

Practicing Hope through Patience

BY HEATHER HUGHES

It is hope that helps us faithfully respond to suffering and that makes true patience possible. Not the small, limited versions of hope that serve to get us through our days, but the living theological virtue—the hope of Christ who was crucified and is risen now from the dead.

Patience sounds boring: passive, maybe even weak. “Have patience” is what we tell whiny children when they want dessert before dinner or cannot wait to open presents until Christmas morning. “Be patient. Wait your turn.” But Christian patience is much different from that.

A few years ago I was reminded in a particularly memorable way that Christian patience is not what most people mean when they say the word. I was going through a difficult time and I went to my church to pray, but became upset instead of comforted. I began complaining to God: *Why won't you make this easier? And if you won't stop bad things from happening, why don't you at least supply me with peace when they do? Can't you, one way or another, take this away from me?* It was perhaps my Gethsemane-like phrasing that made me look up from where I had been staring down at the pew in front of me. Then I almost started laughing.

I have rarely felt so explicitly answered by God, seeing Christ on the cross over the altar in my church. Words could not have been clearer: *You know that is not how I work. There is no escaping the cross – even for me there was not.* I had my answer, and it was the crucifix. God does not suddenly erase suffering, or how would good would come of it? The only way to end suffering is to go through it with God, because there is no way around.

That may sound discouraging but, I assure you, in the moment it was not. My encounter with the crucifix gave me the key to having patience when I

was totally exhausted and that felt impossible: it gave me hope – an assurance in the midst of pain that, no matter how bad my life got, I knew how the story ended. I wanted to hear that my pain would be over now, but I needed to hear both that it would end eventually and that it did not have to be meaningless. We cannot control or eliminate everything that causes suffering, but it is essential to remember that we are in control of how we respond to it.



It is hope that helps us faithfully respond to suffering and that makes true patience possible. Not a false hope that I will wake up and all the pain and terror of the night will recede into harmless bedroom furniture when Dad comes in and turns on the light, but the living theological virtue – the hope of Christ who was crucified and is risen now from the dead.

All virtues are intertwined. Hope implies faith and love; patience requires humility and fortitude. I focus on this particular relationship with hope in discussing patience because it has been the most practically helpful in my own life. And I am not alone in emphasizing the bond between hope and patience. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI wrote in *Deus Caritas Est*, his encyclical on God’s love, that, “Hope is practiced through the virtue of patience, which continues to do good even in the face of apparent failure....”¹ Sometimes we need to know how a story ends in order to keep going through the painful parts. Considering patience as the practice of hope helps us to realign ourselves with the purpose and fulfillment of patience, which is complete trust in God. Understanding patience in this way qualifies and proves insufficient all the half-truths and alternatives: the anesthetizing unreality of false hope, the sibilant “patience” muttered by ambitious cartoon villains which waits only for tangible reward, the hopeless placidity of despair, and the cold endurance of stoics, or nihilists, who can seem powerful in their immovability and heroic by persisting for absolutely no reason. It is only by finding and embracing hope and trust in God that we can practice Christian patience in this life that will not be easy, painless, or free.

Patience is only possible for one who hopes, because without some form of hope, opportunities for patience can only be met with despair. That sounds drastic, and it can be. But there are different kinds of hope, and often small, limited versions of hope serve to get us through our days. If students thought finals week was eternal, they might just give up and die (or at least that is what I remember feeling as a student). If parents did not know that their newborn would eventually sleep through the night, they might not survive the first few months. In ordinary circumstances, simple human experience provides enough hope to fuel patience – we know that bad times do not last forever and this too shall pass; that good times come unexpectedly and joy surprises us at unlikely times. We learn to enjoy the things we can when we can, without dwelling on how quickly they pass or how seldom they seem to come. As pagans from Horace to Dave Matthews have put it: “Eat, drink,

and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” Or a little more recently: “Just dance,” according to Lady Gaga, “it’ll be okay.”

If you believe that life is meaningless and have a beautiful home and family and friends with enough money to take care of all your needs and a pleasant enough disposition, you may not think about it too much. Jerry Seinfeld seems to be doing alright. Even the Apostle Paul said: “If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’” (1 Corinthians 15:32, NAB).² When all goes well, purely natural, materialist hope can be enough for us—if we do not expect too much, or look too hard at the world, or want more than that our human needs are met while we are alive. If a satisfying earthly life is the only goal, then restrain your expectations and pursue your pleasures. As Paul also said, “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.... If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:14, 19, NAB).

