

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## **The Problem of Patience - in a stressful world**

The title of today's talk presents three troublesome things – problems, patience and stress. Let's look at them one at a time. I remember a manager I worked with who loved to say, "There are no such things as problems – only opportunities." He usually said this to someone who had a difficult problem and he rarely explained the precise nature of the opportunity. Of course, there are little problems like "What shall I wear today" or "What shall I have for lunch" and there are enormous problems like "I have just been made redundant." But the common feature of problems is that they require a solution. The real difficulty is finding the solution and not allowing the problems to overwhelm our lives. Patience has been described as a virtue. Something we admire in others but struggle to display ourselves. It is that marvellous ability to be able, not just to cope with the most trying circumstance or person, but to handle every obstacle with a grace and humility that baffles those of us who are constantly defeated by a lack of patience.

We are all familiar with stress which can be described as feeling like an elastic band being stretched to its limits and about to snap. All our resources seem drained and we feel under such constant and increasing pressure that we are no longer able to cope.

Of course it is different with each person. Some people seem to manage far better than others. Some people seem to thrive under pressure. So the issue is not a simple one.

One of the clearest examples we have in the Bible of someone in a stressful situation is found at the end of Luke 10. "Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, 'Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me.' And Jesus answered and said to her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her'" (Luke 10:38-41).

The story begins so well. Martha welcomes Jesus into her house. Martha is presented as a warm hearted person and ready to serve. As she works to ensure everyone is looked after and fed her service becomes stressful. She had a problem. When we are under stress we expect others to understand and help. If they do not respond we can become ill-tempered and angry. What starts as something good is made difficult and unpleasant.

I have five sisters and three granddaughters. In my experience they do not respond well to learning that one sister is doing something better than another! It seems that instead of relieving the stress Martha was under, Jesus increases it. We might have thought the best course of action was to thank Mary for her attention and suggest she helped her sister. But on reflection that would have encouraged Martha's pattern of behaviour and not addressed a fundamental need in her life. We so often react in the same way. We increase pressure on ourselves, it becomes unbearable, we expect others to relieve the pressure and when they do we continue to repeat the very things which cause us stress. Martha has also raised a further question, "Lord, do You not care?" Perhaps we feel the Lord does not care about our situation. But the Lord does care and wanted Martha to understand priorities. John tells us in his Gospel that Jesus "loved Martha and her sister (Mary) and Lazarus." Jesus valued Martha's service but saw the trouble it caused her. She needed to be still, she needed to sit at Lord's feet and learn of Him. I can imagine many listeners thinking that's alright in theory but I don't have the time. I am simply too busy.

After this morning's talk spend a few minutes writing down how you spend your time. Luther once wrote, "I am so busy today I will need to pray for two hours" our reaction is more likely to be "I am so busy today I don't have time to pray"

I was born in Kingston-upon-Hull, the birthplace of William Wilberforce. Wilberforce wrote, "Surely the experience of all good men confirms the proposition that without a due measure of private devotions the soul will grow lean." In other words, if we don't spend time in Christ's presence we shall never be like Him.

The Lord Jesus emphasises this simple principle in Matthew 11:28-30, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."  
For the Christian the presence of Christ is the place where we learn to be at peace, where we all cast our cares upon Him and where all our problems are addressed.

The story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1 is a beautiful illustration of a woman in deep distress and experiencing real stress but discovering peace in the presence of God. She was childless and mocked for being so. Her husband did not understand the deep need in her heart and she went alone to the house of God. The High Priest, Eli, thinks she is drunk as she silently mouthed her prayer for a son. She explains to Eli, "I was pouring out my soul before the LORD". This expression describes the spiritual practice that should mark all the children of God. The problems and stresses of life should never drive us away from God but closer to Him.

I think that in Philippians 4 Paul outlines the spiritual characteristics which best enable us to face life's problems in a patient stress free way.

First of all Paul recognises the Lord Jesus is the resource we all need when he writes, "Therefore, my beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, beloved" (verse 1).

