

The Patience of God

How much frustration and disappointment can you take before you completely lose heart?

One of my favorite stories is about the man lost in the desert. As the sun beat down on him, he got thirsty. Seeing a stand in the distance, he hiked up to it and asked, "Do you have any water?" "No, sir, we don't," the clerk replied, "but we do have bow-ties — striped bow-ties, dotted bow-ties, even flashing bow-ties." "No, I don't need a tie," the man said. "I need water." So off he staggered for several more hours until he came to another stand. "Do you have any water?" he asked. "No," the clerk replied. "But we do have neck-ties — long neckties, wide neckties, even bright and flashy neckties." "No," the man grumbled. "I don't need a tie. I need water!" So on he crawled until he was about to collapse. Just then he spotted a restaurant in the distance. Dragging himself up to the maître de, he croaked, "Do you have any water?" "Yes, sir, we do," the maître de replied. "We have lots of cool, refreshing water. But I'm sorry. I can't let you in without a tie!"

Life is like that at times. Full of frustration and disappointment! In fact, like me you've probably discovered by now that no one gets through life without facing countless hardships and heartaches. God sends His rain on both the righteous and unrighteous. Both good and bad people catch colds, lose jobs, have their cars break down on them, and are wounded by family and friends, to name just a few of life's trials, many of which we have no control over. In fact, so often what's the only thing we can control about them? How we react to them!

So let me take a moment to ask you a few revealing questions. How long can you sit in bumper-to-bumper traffic or wait in the grocery checkout line before you start grumbling under your breath? How much pain can you bear and how much negative criticism can you listen to before you're ready to lash out in anger? How long can you wait for the diagnosis to come back or pray for the spiritual well-being of a loved one before you lose faith and give up all hope? How you answer each of these questions reveals how much of a certain character trait you have, one that most of us have in short supply but which is extremely abundant in God. What virtue is that? Patience! Or what the Bible calls "long-suffering," the ability to endure great disappointment with faith, hope, and love.

For the last few weeks, I've been blogging about the Person of God—what He's like, how He acts, and what He thinks about you and me. So far we've looked at several of His attributes such as His wisdom, His justice, His goodness, and His faithfulness. However, in this message I want to focus on one of His most important traits towards us sinners, and that's His incredible patience.

Perhaps you remember the question Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:21-22) In other words, stop keeping track of how many times you forgive others, and forgive them as often as God forgives you, which is every time you sin against Him. The Psalmist David wrote, "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love...He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him.” (Psalm 103:8-11)

In this message, I want to spotlight the patience of God in the context of three vital relationships we have with Him: His patience with us as our Savior; His patience with us as our Father; and His patience with us as our Judge. My hope is that by the time I finish each of us will be even more thankful to Him and love Him more because of His long-suffering towards us.

God’s Patience as Our Savior

The best word to describe God's patience is "longsuffering," a word found 4 times in the Old Testament and 5 times in the New Testament. Each time it's used in conjunction with God's wrath. Someone deserves judgment, but instead of punishing them right away, God waits until they've had a chance to repent.

Exodus 34 is the first example. God saves His people out of Egypt by His mighty power and gives them the 10 Commandments as an expression of His holiness. So what do they do? They break the first two commandments by worshiping a golden calf, which means they all deserve to die. But instead of getting wrath, they get mercy. Why? Verse 6 says it's because God is patient: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.” But does this mean that our sin no longer makes Him angry? No, for verse 7 immediately adds: “He does not leave the guilty unpunished; He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.” The point is: God interjects His patience not to eliminate His wrath, but to delay it long enough for us to repent and be saved.

Another example is Paul, the great persecutor of the church, who so despised the name of Christ that he pursued Christians everywhere, dragging them out of their homes, casting them into prison, and putting them to death. But instead of striking him dead and casting him into hell, God was patient with him, not only giving him a chance to repent, but making him the first great missionary of the church. Paul explains why in 1 Timothy 1:15-16, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners —of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display His immense patience as an example for those who would believe in Him and receive eternal life." The reason God was patient with Paul was to prove God's ability to save anyone, even you and me! For no one has ever needed more of God's patience than Paul.