Some people go their entire lives believing that; and they get by. Even self-proclaimed Christians can find it difficult to escape this mentality: to take what you can get when you can get it and not look too hard at what you want or why you want it—not search out a *telos* for your desires that may not be there. The gospel is as foolish to the world now as it was when the world first heard it. The world does not want us to demand more than it can offer, and so it tries to make patience unnecessary—hope does not need to be practiced by those already glutted with what they desire. In our culture this is everywhere apparent, but a particularly striking example can be found in popular dating culture.

In “Tinder and the Dawn of the ‘Dating Apocalypse,’” the recent, much-debated *Vanity Fair* article, Nancy Jo Sales writes,

As the polar ice caps melt and the earth churns through the Sixth Extinction, another unprecedented phenomenon is taking place, in the realm of sex. Hookup

culture, which has been percolating for about a hundred years, has collided with dating apps, which have acted like a wayward meteor on the now dinosaur-like rituals of courtship.³

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The drama of this preface seems less humorous after reading the rest of the article. Not all college students and young professionals are represented by Sales’s interviews, but regardless they make a convincing argument for the extinction of traditional courtship as a viable option for young people, let

alone a cultural norm. One young man compares the dating app Tinder to an Internet food delivery service, “But you’re ordering a person.”⁴

Courtship requires purpose. The patience demanded by that kind of dating is fueled by the hope of a fulfilling lifetime commitment, even a sac-

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rament. Any sane person pursuing a relationship for marriage knows that the relationship will involve suffering—patience itself is a kind of suffering—but ideally, like the cross, an eternally fruitful form of suffering. The goal is clear, and the hope of its fulfillment is (sometimes joyfully) practiced through patience—especially when contextualized by faith and the theological virtue of hope. When the goal is

unknown, however, why would anyone see patience as a good thing? Consider the following from Sales’s article:

They all say they don’t want to be in relationships. “I don’t want one,” says Nick. “I don’t want to have to deal with all that—stuff.”

“You can’t be *selfish* in a relationship,” Brian says. “It feels good just to do what I want.”

I ask them if it ever feels like they lack a deeper connection with someone.

There’s a small silence. After a moment, John says, “I think at some points it does.”

“But that’s assuming that that’s something that I want, which I don’t,” Nick says, a trifle annoyed. “Does that mean that my life is lacking something? I’m perfectly happy. I have a good time. I go to work—I’m busy. And when I’m not, I go out with my friends.”

“Or you meet someone on Tinder,” offers John.

“Exactly,” Nick says. “Tinder is fast and easy, boom-boom-boom, swipe.”⁵

It’s safe to say that Nick is not referring to *eudaimonia* here. Encountering this attitude described so cavalierly may be shocking, but it’s important to emphasize that ‘Nick’ and ‘Brian’ and ‘John’ are not necessarily soulless. They are just expressing a ubiquitous mode of behavior with more honesty than most.

In much of modern life, the virtue of patience has been reduced to the patience of the predator (working and waiting for the most beneficial moment to take by force what is desired) and the patience of the junkie

(working and waiting for relief by temporary oblivion). Even if not everyone acts on these assumptions, it is a part of the cultural air we breathe. Turn on the radio and you will hear it: “I only call you when it’s half past five, the only time that I’ll be by your side...” The Weeknd’s Abel Tesfaye sings in “The Hills.” His character boasts of having sex with two other women before calling the subject of the song. But it goes both ways — “Can’t Feel My Face,” another The Weeknd song, is about being used more than using. Obscured by a catchy beat, Tesfaye sings, “She told me don’t worry about it... We both know we can’t go without it... I can’t feel my face when I’m with you, but I love it.”

Again, this may sound a little dire. Abel Tesfaye can be seen as a cultural critic as easily as he can be conflated with the message in his songs. As we have already noted: Jerry Seinfeld is doing *fine*. Not everyone is a predator or a junkie; most people — Christian or not — want a little more than to simply keep busy and chase pleasure, unburdened by relationships like Nick. The purpose of discussing this is not to badmouth Tinder or Millennials or even Nick — a young man whose views will most likely change as he gets older. I have no interest in outrage-mongering. I mention the Dating Apocalypse merely because it provides a startling example of the way we all operate when unguided by hope and a purpose that sees past next Friday night — when we lack patience.

