

Pursuing Patience

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Introduction.

- A. If there is any universal truth about life on earth, it's that events never proceed the way we want them to when we want them to. Life never works according to our plans or on our timetable. I don't care who you are, that's something that you have to deal with. As a result, all of us need patience.
- B. Patience is not necessarily something that the world around us values. The modern-day US is probably the most frantic, time-driven culture in existence. There is perhaps no better example of this than the way we behave on the roads. As drivers go, I'm pretty easygoing and sedate, and it always amuses me when I'm driving to work and folks go zooming by at 15 miles over the speed limit, trying to shave those precious seconds off their commute. Of course, when I coast up to the next light, there they are, having gained a whole car length on me by weaving in and out of traffic like maniacs, steaming and fuming until the light changes. For those folks, cutting them off or slowing them down is a capital offense. They are impatient.
- C. When patience is in such short supply around us, it's clearly something that we need to stock up on ourselves. As with most virtues, the process of acquiring patience is not necessarily an easy one. However, the more patience we develop, the better we will be able to deal with our families, our friends, our co-workers, our God, and our lives generally. Let's look at what the Scripture says, then, about pursuing patience.

I. What Is It?

- A. Naturally, as we consider the subject of patience, we have to define our terms first. We have to ask just what patience is. Scripturally speaking, there are two main ways in which patience is presented. We see the first in James 5:7. Here, James is exhorting the brethren to await the return of the Lord with the same patience with which the farmer awaits the coming of the seasonal rains in Palestine. There is nothing the farmer can do to speed those rains up, and there is nothing the brethren can do to hasten the return of Jesus.
- B. We can call this kind of patience "passive patience." It is simply waiting for an event or occurrence beyond our control. This is the kind of patience we exhibit, or maybe don't exhibit, when we're stuck in traffic on the freeway. In a situation like that, no matter how vividly we imagine laser beams shooting out of our headlights and annihilating every car in front of us for 20 miles, that is not actually going to happen. We're just stuck until somehow or other the traffic jam in front of us dissolves. We can't affect the situation; the only thing that we can affect is the way that we react to the situation. We can sit there and get frustrated and complain and mutter under our breath, or we can just let the frustration go because we can't do anything about the situation anyway. This isn't just important on the roads; there are many areas of life where passive patience is needed.
- C. A different kind of patience, though, makes its appearance in Revelation 2:2-3. Just like the farmer in James, these Christians have a goal. They want God's kingdom to grow. However, the situation of these Christians in Ephesus is unlike the farmer because they can affect themselves whether this goal is reached or not. Their patience manifests itself not by sitting and waiting, but by working and not growing weary.
- D. We can call this kind of patience "active patience." If it were the fall, I imagine I'd have a college football analogy for this one, but it's still summer, so yard work analogies are still in season, and I've got a good one. Believe it or not, after about a month of digging, I think I'm finally nearing the end of filling in the swimming pool crater in my backyard. It has certainly proven to be a project that required patience. However, it wasn't the sitting-around-and-waiting patience that it took. Folks, if I'd just sat around and waited for my hole to get filled in for me, that project would not be one shovelful of dirt closer to being done. Instead, my project took the working kind of patience, of steadily putting in the time and effort, even though the result was a long way off. In our spiritual toolbox, we need this active kind of patience as well as the passive kind.

II. What Does It Do?

- A. Now that we know what patience is, we have to figure out what it does next. After all, if patience has no good effects, we can go through life being just as impatient as we want to be without suffering any harm. Of course, that isn't the case. There are several important spiritual objectives that we can't achieve without it.
- B. The first of these objectives is described in James 1:4. According to this, when patience has completed its work in our lives, we ourselves will be complete. As we consider this verse, though, we need to remember to look at it in a spiritual context, rather than a physical one. This is promising us not physical completion, but spiritual completion. Here's the difference: let's say that back in my formative years, I had wanted to be a star quarterback for Mizou, and I worked as hard as I could toward that goal, and patiently waited to get that good. Folks, no matter what, I would never have taken the field for the Tigers because I have the athletic ability of a tree stump. I would never have seen the physical reality of my dreams. However, because of the time and effort I had spent working toward a goal, I would have been better equipped to serve God. My

patience, even though it would not have seen a physical result, would have seen a spiritual one. This is the kind of completeness we're talking about—the kind that comes with spiritual maturity and spiritual growth.

