

If you haven't yet opened your bible or app to Nehemiah chapter 9, go ahead and do that, and as you do, I want you to think about the word 'patience.' What comes to mind when you hear that word? Maybe your brain goes to time when you witnessed an amazing demonstration of patience. There's probably a good chance your thoughts immediately go to times in your life where your patience fell short. Some of you hear the word 'patience' and you're transported to a freeway, with bumper-to-bumper traffic at a standstill. Others think of the waiting for your turn at the DMV, doctor's office or trying to find the shortest line at the grocery store so you can get out of there. Here's where my mind goes...

Piggly Wiggly in KY (I wasn't very patient)

Very often, when we think of patience, we think of it in the negative: impatience. And that makes sense to me because, generally, we aren't very patient. We live in a 'hurry up!' culture. Everything needs to be done *now*. Parents with little children often find themselves yelling something like, "Let's go!" That doesn't mean we're never patient. I mean, we *can* be...at times...on occasion. When you're dating someone, you tend to be a little more patient—a little less hurried. Grandparents can be more patient with their grandkids than they were with their own kids.

Patience is hard for us. And that's why I think our time talking about what God's like today has the potential to reset and reshape us when it comes to patience.

God is Patient

Too often, we relate to God as if He were like us—as if His kindness were as slight as our kindness, His forgiveness as reluctant as our forgiveness,

His patience as fleeting as our patience¹ and that clouds our understanding of what God's really like. Fortunately, His ways are not like our ways and His thoughts are not like ours (Isaiah 55:9). So, when I tell you that God *is* patient, you can know that's *who He is*. I'm learning patience. He defines it; He's displaying it. He's not working on it. He *is* patient. It's who He is!

Here's something I want you to note before we go too far. God's patience is always aimed at people. Men, women, boys & girls. Us. His patience is not directed at situations or circumstances. God never needs to be patient about things that happen because He knows all things. He knows what's going to happen, so nothing catches Him off-guard when He stands in line at the Piggly Wiggly.

What God's patience is

God's patience is an extension of His mercy and love. And God's patience is a constant reminder that His wrath will not be put off forever. In fact, it seems God's patience is one of the things that we're studying in this series that may come to an end. And when it does, Jesus, the righteous Judge, will return and God's wrath will be finally and fully poured out. Like we talked about a few weeks ago, once Jesus returns in judgment, it will be too late for people to repent and be saved. God is patient and His patience is an invitation to repentance.

So, what is it? The original languages of the Old & New Testaments give us a twofold description of God's patience (sometimes we see the words forbearance or longsuffering). One part of God's patience highlights God's merciful restraint and slowness to get angry. It's describing how long it takes for His anger to boil. In other words, God is *emotionally calm even when provoked*. He's cool as a cucumber—even when you poke Him in the eye (which we've all done).

¹ Hubbard, Scott. "Slow to Anger: The Beauty of God's Perfect Patience" [desiringGod.org](https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/slow-to-anger), <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/slow-to-anger>

Nehemiah 9:17-18 (and a bunch of other places throughout the Old Testament²) describes God's patience. Take a look at that with me. [READ] *"They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, **slow to anger** and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, 'This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,' or when they committed awful blasphemies."* Nehemiah is rehearsing Israel's history and God's amazing patience with them. The English phrase 'slow to anger' is the Hebrew word for 'patience.'

The first part of the description of God's patience underscores His restraint and slowness to anger. The other side of the coin emphasizes God's willingness to withhold judgment to give people more time to repent, place their faith in Him and be saved (from His wrath).

