

Time for Patience

BY CHARLES R. PINCHES

Christian patience keeps us on the path towards an ever more perfect love, especially when obstacles threaten to knock us off this path, or anger and distractions make us forget where we are going. Here patience gets a quite specific protective charge: it protects us against sorrow.

Think of those times when you are tempted especially to become impatient. Are you driving a car somewhere, perhaps late for an appointment? Trying to arrange a flight in the airport after your scheduled one has been cancelled? Moving through city streets with a group and someone is lagging?

Impatience very often arises when we have a plan, and are focused on carrying it through—something we are accustomed to doing in Western society where plans are expected and there is no shortage of instruments for effectively carrying them out. Yet this very fact about impatience can make it ironic, even comical. For impatience tricks us into taking unnecessary risks which can set us far behind wherever we were when we became impatient. Or it causes us to rant and rail furiously against whatever blocks our way. And so it derails us from the very track we wanted so impatiently to travel. Have you ever stood in an airport behind someone who is shouting at an attendant because his travel plans have been disrupted? He looks positively silly. Moreover, you know it will do him no good to vent at this airline representative, who appears to be listening serenely but quite possibly is becoming impatient herself. The traveler's fit of impatience is making it increasingly less likely that he will get where he wants to go.

Simply put, impatience is stupid. As the medievals would say, impatience quickly causes us to relinquish "the good of reason." And impatience grows with the further stupidity that whatever little thing we are doing or wherever we are going just now is what matters most in the world. C. S. Lewis's devil

Screwtape counsels his protégé Wormwood to “zealously guard the assumption” in the mind of the human being he is working on that “‘My time is my own.’ Let him have the feeling that he starts each day as the lawful possessor of twenty-four hours.” As Screwtape knows, this is an absurd assumption, “so absurd that, if once it is questioned, even we [the devils] cannot find a shred of argument in its defense. The man can neither make, nor retain, one moment of time; it all comes to him as pure gift.”¹ So Wormwood’s delicate task is to keep his human charge from seriously investigating his latent thinking, which Wormwood can best do by keeping him annoyed and impatient, perhaps by bringing by an unexpected visitor who talks too much and stays too long, just as he has settled in to watch his favorite television show.

By contrast, then, patience *protects* the good of reason. That is, it keeps us moving toward where we are rightly headed, especially when we face evils that threaten to divert us from this way. By patience we bear evils that come to us as we move along in our lives towards our “final end,” that is, towards becoming fully the person God meant us to be.



The fact that patience has this protective function subordinates it, in a way, to certain other virtues. That is, the protective work of patience arises because some other virtue has already directed us to our good. As Thomas Aquinas explains, virtues that “incline [us] toward the good more effectively and directly” (he lists faith, hope, and love) will be the greater virtues, greater than “those that are a check on the things that lead [us] away from good.”² So, patience is subordinate to faith, hope, and love, which together point us directly to God.

Nevertheless, patience protects these virtues, and so it has a very high calling. Aquinas’s subordination of patience comes only after his agreement with Gregory the Great, who tells us that “patience is the root and safeguard of all the virtues.”³ So, while patience may not be the highest virtue, as Robert Wilken notes, following Tertullian, it “becomes the key to the other virtues, including love, which can never be learned, he [Tertullian] says, ‘without the exercise of patience.’”⁴ Put differently, while patience does not of itself point us to our destination in God, unless we learn it, this destination can never be reached.

This unique role helps explain why we might speak specifically of Christian patience. It is not odd to say of certain non-human animals, quick and stealthy ones such as a leopard or even slower and more plodding ones such as an opossum, that they display patience. The leopard patiently waits in the thicket until just the right moment, and then pounces on its prey; or the possum remains patiently limp until the danger is passed, and then gets up and walks away. The patience here demonstrated has to do with waiting,

remaining still, until the right time. What we might call “ordinary patience” functions fairly simply in this way. Like the crouching leopard, a batter is patient in this ordinary way when he waits for just the right pitch, and knocks it over the left field fence. A business negotiator is patient if she does not rush to close the deal, but waits until just the right moment to make her best proposal, and it is accepted. Now, to be sure, patience as a Christian virtue involves waiting and knowing the right time. But Christian patience is distinguished by the end to which it is ordered; put as simply as possible, this is “following Christ.” Obviously enough, there could be any number of occasions in which “waiting for the right moment to close the deal,” demonstrating ordinary patience, would not relate to this end; in fact it might contravene it.