Surprisingly, he then turns to the problems others have. "I implore Euodia and I implore Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord" (verse 2). It is remarkable that when we begin to think of others our own issues can often diminish in importance. Paul demonstrates a patient and helpful spirit as he encourages others to help fellow believers. "And I urge you also, true companion, help these women who laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the Book of Life." The context of this helpful spirit is the certain knowledge of the security we have in Christ – our names are in the Book of Life. It also gives an eternal perspective to the troubles we face now. If our names are in the Book of Life surely we can live in peace together now!

Paul's concern is for his fellow Christians who he values so much and who he loves. This is a Christlike quality. When we become self absorbed or self pitying we can quickly become bitter in our spirits and lose the joy of our salvation and the power to love.

The next characteristic Paul demonstrates is a joyful spirit, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!" (v4). I referred earlier to the stress we can feel in our lives. Let us not think that the words Paul wrote are those of some Christian leader living in luxury untouched by the pain and complexities of life. He wrote as an aging servant of God who had suffered in all kinds of ways and was now writing from prison. Instead of pleading for help or listing his undoubted needs he radiates the joy he experienced in the Lord. The authorities could deprive Paul of many things but they could not deprive him of the presence of the Lord. He later writes to Timothy, "At my first defence no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them. But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me" (2 Timothy 4:16-17).

Equally Paul's bitter experiences did not harden him. It can be the case that those who have suffered much have little patience with those who appear to have suffered little. Suffering should not harden our spirits but make us gentle. The Lord Jesus demonstrates this incredible grace in the resurrection stories. Instead of condemning those disciples, like Peter and Thomas, who failed so tragically, He restores them and encourages them to greater service. Paul encourages this gentle spirit, "Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand" (verse 5). The thought of the Lord being at hand can be looked at in two ways. It can be looked at in the sense of the Lord's coming being imminent and stressing the importance of Christians displaying Christlike characteristics in our lives in the light of His return. It can also be looked at in the sense of the Lord being close to us at all times and in all circumstances. Today we tend to think that if we are gentle we become vulnerable. The word of God does not view gentleness in this way. It is more an attribute associated with strength. Christ describes Himself as meek and lowly of heart yet able to sustain His people in every circumstance.

Perhaps the most relevant part of this chapter in relation to the problem of patience in a stressful world is what Paul writes about having a prayerful spirit. "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God" (verse 6).

This reminds me of Peter's words, "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:6-7). The word care can also be translated anxieties. The picture is a vivid one. It is of a man transferring a heavy load from his own shoulders onto a strong beast of burden. It is wonderful to know that the person who bore our sins in His own body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24) now lives in the power of resurrection and invites us to cast every burden we have on Him.

It is hard not to be anxious about our own circumstances or in regard to others. I think the secret is in doing what Paul suggests. After all, I don't think God would instruct us to do something which was impossible. The main thing is to bring everything to God in prayer and to do so with thankful hearts. So often our prayers can be a simple list of requests rather than a genuine desire to understand God's will in our lives. Equally we can tend to be thankful after the request has been fulfilled rather than having a thankful spirit in view of what God will do. Habakkuk writes, "Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines; Though the labour of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be no herd in the stalls - Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation." (Habakkuk 3:17-18). It seems Paul is encouraging us to be entirely dependent upon the God who loves us and to be assured He will respond to such faith.

This is summed up in what he writes next, "and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (verse 7). Paul promises that when we exercise such faith in God, God will give us His peace. This peace surpasses all understanding because it is not governed by circumstances but is enjoyed in the most adverse circumstances. Such peace gives us the patience to deal with the most trying of circumstances and the most difficult people. Stephen is perhaps the most powerful example of this experience in Acts 7. When faced with a raging crowd he is described as having a face of an angel. Soon afterwards as he is being stoned to death he commits his spirit to the Lord Jesus and is described as "falling asleep". Of course, God gives special strength to those who are put into special circumstances. But we are also assured that in our everyday circumstances, when we most commonly come under the stresses and strains of life, the Lord wants us to experience the patience that comes from knowing the peace of God.

