

A Happy Person Is a Patient Person

Ecclesiastes 7:7-10; James 1:3

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We do not live in a world in which everything that we want, everything that we order, or even everything that we need, can be demanded or expected to appear precisely when we call for it. Traffic does not move at our beckoned call. Grocery lines or bank lines always seem longer and slower when we are in a hurry. There was a time when we thought it was so great to be able to connect to the internet by way of dial-up through our phone lines (perhaps you don't even remember when one could only connect to the internet by dial-up)—until high speed internet became a reality. Now if you use someone's computer that has dial-up, you ask, "How can you put up with this? I could get the message quicker to them by car."

Everywhere you look in your lives to a lesser or greater degree, you have to wait. Even in the spiritual realm you have to wait upon the Lord for answers to prayer, for growth and maturity in the faith, and for evil to be overcome in your lives and in the world in which you live. The only thing you don't have to wait on is for temptation and sin to happen. Sin springs up quickly and abundantly like weeds in a garden. You have to work hard to slow the weeds down; whereas it takes weeks or months of weeding, watering, mulching, and sunshine (depending upon where you live) before you enjoy the plants over which you have labored. It seems as if that which is good always takes time, takes prayer, takes hard work and effort.

With all of the waiting that is required of us in this world and in the Christian life, you are going to be very miserable people if you do not grow some patience in the garden of your soul. Without patience you will live a life of frustration, of anger, of unthankfulness, and of bitterness. Without patience, you will either be running yourselves silly because you cannot wait, or you will be running yourselves into the ground because you cannot slow down. Either way, you will not enjoy that which God has given to you in this life. You will certainly not find joy in the detours of life, in the waiting periods of life, or in people who do not move according to your schedules and deadlines. Now that is not to condone laziness, procrastination, or indecisiveness. It is simply to recognize that even the unnecessary waiting upon others is God's means of growing you in the grace of patience. Dear ones, if you would have the joy of the Lord, you must learn to patiently wait for God in His providence to bring that which is good to you. Don't you as parents even correct your children when they begin demanding food at the dinner table just because they are hungry? It's good for your children to have to wait at times, for they are going to be doing a lot of it as they grow and mature.

The main points from our text in Ecclesiastes 7:7-10 are the following: (1) The Wise Man Needs Patience (Ecclesiastes 7:7-8); (2) The Foolish Man Cannot Wait (Ecclesiastes 7:9-10).

I. The Wise Man Needs Patience (Ecclesiastes 7:7-8).

A. Solomon in the previous section (Ecclesiastes 7:1-6) has emphasized how a good name, a godly sorrow, and a teachable heart promote the joy of the Lord, even in the midst of oppression. It would seem that the main idea Solomon desired to communicate was the relationship of a good name to a lasting happiness. A godly sorrow and a teachable heart may even be viewed as qualities found in one who has a good name. Likewise, as Solomon moves on to consider the relationship of patience to the joy of the Lord (in our text today in Ecclesiastes 7:7-10), patience may also be viewed as another quality to be found in one who has a good name. This tends to tie the ideas in this chapter together in a more cohesive unit, rather than looking at each verse or two as disconnected one from the other. Thus, if you would have a good name, you must be growing in the grace of patience. And if you would have the joy of the Lord, you must be growing in the patience of the Lord.

B. In order to show the universal need that all men/women/children have of patience if they would have a lasting satisfaction and contentment in this life, Solomon depicts a particular set of circumstances that would drive even a person who was known to be very wise to the point of unwise behavior: “Surely oppression maketh a wise man mad” (Ecclesiastes 7:7).

1. Suppose some form of oppression or injustice is placed on the back of one who is weak and helpless, and nothing can be done to lift that burden from the back of that brother or sister, even one who is wise may temporarily fall from that heavenly wisdom and act like a fool. For example, you witness a fellow brother in Christ at work being slandered and misrepresented day after day (which is a kind of oppression). You try to correct and admonish the oppressor, but to no avail. Finally, one day you totally lose it shouting loudly at the oppressor in front of customers. Now such foolish behavior is sin, but that would be the type of foolish behavior or madness that Solomon might have in mind when he speaks of the effect that oppression can have upon you (even upon the most wise among you).