Brian is completely right: “It feels good just to do what I want.”⁶ And when I cannot do what I want, it feels good to escape that — which applies to Netflix or even books or work as much as to drugs or booze or countless sex partners. And we are not solely to blame for our bad habits — patience is almost never required of us. When there is even a threat that we may be required to wait for something, we have gotten used to having screens shoved in our faces: at the grocery store, in waiting rooms, even while having our teeth cleaned at the dentist.

Patience for us has been pushed to the extreme edges of human experience. We confront it only when forced; when unable to avoid the fact that we do not determine every aspect of our lives: pregnancy, tragedy, illness, injury, and death. Attempting to have patience at these times can feel intolerable — like torture — because we have not practiced under day-to-day circumstances. We are thrown into the deep end, completely untrained. In our culture of convenience, we are unused even to ordinary human patience, let alone the eschatological version. However, if we pay attention, both are required at almost every moment of this in-between time before the Second Coming. It’s not just the bad things — the various drugs — that serve to distract us from our need for patience. We must try actively to practice hope.



After getting this far, it’s still not easy to figure out how to practice hope. So we need to learn how to have patience in big and small ways;

patience is the practice of hope — great. How exactly *do* we practice hope through patience? How do we stay engaged and attentive in patience, and not just seek ways to escape while the time passes? When I was in college, I particularly loved T. S. Eliot’s poem *Four Quartets* as an answer to this question. He blasts the modern world for being “distracted from distraction by

distracted from distraction,” in a memorable line written before cell phones existed.⁷ I read and re-read the passage where Eliot proclaims: “wait without hope / For hope would be hope for the wrong thing.” He qualifies that, “there is yet faith / But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.”⁸ The point that Eliot is making in *Four Quartets* is complex, but when I read it as a

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twenty-year-old it seemed very simple: tough it out. People are beasts, seeking pleasure. Christians are beasts, seeking platitudes and opiates instead of the true, terrifying God found in Christ. Real people of faith do not try to avoid or offer cheap explanations for suffering; they go into the dark and wait without false hope to encounter Him.

Unsurprisingly, this did not go well for me. I wish I had read a little more Pieper along with my Eliot. In his short and illuminating reader on virtues of the human heart, Josef Pieper writes:

Patience is not the indiscriminate acceptance of any sort of evil: ‘It is not the one who does not flee from evil who is patient but rather the one who does not let himself thereby be drawn into disordered sadness.’ To be patient means not to allow the serenity and discernment of one’s soul to be taken away. Patience, then, is not the tear-streaked mirror of a ‘broken’ life (as one might almost think, to judge from what is frequently shown and praised under this term) but rather is the radiant essence of final freedom from harm.⁹

Patience is more than simple endurance. When patience consists only of gritting teeth and bearing the immense weight of time, we will fail. We will give in, turning to distraction, and lash out in our lack of understanding. We will throw fits and complain in a church while ignoring the crucifix. But even if we don’t — even if we can heroically tough it out as long as it takes — we still fail. Because, like any virtue, patience simply cannot be accomplished in isolation. It is a gift, not something self-produced and self-determined. We do not make the terms: we cannot say, “I’ll do it on my own”; just was

we can't say, "I'll endure this much and no more." We can only ask for patience. And then ask for more patience. Bargaining on conditions means we are waiting without hope; without trust and assurance in God's character, will, or power. And it is hope, not strength in endurance, which preserves "the serenity and discernment of one's soul" and grants "final freedom from harm."

Yes, Christian patience demands that we be strong and endure suffering, trusting in God's plan even when it is painfully, seemingly aggressively, opaque to us. These times can feel lonely, but they would be unendurable if we were truly alone. In times of confusion there are some things we *do* know, and we can have patience precisely because we have an explicit purpose for it. In *Spe Salvi*, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's letter on hope, he writes:

Here too we see as a distinguishing mark of Christians the fact that they have a future: it is not that they know the details of what awaits them, but they know in general terms that their life will not end in emptiness. Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present as well.¹⁰

This is what makes Christian patience unique: we know what we are waiting for. It is the reality of our faith—our being sure of what we hope for—which makes living in patience possible.

