The Patience of God

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There is something that we all seem to have in common today. We are all rushed. We are out of time. There is no time to take care of the important things in life. In fact, some are now suggesting that this rushed atmosphere will turn out to be the main characteristic of the 1990's. We see people who are so rushed that they have to use the telephone while they are driving. We see people working six and seven days a week. Out there in the traffic, we see what is called "road rage" or what other people euphemistically call "aggressive driving." What is the purpose of "road rage" and "aggressive driving"? Well, it is to get there a few seconds earlier than when you would normally arrive.

We have 1-hour photo service today. We have 1-hour dry cleaning. And yet, why is there not enough time to sit down and enjoy a good book, or to have a friendly conversation, or to meditate on the Word of God? You might say that there is a lack of patience in our lives. We have to do it now. We have to get there now. We cannot take life at a more patient pace.

Certainly the Scriptures command us to be patient. In James 5: 7-8 we are told to be patient as the farmer is patient for the crop. This morning I'd like to take a different approach. Let us consider the patience of God.

Somebody might say, "Does the Bible really talk about the patience of God?" The answer is yes. In many scriptures we read about God's patience. We read in some translations, as it is worded, about the long-suffering of God, but it is the same word that we are dealing with when we talk about the patience of God.

If God requires us to be patient, then doesn't it also make sense that He would have that quality and that He would set the standard for us to follow? This morning let us think, therefore, about the patience of God. I have broken it down into three different areas.

1. The first area concerns His patience in fulfilling the promises that He has made.

When we start reading the Bible we come to Genesis 3 and we find the promise that God made in the Bible. When He was talking to the serpent God said, "I will put enmity (or hatred) between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed. He shall bruise you on the head and you shall bruise him on the heel."
That is an interesting promise or a prophecy. When was that promise fulfilled? It was fulfilled when Jesus died on the cross. Satan bruised Jesus on the heel, in terms of the crucifixion. Jesus crushed the head of Satan when He died on the cross. How long was it, therefore, between when the promise was made -- how long did the patience of God last until the promise was fulfilled? Well, we don't know exactly when Adam and Eve lived, but somewhere between 4,000 and 10,000 years ago. Can you imagine the patience of God that would wait between 4,000 and 10,000 years for the promise to be fulfilled? I think we begin to get a glimpse of the great patience of God.

There are other promises of God that we find He patiently fulfilled. For example, have you ever thought about this question: Why did God require the Israelites to stay in the land of Egypt for 400 years? Why didn't He just send them on into the Land of Canaan? Why did He wait 400 years before He allowed them to leave Egypt and go into the Land of Canaan, the promised land?

Did you know the Bible tells us the reason for that delay? The reason is given in Genesis 15, as God is talking to Abram. There is a little expression here that maybe we tend to overlook, but it tells us why there was that 400 year delay. Genesis 15: 13-16:

"God said to Abram, Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs. They will be enslaved and oppressed 400 years, but I will also judge the nation whom they will serve and afterward they will come out with many possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace. You shall be buried at a good old age. Then in the fourth generation, they will return here for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."

Notice that expression there, "the iniquity of the Amorite." God was being patient with the Amorites. He was hoping they would repent. They were the ones living in the land of Canaan. Therefore, rather than just send the Israelites on to Canaan, God was being patient with them. He had hopes that they would change their ways. Therefore, He was patient with them for 400 years. Could we be patient 400 years? That is almost twice as long as the entire history of the United States of America. There is no question about it. God was very, very patient, hoping, giving them time to change.

And yet after 400 years, His patience came to an end. Men, women, and children were killed in the land of Canaan. Someone might say, "Well, that is awfully brutal!" And yet, God was patient and gave that tribe time to change. But they refused to change.

Modern day archeologists have found the remains of the Amorite civilization. They have described very brutal and very violent rituals that the Amorites went through, even torturing their own children. And they did not repent, even though they were given 400 years to do so.