2. If even the most wise, who consistently apply the truth of the Lord to their lives, are so vulnerable to oppression, how wicked and evil must oppression be? Dear ones, is there some form of oppression that you are placing on the backs of one another by way of misrepresenting one another, by way of speaking evil of one another, by way of your overly critical words toward one another, or by way of your unfair suspicions of one another? You may not oppress by taking the property of your brethren, but when you unfairly attack one another, you place a tremendous burden upon their back (when in fact you ought to help bear burdens rather than add to the burdens of the brethren). You may read here of oppressors and think only of those who oppress you, but let each one search for those ways that you oppress others, if you would flee all double standards.

3. Solomon says that you all need more and more of the grace of patience because even the wise person can sin and blow it at times under pressure and in the face of cruel and unjust treatment. It is still sin when a wise man acts like a fool, but Solomon reveals how much we all need the grace of patience in our lives every single day. If the wise man (like Solomon) can act like a fool without patience, how much more is that true of each of us? Consider the foolishness of Jeremiah (in Jeremiah 20:7). You can never excuse your own foolish words and actions (and such attempts to do so are sinful as well), but never be so proud or self-righteous as to believe you are beyond falling into sins which you condemn in others (“Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” 1 Corinthians 10:12). If the wisest can fall, so can you.

C. In the second half of Ecclesiastes 7:7, Solomon gives what proves to be the cause for much of the oppression that occurs in the world: the “gift”. What is this “gift” that destroys the heart and leads to oppression? It is primarily a bribe that is offered to one in authority, so that he misuses and abuses his authority to benefit the one giving the bribe. Oppression in high places is often motivated by greed and covetousness. Those who rule are often asked to exchange money, property, a re-election, preferred treatment, and even sex for certain favors. Even peers will come to you and seek to have you compromise your convictions to have a little fun (“Now you’re not opposed to having some fun are you?”), to lie for them if they are late (“It’s just a little white lie”), to work your way up the ladder at work if you will engage with them in their vile speech (“You’ve got to laugh at the wicked jokes of the boss if you want that promotion”), or to dangle the carrot of a bigger, fatter paycheck, if you will only work for a few hours on the Sabbath (“You don’t have to miss your worship service, just come to work after your worship service is over”). Even family and friends will want you to accept a bribe when they plead with you not to allow your convictions to come between them and their relationship with you (“You can come to our Christmas celebration in order to preserve our relationship can’t you? How much is our relationship worth to you?”). Dear ones, if you compromise what you believe in order to gain what you want, you will likewise be much more willing to take the next step in oppressing others in order to gain what you want. No sin in your life remains in a little compartment insulated from other sins. Just as the sin of compromise will lead to the sin of oppression, so

does every other sin (unchecked) in your life and mine. In your desire to overcome a particular sin in your life, you may need not only to deal with that sin, but deal with another sin that leads to that sin. The root of anger may be a hatred for God's sovereign plan for your life. The root of fear may be a distrust of God's faithfulness. The root of lust may be an unwillingness to find your satisfaction and joy in spending time with Christ in secret worship every day. In other words, look not only for the sin that is most conspicuous to you, but also pray that the Lord would grant you the grace to see those sins that prepare the way for that sin that seems like a giant in your eyes.

D. Solomon first answers the question in Ecclesiastes 7:7: Who needs patience? The answer: All of us need patience, if even a wise man needs patience. Solomon now answers a second question in Ecclesiastes 7:8: Why do we all need patience? The answer: Because it is so difficult to persevere from the beginning to the end when so much can happen along the way by way of sin in your life and in the lives of others, by way of problems with your health, by way of financial problems which you did not expect, by way of losing a job, by way of persecution and oppression from others, or by way of the death of loved ones. We all need patience to endure with joy and contentment this marathon race, which we call life. Listen to the inspired words of the Preacher, Solomon: "Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof; and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit."

1. Why is the end better than the beginning according to Solomon? Because as you come to the end, you have finished the race that was set before you. How often have you reached the end of a long hard project and said as you looked over the time, energy, expense, and sacrifices made to reach that point, "I am so happy to be at the end of that project than at the beginning of it." I know it is something I say every time we begin some project in the yard that requires a lot of blood, sweat, and tears. I remember it was something my wife and I said after completing my last two years of college and three years of seminary.

