

# Attentive Patience

## Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS



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UNIVERSITY

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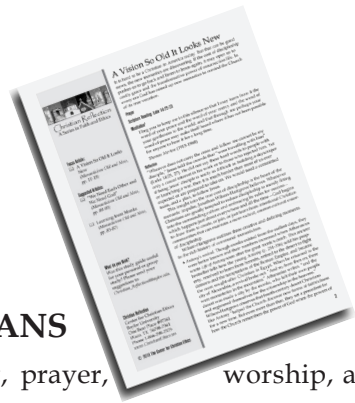


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worship, and



### **HURRY AND THE WILLINGNESS TO BE CREATURES**

Our hurry reveals our anxiety about time. Yet the days that unfold are not a scarce resource slipping away, although they certainly are finite. Our time is God's terrible, mysterious patience, in which we meet what is beyond us and come to know ourselves as beloved creatures.

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# Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

**“For where God is,” Tertullian famously noted, “there too is his foster-child, namely Patience.” He was thinking primarily of God’s long suffering with our waywardness; but he believed this divine quality must also become a key virtue in us.**

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**I**n the third century, Tertullian noted, “For where God is, there too is his foster-child, namely Patience. Whence God’s Spirit descends, then Patience accompanies him indivisibly.” He was thinking primarily, of course, about God’s long suffering with our waywardness; but in this first Christian treatise on a single virtue, he went on to explain how this divine quality can become a key virtue in us – not by working ourselves up to it, but by humbly receiving it as a much-needed gift from God. Indeed, it is only through such patience with ourselves and one another that we can grow in the other virtues. In this issue our contributors explore the distinctive features of attentive patience, its central role in our discipleship, and why its practice has become so difficult for us today.

In *Hurry and the Willingness to Be Creatures* (p. 11), Kelly Johnson diagnoses our busy scurrying – one of the greatest barriers to our being patient – as “anxiety about time: fear of losing it, shame about wasting it, ambition to produce more in it than the competitors do, or a struggle just to keep up.” We treat time as though it were a precious commodity that we control. Johnson refocuses on the reality that time “is not a scarce resource slipping away,” but “is God’s terrible, mysterious patience, in which we meet what is beyond us and come to know ourselves as beloved creatures.”

One reason Christian patience is so important, Charles Pinches explains in *Time for Patience* (p. 19), is it “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.” Specifically, it



protects us against the sorrow that can overwhelm us when we squarely face the brokenness in ourselves and in the world. He agrees with a point Heather Hughes makes in *Practicing Hope through Patience* (p. 37), that such patience is quite different from self-developed, teeth-gritting endurance. The distinguishing mark of Christian patience, Hughes notes, is hope — “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 now risen from the dead.”

How can we receive and cultivate this sort of hope-filled patience? The nineteenth-century poet Gerard Manley Hopkins understood how “very hard it is to ask for patience and to see the world from God’s perspective,” Melinda Creech writes in *Hard Patience* (p. 67). During the demanding, final years of his life, Hopkins confronted the difficulty in one of his so-called “sonnets of desolation,” which begins “Patience, hard thing! the hard thing but to pray, / But bid for, patience is!” Looking back with careful attention to his personal struggles, to some of the people who crossed his path, and to nature, the poet was able to discern God’s working on patience in his life, to draw him ever closer to God and his “delicious kindness.” For another writer, Simon Weil, careful attention to the other is the key to developing Christian patience. “She shows how something as ordinary as school studies, undertaken in the proper spirit, can develop that specific form of attention which, when directed toward God, is the very substance of prayer,” Brad Hadaway notes in *The Education of Attention* (p. 28). He extends Weil’s suggestion to other daily activities that can “cultivate the relevant form of attention” and thereby grow “our capacity for communion with God.”

Carolyn Blevins recalls how she learned patience through grave personal suffering. In *The Difficulty and Beauty of Patience* (p. 76), she reports, “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.” Taylor Sandlin suggests that our preparation to face such grievous suffering can occur through small acts of patience in worship, which are oft-repeated, like waiting upon one another at the Lord’s Table. “The table is more than a place we gather to eat the body of Christ,” he writes in *Waiting to Eat* (p. 80). “We gather here to be the body of Christ.”

The theme of patience being learned and exhibited through suffering is frequent in Christian art. In *The Patience of Job* (p. 46), Heidi Hornik examines Georges de La Tour’s *Job Mocked by His Wife* (cover) for the artist’s “keen observation of the relationship between the husband and wife” as they struggle to deal with their misery. In *Christ’s Patience in the Garden* (p. 48), she studies two depictions of Jesus’ patient suffering and prayer as he faces impending humiliation and death — *Christ at the Garden of Gethsemane*, attributed to the seventeenth-century artist Matthias Stomer, and *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, attributed to the eighteenth-century painter Jacopo Marieschi.

The liturgy (p. 58) by Elizabeth Sands Wise calls us to meditate on such narratives of patience that we find in Scripture and in our own congregations. A *lectio divina* on the story of Elijah on Mount Horeb helps us to develop attention for the details of these narratives and for the God we meet in them. Jonathan Sands Wise employs rich imagery from the Elijah story in his hymn, “To Know That You Are God” (p. 55), which is paired to ADORO TE DEVOTE with a new accompaniment by Kurt Kaiser. Sands Wise asks, “In this world of rushing noise, can we hear God’s voice?” and concludes with the prayer, “Help us learn with grace to see you” and “mend our hearts through work and prayer, that we may love you here.”

“Popular wisdom says our lives are speeding up and we have technology to thank or to blame,” Roger Owens observes in *Where Does the Time Go?* (p. 84). But if “life is speeding up and becoming more efficient,” he wonders why we do not have more free time “for relaxation and to pay attention to our lives and the lives of those around us.” He reviews three recent books that tackle this puzzle – philosopher Mark C. Taylor’s *Speed Limits: Where Time Went and Why We Have So Little Left*, sociologist Judy Wajcman’s *Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism*, and journalist Paul Roberts’s *The Impulse Society: America in the Age of Instant Gratification*. Despite their valuable insights, Owens concludes that “none of these authors imagines...the possibility of counter-cultural communities, not just slow-movement communities that separate from wider society, but communities like churches woven throughout the culture that in their practices of liturgy and work of patiently observing the Christian year, in their seasons of anticipation and repentance, might have resources on which to draw to save some from the addiction to speed and instant gratification and leaven our culture in a positive way.”

Sarah Klaassen’s review essay, *Toward a Slow-Enough Church* (p. 89), addresses the lacuna that Owens identifies. She sifts through Philip D. Kennesson’s *Practicing Ecclesial Patience: Patient Practice Makes Perfect*, Jeffrey L. Bullock’s *Practicing Christian Patience: Encouraging Community, Establishing Peace*, and C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison’s *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus*, to uncover “concrete contemporary practices that draw us deeply into a more intentional and communal life of faith” that can cultivate and tend the virtue of Christian patience. “At one level, these three texts are about patience,” she observes. “At a deeper level, they describe the kind of relational presence that patience can facilitate. Each emphasizes connection with God and with one another, and within these two primary connections are echoes of intimacy with creation, neighborhoods, and the Body of Christ through the ages.” ❖

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# Hurry and the Willingness to Be Creatures

BY KELLY S. JOHNSON

The days that unfold are not a scarce resource slipping away, but they certainly are finite. Our time is God's terrible, mysterious patience, in which we meet what is beyond us and come to know ourselves as beloved creatures.

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In a now-classic interview, comedian Louis C.K. notes, "Everything's amazing right now, but nobody's happy."<sup>1</sup> He recounts hearing a man whine when, on a plane traveling through the air at six hundred miles per hour, the high-speed Wi-Fi connection broke down. To people frustrated with their cell phone's surfing speed, he cries: "Give it a second! It's going to space!" It's all unbelievably fast, but it is still not fast enough for us.

And although we are capable of greater speed than any generation of humans before, in the face of life-threatening crises, we drag our collective feet. We get instantaneous reports of major melting in Antarctica, but global talks to limit greenhouse gasses are stalled. Video coverage of brutality against black bodies goes viral in minutes, while the United States has never commissioned a study of the possibility of reparations for slavery.<sup>2</sup> Companies that trade stocks in milliseconds still have not eliminated the gender wage gap, and our amazing cell phones include metals that may have been mined by slaves, though we thought we left slavery behind in the nineteenth century. How can we be hurrying so much and yet changing so slowly?

We hurry, but we are not getting satisfaction from our greater speed. We hurry, but we do not change. Hurry, it seems, is not a propensity to move quickly toward a goal. Rather, it is anxiety about time: fear of losing it, shame about wasting it, ambition to produce more in it than the competitors do, or a struggle just to keep up. That anxiety can be a very effective way of avoiding anything outside its own scope. Being in a hurry inflames my sense of the importance of my agenda while it shrinks my attention to a

narrow field. That's good, if I am hurrying to rescue a drowning man. But it also makes hurry a supremely useful tactic for those who want to avoid painful realities. We are running to stand still, racing in an attempt to avoid change. The moral problem of a hurried culture is not its love of speed, but its collective evasion of the truth about ourselves and our world: we are creatures, living in an unfolding time whose purposes we do not create.

### **WHAT IS TIME FOR?**

Scripture teaches us that time has a divine purpose. "God has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).<sup>3</sup>

Yet the idea that time has purpose sounds strange to us. The modern mind sees reality as composed of facts, raw materials that have no meaning until such meaning is created in them by human intentions. Time is not *for* anything; it is only the blank page on which human beings write their stories.

The sense that time is a raw material to be filled with meaning by human productivity is not a fact, nor even an idea, but a social reality that has evolved through history. According to scholar Jacques Le Goff, anxiety about time existed well before modern timekeeping – for example, in the Christian concern to make good use of time before death and judgment. That anxiety focused on the particulars of a life or even of a community, looking toward its end. The anxiety about time, however, took on a different character beginning in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.<sup>4</sup> In Italian cities, particularly with the rise of competitive textile trades, urban producers initially relied on monastic bells that called those communities to their canonical prayers to break up their day. Tensions regarding laborers' working hours and pay, however, created a demand for a new way of marking time, uniform enough to account for multiple schedules, including over-time and night work, while also precise enough to content both bosses and workers that they were not being cheated in the calculation of wages. The sort of bells that emerged to govern work hours differed from the monastic bells, marking the community's commitment to the liturgy of hours, and also from the old bells of the cities, which had rung to warn of a crisis or announce a festival. Those bells served and preserved a sense of time that was *for* the purposes of seeking holiness and fostering the life of the town. The new bells created ordinary, predictable divisions to everyday life, unrelated to any specific purpose. This turn created a sense of time much more akin to our own experience of the objective, relentlessly ticking backdrop to our days.

This way of marking time makes it universally measurable, predictable, and exchangeable, which is to say it makes time capable of functioning as a commodity. "Time is money" only makes sense when time has this objective character. Every second is the same as every other, although we can fill each with terror or delight or washing the dishes. Once this kind of timekeeping

is widely accepted—a long historical process in the West, still continuing worldwide—time functions as a resource to be managed, not intrinsically related to particular human lives or to the end of life. It becomes a factor of production that can be traded, conserved, maximized.

This empty time creates the problem of “opportunity cost.” In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas commented on the nature of time in his discussion of usury, that is, making profit from a loan. He described the sin of usury as a way of selling what no one could own, time. To those who claimed that taking interest on a loan was a way of reimbursing the lender for the lost opportunities he or she might have had for use of their money, Thomas argued that such opportunities were purely hypothetical. No one could know what would or could have happened had the owner kept the money instead of lending it out, and to charge someone else for such a fantasy was a form of theft.<sup>5</sup> Time, in his way of thinking, could not be an abstraction, could not be quantified apart from the actual days we live. Time, to his way of thinking, was the particular path of a human life and a human society, not an objective reality apart from them.

Aquinas lost that argument about usury, not because it did not make sense but because the social practice of time was making his claim unreasonable. If, in societies such as ours, time functions as a universal and predictable commodity, then charging for lost opportunities makes sense. Those who lend money or its equivalent for a certain period of time lose possibilities that can be calculated in terms of the hours and days of the lending period. We no longer live in Aquinas’ time, not to mention his era.

All this is to say that time became for European society, the seedbed of global capitalism—not the course of human life in relation to its Source and End, but an objective, scarce resource to be used to maximize utility, filled with whatever content the owner chose for it. It became an item for exchange, rather than an aspect of creaturely life.

This being so, of course we feel anxiety about time. It is the scarcest of all resources. Once gone—and it is constantly (tick, tick) going—we can in no way get it back, and no amount of good management can prevent its running out for each of us. Time is the essential and fragile commodity on which whatever we will make of our lives must be built, and as we lose it,

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we lose the possibility of making our lives mean something. We must control it, which means that we must deny the truth that time is not ours to control.

This tragedy – that what is most necessary for us is constantly running out – gets neatly sidestepped in the myth of endless economic growth. Although every economics textbook explains that goods are scarce relative to human desires and we see all around us well-documented evidence that such growth is destroying not only itself but the conditions for human life on the planet, still we continue to operate on the faith that economic exchange can continually and infinitely expand. While we each hurry to make the most of our own hours, we trust in an infinite cosmic flow of new opportunity to produce new goods, to fill more time with what we take as meaning. John Maynard Keynes’s reminder, “In the long run, we are all dead,” rarely affects operational decisions, overshadowed as they are by this faith in a future that is both infinite and without given purpose. Our urgent need to keep expanding allows us to ignore the evident truth that both individually and collectively, we cannot keep expanding.<sup>6</sup>

If it is unlikely that individuals will take the painful step of giving up comforting evasions that allow us to reconcile our tragic loss of the resources of time, Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us that it is far less likely that social bodies will do so. We reinforce each other’s self-deception and build up social patterns that give them credibility. We avoid making friends and family uncomfortable by referring to this trouble. We struggle even to recognize the problem, since our frame of reference, our hurried world, is so good at evasion. Hurry becomes a social practice, useful as evasion and necessary for maintaining our place in the world of empty, objective time.

## **BEING CREATURES**

Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’*, “On Care for Our Common Home,” quotes Romano Guardini in a telling passage about creaturely existence.

Modern anthropocentrism has paradoxically ended up prizing technical thought over reality, since “the technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere ‘given,’ as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape; it views the cosmos similarly as a mere ‘space’ into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference.” The intrinsic dignity of the world is thus compromised. When human beings fail to find their true place in this world, they misunderstand themselves and end up acting against themselves....<sup>7</sup>

This insight about the creaturely reality of space is all the more true of the creaturely reality of time. Scientific studies allow us to imagine a scale of time in which human civilization is only a flash as eons of geological time pass. The wonder and horror of finding ourselves so small can give rise to a sense of our own meaninglessness, and we are tempted to cope with that

knowledge by making all the meaning we can in the time we have.

