



Fire and Ice Sermon Series

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The Wisdom of Patience

by Thomas Goodwin

(Fourth in a series of four sermons.)

Although I have despatched the subject I first intended, yet I find myself obliged to proceed a little further in the opening ver. 5, in order unto a relieving against a great discouragement, which I know hath, or may have been, in many readers' hearts, whilst I have been thus discoursing these great things about the perfect work of patience, &c.; and also to leave behind me the most apposite direction how to obtain this patience, in the perfect work of it: and I will not go out of my text for these things neither.

An Exposition of James 1:5

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

The discouragement I know is: Oh, how remote are and have our hearts been from this perfect work of patience! which yet some saints have in so great a measure attained, as those great examples given have shewn, both of saints out of the Old and New Testaments. What then shall I think of myself for the present? will such a soul say; or for the future, what shall I do?

Why, truly, God hath provided sufficiently in the text for answer to these queries and complaints of yours, whereby both to relieve you against your discouragement at your want of the exercise of these things, and also to direct you to the most proper and effectual, if not the only means to obtain them.

1. As to this present discouragement about your want, and so great falling short of this hitherto, which you are so sensible of, those first words in the text, 'If any of you lack wisdom,' will be found greatly speaking to your relief therein.

2. As to a direction what you should do for the future to obtain it, those other words, 'Let him ask of God,' point us to the most proper and effectual remedy and way of supply in the case.

3. With this great encouragement added, first drawn from the nature of God, ‘Ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not;’ then seconded with this promise, ‘and it shall be given him.’

Of these three heads in what follows, briefly:

I.—To the discouragement.

The opening of these words, ‘If any of you lack wisdom,’ will greatly conduce to ease your heart as to that; the effect of which is, that the Apostle plainly supposeth that true believers may both really, and in their own apprehensions especially, be found greatly lacking in point of patience when trials do befall them. And this I am sure hath reason to relieve you in what is like to be the great discouragement that usually falls out.

This to be the supposition of the Apostle is made good by opening four things:—

1. That by ‘wisdom’ here is plainly meant patience, together with the perfect work of it which he had spoken of.
2. That he speaks this unto those that were true believers; ‘if any of you.’
3. How it may or can be said that true believers, who have all grace and the principles thereof in them, lack such or such a grace.
4. The intimate reason and occasion upon which the Apostle utters himself in this supposition; ‘if any,’ &c.

For the first; wisdom sometimes is taken largely for all grace and gracious actings whatsoever; sometimes strictly for a particular grace. To find out the difference of which, the measure is to be taken from the scope of the place where either of these is mentioned. Now wisdom, in this place, is to be taken strictly; that is, for that particular grace, or piece of gracious wisdom, whereby to know how to be able to manage a man’s self under trials, especially great, sore, and sudden ones, patiently; which is done when we have taken in and digested by faith such principles as our Christianity affords plenty of, as grounds that instruct and enable the soul joyfully to entertain such trials and tentations, and to endure and go through them with a constancy of joy. For look, as the word ‘grace’ is taken either strictly or largely; that is, either for all grace, and yet again for any or every particular grace, each of which is called grace also: ‘As ye abound in every grace, so ye abound in this grace also;’ thus, all grace is called wisdom in a large sense, as usually throughout the Book of Proverbs, but withal a particular grace is called wisdom too, as the third chapter of this epistle, ver. 13, shews. The grace of

meekness shown in speech and conversation, he styles it ‘meekness of wisdom,’ or a ‘wise meekness,’ or a meekness accompanied with and proceeding out of wisdom. And thus Calvin and most others understand wisdom here in this my text of this special grace; the scope and coherence with the former words carrying it thereunto. True patience being from such a wisdom as whereby the soul hath the skill and ability to manage a man’s self patiently under tentations, to such an issue as that patience should have a perfect work in us; and unto this it is here to be restrained; for this grace it is he had been, and still is, discoursing of.

