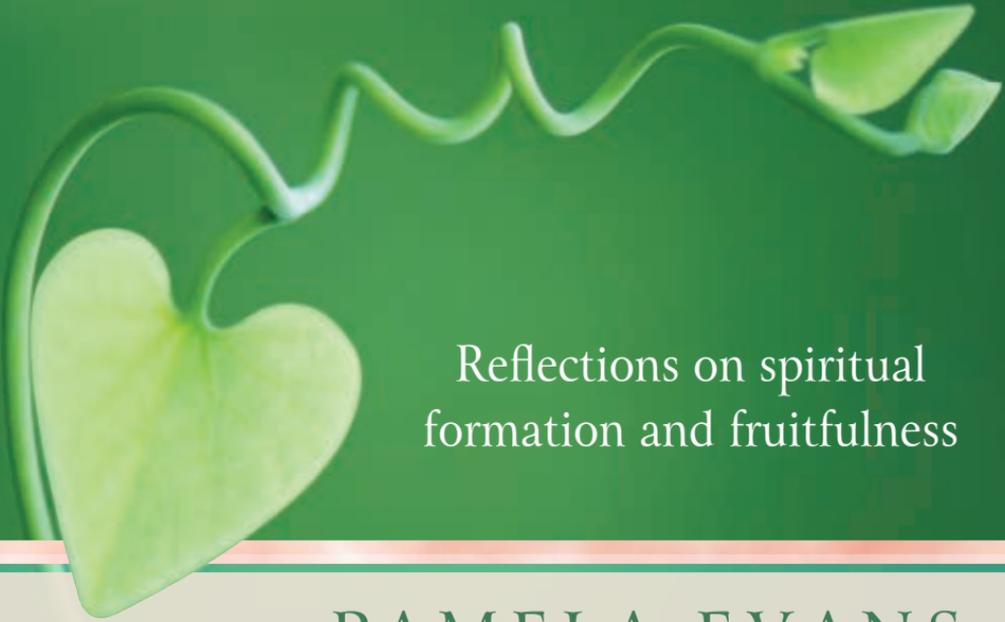


# SHAPING THE HEART

A green vine with a heart-shaped leaf and a pea pod. The vine is coiled and extends across the middle of the cover. The heart-shaped leaf is on the left, and the pea pod is on the right. The background is a solid green color.

Reflections on spiritual  
formation and fruitfulness

PAMELA EVANS

# PREFACE

This book is just a tool. To be of any benefit, it must be *used*. Rushing through on an intellect-only, fact-finding mission will defeat its purpose. It's for brothers and sisters in Christ who are seeking more fruitful discipleship, not just better informed discipleship. Fruitful discipleship comes from yielding to the Spirit of truth and welcoming God's grace *over time*, within a growing relationship with our heavenly Father.

'Be transformed...' wrote Paul to the Christians in Rome (Romans 12:2), and he says the same to us today. However, this isn't a self-help book. If there is such a thing, it's a God-help-me book; after all, spiritual transformation is God's work. It's designed to increase awareness of the nourishment our heavenly Father provides for the Christ-life in us and of the part he calls us to play, which is to open our hearts to him, to welcome his provision, and to cooperate, not hinder, as he makes us more like Jesus.

I'm going to assume that you've already met Christ in the scriptures and welcomed him as both Saviour and Lord. I'm also assuming that Jesus is the one on whom, in your finer moments at least, you wish to be modelled.

The chapter headings give an overall idea of the ground to be covered. There isn't one chapter focusing on reading the Bible because the shaping effect of the scriptures will be acknowledged in every chapter. Neither is there one devoted to the value of Christian fellowship because, throughout, we'll be noting the way we both shape and are shaped by

those around us. The book could be used in a home group or discipleship group with this in mind.

Some of the 'reflections' mentioned in the subtitle are mine, but the rest will, I hope, be yours. At the end of each chapter, three Bible reflections are offered as springboards into further dialogue with God; for these, you'll need a Bible. If you're taking the book on retreat, you could use all three reflections during the course of a day, maybe keeping a record of what God says to you in a journal or notebook. If reading is being fitted in between other demands, then use as many as you are able; at least one per chapter will be suitable for mulling over while travelling to work, having tea breaks or washing up. If you're not sharing the book with a group, you might find it helpful to explore a reflection or two in the company of a spiritual director or mentor.

