

# Followers of the Way

## The Fruit of the Spirit – Patience

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Ex 34:1-10; Lk 24:13-27

You've heard the traditional wedding toast? The father of the bride stands to his feet and commends his daughter and new son-in-law: 'I pray in your marriage you will have the wisdom of Solomon, the patience of Job, and the children of Israel!'

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience...

The first three sound very spiritual, heavenly even, very nice for Church on a Sunday; but the fourth brings us right back down to earth on Monday! What are we like to live with the rest of the week?

So today our focus is on patience. The Greek word means 'long-tempered', the opposite of someone with a short fuse! Older translations use 'long-suffering' while others render it 'forbearance.' Both terms are relevant as we think about patience, because it includes:

- The ability to endure whatever opposition and suffering may come our way, and to persevere without retaliation;
- The ability to put up with the weaknesses and foibles of others, including other believers, and show forbearance towards them.

This is no easy task, and nigh on impossible in our own strength, which is why we need the Spirit of God to help it grow in our lives.

But before we think about patience in ourselves, we must first examine God's patience, for after all, bearing the fruit of the Spirit means having the very character of God in us.

So we are going to look first at the patience of God in the Old Testament, followed by the patience of Jesus in the New Testament, before exploring patience in the Christian life.

### 1. The Patience of God in the Old Testament

The God revealed in the Old Testament has often been caricatured as unloving and full of anger and wrath. Now granted, wrath against sin is part of his character, but there is so much more to God than this, especially with regards to patience.

When he redeemed his people Israel out of slavery in Egypt and brought them through the Red Sea, he led them to Mt Sinai to give them the Law through Moses. While Moses was in the LORD's presence, the people became impatient and urged Aaron to make an idol of gold in the form of a calf, so they could worship.

The LORD's anger burned against them, not surprisingly, as they had heard the voice of the Lord give the Ten Commandments, the first two of which they were already breaking – 'You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol...' (Ex 20:3&4).

Despite interceding on behalf of the Israelites and reasoning with the Lord to turn from his wrath, Moses too burned with a righteous anger, breaking the tablets of the commandments, burning the golden calf and, after grinding it to powder and mixing it with water, making the people drink it.

This is the picture many have in their minds when they think of the God of the OT, but look what happens when Moses ascends the mountain again. The LORD hides him in the cleft of a rock, passing by in front of him, as Moses had requested, and declaring,

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation. (Ex 34:6-7)

Does this look like the caricature of God so many have painted? Or a God of compassion and grace; slow to anger, in other words long-suffering or patient; abounding in love, faithfulness and forgiveness?

Now of course he cannot leave the guilty unpunished, if he did he would not be a God of justice. This was made clear very eloquently by Hazelmary Bull in 2013.

The Bulls ran a B&B from their own home and were taken to court by a homosexual couple who were refused a double bed, a rule which applied to all unmarried couples. The Bulls were interviewed on ITV Daybreak by Lorraine Kelly and Aled Jones.

Aled Jones, 'As a Christian, surely the God that you worship is a loving God, is a tolerant God and, if people are in a civil partnership, they are obviously in love, so what's wrong with them sharing a bed?'

Hazelmary, 'I think it's a myth to believe that entirely. He is a loving God, that's true, he's a forgiving God, but there is...'

Aled interrupts, 'And a tolerant one?'

Hazelmary, 'He is a longsuffering God, he's not entirely tolerant, because the Bible is full of cases where he finally does bring judgement about. And we felt that we wanted to, as far as possible, live according to his instructions, and the Bible's very clear about marriage.'

Lorraine interrupts, 'It's 2013, it's 2013!'

Hazelmary, 'God hasn't changed. Jesus says he's the same yesterday, today and forever. He hasn't changed, the Bible hasn't changed, and we're wrong, we're living in a dream if we think he's changed his laws to suit us, because that's not the case at all.'

Thank God he *is* patient, long-suffering, slow to anger, but that he is also just, punishing the guilty if unrepentant.

## 2. The Patience of Jesus in the New Testament

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus is presented as a new Moses, with his Sermon on the Mount being his Mount Sinai moment, and the Twelve Disciples reflecting the 12 tribes of Israel. So just as the LORD in the Old Testament had to show long-suffering with his stiff-necked, rebellious people, so Jesus had to display immense patience with his slow learning disciples.

Jesus spent three years with his disciples, teaching them by word and example, but at times they tried his patience. For example, in Mark 7, after a confrontation with the Pharisees over eating with unwashed hands and how they set aside the commands of God to follow the traditions of men, the disciples ask him for an explanation. His exasperated response was, 'Are you so dull?' (Mk 7:18)

And in the Upper Room in John 14, in response to Philip's request, 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.' Jesus answered, 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time?' (vv.8-9)

Jesus' patience with his disciples extended beyond his resurrection. As he met the two on the road to Emmaus and asked them to explain why they were so downcast, they spoke of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, saying, 'but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.' (Lk 24:21) How did Jesus react?

