



A Tactical Belief Book

**Why
Every
Christian
Needs
More**

PATIENCE

R. Herbert

Why Every Christian Needs More PATIENCE

(And How to Develop It)

R. Herbert

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About the Author: The author served as an ordained minister and church pastor for a number of years and holds an earned Ph.D. degree in the languages, cultures and archaeology of the ancient Near East and biblical world. He writes for a number of Christian publications and for the websites TacticalChristianity.org and LivingWithFaith.org. His other e-books are available for free download from those websites and from FreeChristianEBooks.org.

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INTRODUCTION: IN A HURRY TO BE PATIENT

“let us run with patience the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1 KJV).

Is there a gene for patience? Sometimes one might wonder! Patience seems to come naturally for some people – even in very difficult situations – while others are not so fortunate. You will know which type of person you are if you are already waiting for this introduction to be over so you can get on with the book.

I have always been impatient. Overcoming this failing is part of my personal Christian climb. I have read the biblical verses relating to this subject many times over and some have been extremely helpful, but trying to be patient when you're feeling impatient can be a bit like trying to feel fine when you are not feeling well. But it is an important battle and one we must all fight to some degree – and that is the reason for this book.

Although many people admit that patience is a virtue, it is easy to regard it as only a minor one - a distant cousin of the great spiritual virtues such as faith and love. But as this book will make clear, patience is actually of fundamental importance in the Christian life. The following chapters not only will show exactly what the Bible says about the need for patience (which is quite a bit more than many people realize), but also will look at some of the unexpected ways the Scriptures guide and help us to make patience a part of our Christian lives.

Of course, patience is not just a concern for Christians. Throughout history many great thinkers, leaders, and successful individuals have stressed the value of patience as a vital quality for successful and happy living. Consider just a few of these words of wisdom:

“Patience is bitter, but its fruit is sweet.” – Aristotle

“Patience is the companion of wisdom.” – Augustine

“Patience is a conquering virtue.” – Geoffrey Chaucer

“Patience serves as a protection against wrongs.” – Leonardo da Vinci

“How poor are they that have not patience!” – William Shakespeare

“The two most powerful warriors are patience and time.” – Leo Tolstoy

“To lose patience is to lose the battle.” – Mahatma Gandhi

“Patience is a key element of success.” – Bill Gates

Doubtless many of these individuals were patient types themselves, though Mark Twain spoke on behalf of those of us who are not so blessed when he wrote, “All good things arrive unto them that wait – and don't die in the meantime.” Twain's wry comment contains a grain of truth – patience is not an easy virtue to practice; only a minority of people exhibit it consistently. There is an old Moroccan saying that “At the gate of patience there is no crowding” – which also stresses just how few people really develop patience in their lives.

But as Christians we are told to do exactly that. Jesus commanded his disciples: “By your patience possess your souls” (Luke 21:19 NKJV). In more modern language that means through patience “gain your lives” (CSB) or “win life” (NIV). If we think about it, that is an amazing statement. It not only urges us to be patient in life, but also promises us that being patient will lead to life! We all tend to remember and think about Jesus' words: “Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39). But do we give equal time and thought to the fact he also said “through patience, gain your lives”? The author of the book of Hebrews makes this command completely clear for us: “For you have need of patience, that, after you have done the will of God, you might receive the promise” (Hebrews 10:36 KJ2K).

Looked at another way, patience is a trait of God himself (2 Peter 3:9), and he calls us to be like him (Ephesians 5:1). So patience is a quality that every Christian needs and – as we will see – we all need more of. But how do we develop patience if we don't naturally have it – and how do we gain more even if we are already fairly patient?

Patience is a fruit of the Spirit of God (Galatians 5:22-23 ESV), but that doesn't mean that God makes us instantly patient if we ask for his help with this trait. As someone once humorously observed, if you ask God for patience, don't expect a quick reply. But we are called to develop patience with the assistance we are given, and if we do so, we will not only help confirm our own ultimate Christian reward, we will also make life much better for ourselves and for others in the meantime. This book shares understandings and principles we can all use in doing that, especially those of us who need more patience – quickly!

PART ONE: HOW PATIENCE WORKS

1. WHAT PATIENCE IS

“Patience: Noun. The ability to stay calm while waiting for an outcome that is needed or wanted.”

We live in an age when we have almost lost the ability to be patient. Our culture is becoming increasingly demanding of the immediate satisfaction provided by instant meals, quick messaging, and same day deliveries. Not having to wait for physical things we need or would like is nice, of course; but people are becoming increasingly impatient. “Delayed gratification” is often seen as an antiquated virtue, and patience itself is often sneered at. As is sometimes cynically noted, “Patience is something you admire in the driver behind you and scorn in the one ahead.”

Because we are able to avoid having to be patient in many physical areas today and are increasingly unwilling to wait, we tend to forget a basic truth – that patience is needed for things that really matter in life. As is sometimes said, “You can’t microwave character,” and the same is true of happiness, strength, and countless other qualities that make life worthwhile and meaningful. It is certainly true that almost every spiritual quality has to be matured through time and needs patience on our part in order for its eventual development to occur (see, for example, Luke 8:15).

Defining Patience

If we as a culture have almost lost the art of patience, we have also lost sight of much of what patience is. If you look up the word “patience” in a dictionary, you will doubtless find a definition similar to the one that opens this chapter. It will tell you that patience is the ability to wait calmly for a desired outcome or to resist frustration or anger despite provocation. That may be true, but definitions of this kind are sadly limited in helping us to see what else patience is. Patience involves and affects far more in our lives than our ability to simply wait.

It is perfectly possible to wait “patiently” for something without waiting properly for it – as is often said, patience involves how we behave *while* we are waiting. Also, of course, limited definitions like those we have just looked at are not a lot of help in getting a better understanding of how patience works (or doesn’t) in the human mind, in what ways it is valuable, and how we can develop it.

