

God, Give Me Patience, Now!

ANYTHING WORTH HAVING IS WORTH WAITING FOR, BUT WALKING OUT THIS TRUTH CAN PUSH US TO THE EDGE.

Another crazy-night schedule began as I sped to the local high school, where I was to pick up my son and daughter from after-school club meetings. I'd hand off his sack dinner, rush her to violin lessons, drop him back home, get her from lessons, take him to youth group, and then invent dinner for the rest of the family.

But halfway to school, a string of red tail lights lit up in front of me. I craned my neck to see a power crew working on a line, narrowing the road to one lane. I glanced at my watch and fumed. How dare they interrupt my tight schedule!

Then I felt a reprimand. That old enemy, impatience, had once again found its target. I'm prone to pray, "Lord, give me patience—and hurry up!" But God knows that everyday circumstances such as traffic problems can help train me in this vital character trait.

I'm still in the school of patience, but there are some things I've learned along the way that I want to share with you.

Lop your list. I had wrongly bought into our culture's worship of productivity. That meant cramming 30 hours of commitment into 24-hour days. Unknowingly, I was illustrating Psalm 39:6 about the person who "goes to and about, but only in vain" (NIV). When "bustling about" didn't cross off everything in my daily planner, I got frustrated, grouchy and impatient.

I acted like the New Testament's busy woman, Martha of Bethany! As Debi Stack observed in *Martha to the Max* (Moody Publishing), "we think, feel, and act as Martha did—overburdened and underappreciated. We have high standards,

low energy, little time, and no tolerance.”

Finally, I learned that some commitments—even good ones—had to go before impatience and stress set up a permanent pity party. When low enrollment cancelled a college class I teach, I actually rejoiced to have another evening freed up. Another time, I dropped out of a volunteer ministry so I could focus on my primary ministry—my family.

Several good things resulted. Though sometimes the schedules got crazy (like the street repair night), I could cope better with the many things I had to do. Cutting back also slowed me down to pray more.

Loosen up for lulls. With a “do-this-do-that” attitude determining my schedule, I felt guilty taking time for other people or even myself. My bedside table was piled with books I wanted to read but didn’t dare pull into my lap when I could be doing “productive” things. My contacts with people I cared for shrunk to “Hi, how are you?” greetings as we rushed by each other at church or at the store.

Relaxing seemed like a waste of time. Oh, I’d read Psalm 116:7—“Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the Lord has been good to you”—but ignored it as written for somebody who didn’t have as much to do.

Bit by bit, I’m learning to put more spaces in my packed life, to “do” less and “be” more. One sunny afternoon at home, as I hunched at the computer doing “work,” my husband remarked, “It’s a beautiful day. I’d like to go on a ride with you, but you’ll probably say ‘no.’”

Ouch! I turned off the machine and spent a few hours with him, just driving along the river and watching for bald eagles.

As we admired one majestic bird soaring over the river for miles, I understood why the prophet Isaiah used that analogy for the way God lifts us up and renews our strength when we’re

stressed and tired. When impatience chokes my delight in God and other people, I need to deliberately loosen up so He can help me “run and not grow weary” (Is. 40:31).

Diminish your demands. I’m wired to be a high achiever. That was a good trait for getting through college. It was as if I carried a flag emblazoned with Proverbs 13:4: “The desires of the diligent are fully satisfied.”

But I got impatient when I couldn’t reach my goals or when others involved in them didn’t perform up to snuff. My stint as editor of the college paper was especially frustrating because student reporters often disregarded deadlines or turned in inferior material.

That impatience, however, had roots in perfectionism, the attitude that something is never “good enough.” I saw this attitude displayed in my teens when they slaved for hours over simple, 500-word essays. If they suspected even a comma error, they sent another draft through the printer, supplying me with a huge stack of junk paper.

Some day they’ll learn, as I have, that they’ll never be perfect. Like the rest of us, they’ll need to come down several notches from “perfection” to the less-demanding idea of “pursuing excellence.”

I used to be a neatnik, and I still like a tidy house. But I can now live with vacuuming just once a week unless there’s been a major “debris disaster.” My thank-you notes don’t have the elegant penmanship I learned in fifth grade, but they’re written. And my husband is happy with handkerchiefs I didn’t iron, as long as they’re clean.

The ability to be happy with “excellence” has robbed impatience of its power in that part of my life. I can tell when I’m on target by following a principle Kathy Collard Miller expressed in her book *Why Do I Put So Much Pressure on Myself and Others?* (Xulon Press): “If we are able to relax and

trust God— even for mistakes—we are mostly likely seeking excellence,” she wrote. On the other hand, “If we are feeling tense,” and I’d add, impatient, “then we’re most likely still focused on striving for perfection.”

Thwart your triggers. I’ve noticed that impatience is like chicken pox—highly contagious. When I get around impatient people, they bring out my own impatience. Proverbs 22:24-25 warns us: “Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared.”

Although impatience doesn’t always lead to hot tempers, the principle still holds. We tend to adopt the attitudes of those around us.

I saw this principle in action when my children were preschoolers and had reached the end of their patience, usually just before dinner. Tired and hungry, they went after each other like cats defending their territory.

I had to split them up for “time out”—on their beds with books, not toys—so the problem didn’t escalate. I knew I was just as vulnerable to losing it—but instead of taking “time out,” I had to keep cooking!

In my adult work world, similar things happened when lunchroom conversations turned into griping. Hearing others complain about workloads or their superiors made me feel I had to add my own complaints to fit in.

But the result was more impatience, not a solution. Sometimes I had to eat at another time or elsewhere instead of adding to the grumbling.

As my children did, I profit from a “time out” to restore my perspective. Instead of dwelling on things that try my patience, I ask God to send the check that comes from His Word.

He has a whole shelf of antidotes, easily found in a concordance under “patience” and related words. I write them out on 3×5 cards and have several rubber-banded together on my bedside table for review before I go to sleep.

When things don’t go my way and I want to whine, “Why me?”, God’s Patience Patrol whispers verses such as Colossians 3:12: “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” Memorizing such verses requires me to think about each word.

There’s no quick route to patience. When I dared to pray for it, God let me have it—slowly. One at a time, my desires to have everything quick and perfect have fallen by the wayside as I’ve gone through the training program He tailor-made just for me.

Now when I encounter roadblocks and delays that test my patience, I try to let God sit in the driver’s seat. He not only knows the best routes to develop my character, He’s never in a hurry. And He will get me where I need to be—in His perfect time.

Read a companion devotional.

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