

Luke 21:19

By John Maclaughlan

In Luke 21 Jesus answers the disciples' questions about the timing of the destruction of the Temple and the signs that will precede this event (verse 7). In answering this question Jesus widens His answer to refer to "the end" (verse 9). In Matthew it is recorded that the disciples included a question about the "end of the age" (Matt 24:3), which it appears that Luke omitted. In His answer Jesus describes some quite terrifying incidents that will take place, but in the middle of describing these things He makes this statement: "By your patience possess your souls" (verse 19). This statement comes after Jesus told His followers that they will be hated by everyone because of their allegiance to Jesus, "but not a hair of your head shall be lost" (verse 18). And it is followed by a terrifying picture of armies attacking and surrounding Jerusalem (verse 20).

No one would like the prospect of being hated by everyone, but this is the picture that Jesus presents of the times that lie ahead for His followers. But, as if this were not bad enough, the picture of a savage war and the siege of Jerusalem would strike terror into many a soul. Both of these prospects are enough to cause fear and panic in many hearts. Yet, it is into this context that Jesus says, "By your patience possess your souls". So, what is Jesus intending for us to take from this statement? Our first thought could be that of the British attitude of showing a stiff upper lip along with the gritting of teeth. But is this what Jesus means?

The Greek word translated "patience" in this passage is found in other parts of the NT. In Romans 5:3 & 4 we read, "knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope", where the same Greek word is translated as "perseverance". In this Romans passage we see that "perseverance/patience" is built into us through "tribulation" and it leads on to something richer called "hope", and indeed we "rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (verse 2). "Patience" is not an end in itself, but it leads on to something more glorious that we who trust in Christ will share in and enjoy one day. This quality of "perseverance" is present because we have been justified by faith and we have peace with God (verse 1): It is built upon the work of Christ! Because of what God has done in Christ we can persevere, and we can have genuine hope. If in our unregenerate and godless state God justified us freely in Christ, then we can face the future with its pains, sorrows and challenges, trusting in Him that He will bring us through to His desired end. This "perseverance" has the work of God as the solid ground that we can build upon and it has a hope that is to do with experiencing the glory of God one day!

Here I would like to quote from an account of one of the Scottish Covenanters, Hugh MacKail, at his execution as recorded in the book 'Fair Sunshine' by Jock Purves: "Up the ladder to the rope he climbed, crying, 'I care no more to go up this ladder, and over it, than if I were going home to my father's house'. Rung by rung he called aloud, 'Every step is a degree nearer heaven'. Sitting at the top of the ladder he took out his pocket Bible, and, after addressing the crowds, he read the last chapter of it. Standing up, the napkin was put over his face, but, lifting it, in a remarkable voice by faith inspired, he burst forth into an ecstatic offering of farewells and welcomes filled with grace and glory, a blessed, wondrous and glorious Amen of comparison. 'Now, I leave off to speak any more to creatures, and turn my speech to thee. O Lord. Now I begin my intercourse with God which shall never be broken off.'" What made such men die like this? Here was a man whose eyes and heart were set upon heaven and the glory of God that lay in store for those who love God. This is "perseverance"!

In Col 1:11 we read of being, "strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy", where "joy" is associated with "patience". This "perseverance" is not pictured as a wearisome task or burden, but it is accompanied by "joy". Obviously, this is not the type of joy that is dependent upon our circumstances, for as the NT shows us, there is much suffering in following Christ, but we are told to, "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Phil 4:4). The "joy" we read of here is a "joy" inspired by Christ and by His work of grace in our lives.

In Rom 8:25 we read that, "if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance". This is written in response to the fact that, "we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body". The child of God is looking forward to something more wonderful than he can ever grasp while here on this earth. He knows that it is something truly amazing that awaits him and so he waits for it with "perseverance/patience" knowing that God will finish in him what He once started.

Interestingly, this word "patience" is used of Jesus Himself. We read in 2 Thess 3:5, "Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ". When we are encouraged to show and act with "patience" we are following the example of the Lord Jesus for we read that Jesus, "for the joy set before Him endured the cross" (Heb 12:2), where the word translated "endured" comes from the same root as the Greek word for "patience". Jesus saw beyond the suffering to the promised "joy" that awaited Him, and that is what believers can share in. But notice that we need the Lord to direct our hearts into this "patience", as if to emphasise that this is not a work of our own doing, but that it is an act of the LORD – and it is a work that the LORD wants to do in us!

Do we realise how rare this quality "patience" is in this world? Many people around us are suffering and it shows in their demeanour and on their faces. So, when people see a Christian suffer and there is no anxiety or complaining to be seen, but there is a calm disposition with a sense of peace and hope, do we realise that this may be something completely alien to them? It is quite possible that such an attitude seen in Christians will stick out like a sore thumb because it is so different and so attractive.

Outside the NT this Greek word (*hupomone*) had been used of a plant that grew under adverse circumstances. In a dry and barren place this plant should not grow, but it did! The plant almost defied logic! I recall as a youngster in Glasgow one day

walking along one of Glasgow's dreary streets. In those days before many of the tenements were pulled down, the tenement walls were often dark or even black due to the smoke and grime that fell on them from the coal fires and the heavy industry. It was only much later when I saw one of these tenement walls cleaned up that I realised that they were a reddish sandstone and were quite attractive in their own way. On this particular day I happened to look up at one of these walls because something had caught my eye. It was a window box on one of the upper stories of the building and in that window box were two lovely orange lilies. They stuck out like a sore thumb against the dreary tenement wall and that picture stuck in my mind. Then, many years later after I had become a Christian, and I came across this Greek word the picture of these two orange lilies came to mind as if to say that this is what biblical "*patience*" is like – it stands out like a sore thumb and even defies our logic! The Christian has hope and joy when everything around him screams out that these are the qualities that he should not have! To the unbeliever the Christian just does not make sense – how can he be at peace and even have hope when things have gone wrong?

In Classical Greek the word is not a very common word, but it is used of enduring, and battling against, grief and the difficulties that have come upon someone against his will, be it a war or even facing death. Such a person has not chosen these challenges, but he rises to the challenge before him. This would call for great bravery with no certain hope of success. Such valour was respected and admired among the ancient Greeks. Many trials and sorrows come upon Christians without warning, but we face these things with hope because our trust is in the LORD. In the Luke 21 passage Jesus actually warns us of the difficult times that lie ahead of us, so that we will not be taken unawares, therefore we can cultivate this quality of "*patience*" before that time comes. (It is worth noting that the parallel passage to Luke 21:19 is Matt 24:13 which reads, "*But he who endures to the end will be saved*". The Greek word translated "*endures*" in Matt 24:13 comes from the same root as "*patience*" in Luke 21:19.)

Today we may be facing many trials, challenges and disappointments that would draw us aside from Christ but let us take heart for the same Spirit that strengthened Jesus as He faced the cross is here with us today to enable us to face our challenges with godly "*patience*" and hope, and to prepare us for the challenges that we know lie ahead of us.