



The Fruit of the Spirit - Patience

By: Paul A. Lee

What is patience for a 3-year-old waiting for his birthday or Christmas? My wife and I had the supreme joy of spending last Christmas with our 3-year-old grandson. Watching him wait until Christmas was a lesson in patience! Long before the day arrived, he knew who was receiving every present under the tree. And I don't think he was reading the nametags.

In a time of armed conflict, what is patience for a family waiting for the return of a loved one from battle?

What is patience for a missionary who must witness, pray, preach, and teach for years and yet see little in the way of a positive response?

What is patience for a pastor who has a vision for what the church can be and do in the community? Yet he must wait patiently praying, explaining, encouraging, challenging, and building a consensus until others commit to that vision and help realize it.

What is patience in the mind of the apostle Paul as he tells the Galatians and us: "The fruit of the Spirit is ... patience"?

The Greek word is *makrothumia*. Translated as patience, long-suffering, or forbearance, it is a compound word consisting of *makros* (long or big) and *thumia* (temper). Thus, it literally means having a "long fuse" as opposed to being short/quick tempered.

In nonbiblical Greek, the word frequently expresses the idea of passivity or resignation in the face of overwhelming difficulties or problems that cannot be changed. There is a kind of stoicism that benignly or passively resigns a person to a situation that cannot be changed. Occasionally, there is a more positive connotation of persistence — being doggedly persistent even though the going gets tougher and tougher.

Biblical use of the word *makrothumia* does not include the idea of passivity or resignation. For the child of God, it is not just a matter of gritting one's teeth and stoically enduring some pain or suffering.

In the Scriptures, *makrothumia* is used in reference to people, i.e., being patient with people rather than with things or events. Barclay says it's the grace of the person who could revenge a wrong but does not. It's the long-suffering which endures injuries and evil deeds without being provoked to anger or revenge. It's a steadfastness of soul under provocation to "right a wrong" or "even the score" with someone, but choosing not to do so.

It seems patience is needed most when the Christian feels least like exercising it. His greatest need for patience is at the low point of his spiritual life when he "clings to God, yet does not feel the assurance that God is near him." Patience is the tenacity with which the Christian's faith holds to the promises of God even though he may feel much more like the conquered, instead of the conqueror.²

That kind of patience doesn't come easily. We develop it while walking closely with Him. It comes from trusting in

Him even when the sunshine of His love and blessing seems obscured by a dark cloud of problems and difficulties hanging over our heads. Can we trust Him then? Can we patiently trust Him when tomorrow looks dark and lonely and frightening — knowing that just as He has walked with us in the past, even so He will walk with us in all our tomorrows as well?

The Christian is patient when in the darker events of life he does not lose control but remains firm in the conviction that obedience to God is required at all times and in all circumstances.³

This is continuing to trust when our trust doesn't seem to be yielding the desired results. This is continuing in trustful obedience to our loving God whether signs of that love are discernible or not.

When used in reference to God, *makrothumia* is often translated “longsuffering” or “slow to anger.” Barclay stated the greatest fact about this word is that it “describes the character of God himself. It is an attribute of Yahweh.”⁴ God told Moses, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love” (Exodus 34:6, NIV). This refrain runs throughout the Psalms: The Lord is “a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love” (Psalm 86:15, NIV; 103:8; 145:8).

Being a God of patience, i.e., slow to anger, Yahweh was always ready to grant forgiveness and bestow His grace on His people. The majestic, omnipotent God graciously restrains His righteous wrath and offers pardon and forgiveness to whosoever will come through repentance and accept His grace.

Jonah had difficulty over God's patience and willingness to forgive the “big sinners” of his day. Like a lot of us, he had to learn that wonderful truth about his God the hard way. Our God is merciful, gracious, ready to forgive, abounding in steadfast love, and very, very patient.

This emphasis continues on into the New Testament and is amplified there. Peter says, “Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation” (2 Peter 3:15, NIV). Thus, God's patience, or slowness in unleashing His wrath, is not because of leniency or an unwillingness to act. Rather, His patience is an opportunity for His children to repent and trust the Savior. In His patience, the Father waits, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to the Savior and trust Him.

In writing to Timothy, Paul tells how he had blasphemed the Savior and persecuted His followers. Indeed, he claimed to be the chief of sinners. But Jesus was patient. He waited until Saul was ready to say, “I surrender, I surrender all!”

Patience, God always waits! Not only does He wait, but He even pursues us with His abounding love. George Matheson captures this perfectly in the hymn:

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

That's the response God wants from us. It's the perfect response to His perfect love, a love patiently pursuing us until we quit running from Him and say, “I rest my weary soul in Thee and Thy grace, O God”; then, “I give Thee back the life I owe.”

Our gracious God is so loving and so patient, how can we speak of His patience and our patience at the same time? It's because He's the Source. We don't develop patience. He grows it within the trusting and obedient heart. It is the fruit of His Spirit working within us.

Endnotes

1. William Barclay, *The Letters to Galatians and Ephesians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), 50.

2. W. Hermann, "Patience" in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, vol. 8, ed. Samuel M. Jackson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 381.

3. *Ibid.* 382.

4. Barciay, 51.

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