- C. Likewise, patience is necessary if we want to bear fruit. Consider the words of Christ in Luke 8:15. This quotation, of course, comes from the parable of the soils, and it describes the good soil of the honest heart. One of the things that makes this heart good is that it is willing to be patient with the things of the kingdom.
- D. This is so important, friends, to the way we understand our spirituality. Almost none of the work that we do for God, whether it's private self-improvement or publicly trying to serve Him, is going to be easy and have immediate, splashy results. After all, we've got the devil hanging on our backs every step of the way. That means, then, that if we ever want to accomplish anything, in ourselves or in the church, we have to be patient laborers who do not grow weary. Satan's resources are great, but they are not infinite. If we invest enough effort and enough prayer in what we're doing, sooner or later we will muscle him out of the way and get the results we want. On the other hand, if we decide the way is too hard and we give up, he wins. The truth is that if we want to be fruitful, we have to be stubbornner than the devil, and we need patience to do it.
- E. Finally, though, we need patience if we want to inherit the promises. Look at Hebrews 6:11-12. If we think about it, this is basically just the previous point on a much larger scale. The things that are true of the various components of our Christian lives are also true of the whole thing put together. If we want the reward, we have got to put in the work. Heaven has no place for the Christian who gets tired or fearful and gives up. Instead, the Hebrews writer describes those people in Hebrews 10 as those who shrink back to destruction. Ultimately, that's why we need patience—because if we don't have it, the lack will cost us our souls.

III. How Do We Get It?

- A. If patience is one of the things that determines our eternal destination, it's important for us to have it. We need to ask, then, just how it is that we get it. One of the ways that we gain patience is defined in James 1:3. When we endure trials and have our faith tested, it produces patience. This does a lot, friends, to explain why bad things happen to good people. If God let us drift through life without any hard times, our patience would be as out-of-shape as the couch potato who never walks any farther than the refrigerator. Instead, He allows us to be tested. We endure short-term physical suffering in order to receive a long-term spiritual blessing.
- B. However, if we want to receive this blessing, we have to approach our trials with the right attitude. When things don't go our way, it's easy to become frustrated, embittered, mad at life, and mad at God. That spirit doesn't produce patience. It just makes us vulnerable to the devil. Instead, when our lives grow difficult, we need to remember that God allowed the difficulty for a reason, and it's up to us to bring good from evil.
- C. Second, we get patience from studying the example of others. Look what James, once again, tells us about this in James 5:10. James, as he continues to instruct his brethren, tells them to think back to the times when the prophets suffered oppression for God, and to learn from the vindication of those men that God will vindicate His righteous ones today too. It's far less painful to learn patience from the suffering and endurance of others, so all of us would do well to study the example of others before God provides us with examples and object lessons of our own. If we learn the easy way first, we might not have to learn the hard way.
- D. We can find these examples in two main areas: in the pages of the word, and in our own personal experience. The first is obvious. Clearly, we should learn from the inspired record of those who endured suffering and triumphed in the name of God. However, the personal stories of Christians we know can often teach us just as much about patience. For instance, just the other day I got a call from a sweet sister down in Beaumont named Nancy Derrick. Nancy is one of the finest, most thoughtful people you can imagine, but when I first met her, even though she had been a Christian for 20 years or more, her husband Joe had never obeyed the gospel. Joe also was a joy to know. He was a pediatrician, in fact, and so well thought of in the congregation that all the sisters brought their kids to him when they were sick—but he still hadn't put on Christ. However, just before I left, through the efforts of Nancy and some others there, he finally obeyed the gospel. Now, Nancy will never appear in Scripture, and would probably blush at the thought, but there are many sisters in this room right now who can learn from her story about the importance of patience and never giving up.
- E. Finally, though, we can also gain patience through prayer. We see an example of this sort of prayer in 2 Thessalonians 3:5. Paul here is praying that the Thessalonians may learn the patience of Christ. Now, I've heard some brethren before joke that you should never pray for patience, because if you do, God will send you some trial or annoyance that will teach you patience. Now, I'm not sure that the underlying assumption there is justified, but even if it is, so what? If we think we need patience, and God thinks the best way to help us develop patience is to put us through a rough patch, God is undoubtedly right. And folks, who's to say that we can avoid trial simply by not praying for patience anyway?
- F. God, of course, is far more resourceful than we can possibly imagine, and He is fully capable of leading us to significant spiritual growth through a hundred tiny events that we don't even notice. Even beyond that, though, we need to remember that God is in our corner. He's rooting for us, and He will do whatever He can to help us. Simply by praying, we can tap into enough power to give us all the patience we need.

Conclusion. However, if you aren't a Christian, you need more from God than just patience. Repent today.