

# The Difficulty and the Beauty of Patience

BY CAROLYN BLEVINS

**Suffering of any kind is an opportunity to learn about patience. We have deeper reservoirs than we realize. When we are patient with suffering, we will discover a new self who has grown spiritually because we learned to be still before the Lord and wait.**

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**T**he psalmist teaches, “Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him” (Psalm 37:7). So, be still. Don’t read further. Wait. Pause for a minute.

Waiting is hard to do in our culture. There are times when we have to be still and wait. Traffic jams, long check-out lines, the long committee meeting, “please hold for the next service representative.”

Be still. Wait.

Living means waiting. Living is being in relationship with and interacting with others: family, coworkers, friends, and community. Since we are not alike, there are times when others do things differently, irritating us and requiring patience. Think of the many ways our patience is tried: the terrible two, the moody teenager, the messy roommate, the undependable coworker, the tardy spouse, the bossy friend, the ill-tempered boss. At every stage of our lives our patience is tested. Life is not smooth. It is so hard to wait.

We do not hit the pause button of our lives very often. Patience is hitting the emotional, physical, social, or spiritual pause button. When conflicts arise, we always have an option to be patient or to be angry. It is easy to be angry and much harder to be patient. Because life is not smooth we are pushed to learn patience daily. Usually we are more patient with those we do not know well or those who are bigger or more powerful than we are. Patience may be in short supply, however, around those we do not fear. But

patience is a choice. We can be patient. Or we can explode. Our choice!

Practicing patience becomes even more challenging when we experience grief. Grief is often associated with death and rightly so. But grief enters our lives any time there is heavy loss – such as a serious illness, shattered friendship, job loss, loss of a home, divorce, or other major brokenness. Eventually each of us will experience some kind of serious loss, and it will be an occasion for grief. At those times of suffering, patience is needed at new levels.

On an August Saturday morning several years ago I began a journey of learning about patience at a deeper level. Life stresses piled up for me before noon that day. As we were preparing for my mother-in-law's funeral that afternoon, I got a call that my ninety-two-year-old mother was hemorrhaging, so I accompanied her to the emergency room until my brother arrived. But the morning soon became even worse. Soon after I dashed home our son called to say he had found our thirty-two-year-old daughter dead in her home! Not our daughter! Surely not! This stunning reality changed my life instantly! My husband and I rushed to her home five minutes away to find emergency vehicles and police tape around the entrance. Repeatedly I asked the police officer if I could go in to see my daughter one last time. Of course, he said I could not. Patience! Eventually I began asking him for information about her death. Of course, he could not reveal anything at that time. Patience! I had no choice but to be still and wait. So I sat down and sobbed. Be still. Wait. For two hours we waited in vain on investigators to get there to begin their work. When time for my mother-in-law's funeral came, we had to leave that place of unspeakable loss to go remember another. My long journey of learning more about patience had just begun.

In the months and years that followed I learned so much about patience and am still learning. That day I had no choice but to be patient with the officials. But I did have choices regarding patience in the coming weeks. I was on a journey of learning patience with myself, with others, and with God. Suffering of any kind is an opportunity to learn about patience. Grief taught me the difficulty and the beauty of patience.

Patience with myself was probably the hardest road. Soon I realized that in the split second that I heard that knee-buckling news, I became a different person. In the days ahead I discovered that the social person was now a recluse, the sleepy person could not sleep, the teacher could not teach, the churchgoer could not go. Suffering changed me. Some of the change was temporary; some was permanent. I was not the same person. Learning to live with and like my new self was not easy. It required patience with me!

While I had many challenges in healing and returning to society, one challenge loomed over the others. Soon we learned that the cause of our daughter's death was murder. Some person took the most precious thing our daughter had – her life! How was I going to come to terms with that reality? In the coming weeks I slowly returned to my activities. But my continuing challenge was my theology. As a Christian I believe in forgiveness.

As I dealt with the murder of our daughter I learned that believing in forgiveness is one thing, but practicing it is another. How could I forgive someone who took her life? This journey of struggling with the tension between what I thought I believed and what I actually felt, was a long trek. Some days I thought I could never forgive him. Others days I thought perhaps I could, but not today! Struggling with the reality of Jesus's teachings in my current circumstance meant I had to give myself time to get to that place of forgiving. "Be still, Carolyn. God will walk with you on this journey but you will not get there quickly," I told myself. Patience. My patience was rewarded. I did forgive, but it took a while. Adjusting to a major loss and its demands on us takes time. Be still. Wait.

Grief also taught me to be patient with others. William Shakespeare wrote, "Well, everyone can master a grief but he that has it."<sup>1</sup> How true! Sometimes people said what they thought were comforting words to me, but they were not. Other people avoided me. Earlier I would have been offended by either action. Now I was more compassionate toward others, realizing they had not yet experienced major suffering and had no idea what it was like. They had not walked in my shoes and I was thankful for that. Grief taught me compassion at a deeper level.

It is so hard to be patient with God in times of suffering. We know that God is all powerful. We know God loves us. Surely a loving God will use divine power to relieve our suffering! We desire immediate relief, but as Frederick Buechner notes, "Faith is waiting."<sup>2</sup> Learning that God's wisdom is not according to our wishes requires enormous patience. I wanted God to heal my pain, struggles, and sadness, and to do it soon. I needed to have faith that if I waited on God, I would be healed. God knew that I would grow through suffering.

The nineteenth-century Mormon leader Orson F. Whitney speaks to the growth that comes from suffering:

No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude, and humility. All that we suffer and all that we endure, especially when we endure it patiently, builds up our characters, purifies our hearts, expands our souls, and makes us more tender and charitable, more worthy to be called the children of God...and it is through sorrow and suffering, toil and tribulation, that we gain the education that we come here to acquire and which will make us more like [God].<sup>3</sup>

What I learned over the months and years that followed I would not have learned had my life been easy. I learned to be patient even with God.

Patience takes time. It is a process, at our own pace. The pace is not the same for everyone. Wounds from any suffering heal slowly, by degrees. The deeper the wounds, the longer the healing takes. But patience is more than

how *long* we wait. It is also about how *well* we wait. As Henri Nouwen explains, “The word ‘patience’ means the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us.”<sup>4</sup>

We have deeper reservoirs than we realize. When we are patient with suffering, we will discover a new self who has grown spiritually because we learned to be still.

Wait. That is the difficulty and the beauty of patience.

## NOTES

1 William Shakespeare gives this line to Benedick in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Act 3, Scene 2.

2 Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 173.

3 Quoted by Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 1972), 98.

4 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *A Spirituality of Waiting: Being Alert to God’s Presence in Our Lives*, audio CD (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2006). A transcript of this CD is available at [www.actonc.org/media/1/29/Common%20Read%20Dec%202013%20-%20Waiting.pdf](http://www.actonc.org/media/1/29/Common%20Read%20Dec%202013%20-%20Waiting.pdf) (accessed November 20, 2015).



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