

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT PATIENCE?

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When a timeless virtue like patience is all but forgotten in the incessant waves of breaking news, fast food, and overnight delivery, we can be sure that we too are somewhere in the current of a powerful riptide.

I am particularly interested, therefore, in recommending this booklet written by RBC writer and research editor Dean Ohlman. Dean's fresh and personal style, combined with his background in education and the classics, have given him the ability to help us see ourselves through windows of the past. His reflections on the virtue we love to hate provide fresh insight into ourselves and the unparalleled wisdom of the Bible.

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A MAN OF PATIENCE

Standing just five feet tall, his acquaintances considered him to be unremarkable in appearance—homely according to some. Yet a statue of this man stands tall in the English “hall of fame,” the Westminster Abbey. The brief inscription on the pedestal below reads, “He removed from England the guilt of the African slave trade, and prepared the way for the abolition of slavery in every Colony of the Empire.”

The one honored by burial in this place of renown was William Wilberforce, a man who gained the respect of his foes as well as his friends for his unrelenting fight against slavery, child labor, and animal abuse. Shortly after beginning his political career as a member of the English

House of Commons, he was encouraged by John Newton (a former slave-ship captain and writer of the song “Amazing Grace”) to fight for the end of the slave trade in Great Britain. Success did not come quickly. But Wilberforce was not a man to give up easily. It would take him 19 long years to reach that goal.

Ending the slave trade in the motherland was not enough for him. He continued to push for legislation that would abolish slavery throughout the British Empire. This was not to happen for another 37 years—the edict passing its final vote just 3 days before he died. If a monument has ever been raised to honor the virtue of enduring patience, certainly Wilberforce’s grave marker is one.

A POET OF PATIENCE

While the life and writings of William Wilberforce have influenced my thinking in recent years, other examples of patience had an effect on my life much earlier. Many of these individuals were introduced to me by my high school English teacher, Ada Moody. Her own love for inspirational prose and poetry radiated from her in a manner that could not be ignored by many of us otherwise-distracted teens. In English literature, in particular, she worked hard to unearth the gems of wisdom glittering beneath their burden of archaic words and phrases. It was especially the writings of John Milton that needed her careful explanations. One of the first works I recall was Milton's sonnet "On His

Blindness." The poem's final line has been with me ever since: "They also serve who only stand and wait."

***"They also serve
who only stand
and wait."***

**John Milton
(1608–1674)**

That line, however, is only a summary of a great lesson learned by this humble servant of Christ. John Milton had become blind at age 43 after having proved himself to be one of England's most capable writers and poets. The year his blindness became total was the same year that Oliver Cromwell unseated King Charles I. Cromwell championed responsible freedom of the press that allowed Puritan writers like Milton to freely publish their convictions

of principles and faith. Now with this great new opportunity to write, Milton was handicapped by the loss of his eyesight. He wondered, in grand verse, how the Lord of the universe could allow this. All he wanted was to use his talent to serve God. How could God demand his labor but deny the “light” by which he needed to work?

. . . but Patience, to prevent that murmur, soon replies,
“God doth not need
either man’s work
or his own gifts;
who best bear His mild
yoke, they serve Him best.
His state is kingly;
thousands at His bidding
speed and post o’er land and
ocean without rest;
they also serve who only
stand and wait.”

By careful reflection on words and people of the Bible, John Milton learned Job’s lesson: We are not indispensable to God. His

ways transcend ours,
His purposes trump ours,
His will triumphs over ours.
Personified patience holds
on to this lesson with a
faith that understands how
blessed we are in our life
under the sun because
God is sovereign.

God allowed Milton to live quietly, reflectively, and patiently for 22 more years—years during which some of his greatest work was done: the writing of the epic moral history of mankind found in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. In the final stanza of his last significant poem, “Samson Agonistes,” the theme of patience returns. Reflecting on the biblical narrative of Samson’s ultimate sacrifice in service to Jehovah, Milton teaches once again the lesson that while we may question the actions of divine providence, in the end His “Highest Wisdom” is shown to be supreme.

Patience reminds us that though “oft He seems to hide His face, [He] unexpectedly returns.”

The unequaled grandeur of well-rendered truth and spiritual wisdom that mark the endeavors of so many of the early masters of English literature depended primarily upon one source, the Bible. Although King James had made the Bible available to the masses in 1611 through the publication of his English language “Authorized Version,” scholars like John Milton were able to study and write from the original languages.

