

“God’s Timetable”

The Big Nine, #4 - PATIENCE

⁸ Dear friends, don’t overlook this one fact: With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. ⁹ The Lord does not delay his promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:8-9) ¹

A month or so ago, I traded for a newer old car, and I hadn’t had it for even twenty-four hours when someone carelessly opened their door in Lowe’s parking lot and put a chip in the paint. I recognized this at once as God’s merciful protection—protecting me from thinking more highly of a machine than I ought to think. I’ve been down that road before.

The experience was similar nearly two weeks ago—during the week in which I was first preparing to preach on “patience.” As you may remember, on Tuesday of that week, I started the washing machine while I drank my morning coffee, and discovered a few minutes later that my malfunctioning machine was flooding the kitchen.

At some point while mopping up the mess (I was very grateful that it wasn’t sewage!), I discovered that my iPhone—on which I am dependent for nearly everything—had locked up, and I was unable to restart it. Recognizing the familiar Hand of Providence giving me assistance in my sermon preparation, I nevertheless looked up to heaven and said, “Okay, I get it. But this is NOT FUNNY!”

Patience is not something for which we Americans are known. According to one survey, we’re willing to wait:

- two seconds for a web page to load (25% abandon the site by five seconds; 50% by 10);²
- thirteen seconds before we honk at a car in front of us that’s stopped at a green light;
- twenty-six seconds before we shush people who are talking in a movie theater;
- thirteen minutes for a table at a restaurant;
- and twenty minutes for the last person to show up for Thanksgiving dinner before we dig in.³

We speed date, we eat fast food, and we use the self-checkout lanes at the grocery. We pay extra for overnight shipping, and *Amazon* is now offering same-day and even one-hour shipping in our area. We look for shortcuts when driving, we tweet in 140 characters or less, we complain about standing in line for airport security, and we watch “sound bites” on TV. We don’t want to drive to get movies at *Red Box*, so we stream them instead . . . well, clips of movies, at least.⁴

It seems that the ideas of time and hurry seep into nearly every conversation. According to the editors of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, time is the most frequently used noun in the English language. The titles of self-help books mirror our obsession with time: *One Year to a College Degree*, *Thirty Days to a Better Life*, *Seven Days to a Brand New Me*, even *Sixty-Minute Marriage Builder*. Still not quick enough? How about *One-Minute Father*, *Sixty-Second Stress Management*, *The One-Minute Healing Experience*, the *One-Minute Therapist*, or *Sixty Seconds to Serenity*?⁵

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 27, 2017.

² Christopher Muther, “Instant gratification is making us perpetually impatient,” *The Boston Globe*, 2.2.13.

³ Rick Lawrence, *Skin in the Game* (Kregel Publications, 2015), pp. 105-107.

⁴ Linton Weeks, “Impatient Nation: I Can’t Wait for You to Read This,” NPR, 12.6.10.

⁵ Adapted from David W. Henderson, *Tranquility* (Baker Books, 2016), pp. 14-16

When the Russian comedian Yakov Smirnoff immigrated to the United States, he said that the thing he loved most about America was the grocery stores. He said, “I’ll never forget walking down one of the aisles and seeing powdered milk; just add water and you get milk. Right next to it was powdered orange juice; just add water and you get orange juice. Then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, What a country!”⁶

But patience isn’t just about time. Patience, in the biblical sense, is about putting up with provocation. We’re not very good at that, either. Road rage has gotten to be a “thing” among us.

A survey by AAA last year noted that nearly 80% of U.S. drivers admitted to expressing significant anger, aggression, or road rage at least once during the past year. *Eight million* of us purposefully rammed another vehicle or got out of the car to confront another driver.

- 51% of us tailgated on purpose;
- 47% of us yelled at another driver;
- 45% of us honked to show annoyance or anger;
- 33% of us made angry gestures at another driver; and
- 24% of us tried to block another vehicle from changing lanes.⁷

The New Testament word for “patience” is μακροθυμία (*makrothumia*), and it has to do with being “long-tempered” rather than “short-tempered.” “Patience” is a word frequently used to describe God’s attitude toward us, as in this morning’s short text from 2 Peter.⁸

Besides “patience,” *makrothumia* is also translated as “endurance,” “longsuffering,” “forbearance,” “slow to anger,” and “steadfastness.” I think we’d probably agree that we’d love for such words to describe us, even if they don’t fit so well at the moment.⁹

The truth is that the “patience” to which Paul was referring in “the fruit of the Spirit” has much more to do with relationships with other people than it does with circumstances such as a flooded kitchen or a flat tire. *Makrothumia* is the character quality of putting up with others, even when severely tried. *Makrothumia* has to do with being wronged and having the power to avenge oneself, but refusing to do it. *Makrothumia* receives wounds without trying to “even the score.” If we love as God loves, we don’t respond to evil in kind.¹⁰

Now it’s easy to be patient when no one is irritating us. It’s easy to love at a distance. But love and patience are a great deal more difficult to practice in the up-close bumps and bruises of life together. It is for this reason that God joins our lives in the body of Christ on purpose, so that we can grow in grace, and God brings unpolished persons into the fellowship both for their benefit and for ours.