In contrast *Laudato Si'* speaks of “the intrinsic dignity of the world,” which is grounded in a vastness that is beyond our knowing but is all beloved by God. The world is vast but not meaningless, beyond our knowing but not empty. The time that stretches behind and ahead of us is not ours to control, but it is neither a void nor chaos. It is the gift of God. To live well in it, we have to begin to encounter both the wildness of creation and the tender intimacy of its Creator to it. As we come to terms with a loving creator who makes the wild and vast, we may begin to come to better terms with the wilderness of time, the dark complexity of memory, and the uncertainty of the future.

The human creature, in any era and any culture, struggles to trust such a creator. While the creation is beautiful, it is also terrifying. It can hurt us. Our own nature rebels because reason wants to govern itself and flesh wants to live forever. Our war against time is a war against being a creature.

Christianity sees in this struggle the discomfort of a natural creature with a supernatural destiny, a beloved creature broken by sin, a redeemed creature not yet brought to fulfillment. Evasion of that discomfort is not the solution. Any denial of our situation as mortal creatures in time is to build on sand. We are creatures, and the Christian story of time is not the succession of uniform, fungible seconds on modern clocks, but the unfolding of God’s friendship with creatures, and it is moving toward fulfillment.

Gustavo Gutiérrez urges us to resist the tendency to think salvation history unfolds above or apart from the ordinary history of humanity.<sup>8</sup> There is, he claims, one history: a history of salvation that is present in human lives and societies, and which moves toward the fulfillment God has promised. Salvation is not an escape from or reward after time; it is why time exists. Working out the gift of our redemption by discovering the give and take of love is what time is for.

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**We are creatures, and the Christian story of time is not the succession of uniform, fungible seconds on modern clocks, but the unfolding of God’s friendship with creatures, and it is moving toward fulfillment.**

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And so creatures live *in status viatoris*, as wayfarers. The wayfarer is on the road, not at home. We are not industrious entrepreneurs who are building our homes with limited opportunities and maximizing return on raw resources including time; rather we are travelers who are heading for a destination we do not altogether know, but following the road toward it in trust. The wayfarer has to live in the awkward, unrehearsed new encounter of

each moment, always incomplete, never quite satisfying, because time is not a possession and not a home. It is the way to fulfillment.

The scriptural story of Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:21-38) shows people who lived with creaturely trust in the uncertainty of time. "When the days... were completed," the gospel of Luke says, Jesus' parents took him to Jerusalem. There they met Simeon, who, filled with the Spirit, knew that he would

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**We who hurry because our affairs are *Very Important*, may be less in need of the vacation that reinforces our pride than of noticing that Jesus stands among those who have no choice but to wait: the hungry, the ill, the imprisoned, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for justice.**

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not die until he had seen the Messiah. He had waited "for the consolation of Israel," while he was aging himself and watching the world age. If those days of waiting were frustrating, he did not resort to pretending that God had abandoned him, nor that the Messiah had already come, nor much less that he had to rush to make some meaning for himself before his time ran out. He did not make himself busy, hurrying to avoid his fears for Israel. He waited and watched. When

he saw what he waited for, he praised God, spoke the words given to him, and declared his readiness to die. Meanwhile the prophet Anna, who at eighty-four never left the Temple but lived each hour in praise of God, gave thanks and spoke to all about the change God was bringing, the redemption of Israel.

This pair, standing in this part of Luke's gospel for the faithful poor of Israel, clearly understood that they were in a story not of their making. There were on a road rather than at home. They knew themselves and their world to be lacking, and rather than turning away from that distress, they were willing to stay in the midst of it, hoping for salvation. They trusted that the full story was in the hands of one who means us good, one way or another. And that trust meant that they were among the few who could act quickly, effectively, and wisely when the new moment demanded it. Their patient attention to the gift of time meant they neither hurried nor delayed, but recognized the gift of each moment already full of meaning.

### **LIVING WELL IN TIME**

Given the forces, economic and cultural and personal, that drive us to hurry, we will not be able simply to think ourselves out of our trouble. How can we begin to live well as creatures in time?

The obvious solution to excessive hurry is "slowing down," and for



those of us fatigued from living in a hurry, slowing down sounds very appealing. We harbor visions of gentle mornings of sunrise and bird songs, long walks with loved ones, home-cooked meals, and long restful sleep. We long for a restorative break in our stresses; and those whose hurry has produced enough wealth to allow it, indulge in such breaks from time to time. The need for a break assures us that we are the kind of people who have to hurry, who are important, and who do not have time to be concerned with anything other than the very important matters we are racing to address. The romance of slowing down hides from us the reasons we do not want to slow down for long, the reasons we cling to our hurry.

Encountering the God who gives days and nights is costly. Whether it is the voluntary act of entering into a silent retreat or the forced pause of unemployment or illness, in stillness people confront whatever their hurry helped to conceal. Hurry creates and thrives on spiritual noise. Hurry protects us from noticing how rarely we address the real struggles of our lives and our societies.

We who find ourselves captive to the false pride of hurry, for whom being in a rush is a sign that we and our affairs are *Very Important*, may be in less need of the vacation that reinforces our pride than of noticing that Jesus stands among those who have no choice but to wait: the hungry, the ill, the imprisoned, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for justice. The culture that rushes to fill seconds with profit pushes aside creaturely needs and relationships as slow, clumsy, and unproductive. It excludes those who do not play the game of infinite growth. But if time is already charged with meaning, full at every turn with God's presence and action, then our task is not to make our mark on our limited time but to encounter the God who walks with creation in time. Communities that recognize this can cultivate practices of conversation and prayer that require stillness and patience, not to evade reality but to discover it. Encountering God and each other in time is the basis of any prudent action. To do that, we must be willing to stop acting the part of the hero who makes meaning within the tragedy of scarce time. We must face ourselves as creatures in time.

The days that unfold are not a scarce resource slipping away, although they certainly are finite. Our time is God's terrible, mysterious patience, in which we meet what is beyond us and come to know ourselves as beloved creatures. Living as creatures in time we do not create or control, we may be able to discover the meaning of St. Catherine of Siena's statement, "All the way to heaven is heaven, for Jesus said, I am the Way."

## NOTES

1 Louis C.K. interview with Conan O'Brien on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* (NBC Television, 2008), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=akiVi1sR2rM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akiVi1sR2rM) (accessed November 3, 2015).

2 Ta-Nehesi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic* (June 2014), [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/) (accessed November 3, 2015).

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# 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.**

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**T**hink 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.’”<sup>4</sup> 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*.<sup>5</sup>

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).<sup>6</sup> 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

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

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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

sees it occur countlessly), we detach it from grief, which, as William F. May has noted, is its natural corollary in a genuinely human world.<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>



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."<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.”<sup>14</sup>

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**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.**

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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?"<sup>15</sup>

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."<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup>

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

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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.

6 Scripture texts marked NABRE are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

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10 Cyprian, *Treatise 9: On Patience*, online at [www.newadvent.org/fathers/050709.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050709.htm).

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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](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/182194).

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

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# The Education of Attention

BY BRADFORD S. HADAWAY

**If Simone Weil is to be believed, we need more books.  
She shows how something as ordinary as school studies,  
undertaken in the proper spirit, can develop that specific  
form of attention which, when directed toward God, is the  
very substance of prayer.**

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Apparently my nine-year-old son, Jackson, is a mystic-in-the-making. As we walked a path along the River Thames as it leaves Oxford, England, my two oldest children and I enjoyed one of those quiet spells that occur when you have walked far enough away from your daily world to feel truly alone with your thoughts. My moments of solitude were preoccupied with cursing the new sneakers that were slowly rubbing holes on both feet, but something sparked a different order of thought in Jackson. After a half hour of quiet, he turned to me and said that taking a long walk into the woods is “like opening the envelope of your soul – an envelope that is usually sealed up tight.” To explain further, he said, “It gives you a chance to concentrate...” and then he stopped himself and said, “No, that’s not quite right. In fact, it’s exactly the opposite. When you’re out here, you’re not really concentrating even though your mind is working. It’s like you are aware of important things without even having to try. Your envelope is opening.”

My first thought in response was, “This, and yet you can’t remember to put your dirty clothes in the laundry basket.” My second thought was, “I need to get little Thoreau here a journal, a quill, an inkwell, and a little cabin by a pond just to see what else he might come up with.” His out-of-the-blue metaphor has stuck with me ever since our walk. In it, I hear the nine-year-old stirrings of something like contemplative prayer – the kind of prayer that occurs when we empty the self (open our envelope) and turn a patient, attentive gaze outward, finally prepared to receive the light of God which is *always* shining. A young boy’s surprise and pleasure at being opened up to

something beyond himself reminds us that we are made for this kind of communion with God. Yet the frenetic pace of life and our restless love of constant activity reshape us into people who genuinely struggle to practice the kind of slow, deliberate, self-emptying attention that would allow us to touch and know the Truth.

We need more walks.

Or, if Simone Weil (1909-1943) is to be believed, we need more *books*. Weil was a French political activist, philosopher, and Christian thinker, and just a year before her death, she wrote a wonderful little essay entitled, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God."<sup>1</sup> Its central argument is that something as ordinary as school studies, undertaken in the proper spirit, can develop that specific form of attention which, when directed toward God, is the very substance of prayer. By exploring Weil's ideas about attention and study in some detail, we may also uncover other ordinary practices – such as reading novels, creating art, and, yes, taking long riverside walks – that can prune our diseased habits of restless distraction and train us for patient, attentive prayer.

### **THE STRUCTURE OF ATTENTION**

School studies can help us cultivate attention, Weil believes, when they take us beyond ourselves and our current level of understanding about a subject. The key word here is "understanding," which goes way beyond information gathering. We top off our information levels daily – for example, when we peruse the sports page to see if our favorite team won or scan the headlines to find out what the politicians just said – but this sort of scanning activity does not flex our mental muscles like reading a many-sided text for understanding does. When we pause to study a rich text – say, Paul's letter to the Romans, or Weil's essay on school studies – we can gain genuine insight about significant matters, but only as we attend to the text with an appropriate method, diligent effort, and patient waiting that allows us to uncover the truth it contains.<sup>2</sup>

The sort of attention required for such understanding, Weil notes, cannot be reduced to the mental concentration that allows us to avoid distractions and pursue some task to its point of completion. If this were all that attention required, then the master of a stare-down contest would possess everything necessary for true spiritual attunement; but this is hardly so. Nevertheless, this ability to tune out distractions is an important ingredient of study. (For example, it helps when my philosophy students put away their smart phones and encounter Plato's vivid allegory of the cave without the tweets, pokes, vines, and other electronic stimuli that have become a virtual carillon of Pavlovian bells for their response.)

Weil believes it is important for our power of concentration to become second nature. If we have to drag ourselves kicking and screaming to the study table, the end result will not be attention of the relevant sort. Indeed,

Weil warns, the kind of will power “that, if need be, makes us set our teeth and endure suffering...has practically no place in study.”<sup>3</sup>

The heart of attention, then, is not in any such strenuous activity, but rather in an easy *receptivity* or *openness* to deliverances of the truth. “Attention,” Weil suggests, “consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object.”<sup>4</sup> It is a kind of waiting—a fruitful inactivity that does not seek anything, but stands ready to receive “in its naked truth” the object explored.<sup>5</sup> The openness that characterizes attention is not a mere *willingness* to accept the truth, but an *anticipation* of it—a hungering for the truth and hopeful expectation of its arrival. The attentive person’s waiting is laden with the desire that her intelligence bear fruit.

Weil’s view makes more sense if we believe the significant truths that we gain through study are “gifts” granted to us through insight, rather than products that *directly* result from some combination of scholarly industry, genius, or clever guessing. (However, as we will see shortly, some grinding work is involved in preparing us for receptive study.) If truth comes as a gift, then our primary job is to humble ourselves and be open to that moment. We must wait for it.

The gift-like character of apprehending truth is especially apparent in moments of genuine intellectual struggle: we wrestle with a thorny problem, try a number of failed strategies, and feel stymied by lack of progress, only to be *hit* with a new thought that leads to a solution. Weil generalizes from this mysterious experience of insight to all discovery of truth. The experience may differ among the various school exercises we undertake, but Weil thinks this process of waiting, or being open and receptive, is as necessary for “the right word to come of itself at the end of its pen”<sup>6</sup> in a writing exercise as it is for our arriving at a profound insight about the nature of the self, the world, or God.<sup>7</sup>

## **PREPARATION FOR ATTENTION**

Even though the apprehension of truth comes to us as a gift when we are attentive, our preparation for the openness and receptivity of attention is not effortless. The ground must be tilled before the fruit of insight can spring forth. First, Weil assumes that apprehension of the truth always takes place against a backdrop of knowledge which makes the moment of insight intelligible. We cannot be struck by just the right way to translate a line of Latin if we do not know Latin grammar or vocabulary. So part of the work that makes attention possible in the first place is the more grinding, often-monotonous, and less intellectually challenging collection and maintenance of this background knowledge.

But once this preparation is done, the real work of attention begins. Weil claims that “attention is an effort, the greatest of all efforts perhaps, but it is a *negative effort*.”<sup>8</sup> By this suggestive phrase, “negative effort,” she means we

must continually adopt the stance of open and receptive anticipation of insight which we have been discussing. But “negative effort” refers to other preparatory work as well.