OLD TESTAMENT MEANING

The noun *patience*, though a significant ancient concept in the Hebrew Scriptures, is not found in the King James Version of the Old Testament. Instead we find

it as the adjective *patient*. It’s perhaps significant that the first use of the word is in one of the Bible’s early lists of the attributes of God:

The Lord passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth” (Ex. 34:6).

The Hebrew word translated “longsuffering” is the one most commonly used in the Old Testament to indicate patience. Many Bible versions use the expression “slow to anger” in translating this Hebrew term.

The “slow to anger” idea is etched in my memory from my childhood. My father was a good and longsuffering man. But as children sometimes do, my siblings and I tested the limits of his patience at times, which led to some painful discipline. Coming to Mother expecting

consolation (a ready disciplinarian herself), we'd often hear what was to become a familiar saying: "Beware the wrath of a patient man!"

***"Beware the fury
of a patient man!"***

**John Dryden
(1631–1700)**

That was a good lesson for me because my dad was also a loving man. I find it interesting that many decades later I still remember the threat of punishment, but I can't recall any particular spanking. His discipline was adequate for the task of correction, but not so severe that the memory of harsh punishment would short-circuit the lesson I needed to learn. Exodus 34:6 defines a God like that.

Another way one can

gain lessons on patience from the Hebrew is by looking at the terms that define its opposite. One term is variously used to indicate the concept my mother referred to: trying one's patience, or finally exhausting one to the point of causing wrath or bringing about discipline. The ancient Israelites had a way of doing that with God, and their prophets found it necessary to remind them that Jehovah's longsuffering could eventually end, and discipline would be meted out:

Then [Isaiah] said, "Hear now, O house of David! Is it a small thing for you to weary men, but will you weary my God also?" (Isa. 7:13).

In some translations the word *weary* is rendered, "try the patience of." Yes, God's patience can be presumed upon too far. Yet it is enlightening to discover

that this particular passage comes just before one of the Old Testament's primary prophecies about the promised Messiah (v.14). Together the two verses tell us that the proper end of true patience is righteous judgment. But God let the full force of His wrath fall on His Son, Jesus Christ, so that we who deserved such judgment could have a pardon instead.

A good way to understand the Old Testament terms relating to patience and impatience is to think of them as words relating to "long" and "short." *Patience* means keeping your anger in check for a long time, enduring hardship for a long time, waiting a long time for goodness, truth, and righteousness to prevail, and striving a long time to reach perfection. *Impatience* is indicated by shortness—of temper, of endurance, of

the will to wait for what is good and true and right, and of the capacity to persevere in the work of developing God-honoring character and behavior.

NEW TESTAMENT MEANING

When we come to the New Testament manuscripts, which were written in Greek, it's a little easier to find nouns that relate more directly to the concept of patience. The two primary Greek words used commonly for patience are differentiated by their reference point: One applies to patience regarding *things* and *circumstances*; the other relates to patience in reference to *people*.

Interestingly, the Greek term that relates to God's patience is almost universally the one that refers to people. One Bible

commentator points out that because God made all things He can do with them what He wants, when He wants. He really doesn't need patience with things and circumstances as you and I do. We can't do anything directly about many of the matters that try our patience. They're mostly beyond our power to manipulate or control as God can. But God does practice great patience toward people, not because He can't compel us to do His will but because He lovingly respects the will of those He has made in His own likeness. God patiently waits for us to voluntarily respond to the leading of His Spirit. It is this same endurance that the apostle Paul had in view when he wrote:

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason

I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering [patience], as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life (1 Tim. 1:15-16).

One of the most soul-stirring of all passages using this human-oriented Greek term for God's patience is found in the apostle Peter's second letter:

The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering [patient] toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9).

Paul, recognizing the importance of patience as a godly attribute, held up his own practice of it as an example to one of his protégés. In a letter to a young pastor named Timothy, Paul

used both of the common Greek terms for patience:

You have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering [patience with people], love, perseverance [patience with things and circumstances], persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me (2 Tim. 3:10-11).

Another Greek word less commonly translated as “patience” indicates that longsuffering with people is associated with an attitude of gentleness and humility. This is the word found in James 3:17.

The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle [humbly patient], willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality

and without hypocrisy.