Fortunately, the Bible gives us a much deeper and richer understanding of what is involved in true patience – one that can help us to increase patience in our lives in a great many ways. There are literally hundreds of verses in the Scriptures that speak of the importance of patience and the need to employ it, but there is no single verse that tells us everything we need to know about this quality. We must bring a number of biblical passages together in order to form a complete picture of what patience is and how to grow it.

Although we may not have a specific biblical verse to guide us in defining patience, several essential aspects of the Bible's teaching on this matter were wonderfully summed up in the words of the Egyptian Christian scholar and teacher, Adel Bestavros (1924-2005):

*Patience with others is Love,
Patience with self is Hope,
Patience with God is Faith.*

Bestavros' summary of patience conveys a timeless truth – or three truths. Rather than being the passive quality of just waiting calmly, as we so often tend to think of it, patience is really a much more dynamic activity – an actual application in our lives of the central biblical traits of faith, hope, and love. As such, properly understood, patience is about what we *do*.

We can understand this by means of a simple analogy. Learning to hold our breath is of no value in and of itself. But a person can learn to hold their breath for an extended period of time in order to do things under water – such as to dive for pearls, or rescue people, or simply enjoy the beauty of the ocean in the sport of free-diving.

In the same way, we can learn patience not for its own sake, but in order to more effectively express faith, hope and love. This is a vital part of what the Bible means by patience and we can find this understanding at various points throughout the Scriptures, and most especially in the writings of the apostle Paul.

Paul speaks of patience more than any other New Testament writer – in fact, more than any other biblical writer. Perhaps (as we will see in Chapter 8), that was because he had to develop a great deal of patience himself. But Paul certainly shows patience to be one of the most important aspects of God's nature (Romans 15:5) and one that *we* must have if we are to become like him (Colossians 3:12).

The apostle shows us not only that patience is one of the fruits of the Spirit of God (Galatians 5:22), but also that it is a quality that can be applied in every area of our spiritual lives. Paul wrote repeatedly about the different aspects of patience and clearly ties them to the three great virtues – faith, hope, and love – that he gives in 1 Corinthians 13:13.

The Priority of Patience

In fact, we can say that spiritually patience is a manifestation of faith, an attitude of hope, and an expression of love. Patience is an underlying ingredient that enables these cardinal qualities to be present and to function properly in our lives.

So when the Bible speaks of patience as one of the fruits of the Spirit and as one of the characteristics enabling us to exercise faith, hope, and love, it is speaking of a quality that goes far beyond the ability to merely wait calmly or to ignore provocation. Patience is involved in these things, of course, but when it is present with a right attitude it is also so much more – it is an active force at the core of our Christian walk. Exhibiting patience is in itself an act of worship and obedience.

When we truly grasp its importance, we come to see that although patience isn't everything, it is needed for virtually everything in our spiritual lives. That is why the apostle James could write: "let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (James 1:4 NKJV).

Seeing what this means in practice can give us a firm foundation in understanding patience that we can then build upon. In the following chapters we will look first at how patience is manifested in faith, hope, and love, as well as other vital ways it interacts with our spiritual lives. Then, in Part Two, we will look at biblical examples from which we can learn in order to increase patience in our own lives.

2. WHY FAITH AND HOPE NEED PATIENCE

“Imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised” (Hebrews 6:12).

Patience Is an Act of Faith

The New Testament makes the connection between patience and faith very clear. For example, we find that time and again in his epistles the apostle Paul connects patience and faith as essential qualities of the Christian life. We see this connection in his letter to the Thessalonians where he writes: “we ourselves boast of you ... for your *patience and faith* in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure” (2 Thessalonians 1:4 NKJV). While Paul could have written either “patience” or “faith” in this context, he mentions both. This is because the two qualities interact in many ways and often cannot be separated.

Consider the involvement of patience and faith in the suffering the Christian may have to endure. Just as he commended the Thessalonians for exhibiting these qualities under persecution, Paul affirms that “we glory in tribulations ... knowing that tribulation works patience” (Romans 5:3 KJ2K). James also tells us to “count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience” (James 1:2-3 NKJV). And Peter makes the same point: “In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that ... your faith ... may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:6-7).

We can see from these verses that suffering refines our faith, making it stronger (as mentioned by Peter), and also produces patience in us (as mentioned by James and Paul). It is to the degree that we develop both patience and faith in situations like this that we are strengthened and endure, and it is that endurance which is ultimately necessary to succeed in the Christian life (see, for example, Matthew 10:22; 24:13).

There are many other ways faith and patience interact. Without patience we would not wait for God to help us, change us, or fulfill his many promises to us. In that sense, impatience with God can be a lack of faith or a faith that is short-lived – and faith that only lasts for a while is ultimately not faith at all. Faith without patience produces Christians who

may start off well, but who eventually falter and fall away or burn out (Mark 4:17). On the other hand, patience without faith produces individuals who experience suffering but do not learn and grow from it in the way God intends.

As the book of Hebrews confirms, we need both qualities in our lives if we are to “imitate those who through *faith and patience* inherit what has been promised” (Hebrews 6:12). Simply put, patience needs faith and faith needs patience. Patience is itself an act of faith, and developing this important quality helps strengthen our faith!

Patience Makes Hope Possible

As Christians, we need hope in our lives just as we need faith, and hope is also connected with patience. Patient Christian hope helps us to keep on going despite adverse external circumstances. It is also important because we often need both patience with ourselves and hope when we look at our path to overcoming.

It’s easy to become discouraged when we fall down and do not do as well spiritually as we truly want to do. But we need to be patient in the hope we have been given (Philippians 1:6) – with the understanding that what God expects from us is not ongoing perfection, but ongoing progress. That is part of humbly accepting God’s incredible patience with us. “I was shown mercy,” the apostle Paul wrote, “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” (1 Timothy 1:16). Certainly, there are times for impatience with ourselves (see the Afterword at the end of this book), but more often than not, we need the patience that comes from the hope God gives us when it comes to continued growth.