For instance, we must hold the relevant background knowledge in our minds, even while we are primarily trying to leave our thoughts open to “penetration” by the objects we explore or the solutions we seek. She compares this to how persons who stand on a mountain can focus on the vast empty space, even while they are seeing a “great many forests and plains” below. Or to take a more concrete example, solving a proof in geometry will not come to us without our using the technical apparatus of proofs, some knowledge of rules of inference, and the like (which are the details of “many forests and plains” in the metaphor above), but if we concentrate on those details we will not be sufficiently attuned and open to the solution to have it penetrate our thought in the appropriate way. So, another aspect of negative effort is keeping our “particular and already formulated thoughts” visible and available for use, but held sufficiently at bay to allow for full apprehension of the truth related to some object or problem.<sup>9</sup>

A more important negative effort involved in attention is emptying our souls so they can more purely reflect the truth for which we wait. Putting aside the self is the way that we create the space to perceive things the way that they really are. “Emptying our souls” is one of the more elusive but suggestive metaphors by means of which Weil analyzes attention. I like my son Jackson’s metaphor of the opened envelope as another way to express this thought. The envelope is not opened to deliver its own contents. Instead, once it is opened up, it remains empty and ready to receive. Or to employ a different metaphor from Weil, when the self has been emptied, the intellect can act like a mirror, reflecting reality purely with “no dimensions of its own.”<sup>10</sup>

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**The openness that characterizes attention is not a mere willingness to accept the truth, but a hungering for the truth and hopeful expectation of its arrival. The attentive person’s waiting is laden with the desire that her intelligence bear fruit.**

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This metaphor of emptying the soul is a nice summary of Weil’s view of attention in school studies. First, self-abnegation occurs in the very openness and receptivity towards the truth that is at the heart of attention. When a student gets “lost” in a text or problem, the concerns of and concerns about herself slip away. Second, we empty the soul when we reject the prideful pretention that we must master objects and problems rather than apprehend

the truth about them as a gift. Instead we adopt a posture of humility. Weil's very concrete proposal to foster such humility is for us to "take great pains to examine squarely and to contemplate attentively and slowly each school task in which we have failed, seeing how unpleasing and second rate it is... trying to get down to the origin of the fault."<sup>11</sup> She predicts that frequently we will trace the origin of the fault to our misplaced efforts in trying to

squeeze the problem or object before us into a pre-conceived solution or interpretation.

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**Prayer empties the self and waits in love for an encounter with God. While school studies only aim at a lower form of attention, Weil claims they are "extremely effective in increasing the power of attention that will be available at the time of prayer."**

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Weil concludes, "We do not have to understand new things, but by dint of patience, effort, and method to come to understand with our whole self the truths which are evident."<sup>12</sup> The "patience" refers to a hopeful anticipation of the truth, the "effort" is the negative task of emptying one's self,

and the "method" is the indirect approach of remaining open and receptive to insight regarding truths that are already in view.

## **ATTENTION AND PRAYER**

So, what does attention cultivated through our schoolwork have to do with prayer or communion with God? The school exercises do not represent the highest aspirations of the development and use of attention. As Weil notes, attention is ultimately important not because it enables us to generate a thoughtful interpretation of the *Iliad*, but because it is the *substance* of prayer. Prayer, she writes, is "the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God."<sup>13</sup> Attention manifested as prayer empties the self and waits in love for a direct encounter with God. Even though school studies only aim at a lower form of attention, Weil claims they are "extremely effective in increasing the power of attention that will be available at the time of prayer."<sup>14</sup> Here's why: the common practice of attention in school studies only leads to a particular truth, but that truth is "the image of something precious." For example, because the solution to a geometry problem is "a little fragment of a particular truth, it is a pure image of the unique, eternal, and living Truth, the very Truth that once in a human voice declared: 'I am the Truth.' Every school exercise, thought of in this way, is like a sacrament."<sup>15</sup>

The parallels between study and prayer are most evident in the spiritual disciplines that dispose the soul for union with God. Thomas Merton writes,



Monastic solitude, poverty, obedience, silence, and prayer dispose the soul for [its] mysterious destiny in God. Asceticism itself does not produce divine union as its direct result. It only disposes the soul for union. The various practices of monastic asceticism are more or less valuable to the monk in proportion as they help him to accomplish the inner and spiritual work that needs to be done to make his soul poor, and humble, and empty, in the mystery of the presence of God.<sup>16</sup>

In *Life and Holiness*, he explains that

our seeking of God is not at all a matter of our finding him by means of certain ascetic techniques. It is rather a quieting and ordering of our whole life by self-denial, prayer, and good works, so that God himself, who seeks us more than we seek him, can “find us” and “take possession of us.”<sup>17</sup>

Merton emphasizes that the spiritual disciplines only prepare the soul for divine union, rather than accomplish it. Once our soul is attentive—empty, waiting, and desiring communion with God—God can find us. Weil makes a similar point about school studies, when she notes

each loving adolescent, as he works at his Latin prose [may] hope through this prose to come a little nearer to the instant when he will really be the slave—faithfully waiting while the master is absent, watching and listening—ready to open the door to him as soon as he knocks. The master will then make his slave sit down and himself serve him with meat.<sup>18</sup>

Weil draws attention to a notable difference between the cases of study and prayer. The diligent exercise of attention may not always yield results in the intellectual realm, but it never fails to yield the desired increase in light on the spiritual plane. We can undertake the practices of patient attention in faith and hope because, as Weil recalls from Matthew 7:11, if asked for bread, the Father does not give a stone.<sup>19</sup> There is no promise that we can apprehend all truths we desire to know, but we may be confident that all we need to know of the Truth, which is God, will be available to us because “a divine inspiration operates infallibly, irresistibly, if we do not turn away our attention, if we do not refuse it.”<sup>20</sup>

Many of us have waited for God, but without immediate results of a profound and deep awareness of God’s ineffable transcendence. “Even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result,” Weil counsels, “one day a light that is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul. Every effort adds a little gold to a treasure no power on earth can take away.”<sup>21</sup> We are in this for the long haul. The more ways we find to practice attention with patience, the more we can trust that God will continue to take

greater and greater possession of us. After all, it is God who is seeking us.

### **BEYOND SCHOOL STUDIES**

Study, then, is exactly the kind of spiritual practice that a restless and activity-infatuated people of God need. Weil reminds us that some daily activities are pregnant with the possibility of growing our capacity for communion with God. Rather than add to our already oppressive to-do lists, we

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**Some daily activities are pregnant with the possibility of growing our capacity for communion with God. Rather than add to our oppressive to-do lists, we should survey our practices to discover which ones cultivate the relevant form of attention.**

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need only to survey current practices to discover which ones, like school study, can help us cultivate the relevant form of attention.

The practices we are looking for will be characterized by a truth-orientation—that is, they will reward sustained attention with insight about the way things really are, the best strategy to solve a problem or win a complex game, the best turn of phrase in a written note, the proper brushstroke in a

painting, and so on. Further, these practices will require attention for the insight to occur—that is, they will push us beyond ourselves and encourage an empty, humble, patient outward gaze filled with a longing to receive the truth. Finally, they will be congruent with the ultimate goal of cultivating a capacity for prayer.<sup>22</sup> If the final goal were anything else—even something as high-minded as self-development or the cultivation of excellence so that one can better serve others—the self, rather than sliding from view, would threaten to reappear and disrupt the receptivity to the truth.

Some obvious candidates are the forms of study that live on long after our schooling has officially ended. For example, reading serious novels and short stories can cultivate attention when we allow their rich narratives to illumine significant aspects of life. Studying the Bible or books of Christian reflection in a church setting does this too, particularly when we spend quiet moments of preparation before the group discussion takes place. And Weil's comments about school children laboring over Latin translations reminds us how important it is for parents to provide their children with self-emptying, reflective learning activities to supplement the necessary but more mundane information transfer that happens in most schools today.

Other attention-cultivating practices may lack the academic feel of those described above. Practicing music, creating art, playing chess, pausing in worship to reflect quietly on a text or image—all of these have a truth-orienta-

tion and a built-in demand to wait patiently on those truths to emerge.

And let us not forget those long, quiet walks, where the “text” is the beautiful created order. If we are attentive and “open the envelope” of our souls as we walk, the insight we receive is as forceful as through the written word. Wordsworth’s “Expostulation and Reply” begins with a character, William, being chastised for wasting away his morning on an old grey stone when he could have devoted that time to studying the light bequeathed by books. William replies,

The eye – it cannot choose but see;  
 We cannot bid the ear be still;  
 Our bodies feel, where’er they be,  
 Against or with our will.  
 Nor less I deem that there are Powers  
 Which of themselves our minds impress;  
 That we can feed this mind of ours  
 In a wise passiveness.<sup>23</sup>

The great work of prayer is to find *all* the ways to quiet our souls, practice attention, and wait patiently for the light to find us in our “wise passiveness.”

## NOTES

1 The essay is collected in Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, translated by Emma Craufurd (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1951), 105-116. For more information about Weil’s life, see the fine biography by one of her friends: Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

2 The patient learning process Weil is describing often takes place outside of a school setting, when the learner can access or generate the right sort of questions to ask about a text, problem, or object.

3 Weil, *Waiting for God*, 110.

4 *Ibid.*, 111.

5 *Ibid.*, 112.

6 *Ibid.*, 113.

7 Weil’s philosophy and theology are heavily indebted to Plato. For a fine collection of articles on those metaphysical underpinnings, see E. Jane Doering and Eric O. Springsted, eds., *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

8 Weil, *Waiting for God*, 111 (*italics added*).

9 *Ibid.*, 111-112.

10 Miklos Veto, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, translated by Joan Dargan (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 31.

11 Weil, *Waiting for God*, 108.

12 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, translated by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge Classics, 2002 [1952]), 116.

13 Weil, *Waiting for God*, 105.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Ibid., 112.

16 Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1957), 3-4.

17 Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Image Books, 1963), 29.

18 Weil, *Waiting for God*, 113.

19 Ibid., 107.

20 Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 119.

21 Weil, *Waiting for God*, 108.

22 Ibid.

23 William Wordsworth, "Expostulation and Reply," *The Complete Poetical Works* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1888), [www.bartleby.com/145/ww133.html](http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww133.html) (accessed November 18, 2015). This poem should be read with its companion poem in the same volume, "The Tables Turned," [www.bartleby.com/145/ww134.html](http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww134.html) (accessed November 18, 2015).

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# 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.**

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**P**atience 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....”<sup>1</sup> 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).<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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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.”<sup>4</sup>

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.”<sup>5</sup>

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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> The point that Eliot is making in *Four Quartets* is complex, but when I read it as a

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**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.**

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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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

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...<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

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.”<sup>15</sup> 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](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html) (accessed November 15, 2015).

2 Scripture texts marked NAB are from the *New American Bible, revised edition* © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC, and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

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](http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/08/tinder-hook-up-culture-end-of-dating) (accessed November 15, 2015).

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

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

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14 Ibid.

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



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restrictions,  
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*Christian Reflection*.

**Despite Satan's assaults, intense physical and emotional pain, and the mockery of his wife, Job patiently maintains his faith amidst the shadows of the candle.**

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# The Patience of Job

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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French Baroque artist Georges de La Tour presents the confrontation between Job and his wife (Job 2:9-10) as a private and difficult moment between the couple. Satan has “inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head” (2:7). At Job’s feet is the potsherd he has scraped over his skin to relieve the itching caused by those sores or for self-mortification. And now Job’s wife taunts him: “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.” She is telling him to commit suicide (or what some scholars consider a form of euthanasia) because things have gotten so bad for him. Job’s proverbial patience is apparent when he responds that she is a foolish woman and declares, “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” (2:9).

This painting—from La Tour’s mature period when he preferred biblical narratives—is a keen observation of the relationship between the husband and wife. They are clearly in conversation as the wife speaks and gestures with her left hand. Job looks up at her with an anguished and direct stare.

Like this biblical couple who had seven sons and three daughters (Job 1:2), La Tour and his wife Diane Le Nerf had an abundance of children—possibly nine. La Tour spent almost his entire life in Lunéville, near Nancy, in the duchy of Lorraine.<sup>1</sup> Although La Tour is now considered one of the four most important painters of his era (along with Nicolas Poussin, Claude Lorraine, and Louis Le Nain), he was forgotten in the scholarship until 1915.<sup>2</sup>

La Tour’s characteristic use of light, originating from a single internal source, is a variation of tenebrism as used by Caravaggio, a contemporary and influential Baroque painter from Italy. Like many of La Tour’s paintings, this one has a spiritual quality inherent from the intense candlelight. Despite the assaults of Satan, the accumulating effects of physical and emotional pain, and the mockery of his wife, Job maintains his faith, patiently and humbly, amidst the shadows of the candle.

## NOTES

1 Michel Sylvestre, “La Tour, Georges de,” *Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), [www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T049527](http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T049527) (accessed November 11, 2015).

2 “LA TOUR, Georges de,” *Benezit Dictionary of Artists, Oxford Art Online* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), [www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/benezit/B00105038](http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/benezit/B00105038) (accessed November 11, 2015).

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The salient qualities of Christ's patience in the Garden of Gethsemane are highlighted in this painting attributed to Matthias Stomer.

*Matthias Stomer (c.1600-c.1650), CHRIST AT THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE (n.d.). Oil on canvas. 60" x 78" (post-restoration). Gemaeldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany. Photo: bpk, Berlin / (Gemaeldegalerie, Staatliche Museen) / (Joerg P. Anders) / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*



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# Christ's Patience in the Garden

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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Filled with anxiety about his painful and humiliating death and his decision to accept it, Christ went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray (Luke 22:39-45). There he modeled patience. The theologian Christopher Vogt identifies four salient qualities of Christ's patience in the garden. First, his patience seeks to avoid suffering if possible, but endures it if necessary. Second, it rests on a sense of Providence, or of divine purpose. His patience can be interpreted as having a limited autonomy. Finally, Jesus shows a connection between patience and the love of his disciples that is a social virtue.<sup>1</sup> The first two qualities of Christ's patience are highlighted in these paintings attributed to Matthias Stomer and Jacopo Marieschi.

Stomer, a Baroque painter from Utrecht, the Netherlands, who traveled to Rome for study and stayed in Italy, and Marieschi, a Venetian Rococo painter, both depict Christ in prayer before an angel with a cup. This is a direct reference to Luke 22:42-44: "'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.' Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground."

Matthias Stomer may have been a student of Abraham Bloemaert (1566-1621) in Utrecht and he went on to study with Gerrit van Honthorst (1592-1656) in Rome. He was influenced by the dramatic lighting and gestures in the paintings of Caravaggio. He traveled and worked throughout Italy, with commissions in Rome (where his home is documented), Messina, Naples (several documented church commissions), and Palermo. He died in Sicily.<sup>2</sup> Stomer became part of the group known as the Utrecht Caravaggisti. Although very little is known about the artist's life, we do know that Don Antonio Ruffo, the Duke of Messina who was the patron of Rembrandt and Artemisia Gentileschi, purchased three of Stomer's pictures between 1646 and 1649.<sup>3</sup>

In this *Christ at the Garden of Gethsemane* attributed to Stomer, the characteristics of the Caravaggisti are present. Jesus and the angel are set in the foreground against an almost black background. Stomer probably used a

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Jacopo Marieschi (1711-1794), *CHRIST ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES* (n.d.). Musei Civici, Padua, Italy. Photo: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

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child on the streets of Rome or Sicily for his model to create this urchin-like angel. The angel is disheveled and points to the cup, which creates a strong diagonal between Christ and the cup. According to Vogt, the cup represents one's portion or destiny that comes from God; it might be a symbol of either bounty and salvation, or divine retribution and punishment. In this instance, Jesus is offered a cup from God that entails suffering and death.<sup>4</sup>

The artist used *chiaroscuro*—strong contrast between light and shade—to heighten the drama of the scene. For instance, Christ wringing his hands simultaneously in prayer and anxiety, is emphasized by the tenebrist light. Soldiers are visible in a small area to the right of Christ in anticipation of what will happen next in the passion narrative. Christ's prayer is answered by the appearance of an angel who gives him strength to endure the suffering and to embrace the divine purpose.