Put in the more classical language of Aquinas, our true end lies beyond nature (although it does not negate it), and can be described as full communion with God. This communion includes knowledge – “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10) – but also exceeds it in true love of God, a love that embraces all our neighbors, including especially “the least of these,” and extending even to our enemies. Christian patience will equip us to love God well, which it does not so much by directing that love, but by protecting it.



Christian patience keeps us squarely and firmly on the path towards an ever more perfect love, especially when obstacles arise that threaten to knock us off this path, or anger and other distractions confuse us such that we forget where we are going. Here is where patience gets a quite specific protective charge: it protects us against *sorrow*.⁵

Now this might seem a little strange. If we were asked to list our temptations, those things that might divert us from following Christ, most of us would not begin with sorrow. So what could this mean?

All the Gospels tell the story of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. In Mark’s account the scene opens with Jesus speaking to his disciples: “‘Sit here while I pray.’ He took with him Peter, James and John, and began to be troubled and distressed. He said to them, ‘My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch’” (Mark 14:32b-35, NABRE).⁶ As the story continues, Jesus goes off by himself, falls on the ground and prays that the cup that he is about to drink be taken from him. After praying he returns to find his disciples sleeping. He wonders, could they not watch even for one hour? And then he enjoins: “Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test” (14:38a, NABRE). This happens three times. Finally, after the third time, Jesus wakes his disciples with “the hour has come.... Get up, let us go” (14:41b-42a, NABRE). And so the cascade of events leading to the crucifixion begins.

Jesus here displays a patience his disciples lack. In the scene sorrow comes to him, deep sorrow. This reminds us that the problem is not the sorrow itself, nor its depth. Sorrow is a passion, or sentiment, that rightly arises in us (and Christ) because the world contains very real evils; when we encounter these we are rightly sad, sometimes deeply so. This is an important point particularly for us today, for we avoid sorrow like the

plague. This is because we are taught in our culture that happiness and sorrow are incompatible, and we are absolutely sure we want to be happy, even if we cannot say what this might really involve. So, for instance, we avoid the subject of death, which is made easier by the fact that we keep people who are dying in places designed to separate them from the “healthy,” living ones. Or if “death” comes up, perhaps in the movies (where one

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sees it occur countless), we detach it from grief, which, as William F. May has noted, is its natural corollary in a genuinely human world.⁷ Such avoidance virtually guarantees that when sorrow and grief come, as they inevitably will, we will have little idea what to do or say. By contrast, Jesus, the “man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3, KJV), knows the world’s deepest sorrows and enters into them out of love.

As Augustine notes, the problem of sorrow comes with what it can produce in us: an “unequal mind,” which will “abandon the goods whereby he may advance to better things.”⁸ This is why “Get up, let’s go” are among the most crucial words in the passage from Mark. Jesus bears his sorrow, not only by praying fervently and weeping before God, but also by keeping his eyes fixed on the work that lies before him, and, at the right time, proceeding on to do it. He does so by patience. As for the disciples, the text does not mention that they are sorrowful in this scene – perhaps they are avoiding it as we often do – but their inordinate sleep, their failure to watch and pray, indicate that they have been knocked off course, and have acquiesced to the dark fog that surrounds them. Without Christ’s prod to action, they might have slept through both the crucifixion and the resurrection.

So the biblical story illustrates patience in Jesus. As well, Scripture frequently attributes patience to God. Paul ventures in Romans that God “has endured with much patience the objects of [his] wrath that are made for destruction...in order to make known the riches of his glory” (9:22). To this

Karl Barth adds,

The fact that [God] has time for us is what characterizes his whole activity toward us as an exercise in patience. Included in this exercise of patience is both God's mercy and punishment, God's salvation and destruction, God's healing and smiting.... By it all Israel is instructed in the divine Word.... God always, and continually, has time for Israel.⁹

For Barth, the very existence of the long biblical narrative is a decisive sign of God's patience. In that narrative God's word has gone out, and it will not return to him empty. In the meanwhile, though, he waits, enduring, as Cyprian notes, humanity's profanity and idolatry, hurled as insult.¹⁰



Although we often think of it this way, patience is not simply passive. Like Jesus in the garden, the patient person acts often and decisively, although she also waits. She is whole in both her acting and waiting. "Patience is not the tear-veiled mirror of a 'broken' life, but the radiant embodiment of ultimate integrity."¹¹ Such an integral life knows sorrow; it must, if it is truthful. But it also knows great joy. Indeed, patience is that virtue that "accounts for the coincidence of joy and sorrow."¹² For Christians this accounting comes in a story that connects the agony of the cross and the joy of the resurrection, in a calendar that includes Good Friday and Ash Wednesday as well as Christmas and Easter. Consciously living within such a time helps integrate our lives through love. Loving rightly now, in this present world, requires both sorrowing and rejoicing.