We can more fully understand this by looking at what Paul wrote regarding the relationship between hope and patience. The apostle shows the connection nowhere more clearly than in his great epistle to the Christians in Rome – which is sometimes called the “Epistle of Hope” (see, for example, Romans 15:13). But the inspiring words on hope found in Romans are tied repeatedly to the need for patience. We see this at its most basic level in what Paul says about the nature of hope itself: “if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently” (Romans 8:25). Of course, we can hope for something and not wait for it patiently, so Paul

is stressing the need for patience in positive and effective hope – the kind of hope that helps carry us through the Christian life.

The apostle also makes the connection between these qualities by showing that hope is the end result of the “chain reaction” he describes in Romans that begins with patience, and that we already saw above in relation to faith: “tribulation works patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope” (Romans 5:3-4 KJ2K).

In the same way, Paul tells us, patience and hope interact through the recorded examples of other believers: “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope” (Romans 15:4 NKJV). These examples from Romans all show us how important patience is in both supporting hope and being supported by it.

That is doubtless why, in his second letter to Timothy, Paul places patience – just as he does with hope in 1 Corinthians 13 – firmly between the qualities of faith and love: “You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, *faith, patience, love*, endurance” (2 Timothy 3:10). Paul makes the connection between patience and hope even clearer in his words to the Thessalonians: “remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and *patience of hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father” (1 Thessalonians 1:3 NKJV).

Faith, Hope, and the Patience of the Saints

The biblical stress on the need for patience to underlie faith and hope is not limited to the writings of Paul, however. The apostle James tells us: “Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near” (James 5:7-8).

James compares the patience of a farmer waiting for harvest to the patience we must have in our hope for Christ’s return. This patience in waiting for the second coming becomes a major theme of the later books of the New Testament and, perhaps understandably, it is found most clearly in the final book of the Bible – the book of Revelation. In fact, Revelation mentions patience more than any other single book in the Bible, and much of what it has to say on the subject is about patience in suffering and persecution.

After a brief introduction, John begins his account: “I, John, your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ ...” (Revelation 1:9). With these words, John affirms that patience in suffering is a hallmark of those who hope for the kingdom of God – the very kingdom that he goes on to describe in the book’s climactic chapters.

We should also notice the fact that in the letters to the seven churches recorded in the second and third chapters of Revelation, Christ specifically commends several of the churches for their patience. John speaks repeatedly of “the patience of the saints” (for example, Revelation 13:10 NKJV), and in a fascinating verse John links our patience with the very core of Christian experience: “Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (Revelation 14:12 NKJV). In other words, patience is necessary for both our belief and our behavior – the sum total of Christian life.

In this chapter we have looked closely at how the Bible links patience to our beliefs – our attitudes of faith and hope. In the next chapter we will look at the more practical side of the patience equation – the way in which patience is necessary and ties into every aspect of our behavior.

3. PATIENCE AND LOVE

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

Have you ever noticed that in his famous description of the nature of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, the apostle Paul begins and ends his list of love’s qualities with the same trait? That trait is patience. Although Paul uses two different words – showing different aspects of this important quality – they both mean patience. It is often said that “the Greeks had a word for everything,” and ancient Greek actually had two words for patience, both of which were used by Paul.

Patience with People

The first of those words was *makrothymia* which is composed of *makran* (“far away”) and *thymos* (“anger”) – in other words, to put one’s anger far away. This involves patience with others, particularly in the restraint of anger – when patience is often needed most. It does not connote the patience of those who cannot do anything about a situation, but that of those who have the power to act against the object of anger, perhaps even to exact revenge or punishment. This is the patience of those with power to affect others; it is the patience of those who could react with negative action, but who choose not to do so in love.

It is the patience husbands need with their wives and wives with their husbands, of parents with children (and sometimes children with parents). It is the patience employers sometimes need with employees and those who work with those for whom they work. It is the patience we should have when someone irritates or hurts us in any way – great or small – and we feel a desire to retaliate. It is the kind of patience that every Christian must develop and that we may need many times in a given day. It is the patience Paul had in mind when he wrote: “be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2).

No matter how much we may have a “feeling” of love toward others, the good that might come of that attitude is short-circuited if it is not

expressed through patience in our interactions with them. Love is patient precisely because patience with others requires us to strive to put aside selfishness and to act in a way that puts their needs before our feelings.

So it is probably not coincidental that this is the *first* quality Paul tells us love consists of – the patience of those who are provoked or irritated, but who choose restraint. That is why Paul also links patience with kindness (2 Corinthians 6:6). Patience is a primary quality without which love for others cannot exist and one that we must always remember is foundational to love itself.

Patience with Circumstances

Paul ends his list of the characteristics of love with the second form of patience. The word he uses to close his list is *hypomonē* which fuses *hypo* (“under”) with *monē* (“remaining” or “enduring”). This word connotes the idea of “remaining under” suffering or difficult circumstances. In the New Testament the word is often translated “persevering” (for example, Romans 5:3-4), but it is a particularly rich word with a wide range of meaning. For example, in Luke 21:19 in the NIV we find it translated “*Stand firm*, and you will win life,” though the King James Version translated this verse less clearly as “In your patience, possess ye your souls.”

This kind of patience represents the attitude of those who are not in a position of strength, but of weakness – a position of being unable to do anything to change the situation they are enduring. This is the patience of the Christian undergoing persecution for his or her faith – whether the persecution comes from the individual’s government, job, neighbors, or even their own family. It is the patience of those dealing with long-term illnesses, injuries, poverty, loneliness, depression, grief, or any other kind of ongoing suffering.

