

BASIC BIBLE PRINCIPLES

PATIENCE

Various proverbs of uncertain origin proclaim that “patience is a virtue.” It is certainly recognised as a desirable quality in daily living; but, given the complexity and pace of life in the twenty-first century, patience can be very difficult to maintain. It sometimes seems that impatience and bad temper are rather more prevalent. The Apostle James warns that “no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison” (Jas. 3:8); and he consequently advises: “let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (1:19,20).

But patience is not just the ability to remain calm under stress, or to resist the temptation to explode in anger when provoked. It can also describe the refusal to succumb to difficult circumstances, or to be defeated by trials or depressed by delay. This form of patience may be exhibited over many months or years while waiting for some hoped-for goal. James reassures those early Christians facing persecution for their beliefs: “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience” (vv. 2,3). Furthermore, Peter reminds the believers of the example of Christ: “For 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. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example . . .” (1 Pet. 2:20,21).

Waiting for the Second Coming

The true Christian hope, established in the Bible by the promise of God Himself, is that Jesus Christ will return to the earth to establish God’s Kingdom. In the words of the angel to the disciples, as Jesus ascended to heaven, “This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). The scoffer can readily point to the fact that nearly 2,000 years have elapsed since those words were uttered and Jesus has still not come. But for the believer the promises of God cannot fail, and there is much encouragement to be drawn from the many signs of the times. There is also a recognition that for every disciple there is the test of faith the apostles spoke of, a period of waiting for the glorious prospect, which demands patience.

The need to endure

The writers of the New Testament, inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16), employ two different words in the original Greek to encourage patience in disciples of Jesus Christ. The first (*hupomonē*, and its verbal form, *hupomenō*) has the basic meaning of ‘abiding under,’ as if describing someone steadfastly *bearing up under a heavy load*. It thus conveys the idea of ‘endurance,’ ‘persistence’ or ‘perseverance,’ and is in fact frequently translated in these ways in modern versions of the Bible, whereas the King James Version almost always renders the word as ‘patience.’

Here is a quality that God looks for in those who follow His Son Jesus Christ. It is the faith which is shown to last under trial. And it is not only *passive*, enduring trials, but also *active*, showing itself in works of faith (Jas. 2:14-18). This patient endurance looks beyond present hardships to the promised goal of the Kingdom of God. It is thus the very opposite of despondency, and is the companion of hope.

The New Testament includes many passages encouraging this kind of virtue, which perhaps explains why generations of Christians have been able to retain their faith through periods of savage persecution:

"let us run with *endurance* the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus . . . who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross . . ." (Heb. 12:1,2);
"If you *endure* chastening, God deals with you as with sons . . ." (v. 7);
"but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces *perseverance*; and *perseverance*, character; and character, hope" (Rom. 5:3,4);
"We give thanks to God . . . remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labour of love, and *patience* of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ . . ." (1 Thess. 1:2,3);
"Blessed is the man who *endures* temptation; for when has been approved, he will receive the crown of life . . ." (Jas. 1:12);
"Indeed we count them blessed who *endure*. You have heard of the *perseverance* of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful" (5:11);
"because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who *endures* to the end shall be saved" (Mt. 24:12,13).

The quality of longsuffering

The second word used for 'patience' in the New Testament (*makrothumia*, and its verbal form, *makrothumeō*) has the literal sense of 'long-tempered' (compare our expression 'short-tempered') and is frequently translated as 'longsuffering'. It is the quality of self-restraint in the face of provocation, being slow to retaliate or punish, and is clearly associated with mercy. It is in fact a characteristic of God Himself, as proclaimed to Moses on Mount Horeb: "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, *longsuffering* [*erek aph*, meaning 'long-of-anger,' the Hebrew equivalent of *makrothumia*], and abounding in goodness and truth" (Ex. 34:6). This Divine quality was demonstrated on the many occasions when God spared the people of Israel, even though they rebelled against Him. And, equally, He is prepared to forgive us our transgressions through our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

For our part, we are called upon to demonstrate this virtue while awaiting the fulfilment of God's promises. Although the progress of God's plan seems slow to us, we have the assurance that His purpose is not deflected: "shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He *bears long* with them?" (Lk. 18:7).

Consequently we are to wait patiently for that day: "Therefore *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).

At the same time, the followers of Jesus Christ are exhorted by the apostles to emulate the Father's longsuffering in their dealings with one another:

"the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, *longsuffering*, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22,23);

"I . . . beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called . . . with *longsuffering*, bearing with one another in love" (Eph. 4:1,2);

"as the elect of God . . . put on . . . *longsuffering*; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another . . ." (Col. 3:12,13);

"Therefore, beloved . . . be diligent to be found by Him in peace . . . and consider that the *longsuffering* of our Lord is salvation" (2 Pet. 3:14,15).

"Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him . . .
Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him" (Ps. 37:5,7).

(All quotations from the New King James Version)

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