The second scene, *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, is attributed to Jacopo Marieschi. Even less is known about Jacopo than Stomer. Scholars agree that Jacopo was born and died in Venice. There is a considerable amount of confusion between Jacopo and the landscape painter Michele Marieschi (d. 1743) that began as early as the end of the eighteenth-century.<sup>5</sup> Jacopo was very

active in the Venetian Academy of Painting, where he became a professor in 1755 and was nominated for president in 1776.<sup>6</sup> He was considered a "history painter" and taught life-drawing classes.<sup>7</sup> Many of his paintings remind the viewer of the color palette used in the *Cinquecento* Mannerist style. He displays the accuracy that comes from drawing from life, which for the Mannerists was important aspect of an artist's "academic" education.

This composition is split in half by a tree in the middle of the painting. The left side contains Christ and an angel bearing both a cup and a cross. On the right side, the approaching soldiers are in the upper quadrant while the disciples sleep in the lower right corner. Christ is robed in the colors traditionally used in the Renaissance and Mannerism for the Virgin Mary – a red garment with a blue mantle.

Once again, Jesus' prayer is answered by an angel who offers the cup to him. Its meaning is suggested by the cross placed prominently across the angel's shoulder. Through patient prayer Christ solemnly accepts the cup of sacrificial suffering that he discerns to be God's will.

## NOTES

1 Christopher P. Vogt, *Patience, Compassion, Hope, and the Christian Art of Dying Well* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 103-127.

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3 Leonard J. Slatkes, "Stom, Matthias," *Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), [www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T081526](http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T081526) (accessed November 11, 2015).

4 Vogt, 103.

5 Ralph James, *Painters and Their Works: A Dictionary of Great Artists Who Are Not Now Alive*, volume 2 (London, UK: L. Upcott Gill, 1897), 175. Some sources state that Michele was Jacopo's father, while others say Michele was a contemporary landscape painter born in 1710 who followed in the tradition of Canaletto. For more information on Michele Marieschi, see Filippo Pedrocco, *Visions of Venice: Paintings of the 18th Century* (London, UK: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 148-173.

6 Federico Trastulli, "Marieschi, Jacopo," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 70 (2008), [www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/jacopo-marieschi\\_%28Dizionario\\_Biografico%29/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/jacopo-marieschi_%28Dizionario_Biografico%29/) (accessed November 11, 2015).

7 Giovanna Nepi Sciré, "Aspects of Cultural Politics in 18th-Century Venice," in Jane Martineau and Andrew Robison, eds., *The Glory of Venice: Art in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 60-67.



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## ❖ Other Voices ❖

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For where God is, there too is his foster-child, namely Patience. Whence God's Spirit descends, then Patience accompanies him indivisibly.

**TERTULLIAN, *OF PATIENCE*, XV (THIRD CENTURY)**

[Tertullian's *Of Patience*] is the first treatise in the history of the church on a specific virtue, and the choice is significant. Not only is patience explicitly mentioned in the Scriptures,...but it was not considered a virtue by the ancients. Cicero and Seneca had written admiringly of the virtue of endurance, by which they meant perseverance in adversity, but said nothing about patience as Tertullian understood it.

Tertullian had in mind what the King James translation of the Bible called "long suffering," an attribute of God, as in the phrase, "slow to anger": "The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression" (Numbers 14:18). The first epistle of Peter says that "God's patience [that is, long suffering] waited in the day of Noah" (1 Peter 3:20), and out of mercy God refrained from punishing those who had done wrong. Tertullian's claim is that patience is not confined to God. In the wisdom books, for example, this divine quality becomes a virtue attributed to human beings: "He who is slow to anger has great understanding" (Providence 14:29).

...For Tertullian, the singular mark of patience is not endurance or fortitude but hope. To be impatient, says Tertullian, is to live without hope. Patience is grounded in the Resurrection. It is life oriented toward a future that is God's doing, and its sign is longing, not so much to be released from the ills of the present, but in anticipation of the good to come. Hence patience becomes the key to the other virtues, including love, which can never be learned, he says, "without the exercise of patience."

**ROBERT LOUIS WILKEN, *THE SPIRIT OF EARLY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT: SEEKING THE FACE OF GOD* (2003)**

The Word of God is led silently to the slaughter. ...He speaks not, nor is moved, nor declares his majesty even in his very passion itself. Even to the end, all things are borne perseveringly and constantly, in order that in Christ a full and perfect patience may be consummated.

**CYPRIAN, *THE GOOD OF PATIENCE*, VII (THIRD CENTURY)**

How often we wish that God...would strike decisively, defeating evil and creating a better world. All ideologies of power justify themselves in exactly this way, they justify the destruction of whatever would stand in the way of progress and the liberation of humanity. We suffer on account of God's patience. And yet, we need his patience. God, who became a lamb, tells us that the world is saved by the Crucified One, not by those who crucified him. The world is redeemed by the patience of God. It is destroyed by the impatience of man.

**POPE BENEDICT XVI, HOMILY AT THE MASS FOR THE INAUGURATION OF HIS PONTIFICATE (2005)**

Like human friends, God's friends not only do things *for* him; they also do things *with* him. In fact, among the spiritually mature, the distinction between doing with and doing for breaks down in the case of friendship with God. For everything that we do for God is done with his aid and in his fellowship.... And this fact is perhaps especially evident when the work that we do for God requires patience. For we can be patient in him – that is, in the knowledge of his presence, in the encouragement of working hand-in-hand with the eternal one, the one with whom “one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Peter 3:8). Because our work is his work, we can rejoice in the present moment, though it is but an early stage in a difficult process that we may not live to see completed.... Each day is a fulfillment in itself, independent of visible results, to those who in Christian patience see their work as the work that God is doing.

**ROBERT C. ROBERTS, TAKING THE WORD TO HEART: SELF & OTHER IN AN AGE OF THERAPIES (1993)**

One model...of fruitful patience is the witness of L'Arche communities, where people of varied abilities and disabilities live together in committed, interdependent relations. L'Arche moves at a pace suitable to community, where people accept each other (and themselves), with strengths and weaknesses, admirable and not-so-admirable qualities, and learn how to live together. Core community members, the permanent residents, bear with the assistants, who often arrive unaccustomed to such a pace of life, and in their shared household, they practice hospitality, not for the sake of “fixing” disabilities, but as part of a much deeper change, a shift toward patience.

**KELLY JOHNSON, “GOD DOES NOT HURRY,” IN D. BRENT LAYTHAM, ED., GOD DOES NOT... (2009)**

Patience is in contrast with teeth-gritting endurance. In real patience I am at ease with myself, dwelling gladly in the present moment despite having some desire, or what would normally be a reason to desire, to depart from it.

**ROBERT C. ROBERTS, THE STRENGTHS OF A CHRISTIAN (1993)**

Perhaps the essential quality for anyone who lives in community is patience: a recognition that we, others, and the whole community, take time to grow. Nothing is achieved in a day. If we are to live in community, we have to be friends of time.

And a friend of time doesn't spend all day saying: "I haven't got time." He doesn't fight with time. He accepts it and cherishes it.

**JEAN VANIER, *COMMUNITY AND GROWTH: OUR PILGRIMAGE TOGETHER* (1979)**

I know of three (mutually and profoundly interconnected) forms of patience for confronting the absence of God. They are called *faith*, *hope*, and *love*.

Yes, patience is what I consider to be the main difference between faith and atheism. What atheism, religious fundamentalism, and the enthusiasm of a too-facile faith have in common is how quickly they can ride roughshod over the mystery we call God—and that is why I find all three approaches equally unacceptable....

Faith, hope, and love are three aspects of our experience with God; they are three ways of coming to terms with the experience of God's hiddenness. They therefore offer a distinctly different path from either atheism or "facile belief." In contrast with those two frequently proposed shortcuts, however, their path is a long one indeed. It is a path, like the Exodus of the Israelites, that traverses wastelands and darkness. And yes, occasionally the path is also lost; it is a pilgrimage that involves constant searching and losing one's way from time to time. Sometimes we must descend into the deepest abyss and the vale of shadows in order to find the path once more. But if it did not lead there it would not be the path to God; God does not dwell on the surface.

**TOMÁŠ HALÍK, *PATIENCE WITH GOD: THE STORY OF ZACCHAEUS CONTINUING IN US* (2009)**

Humility and patience are inseparable, just as are pride and impatience. They are rooted in contrasting loves, the love of self to the contempt of God and the love of God to the contempt of self. The first glories in the strength of its patience; the second knows that all strength which is admirable is a gift from God. "The true patience of the just," Augustine writes, "is from the same source as the charity of God which is in them, and the false patience of the unjust is from the same source as their lust of the world."

**DAVID BAILY HARNED, *PATIENCE: HOW WE WAIT UPON THE WORLD* (1997)**

True patience is the opposite of a passive waiting in which we let things happen and allow others to make the decisions. Patience means to enter actively into the thick of life and to fully bear the suffering within and around us.

**HENRI J. M. NOUWEN, DONALD P. MCNEILL, AND DOUGLAS A. MORRISON, *COMPASSION: A REFLECTION ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE* (1983)**

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# To Know That You Are God

BY JONATHAN SANDS WISE

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In this world of rushing noise, can we hear God's voice?  
Violent winds of weary haste, gales of greed and waste,  
hurricanes of doubt and fear drown out what we would hear.  
Still our troubled, anxious thoughts, to know that you are God.

Lord, you're not in burning greed; show us what we need.  
Filled with far too worldly cares; teach us we are heirs.  
Blinded by slick marketing, but made to serve the King:  
stir our hunger for your love, to seek you as our God.

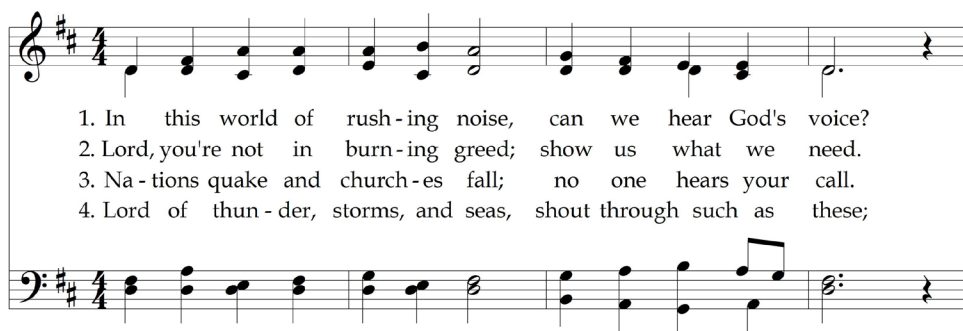
Nations quake and churches fall; no one hears your call.  
All we trust in for release fails to give us peace.  
Shake our prideful hearts again, destroy our homes on sand;  
keep us grounded on the rock of trusting you, O God.

Lord of thunder, storms, and seas, shout through such as these;  
or, as is your gracious choice, speak in softer voice.  
Help us learn with grace to see you in the least of these;  
mend our hearts through work and prayer, that we may love you here.

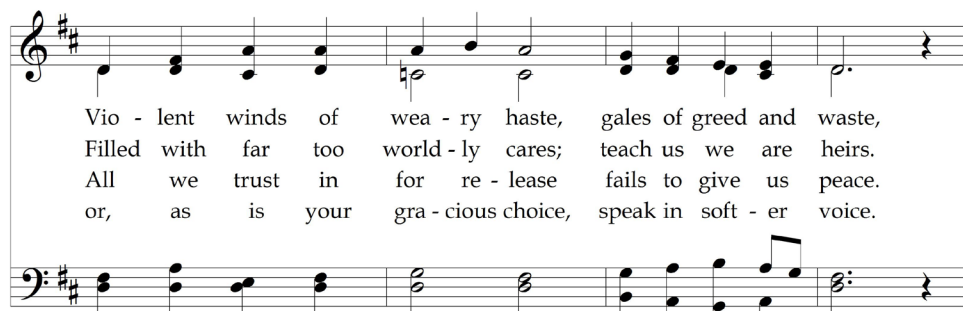
# To Know That You Are God

JONATHAN SANDS WISE

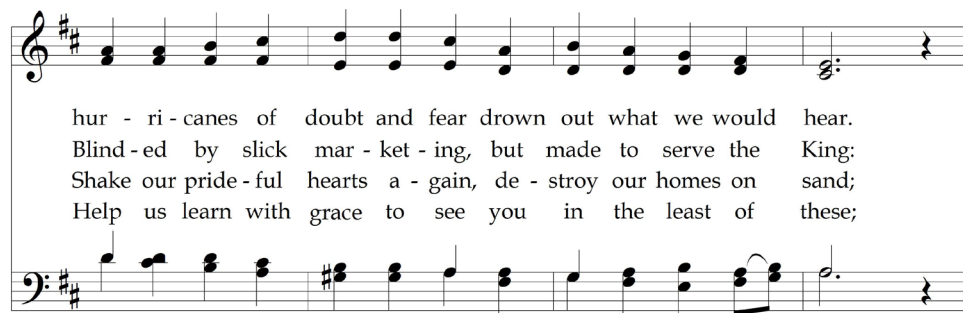
ARR. KURT KAISER



1. In this world of rush-ing noise, can we hear God's voice?  
 2. Lord, you're not in burn-ing greed; show us what we need.  
 3. Na-tions quake and church-es fall; no one hears your call.  
 4. Lord of thun-der, storms, and seas, shout through such as these;

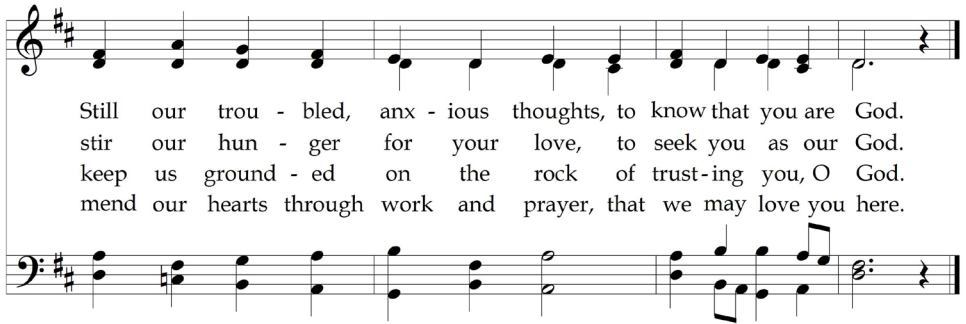


Vio-lent winds of wea-ry haste, gales of greed and waste,  
 Filled with far too world-ly cares; teach us we are heirs.  
 All we trust in for re-lease fails to give us peace.  
 or, as is your gra-cious choice, speak in soft-er voice.



hur-ri-canes of doubt and fear drown out what we would hear.  
 Blind-ed by slick mar-ket-ing, but made to serve the King;  
 Shake our pride-ful hearts a-gain, de-stroy our homes on sand;  
 Help us learn with grace to see you in the least of these;





Still our trou - bled, anx - ious thoughts, to know that you are God.  
stir our hun - ger for your love, to seek you as our God.  
keep us ground - ed on the rock of trust - ing you, O God.  
mend our hearts through work and prayer, that we may love you here.