And there is a special and more peculiar reason why this skill of patience should be styled wisdom in a more eminent sense. For what he had before uttered of rejoicing in afflictions and tentations, and exhorted unto, that patience should have its perfect work; these things being the hardest lessons in Christianity, do therefore need and require the highest principles of divine wisdom, both doctrinal and practical, to be deeply inlaid and fixed in the soul, so as to bow and frame the heart unto a real practice and willing performance of such dictates and conformity thereunto. For then it is that knowledge is termed wisdom; and for that reason it is that our whole religion is styled wisdom, because it rests not in bare notional knowledge, which is a differing thing from wisdom, but makes men proportionably wise to the practice of the things in which it instructs. And particularly this skill of enduring tentations, such as hath been described, doth deserve this style more eminently, for it so far outvies, and is above the sphere of all principles, whether of philosophy or what other profession or professors of patience whatsoever, who whilst, in a sullen patience, for all of theirs was no better, they professed to be wise, they became foolish; and Christianity infinitely outshoots them in what they most gloried in.

Secondly, That he speaks this to them whom he supposeth true believers, and unto them as such, is evident; although at the first blush, as we say, the words would seem to point at and speak to unregenerate men who wholly want all true wisdom and grace; and so the drift should be an intended direction to or for such to seek true grace, which they lack, at the hands of God, by prayer.

But the coherence manifestly shews that he speaks to such whom he supposeth to be already true believers. For in the next words he exhorts the same persons whom he speaks to in these words, to ‘ask in faith;’ and therefore supposeth them to have true faith already whom he directs this exhortation unto. And otherwise it had been more proper, yea, requisite to have exhorted them, if he had intended it of unregenerate men, first to seek faith itself, and then out of faith and in that faith to seek for this wisdom, or grace of endurance. And again he speaks to them that were brethren; so he calls them; and in this passage says, ‘if

any of you,' and such who, being true professors of Christianity, were exposed unto those sundry tentations from persecutions especially. And it is such also whom he exhorts to 'count it all joy,' &c., and here to ask a wisdom of God whereby to be able to suffer for their holy profession. Furthermore, this wisdom lying in patience having its perfect work in them, it supposeth the persons such as had some work of patience and of other graces begun in them already. And, indeed, to have exhorted unregenerate men, that were as yet utterly destitute of all grace, and so out of harm's way as to any sufferings from the gospel, and to direct them to make this the first of their addresses to God, and of their requests, that they might be able to endure tentations, and that patience should have a perfect work in them, and so to have taught them that which is the hardest lesson in Christianity before they had learned the first letters thereof; this had been utterly improper, and a lesson at too great a distance for men in their natural state first to learn.—Thus much for the persons, viz., that he speaks it unto men already regenerate, and supposed in the faith.

The third thing proposed was, How it could be he should speak in this manner of believers, that they should lack this grace of wisdom; whenas, if such, they must be supposed to have all true graces in them; why then should he yet say, even of them, 'If any of you lack,' &c.?

Ans.—This expression, to say such and such a Christian 'lacks' such or such a grace, is not uncouth nor unusual in the Scriptures, when he or they have wanted the exercise of it. For though Christians do receive the principles of all graces, as 2 Pet. 1:3, yet they may neglect to stir up all graces, or may have been disused to the exercise of some. Why else, and to what end, doth the Apostle in the same place stir them up to add grace to grace, as in ver. 5? And in those cases a Christian may be said, yea, charged to lack that grace or graces which he wants the exercise of For so in the same chapter, ver. 9, speaking of a dozed, negligent professor, though true, he useth this very language of him, 'He that lacks these things,' as I have elsewhere opened that Scripture. For *idem est non esse, et non uti*;—it is all one for a thing not to be, and not to be used, when the being of a thing is wholly ordained for use and operation. Now such a thing is grace; and such a thing, if not used, is as if it were not. And the opposition that is between adding grace to grace, ver. 5,—that is, the exercise of one grace after another,—and the lacking grace, in that ver. 9, evidently shews that phrase to be so understood, not of the utter want of the grace, but of the exercise.

The fourth thing is, the intimate reason or occasion whereupon the Apostle doth utter himself in such a supposition. 'If any of you lack.'

This will appear by considering these three things:—

First, In respect that he had exhorted to so hard and difficult a practice; to ‘count it all joy,’ &c. —which requireth such high principles to be drunk in, about the good and benefit of tentations, in the issue and end of them; which principles must also have been thoroughly concocted in their hearts first who shall attain to this.

