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Patience does not have the same delightful attraction of love, joy, and peace. The first three terms Paul uses to describe the quality of life in Christ seem somewhat beneficial; patience seems almost a penalty rather than a benefit. For many Christians, patience seems illusive and unattainable.

Patience as Preparation

The Greek word *makrothumia* which translators have rendered as “patience” comes as a warning. The word is a bit of preparation for something to come, because this dimension of spiritual life can only be practiced and demonstrated in adversity, difficulty, or trying times. The term has been translated variously as patience, steadfastness, endurance, forbearance, and long-suffering. In essence, it involves the long, patient endurance of injuries, insults, and other troubles.

Jesus spoke about many of the qualities of spiritual life marking the fruit of the Spirit on that last night with His disciples in the upper room. After He had warned them of coming tribulation and things they must endure from family and friends as well as enemies, He said, “I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you of them” (John 16:4). The word *patience* reminds Christians of this warning from Jesus.

To say patience is one of the dimensions of spiritual life that results from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is to say troubles will come in every Christian’s life which will require the durability that comes from this quality. As He gathered with His disciples for the last time, Jesus warned them of coming troubles. The last chance Jesus had to talk with His disciples, He devoted to preparing them for hardship.

Denial—Refusing to Prepare

Amazingly enough, sometimes people simply refuse to be prepared. We would rather not know; we would rather not even think that something unpleasant might happen. In his spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis spoke of the thing he dreaded most in his early years—going back to school. Brought up in the English public school tradition, Lewis went away to school for three months at a time. For Lewis, leaving home to go to school was a dreadful thing. When vacation came, it was so glorious he preferred to think that it would never end.

Lewis exhibited the intellectual and emotional struggle people often have. Intellectually, we may know that tragedy comes to all people, but emotionally we say, “Ah, but it happens to other people, not to me!” Lewis preferred not to think that his vacation would ever come to an end. As a result, he was never prepared emotionally when the time came for him to go back to school again.

We often try to think of tragedy as something that happens to other people, but never to us. As a result, we are seldom prepared when tragedy or trouble comes. Jesus warns us, however, because He wants His disciples to know that injury, insult, and trouble will come to us. For Christians the question arises, “How will I respond when trouble comes?”

Ostrich Theology

People respond to trouble in a variety of ways. One of the most common is denial. This might be called “ostrich theology.” Ostriches bury their heads in the sand, and if they cannot see trouble, it is not there. In the same way, people refuse to see the troubles that might surround them. People who deal with trouble in this way expect that if they ignore the problem long enough it will go away. Some people believe this approach shows spiritual strength. Denial of reality, however, is not the same thing as faith. In faith, one must first admit that something is wrong before relief can come.

While serving as a prison chaplain, I learned something about denial. The counselor, who worked with sex offenders ranging from rapists to child molesters, had a requirement for anyone who wanted to be in the therapy group. The counselor required the prisoners to admit

their guilt. An amazing number of people in prison will not admit their guilt. The rationale for the requirement was that someone who was not a sex offender had no business in a therapy group for sex offenders. But more to the point, a person who would not admit something was wrong would not be willing to do anything about the problem. This therapy group in prison has its parallel in everyday life as well. Those who will not face the reality of difficulty in their lives will never do anything about the problem. They will continue to bury their heads in the sand.

Denial ranks among the most popular ways of dealing with trouble. Denial forms the whole background for Buddhist thought. Buddhists hold that the material world does not exist. Christian Scientists share this view and believe that sin involves acting as though a material world does exist. In such a mind-set, trouble cannot exist because nothing exists that can cause trouble. The appearance of trouble, pain, or suffering must be ignored lest the idea develop that a real world exists in which people suffer.

Fantasy

One man in prison will always come to mind when I think of this subject. He had become involved in a gnostic cult known as The Way, and he believed he was a spiritual being no longer subject to the laws of nature. Whenever I inquired as to his health, the prisoner always replied, "Everything is beautiful!" No matter what had happened to him that day, whether he had been beaten up in the dormitory or just received a setback from the parole board, the man always gave the same answer. As he spoke he smiled a painful smile, trying to convince himself that everything was beautiful.

Blanche Du Bois took this approach in Tennessee Williams's play *A Street Car Named Desire*. She had lost everything including a fiancée, a plantation, and her reputation. Yet, she managed to build herself a fantasy world in which everything was beautiful. Blanche still saw herself a great lady. She still believed she was courted by handsome, intelligent, wealthy suitors. She lost her mind. She so deeply denied the unpleasantness in her life, that she lost all contact with life.