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*Baylor University, Waco, TX*

*Tune: ADORO TE DEVOTE (arr. Kaiser)*  
12.12.13.13

# Worship Service

BY ELIZABETH SANDS WISE

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## *Prelude*

## *Silent Meditation*

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

## *Call to Worship*

This is our inheritance:

**It is hard to be attentive.**

**It is hard to be patient.**

**It is hard to wait.**

We are Noah, waiting for rain, waiting for the rain to stop,  
waiting for the waters to recede, always waiting.

**We are the Israelites, waiting and wandering in the desert.**

We are Elijah, waiting for God's voice, expecting it in the wrong places.

**We are the Psalmist, beckoning our hearts to be still before the Lord.**

We are the prodigal son, disbelieving our Father waits patiently  
for us to turn.

**We are the disciples, waiting fearfully in the upper room.**

We are believers waiting expectantly, impatiently,  
and sometimes obliviously, for Christ's return.

**But we are here, and we are waiting.**

Let us awaken our hearts to worship attentively  
as we wait for God's voice.

## Hymn

“Awake, Awake to Love and Work”

Awake, awake to love and work!  
The lark is in the sky;  
the fields are wet with diamond dew;  
the worlds awake to cry  
their blessings on the Lord of life,  
as he goes meekly by.

Come, let our voice be one with theirs,  
shout with their shout of praise;  
see how the giant sun soars up,  
great lord of years and days!  
So let the love of Jesus come  
and set our souls ablaze.

To give and give, and give again,  
what God has given free;  
to spend ourselves nor count the cost;  
to serve right gloriously  
the God who gave all worlds that are,  
and all that are to be.

*Geoffrey A. Studdert-Kennedy (1921), alt.*  
*Tune: MORNING SONG (Dare)*

## Children's Sermon

### Why Is Waiting Hard?

*Ask the children to think about times that they had to wait for something. How did it go? Were they able to wait?*

*Continue the conversation: Why do we say “I can't wait!” when something is exciting, like a birthday, a vacation, or Christmas morning? Why is waiting a hard thing to do?*

*Read the first part of Psalm 37:7 (“Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him”), and ask the children what they think it means to wait on God.*

*Conclude with a brief prayer asking God to teach us how to wait patiently.*

## *Guided Prayers of Confession*

We hear the children talk about why waiting is hard, and we realize that waiting is hard for us, too. We are impatient.

We are unwilling – or too often, simply unable – to see the rewards for waiting. We see the dividends of activity. We say, “Our time is money.” We pride ourselves on being too busy. We find our worth in activity, full calendars, and back-to-back meetings.

We hear the words of the Psalmist:

**Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him.**

But we do not wait. Sometimes it is too hard.

**Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him.**

Sometimes it is too boring.

**Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him.**

Sometimes, we tell ourselves, we simply do not have enough time.

**Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him.**

*Be still* before the Lord. *Wait patiently* for him.

*Be still.*

*Wait patiently.*

*We enter into a time of silence and personal examination to consider our schedules, our attitude toward our busy days, our to-do lists. How has your life become weighed down with distraction? In what ways has your busyness pulled you away from the attentive patience necessary for hearing God’s voice? Confess to God your impatience with waiting. Confess those distractions that make it difficult for you to be still before God.*

Hear now these words of assurance:

Because the God of Scripture is revealed to us as one slow to anger and full of compassion, we can trust that God forgives all who humbly repent and turn to Jesus. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

## *Community Prayer*

Some days, we are so distracted and busy  
that we find waiting on God to be impossible.

On other days, we feel like all we do is wait.

We wait for our children to grow up. We wait for a promotion or a new job. We wait for Christmas. We wait for retirement. We wait.  
We wait.

Impatiently, we wait.

We forget that the waiting is a season that shapes us.

And we forget that God waits on us, too.

Like the father of the Prodigal Son, waiting and watching for his son to return home,

God waits for us to turn, to return,  
to believe in the peace that comes with restoration.

Like the sower of seeds from Christ's parables,

God waits for us to take root, to bear fruit, to nourish others.

God, who came in the fullness of time,  
who knows the timelessness beyond time, waits,  
and we, in the image of God, must wait, too.

As a community seeking the kingdom of God  
within our homes, with one another,  
in the marketplace, the neighborhood, and the world,  
may we learn how to wait,  
how to be patient with stillness,  
how to keep God's eternity just under the surface,  
knowing God waits for us  
and knowing God waits with us.

Amen.

### *Silent Meditation*

You are the one who made us  
You silver all the minnows in all rivers  
You wait in the deep woods

*Anne Porter*<sup>1</sup>

### *Hymn of Assurance*

"So I Can Wait"

I know that heav'n lies just beyond  
this earthly state, this earthly state;  
that Christ himself holds death's cold wand;  
so I can wait, so I can wait.

I know the dark mysterious ways  
my feet may tread, my feet may tread  
will all be plain when heav'nly rays  
are on them shed, are on them shed.

I know the heartaches of this life  
will all be healed, will all be healed,  
when the blest peace that ends earth's strife  
shall be revealed, shall be revealed.  
I know that 'mid the world's turmoil  
God giveth rest, God giveth rest;  
his arm is round me in its toil;  
and I am blest, and I am blest.

I know that when my time shall come  
to dwell above, to dwell above,  
Jesus his child will welcome home  
with tenderest love, with tenderest love.  
His angel guards will open wide  
heav'n's pearly gate, heav'n's pearly gate;  
and I shall then be satisfied,  
so I can wait, so I can wait!

*Julia C. Thompson (1878)*

*Suggested Tunes: COVA DA IRIA or SWEET HOUR OF PRAYER*

### *A Story of Waiting*

Every congregation is made up of members who have had seasons of waiting. Some members may have experienced short- or long-term joblessness while waiting for the next step in a career. Some members have waited for weeks, months, or even years for adoptions to take place, for healing to take place, for miracles to take place.

Prior to the service, ask someone to share a story of waiting. For this particular story, select someone whose waiting has come to an end, whether or not that season of waiting is now looked back on with an awareness of the fruit that came with the waiting. (It is often helpful, especially with stories that may be personal, to encourage the storyteller to write the story out in full and read it verbatim.)

### *Unison Response: 2 Peter 3:8-9*

**But do not ignore this one fact, beloved,  
that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years,  
and a thousand years are like one day.  
The Lord is not slow about his promise,  
as some think of slowness,  
but is patient with you.**

## *Lectio Divina*

*Lectio divina, literally "sacred reading," is an early Christian practice of praying Scripture. The same passage is read aloud three or more times, with a lengthy pause between each reading. During the first reading, simply listen to the words as if you have never heard this passage before. During the second reading, place yourself in the passage and imagine what the moment felt like visually, physically, aurally. During the third reading, listen for a word from God for you today. How might God be speaking to you through this scripture passage?*

At that place [the prophet Elijah] came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying... "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him....

*1 Kings 19:9, 11-13*

## *Hymn of Response*

"To Know That You Are God"

In this world of rushing noise, can we hear God's voice?  
Violent winds of weary haste, gales of greed and waste,  
hurricanes of doubt and fear drown out what we would hear.  
Still our troubled, anxious thoughts, to know that you are God.

Lord, you're not in burning greed; show us what we need.  
Filled with far too worldly cares; teach us we are heirs.  
Blinded by slick marketing, but made to serve the King:  
stir our hunger for your love, to seek you as our God.

Nations quake and churches fall; no one hears your call.  
All we trust in for release fails to give us peace.  
Shake our prideful hearts again, destroy our homes on sand;  
keep us grounded on the rock of trusting you, O God.

Lord of thunder, storms, and seas, shout through such as these;  
or, as is your gracious choice, speak in softer voice.  
Help us learn with grace to see you in the least of these;  
mend our hearts through work and prayer, that we may love you here.

*Jonathan Sands Wise* (2016)

*Tune: ADORO TE DEVOTE* (arr. Kurt Kaiser)

(pp. 55-57 of this volume)

### *A Second Story of Waiting*

Ask a second member of the congregation to share. For this particular story, consider selecting someone who is in the midst of a waiting season. Encourage the storyteller to be honest and transparent regarding the difficulties and the rewards of waiting. It is often difficult to find hope during seasons of waiting.

### *Unison Response: 2 Peter 3:8-9*

**But do not ignore this one fact, beloved,  
that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years,  
and a thousand years are like one day.  
The Lord is not slow about his promise,  
as some think of slowness,  
but is patient with you.**

### *Hymn of Response*

“From Out the Depths, I Cry, O Lord, to You”

From out the depths I cry, O Lord, to you,  
Lord, hear my call.

I love you, Lord, for you have heard my plea,  
forgiving all.

If you did mark our sins, then who would stand?  
But grace and mercy dwell at your right hand.

I wait for God, the Lord, and on his Word  
my hope relies;  
my soul still waits and looks unto the Lord  
till light arise.

I look for him to drive away my night,  
yes, more than watchmen look for morning light.



Hope in the Lord, you waiting saints, and he  
will well provide;  
for mercy and redemption full and free  
with him abide.  
From sin and evil, mighty though they seem,  
his arm almighty will his saints redeem.

*The Psalter* (1912), #362, alt.  
Tune: SANDON

### *Sermon*

### *Communion Meditation*

When winter is over  
And all your unimaginable promises  
Burst into song on death's bare branches.

*Anne Porter*<sup>2</sup>

### *Hymn of Benediction*

"Light after Darkness"

Light after darkness, gain after loss,  
strength after weakness, crown after cross;  
sweet after bitter, hope after fears,  
home after wandering, praise after tears.

Sheaves after sowing, sun after rain,  
sight after mystery, peace after pain;  
joy after sorrow, calm after blast,  
rest after weariness, sweet rest at last.

Near after distant, gleam after gloom,  
love after loneliness, life after tomb;  
after long agony, rapture of bliss,  
right was the pathway, leading to this.

*Frances R. Havergal* (1879)  
Suggested Tunes: LIGHT AFTER DARKNESS (Sankey) or ADELAIDE

## *Benediction and Sending*

Go and be still.

Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently.

When you find yourself at the mouth of a cave,  
and all you hear is silence, lean in.

Listen, friends, for the voice of God.

For with the Lord one day is like a thousand years,  
and a thousand years are like one day.

The Lord is not slow about his promise,  
as some think of slowness,  
but is patient with you.

Go and be still.

## **NOTES**

1 These are the opening lines from Anne Porter, "The Birds of Passage," in *Living Things: Collected Poems* (Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2006), 156-157.

2 These are the concluding, eschatological lines from Anne Porter, "A Short Testament," in *Living Things*, 94.



### **E L I Z A B E T H   S A N D S   W I S E**

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# Hard Patience

BY MELINDA GREECH

In one of his so-called “terrible sonnets” or “sonnets of desolation,” Gerard Manley Hopkins confronts how very hard it is to ask for patience and to see the world from God’s perspective. Yet patience draws us ever closer to God and to his “delicious kindness.”

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**D**uring his Long Retreat of November-December 1881-1882, Gerard Manley Hopkins copied into his spiritual writings notebook this eighth “Rule for the Discernment of Spirits” from the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*: “Let him who is in desolation strive to remain in patience, which is the virtue contrary to the troubles which harass him; and let him think that he will shortly be consoled, making diligent effort against the desolation.”<sup>1</sup> Patience was to become a focus for Hopkins during the last eight years of his life, strained slowly out of the experiences of life and distilled from his attentive study of creation, other people, and spiritual writings. As Ignatius counseled, it was to be patience in the midst of desolation, and Hopkins knew a fair bit of desolation in his short forty-four years.

Growing up in a well-to-do religiously pious Anglican family, Hopkins excelled at Highgate School, London, and attended Balliol College, Oxford, receiving highest honors in both his final exams, Greats and Moderns. He converted to Catholicism during his last year at Balliol and later he entered the Jesuit order. During these early years he struggled with conflicts he perceived between his identities as priest, professor, and poet. He also lived with chronic physical pain, possibly Crohn’s disease. He enjoyed several years living and teaching in his beloved Wales in the 1870s, where some of his best known poems were written—“God’s Grandeur,” “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” “The Windhover,” and “Pied Beauty.” Then in 1883 he was transferred to Dublin to teach at University College and the Royal University of Ireland.

In “To seem the stranger,” a poem written between 1885 and 1887,

shortly after his move to Ireland, Hopkins depicted his new position: "I am in Ireland now; now I am at a third Remove."<sup>2</sup> He was removed from his family, removed from the land he loved, and even within his Catholic faith he was ostracized because he was not "born Catholic" or Irish.

