



Roanoke, Virginia

June 1, 2025

“What Makes Patience a Virtue”

Romans 8:18-25

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In Mississippi, when I'd ask someone who was going through some stuff how they were doing, they'd sometimes answer with one word: “Tolerable.”

Whoever said it may have wanted to lighten the mood, but the answer was always honest. Some things just hurt—or are out of whack—and you live with it.

It's wonderful when a virus runs its course—but not everything can be cured. Some hurt lingers. And so, you learn to live with them—the best you can.

I'm not speaking of *tolerance* in the usual cultural sense, but about *toleration*—the quiet endurance of something painful or wrong, simply because it cannot be changed right now. “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,” says the Serenity Prayer. And sometimes, that acceptance is a kind of virtue.

But not always. Accepting what cannot be fixed *right now* as if it *never* can be fixed—*that* can fall short of being faithful. Toleration may be honest, even necessary. But Paul dares to move us beyond honesty alone—toward hope. Toleration, at its best, should serve a greater virtue: *patience*. You may not have thought about it much, but there is a difference between toleration and patience

Toleration puts up with what can't be changed.

Patience trusts that things *can* change.

Toleration is resignation.

Patience is hopeful waiting.

Toleration says, “I guess this is just how it is.”

Patience says, “This is not the end of the story.”



Toleration shrugs its shoulders.
Patience lifts its eyes.

That distinction matters—especially if we want to understand what Paul is saying in Romans 8. Paul knows suffering. He’s no stranger to hardship or futility:

- something he calls “a thorn in his side” that won’t go away,
- opposition from religious leaders,
- constant resistance to his mission.

And the Roman Christians he writes to are facing their own trials—internal conflicts and the daily pressures of living as a Christian community in the shadow of empire.

Paul endures what he cannot *fix*. But he does not simply tolerate it—he *is patient*. And he calls the Roman church—and us—to be patient as well.

Listen to what Paul says about
waiting,
groaning,
trusting in,
and hoping for,
what we cannot see:

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope, ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

“Patience is a virtue,” it’s often said. But I would add: a *particular kind of patience* is a Christian virtue. I’m not talking about the soft fatalism that calmly endures slow traffic, delayed dinners, and stories that have too many detours and no ending. I’m talking about the kind of patience Paul describes here—what I’d call *hopeful endurance*.

The early church knew all about endurance—groaning under what couldn’t be changed, crying out in frustration, aching for justice. But Paul urged them to a patience that *dared to hope*.

He doesn’t go small. He invites us to join *creation itself* in its groaning—not in despair, but in *eager longing*, a *holy frustration*. The whole creation is leaning forward, aching for what God is doing, what God *will* do so that heaven is revealed on earth.



This is not passive waiting. This is the kind of patience that acknowledges a horizon beyond our control, but we live toward it. It is a patience that

- includes both prayer *and* protest,
- faces what must be endured without giving up,
- waits for what we do not yet see—because God is not yet done.

This kind of patience is heard beautifully in spirituals sung by enslaved people in the fields:

Sometimes I feel discouraged,
And think my work's in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again.

Do you hear it? The first two lines reflect the temptation to resign—to tolerate injustice as unchangeable. But the next two lines reach for the Spirit, for revival, for hope.

Those spirituals were not merely wistful. They were defiant. They bore witness to a patient hope in God's promises—even when the world said otherwise. And they weren't wrong to hope.

History tells us that *what* seemed immovable—
slavery,
apartheid,
the Irish troubles,
the Iron Curtain—
was, in time, moved.

And the friction that propelled the movement was
grief over what *is*
and hope for what *should be*
being held at the same time—*patiently!*

These are grand illustrations, I know. But Paul gives us a grand vision. His scope is cosmic—creation groaning, laboring toward something unseen—the church waiting with creation for:

- a world with no slave or free,
Jew or Greek,
male or female,
- a world made new,
- a kingdom where death is no more
and tears are wiped away.

So, we honor the grand vision of Romans 8 with grand illustrations that give hope to people groaning under oppression.



But, we have our daily lives to live, don't we? So, let's not stay on the mountaintop with this majestic vision. Let's carry it down into the valley of ordinary life. Paul's vision matters not just for the end of all things—but for the *middle* of things. The messy middle where we live.