'How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Lk 24:25-27)

The report of resurrection did not convince them, but instead of revealing himself to them there and then, Jesus patiently opened the Scriptures to them on that seven mile journey until their hearts burned within them. That would have been a Bible study worth listening to!

Jesus displayed great patience with his disciples because he knew what they were, but he also knew what they would become. When calling Peter, one of his first disciples he said, 'You *are* Simon... You *will be* called Cephas (Peter).' (Jn 1:42)

Jesus also has amazing patience with us; he has to, as he also knows what we *are*, yet what we shall *become* in him. We are a work in progress and that takes patience.

As we are all made in the image of God, so we must reflect his image in us, including the fruit of patience; and if we are followers of Christ, which we are, we too must be patient as he is patient with us.

## 3. Patience in the Christian Life

'Patience is a virtue, possess it if you can; found seldom in a woman, never in a man.'

A man was being tailgated by a stressed out woman on a busy road. Suddenly, the light turned amber, just in front of him. He did the right thing, stopping at the crossing, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection. The tailgating woman was furious and honked her horn, screaming in frustration as she missed her chance to get through the intersection, dropping her mobile phone and makeup.

As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. He ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, finger printed, photographed, and placed in a holding cell. After a couple of hours, she was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

He said, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you, and cursing a blue streak at him. I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do?' bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the boot. Naturally... I assumed you had stolen the car."

The fruit of the Spirit is not just for Sundays!

Jesus was patient in the face of suffering, and Christians, too, must follow their Master. In the West not many have had to exercise patience under persecution, but for a great number of our brothers and sisters in other lands this is a daily reality.

For example, Eritrean singer and preacher, Helen Berhane, was arrested and held in an overcrowded shipping container for two years. She ate little food, breathed stale air, had no toilet to relieve herself, and, because of so many people, couldn't even lie down to sleep. She was also singled out to receive more torture than anyone else.

How did she cope? Well, like Paul and Silas in the jail in Philippi, she led her fellow prisoners in songs of joy to the Lord! She said God's presence is always there, she prayed continually, and said, 'God loves me, that's why he put me there.'

Her story could be multiplied time without number, and we need to pray for our Christian family in such situations.

As Christians we must bear the fruit of patience, whether facing persecution like Helen Berhane, or discrimination like Hazelmary Bull. But it's not only in major ways like this, we are also to display patience in the more mundane areas of life.

How do we cope with a phone call when we are having dinner; or we can't find the car keys when we're late for a meeting; or having to repeat your request over and over to someone who can't understand your accent?

Two examples – one negative, one positive.

When following my call to ordination... I needed two clergy to sign my application ... one was my rector, the other was a minister I knew well, and I arranged to call at the rectory. I was met at the door by a very flustered rector's wife, telling me they had just sat down to dinner. She ordered me to go up the stairs and wait in her husband's study. I climbed the stairs only to find the study door locked, so for the next half hour I sat waiting on the stairs. When the rector eventually came up, he was embarrassed by the situation, as was his wife! Every time I met her since she's always been full of apology.

That's the negative; the positive example is an incident that happened to us recently, and it's not to blow our own trumpets, but simply as an illustration.

We both had been working hard all day and we were very hungry. We came into the kitchen to make dinner, when we received a video call from a friend. Her family had gone out for the evening, she was too ill to join them and she was feeling very low. She said she just needed to see a friendly face and hear a friendly voice.

So for the next hour we talked and listened to our friend, while the sound of our stomachs got louder and louder. It wasn't easy, yet that phone call meant more to our friend than we will probably ever know.

Patience is the powerful capacity of selfless love to suffer long under adversity. It is the ability to bear with either difficult people or adverse circumstances in a godly way. Patience is a necessity in a Christian, but not always easy. Some are more naturally patient than others, but all of us are called to bear that fruit in our lives. It can be a struggle, so how can we develop this fruit?

Paul tells us, in Galatians 5, that it comes from the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is given to us when we repent and believe in Jesus; so it is a gift. However, we have a part to play, we must participate with the Spirit. Gal 5:16 says, 'live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature', and after listing the fruit of the Spirit, Paul goes on in v.24, 'Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.'

How do we develop patience? In the same way as all the other virtues: by living in the Spirit; keeping in step with him; and crucifying the sinful nature. It takes discipline – a lot of 'patient' discipline, but it is worth it.

May we all bear this fruit of the Spirit in our lives.