In addition to finding himself emotionally estranged, his physical surroundings were also a wreck. In a letter to John Henry Newman in 1884, he described the buildings at the University as having "fallen into a deep dilapidation. They were a sort of wreck or ruin...with dinginess and dismantlement all round."<sup>3</sup> Writing to his mother the following year, he bemoaned the political situation in Ireland: "The grief of mind I go through over politics, over what I read and hear and see, in Ireland about Ireland and about England, is such that I can neither express it nor bear to speak of it."<sup>4</sup> And he described his own physical condition in a letter to her in 1888:

I am now working at examination-papers all day and this work began last month and will outlast this one. It is great, very great drudgery. I can not of course say it is wholly useless, but I believe that most of it is and that I bear a burden which crushes me and does little to help any good end. It is impossible to say what a mess Ireland is and how everything enters into that mess.<sup>5</sup>

Hopkins struggled under the constant pressure of preparing students for examinations and grading papers. Facsimiles of page after page of checks and ticks, found in his Dublin notebooks and published in Volume VII of the *Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, illustrate the drudgery of the vocation he was called to at University College and the Royal University of Ireland. Interestingly some of these pages are interspersed with bits of poetry and music, indicating the fecundity of his mind even in the darkness of his drudgery. On one page he wrote out the first lines of Shelly's "Ode to the West Wind," annotated with numbers indicating the musical meter of the lines and with solfège syllables (do re mi) suggesting a melody. On the next line he then returns to the grading checks and ticks.<sup>6</sup>

The next year, he again wrote his mother that he had contracted "some sort of typhoid."<sup>7</sup> A month later, June 11, 1889, he was dead. The bad drains of his residence, 85/6 St. Stephen's Green, are usually blamed for the infection and his subsequent death.<sup>8</sup>



It was during these final years of his life that Hopkins wrote the so-called "terrible sonnets" or "sonnets of desolation," including "Patience, hard thing!"<sup>9</sup> He described these poems as "written in blood."<sup>10</sup> He had promised his long-time friend, Robert Bridges, in 1885:

I shall shortly have some sonnets to send you, five or more. ~~Three~~ Four of these came like inspirations unbidden and against my will.

And in the life I lead now, which is one of continually jaded and harassed mind, if in my leisure I try to do anything I make no way. — nor with my work, alas! But so it must be.<sup>11</sup>

John J. Glavin proposes that “Patience, hard thing!” is the fourth sonnet that Hopkins added to the collection, upon further consideration. Glavin argues,

“Patience” is, I think, the poem that caused him to change his mind.... They [the other three terrible sonnets, “To seem the stranger,” “I wake and feel,” and “My own heart,”] know nothing of the “Delicious kindness” that concludes “Patience.” It alone inscapes [expresses] the kind of calm, the assured ease that pervades the final...tercet.<sup>12</sup>

Although Hopkins promised again and again to send the batch of sonnets to Bridges, his letters reveal that he never actually turned them over. He mentioned in a letter to Bridges three years later:

I tried to get some outstanding and accumulated sonnets ready for hanging on the line, that is in my book of MS, the one you wrote most of, and so for sending to you. All however are not ready yet, but they will soon be.... It is now years that I have had no inspiration of longer jet than makes a sonnet, except only in that fortnight in Wales.... Nothing comes: — I am a eunuch — but it is for the kingdom of heaven’s sake.<sup>13</sup>

In a letter written just over a month before his death, Hopkins sent a final poem to his friend entitled “To R. B.” and confessed

we greatly differ in feeling about copying one’s verse out: I find it repulsive, and let them lie months and years in rough copy untransferred to my book. Still I hope to send you my accumulation. This one is addressed to you.<sup>14</sup>

Hopkins died never having sent the “terrible sonnets” to Bridges, patiently holding on to them in the midst of his desolation. Bridges requested his papers from the Jesuit brothers after Hopkins’s death, and found among them the “terrible sonnets,” including “Patience, hard thing!” Bridges preserved them and eventually published them thirty years later.

Hopkins had hoped that some good use would be made of his poetry. “All therefore that I think of doing is to keep my verse together in one place — at present I have not even correct copies —, that, if anyone shd. like, they might be published after my death,” he had written to Bridges in 1879.<sup>15</sup> Two years later, in a letter to his former teacher Richard Watson Dixon, Hopkins affirmed his belief that God valued what he had written, but he felt it wiser to trust God’s providence regarding the publication of his poems. This position of patience had been his principle and practice since becoming

a Jesuit, although he admitted that “to live by faith is harder, is very hard.”<sup>16</sup>

Hopkins commended the virtue of patience to others who suffered as well. For instance, when he wrote his sister Grace to console her on the death of her fiancé in 1883, he advised:

But you are not to think, my dear, that you are somehow to be made happy some day for being unhappy this [day]: there is no sense in that. What God means is that you shall greatly gain if you will be humble and patient. And patience means that grief shall not make you exacting or selfish or in good time unfit you for ordinary duty. It has this effect on some people; it makes wrecks of them.<sup>17</sup>

In “Patience, hard thing!” written a few years later, the poet crystallizes his understanding of the virtue.

Patience, hard thing! the hard thing but to pray,  
But bid for, patience is! Patience who asks  
Wants war, wants wounds; weary his times, his tasks;  
To do without, take tosses, and obey.

Rare patience roots in these, and, these away,  
Nowhere. Natural heart’s-ivy, Patience masks  
Our ruins of wrecked past purpose. There she basks  
Purple eyes and seas of liquid leaves all day.

We hear our hearts grate on themselves: it kills  
To bruise them dearer. Yet the rebellious wills  
Of us we do bid God bend to him even so.

And where is he who more and more distills  
Delicious kindness? – He is patient. Patience fills  
His crisp combs, and that comes those ways we know.

The first quatrain begins by reiterating Hopkins’s recognition that patience is a hard thing. He had expressed in the letter to Dixon the hardness of the practice of patience and the life of faith. Much earlier, in 1864, Hopkins had used that same phrase in his poem “It was a hard thing to undo this knot,” a poem that he wrote during a college retreat in Maentwrog, Wales, an area studded with remarkable waterfalls and rainbows. This poem wrestles with the problem of perspective. Do all the people standing around the waterfall see the same rainbow? Is the rainbow only an image in their mind? Does it exist in reality? Twenty-two years later, shortly after his appointment to Ireland, Hopkins went on a two-week retreat to the same area, perhaps hiking the same trails, climbing the same mountains, or viewing the same waterfalls. It occurs to him that there is now another hard thing in his life, also involving perspective. It is a hard thing to ask for patience, to see things from God’s perspective, because he knows from experience that such

asking is praying for war, wounds, weariness, deprivation, affliction, and obedience.

In the second quatrain, Hopkins depicts the virtue of patience as rare and exquisite, like a treasure. Employing a natural image, he likens patience to ivy, with its purple berries and “seas of liquid leaves” that slowly cover the imperfections in a wall, making it beautiful.

In the next tercet, the poet turns inward, expressing how hard this patience is to endure: “We hear our hearts grate on themselves. It kills / to bruise them dearer.” Similarly in “Spelt from Sibyl’s leaves,” written about this same time, Hopkins depicted “thoughts against thoughts in groans grind”<sup>18</sup>; and in a letter to Bridges in 1885, he confessed “it kills me to be time’s eunuch” as an undiscovered and unappreciated poet.<sup>19</sup> Here he concludes that even though it would be difficult to request war, wounds, weariness, deprivation, affliction, and obedience, experiences that would produce patience, we *do* ask God to bend our rebellious wills toward him. Perhaps through this image Hopkins is playing off the concept “*homo incurvatus in se*” in Augustine, whom Hopkins called one of the most interesting writers he had ever read.<sup>20</sup> For Augustine, the rebellious human soul turns in upon itself and away from God in sin, but the poet asks God to reverse the rebellion and bend our sinful wills toward the divine patience. This echoes Augustine’s view that patience cannot be a human achievement, but must be received as a gift from God.<sup>21</sup>

Hopkins maintains the Augustinian influence and nature imagery in the last tercet. Attending to the blooms of the ivy produced from late summer to early fall, which were rich in nectar, an important food source for bees, Hopkins likens God’s work of patience to the distilling of honey by bees. They patiently store away the nectar of the flowers into honeycombs all summer, and it distills into honey. In the same way God converts patience with patience, a cooperation of his grace and our work, into “delicious kindness.” In a way, this offering of the bee is Eucharistic: we drink the honey and eat the honeycomb; his sacrifice becomes our sustenance and our joy. Hopkins ties the sonnet together in the last line reminding us that “that [patience] comes [a play on combs] those ways we know [through war, wounds, weariness, deprivation, afflictions, and obedience].”

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**For Augustine, the rebellious human soul turns in upon itself and away from God in sin, but Hopkins asks God to reverse the rebellion and bend our sinful wills toward the divine patience. This echoes Augustine’s view that patience must be a gift from God.**

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The Apostle Paul encourages believers to “glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience” (Romans 5:3, KJV). As we have seen, Hopkins experienced his share of tribulations near the end of his life, and realized, as do we, that some people are only saddened, hardened, or angered by their miseries. Yet in the midst of his suffering, Hopkins avoided despair and confirmed his Christian hope in a letter to Bridges: “I do not despair, things might change, anything might be.”<sup>22</sup> Likewise when he earlier had faced an unsettling move from scholastic Oxford to a pastorate in industrial Bedford Leigh, he expressed hope in a beautiful poem, “Peace.” He noted that while pure peace is not compatible with wars and death, patience fills in the gaps, existing in the midst of tribulations. When we are robbed of peace, the Lord leaves us patience instead, which “plumes to Peace thereafter.”<sup>23</sup>

How was Hopkins catechized in the virtue of patience? The key to his development of patience may have been his attentiveness. He was a careful observer of nature, and as evidenced in “Patience, a hard thing!,” creation was his teacher. He also paid attention to the people who crossed his path, and some of them became teachers of patience for him. Finally, he learned from the Bible and spiritual writings how to cultivate attentive patience in his life.

First, Hopkins was an exegete of creation. One of the old fathers at Stonyhurst, where Hopkins had trained for the priesthood fifty years before, was asked if he remembered the poet: “‘Ay, a strange young man,’ said the old brother, ‘crouching down that gate to stare at some wet sand. A fair natural ‘e seemed to us, that Mr. ‘opkins.’”<sup>24</sup> His attention to creation shows from the meticulous portrayal of clouds in “Hurrahing the harvest” to the tiny, intricate pencil drawings in his journals. His poetry and journals abound with careful observations of birds, waves, mountains, rivers, sunlight, fields, and trees. For instance, in a letter to Bridges in 1886, written about the time he composed “Patience, a hard thing!,” Hopkins comments:

I will back Tremadoc [a planned community in northwest Wales] for beauty against Fishguard [a coastal town in southwest Wales]. There are no myrtles, at least I have seen none, but right over the village... rises a cliff of massive selfhewn rock, all overrun with a riot of vegetation which the rainy climate seems to breathe here.<sup>25</sup>

A travel guide from 1885 describes the road to Tremadoc passing “under... a cliff—overgrown with ivy...at its foot.”<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the ivy mentioned in “Patience, hard thing!” is the “riot of vegetation” growing on the cliffs of Tremadoc—Kenilworth ivy, which flowers with purple blooms from May to November. The plants are frequented only by bees, which are attracted to its sweet nectar. In the late fall, purple berries form on long stalks that upon



maturation bend downward and plant themselves among the ivy's roots.

Could it be that Hopkins packed all these attentive observations into the lines and lessons about patience? Did the cliff remind him of the hardness of life, the ivy illustrate the role of patience, and the bees symbolize God's redemption and distillation of his and our patience into sweet honey and a resurrected hope? It is also fitting that the plant is known in Italy as "the plant of Madonna." Hopkins admired Mary, who stored up all these things in her heart (Luke 2:19), as an example of perfect patience.<sup>27</sup>

Hopkins also was schooled in patience by attending to his encounters, even passing or imagined encounters, with other people. A number of figures in his writings illustrate this attention—for example, the exiled nuns in "The Wreck of the Deutschland" patiently awaiting their death; St. Winifred, in Hopkins's unfinished play that memorializes her martyrdom; a soldier patiently performing his duty in "The Soldier," and the ultimate Jesuit "soldier for Christ," Ignatius, comforting him in his time of desolation; the people in "The Valley of the Elwy" who were "good" to him, patiently fulfilling their neighborly role.

In a notebook entry on St. Patrick's Day, 1885, Hopkins reflected on and identified with the patient example of Ireland's patron saint,

thanking God for the way he is glorified in him; his exile and sufferings, his piety and patience; his selfsacrifice and zeal; his miracles and success. Consider his hymn; it breathes an enthusiasm which as far as feeling goes I feel but my action does not answer to this. Ask his help for Ireland in all its needs and for yourself in your position.<sup>28</sup>

On October 5, 1886, having just returned to University College in Dublin from holiday in North Wales, possibly about the time "Patience, hard thing!" was written, Hopkins wrote to his mother about two examples of patience he had observed.

One was his close friend and colleague, Robert Curtis: "poor Robert Curtis was dogged from the University with letters... and with telegrams.... When day after day these afflictions fell in I used to do the cursing: he bore all with the greatest meekness." Hopkins also observed the patience of the woman who housed them on their retreat: "Our landlady [Mrs. Evans] at Carnarvon a Cheshire woman, who knew Vale Royal and Tarporley and all, some distant cousins of ours if

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**How was Hopkins catechized in the virtue of patience? The key to his development of patience may have been his attentiveness—to nature, to the people who crossed his path, and to the Bible and spiritual writings.**

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all were known, gave me instruction on patience: she had, poor soul had great troubles. As by her history appeared."<sup>29</sup>

Finally Hopkins learned patience by attending to spiritual writings. Certainly, Ignatius's guiding words about the value of patience in time of desolation, copied into his spiritual journal, guided Hopkins's difficult years in Ireland. As a Jesuit priest, Hopkins likely prayed the hours of the Roman Breviary — the eight daily meditations composed of scripture readings, hymns, prayers, and writings of the Church fathers — and these frequently address patience. There he would read "...amid the trials of this life we must ask for *patience* rather than for glory"; "...be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in *patience*"; "whatsoever things were written aforetime, were written for our learning, that we through *patience* and comfort of the Scripture might have hope"; and "In your *patience* possess ye your souls."<sup>30</sup> We can be reasonably sure that Hopkins prayerfully read such passages about patience daily, at least while he taught at John Henry Newman's Oratory, and perhaps for his whole life. It is likely that these words guided his thinking, corrected his living, and shaped his poetry.

Gerard Manley Hopkins practiced attentive patience, learning from spiritual writings, creation, other people, and from God who is Patience, and storing away little kindnesses. Patience, the "hard thing," crystallized into "crisp cones," and the "crisp cones" filled with "delicious" sweetness. Today, we can rob the hive and savor the honey of his words as a remedy for our own troubled souls.

## NOTES

1 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Christopher Devlin (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1959), 204.

2 Gerard Manley Hopkins, "To seem the stranger lies my lot, my life," lines 9-10, *www.bartleby.com/122/44.html* (accessed November 23, 2015).

