

Sermon 23, God's Patience Saves, 2 Peter 3:15-16

Proposition: God is patient, and His patience demands that you control your thoughts.

- I. God Is Patient
- II. God's Patience Demands that you control your thoughts
 - A. Think of His Patience as Leaving Room for Salvation, v. 15a
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the first preaching course I took, just a few months into my seminary career, taught that all sermons should be based on a single sentence of the form "Because God is x, you ought to do y." It's a great idea. But as you know, I have had a hard time actually doing it in most of my preaching. But our text this evening is a statement in precisely that form. It tells us that because God is patient, you must count His patience as salvation. That is, because of a character quality in God — He is patient — you and I are on the hook to think a certain way. That way is spelled out in our text by telling us specifically how to think about His patience in delaying the end. There is only one correct interpretation of that reality. It's not the false teachers' interpretation. It is Peter's interpretation, and He tells us that we have accept his interpretation and live in light of it.

I. God Is Patient

You have probably heard statements like "God is the gospel" and "Jesus is salvation." Those statements sound at first like category mistakes: the gospel is a piece of information, a chunk of news. God is not a piece of information, but a personal being. Similarly, salvation is an event, or a state of affairs. It means being delivered from some threat, protected from some harm or hazard. Jesus is not an event, but again, a personal being. Well, how do these statements work? Are they truly category mistakes? Not if correctly understood. Instead, we could say that they are metaphors, or that they elide a number of logical steps to make the point that the foundation of the gospel is the character of God, or that the roots of salvation are found in Jesus Christ and His work. I go into all of this because the statement that "the patience of the Lord is salvation" seems rather strange at first too. God's patience is a character quality in Him; salvation is one of His actions. How can we count a character quality as being something that God does for us? The answer, of course, is that God's patience is the foundation of our salvation. We could even say that God's patience logically entails our salvation, in some sense. Obviously His patience doesn't entail everyone's salvation, but Peter tells us that for us, God's patience is going to result in salvation if we keep following Him. How does that work?

Well, the issue under discussion in this chapter is the scoffers' question: Where is the promise of His coming? Jesus said He was going to come back, and He hasn't. So, say the scoffers, He doesn't keep His promises.

Peter says "No." That is the wrong interpretation of Jesus' non-appearance. The reason He has not come back is that He wants to give you time to repent. He wants as many as possible to be saved. The longer He waits, the more possibility there is for people to be saved. And so He keeps waiting. His patience has the result that millions and millions of people have been saved since the days of Peter, and perhaps millions or billions more will be saved before God finally lowers the curtain on history.

So there is is. God's patience is salvation, metaphorically speaking. If you look at one of the reasons people are being saved, it is God's tremendous patience.

II. God's Patience Demands that you control your thoughts

Do you recognize God as a patient God? We are impatient people. We wanted it all done yesterday. We are presently rolling out 5G mobile connections to the Internet so that you can get data three times as fast, because our present 4G connections aren't fast enough for some people. Now, certainly 5G has some legitimate uses. But I think it's an irrefutable indictment of us as a people, proving conclusively that we do not suffer from having too much patience! And so, as we always want to hurry along to the next thing, we fail to think of things from God's perspective. We think of Him as lollygaggin', dragging His feet, refusing to get with the program and get us off this planet so that we don't have to put up with sin and misery anymore! But Peter insists that we may not think that way any longer.

A. Think of His Patience as Leaving Room for Salvation, v. 15a

Instead, we have got to think of His delay as what it really is: patience. God is so slow, as some people count slowness, not because He doesn't care but because He does!

Now, brothers and sisters, I think that this is one of the most applicable texts in all of 2 Peter to our present generation. Eugene Peterson even once identified the basic sin of American pastors as impatience. We don't even want to think of patience as a virtue — and here Peter rubs it in our face that one of the major components of how we experience God (i.e., His absence, His non-returning in the face of unimaginable sin and suffering here on Earth) is dictated by God's supreme divine patience. We are not allowed to think of patience as a defect in the divine character. We are not allowed to storm and fret and say "God, hurry up already and fix this!" We are not allowed to bind God to our own timetables and schedules. We are called instead to worship and praise Him for His patience. And particularly, we are to see that He is patient with us and saving us.