Most biblical terms in reference to patience indicate that it is an attribute with shoes on—actively working and persevering toward a God-honoring end. It works while it waits. But a few of the

“Have courage for the great sorrows of life and patience for the small ones; and when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake.”

**Victor Hugo
(1802–1885)**

words in the original languages remind us that godly patience involves

more than enduring the passing of time. It also means waiting on God in times of deep trouble. It carries an attitude of faith that God is in control, so we can bring our anxieties to Him. William Wilberforce demonstrated the hardworking, enduring work of patience. John Milton's attitude toward his "untimely" blindness demonstrates for us the godly attitude of gentle humility we should have when all we can do is wait.

ITS ULTIMATE MEANING

The 1955 play *Waiting For Godot* by Irish playwright and existentialist Samuel Beckett is considered by some literary critics to be the defining play of the 20th century. It features two individuals who are waiting for an

apparently important but unidentified person named Godot who never shows up. The characters idle their time away musing over the apparent meaninglessness of human existence. And the fact that the awaited individual never comes is fitting. At the end of the first act, one of the characters says, "Well, shall we go?" The other assents. But as the curtain descends, they are seen not moving—still waiting. This philosophical drama is a picture of the despair of a humanity that merely exists without meaning or purpose. This, of course, is the primary conclusion of the philosophy of existentialism popular in the 1950s—and more or less foundational to current postmodernism.

Though the whole play is about waiting, no one would characterize the behavior of the two characters as patient. True

patience involves waiting, but it is not just waiting; it's waiting on purpose. While Beckett claimed that the "Godot" waited for in his play did not symbolize God, the universal core of existentialism is uncertainty about the existence of God. But patience, at its heart, is faith in the existence, the compassion, and the promises of God. From the first book to the last, the Bible offers us glimpses of faithful patience—waiting for God—by people who trusted Him and His Word. They determined to persevere and endure to the end because God is there and He is good.

Both the Old and New Testament words for patience and the examples of patience indicate that this virtue has two legs—*endurance* and *perseverance*. These aspects reflect two important realities about patience. Patience will in

some instances stand still with firm resolve to hold on to the truth. Such patient endurance marked the life of the apostle Paul. He was imprisoned numerous times (see Acts 16), and in those times he could do little but wait in faith for God to act.

Yet Paul also had the other leg of patience, that of perseverance. Perseverance is patience on the move. It marks those who actively continue in a work they're convinced is God's calling. Perhaps even more significant, however, is persevering in a mundane work that seems on the surface to have little godly purpose. It's faithfully going on with life, trusting that if you do your work honestly and well with a good attitude and gentle spirit, you are indeed serving your God.

A prime biblical example of such patience

is Joseph (Gen. 37–50). The story of Joseph is one of the longest and most dramatic narratives of the Bible. After being sold into slavery by his cruel and conspiring brothers, he was transported to Egypt, where he suffered, like Shakespeare’s Hamlet, “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.”

If anyone had a reason to become bitter, to harbor hatred, to lose faith in God, Joseph certainly did. One could indeed picture Joseph delivering the famous existential “to be or not to be” soliloquy of Hamlet in which the troubled Dane ponders whether or not to kill himself because of the “whips and scorns of time.” Hamlet enumerates the very difficulties suffered by Joseph: “the oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s [insults], . . . the law’s delay, the insolence of office, and the spurns” that unworthily come upon one who must

just bear it all patiently.

The beauty of Joseph’s story is that unlike Hamlet’s, it is true. In the end, Joseph’s faith and hope in God were stronger than ever. He did not resolve to seek vengeance. He didn’t deny his faith in Jehovah and resign himself to a miserable fate and bitter end. Although he must have experienced deep and dark seasons of the soul, he did not end up in despair. Instead, over and over he offered his life to God. Through a series of terrible reversals he trusted his heavenly Father even in the service of pagan rulers and governments. And God blessed Joseph for his faith and patience in ways he never could have imagined—the eventual salvation of his entire family and the perpetuation of God’s promise to Abraham to make of him a great nation that would bless

the nations of the world.

Think of it. One young man's practice of patient perseverance, in seemingly impossible circumstances, some 3,000 years ago, ultimately blessed you and me. His hope is now our hope. Joseph is ultimately honored in the hall of faith found in Hebrews 11, a list of the saints of God who persevered and endured with patience just about every trial imaginable—because they had hope. They knew (as Jesus later instructed us to pray) that God's kingdom would come and His will would be done "on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt. 6:10). The full meaning of their exemplary lives was summarized by the writer of Hebrews after he presented his list of the faithful:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin

which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance [patience] the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 12:1-2).