It is by prayerfully considering what we already know to be true—entering through prayer into the reality of our hope—that we can gather the courage to be patient. Indeed, Benedict XVI calls prayer a school for hope. This is both an obvious and very profound idea. The way to attain patience and practice hope is through prayer. Prayer is the ground we stand on as Christians; it is what teaches us to let go of the consolations of the world and cling to the serenity and freedom from harm granted by our relationship with God. Partly, this is because prayer, as an embodiment of our relationship with God, and thus our definition as his children, comforts us:

When no one listens to me any more, God still listens to me. When I can no longer talk to anyone or call upon anyone, I can always talk to God. When there is no longer anyone to help me deal with a need or expectation that goes beyond the human capacity for hope, he can help me. When I have been plunged into complete solitude...; if I pray I am never totally alone.¹¹

But prayer does more than sooth us or simply remind us of the good things, while we ignore the bad. Benedict XVI goes on to explain that the certain future of the gospel that distinguishes Christians and fuels our patience is more than "good news" as information. Our engagement with the gospel in prayer is "performative" as much as "informative."

That means: the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that

can be known – it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing. The dark door of time, of the future, has been thrown open. The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life.¹²

Prayerfully encountering the gospel transforms us because it is an encounter with Christ himself. It is that encounter that brings hope, and hope changes our lives – gives us “final freedom from harm” even in the midst of suffering.

Christian patience is contingent on this transformation, as it always has been. This can be seen all over the New Testament: “Remember the gospel that I carry,” writes Paul. “‘Jesus Christ risen from the dead, sprung from the race of David’; it is on account of this that I have to put up with suffering, even to being chained like a criminal. But God’s message cannot be chained up” (2 Timothy 2:8-9, NAB). He can be patient and faithful while imprisoned and rejected precisely because he has been transformed by the gospel and given a supernatural hope – complete confidence – that God’s message is the final word. Yet, at the same time, the gift of his patience in suffering also works to transform him:

Man was created for greatness – for God himself; he was created to be filled by God. But his heart is too small for the greatness to which it is destined. It must be stretched. “By delaying [his gift], God strengthens our desire; through desire he enlarges our soul and by expanding it he increases its capacity [for receiving him]”. [In this passage,] Augustine refers to Saint Paul...¹³

This process is certainly not comfortable, but it is rewarding. As Benedict also emphasizes, it is not only good for us but good for the entire world.

The stretching of our hearts and our capacity for God is available not only in times of difficulty and suffering, but at every moment through prayer:

When we pray properly we undergo a process of inner purification which opens us up to God and thus to our fellow human beings as well. In prayer we must learn...that we cannot ask for the superficial and comfortable things that we desire at this moment – that meagre, misplaced hope that leads us away from God. We must learn to purify our desires and our hopes.¹⁴

A life of prayer is the way we can learn how to practice the virtue of hope through patience, and have our capacity for God increased.

There is no one right way to seek the benefits of prayer, but there are many common tools: *lectio divina*, the Liturgy of the Hours, Christian classics on spirituality, the rosary, icons, and so on. As stated simply in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire. This mobilization of faculties is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart, and

strengthen our will to follow Christ.” We must pour our whole lives into prayer, engaging our entire self in the practice of hope. The practical forms of *lectio* or praying the hours are just the starting point: “This form of prayerful reflection is of great value, but Christian prayer should go further: to the knowledge of the love of the Lord Jesus, to union with him.”¹⁵ Prayer is our entrance to the process of conversion. It is a school for the practice of hope, and as members of a culture for whom patience is so alien, it is a school we must attend.

NOTES

1 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, § 39 (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2005), 92-93. This encyclical is also available online in English translation at w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html (accessed November 15, 2015).

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3 Nancy Jo Sales, “Tinder and the Dawn of the ‘Dating Apocalypse,’” *Vanity Fair* (September 2015), www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/08/tinder-hook-up-culture-end-of-dating (accessed November 15, 2015).

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 T. S. Eliot, “Four Quartets,” *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1971), 120.

8 Ibid., 126.

9 Josef Pieper, *A Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1991), 28.

10 Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, § 32 (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2008), 68. This encyclical is also available online in English translation at w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html (accessed November 15, 2015).

11 Ibid., § 2.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., § 33.

14 Ibid.

15 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), §2708. The catechism is available online at www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM (accessed November 15, 2015).



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