If it is not coincidental that Paul begins his list of love’s qualities with patience, the quality we must have with individuals, it is equally likely that he intentionally ends his list with endurance, the patience we must have with situations. If we cannot love others without the first type of patience, it is probable that we cannot love God without the second kind – and we certainly will not be able to continue in the way of love without that perseverance. That is why the word *hypomonē* is found in Jesus’ parable of the seed, in which “... the seed on good soil stands for those with a

noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by *persevering* produce a crop” (Luke 8:15).

Practical Applications of Patience

We already talked in this chapter about a number of ways in which both types of patience need to be applied in everyday living, but there are dozens of other ways as well! At the most obvious level we need patience with others to serve them, and just as patience with events is an act of trust, patience with others is an act of service.

Working with children provides constant examples of this. Whether it is our response to endless small requests or the hundredth time we have to remind a child about a family rule, we have a choice regarding whether we respond patiently or impatiently, whether we are helpful or unhelpful.

Of course, this is a truth that does not just apply to our interactions with children, and in any situation it is only through patience that we can override our own natural inclinations and embrace what has so well been called “the holy inconvenience of service.”

There are many other ways in which exercising patience is an act of love that helps us as well as others. One of those ways – which we might not normally think of – was summarized by the great medieval artist and scholar Leonardo da Vinci, who wrote about having patience in regard to dealing with wrongs that others do against us:

Patience serves as a protection against wrongs as clothes do against cold. For if you put on more clothes as the cold increases, it will have no power to hurt you. So in like manner you must grow in patience when you meet with great wrongs.

The wisdom of da Vinci’s words on this subject is obvious, but they also agree entirely with the attitude of Christianity. They are a good reminder that patience with others can be applied in many, many ways – we just need to consider the possibilities in our own lives in order to be able to love better through the application of this quality. For those of us who know we need to work on developing patience in our lives, this is an area that can be particularly profitable to think and meditate about on a regular basis: when, how, and why do we need to apply patience with others?

It Begins and Ends with Patience

So, carefully looking at 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 shows us that love begins and ends in patience and that this quality is pivotal to effectively loving others and loving God. A number of scriptures such as Romans 2:4; 15:5 and 2 Peter 3:9, 15 show that God is a God of patience (both with people and with events). If we are to become like him, patience – in its two forms – is a quality we must strive to develop with his help.

God will not simply pour patience into us, and we ourselves may not be able to develop as much of it as we need or should have. But as Paul – the apostle of patience – wrote (using both of the two Greek words for patience), if we do our best and ask God for the extra help we need, we will find ourselves: “being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might” to “have great *endurance* and *patience*” (Colossians 1:11).

God desires above all else that we learn to love him and others, and when we trustingly ask him for help to develop the patience we need to do that, Paul says we will receive the power we need. It may take time, but thankfully God is patient in waiting for us to learn patience!

4. THE PATIENCE SUPER-WEAPON

“... patience is better than pride” (Ecclesiastes 7:8).

There may be no quick and easy way to develop patience, but there is a super-weapon that we can employ against impatience – one that can greatly increase our patience if we are willing to accept and use it to the full. That superweapon is simply humility.

In this chapter we will look at what the Bible has to say about how humility increases patience and then focus on some of the ways we can effectively use this weapon.

Ecclesiastes 7:8 tells us that “patience is better than pride,” and these are illuminating words if we think about them. At face value they may seem to simply tell us that patience is good – but we need to stop and think about the connection that is being made. Why is patience compared specifically with pride? We would not say “an apple is better than an automobile” because the two are unrelated – but we might say “an apple is better than a lemon” because the two fruits *are* related, and one is clearly better-tasting than the other.

So, what is the relationship between patience and pride that the wise writer of Ecclesiastes is urging us to see? To find the answer we can turn to the New Testament, to the writings of the apostle Paul. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul makes an important connection between humility, patience, and love:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love (Ephesians 4:1-2).

We have already seen the connection between patience and love that is clear in what Paul says, but we need to look at his thought carefully to see the connection he is also making between humility and patience.

The semicolon directly before “be patient” in the NIV quotation of Ephesians 4:2 above makes it look like there are two separate thoughts (being humble and gentle on the one hand, and being patient and bearing with people on the other). But the ancient Greek in which the New Testament was written did not have punctuation, and this artificial division does not reflect what Paul is really saying.

That is why most other English translations do not punctuate what Paul says in this way – as we see, for example, in the ESV: “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2 ESV). The difference may seem a small one, but it is important. Paul is not contrasting humility and patience; the sense of the verse is really one continuous subject and thought – with humility, gentleness, and patience being grouped together as related qualities.

When we look at what Paul says in Colossians 3:12-13, we see this same pattern again: “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another.” Here we have humility and patience grouped together in the same way we saw in Ephesians 4, but linked even more clearly. It is through our being humble and gentle, Paul tells us, that we can be patient and thus able to love one another.

The connection Paul makes between humility and patience in Ephesians and Colossians explains what Ecclesiastes 7:8 means in saying that “patience is better than pride.” From a biblical perspective, pride and patience are opposite things that often operate on a single spectrum. This does not mean that if we are impatient, we are full of pride – it is possible to be quite humble in some areas and still have a problem being patient. What we need to grasp is that in a given circumstance, the more we can practice humility, the closer we will move to the patience end of the pride-patience spectrum.

This understanding has a tremendously important practical application which we can put into action. When we are feeling impatient with someone, instead of thinking about patience as an abstract goal we can focus on the more concrete qualities that the Bible links with patience, such as compassion, gentleness, and especially humility. This strategy can help control our feelings of impatience in a very real way.

After all, when we remind ourselves that we are not the center of the universe, what does it matter that someone is late to meet with us? If we think about what it means to be compassionate, we can better empathize with the overwhelmed driver in front of us who is holding up the traffic, and so on. If we focus on the other qualities on Paul’s list – and again, especially on humility – we don’t even have to think about patience directly in order to better apply it.