So now you know where we're heading, I invite you to take a deep breath... and read on.

# 3

## THE SCHOOL OF ADVERSITY

Definitions of ‘adversity’ include words such as opposition, misfortune, distress, difficult circumstances, hard knocks and affliction. Of course, one person’s minor hiccup may be another’s total disaster. I tried to teach my children the difference between their ‘anguish’ due to delayed gratification (having to wait for what they wanted) and true suffering (such as that experienced by those with nothing to eat for days on end). It’s good to remind ourselves—and maybe one another, too—that being sneered at by colleagues for our faith is a world away from the horrific adversities suffered by brothers and sisters in Christ elsewhere. And, in an age in which compensation is increasingly sought for minor hurts, we do well to remember that litigation is not the only possible response to offences against us.

When we’re ‘in session’ in the school of adversity, our place as one among many in the body of Christ will allow others to bring encouragement and support. No doubt we’ve already offered the same to them. It’s sad, therefore, that, if asked to list the past month’s afflictions, there are church leaders and members who might wish to mention one or two relating to the behaviour of other Christians. Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is not how it’s meant to be! Hurting people hurt people, so, if we’re welcoming hurting people

into God's family (and I hope we are), there will be times when we and others are hurt. However, as part of cooperating with God's renovation process and seeking to learn all we can in this 'school', we may find it fruitful to ask him whether, for example, our own 'me first' attitudes or our low irritation thresholds and readiness to take offence are adding to our difficulties—and maybe also creating distressing 'learning opportunities' for others.

If, let's say, we sense that resentment is mounting regarding someone's attitude or behaviour, whether within the church or in another setting, we could ask specifically for insight. I am indebted to the late Father Thomas Green SJ for his wise words on many issues, and particularly for suggesting this prayer: 'Lord, let me be just as disturbed about this situation (or this person's behaviour) as you are, no more and no less. If you are angry, let me be angry too. But if you are not disturbed, let me share your peace.' He continues, 'It is amazing, and quite humbling, how often my disturbance simply dissolves once I say that prayer and really mean it' (Thomas H. Green, *Darkness in the Marketplace*, p. 103).

By passing on this prayer, I'm not pursuing the line that, if we really trust God, we'll be transported to a mystical world in which everyone sees everyone else's point of view, trouble doesn't exist, and pain doesn't really hurt. Far from it! The main purpose of this chapter is to highlight how God is able to turn very real adversities around to serve his purposes, if we let him. They include the minor aggravations of life and what Green evocatively calls 'the sandpaper of failure and frustration' (p. 102), as well as the hammer-blow tragedies. We may eventually come to see that God has been using the

very difficulties we've been wanting him (or lawyers!) to bring to an end, to ready us for future challenges for which we would otherwise have been ill-prepared.

## Endurance and perseverance

We may prefer to believe otherwise, but the capacity to endure is developed not by an untroubled existence but by learning to press on through difficulties. God incarnate in Jesus experienced ordinary adversities, presumably including the death of his earthly father-figure, Joseph, before beginning the public ministry that led to the cross. As was said of old, 'Gold is tried in the fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of adversity' (Ecclesiasticus 2:5, KJV). Of Jesus it was written, 'Though he was God's Son, he learned trusting-obedience by what he suffered, just as we do' (Hebrews 5:8, *THE MESSAGE*). No one ever said life was going to be easy.

Primarily, it's our response to life's challenges, rather than the challenges themselves, that determines whether or not we grow stronger through them. When Peter writes about perseverance (2 Peter 1:6; Greek: *hypomone*, sometimes translated 'patience' or 'endurance'), he is not advocating a glum passivity—sitting it out with gritted teeth. The nature of Christian perseverance is active: cooperating with God while looking forward in trust, drawing energy from hope rooted in the faithfulness of the God of hope. Speaking of the good soil ('those with a noble and good heart') in the parable of the sower, Jesus linked perseverance with fruitfulness (Luke 8:15). God-directed perseverance (as opposed to stoicism or common-or-garden stubbornness) can be relied upon to pay

off—although not necessarily in the way we may have been anticipating.