Here Christian patience, like ordinary patience, relates us to time. Yet it does so not by dividing time in bits whereby we wait and pounce, wait and pounce, but rather by placing our full lives fully in the present. In *this* present time, love, joy, and sorrow comingle, and following Jesus now requires a life that integrates them. Patience keeps us squarely in *this* time by resisting the forces by which sorrow obscures and overwhelms joy and stymies love. If we are patient we have the power to go forth even if our heart aches, as Jesus went forth in the garden to face his betrayer. Or we have the grace to wait for an errant child to return to the truth, as Monica is counseled to do as she worries that her son Augustine is lost among the Manicheans.¹³ Patience provides the strength we need in such times. This is why patience is understood to be a part of the cardinal virtue fortitude. Further, it connects essentially to the theological virtue of hope which sustains life now while also anticipating another time, when "I will turn their mourning into joy, I will show them compassion and have them rejoice after their sorrows" (Jeremiah 31:13b, NABRE).

The virtue of hope charts a course between despair and presumption.

Despair arises from sorrow that has turned to sloth (or *acedia*), which sucks the meaning from all our activities. Patience can help keep us from despair by teaching us how to bear our sorrows. But perhaps especially in our modern time, when we have become so accustomed to the “successes” of our fancy technologies, patience is a hedge against presumption. The stupidity impatience fosters is almost always presumptuous – the presumption, for

instance, that “my time is my own,” or, another one, that I am the “master of my fate, the captain of my soul.”¹⁴

A training ground for patience is the family, where we have the unmistakable tendency to provoke one another to wrath. Simple acts of daily care for relatives can train us in patience; indeed, without patience familial love will be threatened.

The presumptions of impatience are addressed above by Screwtape: all our moments come to us as pure gift. As he suggests, thinking otherwise requires a delicately maintained deception, a filmy but systematic relinquishment of the “good of reason,” by which we see things as they are. One wonders if the impatience of our

time is rooted in this: together we tell the story that, as the “captains of our souls,” we can steer them like cruise ships, always in warm, calm waters that shimmer and glisten for no other purpose than to give us pleasure.

Any wise ship’s captain knows he cannot master the sea; if he believes so, it will master him. His life and the life of those on board depend on the movements of the winds and the currents. He must mark these well, and work patiently with them. Indeed, the deceptions of impatience can clear only as we recognize our dependent place in a world that we do not own or control. This is a necessary admission if we are to learn patience; the natural world is a place to begin to learn it. (We might add that our modern distance from the natural world encourages our impatience.)

In his letter to the churches, James illustrates patience this way:

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You too must be patient.

James 5:7-8a (NABRE)

If we grow crops, or gather herbs, or admire flowers or birds, or even notice with joy the changing of the seasons, we will receive training in patience. We will recognize – as does any good farmer – that we are not the makers of

our own destiny, nor can we live without the sustaining help of others. The rhythms of the earth, which bring such variety in its different seasons, teach us to wait on another and receive its gifts with gladness.

Another training ground for patience is the family, the most basic form of human community, where we have the unmistakable tendency to provoke one another to wrath. It is often difficult to bear patiently with our closest relatives. Simple acts of daily care for them can train us in patience; indeed, without patience familial love will be threatened. As we know, families can become crashing, foaming seas—and so also yield disasters that love finds difficult to bear. King David, a man who controlled so much with such ease, is undone by the tragedies that come to his family, partly as a result of his own self-deceptions about the meaning of God's blessing. So he weeps bitterly when he receives the news of the death of his rebel son Absalom: "My son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you, Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Samuel 19:1b, NABRE). David is utterly awash in sorrow; it is right for him to weep. Yet as his general Joab soon complains (19:6), his great sorrow tempts him, in Augustine's words, "to abandon the goods whereby he may advance to better things" — something patience, which so much success perhaps kept him from learning, could have protected him from.