And this principle does not apply only to patience with people. It also applies equally to being patient with events. When we become impatient because events are not working out as we expected or hoped, we are really

following an inner assumption that we know what is best in our lives. But when our plans – whether for a single event or our whole lives – don't work out and things don't go as we intended, humility can often help us to see things in a larger perspective. Humility helps us remember that if we are walking with God, then he is ultimately in charge and will guide the circumstances not as we would always choose, but as he sees best. Humility in such situations reminds us that we do not have total understanding of our own lives and how limited we are in wise planning compared to God.

If we ever doubt this, all we have to do is watch a game of chess played out by grand chess masters. Even if we understand the basics of the game or can perhaps play it quite well, the moves of the masters often seem mystifying until they result in the intended outcome. Humility reminds us how much greater the mind of God is than that of any human chess master, and it reminds us that we can and should let God make the plays in our lives without stressing and becoming impatient about them, just as we should learn to be patient with the weaknesses and provocations of others.

In fact, both of these types of patience are specifically mentioned in the passage in Ecclesiastes 7:8-10 from which we took the quotation that begins this chapter:

Verse 8: “The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride.” This is the underlying principle that we find in both the Old and New Testaments.

Verse 9: “Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.” This is clearly the application of the principle in terms of patience with individuals.

Verse 10: “Do not say, ‘Why were the old days better than these?’ For it is not wise to ask such questions.” The context of the passage (see also vss. 13-14) shows that this verse is referring to the application of patience with events.

So, whether it is patience with people or patience with events, ultimately patience is most often found in the opposite of pride – in an attitude of humility. The practical application of this fact is that focusing on humility when we do feel impatient can truly help us to develop in this area.

Perhaps we may not always improve as quickly as we would desire – but that is part of growing in patience.

Now that we have looked at what patience is and how it interacts with the vital Christian qualities of faith, hope, and love – and have seen how we can develop more patience through humility – we can turn in the second half of this book to biblical examples of patience in action.

PART TWO:
CASE STUDIES IN PATIENCE

5. THE PATIENCE OF JOB

“You have heard of the patience of Job” (James 5:11 WEB).

If we were asked, “Who was the most patient man in the Bible?” many of us might answer “Job,” as the Scriptures specifically refer to how patient he was (James 5:11). Although James does not say that Job was the *most* patient of all biblical characters, as is sometimes stated, he certainly shows that Job’s patience was remarkable.

The story of Job, which tells how the righteous patriarch was severely tested, is one of the most compelling in the Bible. Job’s name may be derived from the Hebrew word for “persecution,” thus meaning “the persecuted one.” It is clear that Job did feel persecuted by God himself (Job 19:22) because of the terrible things that happened at one phase of his life – apparently through no fault of his own (Job 1:22; 2:10).

Yet despite the terrible things that happened to Job – the loss of his possessions, his children, his health, and finally his friends (who presumed he was being punished for some sin) – throughout the book we see that Job patiently persisted in the hope that he might somehow find opportunity to vindicate himself before God (Job 9:15-30; 10:7; 13:15-23; 16:17; 23:7-12; 27:1-6; 31:35-37).

This is an important aspect of the story. We may know and love the verse in which Job is said to exclaim “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him” (Job 13:15 KJV), but this is actually a mistranslation. The NIV gives a footnote explaining that this verse may be translated “He will surely slay me; I have no hope, yet I will surely defend my ways to his face.” This is, in fact, what the Hebrew text says – and the verse is translated that way in many versions of the Bible such as the RSV and NEB.

Choosing the supposedly less negative translation of Job 13:15 found in the KJV, NIV, and some other versions actually minimizes Job’s terrible anguish and his unflagging determination to bring his case before God. On the other hand, knowing the better translation helps us to more clearly understand the patience of Job.

As we saw in Chapter 3 of this book, there are two kinds of patience: patience with events and patience with people – represented by the two Greek words *hypomonē* and *makrothymia*. The patience Job exhibited was clearly patience with events – *hypomonē* – in fact, that is the word James uses of him in saying “You have heard of the patience of Job”

(James 5:11). That is why the NIV and many other recent English Bible versions translate the word “endurance” rather than patience, but endurance can suggest simply hanging on despite circumstances rather than persistence for a reason, a goal – just as Job did. For this reason, *hypomonē* is probably best translated not simply as “patience” or “endurance,” but “patient endurance.”

The book of Job actually indicates Job might not have been as patient with people as he was with events. We see this, for example, in Job 12:2-3 and in some of Job’s other responses to his friends. That is not to say Job was not provoked, just that a lack of patience with people does seem to be present in what he is recorded to have said. If we have ever exhibited a lack of patience with people after a bad day at work or having been stuck in traffic for hours, we can probably sympathize with Job rather than judge him in this. Job’s occasional impatience with people even flowed into his relationship with God, as he himself admitted: “Is my complaint directed to a human being? Why should I not be impatient?” (Job 21:4).

Remarkable Patience

But when it comes to patient endurance with circumstances and events, Job’s response was truly amazing. This is especially true when we realize the length of time that may have been involved in Job’s suffering. When we read this book, we don’t always think about the way the storyline leapfrogs from one event to another, but there may have been considerable time between the different events. Think, for example, of the length of time possibly involved between the two times that the Satan or accuser comes before God (Job 1:6; 2:1) and the time involved for Job’s friends from other lands to receive news of his plight, to prepare for the journey, and then to travel to be with him.

Everything is, in fact, slowed down in this book – just as it is when we suffer. The three friends wait seven days before even speaking. And Job himself exclaims “I have been allotted months of futility, and nights of misery have been assigned to me” (Job 7:3). All of these factors – and others – indicate that Job’s suffering may have lasted a considerable amount of time, so his patient endurance in the terrible circumstances that he faced is all the more remarkable.