There are other promises of God that are just astounding in terms of His patience. You may remember in Joshua 6, concerning the attack upon Jericho. There was a promise
made there, because the people of Jericho did not repent. They were given a chance also to repent and change. They did not. There was a promise that was made. Joshua 6:26:

"And Joshua made them take an oath at that time saying, 'Cursed before the Lord is the man who rises up and builds this city, Jericho. With the loss of his first born he shall lay its foundation and with the loss of his youngest son, he shall set up its gates'."

That is interesting. They had been such immoral people that God spoke through Joshua and said whoever rebuilds this city shall lose his firstborn son and his youngest son. We keep reading through the Scriptures and we come to the book of I Kings, chapter 16. Approximately 750 years later in the reign of King Ahab in the Northern Ten Tribes of Israel, a little verse that is inserted there, I Kings 16:34:

"In his days [that is, the days of King Ahab] Hiel the Bethelite, built Jericho. He laid its foundation with the loss of Abiram, his firstborn and set up its gates with the loss of his youngest son, Segub, according to the Word of the Lord, which He spoke by Joshua, the son of Nun."

The patience of God. 750 years later the promise was carried out.

If we had time this morning, we could read from Matthew 24, where our Lord spoke about the destruction of Jerusalem. That was carried out 37 years later. There is a point here that these Scriptures should bring to us. Whether it is 37 years or 750 years or 10,000 years, God is patient. But eventually, His patience runs out and the promise is fulfilled. That is one example of His patience.

2. The second area deals with our weaknesses and our need for salvation.

Most of us have run into people who have made up these tear-jerking stories to get around baptism. The one I have heard the most is the story of the guy in the airplane. He is reading his Bible and he suddenly realizes that he has to be baptized, but before the plane can get down and he can get to a baptistry, the plane crashes and everybody on board is killed, and how could God possibly send that man to eternal destruction just because the plane crashed before he got to the baptistry.

There are lots of variations to that story. You've heard the desert story, I guess. The guy is out in the desert. He's dying of thirst. He's crawling across the sand and he realizes he has to obey the Gospel, but he dies before he gets to a body of water big enough for him to be baptized in. All of these are stories where people try to get around what the Word of God says.

Let's notice what the Word of God says about these stories. Acts 17, Paul's speech on Mars Hill in Athens, Greece. In verses 26 and 27, Paul says
"He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the Earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us."

Paul is saying that if there is a guy groping around for God, and he is searching for God, then he is on the right track. God's not going to let him die in a plane crash. God will be patient with that man. For those who are groping around in the dark trying to find God, He will let them find Him. The patience of God will be extended to those who are trying to find Him. It is not a case of God seeing the plane develop a case of engine trouble and God saying, "Well, I guess that guy waited too long. His time is up; it's all over. I'm recalling his soul. Tough luck, Buddy!"

Paul says for those who are groping, they are seeking God, God is patient. He doesn't want people to be lost! Remember these words in John 3:17 -- we remember John 3:16 -- the next verse... "For God did not send His Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." God does not want people to perish. Therefore, He is patient with them. He gives them the opportunity to obey the Gospel.

Here's an example in Revelation 2 of that patience. The Church at Thyatira, in Asia Minor, one of the seven Churches in Asia, had a woman in it who was a false teacher. She was actually more than that, she was a fornicator. She was committing fornication with some of the members of the Church there. Just an incredibly terrible situation. Nevertheless, that is what was going on at the Church at Thyatira. Notice what Jesus wrote in His letter to the Church at Thyatira. Rev. 2:20-21:

"But I have this against you. That you tolerate the woman, Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads my bondservants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols."

Notice, please, the next statement.

"I gave her time to repent and she does not want to repent of her immorality."

Think about the wickedness of this woman. As bad as she was, God gave her enough time so that she could repent if she had wanted to. She chose not to, and therefore, the punishment of God was brought down upon her. As we think about situations today in our society, I'm glad that we don't have the power of God to destroy people. Because I'm afraid that I don't have the kind of patience that God has in dealing with people. And there's some things I can think about where it'd be very tempting if I were God to call down lightning and just burn that person to a crisp.