Take a look in your bible at 2 Peter 3:8-9. For context, people are scoffing and denying that there is a Christ or that He's coming back because everything continues to drag on day after day, just as it always has. The sentiment is kind of like, 'Well, where is He? He hasn't come back because He isn't gonna. Live however you want because God isn't gonna stop ya.' And this is Peter's response, [READ] *"But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."*

God's timetable is not the same as ours. We're impatient when the microwave takes too long. But God is patient waiting centuries, even millennia, while His plan unfolds. Basically, Peter is saying, 'Don't think that the reason our Lord has not yet returned is because He is slow in

² More 'slow to anger' examples: Exodus 34:6, Numbers 14:18, Psalms 86:15; 103:8; 145:8, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2

keeping His promises. You need to know that He is patient toward you and everyone else. He wants to give every man, woman and child as much time as possible to repent...³ God is giving people time to turn it around.

He's delaying Jesus' second coming because He wants to give people who have rejected Him time to fix that. If you are not yet a Christian, this is precisely what the Lord is doing for you. The reason you're still alive is so you can have another opportunity to get right with Him. That's how much He loves you. That's how merciful and good He is. He doesn't want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. Let that rattle around in your head and heart this morning. God has given you time...don't waste it.

So, God's patience is a two-parter: His restraint with slowness to anger and His desire to withhold wrath to give people more time to repent. This doesn't sound like an angry, spiteful God to me. This doesn't sound like a God who is eager to for people to go to hell. This sounds like the good, kind, gracious, merciful, loving God who's giving people every opportunity possible to get right with Him and be saved. That's what God's patience *is*.

What God's patience is not

Here's what it *isn't*. God's patience is not passivity; He is not indifferent, apathetic or impotent when it comes to our sin. He is not a pushover or a wimp. His forbearance doesn't mean that He's okay with sin, it just means He's willing to give a chance for repentance. Also, God's patience is not permission for us to continue in our sin. You know how people are: if you don't get caught the first time, the second time is even easier.

Ecclesiastes 8:11 says, "When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, people's hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong." Some mistakenly believe that since God doesn't wipe us out the moment we mess up, that He never will. That's a tragic misunderstanding of His

³ Fickett, Jr., Harold L. *Peter's Principles: from 1 and 2 Peter* (Regal Books, Glendale, 1975), 216.

patience and we'll talk more about that in a few minutes. God is holy, righteous, just—and patient. His patience is an invitation to repentance.

God's Patience in the Bible

As you read your bible, you'll notice God's patience all over the place, starting in Genesis. God was patient with Adam & Eve (there were consequences to their sin, but He didn't wipe them out). He was patient with sinful humanity before the flood (that 120 years while the ark was being built was 120 years of opportunity to get right with God!⁴). God was constantly demonstrating patience toward His chosen people, Israel, even when they chose to follow other (little "g") gods, worshipped idols, rejected God's chosen leader, failed to take the Promised Land when they had the chance, intermarried with godless nations in direct disobedience to God's command and the list goes on. There were so many times when it must have seemed a better idea to God to just start over, but He was reminded that He is 'slow to anger' and chose *not* to wipe Israel out and start fresh with Moses.⁵

Many of you remember Jonah and his reluctant mission trip to Nineveh. God was going to wipe them out, but the people repented! God's patience made all the difference. (Ultimately, Nineveh went back to their old ways and turned their backs on God. In the end, Nineveh was in ruins and the Assyrians disappeared from history.)

When Jesus came, most of the Jewish people refused to believe that He was the promised Messiah. They didn't want to hear it. But God didn't unleash His righteous wrath in the moment—He was patient. He was patient as the church began and they were trying to figure out who was 'in' and who was 'out,' what things were 'necessities' and what things were 'optional.' The Apostle Paul was regularly run out of town, beaten, arrested or narrowly escaped with his life because the people didn't want to repent and turn to God.

⁴ Genesis 9:11-17

⁵ Numbers 14:10-20

God is slow to anger...He resists allowing His anger to boil because He doesn't *want* to punish. He *wants* everyone to have time to repent. His patience is an invitation to repentance.

Patience in Person

Now, let's talk about Jesus. Colossians says, "The Son is the image of the invisible God...For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Colossians 1:15; 2:9). So, when we see Jesus, we see God. Right? In Jesus we see the love of God. We see His kindness, His mercy, His righteousness and goodness. And when we see Jesus, we see the patience of God in person. When Jesus came humanity saw the God who is 'slow to anger,' face-to-face. For the first time, Patience walked among us. Jesus is patience in person.

