As we journey through Advent, it's crucial to understand what spiritual awakening truly means in this context. *It is more than an intellectual acknowledgment of Christ's birth; it is a transformative experience that reshapes our understanding of God, ourselves, and our place in the world. It is an opening of the heart and mind to the profound truth of Christ's presence and work in our lives.* Advent, a time of waiting and preparation, mirrors our own spiritual journey of awakening. It's a season that invites us to pause, reflect, and anticipate the coming of Christ, not just as a historical event, but as a living reality that has the power to transform our lives. In this season, we are reminded of the words of C.S. Lewis: "You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending."

This gift of awakening in Christ is about realizing and embracing the fullness of life that He offers. It's about moving from darkness into light, from slumber to a state of alertness where we are keenly aware of God's presence and calling in our lives. It's about cloaking ourselves in the armor of light, as Paul urges in Romans 13, and living out the truth of the Gospel in every aspect of our lives. As we embrace the promise of Advent, let us open ourselves to the gift of spiritual awakening. Let this season be a time of deepened faith, renewed hope, and a rekindled desire to live in the fullness of Christ's love and light. Let us move forward with the anticipation of the shepherds, the perseverance of the wise men, and the humble acceptance of Mary and Joseph, embracing the transformative journey that Advent invites us on.

In the tapestry of Christian testimonies of faith, trust, and patience, the story of Corrie ten Boom stands out as a powerful testament to the strength of the human spirit underpinned by unwavering faith. Corrie, along with her family, harbored Jews during the Nazi occupation of Holland, an act of profound courage and faith. Her family's home, the "Hiding Place," was a sanctuary for those fleeing persecution, but this act of defiance eventually led to their arrest. Corrie and her sister Betsie were sent to Ravens Bruck concentration camp, a place of unspeakable horrors. Yet, even in the midst of such darkness, their faith did not falter. Corrie's resilience and hope during this time were rooted in her deep trust in God's plan and His promises. She and Betsie found strength in sharing God's word with fellow prisoners, turning a place of despair into a haven of hope. **James 1:2-4** says, "*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the*

testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." Corrie's story is a living embodiment of these verses. Her journey through suffering and loss was a crucible that refined her faith and character. After the war, Corrie's spiritual journey took a remarkable turn. She became an advocate for forgiveness and reconciliation, a message born from her own experience of forgiving one of her former camp guards. This moment of forgiveness was not just a personal victory; it was a profound spiritual awakening to the power of God's grace and the transformative potential of Christ's love. Corrie ten Boom's life challenges us to consider our own response to trials. Her story is a vivid illustration of the profound awakening that comes from trusting in God's plan, no matter how inscrutable it may seem. It serves as a reminder that our greatest trials can lead to our most significant spiritual awakenings, shaping us into vessels of God's grace and bearers of His unfathomable love.

As we draw our journey to a close, we reflect on the profound lessons of the Marshmallow Test, the enduring faith of Joseph, the inspiring story of Nick Vujicic, and the unwavering spirit of Corrie ten Boom. Each narrative, woven from the fabric of faith, trust, and patience, brings us to a deeper understanding of what it truly means to embrace spiritual awakening.

In this season of Advent, as we anticipate the coming of Christ, let us hold onto these stories as beacons of hope and transformation. The Advent journey is not just a remembrance of a historical event but a living experience of waiting, preparing, and awakening to the ever-present reality of Christ in our lives. As we leave today, let us carry with us the gift of awakening - a gift that calls us to rise from spiritual slumber, to clothe ourselves in the armor of light, and to live out the fullness of our faith in Christ. Let this Advent season be a time of reflection, renewal, and a recommitment to our journey with God. In the words of **C.S. Lewis**, "You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending." May this be our mantra as we embrace the Advent season, not as a passive waiting but as an active preparation for the spiritual awakening that Christ offers to each one of us.

A Prayer for Patience, Trust, and Awakening: Let us bow our heads in prayer. Heavenly Father, in this sacred season of Advent, we come before You with hearts open and ready for the gift of awakening. We thank You for the lessons of patience and trust exemplified in the lives of Your faithful servants, from Joseph to Corrie ten Boom, and in the inspiring journey of Nick Vujicic. Lord, as we navigate the trials and temptations of our lives, grant us the strength to wait with purpose, to trust in Your perfect timing, and to embrace the transformative power of Your love. Help us to clothe ourselves in the armor of light, to rise from our slumber, and to walk in the fullness of awakening that Your Son, Jesus Christ, offers to us. Guide us through this Advent season and beyond, that we may live out our days in anticipation of Your glory, in the joy of Your presence, and in the peace of Your eternal promise. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.