Today, the easy option often finds favour: fair enough, for those who are free agents. But there are other ways of looking at things. Here, for example, Paul views it all through the lens of character development:

*We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience [hypomone] in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!*

ROMANS 5:3–5 (THE MESSAGE, MY EMPHASIS)

Peter encouraged his contemporaries with a glimpse of the bigger picture: 'For a little while you may have to experience grief in various trials. Even gold is tested for genuineness by fire. The purpose of these trials is so that your trust's genuineness, which is far more valuable than perishable gold, will be judged worthy of praise, glory and honour at the revealing of Yeshua the Messiah' (1 Peter 1:6–7, CJB). He also highlighted the contribution their difficulties were making to their spiritual formation: 'Since Jesus went through everything you're going through and more, learn to think like him. Think of your sufferings as a weaning from that old sinful habit of always expecting to get your own way. Then you'll be able to live out your days free to pursue what God

wants instead of being tyrannised by what you want' (4:1–2, *THE MESSAGE*).

In the same vein, James makes a plea for Jesus' apprentices to resist the temptation to look for a hassle-free life: 'You know that the testing of your faith [trust, CJB] develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything' (James 1:3–4). But... but... but... On a good day, we know that we who have chosen to follow Christ serve more than just our own comfort. At other times, maybe you detect—as do I—a part within you that rails against all this enduring and persevering. If so, why not take time now to hear what Father God has to say about it? You could also assess your level of enthusiasm for being set free from the tyranny of your wants.

Let's return to Paul. Describing a particularly difficult time spent in Asia, he said, 'We felt like we'd been sent to death row, that it was all over for us. As it turned out, it was the best thing that could have happened. Instead of trusting in our own strength or wits to get out of it, we were forced to trust God totally—not a bad idea since he's the God who raises the dead!' (2 Corinthians 1:8–9, *THE MESSAGE*).

## Waiting for God

Donald Winnicott, who worked with disturbed children in the mid-20th century, noted the importance for a child of coming gradually to the realisation that his or her mother had other concerns; that she was not an exclusively devoted 'perfect mother' giving no thought to anything or anyone else. As part of developing capacities important for later

life, children must learn to wait. A ‘good enough mother’ provides loving, age-appropriate care but also allows her child gradually to experience greater delay in her response to cries or needs. Her being unable to be in two places at once usually guarantees a certain amount of waiting for the child!

It’s interesting to relate Winnicott’s work to our relationship with Father God. He is all-powerful and omnipresent, yet he still allows his children the experience of waiting for him to act. Within a relationship of trust, we may assume that this is, at least in part, because he knows the beneficial effect on our capacities. If this idea is new to you, you could pause to mull it over before continuing. Often, the waiting is more easily understood with hindsight, but some delays we may never understand this side of heaven.

In his book *Life from Death Emerging*, Paul Bradbury shares personal and theological reflections set in train by the birth of his first son. Jacob failed to thrive and was prone to infection but the correct diagnosis was slow in coming. He became increasingly unwell to the point where, in a hospital room, ‘life remained suspended and death hung in the air’ (p. 52). Bradbury describes the frightening vulnerability brought about by not knowing where they were heading as a family, their inability to plan for the future and the painful questions about God that surfaced.

*We did not believe that Jacob was now in the hands of fate but very much in the hand of God the Father... We believed that within this state of delay, in which we were powerless, we could call on an all-knowing, all-powerful God whose nature and heart led him to heal and restore. God would surely be the means by*

*which our delay would swiftly end and normality be restored... Yet our experience was far from this apparently defensible claim... Why were so many prayers apparently unanswered and the delay allowed to go on? Were we expected to pray? Did it make any difference?* (pp. 64–65)

The journey that Paul and his wife Emily travelled within the confines of that hospital ward led not only to previously unplumbed depths but also to a sense of how their experience connected with that of others and with scripture. Having reflected on John 11, and Martha and Mary's 'if only you had come more quickly' reaction to Jesus after the death of Lazarus, Bradbury comments:

*This is the experience of delay—doubt, confusion, disappointment, anger, for some even a loss of faith. In delay the disjunction between the God we thought we knew and the God of our experience proves too much. Yet delay can also be a time of great growth and refinement, although often we only sense this in retrospect... I can sense now with my present perspective that that experience of waiting will remain one of the most enriching times of my life in terms of my understanding of God and my faith in him.* (p. 66)