True patience is anchored in hope. And our hope is grounded not only in the much-witnessed life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but also in the promise of His return. French philosopher Vauvenargues stated it simply: "Patience is the art of hoping." This truth was elegantly stated by another English writer I learned about when my high school literature teacher introduced us to Edward Bulwer-Lytton, a 19th-century novelist, who

said, "There is one form of hope which is never unwise, and which certainly does not diminish with the increase of knowledge. In that form it changes its name, and we call it patience" (*The New Dictionary Of Thoughts*, Standard Book Company, 1966, p.296). The writer of the letter to the Hebrews gave us the essence of that hope:

God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. For when God made a promise to

Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, "Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you." And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute. Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has

entered for us, even Jesus (Heb. 6:10-20).

James, the brother of Jesus, also emphasized the hope in Christ that is the underpinning of our faith and the reason for our patience:

Be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand (Jas. 5:7-8).

Because the apostles had personally met the Son of God, received bread and wine from His hands, experienced His sacrificial compassion, touched His wounds, and seen predictions of Jewish prophets fulfilled, these early followers of Christ were not left in an

existential quandary about the One they expectantly looked for. It was not Godot

***Patience is not
a desperate waiting
in doubt, but a
hopeful waiting
in confidence.***

they awaited; it was God in the flesh, the One who is coming for the “restoration of all things” (Acts 3:19-21). Patience is not a desperate waiting in doubt, but a hopeful waiting in confidence.

THE COMPANY PATIENCE KEEPS

If we learned nothing else about patience from the Bible than what we know about the good company it keeps, that in itself would be profound.

One of most significant facts about patience is that it is found in several Scripture “honor rolls,” lists of godly character traits that people living under the influence of the Holy Spirit were intended to possess.

Perhaps best known is the list of attitudes and behaviors that mark the follower of Christ who is acting in the power of the Spirit. In writing to the church in Galatia, Paul first highlighted characteristics that define those who will not “inherit the kingdom of God.” He set them in opposition to the attributes that identify true followers of Christ—the ultimate kingdom inheritors:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering [patience], kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law (Gal. 5:22-23).

While this accounting of honorable attributes readily comes to mind to those familiar with the Scriptures, there are other lesser-known lists that reveal to us how highly God regards patience, whether on His part or ours. Here are a few passages about patience accompanying God’s lovingkindness, readiness to forgive, and commitment to justice:

*Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, **patient** in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless*

and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion (Rom. 12:9-16).

For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all **patience** and **longsuffering** with joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the

inheritance of the saints in the light (Col. 1:9-12).

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, **patience**, gentleness (1 Tim. 6:10-11).

But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine: that the older men be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in **patience** (Ti. 2:1-2).

Paul gave us an impressive list of Christian virtues that accompany patience: love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, genuineness, affection, friendliness, innocence, humility,

industriousness,
selflessness, spiritual
fervency, hopefulness, piety,
charitability, hospitality,
empathy, sympathy,

**“Patience with
others is love.**

**Patience with self
is hope. Patience
with God is faith.”**

Adel Bestavros

agreeableness, gratefulness,
righteousness, godliness,
sobriety, reverence,
temperance, orthodoxy.

Our Lord and His first-century followers considered patience to be a defining character trait of those who claimed to be His followers. Understanding how Jesus Christ is the epitome of love and compassion, we should not be surprised to find that love is often defined by

patience. As if to highlight that truth, Paul used both common Greek terms for patience in his definition of love for the troubled church in Corinth—patience with people, and patience with things and circumstances. The 13th chapter of this letter is considered to be one of history’s classic descriptions of love—often quoted from the King James Bible in English literature books. Especially significant are these verses:

Love suffers long [is patient] and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, [patiently] endures all things. Love never fails (1 Cor. 13:4-8).

Simply stated, being patient is the behavioral way to say, “I love you.”

THE TRIALS OF PATIENCE

When we come to learn that patience is an aspect of love built on the pillars of endurance and perseverance, we realize that it is an essential virtue for living in a fallen world on a cursed earth. Many Bible translators have rightly chosen the expression *longsuffering* as the most symbolically accurate term for patience. In a perfect world, like that experienced by Adam and Eve, patience would be meaningless. We’d be living in a state of perpetual satisfaction with no struggles and no pain. One does not “endure” a joyful and pleasant experience. Nor do we “persevere” in a task

that offers no challenge.