Eventually, the story tells us, God showed Job his error and Job repented, but his repentance seems not to have been for wrongdoing, but for questioning God’s wisdom and purposes. That is why Job exclaims:

“Therefore I take back my words and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6 CSB). Job may have been unable to see God’s purpose in allowing him to suffer undeservedly, but his patient endurance remains a lesson and an encouragement to all of us. Whatever he was not, Job certainly was patient and endured even the worst of imaginable circumstances with a willingness to wait: “All the days of my hard service,” he told his friends, “I will wait for my renewal to come” (Job 14:14).

So there is a great deal we can learn from Job in the matter of patience. His story gives us a perfect case-study of patience with circumstances and is one from which we can all profit in the difficult times we may encounter in our own lives. Job shows us that although we may not understand why God allows certain things, we aim to be patient through whatever occurs. We can worship God and still express our deepest pain and unhappiness. We can say with Job: “You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit. Yet these things you hid in your heart” (Job 10:12-13 ESV), and we can strive to patiently endure whatever the pains and unhappiness may be.

Interestingly, Job is also a reminder that even with a great degree of patient endurance with circumstances, we can still lack patience with people. Problems associated with our health, families, work, or other areas of life can all make the continued expression of that kind of interpersonal patience seem difficult. Yet the Christian is called to both, and we cannot use the presence of one form of patience as an excuse for a lack of the other. That may often be easier said than done, but it is an attainable goal, as we will see in the next chapters.

6. THE PATIENCE OF JOSEPH

“Joseph, sold as a slave. They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons, till what he foretold came to pass” (Psalm 105:17-19).

The great-grandson of Abraham, grandson of Isaac, and son of Jacob, Joseph was the last of the great biblical patriarchs, yet in his divinely-supported leadership accomplishments Joseph eclipsed them all. Rising from slavery to the position of second most powerful man in one of the greatest superpowers of the ancient world, Joseph’s story is familiar to all readers of the Bible.

The Patriarch and Prophet of Patience

But there is an aspect of Joseph’s life that, although it made his accomplishments possible, is often overlooked. That quality, so clearly found in everything we are told about Joseph, was patience. Joseph is one of the greatest examples of patience with events that we can find in the Bible – or elsewhere. The events of his life read like the nominations for a patience awards ceremony and comprise a nearly endless succession of things for which he had to wait in order for them to work out. Consider the following:

The favored young son that God had shown would become a leader of his people (Genesis 37:5-11) was thrown into a pit by his jealous brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt (Genesis 37:27-28). But over time Joseph patiently worked his way up to become the trusted second-in-command in the household of the wealthy Potiphar. When he was wrongfully accused and imprisoned, Joseph patiently worked in jail for many years, eventually acquiring responsibility over all the prisoners there.

We are told that while he was imprisoned, Joseph prophetically interpreted the dreams of two royal servants. Although his interpretation proved true, Joseph had to wait yet more years until he was brought before the Pharaoh, who elevated him as second leader in the nation (Genesis 41:37-44).

To briefly mention these events fails to give a real sense of the years of waiting – under adverse circumstances – that Joseph endured. Psalm 105:17-22 summarizes the difficulties of those years of patience. But although he doubtless did not understand all that was happening, Joseph

trusted God to fulfill his plan for him. He patiently worked in each situation he found himself in until God did elevate him to great power and responsibility.

Continued Patience

Under Joseph's patient leadership, Egypt saved and stored grain during seven years of abundance before it was carefully disbursed to the people through seven years of hunger. This was the widespread famine that prompted Jacob to send Joseph's brothers to Egypt to seek food (Genesis 42-46).

But Joseph and his family were not quickly reunited. Yet more patience was needed when Joseph did not reveal who he was to his brothers immediately. Instead, he waited patiently for them to take the needed food back to their families and eventually return to Egypt for more. Even once he revealed his true identity to his brothers, Joseph waited again while they went back to Canaan to bring their father, Jacob, to Egypt. In an era when international travel – by foot – took months, Joseph's patience was needed repeatedly.

The book of Genesis makes it clear that God directed the events of Joseph's life, but without Joseph's patience he would not have been able to accomplish God's plan. At every stage of his life Joseph was willing to wait. From the pit of slavery to Potiphar's house, from the depths of prison to the heights of the palace, Joseph displayed the ability to wait for situations to work out while continuing to advance – without succumbing to ineffectiveness and self-pity in his own difficult circumstances.

The People behind the Circumstances

There is also another aspect to Joseph's patience that we should not overlook – his patience with people. There are several examples of this in Joseph's story, but none is as clear as the way in which he patiently accepted and forgave his brothers when they came to him in Egypt – despite the fact that they had sold him as a slave.

Humanly, it would have been very easy for Joseph to write off his family, to disown and reject them – and even his whole people – and to identify entirely with his wife, children, friends and neighbors in Egypt. But Joseph's patience with people not only made his reconciliation with

his birth family possible, but also made it possible for him to be instrumental in saving both that family and the Hebrew people.

Interestingly, Joseph is the first person in the Old Testament who is shown to have exhibited patience not only with events, but also with people. This does not mean, of course, that he was the first person to exercise patience in this way, but that his life contains the first examples we are given. These instances of Joseph's patience with people are all in terms of their past behavior toward him. While we may think of this trait as one of forgiveness, it is also a vital aspect of patience. We can learn much about this kind of patience from the story of Joseph.

7. THE PATIENCE OF MOSES

“My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience” (James 5:10 NKJV).

If we select the most patient individuals found in Scripture, Moses has to be one of them. The patience of Moses is clear in the biblical accounts of his life, but we need to piece together the information we are given in order to see the lessons that are there for us. Fortunately, the Bible gives us chronological signposts in Moses’ life that can help us to do this.

The book of Acts tells us that Moses was forty years old when he fled in fear from Egypt after killing the taskmaster who was abusing a Hebrew slave (Acts 7:22-29). Acts also tells us that Moses then lived forty years in the wilderness before God called him: “After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai” (Acts 7:30).