Bradbury describes delay as 'a revelatory process' and 'one of God's ways of lovingly ensuring that we discover more about him' (p. 74). He has concluded that we are richer for such times (p. 75)—and that has been my experience also. (We have already seen that this is a recurring theme in scripture.) Mother Basilea, founder of the Sisterhood in Darmstadt, Germany, frequently testified that 'with God, suffering is

never the final outcome'. As the apostle Paul wrote, 'This is why we do not lose courage. Though our outer self is heading for decay, our inner self is being renewed daily. For our light and transient troubles are achieving for us an everlasting glory whose weight is beyond description. We concentrate not on what is seen but on what is not seen, since things seen are temporary, but things not seen are eternal' (2 Corinthians 4:16–17, CJB).

## Settled hearts and minds

The mindset we adopt while waiting for God may be a factor in determining the course of events. Think of Job: if, amid the devastation of his home and family, he'd adopted his wife's view that he might as well 'curse God and die' (Job 2:9), the outcome could have been very different. When we need to remain steadfast, a godly mindset is useful—rather like an invisible splint. For example, when David says in Psalm 16:8, 'I have set the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken', he is demonstrating a mindset found in many of the psalms, which may be summarised, 'However it looks, God is faithful and is to be trusted.' Now, David does moan from time to time, and he does sometimes ask when God is going to turn up and sort things out, but he is working from the 'given' that God is faithful. He doesn't keep weighing up whether or not to trust God.

An unexplained deterioration in my health began in 2005. In twelve months I lost ten kilos in weight without trying. No clear diagnosis was forthcoming. Everything felt like an uphill struggle. Writing another book was out of the question and

I stopped accepting speaking engagements. What did the future hold? My experience at that time, of God being close enough to lean upon, and my need for him to be so, is echoed in Bradbury's description of God as 'necessarily tangible and present' (*Life from Death Emerging*, p. 75). During the three years of waiting for the cause of my illness (an enzyme deficiency) to be revealed, I found that rehearsing in my heart the truth that God is faithful and is to be trusted promoted peace and soul-rest. Now, as I move towards better health, this habit remains a blessing. When something unexpected comes out of the blue, I can be jolted into less constructive self-talk but, encouragingly, it now takes less time to find my way back from it.

It's interesting to note how many of the things Jesus said to his disciples were aimed at developing settled hearts and minds so that, in the heat of a crisis, they wouldn't have to weigh up whether or not to trust God. A good example is when Jesus said to them, 'When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say' (Luke 12:11–12; see also 21:12–19). We see this teaching bearing fruit when Peter and the others were brought before the Sanhedrin. They had 'set minds'—set on God, his truth and his ways. Despite being flogged and ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus, they didn't spend time deliberating. They simply said, 'We must obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29).

This aspect of Jesus' teaching also emphasises the wisdom of renouncing self-protection, as mentioned in the previous

chapter. If the Lord has been speaking to you about this, you could ask him to highlight relevant verses as you read the Gospels, and to use them to settle your heart into a habitual position of trust. (Writing them in a journal could help you to keep them in mind.) You could also pray that when the unexpected happens, your immediate thought may be something along the lines of, ‘OK, Lord, what do you have in mind here?’

Another theme from Jesus’ teaching, relevant to this context, is what he said about temptation. His advice to his disciples was, ‘Stay alert; be in prayer so you don’t wander into temptation without even knowing you’re in danger’ (Matthew 26:41, *THE MESSAGE*). Temptation, even if resisted, can be unsettling. No doubt that’s why Jesus made mention of it in the prayer he taught his disciples (Matthew 6:13). Paul, too, advised fleeing various sorts of temptation (1 Corinthians 6:18; 10:14; 1 Timothy 6:9–11; 2 Timothy 2:22–23). A settled mind, which knows that God will not let me be tempted beyond what I can bear and trusts him to provide a way out (1 Corinthians 10:13), is less likely to succumb to ‘evil desire’ (James 1:13–15).