Paul then introduces an interesting subject – the things we should meditate or reflect upon. The problem of patience in a stressful world is affected by what our minds absorb. Like the body, the mind needs a wholesome diet. The images and words we absorb can gain a strong hold on our memory and our imagination. Paul encourages us to think about positive things. "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things." (verse 8). When you think about it we are often confronted in the media by what is the opposite of Paul's striking list of valuable things. It is what is untrue, ignoble, unjust, impure, ugly and bad news that so regularly fills the news. There is no wonder that people become anxious and depressed when constantly bombarded by misery. I was involved a little while ago in the production of perception surveys for local communities. It was striking that the people least likely to experience crime were the most worried about becoming victims. This perception was fed by media presentation and could not be dispelled by showing evidence to the contrary. Many of our anxieties are real but we are also capable of unnecessarily manufacturing imagined ones. Paul helps us focus on what is good. Harold St. John was once in the company of several friends when the conversation turned to a fellow Christian who had a reputation for being a difficult person. After a few minutes had been spent criticising the brother in question someone asked Harold what he thought of the man. Harold thought for a while and then replied, "He has a very charming wife!" It is wise to find what is good in the lives of others rather than constantly reflecting on the negative.

Through the grace of God Paul had become a great example to his fellow Christian. He was chosen by Christ to be a special witness. So he could write, "The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you" (verse 9). I suppose we would hesitate to write the same words but we should strive to be examples. Peter exhorts the elders to be examples to the flock of God (1 Peter 5:3). Paul describes the Thessalonians as being examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thessalonians 1:7).

Paul's own example was characterised by a contented spirit. "But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (verses 10-13).

He had learned how to be content in circumstances of prosperity and poverty.

Stress is often caused by not being content. Paul also writes, "Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out" (1 Timothy 6:6-7). We do live in a materialistic world and often the pursuit of wealth or possessions can place excessive demands on our time, our relationships and our ability to live balanced lives. Stress fractures begin to appear in all our relationships which ultimately can become unbearable. This can lead to greater problems and even the destruction of the things we value most. It is very important that in our Christian relationships, particularly marriage, that we keep our priorities in balance. It is important to regularly discuss the way we live our lives and the pressures that build up. We should specifically pray together about the concerns we have and learn how to bring them to the throne of grace. We should not be afraid of changing our circumstances to ensure we are not robbed of contentment.

It is interesting that Paul goes on to write about the generous spirit which marked the Philippian church. "Nevertheless you have done well that you shared in my distress. Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only. For even in Thessalonica you sent aid once and again for my necessities. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account. Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God" (verses 14-18). The Philippians had learned very quickly how to sacrifice. If you go back to Acts 16 where Paul was instrumental in the conversion of Lydia and the Philippian jailor you will see how both these new Christians immediately opened their homes and shared freely what they had.

Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians, "But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:6-8).

A generous spirit is a great antidote to the self occupation. It is a theme which runs through the passage. But it is not that our interests are neglected or our worries are trivial. No, Paul presents a manner of life which is held in high regard by our God and Father. He further writes, "And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (verse 19).

Paul does not suggest for a moment, when he presenting a pattern of life characterised by the daily operation of faith, hope and love, that the giver is left empty, desolate or burnt out. No, he rather emphasises that this pattern of life is one which God values the most and in which He demonstrates His blessing.

Paul had proved that God had supplied all his need as he had learned to live a patient contented life. He wanted his fellow Christians to experience the same sense of God's supply in their lives as well.

He ends the passage with a spontaneous outpouring of worship. This worship which came from the heart of a man who was in prison yet, who at the same time, experienced the greatest liberty of spirit. He exclaims, "Now to our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen" (verse 20).

Paul had every reason to feel alone, discouraged and depressed. Instead he shares his experience of God's presence, he encourages his fellow Christians and he rejoices in Christ.

The problem of patience in a stressful world is not resolved by asking God to change or remove difficult circumstances, although He sometimes does this, it is resolved by bringing God into our circumstances. God did not take Paul out of prison. He was with Paul in prison. This is how He brought in salvation by coming down to where we were. And this is how He continues to prove His love by being present with us in all the circumstances we pass through and teaching us the power of patience and contentment in a stressful world.

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