3 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins: Volumes I & II: Correspondence 1882-1889*, edited by Catherine Phillips and R. K. R. Thornton (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), II.660.

4 *Ibid.*, II.715.

5 *Ibid.*, II.942.

6 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins: Volume VII: The Dublin Notebook*, edited by Leslie Higgins and Michael F. Suarez, S. J. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 103.

7 Hopkins, *Collected Works*, II.995.

8 *Ibid.*, II.996.

9 The "terrible sonnets" or "sonnets of desolation" were probably written in the summer of 1885 or perhaps as late as the spring of 1886. Hopkins revised them until September 1887. The order of their composition cannot be determined, but the poems are commonly said to include: "To seem the stranger," "I wake and feel," "No worst," "My own heart," "Carrion Comfort," and "Patience, hard thing!"

10 Hopkins, *Collected Works*, II.736.

11 *Ibid.*, II.743.

12 John J. Glavin, "'The Exercise of Saints': Hopkins, Milton, and Patience," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language: A Journal of the Humanities*, 20:1 (Spring 1978), 139–152, here citing 147.

13 Hopkins, *Collected Works*, II.914. I propose that this "fortnight in Wales" may have provided Hopkins with his inspiration for "Patience, hard thing!"

14 *Ibid.*, II.990.

15 *Ibid.*, I.333.

16 *Ibid.*, I.502.

17 *Ibid.*, II.580.

18 Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Spelt from Sibyl's leaves," line 14, [www.bartleby.com/122/32.html](http://www.bartleby.com/122/32.html) (accessed November 23, 2015).

19 Hopkins, *Collected Works*, II.744.

20 *Ibid.*, I.379.

21 In a short treatise on the virtue of patience, Augustine explains, "There are those who attribute it to the powers of man's will, not those which men have from Divine assistance, but from their own free will. This is an arrogant error." See Augustine, "Patience," in *Saint Augustine: Treatises on Various Subjects*, The Fathers of the Church Series, 16, translated by Mary Sarah Muldowney (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1952), 428.

22 Hopkins, *Collected Works*, II.744.

23 Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Peace," lines 8-9, [www.bartleby.com/122/22.html](http://www.bartleby.com/122/22.html) (accessed November 23, 2015).

24 Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Humphry House and Graham Storey (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1959), 408.

25 Hopkins, *Collected Works*, II.803.

26 Mounftord John Byrde Baddeley, *North Wales (part 1): Chester, Rhyl, Llandudno, Bangor [etc.]* (London, UK: Dulau & Company, 1884), 163.

27 For many examples of Mary's connection to creation, see Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The May Magnificat," [www.bartleby.com/122/18.html](http://www.bartleby.com/122/18.html) (accessed November 23, 2015).

28 Hopkins, *The Sermons and Devotional Writings*, 260.

29 Hopkins, *Collected Works*, II.806.

30 We do not have the breviary used by Hopkins and his notes in it. Yet we know the breviary used by his older friend and mentor, John Henry Newman (1801-1890). Hopkins greatly admired Newman, seeking his advice when making his conversion to Catholicism and teaching Greek and Latin at Newman's Oratory School upon graduation from Balliol. He wrote a birthday letter to Newman every year of his life beginning in 1873 and served as a Greek and Latin professor in the school in Ireland that Newman had begun thirty years earlier.

The quotations above are from John Henry Newman, "On the Roman Breviary as Embodying the Substance of the Devotional Services of the Church Catholic," *Tracts for the Times* #75 (London, UK: Rivington, 1840), 106, 138, 179, and 200; italics are added.



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# 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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# Waiting to Eat

BY TAYLOR SANDLIN

**True community in the family of God requires that we wait on one another. Few things in worship help us learn that lesson like the practice of the Lord's Supper in all of its inefficiencies.**

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**W**hen I was growing up, my family rarely depended upon fast food for the evening meal. Usually my mother cooked. As the food began to make its way to the table, she would call us to come and eat. Once seated, getting to the food took some time. We would pass the various dishes from one person to the next, making sure everyone was served. After each member of the family had received their share of the evening's fare, we would bow our heads to say grace. Only after my father had said "Amen" could we begin to eat.

The slowness of the process frustrated me. I was a hungry young boy ready to eat. I did not grasp the value of waiting for others to be served. For me, mealtime was about the consumption of food. For my parents, mealtime served as an opportunity to shape their young boys into the kind of people who could function in polite society. Looking back, I recognize my mother and father were teaching us so much more.

At the table we learned to give and receive. At the table we learned to offer thanks for God's good gifts. At the table we learned how to ask for things we needed, but also, how to do so politely. At the table we learned to be patient with each other as we waited for our turn to take a piece of chicken. At the table we learned how to be kind to the person next to us, even if we would rather that person be someone else. At the table we learned what it means to be included and to include. In other words, at the table we learned to live together as a family.

The Lord's Table served the same purpose for the Apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 10, he references the Lord's Table when he calls the Christians in Corinth to live more faithful lives as the family of God. In the next chap-



ter, he turns his attention directly to their practice, or rather malpractice, of the Lord's meal. Paul was not at all happy with how the wealthy Christians in Corinth were observing the Lord's Supper. Indeed, he warns them, "When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat" (11:20). Problematically, when the Corinthians came together, they did not actually come together. They were divided primarily along socio-economic lines. The wealthy members started the service early in the evening before the poor members finished with work! When the poor finally arrived, they were limited to eating leftovers in the outer courtyard while the rich people continued to party inside.

Paul expresses his frustration with the Christians in Corinth by offering them a remedial course on the Lord's Supper. Recalling the events of the Last Supper, he writes that they have missed the point of Christ's meal. The Lord's Supper is not about self-indulgence or meeting one's individual needs. The Lord's Supper is a communal meal designed to shape the community. If the entire community is not included, it is not the Lord's Supper that a church eats. Paul's correction, "Wait for one another" (1 Corinthians 11:33), sounds like my mother's. Paul understood that the table serves as a practice run for the rest of life. If we cannot wait for each other there, we likely will not wait on or serve each other anywhere else.

Waiting on others has never been easy, but today it may be more difficult than ever. In a world of fast food and fast-paced families, the admonition to wait for one another seems farfetched. Meals are grabbed on the go. One child eats before football practice. Another eats after ballet. Life becomes about what is efficient, not necessarily about what is good. Individuals get fed, but the family does not.

Church families fall into the same trap. The practice of the Lord's Supper is anything but efficient. It does not seem to have the immediate effect of a clever sermon or emotion-stirring song. In a world that constantly boasts of faster, more efficient service, the Lord's Supper, when it is done well, remains excruciatingly slow. As a result, many congregations do not know what to do with it. Some observe it only rarely. Others tack it onto the end of a service and condense it into as short a time as possible. I know of one congregation that pushes it out of worship altogether: it offers a room outside of the worship center where individuals who wish to serve themselves Communion can do so at their leisure. Such a supper is efficient, but it is not the Lord's Supper that they eat. It is only the Lord's Supper if we eat it together as the people of God.

Christ commands us to eat together in remembrance of him for many reasons, but one of them is to remind us that the gospel he brings is not a gospel of efficiency. Christ's sacrifice unites us not only to God our Father, but also to one another as the family of God. Families are almost never efficient. True community requires that we wait on each other in worship and outside of it as well. Few things in Sunday morning worship help us learn

that lesson like the practice of the Lord's Supper in all of its inefficiencies. Services that are streamlined and efficient tempt me to focus on my desires without considering others. By slowing us down, the practice of the Lord's Supper invites us to consider our neighbor's needs as well as our own.

A member of my congregation reported her experience at a sister church. The deacons got a little confused while passing out the bread so that

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**Services that are streamlined and efficient tempt me to focus on my desires without considering others. By slowing us down, the practice of the Lord's Supper invites us to consider our neighbor's needs as well as our own.**

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it was unclear if everyone had received a piece. The pastor, a patient soul, simply paused the proceedings and asked, "Has everyone been served? Do not worry about speaking up. We will wait for you to get the bread. We will not continue until everyone has been served." The waiting took several more minutes. The service came to a screeching halt. Because the organist had stopped playing, you could hear the

deacons shuffling around making sure everyone had a piece of bread. Everything became awkward and self-conscious, as though someone had hit the pause button on the worship service. At the same time, my church member said it was one of the most meaningful Lord's Suppers she had ever experienced. "The waiting on one another," she recalled, "felt right and holy. By the time we ate, we ate not as a collection of individuals, but as the family of God."

My friend shared this story with me, in part, because our church has made a concerted effort to observe the Lord's Supper more frequently. The move has not been an easy one. We have had our share of awkward moments. Serving several hundred people the bread and the cup takes time. Sometimes the service runs long. To date, though, I have not had a single complaint. I think that is because we are discovering some visions of God come only to those who wait.

I know that the waiting is good for my soul. As the pastor, I am used to being able to control the pace of the service; but once we begin the Lord's Supper, the service is largely out of my hands. I must wait on others to finish before the service can continue. Waiting on others helps me see those who are at the table with me. I see people like Erwin slowly making his way up to the front with his walker. The line builds up behind him, but no one seems to mind. We know that when he eats the bread and drinks the cup he is thinking of the day when he will eat this meal in the kingdom of God with Jesus, the saints, and his sweet wife Lena, who died last year. I see

Mary Kate who was baptized just last week. She is nervous about what to do. This is her first Communion. Her mom leans over and whispers in her ear. She eats the bread and cannot help but smile. I see Jan and Steve. I know they have been struggling in their marriage, but also know how much effort they are putting into working things out. I wait on each of them, wondering how the bread of reconciliation might nourish them this week.

One by one, the people of God take their turns. We wait on one another, patiently. Slowly, we are coming to understand, the table is more than a place we gather to eat the body of Christ. We gather here to be the body of Christ. To be the body of Christ takes time, so we wait, we see, we eat. We wait some more, and we are blessed.

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# Where Does the Time God?

BY L. ROGER OWENS

**How have we become addicted to speed, to having what we want right now? Is the ever increasing speed of our world good or bad? And if it is bad, what can we do about it? The three books reviewed here take up these questions in very different ways.**

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I knew when I left for work this morning that a closed bridge would increase the traffic on my usual route. My preferred alternate route had road construction and a detour. So I consulted my Google Maps app on my iPhone, which proposed a third route — a mile shorter and, at least today, seven or eight minutes faster than either of the other two. I gladly went Google's way.

Popular wisdom says our lives are speeding up and we have technology to thank or to blame. If life is speeding up and becoming more efficient, shouldn't we have more time for relaxation and to pay attention to our lives and the lives of those around us? But we don't. We endure longer commutes to work longer hours, spending less time enjoying leisurely meals with our families. How did we get here and where do we go next? Is the ever increasing speed of our world good or bad? If it is bad, what can we do about it? The three books reviewed here take up these questions in very different ways.

Mark C. Taylor, a professor at Columbia University, has written an at times maddeningly a-linear book: *Speed Limits: Where Time Went and Why We Have So Little Left* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014, 396 pp., \$22.00). While the subtitle suggests Taylor will tell a simple story, his account ranges through the history of theology, the industrial revolution, modern-day capitalism, and global climate change. The book ends with a doomsday scenario: "The growth and speed required to maintain growth are fast approaching the tipping point, which threatens not only economic and financial systems but also the conditions of human life on earth" (p. 330).

Far from telling a simple story about how individuals and families are pressed for time, Taylor wants to show how technology and speed have brought us to the brink of catastrophe.

His story begins with Martin Luther. Luther's challenge to the Catholic Church created the modern subject and the conditions for modernity's fixation on speed: privatization, decentralization, deregulation of economic structures, and literacy. What started as a protest against what Luther viewed as a corrupt economic and theological system, created the structures for the invisible hand of Adam Smith's capitalism to displace the invisible hand of God. The stage was set for modernity's rapid acceleration.

The road from Luther to what Taylor believes is our current unsustainable hyper-efficient but irrational capitalism passes through the Industrial Revolution. Two things happened in the Industrial Revolution that set the stage for today. The first was the development of scientific management whose obsession with efficiency dramatically increased production. The second, less often noted, was the "burst of new technologies" (p. 80) that sped up and made efficient the dissemination, storage, and retrieval of "immaterial flows," that is, information and eventually capital. These technologies, including blotting paper and the filing cabinet, "created a revolution in the production, reproduction, storage, and searching of data and information that was every bit as transformative as the changes taking place in workshops and on factory floors" (p. 81).

This transformation was so important because money became one of these immaterial flows and the rapid searching of data, now done by massive computing power, made possible the current capitalist system that deals less in material production and more in the trading of financial fictions like securities in a fraction of a second—the very system that made possible the financial meltdown of 2008. "[T]oday's algorithmic trading has completely changed financial markets and, by extension, is transforming the world" (p. 243).

The reason is this: our financial system has become an "emergent complex adaptive network [ECAN]" (p. 249). There are a number of features to these systems, but Taylor focuses on the way these networks "are distributed and not subject to any centralized control mechanism" (p. 252). When that distributed nature is combined with the instability of speed, volatility becomes endemic and complete collapse becomes possible. He writes that, as an ECAN, "the market, which emerges from the activity of individual investors or increasingly different algorithms, loops back to nudge them toward endpoints of which they are not always aware" (p. 253). One such nudge—whether we are talking about the ECAN that is the global financial system or the ECAN that is the global climate—can push the whole system over a disastrous cliff.

This doomsday scenario seems a far cry from answering "where time went and why we have so little left." Taylor's real concern is how techno-

logical speed is changing human brains, our financial systems, and our world – and not for the better.



If Mark Taylor breathes the rarified air of the philosopher, Judy Wajcman, a sociologist at the London School of Economics, comes down to earth to study technology and speed where it really matters – in the ordinary lives of human beings. Her book *Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015, 215 pp., \$24.00) questions the perceived wisdom that our lives are speeding up by looking at how technological innovation actually functions in people’s ordinary lives.

One of Wajcman’s chief aims is to cast doubt on what she calls “technological determinism” – the story of the unidirectional and thus deterministic influence of technology on our lives, the belief that the acceleration of time is *caused* by advances in technology. I suspect she would charge Taylor with falling prey to this myth without examining the data. As a sociologist, examining the data is exactly what she does.

The other question she seeks to answer is the question of a temporal paradox: *If life in digital capitalism is speeding up, why do we feel like we have less of it?* On the basis of her own research, along with her examination of the research of others, she argues that the answer to the myth of technological determinism is the answer to the paradox of speed.