I find it fascinating that of the heroes of faith listed in Hebrews 11, some demonstrated great patience while others showed impatience.

Noah is a prime example of patience. His 120-year task of building the ark has to be one of history’s most amazing examples of perseverance. Surrounded by an evil civilization that had become violent and godless to the core, he must have received unending mockery.

Abraham and Sarah are listed in Hebrews 11 as well. Some of the facts about their lives demonstrate the dire consequences of impatience, though ultimately through faith they persevered—and God’s promised creation of a special “chosen people” was fulfilled through them.

Moses’ life illustrates both impatience and

patience. All told, however, Moses demonstrates amazing perseverance and endurance—in 40-year stints. For 40 years he kept his faith in the one God, Jehovah, while being educated in the courts of polytheistic Egypt. In fact, it was his belief in the God of the Hebrews that motivated a costly act of impatience. While agonizing over the cruel captivity of his people, he impulsively struck and killed an Egyptian overlord who was abusing one of the Hebrews. His ancestor Joseph had prophesied many years earlier that God would free the children of Israel and bring them back to the land promised to Abraham (Gen. 50:24). So Moses could have patiently trusted in that prediction—allowing God's plan to unfold in God's time. Because he didn't, he spent another 40 years enduring the barren land of Midian—

tending sheep. We have no record that God ever communicated directly with him during those long years. So when God dramatically entered his life at the burning bush (Ex. 3), Moses had already spent many years in the school of patience.

When God asked Moses to lead His people out of Egypt and on to their promised land, Moses soon found that he was still “in school.” Instead of graduating to a life of ease, Moses had to endure another 40 years of extreme trial, hardship, and suffering. During those years Moses got more lessons in patience—and impatience—than he ever wanted. His frustration with the Hebrews has been recorded for us in several places. One that stands out is his irritation over their lack of faith that God would provide them the water they needed:

Therefore the people contended with Moses, and said, "Give us water, that we may drink." So Moses said to them, "Why do you contend with me? Why do you tempt the Lord?" (Ex. 17:2).

The Amplified Bible translates the Hebrew word for "tempt" here as "try the patience of." One could say that the impatience of the Hebrews constantly tried the patience of both Moses and Jehovah. Later prophets frequently commented on the lack of patience shown by the people of Israel—an impatience that often led to God's judgment. Time and again they would speak of God's longsuffering compassion for His stubborn and wayward people, yet also with the warning that His patience would not last forever.

Israel's King David, in his reflective moments, understood well and

articulated beautifully the importance of patience:

Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him; do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass. Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; do not fret—it only causes harm (Ps. 37:7-8).

Perhaps it is this understanding that helped promote David to the honor roll of faith in Hebrews 11:

And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out

of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again. Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth (Heb. 11:32-38).

The writer of Hebrews concluded his comments about these mostly unnamed heroes of the faith by recommending that we keep them all in

mind whenever we have to endure hardship—finally pointing to the ultimate example of Jesus:

Consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls (Heb. 12:3).

King David summed it up this way:

I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps. He has put a new song in my mouth—praise to our God; many will see it and fear, and will trust in the Lord (Ps. 40:1-3).

The ultimate motivation for patience is contained in these words of that great psalmist. As followers of Jesus we are sometimes going to have to suffer long.

We will be misunderstood.
We will be taken advantage
of by unprincipled people.

*When we patiently
wait for the Lord
through persecution,
pain, depression,
boredom, and
troublesome
circumstances, we
may unknowingly
be leading others
to Christ.*

In it all, however, we are directed to stand firmly on the two legs of patience—endurance and perseverance. And don't forget that when we patiently wait for the Lord through persecution, pain, depression, boredom, and troublesome circumstances, we may unknowingly be

leading others to Christ. Practicing patience is sometimes an act of evangelism.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF IMPATIENCE

Our discussion up to this point may have left the impression that patience is a great and noble virtue that is needed only in the most extreme and difficult times of our lives. But the truth is that patience is a practical, everyday virtue—one we're required to practice mostly in small, almost unnoticed ways. Sadly, the meaning of simple patience is often dramatically demonstrated by our acts of impatience.

