

“Heavenly Virtues - Patience”

Job 4:1-2, 7-8; 38:1-4; 40:1-2

“Patience is bitter, but its fruit is sweet.”

–Aristotle



Are you a patient person? I often marvel at how silly we are when we get distressed because we picked the wrong line at the supermarket. But some waiting brings real suffering. Have you ever been impatient waiting for test results from your doctor? That anxiety is real – and that is the key to understanding the deeper, truer meaning of patience. Here is Karen Swallow Prior on patience:

That “suffering” is the meaning of the root word for patience is made clear by the fact that we also use the word patient to refer to someone under medical care. The patient is someone “suffering” from an ailment—not merely waiting. Patient shares the same root as the word “passion,” which also means “suffering.” Someone who has a passion—a passion for music, a passion for soccer, a passion for a person—suffers on behalf of that love. When we speak in the church about “the passion of Christ,” it literally refers to the suffering of Christ on the cross on our behalf. The overlap between the words suffering and patience can be seen in another meaning of both words: “permit.” When Jesus said, “Suffer little children . . . to come unto me” (as Matthew 19:14 is rendered in the King James), he meant “permit” them to come. And when we speak of women’s suffrage, we refer to women being permitted to vote. The word permit in these contexts suggests willingness; the willingness to endure suffering is the meaning of the word “patient.” The expression “the patience of Job,” describing the great test of faith Job underwent in the Bible, refers to Job’s suffering, not merely his endurance. As connected as patience is to suffering, it is no wonder that, as theologian N. T. Wright points out, we “applaud patience but prefer it to be a virtue that others possess.”¹

Like all the virtues, patience is the mean between an excess and a deficiency. Patience keeps our anger from running away with us to an unrighteous wrath. Anger is the proper response to injustice and other wrongs, but our anger can quickly accelerate until we are committing wrong ourselves. Conversely, a deficiency of patience is seen in apathy, sloth, and disinterest. Being patient does *not* mean we do not care!

A portrait in suffering and patience

The “once upon a time” story of Job is simple. He lives in the land of Uz and is, by all accounts, a “blameless and upright” man, wealthy and devoted to God. Meanwhile, in the heavens, a member of God’s divine council is charged with roaming the earth as a sort of prosecutor. Coming before God, the Accuser (*ha-satan* in the Hebrew) claims that Job is devoted to God only because he has been very blessed in his life and that if Job loses everything, then he will turn against God.

So God and the accuser make a bet. God allows the Accuser to take everything from Job – his family, his home, his wealth, even his health. Then, they will find out whether Job is truly faithful to God or not.

And so the world falls in on Job and his family. The disasters that follow are numerous and varied. Some of the suffering he endures is caused by marauders. But much of Job’s suffering results from what we would call natural disasters; lightning, a wind storm, disease. Job loses everything as his family is killed in the disasters and raids and all of Job’s property is destroyed.

¹ Swallow Prior, Karen. *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Job has no idea why such suffering has fallen on him. Job's friends come to comfort him and for seven days they simply sit with him. That is very wise of them. But as the days go by, they can't resist trying to answer the questions posed by Job's suffering. Surely, Job has done something wrong. Or perhaps his family did. Somebody must have, they say...for bad things don't happen to good people.

But, of course, you and I know that they do. Bad things happen to good people all the time. Sometimes it is at the hands of other people, but sometimes it is the indiscriminate suffering caused by a tsunami or a tornado or an illness.

Through all this, Job patiently endures his suffering. Even when his wife urges him to curse God, Job refuses. We can't pretend to know what emotions and thoughts were swirling inside Job. All we know is that he never cursed God, he endured, he suffered patiently. After all, what else could he really do? He did nothing to bring this on and he could do nothing to get rid of it. All he could do was to bear it well, with courage and patience.

And, in the end, after Job's friends have demonstrated their foolishness and pride through all their futile and incorrect explanations, God arrives and puts human wisdom in perspective.

The gist of what God has to say is this: this is God's world and Job's friends are foolish to think they can answer all the questions. They do not have the answers and they won't ever get them. In essence, Job, his friends, and all of us are finite and limited in our perspective, our knowledge, our understanding, and our power. God is not.

But "Why??"

Perhaps it is this "why" question that makes it hard for us to endure patiently. We want answers and we want them now. No matter how much we might try to shove the question to the side, it keeps coming back to us. Why so much suffering in our lives? Why couldn't God have made a world without such pain?

The Bible paints a picture of a creation that, though good, is not static and unchanging. Instead, creation is dynamic, evolving, untamed, and even hostile. God made the world, but the humans are to "subdue" it (Genesis 1:28). Further, in the story of the flood, we meet a God deeply involved in and connected to his creation. Far from remote, God commits to a self-limiting promise. These stories prepare us to consider the "why" differently than before and learn some measure of patience.