David's profound grief in the family suggests that its deep sorrows require more than ordinary patience. Christians affirm that the source for such patience lies beyond us. Sister Helen Prejean, a tireless advocate for the abolition of the death penalty and spiritual advisor to many death row inmates, ends her popular memoir *Dead Man Walking* with the story of Lloyd LeBlanc, construction worker, father, and husband, whose life took a horrible turn. Prejean calls LeBlanc the hero of the book. In 1977 Lloyd and Eula LeBlanc's son David and his girlfriend Loretta Bourques were innocently parked on a country road after the high school football game in St. Martinville, Louisiana. There they were accosted by Patrick Sonnier and his brother Eddie, who brutally murdered them. In the months prior to his execution by electrocution in 1984, Sr. Helen became Patrick Sonnier's spiritual advisor. She was drawn into the case, her first one, by innocently consenting to be Patrick's pen pal. Soon she was thrust into the thick of controversy, drawn by love to visit Sonnier often in jail. Her opposition to the death penalty grew as she visited and she began to speak out. After testifying at Sonnier's Pardon Board hearing, Sr. Helen was greeted by Lloyd LeBlanc, who said pointedly to her, "Sister, I'm a Catholic. How can you present Elmo Patrick Sonnier's side like this without ever coming to visit me and my wife...? How can you spend all your time worrying about Sonnier and not think that maybe we needed you too?"¹⁵

LeBlanc's forthright comments suddenly make Sr. Helen aware of what, in her rush, she has failed fully to consider: the deep pain of the murdered victims' families. She later visits the LeBlancs and begins to learn from Lloyd of a patience that goes deep enough to enable him to emerge whole from the horror of such senseless violence and death. While Lloyd had spoken up against Sonnier at the hearing, he did so principally to support the Bourques family. At his execution, Sonnier surprisingly apologizes to Lloyd.

Sr. Helen visits the LeBlancs again, and trust grows between them. Eventually Lloyd invites her to join him in a chapel in St. Martinsville where he prays in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament each Friday morning from four to five o'clock. There and subsequently as their friendship deepens Sr. Helen learns how Lloyd LeBlanc prays.

Lloyd has told me how he prays for "everyone, especially the poor and suffering." He prays for the "repose of the soul" of David and for his wife, Eula. He prays in thanksgiving for his daughter Vickie, and her four healthy children. It is the grandchildren who have brought Eula back to life – but it has taken a long, long time. For a year after David's murder, Lloyd had frequently taken her to visit David's grave. Unless he took her there, he once told me, "she couldn't carry on, she couldn't pick up the day, she couldn't live."¹⁶

Lloyd's prayers do not stop there.

Now, Lloyd LeBlanc prays for the Sonniers – for Pat and for Eddie and for Gladys, their mother. "What grief for this mother's heart," he once told me in a letter. Yes, for the Sonniers too, he prays. He knows I visit Eddie, and in his letters he sometimes includes a ten-dollar bill with the note: "For your prison ministry to God's children." And shortly before Gladys Sonnier's death in January 1991, Lloyd LeBlanc went to see her to comfort her.¹⁷

How is this possible? How can a man, who has endured such sorrow, pray and write and comfort like this? As our reflections have suggested, he is supported by a patience that not only endures, but also clears his eyes so he sees deeply into reality. It has kept him from being overwhelmed by his sorrow, and abled him to notice others'. It has protected love so it can grow and wait and act. It is the patience of Christ.

NOTES

1 C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1982), 96.

2 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 136, 2, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

3 Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Evangelia*, Homily 35, in *Forty Gospel Homilies*, translated by David Hurst, O.S.B. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009 [1990]), 305.

4 Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 284.

5 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q 136, A 3.

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7 William F. May, "The Sacral Power of Death in Contemporary Experience," in M. Therese Lysaught and Joseph J. Kotva, Jr., with Stephen E. Lammers and Allen Verhey, eds., *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, third edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 1033-1042, here citing 1033.

8 Augustine, *On Patience*, 2, translated by H. Brown and revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, available online at www.newadvent.org/fathers/1315.htm.

9 Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God*, Church Dogmatics II/1, edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1978), 417.

10 Cyprian, *Treatise 9: On Patience*, online at www.newadvent.org/fathers/050709.htm.

11 Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 129.

12 William Werpehowski, "Weeping at the Death of Dido: Sorrow, Virtue, and Augustine's Confessions," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 19 (Spring 1991), 175-191, here citing 178.

13 Augustine, *Confessions* 3, 12. After refusing to intervene to refute Augustine's errors, a wise bishop gives this advice to Monica: "Let him alone. Only pray to the Lord for him: he will himself discover by reading what his error is and how great his impiety." Translated by F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2006), 51.

14 These lines are from the well-known poem "Invictus" by William Earnest Henley, online at www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/182194.

15 Sister Helen Prejean, *Dead Man Walking* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 64.

16 *Ibid.*, 242.

17 *Ibid.*, 243.



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