Acceptance—Prelude to Despair

While denial leads to disaster, acceptance is not necessarily any better. Sometimes when people accept their situations, they not only accept and face the reality of the trouble and trials they are going through, but they go one step farther and accept defeat. Acceptance offers no solution when in the same moment one accepts defeat because defeat leads inevitably to despair.

Defeat

Sometimes the hardest thing for people to see is an option. Defeat may have an alternative. People who decide to attempt suicide may do so because they think they have viewed life's problems and decided they have no options: "I am defeated, my troubles have overcome me, and I have no way out." When we confront the difficulties of life and decide we have no hope, we accept defeat.

Defeat and despair pose one of the greatest problems for modern urban life. As life becomes more and more complicated in the technological age of instant communication, a feeling grows that we have no control over our own lives. When we feel that we have no control, stress also builds and builds. Through stress, people can inflict a form of suffering on themselves that leads to the acceptance of defeat and despair.

Futility

Anyone who has ever tried to deal with a bureaucratic institution knows the kind of powerlessness and futility that can come from that experience. Whether from a government institution or the job we hold, the ordinary frustrations of daily life can train us to accept defeat. People even find that they have no control over their own personal schedules and private time. A growing feeling that we have lost control of our own lives permeates society. Losing control helps create that sense of helplessness that marks despair.

When people accept their lot, despair takes over. With a shrug of the shoulders, some habitually respond to the trials of life, "Well, that's the way things will be, there's nothing I can do about it, and I might as well give up." This surrender to despair can hold people in bondage throughout their lives, because it is learned early.

People begin assigning labels to individuals at an early age. You are ignorant. You are an unmanageable child. You are no good. You are stupid. With all the thousands of labels people are willing to tag on us, how many do we despairingly accept as reality? Acceptance is not necessarily better than denial.

People will often simply decide to fail. Failure may seem simpler than the struggle. In his monumental work *A Study of History*, Arnold Toynbee was trying to decide what made great civilizations emerge. In his quest, Toynbee investigated not only the places where great civilizations emerged but also the places where civilization did not develop beyond a primitive state. He studied the Eskimos as well as the Romans. Toynbee noticed something about difficulty. Where people accepted suffering as the normal way of life, taking for granted the harshness and difficulty, they gave up the hope that there might be some alternative.

When the Eskimos crossed the land bridge from Siberia ages ago, they faced a series of dense forests. They had no tools for cutting the trees or clearing the land. Going into the forests seemed too great a difficulty. It seemed hopeless. Rather than move into the forests and on down the continent as the ancestors of the great Indian civilizations did, the Eskimos stayed where they were in the frozen wastelands of the north. They did not hope for anything better than that, so they capitulated to the difficulty.

Job's wife gave the same advice. When everything bad that could possibly happen had happened, Job's wife told him to curse God and die. She saw no hope for Job. He might as well accept defeat and be done with it.

We experience a tension when we face great trials. Defeat has a natural attraction because at least it brings a kind of end. Any ending will do; just let it all be over. There is a pull to accept defeat in the face of pain, trouble, and adversity of all kinds. Israel felt this pull in the wilderness. No sooner had they left Egypt and begun to make their way through the wilderness than they began to lament that it was better for them in Egypt. They argued it was better to have remained as slaves than to die in the desert (Ex. 16:3). Israel decided that defeat was better than the trouble they were going through.

Hope—The Grounds for Patience

Somewhere between denial and despair lies hope. Somewhere in that region where we honestly recognize and admit the trouble that faces us, and where we decide that we will get through it, this word *makrothumia* emerges. Patient endurance! What makes for endurance or durability?

I once bought a wallet by mail. A credit card company offered the wallet as a special deal for its customers, and I fell for it lock, stock, and barrel. It looked like a super wallet. It had a pen with a digital clock on the end of it. It had a small calculator for me to figure out how deeply in debt I stayed. It had a place for my checkbook, so I could spend my life away. It had a note pad for me to write memos to myself. It could hold dozens of credit cards. It even had a place for me to keep money. It was truly a super wallet.

The wallet began falling apart a week after I got it. The spring in the pen broke, but that did not matter because it did not write anyway. The calculator flashed off and on in the middle of a calculation. Some numbers worked, and others did not. The binding tore when I folded it. The super wallet, as grand as it seemed, had no durability. What makes for endurance or durability? Some people are not unlike that wallet when it comes to durability.

The company that made the wallet was not particularly interested in making a wallet that would last. They were interested in selling wallets. As soon as this wallet had given its all, I had to buy another wallet. Planned obsolescence is a part of the American system. There is such a thing as planned survival, too.