And, secondly, there being many poor souls, as of such that were weak, and some new converts, amongst them whom he wrote to, who might, and did then, as many now-a-days, that yet are sincere-hearted, in the sense of their own weakness, find and apprehend themselves so far off and remote from such high principles and attainments, and therefore, upon his thus discoursing, were like to be utterly discouraged; thinking with themselves, judging themselves by the present frame of their infirm spirits, both that their hearts had never yet, nor would ever be, wrought up to this pitch. What, to count it all joy! think they; is that it you exhort us unto? Alas! our hearts tremble at the very thoughts of entering into such sudden and so great tentations as you here forewarn us of. And of all graces else, it is this of a patient suffering frame, and strength of spirit thereto, that is and hath been our want. This is it we ‘lack,’ nor do we know how to manage ourselves wisely under such trials, so as to glorify God; yea, and not shamefully to dishonour him. Nay, if we should fall into such trials and sufferings, we are liker utterly to fall away under them, rather than to rejoice when we fall into them.

Further, thirdly, there might be many strong Christians, as to the active part of the life of Christianity, who yet might be to seek as fresh soldiers at the first, when such trials come unexpectedly, and thick and threefold upon them; and that they fall into them as downfalls and precipices. And in this dreadful a manner he had set them out to them, as impendent on them, as was opened. And even such Christians, being surprised, might be at a loss at first, in respect of that confidence of spirit to bear them, till by prayer and faith recollecting themselves, they should anew obtain or regain this wisdom. Even strong Christians are apt to be stounded at first, as men are with a great blow, and cannot well stand or keep their ground.

Now unto such, either of these, doth the Apostle in this language, ‘If any of you lack,’ apply himself, and therein speaks to their very hearts; but especially to the first sort of weak Christians. And, indeed, speaks their very fears, and most inward thoughts and apprehensions, they had or might have of themselves; and so utters their misgivings of heart in their own language. Oh, I lack these things, says the soul. ‘If any of you lack;’ says the Apostle. And it is no small comfort to such

to hear an apostle, from the immediate inspiration of the Holy Ghost, to suppose that very true and sincere Christians may thus be lacking and thus surprised.

Thus as to the removal of their main discouragement, which was the first thing proposed.

II.—The direction.

Let him ask of God.—Having thus spoken their hearts, as to the fears and apprehensions of themselves in respect of their falling short of this high duty of joy and patience, &c., he now directs them to the most proper and sovereign means for the obtaining of it of all other, and that is faithful, instant prayer: ‘Let him ask of God,’ &c.

And herein also he speaks the hearts of all true Christians also, even of the weakest; whose refuge in all their wants is to cry to God for a supply of what they lack, especially when they feel, or are apprehensive of their lack and want in any grace that should help them in time of need. And look, what effectual supply of this grace in tentations all the Apostle’s persuasions alone would not have effected, that, faith venting itself in constant and fervent prayer, will bring in and obtain; and their hearts will in the end be raised and wrought up. unto, so as they shall be able to abound in this grace also. Weak faith, when it cannot find in its heart to suffer, or so much as to enter into trials, can yet pray; and so doth beg with desires unutterable to have this grace, to be able to suffer these trials in this joyful manner the Apostle exhorts us unto. And the weak heart continuing so to pray and importune God, in the end this shall be given him; as here he promiseth. I shall not enlarge on this further. For when an apostle shall single forth a means, and that one single one, whereby to obtain any eminent grace one needs, that means ought to be with all diligence put into use and practice; and so there needs no more to urge it.

Only observe how in this directive part he puts them not upon praying chiefly to have tentations and trials averted or kept off, nor to ask *deliverance* out of them, though that is lawful and may be done; not a word of these in this his exhortation; but he draws the main and great intention of their souls unto praying for grace, how to be patient and joyful, &c.—This as to the direction.

III.—His encouragements to pray.

His encouragements, that by seeking a believer shall obtain, are drawn, first, from that gracious wont and disposition of God, that *giveth* to all *men liberally*, &c.

