

What is “the patient expectation of Jesus Christ”?

by Stephen D. Cole

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I, John, who also am your brother and companion in affliction, and in the kingdom and patient expectation of Jesus Christ, came to be in the island called Patmos, for the sake of the Word of God, and for the sake of the testimony of Jesus Christ. (Revelation 1:9)

You may, or may not have noticed that the translation of one expression in this text was slightly different from the translation in our lesson from *Apocalypse Explained*. The words expounded there were simply “the expectation of Jesus Christ,” while what we just read was “the *patient* expectation of Jesus Christ.” Why the difference?

A simple, but perhaps unhelpful explanation is “that is what the Latin says.” In the original, the *Apocalypse Explained* has one Latin word “*expectatio*” to convey one Greek word “*hupomone*”(ὑπομονή.) [Translators of *Apocalypse Explained* have sometimes helpfully supplied the word “patient,” but it is not in the work as it was originally written.] But, a few years later, when the *Apocalypse Revealed* was published, Swedenborg was inspired by the Lord to add the word “*patiente*,” conveying the idea that “*hupomone*” here suggests not simply “expectation,” but rather “patient expectation.”

Patience is a virtue. One is well advised to have it if one is able. But how does one cultivate patience? Patience can involve hoping, expecting, and waiting. But waiting, in fact, can be patient or impatience. Think back 2000 years to the century in which John was writing the Book of Revelation. One can picture the early Christians waiting for the return of Jesus. Some were probably more patient than others.

True Christian Religion points out that even as the Lord blessed the apostles and ascended into heaven, a foretelling of his Second Coming is reported in the Book of Acts. As the apostles watched intently as the Lord vanished into a cloud, two angels said to them, “‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.’” (Acts 1:11) Although there is no mention of when, exactly, this would take place, there is an sense of immediacy and even an implication that they, themselves, would witness the return.

But time passed. And at the point at which John wrote the words of the text, there was quite possibly a good reason that those who first read them already needed to be encouraged not just to await Jesus Christ, but to await patiently.

Christian tradition since early times has presumed that when John speaks of being on the island called Patmos “for the Word of God” and “the testimony of Jesus Christ,” he is speaking in the context of the “affliction” that he has just mentioned – that he is alluding to his being exiled there during the persecution of the Christians under the Emperor Domitian, probably around 95 AD, thus, obviously, many decades after the death and resurrection of the Lord.

But the Heavenly Doctrine explains the words “for the sake of the Word of God, and for the sake of the testimony of Jesus Christ” differently: “John was commanded to betake himself into the isle of Patmos, that the things that are to be at the end of the church might there be revealed.” (AE 50) If John was directed by the Lord to go there because of what the place represented, then perhaps it was not, after all, directly linked to the persecutions. So perhaps it is not so clear exactly when John wrote these words.

What is clear, nevertheless, is that many early Christians expected the Second Coming and the Last Judgment to happen within their lifetimes. The charge to wait patiently, then, would have gotten more and more challenging as time went by. And by the time that the Heavenly Doctrine was written, it could speak of those for whom “that day has been expected in vain for so many centuries that they too are in doubt.” (AC 1885)

“But,” the little work on the *Last Judgment* tells us, “lest they should expect this everlastingly, from age to age in vain, the spiritual sense of the Word is opened, that thus it may be known what is meant by many things in the Word, which, when thought of naturally, do not enter the understanding, and, at the same time, what is meant by ‘the heaven and the earth’ which will pass away.” (LJ 65)

For the New Church the wait is over. The Lord has made His Second Coming and the Last Judgment took place in 1757. For those who accept the new gospel, it would seem, there is no need for “the patient expectation of Jesus Christ.” Or is there? One can acknowledge that these things happened more than 200 years ago and still have questions or even doubts about just where things stand at the present day and what the future may hold in store.

The Last Judgment may have happened centuries ago, but why, then, isn’t the world now a better place than it is? The New Church is the crown of all the churches that have hitherto existed on the earth, but why haven’t its reasonable and consoling teachings reached a much larger proportion of humanity by now? In some ways, it might seem that the New Church was more prominent and influential in the 19th century than it is today. Could it somehow be in decline?

Even having the beautiful and inspiring teachings of the Heavenly Doctrine, it is easy to become discouraged or impatient about the prospects of the church. Our lesson stated “‘the expectation of Jesus Christ,’ is the coming of the time when the church shall know the Lord; and the church knows the Lord when it acknowledges the Divine in His Human.” (AE 49) There are still relatively few, even at this day, for whom this is true. For us to believe that the day will come when there will be many more who do so still requires patient expectation on our part. But how do we cultivate this patience?

The words “patient” and “patience” have been used many times so far, but their meaning has not as yet been closely examined. What do they actually mean? “Be patient” may sound as though it is a charge to remain “passive,” a word to which it is, in fact, related. “To be passive” may, in turn, suggest being quiescent without reacting – being neutral or inert. But this does not accurately reflect the idea expressed in the Greek, “*hupomone*.” The first part of this word is a prepositional prefix meaning “under,” which we also see in English words beginning “hypo-.” The second part is from a Greek verb meaning and related to our English verb “to remain.” So, what is it under which one “remains” while one is patient?

