

Patience

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This article, first published in May 1947, shows that there are two aspects to this essential quality: the passive patience of waiting, and the active patience of persisting in well-doing.

THE EMPHASIS laid upon patience in the Scriptures demands that we regard it as an essential virtue of the Christian life. "In your patience possess ye your souls", said Jesus (Lk. 21:19). James tells us to "let patience have her perfect work, that [we] may be perfect and entire" (Jas. 1:4). Paul says that "tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience" (Rom. 5:3,4), and Peter's exhortation is, "And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience" (2 Pet. 1:5,6).

We often understand things more clearly by contrast, and, while patience may be hard to define, we have no difficulty in recognising impatience. Impatience cannot wait for events to take their course; it irritably pursues its objective, neither tolerating delay nor bearing with other people's mistakes. Impatience cannot brook slowness or incapacity in others, nor can it linger to explain to those of more limited intellect. If we are honest with ourselves we may discern a grim picture which reveals a side of our own character, because patience is a quality as rare as it is beautiful.

Patience is of two kinds. There is the passive kind of patience so aptly pictured by Shakespeare when he wrote:

"She sat like patience on a monument
Smiling at grief".

And there is the active kind, which is perhaps best summed up by James when he writes:

"Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain" (5:7).

The husbandman's patience is demonstrated by his careful work on his vineyard. He digs and manures, prunes and supports the vines, and even carries up again on his back the soil that has been washed from the terraced hillsides by the heavy rain. His waiting and long patience are filled with activity.

Passive patience

There are times when our patience must be of the passive kind. An occasion arises and waiting is necessary, for we can do nothing to hasten or improve the situation. How many of us have spent long hours during the war years waiting for trains? There is nothing we can do. We are too weary to read seriously, too cold or uncomfortable to sleep, too shy or diffident to converse, and we must wait.

How many of us have spent days waiting for letters? We watch for each post, and as the postman passes our heart sinks. We cannot do anything to improve the situation, we must just wait.

There was a young man who was unjustly imprisoned with no hope of release. After several years in prison, a chance meeting with another prisoner who was about to be released gave him hope that soon his case might be heard again. His fellow-prisoner was set free. The young man waited for his call to come. Two years passed in weary weeks of waiting. His prisonmate had forgotten him, but a strange circumstance jogged his memory and the young man was sent for at last.

What did Joseph do in those two years of waiting? "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick" (Prov. 13:12), and yet Joseph came out of prison with his faith unwavering. "It is not in me", he said to Pharaoh; "God shall give Pharaoh an answer of peace" (Gen. 41:16). We learn how Joseph managed to bide the long prison sentence, and how in our turn we may bear the times when waiting and watching are all we can do in another time and place.

The patience of Jesus

We must look westward from Gethsemane to see the dark silhouette of Jerusalem against the starlit sky, the pinnacle of the temple black against the deepening blue, and the inky velvet mass of the walls rising from the stony valley. We must scan the blackness anxiously for a glimmer of light, and listen with straining ears for tiny sounds: a pebble flicked from the path and rolling down the hillside; the rasp of a hinge in a gateway; the footsteps of hurrying men or the sharp word of command.

Ancient olive trees in what is believed to be the Garden of Gethsemane.



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We must see the dark shapes of the trees in the garden lifting against the Milky Way, and the prostrate forms of the disciples as they sleep, weariness cushioning for them the ground.

We must see Jesus in his agony waiting there.

When he went to the garden he did not expect to wait long, for had not Judas gone long before to do quickly that which he did? The chief priests would send their servants hurriedly, for they were eager not to lose their quarry. But there was delay. The Sanhedrin must be warned of a meeting before dawn. Pilate must be asked to try the prisoner at an early hour. Time passed. The guard waited for the order to proceed; Judas waited with them. Jesus waited too. And this waiting was one of his severest trials; these hours when he could do nothing but wait.

Do nothing? "Sit ye here", he said, "while I go and pray yonder" (Mt. 26:36). And what did he pray? An agonised prayer that he might have strength to wait for the dreaded hour of his trial and crucifixion. How often during that waiting could he have said, "Arise, let us be going, the house of Martha and Mary is at hand", and Gethsemane would have been unknown to us! To know what was to happen and yet to remain; to wait for hours, with escape and freedom looming large in the black shadows all around him, and yet to remain!

And when the tiny flickering lights had drawn nearer, and the faint stirring echoes had resolved into the sound of shuffling feet, to be able to wake gently the sleeping disciples and say, "Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me" (v. 46). And when one man dislodged himself

from the band and said, "Hail, master; and kissed him" (v. 49), to be able to say, "betrayest thou the Son of man with a kiss?" (Lk. 22:48).

Jesus is never referred to as a patient man. We are never asked to consider his patient waiting, yet how instructive it is to know how he spent the time when he could do nothing!

Showing active patience

We all admit that it is easier to be patient if we have something to do. We can wait better if we can work. That is why James says, "Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman . . .". We must not be patient in idleness if we can work. And since we can work, our need is for active patience.

Jesus gives us a lesson which is very apt here. He tells us that we must not merely empty our lives of evil things, we must try to fill them with good things. We must not concentrate on negative virtues, but on positive good works. If upon coming into association with Christ we merely refrain from worldly pursuits, we shall find our empty lives peopled with devils of our own imaginings, and after a time we shall go back to those things which we once left behind. We must first empty out of our lives that which is unnecessary and harmful, and then try to fill them with those things that God would have us do. Or, better still, ask God to use us to do His work.

It is axiomatic in teaching that a class with plenty of work which it can do, and in which it is interested, is a well-behaved class. Disciplinary troubles start when the children have nothing to do or are not interested in the task before them. Something of this applies in our development in

Christ. So we must look on the second half of the virtue of patience as an active, progressing thing, a force which can help us to go on steadfastly to the end.

Paul calls our heavenly Father "the God of patience" (Rom. 15:5), and we may be sure that in His case patience is an active force. If we examine His dealings with Israel we see it at work. He sent His servants the prophets to His children. "Rising early and sending them" (Jer. 25:4) is the phrase which so vividly pictures for us the anxious parent rising with the dawn to send out His messengers to correct His children. And finally, when warning was of no avail, came punishment. God could have allowed Israel to drift unrebuked into sin, but because He knew that the end was eminently worthwhile, the patient work of warning, rebuke and chastisement continued, and continues to this day.

Acquiring patience

Paul said, "tribulation worketh patience", and Peter, "add . . . patience". How are we to acquire this patience? Habits are formed by repeating certain actions over and over again. We are told

that actual habit tracks are formed in the mind, so that, if we are presented with a certain situation, our reactions will follow certain defined lines. We know that once a habit is established it seems easy and natural to do things that way.

We all find that it is very much harder to make a habit of certain virtues, but we can at least try, knowing that every time we go the right way we are making it easier to go the right way next time. If we can only begin to make the effort consciously to check the hasty retort, to quell the rising impatience, then next time it will be easier, for we shall have begun the habit tracks in our minds, and these tracks eventually form the character which God in His mercy will perfect for us at the judgement: "But we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth . . . Who will render to every man according to his deeds: to them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life" (Rom. 2:2,6,7). With our own prayerful efforts, the appeal of Paul for us will gradually be accomplished: "And the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ" (2 Thess. 3:5).