Nearly all of us have grieved over acts of impatience that had dire consequences. Many years ago, when my boys were still young, I was stunned when

I heard the news about the tragic death of a neighbor. She was also the parent of young children. Heading off to work one morning, she drove out of our quiet neighborhood onto a busy highway—only to be struck and killed by a car she should have waited for. Like so many of us, however, she was in a hurry and did not take the time to judge the speed of the car moving toward her. What unintentional loss she suffered. What horrible emotional distress the surviving children and husband had to struggle through. All they could ask was, “Why? How could such a common act of impatience have such tragic results?”

Most of our acts of impatience, of course, do not have such instant outcomes. But they all do have consequences—many

of them negatively affecting our relationships with others. Reformer John Calvin once painfully confessed,

“To put it in a nutshell, every sin is to be traced back to impatience.”

**Tertullian
(c.160–225)**

“My struggles are not greater against my vices, which are very great and numerous, than against my impatience; and my efforts are not wholly useless. I have not, however, been able yet to conquer that ferocious animal” (*John Calvin—His Life, His Teaching, & His Influence* by William Wileman).

Maybe if we ask ourselves what our impatience means, we’ll have a better handle on

patience. Looking at my own life, I can see my acts of impatience motivated by these selfish thoughts:

- “My time is more important than your time.”
- “Don’t you realize that your slowness is irritating me!”
- “Come on, I have things to do.” In other words, “My activities are more important than yours.”
- “If I don’t hurry, I’m going to miss something important to me.”
- “I don’t have time to deal with your problem.”
- “This waiting is inconvenient for me.”
- “You’re keeping me from doing something I want to do.”
- “I have to do this quickly because there’s something else I want to do.”
- “God’s work must be done now, and I’m the only one to do it.”

At its heart, impatience is one of the chief traits of self-centeredness. And self-centeredness is a mark of immaturity. We are not surprised that children want what they want when they want it, but we expect grown-ups to have matured to the point where they’re willing to wait and to give of their time to meet the needs of others.

Unfortunately, we live in a society that all too often doesn’t know how to wait. Our generation has become the “I Want It Now” generation. We’ve become so accustomed to immediate self-gratification that we have lost our appreciation for the gift of patience. We tend to live like children looking forward to Christmas, a fact noted by Irish poet Mary Tighe: “O how impatience gains upon the soul when the long promised hour of joy draws near. How slow the tardy

moments then seem to roll” (*The New Dictionary Of Thoughts*, Standard Book Company, 1966, p.296).

I thank God for allowing me to live long enough to look back and see how little I have accomplished by impatience. Not only does impatience mostly fail to bring about what I want, it often destroys my joy in getting it. Impatience even turns necessary negative things into worse things.

Seventeenth-century English bishop Jeremy Taylor noted, “Impatience turns an ague [a chill] into a fever, a fever to the plague, fear into despair, anger into rage, loss into madness, and sorrow into frenzy” (ibid, p.295).

A later bishop, George Horne, agreed: “Adversity borrows its sharpest sting from our impatience” (ibid, p.296).

Here’s a list of common consequences of impatience that can no

doubt be readily added to by others who have suffered under its impetuous control:

- Untimely death
- Physical pain and suffering
- Broken dreams
- Troubled personal relationships
- Stunted character growth
- Compromised integrity
- God’s displeasure
- Missing the best of Christlike love
- Loss of the ultimate best in pursuit of an immediate pleasure

That last consequence reminds me of the neatly lettered sayings posted near the front of every classroom at the Christian university I attended. After seeing these wise maxims hour after hour and year after year, many of them sank in. I think I can still quote them all after some 40 years. One in particular sticks with me: “Don’t sacrifice the permanent on the

altar of the immediate.”

If impatience does anything, it often gives up what is lasting and significant for that which is fleeting and relatively meaningless. That point was graphically illustrated for me as a young man by pastor Charlie Shedd in his landmark book on sex, *The Stork Is Dead*, which he wrote for Christian young people.

Charlie wrote about his experience as a kid growing up in the American South and planting peanuts. Because peanuts are tubers that grow on the roots beneath the ground, you can't see how well they're developing. So being an impatient kid, he decided to dig them up to see how they were doing. Well, they were doing fine. So he shoveled them back into the hole and tamped the ground firm. A month or so later, he went to harvest them. How

disappointed he was. Many of the peanuts had died and the rest were shriveled and misshapen.

“That's how it is with pre-marital sex,” Charlie wrote. In fact, that's a picture of the consequences that follow virtually every impatient act.

