



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Hard Patience
(*Attentive Patience*,
pp. 67-75)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Difficulty and Beauty
of Patience
(*Attentive Patience*,
pp. 76-79)

What do you think?

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

Christian Reflection

Institute for Faith and Learning
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97270
Waco, TX 76798-7270
Phone 1-254-710-4805
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2016 Institute for Faith and Learning

Hard Patience

In one of his so-called “terrible sonnets,” 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.”

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Romans 5:3-5

Meditation

Patience, hard thing! the hard thing but to pray,
But bid for, Patience is! Patience who asks
Wants war, wants wounds; weary his time, 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 distils
Delicious kindness? — He is patient. Patience fills
His crisp combs, and that comes those ways we know.

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)

Reflection

For many of us, the Apostle Paul’s encouragement to “glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience” (Romans 5:3, KJV) is difficult to understand and even harder to embrace. We know too many people who, when confronted with suffering, succumbed to sadness, anger, and despair.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins “experienced his share of tribulations near the end of his life” and struggled with the spiritual dangers they invited, Melinda Creech writes. Yet in a letter to his longtime friend Robert Bridges, Hopkins confirmed his Christian hope. He had gained a valuable insight, Creech notes: “When we are robbed of peace, the Lord leaves us patience instead, which ‘plumes to Peace thereafter.’”

Creech traces Hopkins’s mature understanding of the Christian virtue of patience in his sonnet, “Patience, hard thing!”

- ▶ It is *hard to ask God for patience*, Hopkins notes in the first quatrain. That is because the virtue is not teeth-gritting endurance, Creech explains, but coming “to see things from God’s perspective,” to experience the world’s brokenness expressed in such things as war, wounds, weariness, deprivation, and affliction, and yet to obey God’s leading.
- ▶ Yet, *patience is a treasure*, Hopkins affirms in the next quatrain. “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,” Creech writes. It is like the Kenilworth ivy he had admired on cliffs above Tremadoc, Wales. Known as “the plant of Madonna,” this ivy is associated with Mary, whom the poet esteemed for her patient obedience to God.



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, is Senior Scholar in The Institute for Faith and Learning at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2016 Institute for Faith and Learning

- ▶ *Allowing God to transform our rebellious wills requires patience*, he notes in the next tercet. Clearly patience must be a gift, not a personal accomplishment. Repenting and asking God to deal with our sin is like the heart grating on itself.
- ▶ *The patience we seek is exemplified by God*. The poet likens God to a bee working unwearyingly over the ivy. "God converts patience with patience, a cooperation of his grace and our work, into 'delicious kindness,'" Creech explains. "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." The last line reminds us "that [patience] comes [a play on combs] those ways we know [through war, wounds, weariness, deprivation, afflictions, and obedience.]"

The patience which Hopkins sought he exhibited through hopeful commitment to his work and confidence that his poetry would be appreciated. "The key to his development of patience may have been his attentiveness," Creech suggests. "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."

Study Questions

1. Why, according to Gerard Manley Hopkins, is seeking the virtue of patience so difficult? If it is so hard, why would a person pray to develop patience?
2. How is the virtue of Christian patience a participation in the divine patience?
3. Review how Hopkins was catechized in patience by his close attention to nature, his encounters (real and imagined) with other people, and spiritual writings. Can you identify similar teachers in your experience?
4. According to Carolyn Blevins, when we face intense personal suffering and grief, why is it so difficult to be patient with oneself, other people, and God?

Departing Hymn: "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 or ADELAIDE

Hard Patience

Lesson Plans

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

Teaching Goals

1. To explore how Gerard Manley Hopkins depicts the difficulty and beauty of Christian patience in “Patience, hard thing!”
2. To examine how personal suffering can be an opportunity to develop and exhibit patience.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Attentive Patience (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Light after Darkness” locate one of the tunes LIGHT AFTER DARKNESS or ADELAIDE in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/) or Hymnary.org (www.hymnary.org).