Planned Survival

In planned survival, we can decide that we are going to survive. We can decide that we are going to get through our difficulties. We can decide, in contrast to Israel, that we can get through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

A few years ago, Great Britain was going through one of its periodic crises. It may have been a labor dispute, an economic problem, or an international crisis. The nature of the problem is unimportant. In the midst of a discussion of the problem someone was criticizing the British and prophesying that they would never get through this crisis. At

that point my father interjected a comment about the British. He had been with them during the blitz in London, and he had fought beside them in France, Belgium, and Germany. He said, "The British are survivors."

In speeches to the people during the Second World War, Winston Churchill continually urged the people toward hope. Years later after the war, Churchill addressed the boys of one of Britain's public schools. Reflecting on the struggles and difficulties he had faced, he offered this advice, "Never give up, never, never, never, never."

People can decide that they will endure through any crisis and emerge on the other side. In the study of civilization, when Arnold Toynbee began to examine why some civilizations do endure, he looked at Britain—a tiny little island cut off from the rest of Europe—with a storm-tossed sea around it, a rugged countryside that will not grow very much food, and a people of often contrary independence. Why would it become the ruler of one of the greatest empires the world has ever known? When the British see difficulty, trial, and trouble, they do not see it as defeat. They see it as opportunity.

Pain, trouble, insult, injury, and all manners of adversity will all happen to us at some time or another, Jesus insisted, but we can make a decision about how we will respond to them. Like the Unsinkable Molly Brown sang in the Broadway play, "I may be low, but I'm not down yet."

Looking Beyond Trouble

We can look beyond our troubles. If the spirit of Christ dwells within us, we cannot be defeated. The Spirit of Christ is a Spirit of durability or endurance that shares the power to endure with our spirits. Instead of fearing what lies ahead, Christians can go forward with the assurance that they can endure, "for God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power" (2 Tim. 1:7). The real presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives is the basis for endurance. Without the confident assurance of that presence and power, people have no real basis for hope.

Despite all his other suffering, Job's greatest anguish came because he was not sure of God's presence in the suffering. He railed against his friends and argued with them, but Job's most dramatic statements came from his longing for certainty of God's presence:

“Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
 that I might come even to his seat!
 Behold, I go forward, but he is not there;
 and backward, but I cannot perceive him;
 on the left hand I seek him, but I cannot behold him;
 I turn to the right hand, but I cannot see him” (23:3,8-9).

Endurance comes in the presence of Christ who brings the knowledge that something lies ahead, that we have a future, and that we can look forward to it with hope.

The fruit of the Spirit of Christ describes what the life of a person is like when Jesus Christ dwells in that life. The fruit of the Spirit results from a Christian taking on the character of Christ. The fruit of the Spirit is the natural result of being in Christ. Whatever Christ's character is like, our character is becoming “from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).

Yet a Christian must consciously cooperate with Christ in order to experience the patient endurance He offers. At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told the story of a man who built his house on a rock, “and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock” (Matt. 7:25). Jesus said this foundation came from hearing His words and doing them (v. 24).

Sharing Christ's Durability

Christians can endure suffering, pain, insult, injury, and affliction because Christ did. His Spirit dwells within all believers. The Bible says that Christ “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2). Jesus' durability allowed Him to endure the cross and come to believers as a gift by virtue of the presence of His Spirit in their lives. Beyond the suffering of the cross lay the victory of the resurrection. In Paul's great prayer for believers in the first chapter of Ephesians, he prayed that we might know the hope that God offers, the riches we have already inherited, and “the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead.” (Eph. 1:19-20). The same power that brought Christ through the misery of the cross to the glory of the resurrection is at work in everyone who believes on Christ!

Suffering holds no virtue. It has nothing to commend itself. Martin Luther discovered that fact when he searched for God in his own life. Luther thought that if he tormented his body enough by beating himself, wrapping himself in chains, wearing a hair shirt, and in other ways punishing himself, that the suffering would somehow bring him to the Lord. Of course, Luther only succeeded in increasing his anguish. After he knew the Lord loved him, had died for him, and had extended mercy to him personally, however, Luther found that he could endure anything:

The Spirit and the gifts are ours
 Thro' Him who with us sideth:
 Let goods and kindred go,
 This mortal life also;
 The body they may kill:
 God's truth abideth still,
 His kingdom is forever.¹

Suffering is not desirable, but Christians can rejoice through their suffering because they have hope that something better lies beyond the immediate moment of gloom.

Notes

1. Martin Luther, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," *Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1975), 37.