1. As being a God ‘that giveth to all men.’ And this also is to be limitedly understood of all those men who thus do, have, or shall apply themselves unto God by faithful and importunate prayer. For he had said first, ‘Let him ask of God;’ and therefore God’s giving here must be supposed to be a giving to him that asketh. Again, although it be said that faith works patience, yet it is prayer that fetcheth and brings down the power from God into the heart, that works both faith and patience, and all. Prayer is the midwife by which faith, the mother, brings forth patience in the heart.

2. His gracious disposition in giving is further set out—

(1) That he giveth liberally. The word *απλως* both signifies a free-hearted giving, in a pure way of simplicity of heart; as being neither moved by any respect in us, as of worthiness, or the like, but singly and simply out of such motives and considerations as are in his own heart, and which his own great and gracious divine nature prompts him to: *freely*. We generally use to say, ‘out of his free grace,’ which comes all to one with the import of the word which the apostle useth here. Therefore make that grace as thy plea to him in thy prayers for it, or whatever else thou seekest at his hands.

(2.) It signifies largely, abundantly, liberally, richly; as the word is used in 2 Cor. 8:2, and so translated there. You have both in that passage of David’s, 2 Sam. 3:21, ‘According to thine own heart’—there is freely or simply—‘hast thou done all these great things,’—there is liberally.

And upbraideth not.—That is a second property or disposition in God and his giving; the sense whereof is, first, that when he hath given liberally, never so often, nor so much, yet he upbraideth not, as men are wont to do. Among men, he that is most liberal, yet if the same man he hath formerly given unto will come often to him to be relieved, in the end he at least will excuse himself, or else say, Why do you come so often, thus again and again? which is a tacit and implicit way of upbraiding, or insinuation of foregone benefits. Surely Calvin, and Estius from him, have hit it, who put this scope and drift upon this clause: that no man should be afraid or solicitous to come, though never so often, to this free and generous giver, nor be discouraged within himself that he should need to come so often to him, nor forbear to continue his incessant importunities, though it be never so long a time ere he obtains.

And thus understood, it is as if he had said, God is so free, so simple-hearted and liberal in giving, as the oftener you come the welcomer, especially when for grace; yea, he hereby inviteth us of his own free heart to come always, to ask and pray continually and incessantly, as that parable, Luke 18:1, made on set

purpose, shews. So then, a frequent, constant, importunate continuing in prayer to obtain is hereby exhorted unto.

A second scope in his adding this clause is, that though we find that God doth indeed upbraid impenitent men for their sins, as Christ those cities, yet he never did, or ever will do, any sinners in this case wherein it is proposed,—namely, when they shall come and humble themselves for their sins, seeking for more grace to help in time of need against their corruption; and this much rather than from deliverance from or out of troubles,—in this case he will not twit them with any of their unworthiness that hath been past; he will pass by their iniquity, and not upbraid them. And this is a great encouragement indeed; for the guilt of sin and former ingratitude do above all things deter men from coming to God, lest he should remember their iniquities and upbraid them with them.

And it shall be given him.—He follows and confirms this hope of obtaining with this sure and certain promise, ‘and it shall be given him.’ For when the souls of men, being made thoroughly apprehensive of their own want of a grace, are carried forth (to choose) to seek for grace, or such or such a gracious disposition; and that before and above all deliverance out of the trials they are in, as was before observed the Apostle had directed; in this case, God—that is, the God of all grace—is the most ready giver of grace that he is of anything else. There are no requests more pleasing to him, or that suit his divine and blessed disposition so as this doth of praying for grace, as thus stated. For the bestowing and giving of grace thus prayed for doth tend, above all things else, to the glorifying of himself; and it is the aiming thereat that must and doth carry out such a heart to make this to be the top and chief of its most earnest petitions. The God of grace is the most free of grace. Thus Christ says, ‘If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?’ Our Apostle hath also told us that though the spirit that is in us lusteth to envy, that yet God gives more grace—that is, a counterpoise of grace unto that lust—unto all them that humbly seek for it; as, chap. 4:5-7, ‘Do ye think that the Scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy? But he giveth more grace. He resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble.’

I shall now go forth of my text but to fetch in one thing. I observe, when the Apostle particularly comes to that part of his prayer made for the Colossians, that they might have all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness, —which exactly agrees with what is the matter exhorted unto in this text,—he implores the glorious power of God, in these words, Col. 1:11, ‘That ye may be strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and long-

suffering with joyfulness.’ And to draw and fix your hearts on this glorious power of God, and point your prayers thereto, is the thing which I mean and intend.