And here I invited a keen observer of ordinary life, Wendell Berry, to help us. In his novel *Jayber Crow*, we meet the town barber of Port William—a quiet observer of life, love, and faith.

Jayber loves Mattie Chatham. He has promised to love her and be faithful to her—

- in plenty and in want,
- in joy and in sorrow,
- in sickness and in health—
 - as long as he lives.

But he speaks those vows *only* before God and *not* before witnesses. Certainly *not* to Mattie.

Because Mattie is already married.

She is married to Troy Chatham, and they have children. Jayber sees how difficult that marriage is—how destructive Troy's pride and ambition have become for their family. And Mattie sees it, too. But she is as steadfast in keeping her public vows to Troy as Jaber is in keeping his private vows to her.

So, what is Jayber waiting for?

Not for Mattie to choose him over her husband. He knows she never will. He is not waiting for her to choose him.

He is waiting with *a different kind of patience*—one that lives with heartbreak but chooses devotion anyway. A patience that bears silent witness to love, even when love cannot be fulfilled.

In a way, Jayber becomes for Mattie what she is for her husband: someone who patiently loves, *even* when that love is not returned in the same way. Jayber can't fix Mattie's marriage. He can't express his love freely. But he chooses to live in tension. In that tension, he loves faithfully and is a friend she needs. That is *not* resignation. That is patience—the kind Paul describes: aching, groaning, but full of hope.

Most of us are not carrying secret vows like Jayber but all of us are living with situations we can't fix. Never mind the *global* problems, or the social or political realities we'd love to see change. We live with people we can't change. Pain we can't escape. And in those places, what might *hopeful endurance* look like?

What difference might patience make in a relationship that can't, right now, be fixed? Well—

- How many friendships survived and grew stronger because an argument ended with a comma, not a period?
- How many marriages celebrate anniversaries because one or both refused to give up when marital stress was real? ¹

¹ I commend those books where the stories are public. Such as *Crossing to Safety* by Wallace Stegner, who tells of two couples who endure through professional disappointments, chronic illness and conflicting goals. Or the



- How many children were empowered because they had parents who waited, prayed, and hoped—when a diagnosis, behavior, or a season made that hard?

Some of the most powerful stories of patient love can't be told because they're confidential. But I can say this: when someone waits with love *that often groans*—
waits not passively, but prayerfully—
things can change.

I wish I were preaching this sermon during the school year when children's programming is going strong and more parents are in church because the sustaining and ultimately transforming power of patience applies to everyday parenting. I thank God for those teachers and parents who didn't give up on me when I was a distracted, underperforming grade school student. Some teachers gave up on me and that made it harder. But a few believed that my future didn't have to match my present and hung in with me.

I think every parent can learn from those parents who accept a diagnosis of something that can't be changed—Down syndrome, learning disabilities, chronic conditions—and choose to raise their child with a hopeful, enduring love. They start with the truth: some things must be accepted. But they do not give up on what might yet be. They do not give up on God's surprises.

This is the patience Paul means. Not stoicism. Not passivity. But a Spirit-led, eyes-lifted, groaning-but-trusting, Gospel-shaped hope.

And here's the most important thing about patience as a Christian virtue: *this patience is not something we have to drum on our own.* It begins in God and is given to us.

God is patient with *us*—gracious, long-suffering, steadfast. God does not count our faults against us but claims us as beloved children, even when we are frustrating, slow to change, and stuck. God waits—not with resignation, but with redemptive resolve. He knows what we *can* become by grace.

So, by the Spirit, we can practice that same patient hope toward others. Because God is working toward a new creation, we do not lose hope—even when the evidence is hard to see.

So maybe questions to carry into this week are these:

1. Where have I settled for toleration, when God may be calling me to patience?
2. And what might change if I waited with hope instead of resignation?

Benediction:

collection of essays by Ann Patchett, called *This is the Story of a Happy Marriage*, where in her second marriage she learns to chose partnership as a daily act of love and work.



Go now in the hope that does not disappoint,
In the love that
 bears all things,
 believes all things,
 hopes all things,
 endures all things.

Wait patiently, not with resignation, but with confidence in the One who is making all things new.

 And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
The love of God,
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
Be with you—and all creation—as we wait and groan in hope. Amen.

