

Just the other day, we had to dispose of some milk that had spoiled in the refrigerator during our travels. Now we're not just talking about milk that had simply soured—no, this had gone all the way to *spoiled*. So, we threw it out. In America, certain baked goods, dairy products and even infant formula are labeled with a pull date...that's the date where the product is at its peak, labelled so for the benefit of both the retail seller and the consumer. Go take a look—a pull date is printed on every carton of milk in America!

Along those same lines, let's talk about God's promises. *Every vibrant Christian gratefully operates on the promises of God.* And God has given us plenty of extraordinary promises—from salvation to healing to never leaving or forsaking us...yay, every nook and cranny of life are part of His promises unfolding for our good! Our mature response to all circumstances, of course, is to operate in faith and trust that God will perfectly fulfill His promises. But here's the catch: God operates on His perfect timetable, His perfect timing—and His timetable is often not the same timetable as ours! Or had you not noticed that? Ha.

In fact, an essential element of faith is patience, right? After all, if God responded *immediately, right on the spot* to every one of our requests—like a vending machine activated by voice command—then God would not be God, He would be the perfect butler...immediately fulfilling our every whim!

Hey, we're speaking out a fresh new episode in the Abraham series here, spending our brief time together talking about "*the pull date on patience.*" That's because, when God's answer seems to lag, even the most patient believers can find themselves feeling an uneasiness that can easily germinate into a complaint. "Hey, God, I know you promised this quite a while back, so what's goin' on here?" Then, that age-old temptation starts to hover—*let me take it into my own hands!* Yeah, what can I do to precipitate getting the results of the promise sooner—you know, how can I help God out so that things get rollin' faster?

Who hasn't *been there, done that?* And, the truth is, sometimes God does want us to take a particular action in faith, maybe a fresh prayer, or just a persistent prayer, or perhaps picking up the phone and calling someone and sharing the particulars of the situation. Could be that God wants that evidence of His blessing to be made evident to all. For sure, we know that the Holy Spirit will direct us in these cases.

But other times, we can kinda just act unilaterally, just "humanly"—*that's right, apart from the Holy Spirit*—and decide that the pull date on our patience is *today, even right this very minute!* We've had it! Perhaps the supernatural dimension of God's promise seems so far-fetched that we question our spiritual discernment. So then, we humanly think we see a way how we can gain some measure of control over the promise at hand...yeah, yeah, just helping God out a bit in the natural in order for Him to accomplish the supernatural sooner. Yeah, *sooner!* The pull date on our patience is getting very near, yes, even *now!*

Now that's happened about a trillion times for God's people over the millennia. Well, I don't know if that's really a *trillion* times...it's may even be much higher! But I know...and *you* know...it's a whole lot of times!

Take Sarah, Abraham's wife, in one of her key actions that changed history for countless people. Long before, the Lord had come to Abraham and made a covenant with him about having offspring as numerous as the stars in heaven. We pick up that narrative later, in Genesis 16:1-6 in the ESV (and remember, in this passage, the names for Abraham and Sarah had not yet been changed by the Lord.)

"Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, 'Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, 'May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!' But Abram

said to Sarai, 'Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.' Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her."

See how Sarai wanted God's plan to have moved along faster...better? She framed it in *supernatural* terms, but her understanding was in the negative: "the Lord has prevented me from bearing children." But then her "solution" was in the *natural*, trying to put herself in control of the situation by having Abram have a baby with Hagar. It looks pretty clear—Sarai had reached *her pull date on patience*....and she took action! And this is important, too: Abram did not end that idea or even tap the brakes a bit—no, he agreed to the whole plan! And afterwards Sarai roped Abram in on the blame for how Hagar was treating Sarai.

Hagar fled, then the angel of the Lord apprehended Hagar, giving her instruction and promises. Take a listen: "The angel of the Lord also said to her, 'I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.' And the angel of the Lord said to her, 'Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.'"

And there you have it. Indeed, history tells us that the hand of Ishmael's multitude of offspring has been against a whole lot of folks, not least that *other* son of Abraham named Isaac! All of this started by the triggering of Sarah's pull date on patience...and Abraham's agreement with her stand. That's a powerful lesson for those of us who have marriage partners or business colleagues. Do we sometimes agree with our closest partner or colleague just to keep short-term harmony—even when there could be damaging long-term impact? What was the language we suggested earlier? Maybe...*been there, done that!*?

But we should remember that both Abraham and Sarah are among the very few listed in Hebrews 11 for their amazing faith. Again, Sarai's problem was not that she didn't believe God was acting supernaturally—she did! It's just that she didn't believe God was acting in a fashion or timetable that fulfilled her desires. Yet God *did* keep His promise by blessing Abraham and Sarah with Isaac—*fourteen years later!* God was faithful, and so were Abraham and Sarah. But it didn't happen along the timeline that Sarah had wanted.

Along this same type of theme, remember the story of the Canaanite woman told in Matthew 15:21-28? She knows Jesus is Messiah and reports that her child is severely oppressed by a demon. Jesus chooses not to do anything—His timing was not yet for Gentiles. When she persists, Jesus praises her for her great faith and heals the child instantly. Wow, here, the Gentile woman's pull date for patience was triggered...and *Jesus honored that!* But here's a key: she didn't take the situation into her own hands for a human solution, she merely repeated her appeal for Jesus to do something supernatural!

And don't forget Luke's account of the centurion and his servant near death. The centurion sent a request via the Jewish elders for his servant's healing. When Jesus started traveling that way, the centurion said he did not presume that Jesus needed to visit the centurion's house—rather, the centurion understood authority and appealed to Jesus to "...say the word, and let my servant be healed." Jesus marveled and said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." *And the servant was healed.* Again, the centurion didn't take mere human action to address the situation—he appealed to Jesus's supernatural authority! And Jesus marveled at the centurion's faith. *The timing was moved up by the centurion's faith.*

So what are common threads—from Sarah to the Canaanite woman to the centurion? All were lauded for their great faith. But where the request was not about taking control of the situation into merely human hands, the urgent timetable request was honored. Let's face it, acting upon a pull date on our patience is very tempting. But, maybe, just maybe, our most astute request is to leave any changing of the timetable in God's hands—then trust for the amazing goodness of God to be revealed in *His* timing!

A&A: Application & Action

1. Have you ever acted upon your “pull date on patience” because God just didn’t seem to be meeting your timetable or expectations? Share specifics.
2. Just how is it that Sarah could pull such a boneheaded move with Hagar when she ran out of patience in God’s plan yet still be lauded in Hebrews for her faith? Could it be we too can have great faith in Christ even while lapsing some on the patience side of the equation of faith in certain circumstances? Discuss.
3. Think of your key, closest working relationships in life, whether that’s a spouse, someone at church, or someone at work. Like Abraham with Sarah, have you gone along with a rushed idea for the sake of harmony or even because of your own frustrations with the situation? Give an example, whether you agreed to a very poor action or, conversely, helped detour a bad plan.