

Patience (*makrothumia*)

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There are two New Testament words translated "patience." One is *hupomone*, which means something like endurance. The other, *makrothumia*, is less easily grasped today. Let us examine this word.

Patience in God

One of the most significant things about *makrothumia* in the New Testament is that it is a characteristic of God. Paul speaks of God's kindness and forbearance and patience (Romans 2:4) and of God enduring with much patience (9:22). In 1 Timothy it is Jesus Christ who displays his perfect patience (1:16). God's patience waited (1 Peter 3:20) and Christ's patience is our salvation (2 Peter 3:15).

Clearly this is not the sort of resigned inactivity one engages in while waiting for a bus. It is the sort of undiscouraged persistence which Columbus employed in crossing the Atlantic.

The very idea of Christ displaying perfect patience tells us that we are not dealing with docile receptivity. Christ's perfect patience was seen in the Garden of Gethsemane, where sweat poured from him like drops of blood. It was seen in his temptation, where Satan was the one who quit work early and decided to give it another try later on. Christ might drive himself to the point of exhaustion and lie down to sleep in the back of the boat, but he never folded his hands and waited for God to drop bread into his lap. The perfect patience of Christ was an unremitting effort which sought and gave salvation for the world, an inexhaustible energy which did not explode but which drove.

Patience in God's People

When, therefore, Paul calls on the followers of Christ for patience, he is

seeking not a quiet acceptance of the status quo but a ceaseless living of a Christ-like life.

On two occasions Paul links our patience with the power of God (2 Corinthians 6:6 and Colossians 1:11), and in both cases patience is one of the fruits of the Christian life.

Three times patience is linked with kindness (Romans 2:4; 2 Corinthians 6:6; and Colossians 3:12) and like kindness, patience *does* things. The Roman soldiers told Judas Maccabeus that by planning and patience Rome had conquered the empire (1 Maccabees 8:4). There was force inherent in the New Testament term. It expressed a long-term vigor which expands with the universe and beyond.

In Colossians 1:11 Paul gives a mighty wish, a powerful invocation. He says, "May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and *makrothumia* with joy . . ." Perhaps the only English word which can render Paul's meaning there is "aspiration" and even it falls short of conveying the energy implicit in Paul's expression.

Patience Today

The dynamic of the Greek word *makrothumia* was drained as it was translated first by the Latin word *patientia*, which meant suffering, and then into English where it was confused with the agent-patient relationship (the agent being the active person and the patient the one who is acted upon). So a word which indicated valiant persistence in the first century is now translated by a word which suggests inaction.

And apart from semantic decay, there has been cultural degradation. At least three forces have acted to drain the concept of patience of its ancient vitality.

One is the romantic notion that ef-

fective change begins with being impatient. A psychological restlessness is supposed to initiate all progress. The fact that such restlessness usually signals only an inability to stick with a task is ignored.

A second force detracting from patience is a modern emphasis on short-term success. In business, money is taken from research and development and spent on advertising. In education emphasis is shifted from curriculum planning to promotion. In theology, the gospel is subordinated to institutional concerns.

The third force weakening the ancient power of patience is the inadequacy of our social structures to support continuity. Trees which took a hundred years to grow are cut down in hours; dune grass is killed and shore lines disappeared. Stable companies employing thousands of people are bought out, broken up, and sold piecemeal. And commitment to the church of Christ is subordinated to enthusiasm for a television evangelist.

There would seem to be little point in trying to rehabilitate the word patience. It would be better to deal with the New Testament concept and express it in contemporary terms. We can speak of God's relentless pressure on our world. We can recognize the need in our lives for a tireless striving which does not feed upon approval or even on accomplishment but which feeds on the validity of the goal. The great commission required and requires that sort of *makrothumia*.

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