But the best example of God's patience is His mercy toward you. Think of all the ways you've offended Him, all the times you've known the right thing to do and did not do it, and all the chances you had to respond to His mercy and didn't. But rather than cutting you off the first or second or hundredth time, Christ kept knocking at the door of your heart, giving you another chance to believe. Why? Because He's a great Savior and patient God! Romans 9:22 asks, “What if God, although

choosing to show His wrath and make His power known, bore with great patience the objects of His wrath—prepared for destruction? What if He did this to make the riches of His glory known to the objects of His mercy, whom He prepared in advance for glory?" Paul says God has been patient with us for two reasons: 1) To give us, the objects of His mercy, a chance to be saved; 2) To demonstrate His mercy to everyone, so they'll realize, "I can be forgiven too!"

Unfortunately, not everyone responds like that. Many interpret God's patience as an indication that He doesn't exist or that He's soft on sin. Solomon warns in Ecclesiastes 8:11, "Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil." Pastor Joseph Parker shared the example of Robert Ingersoll, the famous skeptic. After giving a speech on the folly of believing in God, Ingersoll pulled a watch from his pocket and said, "According to the Bible, God has struck men dead for blasphemy. I will blaspheme God and give Him 5 minutes to strike me dead and damn my soul." No one said a word the first minute. Two minutes passed and the crowd grew nervous. Three minutes went by and a woman fainted. Four minutes and Ingersoll began to sneer. At five minutes, he snapped his watch shut, put it back in his pocket, and said, "As I said, there is no God, or He would have taken me at my word." Later, when asked about it, Dr. Parker replied, "And did the American gentlemen think that he could exhaust the patience of God in 5 minutes?"

A similar story is told about the evangelist, Dwight L. Moody. Walking the streets of Chicago, he saw an atheist standing on the corner ranting and raving against the idea of God. As he listened, the atheist took out his watch and said, "I'll give God, if there is a God, 60 seconds to knock me to the ground." This was too much for Moody who took off his coat, walked up to the man, and knocked him to the ground saying, "Never ask God to do something that his humble servant can mighty well take care of himself." If the story is true, Moody was probably out of line. But his point was well taken. Just because God isn't judging us this very moment doesn't mean He won't judge us at all. For you can only tickle the chin of a sleeping lion so long before he pounces on you.

So don't be fooled! The fact that God is tolerating your sin today says nothing about what He'll do tomorrow. For His patience is only intended to delay, not eliminate His wrath. In fact, the very word "longsuffering" implies that it's only for time and not for eternity. He suffers long, but not forever! Therefore, what's the best thing for us to do? To turn to Him today while we still have the chance. This is Peter's closing argument in the letter known by his name. He warns that many will scoff at the promise of Christ's return because He hasn't returned yet. But instead of being a reason for disbelief, it's a reason for repentance. For "do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. Instead He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

God's Patience as Our Father

There is a crisis of fatherlessness in America today. 27 million kids are growing up without fathers in their homes. That is in no way intended to stir up guilt or demean the great sacrifices made by single

moms. It's simply to recognize the vital discipline and stability a good father provides his family. Consider the ever-increasing prison population in our country. Did you know that 85% of the men in our correctional facilities are from fatherless homes? Of course, having a dad in the home doesn't guarantee he'll be loving and consistent. Think back to your own dad. Was he involved and encouraging? Or was he negative and neglectful? No one can turn back the hands of time and recover what he never had. But what you can and must do, if your father was distant or absent, is recognize your need of a father today and look to your Heavenly Father to fill that hole, for He is more than able to heal your hurts and meet the needs of your heart.