The book of Exodus confirms these figures when it tells us Moses’ age when he first spoke to Pharaoh: “Moses was 80 years old and Aaron 83 when they spoke to Pharaoh” (Exodus 7:7). As we know, after Pharaoh finally released the Israelites, Israel spent forty years wandering in the wilderness (Number 32:13). Finally, Deuteronomy tells us that at the end of that time Moses died at age 120 on the edge of the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 34:7).

A Chronology of Patience

So, we have a clear chronology for Moses’ life. What it shows us is that Moses spent forty long years living in the wilderness before God called him. As Moses was raised in a royal household, God could doubtless have worked it out for him to have been acquitted or exonerated after the incident with the taskmaster – so that he could have stayed in Egypt until it was time to lead the Israelites out of that land. But God did not do that. He let Moses flee and let him live miles from anywhere – with nothing to watch but the flocks and the sand – for four decades. Could it be that Moses was given the opportunity to learn patience in those long, slow desert years? Moses then spent forty excruciating years leading the Israelites through more desert – during which his patience was tried endlessly.

The Israelites in Moses' care complained continually, and on a number of occasions they are said to have grumbled against Moses directly – blaming him for their self-caused problems with an ongoing refrain of “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” (Numbers 21:5).

Yet throughout this continued provocation, Moses was almost unfailingly patient with the Israelites, often pleading with God on their behalf and asking God, in effect, to be patient with them. We see this especially on the occasion when God threatened that he would wipe out the Israelites for their sinfulness and make a new nation through Moses (Exodus 32:9-10; Numbers 14:19). Moses exhibited incredible patience throughout those years of problems. At the end of Moses' life, after waiting forty years to see the Promised Land, Moses displayed supreme patience in humbly accepting God's will; he would not, at that time, enter the land for which he had worked and waited so long. In that sense, Moses truly learned to act like God – who was patient with Israel that whole time, too.

No one's patience is perfect, of course, and the Bible indicates that Moses may have become impatient at times. His striking the rock twice at Meribah (Numbers 20:8-11) may have been the result of a moment of impatience when water did not appear immediately – the event that led to Moses being denied entry into the Promised Land (Numbers 20:12). But in this we see that God was holding him to an exceptionally high standard – perhaps because patience was the quality needed above all else in the job God had called Moses to do.

Pride, the Present, and Preparation

What was the secret of Moses' patience with people? The Bible gives us a very clear indication. As we saw in Chapter 4, the book of Ecclesiastes directly contrasts patience with pride (Ecclesiastes 7:8). In that chapter we concluded that no one compares or contrasts unrelated things – only things that have some kind of relationship. And as we also saw, pride and patience are indeed conversely linked. The more we have of one, the less we will have of the other. This is particularly relevant to the extreme patience exhibited by Moses because we are told that he was: “... a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3). It is doubtless because of Moses' deep humility that he was able to exercise the patience he did – and “people patience” is even

more clear in his life than it is in what we are told of the life of either Joseph or Job.

Moses' patience was also primarily applied not to past events (as we saw in the life of Joseph), but to the events of the present. That is often the hardest application of patience to master – patience with those who disappoint us, hurt us, raise our blood pressure, or otherwise affect us in the now in which we live and react. Moses is a model worth studying in this regard.

There is a final aspect of Moses' patience that can encourage us all. Moses seems to have learned patience over forty years in order to do a supremely patience-requiring job for a further forty years. There is perhaps a lesson in this aspect of Moses' life for all of us. Just as Moses doubtless did not realize he was being prepared to be patient, so we may not realize that some of the things that we feel impatient about may be being used to prepare us, also. Next time your patience is tried, remember Moses – it can be an encouraging thought.

8. THE PATIENCE OF PAUL

“Short time or long – I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains” (Acts 26:29).

The New Testament makes it clear that the apostle Paul accomplished as much as – if not more – than any other New Testament apostle. Yet his incredible achievement in missionary journeys that led to the expansion of Christianity throughout the vast gentile world would never have occurred without the simple quality of patience.

We do not know if Paul exhibited patience before his conversion, though his determination to pursue goals was clear in both his years of training under the eminent teacher Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) and his early persecution of the church (Acts 22:4). When we look at Paul’s ministry, we certainly see patience at work. Soon after his conversion Paul journeyed into “Arabia” – presumably to study and learn the way of Christianity in detail – for some three years (Galatians 1:17). Then, time and again throughout his subsequent missionary journeys, Paul exhibited patience with even the most difficult events and circumstances.

Certainly, by the latter part of his missionary work he could confidently exclaim that whether it would take a “Short time or long,” he was glad to do the work God had given him to do (Acts 26:29). Yet it is in Paul’s captivities, at the end of his career, that his patience shines the most. Consider a single portion of that time.

A Patient Prisoner for Christ

When Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea in Judea, before being sent to Rome, he languished in a Roman jail cell for two whole years. Then, at last, things started to look up. The Roman governor, Felix, announced that he would soon decide Paul’s case and allowed Paul some limited privileges (Acts 24:22-24). Felix even went with his wife Drusilla to hear Paul’s gospel message – and he continued to speak with Paul on an ongoing basis. It appeared that there might finally be light at the end of the tunnel of Paul’s imprisonment.

But soon after this we are told: “When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to

the Jews, he left Paul in prison” (Acts 24:27). This must have felt like a crushing blow to Paul, yet he continued to accept the circumstances in which he found himself. As it was, Paul’s time in prison had only just begun.

Paul was then taken to Rome where he spent a further two years under house arrest (Acts 28:30) awaiting his trial and ultimate acquittal, probably in AD 63. Within a few years he was arrested again and spent another year or so in a jail cell in Rome, until his execution around AD 68. So, the apostle was under arrest and imprisoned for five long years of his ministry. Yet the letters Paul wrote during that time show nothing but patience with these events. Although he had done nothing wrong, Paul never displays frustration, anger, or impatience with his situation. Instead, he used the opportunities that his imprisonment gave him and shared the gospel with all those he met during his time in prison.