And indeed the consideration of this one thing will have a general influence into all those three heads have been treated of in this last fourth section. As, first, it may be no great wonder if many of us have been so deficient and lacking in this grace; for it is not an ordinary power, such as in ordinary walkings holily doth assist us, but a glorious power is requisite to perfect this grace: which argues this to be so difficult an exercise above any other, and that our natures are infinitely remote from it of ourselves, which we not minding nor considering, have not perhaps with answerable vehemency implored the aid of so great a power. And, secondly, this gives us a clear reason why prayer, of all other means, should be directed by the Apostle, and extraordinarily set upon by us, as the most effectual, yet, as an only means to obtain this. For seeing that power lies out of ourselves, in God, which must effect this in us, then surely nothing can be judged so prevailing as faith and prayer, which are the graces in and by which the soul, going out of itself, in a sense of its utter insufficiency, supplicates the grace in God’s heart to exert this power of his good pleasure, and so do draw it forth and bring it down into the heart. And then, thirdly, this gives us the highest encouragement, that we may obtain this perfect work of it, however remote from it the present temper of our spirits may seem to be to us, seeing that no less than such a glorious power is requisite to effect it in the strongest Christians, and a power so glorious is able to work it in the weakest.

Let us pray, therefore, with all vehemency for ourselves, as the Apostle did for those Colossians, that this glorious power may come upon us, and strengthen our inward man—as it is elsewhere, Eph. 3:16 —with all might; which might in us is the effect of that power in God as the cause.

For is this patience is to be an ‘all patience,’ or else it hath not its perfect work, so this might must be an ‘all might’ you must be strengthened with unto such a patience, or you will not be perfect at it. That might you had in such or such a trial will not serve to strengthen you against the next trial that shall come; but you must still have a new special might for every new trial. Your dependence, therefore, is great upon God for this perfect work of patience, and yet your encouragements are great. For as it must be that, if God will please to strengthen us under any great unusual tentations, that he should put forth no less than this ‘glorious power:’ so we have heard how, in our Apostle, he hath promised he will give it, and give it freely and liberally to them that make it their main, constant, earnest business to ask it; and therefore, his grace, if applied to, is engaged to put this power forth.

It cannot but be a great support to a weak heart that finds itself so remote and distant from such a work of patience, and weak also in comparison of finding such an inward might, that it should have ground and cause to think and to believe that God's glorious power is engaged most freely, to be abundantly and readily put forth, if continued to be sought unto. Why, this, says the weak heart, will do it; namely, this glorious power; and I have found by some trials already that the strong God and a weak heart will be too hard for any thing, yea, for the whole world.

And therefore, when you think your present trials that are come upon you far greater than you can bear, think withal of the glorious power of God that is at hand to help you. It is a great word that, 'his glorious power,'—a greater attribute could not have been named or found out for our comfort,—and is a word of virtue, force, and power, to hearten to or against anything whatever. It is true thy present trial may be, and is, above that inward strength which serves and hath served hitherto to act thy graces in thy ordinary walkings with God, holily and sincerely. A child may by its ordinary strength be able to walk up and down a room by stools (suppose) supporting it, without any other extraordinary help; but if it be to go up a pair of stairs, the strength that enabled it to these lesser performances will not be sufficient thereunto; he must be carried and held up in the arms of one who is strong and mighty. And so it is here. That other part of our Christian obedience, the active life of a Christian, prayed for by the Apostle in that place to the Colossians also, whereby he walks fruitfully, &c., as in the seventh verse of that chapter, requires indeed God's power, for by it it is we are kept unto salvation all along. But when it comes to patience and long-suffering, and all patience, and that such a trial comes as will try all patience in you; then it is he makes mention of that glorious power, and not before. For it must be no less that must go to that than God's glorious power. And the promise therefore is, in such a case, that the Spirit of glory shall rest upon us, and not the Spirit of grace only, as I Peter 4:14. Relieve and comfort, therefore, yourselves with these things, and specially with this: that as your trials abound, so this glorious power of God will abound also towards you, for your support. Amen.

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