Psalms 103 blesses the Lord for His goodness: "Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not His benefits: Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals your diseases, Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies." Two things to notice here: first, the slowness of God's anger. We human parents tend to jump to conclusions and discipline our children out of fear and frustration rather than love. When we're rested and well-fed, we're gentle and patient. But when we're tired and under stress, we're tempted to react harshly, rashly, and even abusively. Thank God, He never reacts like that! We never have to fear a sudden outburst of rage on His part. Verse 8 assures us: "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy."

Furthermore, verse 13 adds: "As a father pities His children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust." You and I often have unrealistic expectations of our children. For example, have you ever heard yourself say, "How could you do that? You know better than that!" I remember saying that to my children many times. But the fact is they didn't know better! Children don't come loaded with software enabling them to distinguish wisdom from foolishness. That's something we have to teach them. Consequently, if you find yourself yelling at your kids because they don't know any better, remember! That's an indication of your failure, not theirs. For we, not they, are the ones who ought to know better, and it's our job to pass that onto them with patience and love. This is David's point in verse 13. Rather than expecting superhuman performance from us, our Heavenly Father treats us with pity. And why? "For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust."

That truth has been precious to me over the years, not only as a father, but also as a pastor, because the wisdom needed for shepherding others is often learned in the crucible of failure. As I look back on my many failures in ministry—missed opportunities to witness for Christ, missteps in leading a building program, and mismanaged conflicts with others—I could be very discouraged and tempted to give up on myself. But as I've meditated upon this passage, what have I found? One of the simplest and most blessed truths in the Bible! My Heavenly Father doesn't expect me to know today what He intends to teach me tomorrow. Nor does He expect me to know tomorrow what He plans to teach me next week or next year. Yes, He does expect me to put into practice what He's taught me to date. But no one, not even the most seasoned saint, has learned all that there is to know. And that includes you, my flawed and faulty friend! It's His amazing grace "hath brought us safe thus far and grace will lead us home.

Therefore, in light of His fatherly patience and love, how should we live? First, we should be incredibly grateful and live not according to our own perfectionistic standards, but according to His pity and grace. For living by grace is what the walk of faith is all about. Second, we should learn to show the same kind of pity and patience toward others. After all, if God is willing to give us time we need to grow, who are we to expect instant maturity from others?

In his book, Zorba the Greek, Nikos Kazantzakis recalls a simple yet poignant event that shaped much of his thinking. “I recall the morning I found a cocoon in the bark of a tree just as the butterfly was preparing to come out. I waited a while but it was slow in appearing and I was impatient. I bent over and breathed on it to warm it as quickly as I could and the miracle began to happen before my eyes. The case opened and the butterfly started slowly crawling out. But I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled. The butterfly tried with its whole trembling body to unfold them. Bending over it, I tried to help it with my breath, in vain. It needed to be hatched patiently. The unfolding of its wings must be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath forced the butterfly to appear before its time. It struggled valiantly and a few seconds later died in the palm of my hand. That little body is a great weight on my conscience today. Now I realize that it is a mortal sin to rush the laws of nature. We must not hurry. We must patiently obey the eternal rhythm. If only that little butterfly could always flutter before me to show me the way.”

I share that because I believe it’s one of our greatest sins. Instead of pitying each other's weaknesses, as our Heavenly Father does, we become impatient with one other demanding rapid if not instant growth. What we need to remember is that God is at work in their lives too, even in the life of the most annoying person you know, not expecting her to know today what He plans to teach her tomorrow, but gently and persistently nudging her to become like Christ. This is the reason for Paul's warning in Romans 14: “Who are you to judge another man’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.” For 2 Corinthians 5:18 goes on to promise, “We all with unveiled face, beholding in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.”

