

# Staying Power

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



*"Portrait of Patience Escalier" by Vincent Van Gogh*

## Prayer of Illumination

Make us to know your ways, O Lord;  
teach us your paths.  
Lead us in your truth, and teach us,  
for you are the God of our salvation;  
for you we wait all day long.  
Amen.

## Epistle Reading

### Scripture: James 5:7-10 (NRSVue)

<sup>7</sup> Be patient, therefore, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. <sup>8</sup> You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. <sup>9</sup> Brothers and sisters, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! <sup>10</sup> As an example of suffering and patience, brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.***

## SERMON – Staying Power

These days it's not very fashionable or acceptable to wait. We're not taught how to wait. It's not easy or fun to wait. As the saying goes, "I had my patience tested. I'm negative."

With the advent of Amazon Prime we can get the products we want almost immediately—sometimes even same day service without ever leaving our homes. And so we're willing to pay a lot of money to expedite the things we want. We hear the phrase "time is money" but these days "money is time." We live in a fast food, buy now, microwave, automatic, quick fix, silver bullet culture. We and our frenetic society expect instant results with minimal or no effort involved. The problem is, life still requires patience—no matter how hard we try to eliminate the need for patience in our lives.

Dr. Seuss has an Advent message for us in his classic "**O The Places You'll Go!**"

The book speaks of the various places our lives take us. He memorably describes one of the more challenging places we will find ourselves:

*The Waiting Place... ...for people just waiting.*

- *Waiting for a train to go or a bus to come, or a plane to go*
- *or the mail to come, or the rain to go*
- *or the phone to ring,*
- *or the snow to snow or waiting around for a Yes or a No*
- *or waiting for their hair to grow.*

*Everyone is just waiting.*

- *Waiting for the fish to bite*
- *or waiting for wind to fly a kite*
- *or waiting around for Friday night*
- *or waiting, perhaps, for their Uncle Jake or a pot to boil*
- *or a Better Break or a string of pearls, or a pair of pants or a wig with curls, or Another Chance.*

*Everyone is just waiting.*

Our faith teaches us that to navigate life well, to wait well, we've got to allow the Spirit to cultivate the fruit of patience in our instant gratification culture.



In fact, patience is one of the key indicators the Spirit is at work in us. So what *is* patience? Is it resignation? Acceptance of fate? Ambivalence? Passivity?

The Scriptures give a different understanding. Patience is described in the Scriptures as:

- God-given restraint.
- Having a long fuse, rather than a short one.
- It's slow to judge, listening to others, and understanding the situation.
- Patience takes the long view of things.
- Patience is a purposeful waiting upon God, prepared to act at the right time.
- We can be patient because **God is patient**.

*"The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,"* the Scriptures say. It's an act of humility to be at peace with the reality that God's time frame is often different from our time frame. As James the brother of Jesus tells us, we can learn from farmers who know it takes time, usually more time than we'd like. They know that you have to adjust yourself and your expectations to the rhythm of the seasons.

Patience knows action is required: you've got to plant your seeds and tend the fields, but they've got to have time to grow. So patience requires trust, trust that the seeds are growing underground, even though we can't see it happening. The farmer has the green light to act when harvest time arrives. When the spring and autumn rains have come. Then it's the right time to gather. We can learn from the farmer.

*"Be patient,"* says James. *"Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near."* Be assured that Christ will return for us in the fullness of the kingdom of God. Our faith teaches us that patience is about trust. And trust is about relationship, communication.

We learn from the great prophets of old: *spend time in God's presence. Get acquainted with God.*

We learn from the patience of Job—who persevered and kept engaging with God through his trials. He knew the only way out, was the way through. And he experienced a reversal of fortunes when he came out.

There's a long tradition of the prophets who remained faithful to God through hardship and opposition: Noah, Abraham, and others. And this was most clearly seen in Christ—our prophet, priest, and king who endured the cross and survived death for us. To wait well is to focus our attention upon the Lord who comes to us with life and hope from the future. We strengthen our hearts by giving Christ our impatience, impulsivity, irritability, and insecurities.

"Come to me," says Jesus, "all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you,"—what?—"rest."

Advent teaches us our waiting is an active waiting, a hopeful waiting, expectant waiting. We know there's a purpose to our waiting. That God is working, even if we can't see it yet.

There's a Native American legend about a grandfather explaining to his grandson about our internal struggles that battle within us. One wolf is the true spirit, the other wolf is the false spirit. "Which one will win?" asked the grandson. "The one you feed." It takes a patient

steadiness to keep feeding the right wolf. But we've also got to learn how to be patient with the wrong wolf who is always with us. Patience teaches us to be wolf whisperers.

Mark Thibodeaux is a Jesuit Priest who talks about this in his book *God's Voice Within*. It's vital for us to patiently address our struggles—struggles with others and our own internal struggles. He happened to be on a twenty-six hour bus ride. He wanted to use this extended alone time for prayer and reflection. But he found some pesky emotions of anger and judgmentalism over a certain situation rising up within him. His anger kept interrupting his prayer time and distracting him and gnawing at him. He doubled down to rid himself of the anger, but the harder he fought against anger, the angrier he became. This happened for a considerable number of hours. Anger was not budging from its seat. But as Mark watched different people leave and others enter the bus from city to city, he had an aha-moment. Some people who sat next to him were talkative, others were quiet. But they all eventually left the bus. So he changed his strategy with anger, his unwelcome bus companion. He chose acceptance. Patience. So he spoke directly to his anger.

*"OK anger, I can't seem to get you off this bus. You're insisting on staying and sitting right next to me the whole trip. Alright then, I give you permission to stay around for a while. But I'm going to quietly pray, so I need you to not make too much noise. You need to stay in your seat, and you certainly can't be in the driver's seat."*

After a while, Mark realized anger finally got off at one of the stops. Patience won out.

Patience helps us enjoy not only Point B (the destination), but also the line leading to Point B (the journey). Patience from above is strong—it gives us staying power. Endurance. It's gentle, but not easily pushed around. We can hold steady in the turmoil. Agitations come and go. And it's the fruit of the Spirit of patience that gives us staying power to stay with our emotions, to observe them, and let them pass, rather than holding on to them. Heartened by Christ, we can be more forgiving of others and ourselves. We can embrace the unknown, be willing to abide for a season in *"the waiting place."* We can endure those seasons of uncertainty that we just can't change. Patience trusts God, that all will be well. We know *"this too will pass."*

Patience is not only a virtue, it's a lot like a muscle. You build strength of patience slowly over time by working it out. With time your "patience muscles" can grow stronger. You can exercise your patience by looking to Christ, waiting for wisdom, waiting for direction, waiting for open doors or a way forward. *"Those who patiently wait under hardship,"* James tells us, *"we call blessed."*

May you be blessed in your waiting, this Advent and always.

Amen.

Sermon Art: *"Portrait of Patience Escalier"* by Vincent Van Gogh, 1888 (Wikimedia Commons)

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