***“Don't sacrifice
the permanent on
the altar of the
immediate.”***

English scientist-philosopher Francis Bacon recognized the extreme danger of impatience. He said, “Whoever is out of patience is out of the possession of his soul.” Being a follower of Christ, Bacon was no doubt recalling the words of Jesus to His disciples about the last days:

You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But not a hair of your head shall be lost. By your patience possess your souls (Lk. 21:16-19).

THE REWARDS OF PATIENCE

Because patience is such a valued attribute for the servant of God, it is found throughout the Scriptures. Sometimes we see it in failures and loss created by human impatience. But most commonly we find it marked by its rewards. Consider the following:

Patience leads to earthly benefits. “The Lord restored Job’s losses when he prayed for his friends. Indeed the Lord

gave Job twice as much as he had before” (Job 42:10).

Patience provides us a better end than the present. “The end of a thing is better than its beginning; the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit” (Eccl. 7:8).

“Patience is the best remedy for every trouble.”

Plautus
(c.254–184 BC)

“[God] will render to each one according to his deeds: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality” (Rom. 2:6-7).

Patience allows us to bear fruit from seeds of faith. “The [seeds] that fell on the good ground are those

who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience” (Lk. 8:15).

Patience wins the approval of God. “I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry” (Ps. 40:1). “What credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God” (1 Pet. 2:20).

Patience makes us a good example for others. “We ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure” (2 Th. 1:4).

Patience perfects our character. “Let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (Jas. 1:4).

Patience provides health for our souls.

“By your patience possess your souls” (Lk. 21:19).

Patience gives us hope. “Whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).

Patience provides us with God’s power.

“Walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy” (Col. 1:10-11).

Patience enables us to inherit God’s promises. “We desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you

do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (Heb. 6:11-12).

ITS ULTIMATE HOPE

The apostle John, known in the Bible as “the apostle Jesus loved,” lived out many of his later years imprisoned on the rocky Isle of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. The pictures I have seen of this rugged and remote island have helped to form the image I have in my mind of the old disciple of Jesus quietly enduring his forced isolation, wandering ruggedly beautiful rocky shores—gazing out over striking blue waters in the direction of Jerusalem several hundred miles to the southeast. No doubt much of his time there was initially spent remembering the

events that led up to the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, whom he loved so dearly. Many years had passed, and John had been wearied by the suffering and pain he had endured to spread the word of what he and his friends had witnessed. I can see him writing these words which eventually became Scripture:

I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the Word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ (Rev. 1:9).

Patient endurance and perseverance had marked his life and the lives of his brothers and companions, as they had marked the life of Christ. But the account John was about to write and send to the churches in Asia Minor directly east

of his isolated island was astoundingly different from the letters he had written before about how to live and walk in the love and patience of Jesus Christ (John's three epistles). The last sight John had had of God the Son so many years before was that of a humble, persevering Servant being received into heaven by God the Father. This was 10 days before all the disciples were to be visited by God the Holy Spirit. John, in fact, had been worshiping in that very same Spirit on the Lord's Day when he was suddenly visited by his Master of old. This time, however, it was not a meek and mild suffering Servant he saw. It was his glorious, conquering Savior. John wrote about his vision:

I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the seven

lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength. And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death" (Rev. 1:12-18).

Jesus continued to speak, providing an astonished John with visions of the last days.

I'm not sure how this awe-inspiring appearance of Christ affected John's life afterward, but one thing I believe we can be confident of: John came to understand that his patient continuance in the faith was worth every beating, every humiliation, every blister, every drop of sweat, and every tear he had shed in service to the Savior.

Had you or I been there, we too would have come to the same conclusion. How thankful we can be that

NINE REQUISITES FOR CONTENTED LIVING:

- Health enough to make work a pleasure.
- Wealth enough to support your needs.
- Strength to battle with difficulties and overcome them.
- Grace enough to confess your sins and forsake them.
- Patience enough to toil until some good is accomplished.
- Charity enough to see some good in your neighbor.
- Love enough to move you to be useful and helpful to others.
- Faith enough to make real the things of God.
- Hope enough to remove all anxious fears concerning the future.

— Goethe (1749–1832)

everything patiently endured in our life, in our world, in our work for Christ, and in our love for others will receive the ultimate reward dramatically recorded for us in the Bible's last book: "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming quickly.' Amen. Even

so, come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20).



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