We’ve all had the phone calls. “Did you get my email?” “Yes.” “But you didn’t reply.” Well, no, I’ve been out all morning and I haven’t had the time to get to my emails.” Politely, you suppress the comment “What’s the big rush? In the good old days it would have taken at least 2 days for my reply to have reached you. Chill out!” What’s the hurry?

Sometimes we worry about our hurry: things are moving too fast and we can’t keep up. There’s plenty of evidence to support your concern.

James Gleik’s book, Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything\(^1\), chronicles the frantic pace of modern life. He writes

> We are in a rush. We are making haste. A compression of time characterizes the life of the century ...

[Some examples:] The DOOR CLOSE button in elevators, so often a placebo, with no function but to distract for a moment those riders to whom ten seconds seems an eternity. Speed dials on telephones: do you invest minutes in programming them and reap your rewards in tenths of a second? Remote controls: their very existence, in the hands of a quick-reflexed, multi-tasking, channel flipping, fast-forwarding citizenry, has caused acceleration in the pace of films and television commercials ...\(^2\)

His book is not the only one. Amazon also offers, Faster Together; Faster than Normal; The Faster Way to Fat Loss Cookbook; Faster After 50; Faster Higher Stronger; Faster Cheaper Better; Faster Smarter Greener and a memoir from racing driver Jackie Stewart, titled simply Faster.

All this rushing makes us impatient. A friend in Australia once gave us a fridge magnet that said, “Grant me patience, Lord, but hurry!” It’s not just a modern problem, however, caused by all our novelties and gadgets. The ancient world needed patience too. Paul encourages patience no fewer than seven times in his letters.

- Patience is one of the nine fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5. That’s why we’re looking at it today.
- It’s one of the qualities Christians are to clothe themselves in, in Colossians 3:12.
- The utmost patience is to characterize Timothy’s teaching, in 2 Timothy 4:2.
- Love is patient, according to Paul’s great hymn in 1 Corinthians 13.
- In Ephesians 4:2 patience is one of the ways Christians lead lives “worthy of the calling” we’ve received.
- In 1 Thessalonians 5:14, patience is the quality needed when dealing with idlers, the fainthearted, or weak Christians.
- Paul knew very well what he was talking about. After acknowledging his pre-Christian past, with its persecution of believers, he testifies:

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\(^2\) Faster, pp9-10.
... I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.\(^3\)

So patience is one the qualities Jesus employs as he leads us to faith in him. And as Jesus, so God. Patience is part of the very nature of God, as our Exodus reading showed us.

Moses had been given the Ten Commandments during an intense, drawn out encounter with God on Mount Sinai. While he was away, the people’s spiritual insecurity surged and they succumbed to idolatry and worshipped the golden calf. Moses’ patience snapped and he smashed the tables—a symbol of the covenant broken.

God’s patience, however, held and Moses was given a second printing of the Commandments as a powerful assurance of the grace and mercy of God:

> The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation.\(^4\)

‘Slow to anger’ is the typical way the Hebrew expression for patience is translated in our English Bibles. And the scriptures are unflinching in describing the frequency with which God had to call on this characteristic. Both testaments describe God patiently seeking, forgiving, calling and using servants who are often anything but willing, anything but faithful.

It’s a story that has continued, unchanged, since biblical times. When I was at university, the British newspaper The Sunday Times had a weekly cartoon titled “My God.” It offered a comment on life more or less along religious lines. The one I remember best showed the globe as a scene of violence, discord and strife, with smoke billowing from several places. And God is seen looking at the chaos and saying, “One week’s work and an eternity of trouble.”

As Moses was to note, it is a miracle that God didn’t wash his hands of the entire project. And that’s as true of us as it is of ancient Israel.

Think of the struggling, sometimes grudging way we find our way to faith. C S Lewis’ conversion is a case in point. He resisted the thought of becoming Christian and kept God and bay for quite some time (doubtless testing God’s patience) until finally, he recalls,

> That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is the most shining and obvious thing: the divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms.\(^5\)

Humility is an off-shoot of patience!

Then think of the struggling, sometimes grudging way we strive to find ways to keep faith from making any difference to our status quo.

Rev Andrew Young contributed a story to the Upper Room’s daily devotional. He recalled the day his daughter announced she was going to work for Habitat for Humanity—in Uganda. It was not long

\(^3\) 1 Timothy 1:16  
\(^4\) Exodus 34:6, 7.  
after Idi Amin’s reign of terror, and her father was appalled. Didn’t she know it was dangerous—no law, no protection if she were attacked. “Yes,” she replied, “I’m going to Uganda.”

Young commented, “I wanted her to become a respectable Christian. I never dreamed that she’d become a real one.” And all the resistance we bring to becoming a real Christian tests the patience of God.

The letter to the Hebrews shows us what we are to do.

The old King James translation rendered verse 1 of chapter 12:

Wherefore, seeing we also are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, ... let us run with patience the race that is set before us. Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith...

More modern translations use the word ‘endurance’ rather than ‘patience’ here, but the meaning is the same. Endurance is simply patience in for the long haul! We are to develop our patience by looking to Jesus, by learning from the mercy, grace and love of God revealed in Jesus—and then doing it. If God can be so patient with us, we can be—we’re called to be—patient with one another.

We love because he first loves us, 1 John tells us. A corollary of that is, we are patient because he was first patient with us. And the more we learn, the more we trust, the more this quality can grow.

In her hilariously self-deprecating book, Flunking Sainthood: A Year of Breaking the Sabbath, Forgetting to Pray and Still Loving My Neighbor, Jana Riess describes enough spiritual failures to test divine patience to the limit. But she also discovers that doing grows us, that working to develop our spiritual life is the way to have it take root in our lives.

When Riess was fourteen, her father had emptied the family bank account of every cent and walked out. She never saw him again until, twenty six years later, a phone call told her he was dying; would she come and say goodbye? Imagine her feelings.

The shock, the pain of his sudden abandonment, the betrayal of knowing that he’d chosen to humiliate us still further by emptying the future of retirement for my mother and college fees for us kids still stung. The selfishness of it. The shame.

A friend told her she’d be quite justified in turning back and going home. But no. “I feel like this is a test... Today I find out whether I’m really a grown-up and a Christian. What if I fail?”

She went. She saw him. He died. She wrote:

Here is what I learned from my father’s sudden reappearance and death: all those unsuccessful practices, those attempts at sainthood that felt like dismal failures at the time, actually took hold somehow. They helped to form me into the kind of person who could go to the bedside of someone who had harmed me and be able to say, “I forgive you, Dad. Go in peace.” Although I didn’t see it when I was doing the spiritual practices or even while I was writing the chapters in this book, the power of spiritual practice is that it forges you stealthily, as you entertain angels unawares.

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7 1 John 4:19

Spiritual practice forges you stealthily; God’s patience at work.

The world needs it!

You need it because it connects you to the patience in which God holds you. It’s God’s love at work. Go do it!