Brothers and sisters, George MacDonald speaks somewhere of a girl who was so patient she did not even know she was being patient. Does that describe you and me? Or when we are being patient, waiting around for someone else to get their act together, do we fuss and fume and wish to heaven that we had no need to go through this incredible waste of time?

You and I don't like patience when we have to show it to others. But don't we value it when it is shown to us? God doesn't foreclose on the world because He is patient. He is willing to wait for us to turn to Him, to wait for us to grow, to give us time and space to do all that we need to do. His patience saves. In fact, we could call it salvation.

So this means that we need to control our thoughts. You may not think that God's delay in answering your request is a sign of His disfavor, or of His lack of concern. His delay is actually proof that He loves you and wants you to trust Him even more deeply than you currently do. That is His gift to you. That is His Fatherly patience. Do you believe that? Can you endure what you're facing in the present, whatever it is, with confidence that God's delay in rescuing you from it is a manifestation of His patience?

God waits to destroy evil because He is making room for repentance. He wants to give you the maximum opportunity to turn to Him.

B. Think of His Patience as Described by Paul, vv. 15b-16a

Well, Peter refers us to what Paul wrote about God's patience, as if to say "Don't just take my word for it. Go look at what this dear brother and fellow worker for the Kingdom of Christ had to say about it." So what does Paul say? There are two major places where Paul mentions God's patience.

1. Romans 2:4

Here's what Paul says: "Or do you despise the wealth of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" And what is the outcome of repentance? Salvation! God will judge those who commit the sins they condemn, Paul says. But He won't necessarily do so right away. That wrath is coming on the day of wrath. Before that day dawns, what God mostly reveals is His kindness, forbearance, and patience. Yes His wrath is revealed from Heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. But so is His longsuffering, His willingness to put up with things we do. Again, then, as we understand Paul's point we see the challenge to ourselves. We want to despise God's longsuffering. We want Him to fix everything now! But He wants us to come to repentance. He wants us to turn away from sin. The fact that judgment has not yet fallen conclusively on you, on our church, on our nation, and on the whole world is one big opportunity for repentance. You and I can and must turn back to God, no matter how far we've wandered, no matter how evil we've been. If you're involved in sin, and you haven't yet died, God is still being patient with you. He's still giving you a chance to turn back. Can you worship Him for that, rather than despising His patience?

2. 1 Tim. 1:16

Paul certainly did. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life." Do you see what Paul is saying? He confesses that he, a murderer and persecutor of the church, was the worst sinner ever. Early in his ministry, in 1 Cor., he called himself the least of the apostles. Later, in Ephesians, he called himself the least of all saints. But

now, at the end of his ministry, he has realized that he is the chief of sinners. I'm the worst! And brothers and sisters, if your heart doesn't tell you that then you have not yet learned to know yourself. The Spirit will make you sensitive to sin. He will make you hate sin. And when you really see your own sin, you will value God's immense patience. You will stop begging Him to pour out His wrath. A forgiven person is not a trigger-happy person. If you know your own heart, and just how patient God has been with you, then you will be the spotless, blameless, peaceful person that Peter just described.

Brothers and sisters, Christ's patience is immense. It has already lasted thousands of years. It may last many thousands more, or even longer. Yes, the last days are here. But won't you take this opportunity to turn from your sins, counting the patience of the Lord as salvation? He won't condemn you until the last second. Until then, turn. Repent. If you're a believer, repentance is for you too. From what sins do you need to turn away? How can you set things right with Jesus? Do it, I beg you. Seek His forgiveness today, while there is still hope. His patience doesn't save, but the God who is patient saves. Trust Him. Repent. And He will deliver you, even if you're the worst of sinners. In Jesus' name, Amen.