Consider as well this beautiful reminder from 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter: “Love suffers long and is kind...love is not easily provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

God’s Patience as Our Judge

In 1869, the French chemist, Pierre Bethelot, wrote these prophetic words: “In 100 years of science, man will know what the atom is. When science reaches that stage, God will come down to earth with His big ring of keys and say to mankind: ‘Gentlemen, it's closing time.’” That time is here. Science has not only unlocked the secret of the atom, but also the structure of the human genome and countless other powerful mysteries that are beyond our ability to manage wisely. This leads many of us to believe that the time is short and Christ will soon return to judge His creation. The Apostle Peter concurred with this conclusion, warning both believers and unbelievers of the need to be ready. First, he warned of—

The Danger of Complacency. “Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation. But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed.” What is Peter talking about? The Flood! That just as God condemned the world in the past, when they least expected it, Christ is coming again to judge the world, even though many scoff at it now. He adds, “By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.” (2 Peter 3:3-7)

Did you hear about the Christian farmer who agreed to a contest with his neighbor, an atheist? The atheist proposed, “I’ll tell you what. You plant your crops this spring and work your field 6 days a week, taking Sundays off to worship God. I’ll work my field 7 days a week and in the fall we’ll see who has the biggest crop.” When October came and the crops were gathered in, the atheist dropped by to see the results. Sure enough, his harvest was much larger than the Christian’s. “So what do you say now?” he sneered. The Christian replied, “I say that God doesn’t settle all of his accounts in October.”

So it is today. Because Christ hasn’t yet started sending out thunderbolts of judgment from heaven, people assume that they’re safe. But don’t make that mistake, friend! Read the final chapter of the Book and you’ll see what God is about to do. Jesus warns in Revelation 22:12, “Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every man according to his work.” And Peter also has a reminder for those of us who believe, and that’s—

The Duty of Communication. Verse 9 adds: “But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” Why hasn’t Jesus returned to earth yet? Peter makes it very clear. It isn’t because of apathy or tardiness on His part. It’s because of His longsuffering and His desire for everyone to be saved. Ezekiel the prophet was right! God has “no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked should turn from his way and live.”

Consequently, if we love Jesus, what should we be doing in the time that remains? Not merely treading water while we wait for the Rapture, but praying and preaching and doing everything in our power to see men and women, boys and girls, turn to Him as their Savior. So let me pause for a moment and ask you: Is that your great passion and priority? Do you believe that Christ is returning soon and that you have a responsibility to warn others about it?

I’m reminded of the preacher who was preparing his Sunday sermon. But for some reason, he wasn’t feeling it. So on Saturday, he and his wife took a drive around town to get his spiritual juices flowing. To their alarm, they saw a house on fire and watched as a man dashed in and out of the flames saving first one, then another member of his family. This so inspired the preacher that he decided to make it the focus of his sermon. With great drama he told his people the next morning how this father carried first one and then another of his children out of the house and set them safely on the ground.

To his surprise, his sermon went over like a lead balloon. The people just didn't care. On their way home, he complained to his wife, "I just don't get it! Why was there so little response to my sermon?" "Well," his wife explained gently, as wise wives do, "Your sermon was good and the story illustrated your point. But you forgot to tell them one thing." "What's that?" he said. "You forgot to tell them the house was on fire."

Could that be our problem? Could it be that the reason we're hesitant to talk to others about Jesus is because we've forgotten that their house is on fire? And could it be that the reason they've been slow to listen is because we're afraid to emphasize the greatness of their danger? Nobody likes a nag. But let's make sure we aren't committing the opposite error by keeping quiet when we ought to be speaking the truth in love. For that's why He's delayed His coming until now. He is patient and wants everyone to have a chance to hear and believe! So if you know the truth and have a friend or loved one who needs to hear it, pray for an opportunity to tell them about it this week. Or maybe you've heard the truth, but you haven't acted upon it yet. Then don't wait another day to do so. Bow your head in prayer right now and invite Jesus to come into your life, and He will. Then write us and tell us about it, so we can pray for you.

"Time after time He has waited before, and now He is waiting again, to see if you're willing to open the door. O, how He wants to come in!"