As we saw in Chapter 2, in his letter to the Romans Paul affirms the simple reason for his patience with these trying events: “we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation works patience. And patience, experience; and experience, hope. And hope makes not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Romans 5:3-4 KJ2K). Paul knew that patience with trying events and circumstances leads directly to the kind of character that God desires to develop in us – and Paul displayed this endurance or patience with events as much as any other biblical figure.

Paul’s Patience with People

But Paul’s patience was not just with events beyond his control. The apostle’s letters are full of examples where he exhibited great patience with the individuals and groups with whom he worked. It is true that Paul’s “people patience” was strained at times – as when he and Barnabas argued over whether to allow John Mark to accompany them on their missionary journey (Acts 15:36-40), and in dealing with some of the persistent problems in the churches he established (for example, 2 Corinthians 10-13).

But for every instance of impatience in Paul’s story, we find him being patient – sometimes amazingly so – many other times. In writing the book of Acts, Luke was doubtless very aware of Paul’s patience with people, and the Gospel writer underscores it on several occasions. For example, Acts 16:16-18 tells us that while Paul was preaching in Philippi, a

spirit-possessed girl followed him shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.” Luke says that the woman kept this up for many days until, finally, Paul became so annoyed that he commanded the spirit to come out of her! Forever the good historian, Luke records not only Paul’s annoyance, but the many days of patience that led to it.

Lessons for Us

The details we are given regarding the patience that the apostle Paul exhibited – both with circumstances and with people – show that he was certainly one of the most patient of biblical characters. Yet we are given enough details to make it clear that there were sometimes limits to Paul’s patience – as there are to ours. Perhaps Paul had been impatient in his earlier life, we do not know; but the New Testament does make it clear that Paul’s patience increased over time and that by the end of his ministry he had developed an incredible amount of patience. We see this in his famous words to Timothy:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

These are not only the words of a victorious warrior of the faith, but also the words of someone who had longed for something for the greatest part of his adult life – and had worked endlessly while he patiently waited for that great goal. Paul had learned patience with events as well as with people, and his story remains an encouragement to all of us as we strive to learn patience, too.

AFTERWORD:

DO YOU NEED MORE IMPATIENCE?

“I the LORD have spoken. The time has come for me to act.”
(Ezekiel 24:14)

The word “impatience” is not a typo in the title of this Afterword. Patience is a good thing, of course – as we have seen throughout this book. The Bible shows that God is incredibly patient with us, and he expects us to learn to be patient with others, also (Colossians 3:12). So why would we need impatience?

As with many aspects of the Christian life, there is sometimes a place for impatience as well as patience, just as there is a place for both mercy and judgment, “a time to be silent and a time to speak” (Ecclesiastes 3:7), and so on. Proper impatience does exist and it can be the “other side of the coin” of patience – and just as necessary.

To understand this, we must first see that impatience can be an attribute of God. The book of Judges tells us that after suffering affliction for some time, the ancient Israelites: “put away the foreign gods from among them and served the Lord, and he became impatient over the misery of Israel” (Judges 10:16 ESV). The Hebrew expression translated “impatient” in this verse is literally to become “short of soul,” in the way we would say “short-tempered” or “running short of patience” – in other words, impatient – not with Israel, but with its suffering. This verse is clear in telling us that God can express the trait of impatience when he views human-caused suffering and he wants to end it.

God can be impatient with other things, also – especially sin. He is patient almost beyond belief when it comes to working with us to help us toward repentance, but his patience with sin can run out, as we see in the narrative of the flood where we are told: “Then the Lord said, ‘My Spirit will not contend with humans forever’” (Genesis 6:3). A number of biblical writers, including the apostle Paul, also stress that God’s patience has limits (for example, Romans 2:4-5).

We find other examples of righteous impatience in the New Testament. Jesus himself displayed impatience with the money-changers in the temple (Matthew 21:12–13) and on occasions such as when his disciples (who had been given the power to do so) could not heal a spirit-tormented child (Luke 9:1, 38-40). Luke tells us that Jesus’ response was an

impatient one in this situation: “You unbelieving and perverse generation... how long shall I stay with you and put up with you?” (Luke 9:41). Notice that the object of Jesus’ impatience was not the individuals themselves, but the lack of belief of a whole group despite the fact they had already witnessed many miracles.

Putting the various scriptures together that show godly impatience, we see a definite pattern. God, and the Son of God, are clearly said to express impatience at times, and it is usually with human-caused suffering, sin, and disbelief. How does this apply to us? We are certainly called to be patient, and we are not called to express impatience with others. But a right response to the three factors of sin, disbelief, and avoidable suffering should increase our impatience with ourselves.

Sometimes we need to become more impatient with our own sins and failings in order to make greater progress in overcoming them (Romans 7:24-25). Sometimes we need to be impatient with our own disbelief when it is holding us back from spiritual growth (Mark 9:24). And we need real impatience with ourselves when we cause any kind of avoidable suffering – even in situations where we think we are in the right (Acts 8:3). That kind of right impatience, if it is utilized, spurs us on to move closer to God and to grow more like him with his help.

We also need a kind of impatience when we view much of the suffering that fills the world in which we live – and that impatience can be rightly expressed in more fervent prayer for the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:10) and more active involvement in doing what we can to help alleviate suffering (Matthew 6:2-4). But in any situation, the right kind of impatience for us to feel as Christians should always be aimed at ourselves, whether to further propel us in the growth for which we all should be aiming or to spur us to do more to help others.

If we are working to master the quality of patience, we should keep up the good work – but we should not forget the necessity of righteous impatience where that characteristic is also appropriate!

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