

Shaped by the Spirit: The Fruit of Life with God— Patience

By Frik Kruger

Patience is defined by Biblical scholar Christopher Wright as:

- The ability to endure for a long-time whatever opposition and suffering may come our way, and to show perseverance without wanting retaliation or revenge.
- The ability to put up with the weaknesses of others (including other believers), and to show forbearance toward them, without getting quickly irritated.

How do we grow in patience? How do we grow in the ability to hold on even in suffering?

We grow in patience by reflecting the light of the God who is patient

Genesis 1 says we are made in God's image. Sin has fractured our reflection of that image.

But God loves us too much to leave us in the broken state. Through Jesus' sacrifice we can have right relationship with God and receive the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:38).

It is the work of the Spirit in us, restoring that reflection, that grows us in patience. C.S. Lewis wrote "we are mirrors, whose brightness, if we are bright, is wholly derived from the sun that shines upon us."

Patience as a Characteristic of God

Exodus 34:5-7 describes God as long-suffering. The prophets reveal a God who does judge, but that judgment comes after a long period of forbearance (see Micah 7:18-19).

God suffers in His waiting for us to return to Him and His ways (see Jeremiah 31:20). Jesus demonstrated this in His patience to His disciples, even the one who betrayed Him. God is patient towards the end as well, even holding back the final judgment hoping for more people to repent (see 2 Peter 3:8-9).

God holds on even during suffering, He holds on to His love for us even when it hurts Him.

Reflecting God's Patience

Patience is for the real world. Romans 5:1-5 says:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Patience in God's way is holding on even in suffering. Holding on to our faith and what God shows us is right even when it costs us (see James 5:7-11).

Jeremiah is an example of patience. He prophesied for 40 years asking Israel to change its ways, even though no one would listen to him (see Jeremiah 7:27). He could do this because God was with him (see Jer. 1:18-19).

Job is another example of patience. He was a wealthy man who lost everything but still didn't curse God for it (see Job 1:21-22). Being patient doesn't mean we aren't real about suffering, Job was. But it means we trust God even in our suffering.

1 Peter 4:12 warns us that we should not be surprised when fiery trials come upon us to test us. When we suffer for the faith, are persecuted, suffer in our mental or physical health, or suffer uncertainty, God calls us to be patient.

How do we reflect God's patience?

We hold on in suffering by relying upon the work of the Spirit restoring the reflection of God in our lives. Seeking God's will, reading Scripture and praying, being in community, loving God and our neighbors. Especially those neighbors who irritate us.

These are not works to earn salvation. Dallas Willard once wrote: "Grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning. Earning is an attitude. Effort is an action. Grace, you know, does not just have to do with forgiveness of sins alone."

Like plugging in an old kettle in a cabin to boil away stains and bugs, we must stay plugged in to the Spirit to be refined and cleansed.

An amazing example of patience, of holding on even in suffering, is Nelson Mandela. He was imprisoned for 27 years for the work of trying to reconcile South Africa and end apartheid. As he left prison, he wrote "As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison."

Mandela maintained a strong Christian faith, even though he wasn't public about it. It was the work of the Spirit in his life that allowed him to hold on even through suffering.

May we learn to do the same.