

**JAMES
ALEXANDER**

PATIENCE

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Содержание

ADVERTISEMENT	5
PATIENCE	6
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	8

James W. Alexander

Patience

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The following meditations on Patience, though once delivered in substance to a Christian assembly, were written as a pastoral gift to an esteemed friend, who had been more than two years confined to her dwelling by a dangerous, lingering, and sometimes exceedingly painful malady. May the good Lord carry his truth with a blessing to other chambers of trial!

PATIENCE

Some words which are often in our mouths are, nevertheless, but little understood; and some virtues which we are continually praising, are hardly ever put in practice. This is as true of patience as of any thing else. Every man needs it, every man knows he would be the better for it, yet every man falls short of it. This, I suppose, was one reason why the apostle James teaches so emphatically concerning it,

"Let patience have her perfect work." James i. 4.

It would seem that the "twelve tribes scattered abroad," to whom this apostle wrote, were in trials and needed comfort. For the very first words of his letter are as if he stood over them and said, *Be of good cheer!* "My brethren," says he, "count it all joy, when ye fall into divers temptations," *i. e., trials*. These troubles tried their faith (v. 3,) and "untried faith is uncertain faith." The result of these trials of faith is *patience*. The very word is derived from "suffering,"¹ and if there were no pain there could be no patience. If then patience is good, trials are good. And the great caution to be observed under such dispensations is, that we lose not the fulness of the benefit; that we content not ourselves with half the mercy; that we stop not short of the entire grace; for we may suffer and yet not profit; therefore, says the inspired teacher, "Let patience have her *perfect work*."

I. *Patience* is a certain temper of mind under suffering. As we all are appointed to suffer, and some of us to suffer greatly and suffer long, we should do well to learn more of this heavenly art, concerning which so much good is spoken in Scripture.

In its simplest form, patience is a calm and unshaken state of mind, strongly bearing up against a present burden of distress. This may exist without religion. A Stoic or a western savage may endure pain without a murmur. Malefactors have stoutly faced the torments of their penal death. In respect to this, the natural temperament of human beings differs. Some can naturally bear more than others. They have more rigid fibre, or less shrinking nerves, more robust health, or smaller sensibility. The degree of pain is to be measured, not by the force of the blow, but the power of resistance. That which would crush a reed shall leave no mark upon an oak. When pain comes, however, it is well if we have even natural means of enduring it. But practice, discipline, and exercise add vastly even to this natural fortitude. Fresh soldiers and new recruits quail and fly, but the veteran has looked death in the face. He who has endured once, can endure again. Still more efficacious is the operation of inward principle, adding moral motives to the barely natural power. Education has this for part of its work, to teach the young to bear some burdens, not to fall back at every alarm, nor cry out at every pang. Stern determination will help one to sustain what might at first have seemed intolerable. This is remarkably the case in great and sudden pangs of anguish, for which a resolved mind has prepared itself.

Though pains of mind are worse than pains of body, they also may be endured by some with hardihood and tranquillity, and this we call fortitude, and in some circumstances patience. By great skill and self-control in managing the thoughts and detaching the attention from distressing objects, some are able, to a degree which at first might seem impracticable, to keep up quietude, self-possession, and even a show of cheerfulness, under complicated bereavements, mortifications, and griefs. All this may enter into the Christian's patience; but all this falls infinitely short of its "perfect work."

Christian patience adds to this a sweet, childlike resignation to God's holy will, in the affliction, whatever it may be. All merely natural or philosophical patience is cold, gloomy, sullen, and unprofitable. Though it may refrain from tears, it cannot smile; for it hath no faith, no love, no Saviour,

¹ In Latin *patientia*, from *patior*.

no covenant, no God! Christian patience "endures, as seeing Him who is invisible;" that is faith. Heb. xi. 1. It looks up to the rod in the hand of a chastening Father. Heb. xii. 6. It considers One that endured such contradiction against himself, and arms itself with the same mind. 1 Pet. iv. 1. It beholds every pang disposed according to a covenant transaction. 1 Cor. iii. 22, 23. And it bows to all, however distressing, as ordered by the infinite wisdom, justice, and goodness. Lam. iii. 37-40. Therefore it is, that the stoutest and hardest of worldly sufferers falls so far below the feeblest of Christ's lambs, when laid under heavy trials. Though pangs of anguish must now and then extort a sigh, tear, or groan, the child of God still turns to him, when smitten, and kisses the paternal hand. It is again *faith*, believing that God doth it, and that all he doth is wisest and is best. It is *submission*, yielding the neck to the yoke (Lam. iii. 27), bowing down under the Omnipotent hand, (1 Pet. v. 6), and prostrating itself beneath the infinite and eternal will, (Gen. xviii. 25.) It is *resignation*, giving the whole matter into the best hands, that He may undertake, (Isa. xxxviii. 14), and undoubtingly referring every future event unto the God of the lilies and the birds. Matt. vi. 26. It is *humility*, owning itself little, and dependent, and mean, and unworthy, and therefore willing to suffer. And it is *penitence*, bewailing sin, pleading for mercy, wondering that it suffers so little, and remembering how light are these pains compared with the agonies of the lost, or the vicarious sorrows of the Lord our righteousness. All this, and much more, is present in every case of truly sanctified Christian affliction; and this sheds a light through the curtains of evangelical sorrow, which is altogether unknown to the most resolute of stoical heroes.

There is a third consideration, not to be omitted in our study of Christian patience. The word, as said above, implies *suffering* and *endurance*, but it includes another idea. It has reference to *time*. It is not barely willingness to *suffer*, but willingness to suffer *more*. Nature would not wait a moment; it would be delivered *now*. Grace leaves all to God, and says, "My times are in his hand!" Though the succour tarry, patience can wait. Hab. ii. 3. What grace is this, thus added to faith and love? Is it not HOPE, the sister grace, that abideth? 1 Cor. xiii. 13. Leaning on her anchor, hope looks out from her post of observation, casting the eye over a waste of billows, and sweeping that dim horizon where as yet no sail twinkles along the distant line that unites the sea and sky, but sure that though weeping may endure for a night, joy cometh in the morning. Psa. xxx. 5. He that hath been with her in six troubles, in the seventh will not forsake her. Job v. 19. Here is a blessed pillow for the languid aching head, a cool refreshment for the throbbing temple. Here is a secret cordial which has enabled many a child of sorrow to bear the heavy load; when tribulation worketh *patience*

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