

“The Fruit of the Spirit: Patience”

(Galatians 5.22-23a)

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(very long pause...) ... Oh, are you waiting for me to talk to you about patience?!?

The fruit of the Spirit is ... *patience*. Some translations use the word *longsuffering*. Dictionary.com defines patience as “the quality of being patient, as the bearing of provocation, annoyance, misfortune, or pain, without complaint, loss of temper, irritation, or the like; (2) an ability or willingness to suppress restlessness or annoyance when confronted with delay; or (3) quiet, steady perseverance; even-tempered care; diligence.” We tend to use the word to describe the capacity to wait around for something to happen without letting the waiting bother you. As we will see, that’s not exactly what the biblical writers were getting at.

Paul and other New Testament writers tell us in several places that we need to have patience:

- As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. (Colossians 3:12)
- I ... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.... (Ephesians 4:1-2)
- Love is patient... (1 Corinthians 13:4)
- May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience.... (Colossians 1:11)
- Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. (James 5:7-8)

Sometimes we are advised to be patient with particular people...

- We urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. (1 Thessalonians 5:14)

... or in particular circumstances:

- I beg you to listen to me patiently. (Acts 26:3)

But what does patience actually look like? Are there any examples in the Bible of someone who has patience? Well, yes. Abraham, for example:

- When God made a promise to Abraham ... he swore ..., saying, “I will surely bless you and multiply you.” And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise. (Hebrews 6:13-15)

What is that referring to? What did Abraham *patiently* endure? A lot. God gave him that promise just after God had tested him to see if he would be willing to sacrifice his own son for God. God had put Abraham through an incredibly hard trial – a trial that most of us probably would not endure – and Abraham had *patiently* endured it. This gives us a little hint that when the Bible talks about “patience,” it doesn’t just mean “waiting around for something to happen without letting the waiting bothering you”; it also has something to do with *endurance* – endurance in the face of hardship or suffering.

Another example: Paul himself. Twice, Paul uses the word “patient” to describe his own ministry:

- You have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness.... (2 Timothy 3:10)
- We prove ourselves by our purity, our understanding, our patience, our kindness, by the Holy Spirit within us, and by our sincere love. (2 Corinthians 6:6)

But again, this doesn’t mean simply “waiting around” as if you didn’t have a care in the world. No, Paul’s ministry was filled with an incredible amount of hardship: “We have been beaten, been put in prison, faced angry mobs, worked to exhaustion, endured sleepless nights, and gone without food....” (2 Corinthians 6:5) “Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.” (2 Corinthians 11:24-27) When Paul talks about his “patience,” we have to keep in mind what he patiently *endured*.

So when Paul tells his protégé Timothy to “proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2), what he means by that is, be prepared to *endure a lot of hardship* as you teach and preach the gospel. You might have to put up with *a lot*. You might have to suffer *a lot*.

Are you starting to see a pattern here? Patience is not just about *waiting*. It’s about *enduring*.

- As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. (James 5:10)

If you’re familiar with the Old Testament prophets, you know they had to put up with *a lot*. Elijah had to flee Israel, all the way to Mount Sinai in the Sinai peninsula, because he had made some people so angry

they wanted to *kill* him. (1 Kings 19) Jeremiah was the target of an assassination plot; he was beaten and put in stocks; another time he was thrown down into a muddy reservoir and left to die; then he was rescued but immediately thrown into prison – all because he was trying to preach the Word of God. If you want examples of *patient endurance*, of putting up with a ton of *stuff* all because you're trying to be faithful to God – well, read the prophets.

But there's another example of someone in the Bible with a tremendous amount of patience, an example of patience *par excellence*: God.

- Do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? (Romans 2:4)
- God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark... (1 Peter 3:20)
- The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

How does God demonstrate patience? *By putting up with people like us!* We humans have shown a remarkable capacity to be stubborn, rebellious, headstrong, willful, arrogant, prideful, self-centered, mean, rude, cruel, hurtful, lazy, ill-tempered, downright evil at times – the fact that God didn't give up on us long ago is utterly remarkable. (He thought about it, if you'll remember, back in the days of the flood!) When God rescued the Israelites from Egypt, what did they do? They threw a wild party and made gods for themselves! When God brought the Israelites into the Promised Land, what did they do? They abandoned God's laws and did what was right in their own eyes. When God sent Jesus to save us, what did we do? We betrayed and killed him! When God sent the Holy Spirit to us as our guardian and guide, what did we do? We wandered and strayed, everyone to their own way. And we *still* do it, screwing up and screwing around, violating God's laws and Jesus's teachings, sometimes trying to justify our own actions, because even after all this time we *still* haven't figured out how to keep Jesus front and center in our hearts. God patiently endures all our screw-ups, heart weeping, but still loving us, like a disappointed parent: "I don't like what you did, *but I still love you.*" *That's* what we're talking about, when we're talking about patience – putting up with all the *stuff*, enduring it all, *never giving up hope.*

So what does this mean for you and me? When Paul tells us "clothe ourselves with patience," what does that mean, and how do we do that?

It doesn't just mean waiting around for something to happen without letting the waiting bother you. That's a piece of it, but it's more than that. It's a *lot* more than that.

What it *does* mean: doing God's will, to the fullest extent of your ability, each and every single day. Asking God to direct your path, and then *doing* whatever it is that God directs you to do. No "if"s, "and"s, or "but"s; no chickening out; no "well, maybe *tomorrow*, but not *today*". And if doing God's will means you're going to have to put up with some hardship, some difficulties, some ridicule, maybe even some persecution, *so be it*. Paul faced it. The prophets faced it. *We need to be willing to face it too.*

And *how* do we do that? This may sound simplistic, but it's true: with prayer. You've got to be praying. You've just *got* to be praying. A whole heck of a lot. Then the patience will come.

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