## Bread for the journey

In an acute emergency, we may expect our faithful God to provide strength and carry us through, even if we’re finding it difficult to sense his presence. When thoughts and feelings are all over the place or numbed by shock, it’s such a blessing to have, already formed deep in our inner being, an assurance that God is to be trusted. And, in times of turmoil, the

company of those whose lives and attitudes speak of God's love can heighten our awareness of him and of his care for us. (See my book *Building the Body*, BRF, 2002, for more on how we may encourage one another as fellow members of Christ's body.)

It's also a blessing to be alert to evidence of God's hand in our surroundings, seeing beyond to the God who chose to create a world in which gratuitous beauty is everywhere—even at a microscopic level and in the depths of the earth and the ocean where no human eye will ever see. God-given beauty, whether on a small scale in the intense colour of a patch of violets or generously painted across a sunset sky, ministers refreshment to my soul. I've learned to 'bless all that is good', taking the opportunity to thank God for good and beautiful things and wise or helpful actions, whenever I notice them. A stranger who holds open the door for me and my baggage is worth thanking God for, and noticing that blessing will interrupt any grumbling inner dialogue (about travel delays or other pressures of the moment), prompting a more edifying focus.

This isn't 'the power of positive thinking'. It's about choosing, amid the pressures of life, to go on celebrating the blessedness of being 'careless in the care of God' (Matthew 6:26, *THE MESSAGE*), of being held and provided for by an all-powerful, trustworthy, loving Father. When it comes to evidence of his care, it's up to us to cultivate the habit of noticing the many and varied ways in which he provides for us. Father God doesn't want us just to get by on a starvation diet. He knows our needs: he has even anticipated them.

If you wished, you could reflect on what you've read so

far in this chapter while making bread—maybe sharing the experience with a friend or a small group. This exercise works to some extent using your imagination but, if you've never made bread, why not welcome along someone to share their expertise? Notice the bringing together of carefully chosen and weighed ingredients to make a loaf of a particular type. Be aware of the importance of the period of kneading: do you know what is happening to the dough at this point? Then there's the waiting—first, for the dough to rise. In our hurry-sick world, this feels so *slow*! Eventually, there's the smell of freshly baked bread, which seems to have almost universal appeal.

During the bread-making process, there will be plenty of time to listen to God and to ask what he wants to show you through it. Depending on the size and nature of your group, you could agree to keep silence for one or two periods. Here are a few questions worth considering. God created your inmost being and his eye has been upon you since before you were born (Psalm 139:13–16), but have you also felt at times as if you were being 'kneaded' by him along the way? How have you coped with the waiting times, especially when not much seemed to be happening? Have you been aware of receiving 'bread for the journey' from God? Is the reality of Jesus as 'the bread of life' part of your experience? (Reflecting on John 6 in this context could be very helpful; the same applies to Isaiah 55.) As those who are in the process of having Christ formed in them, what might it be like for your group to be 'the aroma of Christ' (2 Corinthians 2:14–15) to the people around? Finally, how may the finished bread (and perhaps also the story of its making) be shared to bring blessing?

## Praying during times of testing

In times of adversity, prayer may become impossible on account of physical or mental fragility, lack of concentration or exhaustion. The rhythm of prayer that usually sustains us may be disrupted. Brothers and sisters in Christ can support us in prayer but it's also true that, at such times, when we're unable to put the cries of our hearts into words, God still hears them. Please read what follows in the light of that truth, and not as implying that unless we 'pray proper prayers' God won't hear us.

In recent years I've learned the value of single-line prayers. Pastor John Mulinde from Uganda, who brought blessing during my illness by expanding my understanding of covenant and of God's enduring faithfulness, taught us to pray, 'Jesus, my mighty covenant partner, fight for me!' I can't recall how I learned to pray, 'Jesus, anchor me!' but in three words it sums up the choice to trust God in circumstances that feel overwhelming.

Praying scripture can be a blessing, especially in times of disorientation. Paul's letters record prayers prayed for those to whom he was writing. These and many others (including in the Psalms) may help when we're struggling to find words. Even those who in normal circumstances see written prayers as a straitjacket may value them in testing times. A line or two from the Lord's Prayer, such as 'Your kingdom come, your will be done', may be all we can manage, but, when we've no idea what is going on or where we are heading, lining up our will with God's is powerful. It shows where we're choosing to stand.

