



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Practicing Hope through Patience
(*Attentive Patience*, pp. 37-45)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Patience of Job
(*Attentive Patience*, pp. 46-47)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Practicing Hope through Patience

Hope helps us faithfully respond to suffering and makes patience possible. Not the 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.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: James 5:7-11

Meditation†

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 is, as Hildegard of Bingen states, “the pillar that is weakened by nothing.”

Josef Pieper (1904-1997)

Reflection

“Hope is practiced through the virtue of patience, which continues to do good even in the face of apparent failure,” Pope Benedict XVI writes in *Deus Caritas Est*, his encyclical on God’s love. A distinctive feature of Christian patience is its being grounded in hope and trust in God. And, as Benedict indicates, patience in turn enables us to act on this hope, even in dire circumstances.

Patience requires hope, Heather Hughes explains, because “we need to know how a story ends in order to keep going through the painful parts.” The alternative to such hope-practiced-through-patience is despair. Despair can appear as an enervating sadness: we fully recognize the brokenness in ourselves or the world, and cannot find the resources to continue to act. But it also manifests in restrained desires and welcomed distractions. The latter symptoms are common: “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,” she observes.

Hope is practiced through patience, but we are unpracticed and, so, not very good at being patient. “Patience for us has been pushed to the extreme edges of human experience,” Hughes admits. “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.”

How can we become more hopeful and patient? Hughes explores how we can be shaped in these important, related virtues through two experiences: suffering and prayer.

- ▶ *Suffering* often requires us to trust “in God’s plan even when it is painfully, seemingly aggressively, opaque to us,” she writes. These times can feel very lonely, but they would be unendurable if we were truly alone.” These times of suffering can stretch us spiritually. Augustine explains, “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].”



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► *Prayer* is a school of hope and patience. “By prayerfully considering what we already know to be true—entering through prayer into the reality of our hope—we can gather the courage to be patient,” Hughes writes. “As an embodiment of our relationship with God, and thus our definition as his children, [prayer] comforts us” by reminding us we are never alone in our suffering. But prayer is more than informative; it is transformative “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.”

Hughes concludes, “The stretching of our hearts and our capacity for God is available to us not only in times of difficulty and suffering, but at every moment through prayer.” As our praying grows beyond mere reflection to “the knowledge of the love of the Lord Jesus, to union with him’ . . . , [it becomes] 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.”

Study Questions

1. How does patience, in both its ordinary and Christian forms, depend upon hope?
2. What are the symptoms of despair in our culture? How can despair undermine our resolve and patient waiting to act?
3. According to Hughes, why is patience so difficult for us to practice today? How can we learn Christian patience?
4. Discuss the context in which James commends the patience of the prophets and Job (James 5:7-11). How is Job’s patience depicted in Georges de La Tour’s *Job Mocked by His Wife*?
5. In Georg Neumark’s hymn “If You But Trust in God to Guide You,” why is God trustworthy? How can this undergird our patience?

Departing Hymn: “If You But Trust in God to Guide You” (vv. 1 and 2)

If you but trust in God to guide you
and place your confidence in him,
you’ll find him always there beside you
to give you hope and strength within;
for those who trust God’s changeless love
build on the rock that will not move.

Only be still and wait his pleasure
in cheerful hope with heart content.
He fills your needs to fullest measure
with what discerning love has sent;
doubt not our inmost wants are known
to him who chose us for his own.

Georg Neumark (1641), trans. *Catherine Winkworth* (1863), alt.
Tune: WER NUR DEN LIEBEN GOTT (Neumark)

† Josef Pieper, *A Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1991), 20.

Practicing Hope through Patience

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how Christian patience depends upon hope in God and enables us to act on that hope.
2. To consider how we can develop Christian hope and patience through the faithful endurance of suffering and through the practice of prayer.
3. To identify two symptoms of despair in our culture—enervating sadness and lowered expectations for our lives.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Attentive Patience (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “If You But Trust in God to Guide You” locate the tune WER NUR DEN LIEBEN GOTT (Neumark) in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/) or Hymnary.org (www.hymnary.org).

Begin with a Story

“I went to my church to pray, but became upset instead of comforted,” Heather Hughes recalls about a difficult time in her life. “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.” (*Attentive Patience*, pp. 37-38)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to bless members with hope and patience to respond to the specific sufferings they face, whether these were shared or unexpressed.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read James 5:7-11 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

The previous study, "Time for Patience," and this one focus in turn on two reasons that a form of patience might be called "Christian": it is ordered toward following Christ, and it depends on hope and trust in God. These features distinguish Christian patience from ordinary patience and teeth-gritting endurance.

Christian patience is the virtue that enables us to act on our hope in the midst of disappointment and suffering, and thus Heather Hughes speaks of "practicing hope through patience."

Study Questions

1. Being patient in disappointment and suffering does not mean that we passively accept our troubles, but that we actively stay focused on our good purpose. This requires hope that all is not lost; we must expect the good purpose ultimately will be accomplished, and usually not just by our own efforts, but with the caring assistance of others. So, even ordinary patience requires some hope for a good future and friends' help. Christian patience is distinguished by its aim at following Christ into God's future and its trust in God's assistance.

Heather Hughes contrasts true patience to these "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."

2. Hughes gives an extended example of despair in contemporary dating culture, in which despair manifests not as enervating sadness, but as settling for what's easily available: you "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." She continues, "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."
3. We rarely practice patience in day-to-day situations. "Patience is almost never required of us," Hughes notes. "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." When patience is required in grievous situations, "We are thrown into the deep end, completely untrained."

Growth in Christian hope and patience requires "stretching of our hearts and our capacity for God." That is, we must desire God's good future more fully and be more confident in God's assistance. The Apostle Paul was stretched in this way through suffering as he came to rely more fully on God. We are also stretched this way through the practice of prayer.

4. James commends patience in the context of suffering, perhaps when one has been treated unjustly by rich and powerful people (cf. James 5:1-6). Job's reputation for patience is based on this scripture passage and its stimulus for Gregory the Great's influential reading of the book of Job in the sixth century. La Tour depicts the moment when Job resists his wife's taunting encouragement to end his life. In the biblical story, Job rebukes his wife and expresses trust in God (Job 2:9). In this painting, their conversation is intimate and Job expresses his resistance to despair through an anguished but determined stare.
5. Neumark wrote this, his most famous hymn, on the occasion of finally finding employment after he had been robbed almost penniless on his journey to enroll in university. (The full story is at www.hymnary.org.) The first stanza reminds us that God's love is unchanging, which is a source of hope and strength to those who trust God. The second stanza emphasizes God's intimate knowledge of our needs and commitment to meeting them with "discerning love." Divine love is emphasized again when it says God "chose us for his own." God's attention to and love for us is a source of joy and confidence in our times of trouble.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.