This is how deeply committed God is to giving everyone the opportunity to be saved. Jesus lived, loved and served people everywhere He went. And, living with them meant bearing with them⁶—think forbearance. He was light in the darkness, perfection in the presence of sin, kindness and gentleness amidst anger and greed. His life and ministry clearly demonstrated how much God loved them, wanted to be in relationship with them and what it would take to do that. He lived among them, healed them, fed them, wept over them and, ultimately, died for them...for us!

Think about the Christ's patience as He took the beatings, the punches, the thorns, the mocking, the nails, the death that we deserved—satisfying God's righteous judgment against humanity so that we could have the chance to repent and be forgiven. Jesus took all of that and never fought back. He could have called legions of angels to His aid, but He didn't. He patiently took it all.

⁶Luke 9:41

One writer says, "In the cross of Jesus, we see not only *that* God is patient, but *how* God can be so patient. How could He, 'in his divine forbearance,' pass over former sins—and how can He, in his divine forbearance, continue to show us mercy? Because the patience of God, in the person of Christ, purchased our forgiveness."⁷ He didn't have to offer a way out. But He did! And, for clarification, if Jesus didn't come, live, die, rise again and return to the Father, we're toast. We're still dead in our sins and trespasses. We're still guilty. We have no hope because we can't fix it! BUT because of everything Jesus did, we have hope and can made right with God by grace through faith.

Every single person listening to my voice who is following Jesus, is a recipient of God's patience and not just for how you lived *before* you knew Christ; He's patient with you today. If we're honest, there are times when we deliberately sin, and other times we may sin without knowing it. But God is patient and, since our sin has been taken care of through the finished work of Jesus, like it says in Psalm 103:10, He does not deal with us as our sins deserve.

Christ's Delayed Return

When Jesus came the first time, it was to make it possible for us to be forgiven and free so we wouldn't have to bear God's wrath and spend eternity separated from Him. That's God's patience. But when Jesus comes again, He's bringing righteous judgment; divine wrath will be poured out (opening up a can of *whoop-wrath*). Now, here's where it gets interesting: In His patience, the Father is delaying Christ's return (and the eternal judgment that goes with it) to give people a little more time to repent. That's what Peter is saying in 2 Peter 3. God has promised that Christ *will* return, and final judgment is coming with Him. Those who have trusted Christ will be saved and don't have to worry, but those who have not trusted Christ will face His eternal judgment. In His patience, the Father has delayed Christ's return.⁸

⁷ Hubbard. Ibid.

⁸ Only the Father knows the timing...Matthew 24:36, Mark 13:32

Unfortunately, those who are still far from God mistake God's patience for weakness or indifference. They think that He won't do anything about sin because He doesn't really have a problem with it, so there's nothing to worry about. 'If sin is such a big deal to God, He'd snuff it out the minute it happened.' This flawed line of thinking encourages people to continue to live like there is no God, refusing to receive the gift of His grace and forgiveness. Here's the comedy: if their mistaken thinking was true, then none of us would be here because God would have already snuffed us out! But, because God is patient, we have hope. God is delaying Jesus' second coming because He wants to give people who have rejected Him time to fix it. If you're not yet a Christian, this is precisely what the Lord is doing for you. You're still breathing, so you still have a chance to get right with Him. That's how much He loves you. God has given you time...use it wisely. His [God's] patience is an invitation to repentance.

Patience toward us

When I think about how I lived before I got connected with Jesus, it's a miracle that I'm alive with all the stupid things I did. And it's a miracle that God didn't just take me out. Here's how bad I was: after I became a pastor, I ran into one of my ex-girlfriends and, after apologizing for being a *terrible* boyfriend, I told her that I'd become a Christian and was now a pastor. Her response was perfect, "You're a pastor? *At what kind of church?*" Fair enough!