Finally, I've already suggested prayers along the lines of 'Father, please expand my heart's capacity to...'. I've found it constructive to pray in this way, especially when hearing myself say something like, 'I wish I were more...' (whatever it happens to be at that time). Turning the thought into a prayer acknowledges what can, in the goodness and grace of God, become a reality—which is much more worthwhile than simply sighing about it. Is there something you'd like to express to God now—something he's been putting on your heart—using a one-line prayer? 'Father, please expand my heart's capacity to \_\_\_\_\_.'

## THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

Now for two more aspects of Jesus' character: patience and kindness.

In Ancient Greece, patience was not regarded as a virtue. What about today? We may speak of 'hanging on in there' when adversity is taking its toll, but too often patience is equated with passive resignation or seen as a weakness to be exploited. Those who admit to lacking patience often mean that they hate queuing or that they exhibit a childish inability to delay gratification ('I want it *now!*'). Although the old rhyme still tells us that 'patience is a virtue', there's little awareness of what genuine patience looks like in practice.

The New Testament word translated patience, *makrothumia*, and others related to it, lack exact English equivalents, but scriptural references to them can contribute to our understanding. In the Greek version of the Old Testament, God is

repeatedly described as *makrothumos*, often translated ‘slow to anger’. For example, ‘The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love’ (Psalm 103:8). This reflects the literal meaning of the word, which is ‘long temper’. The New Testament also bears witness to God’s patience: Peter writes, ‘The Lord... is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance’ (2 Peter 3:9). The writer to the Hebrews urges his readers to ‘imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised’ (Hebrews 6:12). Here, the Amplified Bible is particularly glorious, counselling believers to follow the example of ‘those who through faith [that is, by their leaning of the entire personality on God in Christ in absolute trust and confidence in His power, wisdom and goodness], and by practice of patient endurance *and* waiting are [now] inheriting the promises’.

We are to bear patiently not only with events but also with people. Think of Jesus’ attitude to his disciples. Peter put his foot in it on several occasions that we know about and probably many more of which we know nothing; Thomas was pessimistic and then couldn’t recognise good news when he heard it (John 11:16; 20:25). Jesus was not blind to their failings, yet he stuck with them—and with others, including Judas. God shows the same enduring patience with each one of us, you and me included.

This has implications for our life together in God’s family. We may not realise it but, when we accept Christ as our Saviour, we enter into an indissoluble relationship with all other Christians. It seems appropriate to borrow a line from the marriage service: from that day forward, ‘for better, for

worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health', we are brothers and sisters in Christ and members of Christ's body, the Church (1 Corinthians 12:12–13). In a passage that makes mention of the effort necessary to keep our unity in good repair, Paul reminds 'the saints in Ephesus' to 'be patient, bearing with one another in love' (Ephesians 1:1; 4:2–6). Yes, patience and other Spirit-given qualities are indispensable within the community of God's people. If, at the moment, conflict within your local church is giving cause for concern, why not use these verses as a springboard into prayer?

William Barclay writes evocatively of the qualities that *makrothumia* represents. He links them with the great-heartedness of magnanimity, adding that some translators have tried to invent the word 'longanimity'. In a comment that has relevance also to the first part of this chapter, Barclay observes that 'the hardest lesson of all' may be 'to learn... how to wait when nothing seems to be happening, and when all the circumstances seem calculated to bring nothing but discouragement' (*Flesh and Spirit*, p. 91). Barclay goes on to say:

*The Christian must be like the prophets who again and again had to wait for the action of God; he must be like the farmer who sows the seed and who then through the slow months waits until the harvest comes (James 5:7–10). It may be that this is the hardest task of all for an age which has made a god of speed.*

FLESH AND SPIRIT, P. 96

Lest patience be associated only with prolonged waiting in difficult circumstances, imagine a father hovering behind a child who is learning to ride a bicycle. He's prepared either

to grab hold if wobbles become too severe or to whoop with delight at signs of progress. Is that father conscious of being patient or long-suffering? Probably not! So, as we take note of how the Holy Spirit once again seeks to form in us a characteristic of God himself, let's recall the Father's delight—not just his forbearance—and allow ourselves to be surprised afresh by joy.