2. But how does one finish the race set before him/her? One can only finish what one begins, if one does not quit, if one does not throw in the towel when life becomes difficult. One can only enjoy the harvest, if one patiently endures the hardship of plowing and sowing under the scorching heat of the sun. One can only receive the trophy at the end of the marathon, if one is willing to overcome the desire to rest, the desire to quit, or the desire to be comfortable. One can only reign with Christ, if one is willing to suffer with Christ (2 Timothy 2:12). The character of a person is tried in the furnace when what he/she had planned does not work out. When your children, whom you have trained in the ways of the Lord, take turns for the worse and rebel against the Lord and the truth of Christ which they were taught, will you quit and conclude that what you taught must have been wrong? When your church goes through periods in which families leave, in which controversies must be decided, in which matters are not settled in the way that you would have preferred, will you quit, even if the church seems barely able to keep its nose above water? When your physical suffering, or financial needs, or marital problems, reach a point of pain to such a degree of discomfort, will you quit? Without the grace of patience you will quit. You will say, "I cannot go another step."

3. Dear ones, that is why Solomon says, "The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit" (Ecclesiastes 7:8). Those who are proud and puffed up may be loud and boisterous in how they will reach this goal or that goal, how they will accomplish this or that, how nothing will stand in their way in reaching the end, but so often it is the loud and the proud that start quickly, but fade out like a shooting star. There was a sign that hung in the office of my coach at high school which said, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." Dear ones, it is not the proud that have the grace to finish the race, for the proud look for the easy way or the comfortable way to finish the race (perhaps a short cut somewhere along the way). It is the one that is patient, who quietly trusts Christ and looks to Him for the strength that is lacking, who finishes the race that is set before him/her. One of my favorite passages of Scripture to which I look when I sinfully feel like quitting is Isaiah 40:28-31 (yes, pastors, like everyone else, feel like quitting at times). Dear ones, the patience in this text that is held up for you to admire and desire is not a personality trait, it is a

spiritual grace that comes from the Lord Jesus Christ alone (Hebrews 12:1-3). It is by means of the very trials that you endure that God produces this needed grace of patience in your life and mine (Romans 5:3; James 1:3). Patience is needed particularly in serving one another—for you may seem to reach the end of your rope when it comes to people that rub you the wrong way. Have you thanked the Lord for the trials, tribulations, and difficult people God has placed into your life, so that you might grow in the grace of patience?

4. Before moving on to the next main point, I would have you to remember that the end is not better for the wicked. The end for the wicked is everlasting torment in the flames of hell. Whatever they have faced by way of pain here upon the earth will seem like a mere scratch on the arm in comparison to the end of their sin and rebellion against the Lord Jesus Christ. But the end of the righteous will be joy unspeakable and full of glory. Although there be tears in the evening here upon the earth, there will be shouts of joy in the morning there in heaven in the presence of Christ, His holy angels, and all the redeemed (Hebrews 10:36).

II. The Foolish Man Cannot Wait (Ecclesiastes 7:9-10).

A. Solomon says that the fool is characterized by two qualities: (1) He is hasty (rather than learning to patiently wait for the reward) in Ecclesiastes 7:9; and (2) He looks backward to the good times and the easy times at the beginning of the race (rather than looking forward to the reward at the end of the race) in Ecclesiastes 7:10.

B. Those who are impatient are not happy campers. Impatience only breeds frustration, anger, stress, ulcers, high blood pressure, and discontentment. Note what the Holy Spirit says through the pen of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 7:9: “Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools.”

1. Those who cannot wait for that which they want, or cannot wait to give others a piece of their mind, will usually be people given over to temper tantrums. They will bottle up their impatience and frustration only so long, and then they will let it out in volcanic eruptions. If you have a problem with your temper, it may be that you need to look at your inability to wait patiently upon the Lord to bring all things to pass in His own appointed time. For waiting upon the Lord is very practical; for example, learning to wait patiently in a line or in traffic. You may think that when you blow up at your husband or wife, at your children or parents, at your co-workers or fellow-students, that you were simply impatient with that person. But ultimately you were impatient with God, for it was God who ordained that person to say or to do that which you believe pushed you over the edge. And the Lord did so in order to give you a pop quiz on patience (Psalm 37:7-9). What that person said or did may have been wicked. But your response may likewise be wicked, if you are not slow to speak, slow to press the “send” key on your computer, or slow to be angry (James 1:19).