This past week in *US News and World Report* there is a review of a new play on Broadway. The title of it is "Corpus Christi, the Body of Christ." It is by Terrence McNally, who has won other awards as a playwright. It is about Jesus Christ the homosexual and says that he was having a homosexual relationship with Judas and the
various other apostles. In the words of the playwright, these are not my words, but in the play Christ is called the King of the queers. I'm telling you, it would be tempting if I had the power to strike that man dead. It would be very, very tempting to bring down fire out of Heaven and destroy anybody who would call Jesus by that title.

Nevertheless, the plans for this play are going ahead. They say that this is nothing more than Christian baiting. I would say that this is more than Christian baiting: it is Christian bashing. It is unfortunate that a society would put up with something like that. We might say, "Well, why God, haven't you destroyed the guy that wrote that play? Why haven't you opened the Earth up the way you did with Korah and let the guy fall in and close the Earth up on him?" I think God's reply would be because He is going to give him some time. There maybe hope that he might repent, you never know. He might repent! Why did God destroy Korah back there in Numbers 16? Because apparently he had had time to change and God could see no more hope that he would change. Therefore, the Earth opened up and swallowed Korah.

Why were Ananias and Sapphira stricken dead in Acts 5 for lying to the Holy Spirit? We would have to assume from studying these Scriptures that they had time to repent but they chose not to. And, therefore, we say today, "God, why aren't you doing more to stop immorality?" And I think the Scriptural answer would be because God would say that there would be a glimmer of hope. There is something there that might possibly cause that person to change at a later date. God is patient. Far, far more patient than we would be today.

There's a third area where we can see the patience of God.

3. The second coming and the end of the world.

Even today there are those, as there were in the 1st Century, who were saying, "Well, where's Christ? He hasn't come back! It's been 2000 years! Christ has not returned!" In the 1st Century, they were saying, "It's been 40 years since Christ promised to return. He hasn't come back yet." Notice what we find here. In the book of 1 Peter, chapter 3, where the Apostle Peter was getting on this subject (and more so in 2 Peter), but notice what he said concerning God's patience back in the days of Noah.

"For Christ also died for sins, once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh but being made alive in the Spirit. In which He also went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, (notice please) when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is eight persons, were brought safely through the water."

We think times are bad today. They are. Times were awful in the days of Noah. Why didn't God just strike everybody else dead except for Noah and his family? Notice Peter said it was the patience of God that prolonged the flood. How long was the flood put off
so that people might repent? According to Genesis 6:3, the flood was delayed 120 years. That is a long time. That is more, I'm sure, than any of us here will live. 120 years the flood was delayed. Why? Because God was patient. God was hoping that more people would repent and change their lives and turn to Him, but it didn't happen. Ultimately, there was only Noah, his wife, their three sons and their three wives.

In the book of 2 Peter, Peter gets back on this subject again that people are always saying, "Well, where's Christ? Why hasn't he returned?" Notice, please, that Peter again discusses the patience of God. 2 Peter 3:1-9:

"This is now, beloved, the second letter that I am writing to you, in which I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder that you should remember the words spoken beforehand by the Holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken by the Apostles. Know this first of all, that in the last days, mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.' For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God the Heavens existed long ago and the Earth was formed out of water and by water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. But by his word, the present Heaven and Earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of Judgment and the destruction of ungodly men. But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord, one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years is like one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing any should perish, but for all to come to repentance."

Where is Jesus Christ today? Why hasn't He returned? The Apostle Peter tells us here: because God is patient. There are still those living on the Earth today that have the potential for obeying the Gospel. There is the possibility that they might repent. God does not want to destroy their souls in Hell. God would rather put off the Second Coming, so that these might come to an awareness of their sins, obey the Gospel, and be saved.

It is difficult by human vision for us to see the potential that people have for obeying the Gospel. The last two issues of the World Evangelist Newspaper (this comes from our Brethren in Florence, AL, the International Bible College) have been written primarily by preachers who have been preaching 40 years or more. And the editor has asked them to describe their most interesting event in the history of their preaching. What's the most unusual thing that has happened to them?

Here's an article written by our Brother Fred Dillon, who preaches for the Church in Florence, AL. At the top of his list, here is what he says after 40 years of preaching, this is the most unusual thing that happened to him:

"It was 3:00 am when the phone rang. 'Come up here and say a prayer for my buddy.'