For example, Wajcman takes on the seeming verity that people are working increasing hours, partly because technology has made us accessible 24/7 and blurred the boundaries between home and work. The picture, she suggests, is more complicated. Research has shown that individual work hours have not increased in the last few decades, but the “widespread perception that life has become more rushed...has as much to do with real increases in the combined work commitments of family members as it is about changes in the working time of individuals” (p. 66). Furthermore, the perception that parents spend less time with children is caused not by objectively less time but the cultural pressure toward more intense parenting. The sense that we are increasingly harried with less leisure time comes from what she calls increased “temporal disorganization” and “temporal density” – the increased difficulty of “coordinating social practices” with others (p. 74) and the attempt to do many things at the same time. Far from being caused by technology, Wajcman argues that technologies like iPhones can actually help in managing temporal disorganization and density.

For Wajcman, technology impacts our lives but that impact is influenced by the way we adopt and shape the technology in our lives. The washing machine, for example, did speed up washing clothes; but then we used the washing machine in a way that raised the expectations of cleanliness, so women were doing laundry more often. The mutual influence of the technology and its use in our lives creates the time paradox: things speed up, but we feel like we have less time.

All of this means, for Wajcman, that we are not at the mercy of these machines. New slow movements are not the answer, neither is moving off the grid, both of which assume technological determinism. Rather, we can use and shape new technologies in ways that improve our lives and do not just accelerate them.



Taylor tells an interesting if sometimes hard to follow story from thirty-thousand feet. Wajcman looks at the details of that story as they happen on the ground in people's ordinary lives. Paul Roberts offers a different take on the story. Writing with a journalist's clarity and felicity in expressing complex ideas, Roberts's book *The Impulse Society: America in the Age of Instant Gratification* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014, 308 pp., \$28.00) synthesizes his research to tell the story of how we became an "impulse society," what impact that has had, and what we can do to fix it.

In our impulse society, as Roberts sees it, a culture of production has turned into a culture of consumption where the "gap between wanting and having, between who we are and what we love" is approaching zero (p. 60). What we consume, primarily, are means of self-realization. We have become unfettered from the kinds of community strictures that might temper our wanting, so that we believe we should have whatever will fulfill us, and we should have it *now*. Roberts calls this "therapeutic consumerism" (p. 26), and it is at the heart of the impulse society.

The hyper-individualism and instant gratification of the impulse society is paralleled in the financial economy. There was a time, Roberts argues, when corporations took care their employees, their chief asset, invested in dependable products and long-term innovation, and shared profits with workers. The "shareholder revolution" of the 1980s, when deregulation made it increasingly possible for a company's share price to be the sole determiner of the company's value, allowed keeping the price high for the shareholders to become a company's *raison d'être*. Shareholders and CEOs, now compensated with shares of the company, became impatient for short-term profits at the expense of long-term investment and innovation. The same drive toward instant gratification that possessed individuals had come to dominate the market.

The results of the growth of this impulse society has been dramatic and largely negative. One consequence is that myopic business plans aimed at increasing short term-profits by reducing wages have left labor in the lurch. "But just as consumers had been enabled by innovation to pursue their own interests independently from the larger society, companies, too, had discovered how to use innovation to separate their own fortunes from those of their workers" (p. 154). A more serious consequence is our current polarized politics. "Political parties operate like well-funded public relations firms while voters are encouraged to treat politics as another setting for self-expression, identity creation, and emotional fulfillment" (p. 200). Political parties have

harnessed the efficiency of micro-targeting, which, while effective at getting the right message to the right people, contributes to the country's growing ideological ghettoization.

One of the appeals of this work is the way it displays an almost Augustinian account of contemporary society both in the individual and in culture writ large: the market takes advantage of the "bottomless psyche of the consumer" (p. 25), offering what the consumer wants as cheaply as possible but denying the consumer a share in the profits of that consumption, the majority of which goes to the endless appetites for wealth of the shareholders.

When looked at this way, Roberts's own proposals for healing the impulse society—change the way we measure GDP, institute campaign finance reform, end brand politics—all have the feel of too little too late. Because, at least for Augustine, the heart curved in on itself—an apt description of the impulse society—does not have the willpower to turn itself outward.



My commute home today, whether it is fast or slow, will give me the chance to ponder further these things—how, for example, the healing from our addiction to speed might happen if our wills have become too used to having what they want right now. One thing none of these authors imagines is the possibility of counter-cultural communities, not just slow-movement communities that separate from wider society, but communities like churches woven throughout the culture that in their practices of liturgy and work of patiently observing the Christian year, in their seasons of anticipation and repentance, might have resources on which to draw to save some from the addiction to speed and instant gratification and leaven our culture in a positive way.

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# Toward a Slow-Enough Church

BY SARAH KLASSEN

The books reviewed here are about patience, but they also describe the kind of relational presence that patience can facilitate with God and with one another.

In these connections are echoes of intimacy with creation, neighborhoods, and the Body of Christ through the ages.

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As an athletic child growing up in the rural Midwest, winter nights were filled with basketball. My dad drove me all over central and south central Kansas to watch the most talented high school girls basketball players in the state, and then I would go home and climb a ladder into the emptied out hayloft of our white, wooden barn, and I would reenact what I had seen. For hours and hours I would practice under that tin roof. Over the years, nets frayed and once-dimpled basketballs were worn smooth, and ever so slowly my basketball abilities grew. It seemed like there was never a difference in my skill from one day to the next, but when I compared sixth grade and seventh grade to eighth and ninth, it was apparent that the practice was doing its magical work.

Decades later in our now incessantly connected world, the desire for instant gratification looms larger than it used to. In the world of basketball, children compete at younger ages and have access to nonstop, year-round competitive leagues and personal trainers. Still, regardless of how many personal lessons you take and no matter the number of games you play, to make free throws, you still have to *practice* free throws.

To practice something is to take the long view, to extend one's horizon of time well beyond today or tomorrow and perhaps even beyond one lifetime or two. Despite many tempting shortcuts toward the good life, virtues are the same as free throws. They require practice.

The three books in this review offer us theological reflections and historical musings on the necessary patience at the heart of Christian life. Even more, they provide concrete contemporary practices that draw us deeply into a more intentional and communal life of faith.



There's an appealing, old-school style to the way Philip D. Kenneson talks about patience in his short essay, *Practicing Ecclesial Patience: Patient Practice Makes Perfect* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013, 26 pp., available for free download at [www.ekklesiaproject.org/publications/pamphlets/](http://www.ekklesiaproject.org/publications/pamphlets/)). He begins with an imagined comment from his mother after he explains to her the slow food movement: "I think I hear what you're saying, dear, but that just sounds like *plain old food* to me" (p. 1).

"Plain old church" is the same. As multifaceted as it may be today, the church's role in the world is always tied to the "patient work of God" (p. 2), and Kenneson reminds us that when it comes to cultivating Christian patience, we are headed toward something old, rather than something new.

Kenneson's theology here is thoroughly relational in orientation. He firmly believes that God's greatest gift is the gift of presence, but he reminds us again and again that relationships (divine and human) take time. This is why patience is fundamental to the Christian life. Slow down, he says. Distrust urgency. Take the long view. Let mystery do its work. He explains,

Receiving God into our lives, as well as offering ourselves to God; receiving another person into our lives and offering our lives to them; making room in our lives to take in the beauty and wonders of the created order and offer ourselves in turn to its care—all of these unfold slowly, over time. None of them can happen at the break-neck speed at which all of us are encouraged to live. (p. 3)

After introducing these theological parameters, Kenneson offers three habits (or dimensions) that develop more faithful presence within us. *Abiding* "involves being with and remaining in another" (p. 5); *devotion* is "giving ourselves to another" (p. 7); and *attention* "involves an intense and focused openness to another" (p. 9). The quality of presence we cultivate through these three virtues emulates the depth of God's presence with the world.

Next, Kenneson provides us with practices that allow us to mature into these virtues—such as praying, weeping with those who weep, stopping, and eating together. These practical suggestions are not profound except in their accessibility and simplicity. In the section on stopping, for instance, Kenneson mentions the theological worth of sleep, and asks poignant, personal questions including my favorite: "What does it say about my life...if I can't make it through the day without a rather sizeable influx of stimulants?" (p. 18).

The virtues and practices described in this pamphlet are understood to be countercultural, imminently feasible, and wholly rooted in a theocentric

vision: "The patient work of God goes on every day, all around us, but because it so often is quiet and unassuming, it's easy to miss" (p. 24). Our proper response is to notice and join that work.

While we are right to be skeptical of movements that uncritically yearn for the good old days, Kenneson uses the lenses of patience and presence to recover aspects of a pre-digital, pre-globally connected world. He invites us to join with the patient work of God through our own attentive presence. For anyone beginning to think about Christian patience, this pamphlet, originally a plenary address of The Ekklesia Project, is an excellent starting point.



Jeffrey L. Bullock's well-organized, succinct survey of Christian patience, *Practicing Christian Patience: Encouraging Community, Establishing Peace* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2014, 95 pp., \$14.00), takes us several steps deeper into Scripture, tradition, and history. He begins the short volume by describing patience as a virtue defined and supported by nothing less than Scripture. The text moves readers through biblical samples and early church perspectives, including brief summaries of four church fathers: Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine, and Gregory the Great. The book concludes with descriptions of Christian patience today for both theory and practice.

Bullock initially brings patience into view through a narrative lens, contrasting the story of capitalism with the story of Christianity. The free market story operates in crisis mode and encourages self-interest, urgency, and personal success. In direct contradiction, the Christian story's lengthened horizon of time provides those within it the ability to turn outward, consider others first, and trust that God's sovereignty transcends time itself. Virtues embedded in each of these stories function (often subconsciously) to shape those who occupy the narratives.

In chapter one, Bullock unmask the subliminal virtues of this "age of impatience" (p. 12), and he invites the Church to practice Christian patience instead. Patience "gives us the time to unravel tangled relationships" and restore "all creation to be right with God" (p. 17). As Augustine reminds us, our Christian aim and end are measured by the eschaton and nothing more temporal will do (p. 59).

In a brief biblical survey, Bullock's strongest work is with Pauline texts that speak directly to early Christians about how to be community. He also invokes Isaiah's suffering servant theme and the patient suffering of Jesus on the cross. However, feminist, womanist, and liberation thinkers offer an appropriate critique of patient suffering from the perspective of the oppressed, which Bullock is remiss in his failure to mention.

Several themes weave through the book. First, patience is fundamentally relational (as Kenneson noted). It is a necessarily communal practice and a virtue that, for Bullock, is intrinsically tied not only to God's reconciling work but to the revelation of God in Trinitarian form. Second, patience originates

from God, which shows in the way God relates to creation. Patience is bound together with God's generous grace and is "the cornerstone of God's justice" (p. 69). Finally, patience is only patience when it is lived, enacted in the narratives of our own lives and the lives of our congregations. This happens both interpersonally and liturgically as "worship dramatically illustrates patience at work in our lives through the cycle of the liturgical seasons" (p. 79).

Bullock concludes the book with three stories of Christian patience at work. The true stories resonate beyond their particular contexts as they articulate common human experiences: a family's struggles with mental illness; the long, slow work of community change; and a church navigating conflict around deeply held beliefs about homosexuality. In the end, Christian patience is not only a virtue to be admired and believed, but a virtue to be practiced and lived within the messiness of this world.



C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison's title – *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014, 247 pp., \$16.00) – clearly presents their thesis: a slower, more patient church is precisely the kind of authentic, holistic church needed today.

The authors are laypeople, self-proclaimed amateurs pursuing their great passion for the Church and the practicing of their faith "separate from any compensation (money, fame, career) that could come from it" (p. 20). Indeed, their passion and the depth of their commitment are present throughout this accessible and enjoyable read.

Like both Kenneson and Bullock, Smith and Pattison depend upon a countercultural frame to set the long, slow work of faith apart from the hurried tenor of today's world. Unlike Kenneson and Bullock, they directly and continuously engage the culture that they also critique. Today's world (and too often the American church) is plagued by "McDonaldization," a phrase sociologist George Ritzer describes in four dimensions: efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control (pp. 13-14). Their favorite ecclesial examples of "McDonaldization" are megachurches and the underlying philosophies of the church growth movement, which are a direct contrast to the slow church calling. The Slow Church is rooted in individual neighborhoods, works against uniformity, and emphasizes spiritual formation over numbers. By contrast, the church growth model relies on homogeneity, presents a static vision of church life, and focuses on quantifiable results.

Throughout the book, the authors introduce readers to pithy phrases that capture a constellation of concepts in a fresh way: "crisis of hypermobility," "culture of impatience," "stingy vision," "mythology of scarcity." Furthermore, the categories they use to describe a relevant and faithful church are both fresh and easy to grasp. Their final chapter on "Dinner Table Conversation as a Way of Being Church" reframes an ordinary daily event and imbues it with theological meaning: "We challenge you to imagine

what our common life would look like if it were centered around (a) eating together at the table and (b) the slow, Eucharistic conversation that convivial feasting encourages" (p. 209).

I am unsure of the link Smith and Pattison make between patience and Jesus. Jesus was often rather impatient and insistent, at times even breaking longstanding relationships by insisting that one make an immediate decision to follow him. When offering images of patience, there are other, more biblically resonant models in the Christian tradition and Scripture (see the examples cited by Bullock). This small blip does not detract from the immense practical resources the authors offer clergy and laity alike. Each chapter is centered on a theme (for example, stability, wholeness, Sabbath, and gratitude), and each chapter includes basic history and Scripture that round out a holistic sense of the authors' perspectives on those topics.

This book is the most engaging of the three works. Its authors employ a range of conversation partners, quoting Shakespeare and G. K. Chesterton, the Rule of Benedict and Parker Palmer, Tertullian and fictional Ron Swanson of the sitcom *Parks and Recreation*. At the end of each chapter, several reflection questions ask readers to apply the concepts to their own lives and communities. Not only is this book accessible and practical, it is entertaining. I recommend it for book clubs and study groups as well as personal reading.



At one level, these three texts are about patience. At a deeper level, they describe the kind of relational presence that patience can facilitate. Each emphasizes connection with God and with one another, and within these two primary connections are echoes of intimacy with creation, neighborhoods, and the Body of Christ through the ages.

This trio of works has more similarities than differences. They are unapologetically theocentric: all begin with the slow, enduring, and reconciling work of God as a primary theological starting point. They all present their story of patience as a foil to powerful contemporary cultural forces. In complementary ways the three remind us that the work of the Church is old, ancient work and should be built upon uncomplicated virtues. And finally, the calling to patience for today's church takes cultivating and tending. In other words, our patient work as people of faith takes practice, just like free throws.



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