2. So much of life (and especially the Christian life) is about waiting, and most of us are not very good at waiting. If we do not grow in the grace of waiting patiently, we will be miserable, cranky, frustrated, and angry people. Dear ones, instead of turning to frustration when you are waiting in a line, or waiting in traffic, or waiting to hear back from someone before you can take steps you need to take at work, consciously turn away from that frustration and consciously turn to the Lord and ask Him to grant to you in that specific circumstance the grace to patiently wait. How in the world will you be able to wait for the big things in life, if you cannot even wait in a line without becoming frustrated and angry? God gives you opportunities every day to grow in patience. Do you see with spiritual insight those occasions as opportunities to grow in patience or as simply situations in which to be irritated and angry?

3. Dear ones, if you do not learn to wait upon the Lord (and it is a learning process just as Paul said he had to learn to be content in Philippians 4:11), anger will not only occasionally be manifested in your life, but will eventually “rest” and make itself comfortable in your hearts says Solomon, “for anger resteth in the bosom of fools” (especially fools that have not learned to wait patiently upon the Lord). Learning to wait upon the Lord comes from spending time with the Lord in prayer and studying His Word, knowing the Lord,

trusting the Lord, enjoying the Lord, loving the Lord, and obeying the Lord. You want what you want yesterday—today is even too late. However, the Lord trains you through waiting to depend upon Him day by day, to trust in His mercies day by day, to flee to His promises day by day, to see His faithfulness day by day, as you patiently wait upon Him (Jeremiah 14:22). You see, dear ones, this is ultimately a matter of you recognizing who is in charge here: God or man? When you not only affirm with your mouths that God is in charge of every circumstance and situation in your life that involves your waiting, but also apply that truth by faith in your daily experience, you will see that ultimately patience is a matter of your submission to the providential will of God. Patience is submission to God. Impatience is rebellion against God. Let not anger rest in your bosom. Let patience rest in your bosom, and find a welcome home in your heart.

C. Solomon declares that a fool is not only manifested by his inability to wait patiently on the Lord, but also by his tendency to look backward to the beginning of the race when everything seemed to be going so well, rather than looking forward to the reward at the end of the race. God says through Solomon in Ecclesiastes 7:10: “Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? For thou dost not inquire wisely concerning this.”

1. Another problem there is with being impatient under oppression from others, under physical afflictions, under financial burdens, under besetting sins, under stressful deadlines and the demands of others, is casting your thoughts back in time when the attacks of others, the physical afflictions, the financial burdens, the besetting sins, or the pressure and stress were not so difficult. At times you even dream of when you were children and life was so easy. But dear ones, it is not a backward look over your shoulder at those “former days” that will give you the patience, endurance, and perseverance to press on. It is rather a forward look to the prize at the end of the race that will help you finish the race. Do you want to finish the race (whatever the particular race may be in your life)? Don’t be backward-looking, like the children of Israel who looked back in their thoughts to Egypt and whose selective memory could only remember the melons, the cucumbers, the leeks, and the garlic that they did not have in the wilderness. Rather be forward-looking, like Moses concerning whom we read the following in Hebrews 11:25-26.

2. Here we see that impatience breeds discontentment and unthankfulness, rather than joy, satisfaction, and thankfulness. One who impatiently looks back to better times is one who will have much about which to complain in the present time. So if you find yourself unthankful and discontent, it is likely the case that you will be one who is also impatient and backward-looking, rather than one who is able to wait upon the Lord and forward-looking to the reward.

3. Dear ones, joy in the Christian life and joy in the midst of every trial you face in this life is intimately connected with looking forward to the reward in heaven, where there will be no more sin and struggling with temptations, or struggling with difficult people, or struggling with demanding deadlines, or struggling with pain, sorrow, death or tears. The reward of heaven will be fullness of joy and happiness in the Lord (not just occasionally, but every moment for all eternity), fullness of peace and contentment in having and enjoying more than the heart ever thought possible in the presence of the Lord, and fullness of fellowship with God, the holy angels, and the redeemed of all ages. But dear ones, if you are to look forward to that reward, you stand in need of patience right now according to Hebrews 10:36: “For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, YE MIGHT RECEIVE THE PROMISE.” Note that it is not BEFORE you have patiently done the will of God in finishing the race that is before you, but AFTER you have done the will of God in finishing the race that is before you that you receive the reward. With the Apostle Paul, may we say as we stare death in the face, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

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