'Who is your buddy?'
'It makes no difference, he needs a prayer. There has been a Baptist preacher here and a Holiness preacher here to pray for him, but their prayers didn't reach the ceiling.'

The phone call was from a known bootlegger and moonshiner. The person in question was a man who made his living in the liquor business for a number of years. He had been shot several times and lost a lot of blood in one shoot-out near the Tennessee/Alabama state line. But I responded to the call. I prayed with him and for him. And within the next 6 weeks, I began a series of Bible studies with him and his wife and his family.

As the studies continued and his health improved, this man, his wife, his sister-in-law, his son, his daughter, and several years later, his three grandsons were all baptized into Christ. Within 7 years, he was appointed an elder in his local congregation. He and his wife both taught Bible classes. His son is now a preacher for a rural congregation. His daughter married a song leader in the Church. The contribution in our small country church went up when he became a member and it has never gone back down again. He quit the whiskey business and is now a successful business man, employing a number of people in an honest construction business. He is now my Brother. And I love him and his family. Thank God for that early morning call from the hospital."

Let us all thank God for His patience. If He had brought the Earth to a close 50 years ago, there is a man that would have been lost, along with most of his family, it sounds like. If God had brought the world to an end 5 years ago, there are some here this morning who would have been lost. If God had brought the Earth to an end, that is, to recall His Son back to the Earth, to bring about the destruction of this Universe, to bring about the Day of Judgment, if God had done that one year ago, there are some here this morning who would have been lost. It was through the patience of God that those people have been saved. It was the patience of God that resulted in their obeying the Gospel.

It is as what we read concerning the parable of the barren fig tree. This represents God's attitude. Luke 13:7-9:

"Then he said to the vineyard keeper, 'Behold for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' And he answered and said unto him 'Let it alone, sir, for one more year until I dig around it and put in fertilizer. If it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.'"

Doesn't that represent the attitude of God? Others are saying go ahead and destroy all of these evil people, but God says you have to give them a little more time. There is still the possibility that they may repent. Give them another year; a little more time. The patience of God is shown in that parable.

What we find, therefore, is that it is only God's patience that keeps this world from coming to an end this very moment. God is waiting for someone to obey the Gospel.

Concerning individual promises we saw in those early Scriptures, that eventually His patience ran out and the promises were fulfilled. Concerning nations, the patience of God
eventually runs out. Concerning individuals today who need to obey the Gospel, the patience of God will not continue indefinitely. For those this morning who have not obeyed the Gospel, my message would be: "Don't take advantage of God's patience." Don't say, "Why hasn't Christ returned?" "Where are the signs of His coming?" "Why hasn't He come back to destroy this wickedness?" That is not the point of these Scriptures. These Scriptures say that kind of talk is dangerous.

With all individuals eventually the patience of God will run out. Our attitude ought to be the attitude we find in I Corinthians 16:22. We should be able to pray at all times, "Maranatha" -- oh Lord, come. The same attitude is expressed in the last book and the last chapter in the last verse of the Bible, Rev. 22:20: "He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming quickly.'" And then the Apostle John added, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."

Our attitude ought to be Lord, we are ready now. If in Your wisdom this is the time for the return of Your Son, we are ready. If it is going to be a thousand years from now, a million years from now, may Your patience be carried out. The people say, "Well how can a loving God send anyone to Hell?" The answer is, "How could God be so patient that He would give everyone at least one opportunity to obey the Gospel?"

The day came when those eight individuals got on board the ark and the Bible says that God closed the door. Good friends, the day is also coming when God's patience will be brought to an end. And His Son will split the sky open with lightening from East to the West. The dead in Christ will rise first and be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. And those Christians who are living will then be caught up to be with the Lord. And the lost people will realize that God's patience has run out. We hope that you are not in that final group of people.

If you are subject to the invitation this morning, do not take further advantage of the patience of God. Use this opportunity to respond to his love and patience by making the Good Confession in our midst, believing in Christ, repenting of your sins, and being immersed in water for the forgiveness of those sins. If you are subject to that invitation, please come to the front while we sing the next song.