Patience in the church involves holding our own agendas and preferences loosely. Godly patience—*makrothumia*—is characterized by a largeness of spirit that can endure difficulties and annoyances for a long time. Among other things, patience in the church often involves being patient with expressions of worship that we ourselves don’t prefer. The main point is that we’re in this together for the long haul, not for the short-term. Patience is essential.

⁶ Mark Batterson, *The Circle Maker*, (Zondervan, 2011), pp. 134-135.

⁷ Tamra Johnson, “Nearly 80 Percent of Drivers Express Significant Anger, Aggression or Road Rage,” *AAA News Room* (7-16-16).

⁸ Other examples include Romans 2:4, 9:22; 1 Timothy 1:16; 1 Peter 3:20.

⁹ My Dad was a very good example of this character quality . . . and many others as well.

¹⁰ Evan May, *Love Gives Life: A Study of 1 Corinthians 13* (Lexington, KY: Golden Mouth Press, 2012), pp. 25-26.

We need patience with one another, and we also need patience with God. I'm afraid that many of the speeches we address to God are not really prayer, not really conversation, and if the truth were told, we aren't all that interested in God's side of the matter. We want God to bring about what we want, when we want it, and in the way that we want it. And when God refuses to be treated like a vending machine, we impatiently pout and give up on those fitful and petulant speeches we so often misrepresent as "prayer."

It may be a bit of a surprise, but God doesn't need your input or mine in order for creation to turn out right. God will accomplish the goal of bringing creation to its appropriate end with or without us, through us or in spite of us. God's purposes will be achieved. God does invite us to participate in bringing in the Kingdom; but God doesn't work according to our wishes or our timetables.

As we've noted many times, God's purpose in your life and in my life is to use our experiences in space and time to shape our character into something resembling the character of Jesus. God does this so that we can be useful in bringing others to faith in Jesus, our Savior and our Lord. And God does this so that we ourselves will be well prepared to recognize, to experience, and to rejoice in the New Creation we will be given in due time.

But here's the deal: *much of the curriculum required for our transformation lies in the very things we're most likely to ask God to change, prevent, or remove*, because some of them are not particularly pleasant. Let me say that again: **much of the curriculum required for our transformation lies in the very things we're most likely to ask God to change.**

This is why absolute trust, born at the foot of Calvary's Cross, is so absolutely crucial. We are able to live our days on earth with patience, because we have come to believe in the very depths of our being that whatever God allows in our lives, God can be trusted to use and to redeem. And God is extremely patient with us while we're growing into this understanding.

In one of my favorite vignettes in *The Shack*, Mackenzie, the protagonist, is challenging Papa, the black woman who represents God the Father: "But why me? I mean, Why Me? Why do you love someone who is such a screw-up? After all the things I've felt in my heart toward you and all the accusations I've made, why would you even bother to keep trying to get through to me?"

"Because that is what love does," Papa answered. "Remember, Mackenzie, I don't wonder what you will do or what choices you will make. I already know. Let's say, for example, that I am trying to teach you how not to hide inside of lies . . . and let's say that I know it will take you forty-seven situations and events before you actually hear me—that is, before you will hear clearly enough to agree with me and change. So when you don't hear me the first time, I'm not frustrated or disappointed, I'm thrilled. *Only forty-six more times to go!*"¹¹

The hymn writer put it this way:

God is working His purpose out, as year succeeds to year:
 God is working His purpose out, and the time is drawing near:
 Nearer and near draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
 when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea.¹²

¹¹ Young, pp. 186-187.

¹² Hymn, "God is Working His Purpose Out," words by Arthur Ainger, 1894, and tune by Martin Shaw, 1931.

Once we finally “get this,” when we have decided once and for all that God can be trusted, then this conviction changes how we live and it changes how we pray. For example, Dan McConchie was hit by a car while riding his motorcycle, and nine years later, he is still in a wheelchair.