To explore this, let us consider another word to which “patience” is related. “Passion” may seem almost the opposite of “passive,” but it comes from the same origin – a root word that means “to be acted upon,” and, originally, in the case of “passion,” acted upon in such a way that one suffered. This original meaning is obvious when reference is made to the Lord’s “passion on the cross.” So, too, the idea of patience can allude to the enduring of suffering. “*Hupomone*” means to remain under the burden of some hardship.

You may have heard of the “patience of Job.” This is not simply a common proverbial expression but rather a biblical reference, coming from the Epistle of James. We read: “You have heard of the patience of Job and seen the end *intended by* the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.” (James 5:11) Now, if you have read the Book of Job, or are even familiar with the story of Job, you might object that Job doesn’t sound all that patient, if by “patient” we understand uncomplaining acceptance. But that is the point – James uses our word “*hupomone*” and he is talking about enduring through suffering without losing one’s faith, not necessarily accepting one’s lot with passivity.

A “patient,” in the medical sense, is so called not from passively awaiting treatment, but from suffering with the malady for which the treatment has been sought.

Patience, as it is spoken of in the Bible, is more like the endurance to push on and finish a race than is to stand uncomplaining as one waits in a long line. “*Hupomone*” is the word used in the first verse of Hebrews chapter 12, which, in the King James version reads: “Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset *us*, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.” In the New King James this becomes “let us run with *endurance* the race that is set before us.”

That this is what is meant in our text is clear from the fuller context. John calls himself “your brother and companion in affliction, and in the kingdom and patient expectation of Jesus Christ.” One maintains “patient expectation” in the face of “affliction.”

This word is used only twice in the gospels, but seven times in the Book of Revelation. The first is in our text, but the next four are in the two chapters that follow – the messages to the seven churches. These messages generally identify strengths and shortcomings of each of the churches. And *hupomone* is mentioned among of the strengths in the case of three of the churches.

In these passages, actually, the Latin translation has shifted to “*tolerantia*,” meaning “tolerating” or “enduring.” The explanations in the *Apocalypse Revealed* are not that helpful in delving more deeply into the meaning here, as you can see from this example: “*And thy labor and endurance*; that this signifies their study and patience, is evident without explanation.” (AR 77) The spiritual sense of “endurance” in this case is simply said to be “patience.”

Fortunately, the explanation in the *Apocalypse Explained* goes into more detail:

And thine endurance, means conjunction with the external, and the combat which follows.... This is signified by "endurance," because the conjunction of the internal with the external, or of the spiritual man with the natural, is effected by temptations; without these the two are not conjoined; therefore, the combat by which that conjunction is effected, since man then suffers and endures, is signified by "endurance." (AE 156)

Spiritual temptation can be portrayed in the Word by more dramatic imagery such as that of battles or floods. But it can also take the form of the challenge to continue slogging on even when one does not feel inspired to do so, even when the end is not in view. All temptation could be said to have only one goal: to lead us to the realization that it is the Lord’s power, and not our own, that can carry us through to the end. This is an easy formula to acknowledge with the mouth, but it is only through repeated life experience that it can become a reality for us.

A favorite teaching for many in the New Church is the one passage in all the canon that speaks of the “stream of Providence.” Concerning those who trust in the Divine it says:

“They do not think of the morrow with solicitude, still less with anxiety. Unruffled is their spirit whether they obtain the objects of their desire, or not; and they do not grieve over the loss of them, being content with their lot.... they who are in the stream of Providence are all the time carried along toward everything that is happy, whatever may be the appearance of the means; and that those are in the stream of Providence who put their trust in the Divine and attribute all things to Him. (AC 8478:3-4))

This passage stands, at one and the same time, a powerful consolation and a great challenge. It can be a profound reassurance that the Lord guides everything toward the best possible outcome. But it is often not easy, in the midst of afflictions, to keep ourselves in the patient expectation that “for those who trust in the Divine all things advance toward a happy state to eternity, and that whatever befalls them in time is still conducive thereto.” (AC 8478:3)

Amen.

Lessons:

Revelation 1:1 The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to Him, to show to His servants what must quickly come to pass; and He signified, sending by His angel to His servant John, 2 who gave by testimony the Word of God, and the testimony of Jesus Christ, whatever he saw. 3 Happy *is* he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and keep the things written in it; for the time *is* near.

4 John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace *be* to you, and peace, from Him Who is, and Who was, and Who is to come; and from the seven spirits who are before His throne; 5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful Witness, the Firstborn from the dead, and the Prince of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us, and washes us from our sins in His blood, 6 and makes us kings and priests to His God and Father; to Him *be* the glory and the might for ages of ages. Amen

7 Behold, He comes with the clouds, and every eye shall see Him, and those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth shall wail over Him. Yes; amen.

8 I am the Alpha and the Omega, Beginning and End, says the Lord, Who is, and Who was, and Who is to come, the Almighty.

9 I, John, who also am your brother and companion in affliction, and in the kingdom and patient *expectation* of Jesus Christ, came to be in the island called Patmos, for the sake of the Word of God, and for the sake of the testimony of Jesus Christ.

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And the expectation of Jesus Christ, means where there is knowledge of the Lord's Divine in His Human. This is evident from the signification of “the expectation of Jesus Christ,” as being the coming of the time when the church shall know the Lord; and the church knows the Lord when it acknowledges the Divine in His Human. That by “Jesus Christ” is meant the Lord in respect to the Divine in His Human, see above. The church of which this is said is the church that is to come after the present one, for it is said “in the expectation.”