Begin with a Story

Though Gerard Manley Hopkins, S. J. (1844-1889), is now recognized as one of the greatest English poets of his time, his distinctive style—he called it “sprung rhythm”—was not embraced by his contemporaries and his poems were not published during his lifetime. The final six years of his life were especially isolated and difficult. He suffered chronic pain (possibly from Crohn’s disease), and served in a lonely, drudging assignment as professor at University College and the Royal University of Ireland in Dublin. In a poem titled “To seem the stranger” he complained, “I am in Ireland now; now I am at a third Remove.” As Melinda Creech explains, “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.”

Hopkins’s depression is evident in six poems from this period, the so-called “terrible sonnets” or “sonnets of desolation,” which were discovered after his death. One of these, “Patience, hard thing!,” reveals the poet turning a spiritual corner. Creech commends it for Hopkins’s insight into the relation between personal suffering and developing the virtue of patience.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God, even in the midst of our difficulty and suffering, to draw us closer to him and to one another through attentive patience and hope.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Romans 5:3-5 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Before the meeting, ask a group member to prepare to read aloud “Patience, hard thing!” with understanding.

Reflection

This study explores the difficulty in seeking Christian patience and the great beauty of this virtue in the context of personal suffering and grief. Consider how much biographical background members will need to appreciate

Gerard Manley Hopkins's sonnet. Use Carolyn Blevin's article to focus on the dimensions of patience with oneself, others, and God.

Study Questions

1. Hopkins realizes that to have the virtue of patience is "to see things from God's perspective" – which is to say, to face and understand the world's brokenness, eschew false hopes, and not fall into patterns of avoidance. "It is a hard thing to ask for patience," Melinda Creech explains, "because [Hopkins] knows from experience that such asking is praying for war, wounds, weariness, deprivation, affliction, and obedience." Obedience to God's way is the hardest aspect of patience. In Hopkins's own life, having patience meant seeking and embracing God's perspective on his ambitions as a poet, work as a professor, and commitment to the ministry of the Jesuits.

The beauty of patience, according to Hopkins, is twofold. First, "Patience masks / Our ruins of wrecked past purpose"; perhaps by this elusive phrase he means the new perspective *replaces* our rebellious goals with a divine purpose, or that it *reveals* God's gracious dealing with those goals. Also, patience brings us closer to God, for "He is patient."

2. We *benefit from* the divine patience; our salvation is due to God dealing patiently with us. Thus, Creech suggests the final tercet is a Eucharistic image: the honey, the "delicious kindness" distilled by the divine patience, is presented to us as "our sustenance and joy." Also, our patience *comes to imitate* the divine patience; our "times" and "tasks" become sacrificial efforts on behalf of those around us, as our wills are bent to God's will. This last point is important. Christian patience is not abusive subservience to other people's whims; rather, it involves discernment about and alignment with the divine purpose for our lives.
3. Form three groups to explore how Hopkins learned patience from three sources: his close attention to nature, his encounters (real or imagined) with other patient people, and his study of certain spiritual writings. (Regarding the first, notice how Hopkins learns patience by his attending closely to natural systems to appreciate their intricate beauty, and by noticing certain slow workings of those systems.) Invite each group to share how they have learned patience from these sources. Ask members if there are other ways that they have been catechized in patience.
4. When Carolyn Blevins suffered many heavy losses at once—her mother-in-law's passing, her mother's medical emergency, and her thirty-two-year-old daughter's murder—she began to learn much about patience. Form three small groups to report on why Blevins struggled to be patient *with herself* (for example, she found it hard to like herself after the changes caused by suffering; it was hard to practice forgiveness toward the murderer), *with others* (e.g., for being unable to identify with her suffering and encourage her), and *with God* (for seeming slow to heal her). This conversation may stir difficult emotions and memories in some members. Invite them to share, as they will, their own struggles with being patient in the midst of suffering and grief.

Departing Hymn

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