“What I’ve learned,” Dan says, “is that this life isn’t for our comfort. The purpose of this life is that we become conformed to the image of Christ. Unfortunately, that doesn’t happen when everything is unicorns and rainbows. It instead happens when life is tough, when we are forced to rely upon God through prayer just to make it through the day. That is when God is most at work in our lives molding us into who he designed us to be.

“My prayers are different today than they were nine years ago. Back then, I looked at God like Santa Claus. I asked him to send nice things my way. Now, I have one prayer that I pray more than any other: *‘Lord, may I be able to say at the end of today that I was faithful.’*”¹³ Dan McConchie has learned what it is to trust God’s timetable. This is sometimes a costly lesson, but it is worth what it costs.

Adoniram and Ann Judson arrived in Burma (Myanmar) in 1812 as the first Christian missionaries to that country. It wasn’t long before Ann became ill and died. Adoniram himself was treated badly, persecuted, and imprisoned. Depressed and discouraged, Judson nevertheless continued his work on translating the Bible into Burmese, which he completed in 1834.

After thirty-eight years in Burma, there were fewer than thirty believers in the land when Adoniram died in 1850. But at the 150th anniversary of Judson’s translation of the Bible into Burmese, held in 1984, Matthew Hia Win noted that “We know how Adoniram Judson loved the Burmese people and how he suffered for the Gospel out of love for us. He died a pauper, but he left the Bible for us. When he died, there were few believers, but today, there are over 600,000 of us, and every single one of us traces our spiritual heritage to him.”¹⁴

From utmost east to utmost west, wherever the church has gone,
By the mouth of many messengers the call of God has come:
Listen to me, you continents; you isles, give ear to me,
That the earth may be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.¹⁵

Many are lamenting the deteriorating condition of race relations in these United States, most of us with them. And as things get darker, the wisdom of Dr. King’s *makrothumia* shines brighter in that darkness, carving another “stone of Hope” from another “mountain of despair.” Hear his words again, from his “Christmas Sermon on Peace,” which I believe was delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church during what would be Dr. King’s last Advent before Glory:

I’ve seen too much hate to want to hate, myself, and I’ve seen hate on the faces of too many sheriffs, too many white citizens’ councilors, and too many Klansmen of the South to want to hate, myself; and every time I see it, I say to myself, hate is too great a burden to bear.

¹³ Dan McConchie, “Prayer and Faith in the Midst of Personal Tragedy,” *Washington Times* (3.22.16).

¹⁴ From Julia Cameron, editor, *Christ, Our Reconciler* (InterVarsity Press, 2012), pp. 200-201.

¹⁵ “God is Working His Purpose Out,” Ainger & Shaw.

“Somehow we must be able to stand up before our most bitter opponents and say: ‘We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws and abide by the unjust system, because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good, and so throw us in jail and we will still love you.’

“Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and, as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and drag us out on some wayside road and leave us half-dead as you beat us, and we will still love you. Send your propaganda agents around the country, and make it appear that we are not fit, culturally and otherwise, for integration, and we’ll still love you. But be assured that we’ll wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves; we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.”

That, my friends, is *makrothumia* writ large.

March we forth in the strength of God, with the banner of Christ unfurled,
That the light of the glorious gospel of truth may shine throughout the world;
Fight we the fight with sorrow and sin to set their captives free,
That the earth may be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.¹⁶

One more story and we’re done. In her book, *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus*, Lois Tverberg tells the following story about a famous first century rabbi named Rabbi Akiva:

One day as Rabbi Akiva was shepherding his flocks, he noticed a tiny stream trickling down a hillside, dripping over a ledge on its way toward the river below. Below was a massive boulder. Surprisingly, the rock bore a deep impression. The drip, drip, drip of water over the centuries had hollowed away the stone. Akiva thought, “If mere water can do this to hard rock, how much more can God’s Word carve a way into my heart of flesh?” Akiva suddenly saw that if the same volume of water had flowed over the rock all at once, the rock would have been unchanged. It was the slow but steady impact of each small droplet, year after year, that completely reformed the stone.

After telling this story, Tverberg observed that: “I’ve learned that God likes to reveal truth over many years. I realize now that big ‘splashes’ aren’t usually God’s way of doing things. Instead, through the slow drip of study and prayer, day after day, year after year, God shapes us into what he wants us to be.”¹⁷

All we can do is done in vain unless God blesses the deed;
vainly we hope for the harvest-tide till God gives life to the seed:
Yet nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.¹⁸

It shall be so, my friends. *Patience!*

¹⁶ “God is Working His Purpose Out,” Ainger & Shaw.

¹⁷ Lois Tverberg, *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus* (Zondervan, 2012).

¹⁸ “God is Working His Purpose Out,” Ainger & Shaw.