But God's patience isn't just for the unbeliever, is it? It's also for those who've been walking with Jesus for a week or a lifetime. Think about the ways that God has been patient with you, before and since you were saved by grace through faith. Take a moment to write down your thoughts in your notes. I'll give you some ideas: He's been patient not only in your blatant sin and rebellion, but in your anxiety and insecurity about whether He really loves you or if He's really good or trustworthy. He's patient with the countless questions and handwringing over decisions to be made or directions to go. He isn't angered or bothered by your insecurity. When you fall short as a spouse or as a parent, He

doesn't flip His lid. He isn't functioning at a low boil because of your ignorance or irrationality. He's patient because that's who He is.

For those of you who haven't yet received God's gift of salvation, maybe you didn't know that He was being patient *with you*. Let me encourage you to take advantage of the opportunity He's given you to repent. He loves you. He wants you to spend eternity with Him. He wants to adopt you as His own, relieve you of your guilt and clean your conscience.⁹ If you'd like to embrace all that God has for you, come talk to me when we wrap up or fill out one of those connect cards and check the box at the bottom that aligns with what you're thinking. You can bring it to me or drop it off in one of the black boxes in back. I'd love to follow up with you and pray for you. Remember, His patience is an invitation to repentance. Don't waste it.

Patience in our Lives

Because of God's patience toward us, we get the chance to be patient with others. I think it's safe to say that, if we were God, we would have grown impatient with people just like us a *long* time ago. We are often quickly and easily offended and our attitude towards those who annoy us can be pretty spicy. But God calls us to be patient with others and in life's trials. Patience is a Fruit of the Spirit—a maturing growth within us that is the direct result of being a child of God, indwelt and empowered by His Spirit. So, if you're hoping to cultivate patience in your life, stay close to Jesus and He will grow it in you. You can't grunt and groan and dig deep to make it happen—it's spiritually developed—and the only One who can grow it in you is Jesus. Imagine what your relationships would be like if you were more patient—genuinely patient—not inwardly impatient with a cool exterior. If patience is a struggle or a growing edge for you, continue to stay close to Jesus and daily surrendered to His leadership. Open the sails of your life so His Spirit can fill them to lead and guide you. I'm more patient than I used to be, but not as patient as I want to be. I've got to stay

⁹ Hebrews 10:22

close to Jesus and be willing to let Him do His good work in me every day.

One last piece for you to consider before we wrap up: Since God's patience is an invitation to repentance, then we need to take advantage of every opportunity to share the gospel with others so they can have the chance to repent, place their faith in the grace and finished work of Jesus and be saved. In Matthew 28, Jesus was very clear that we are to make disciples, but we'll never have the chance to do that if we don't first share the gospel. Don't make it a project, friends. Just love people—and when they ask why you're so pleasantly different—tell them about Jesus and what He's done in your life.

Wrap

I'm glad that God is not like me—that would not be good. I'm grateful that He is patient because, if He wasn't, He would have wiped me out ages ago, and He would have been absolutely right to do that. But His patience was my invitation to repent, and boy was He patient. That's *our* story, friends. This is how author Scott Hubbard summarizes God's patience in our lives, "In Christ, your life...tells a story of divine patience. God was patient with you as you wandered from him – scorning his Son, treasuring sin, scarcely giving him or his gospel a thought. He *is* patient with you now, as you daily find need for forgiveness. And he *will be* patient with you tomorrow, and the next day, and until the day of Jesus Christ, when he finally finishes the good work he's begun."¹⁰

As we get ready to go, I want to issue a challenge for all of us who know and walk with Jesus: May we be bold in sharing the gospel, knowing that God is being patient, inviting people to repent. May we stay close to Jesus, cooperating with Him moment by moment as He cultivates His patience in our lives. And may we be generous with patience toward others, just as He has been generous toward us.

¹⁰ Hubbard. Ibid.