John Polkinghorne has long held the mantle of world's leading physicist/priest, excelling and renowned in both. Here's a bit of what he has to say about the nature of this world's design:

We tend to believe that if we had been in charge of creation we would have done it better. With a little more care about the details, we would have kept the beauty of sunset, but eliminated germs like staph. The more we understand the processes of the world, however, the less likely does it seem that this would be possible. The created order looks like a package deal. Exactly the same biochemical processes that enable cells to mutate, making evolution possible, are those that enable cells to become cancerous and generate tumors. You can't have one without the other. In other words, the possibility of disease is not gratuitous; it's the necessary cost of life.²

It seems silly to suggest that God would design a "sub-optimal" cosmos. I suspect that in our finiteness, we can't really understand all of the "design criteria." After all, God is love. What does the primacy of love really mean for the design of the material cosmos? What sort of world is really "best" for those whom God loves? A world in which there is no risk, no challenge, no growth, no change, nothing to overcome? Is that a world you'd wish for those you love?

In *Creation Untamed*, Terence Fretheim offers us these reflections on the questions for God in the Job story:

[The] world that God describes in these speeches represents God's willed design, and Job should trust that God knows what God is doing in creating such a world. At the same time, God does not ignore

² From an NPR interview with John Polkinghorne in 2008 by Krista Tippit, "Quarks and Creation." It is quoted in Fretheim's, *Creation Untamed*.

Job's questions about such a world. God could have dismissed Job's queries outright and shut down conversation in a hurry. Yet God chooses to respond at some length to the issues Job raises and gives Job room to respond, thereby demonstrating that the "why?" questions are worthy of consideration and, at least to some extent, can help human beings understand some reasons for suffering, reasons not necessarily related to sin. God may be said to have created a good world, but that world is not harmless. Job and we ourselves might wish God had created a different kind of world, but we will never know whether such a world would have been less dangerous.³

In the end, like Job, we are left with one question: Will we trust God? It is trust in God that enables our patience in the midst of wrong and suffering. We are then confident that fixing all wrongs is not on our shoulders alone, nor is the alleviation of suffering. We are called to act, to avoid sloth and indifference, but we also must have the patience not to get swept up toward bad ends in our anger.

In closing, a bit more from Karen Swallow Prior:

N. T. Wright says that patience is required in order to attain the other virtues. "Patience is one of the places where faith, hope, and love meet up," he writes. Augustine describes patience as the virtue by which "we tolerate evil things with an even mind." The patient person, he continues, chooses to bear evil rather than to commit further evil in response to it. Patience keeps us from yielding to evils that are "temporal and brief" and from losing "those good things which are great and eternal." Patience is a high virtue, that's certain. No wonder patience is traditionally understood to be a sub-virtue of courage. Indeed, all the virtues, Aquinas says, "are directed to the good of the soul." He continues: "Now this seems to belong chiefly to patience; for it is written (Luke 21:19): 'In your patience you shall possess your souls.' Therefore, patience is the greatest of the virtues."⁴

"Are the bad things that happen to us punishment for sin?"

In the ancient world and for many people still, the bad things that happen to us are necessarily the result of something we've done, some sin we've committed. Certainly, this is how many of the Israelites understood the world to be. For most Jews, the prosperous were blessed by God and those who struggled or were struck by tragedy were reaping the consequences of their sin.

But the book of Job is like a blaring trumpet reminding us that things are not that simple. Yes, sin has consequences, often tragic consequences. We are created to live in one manner but often choose to live in another. We can't be surprised that life often takes bad turns as a result of our own bad choices.

BUT...we cannot reverse the equation. Though sin leads to bad consequences, we can't conclude that suffering necessarily results from sin. Job suffered but he had not sinned. This is one of the main points of the book. Job doesn't know why he has suffered but he knows that he didn't bring it on himself.

SO...there is truth in the statement: *If you sin, then you will suffer.*

But Job's friends incorrectly reversed the statement: *If you suffer, then you have sinned.*

The equation works in one direction, but not the other. The reversal is an error in reasoning and the book of Job is a critical corrective against it.

³ Terence Fretheim, *Creation Untamed*, 2010. P. 88-89

⁴ Swallow Prior, Karen. *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Daily Bible Readings *More on Job*

Monday	Job 1 and 2	the wager is made
Tuesday	Job 4	Eliphaz believes the innocent do not suffer
Wednesday	Job 8	Bildad believes that the innocent will prosper and the guilty will suffer
Thursday	Job 27	Job affirms his innocence
Friday	Job 38	God speaks
Saturday	Job 40:1-14, & 42	Job repents and is restored