

The Expectation-Action Gap

A couple of years ago a friend was building a house, and before he started framing, he ordered his windows and doors because he was told that it would take about four months for them to arrive. The lag between demand and supply has increased significantly over the past few years, and what we normally could buy off the shelf or wait a few days to obtain it now takes weeks or even months. Thankfully, things are beginning to become “normal” again and we find that supply is not lagging as long behind demand as it used to.

We might call this delay a gap between expectations and actions. We have certain expectations (how long it takes to obtain windows for our house, how long we have to wait in line to get the hamburger we ordered, etc.), and if the length of time exceeds our expectation, we can become irritated. When another’s actions fail to meet our expectations, our frustration level grows. We may even lose faith in them.

In the Bible there is sometimes a gap between our expectations and God’s actions. One story that has puzzled me is the story of the Saul and David. In 1 Samuel 15 the prophet Samuel, tells Saul that God has rejected him as king. In the next chapter, Samuel anoints David to be the next king of Israel. What is puzzling and even a little troubling is that it takes another 20 years for Saul’s reign to end (he was 72 years old) and David’s to begin. If God had told Saul that he had rejected him as king, why did he let him reign for another 20 years? Our expectation is that when God says he is going to do something, he should do it, and he shouldn’t procrastinate.

Another example of God’s seemingly delayed activity could be seen in Psalm 13, a psalm of David. There David laments: “How long will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? . . . How long will my enemy triumph over me?” We don’t know when David writes this psalm, but it could well have been in those years between his anointing and his coronation, for it was during those years that Saul tried to kill him. Clearly David is frustrated by God’s seemingly slow action, for he feels that the oppression will never end. If God doesn’t act, the psalm continues, David feels that he might be killed. We can understand his frustration at God’s seeming inactivity.

The most obvious example of God’s seemingly slow action can be seen in the delayed return of Jesus. There is strong indication that the early church was also a little confused about Jesus’ return, for when he ascended into heaven, it did seem that his return would be imminent. True, during those early years the church grew rapidly, but so did its suffering. During times of severe persecution, it is not hard to believe that our brothers and sisters felt very much in tune with David’s sentiments in Psalm 13: “How long, Lord, will you forget us forever?” If the early church had known that this world would still be carrying on 2000 years later, they might have been quite surprised. There truly is a very large gap between their expectations and God’s actions. The gap is so large that today we scarcely give thought to Jesus’ return. It’s almost as if it won’t happen. (We know Jesus will return, but we don’t think about it that much.)

We may feel that gap between our expectations and God’s actions in our own lives. We pray for the salvation of a loved one, but it doesn’t happen as quickly as we might expect. We ask God for healing, but

instead of being healed overnight, it takes years. We pray for God to open doors, but no doors open, and we remain feeling trapped in our current lives.

These gaps between our expectations and God's action can leave us feeling frustrated, and we might even lose some faith in God. Our cry may also be, "How long, Lord, before you do something?" but God doesn't seem to answer or even give us a reason.

It would be helpful to know the reason for the delay. When we order windows and the lead time doesn't meet our expectations, we can usually discover why. Perhaps the supply of raw product (plastic for the injection molding machines) has been delayed, and we discover that the reason for the delay is that a ship has turned sideways in the Suez Canal (as happened a couple of years ago). Or we might learn that the plant that makes the windows we ordered had a fire and production had been paused for a couple of months as repairs were made. When we discover the reasons behind the delay, we might retain our trust and not become quite so frustrated.

God, however, does not always reveal to us the reasons he does not act immediately. We are never told why Saul reigned another 20 years before he was removed from the throne. We don't know why Jesus hasn't returned. We don't know why God doesn't heal us or turn a loved one back to himself. We can speculate, but we have to remember that any guess we have might be wrong. We cannot know.

In Psalm 13 David doesn't receive any answers. He frets about his situation, and he cries out to God, but it does not seem as if there is any answer forthcoming. Yet, in verse 5, David says this, "But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation." The word that is translated as "unfailing love" is often understood as "committed love" or "covenantal love." What David trusts is that God's love for him is not based on emotion or circumstance. God had made a commitment to David, and God would keep it. Of this David was absolutely sure. And that allows him to end the psalm with praise as he says that God has been good to him even though he hasn't received what he asked for.

David doesn't receive reprieve from his enemies. He doesn't receive an explanation from God as to why there was a delay. He doesn't even get a timeline, telling him when things would change for the better. But what he does have is the assurance that God loved him and would give him what he needed. How that would happen and when it would happen, he did not know. But God still loved him.

When God's actions don't meet our expectations, it is frustrating. But David instructs us by his example that in spite of what we experience and know, God's love remains steadfast, and he will take care of things in his way and in his own time. Our response is simple: trust God that he will do what he will and leave it in his hands.

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