Kindness (*chrestotes*) is also a characteristic of God (see, for example, Romans 2:4; Ephesians 2:7; Titus 3:4). It's one of the list of attributes with which Paul tells us, as God's chosen people, to clothe ourselves (Colossians 3:12; for an explanation of 'clothe', see the third Bible reflection at the end of this chapter). Elsewhere, in a passage in which Paul uses several Old Testament quotations to express his dismay, he specifically mentions the lack of *chrestotes* (in this case, referred to as 'doing good'): 'All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one' (Romans 3:12; quoting Psalm 14:3). Bear in mind that what is being referred to in this section is a kindly *disposition*, a heart-appetite for all that is good. The focus is not on doing lots of good, kind actions, although kindness may well be manifested in such ways.

In the Middle Ages, the Church taught about the seven contrary virtues, the antitheses of the seven deadly sins. Kindness (Latin: *humanitas*) was seen as contrary in spirit to envy (an ill-will which, at its most venomous, seeks the destruction of the good that is being envied). *Humanitas* is humankind at its best—not as in the sentiment 'We're all nice really; I'm sure God will let everyone into heaven', but in the sense that, in showing kindness, men and women offer

a glimpse of what it means to be made in the image of God. Even a remnant of the image can offer an occasional pinpoint of light. As we who, in Christ, have been created anew (2 Corinthians 5:17) allow Father, Son and Holy Spirit to make their home with us, their influence will bear fruit in our lives and we will increasingly be able to show God-honouring and God-revealing *humanitas*.

‘Be kind to each other, tender-hearted; and forgive each other,’ says Paul, ‘just as in the Messiah God has also forgiven you’ (Ephesians 4:32, CJB). Our kindness is not only inspired by but both encircled and eclipsed by the heart of our kind and forgiving God. It could be helpful to memorise this verse (or your preferred version of it) and carry it in your mind as you go about your daily activities. Don’t come under condemnation when you become aware of falling short. Rather, pray, ‘Jesus, friend of sinners, forgive me for \_\_\_\_\_, and grow and nourish your kindness in me.’



## BIBLE REFLECTIONS

### 1. Read Isaiah 37:9–20.

Hezekiah’s response was to take his adversary’s threatening letter to God without delay, to look ‘up and out’ of his difficulties. Keep this picture in mind during the day as events unfold. Is there a dilemma, a difficulty or a delight that you’d like to ‘spread before the Lord’ as Hezekiah did?

2. Read 1 Corinthians 9:24–27 in *THE MESSAGE* (as below). Read slowly, visualising the images depicted:

*You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally. I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finishing line. I'm giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me! I'm staying alert and in top condition. I'm not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it and then missing out myself.*

Now pick out words and phrases that illustrate 'running to win', 'sloppy living' and their divergent consequences. We'll be looking more closely at the place of effort and discipline in following Jesus in Chapter 5. Does God want to say anything to you in preparation? Rereading this passage now and then would be a way of showing him that you're open to hearing. If you're struggling with ideas found in the passage, you could express your feelings to God, then listen to what he has to say.

3. Read Colossians 3:12–17.

Note that when Paul says, 'clothe yourselves with' and 'put on', there's no sense of dressing up in order to conceal undesirable characteristics. The Greek verb is *enduo* and the sense is of being active participants, clothing ourselves with God's provision. Paul uses the same word to tell us to put on 'the armour of light' (Romans 13:12), 'the full armour of God' (Ephesians 6:11), 'faith and love as a breastplate, and

the hope of salvation as a helmet' (1 Thessalonians 5:8).

Make a list of the characteristics of God's people from this passage, then take time to be still before him. Thank him for his patience and kindness, and ask him which of these 'articles of clothing' he wants to provide for you right now. Focus on what he has for you, not on how grubby or inadequate you feel. If you can't get past your own inadequacies, talk to God about them, but make sure you also listen to what he says in reply. When you're ready, tell Father God that you're ready to receive, and thank him for his provision.

# Enjoyed this sampler?



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A retired doctor with experience in counselling, Pamela Evans is involved in writing, teaching and spiritual direction. Her other books are *Driven Beyond the Call of God* (1999) and *Building the Body* (2002), both published by BRF.



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