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## THE IMPATIENT ITCH FOR THE INSTANTANEOUS

*“Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Mark 15:32a*

Norman Cousins, in his book *The Healing Heart*, tells of an unforgettable experience he had some years ago in the Los Angeles airport. This was before cell phones. He was between flights and needed to make a quick telephone call to his office. He put a quarter – the only change he had in his pocket – into the phone, but somehow something went wrong and he didn’t get a dial tone. He pressed the coin-return button, but to no avail. Nothing happened. His quarter did not come back! Frustrated, with no more change and with no time to go get any, he began to jiggle the phone’s hang-up lever until finally an operator came on the line. He explained to her what had happened, how he had lost his only quarter, and he asked the operator if she would please push the button to send his money back so he could try again.

“I’m sorry, sir,” she said, “I can’t do that, but if you will give me your name and address, the phone company will be glad to mail it to you.” “Come on, now, operator!” Cousins said. “Please, just push the button and send me my quarter. That would be so much simpler.” “I’m sorry, sir. Give me your name and address, and we will be glad to mail it to you.” “You mean to say that you are going to send me a check for a quarter in the mail using an envelope and a twenty-two-cent stamp? (That’s what stamps cost back then!) That’s ridiculous! Couldn’t you just....” “I’m sorry, sir,” said the operator, “Give me your name and address, and we will be glad to mail it to you.”

At this point, Cousins decided to try the coin-return button one more time. You won’t believe what happened: Quarters literally began pouring out of that telephone, quarters and dimes and nickels pouring out faster than he could catch them. There were quarters pouring out and spilling onto the floor. “Operator, operator, are you still there?” asked Cousins. Then he said, “Operator, something quite remarkable has just happened. All I did was press the coin-return button and the machine is giving me all its earnings. “Sir,” the operator said, “will you please put the money back in the box?”

Now, let me ask you something: What would you have said in that situation? Well, Norman Cousins said it: “Operator, I’m very sorry. I can’t do that, but if you will give me your name and address, I’ll be glad to mail it to you!”

Isn't that a wonderful story? It shows us that things can come back to haunt us. It also dramatically shows how we love instant results. If anything is characteristic of the times in which we live, it is, as J. Wallace Hamilton called it, the "impatient itch for the instantaneous." We want everything in a hurry these days: instant coffee, fast-food, high speed internet, instant everything, to get things now!

We are impatient people, looking for near ways and quick results, so much so that God's patient ways sometimes confuse and perplex us. We are in a hurry. We look for the quickest route, but God refuses to take shortcuts. And sometimes, because of our impatient ways, God's long-suffering patience frustrates us.

Think about it. There is a dramatic contrast between our modern ways of thinking and acting, our "impatient itch for the instantaneous," and God's patient ways. We are impatient, but God is deliberate, steady, and long-suffering. We look for the speedy way, the shortcut, the instant answer, the immediate solution, but God takes the long way around. God refuses to be rushed. And sometimes in our fast-paced, hurried, and harried world we find it hard to understand the slow-but-sure ways in which God works. Let's think about this together for a few minutes.

**LOOK FIRST AT HOW PATIENT GOD IS.** For example, remember the Exodus. God led the people of Israel out of Egyptian slavery to the Promised Land. But notice God led them the long way around. So short a way to go – two hundred miles; so long a time to get there – forty years. Why? The New Testament says it was because of their unbelief, which is just another way of saying that they were not ready for it. The way of the wilderness was for them "the way of preparation." They were not really prepared for the Promised Land. It took time to get them ready. It took time to mold them into a people and make them into a nation. There in the wilderness they received the Ten Commandments and became God's people. It was their "getting ready time." You see, the point is clear: promised lands can't be entered too quickly.

Promised lands have to be prepared for, worked for, longed for, waited for, and deeply wanted. I would venture to guess that many of our disappointments in life come from grasping too eagerly for good fruit that isn't yet ripe. We like the shortcut, but God takes the long way around – the way of slow, deliberate maturing, the way of long-suffering patience.

Remember the Crucifixion scene – Jesus hanging on a wooden cross. The people mocked him: “Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Even as you read it, you feel yourself wishing that he would. You almost wish God would show them, but again God refuses to take the shortcut. God chooses instead the long way around. Again, we see it; God chooses the way of love and persuasion and patience. How patient is our God. But let’s look at the other side of that coin.

**LOOK NEXT AT HOW IMPATIENT WE ARE.** It’s one of the key differences between God’s way and ours. We’re in a hurry; God isn’t. We want instant solutions, but God brings us along slowly. We like the shortcut, the direct route. God takes the long way around, and this is sometimes hard for us to understand. Most of us can relate to that little one-sentence prayer: “God, give me patience, and give it to me right now!”

Martin Luther couldn’t understand how God could continue to put up with us. “If I were God,” he said, “and the world treated me as it had treated Him, I would kick the wretched thing to pieces.” And I suppose Luther might have. But not so with God. God is patient, forgiving, and long-suffering.

J. Wallace Hamilton graphically described this contrast between God and us. He wrote: “Go out in the woods and remember how God makes a tree. Sit by a great rock and remember how God fashioned the world. It didn’t happen in a moment, as a magician waves his hand.....One of the most characteristic words of the Bible is the word ‘wait.’.....’Wait on the Lord.’.....The whole idea of waiting of course runs counter to the modern temper.....Who wants to wait for anything today? We’re an aggressive generation, impatient with delays or detours, or even disciplines. We want things done at once. The push button has become our symbol.....’Why wait?’ The itch for the instantaneous.....instant biscuits, instant coffee, instant cereal.....We are impatient people, looking for near ways, shortcuts, quick results.”

Oh, how impatient we are! But, it’s not that way with God. God takes the long, deliberate, steady-but-sure way, the way of patience and love. Maybe it’s because God knows in God’s great wisdom a very special truth. And that brings us to point three.

**THE THINGS THAT MATTER MOST TAKE TIME.** God’s patient ways are right because the things that really matter take time to cultivate. To be sure, some things you can get immediately by pushing buttons or rubbing

something on, or by paying something down – you can have them now. Some things you can acquire by the direct route, and the shortcut, and I don't mean to minimize that. But the great things, the real values, do not come that way. They have to be grown and cultivated and developed. You can get a car or a big-screen TV with a quick down payment. But character, maturity, morality, and spiritual strength are things you have to wait for, work at, want desperately, and grow, slowly but surely.

There is a delightful children's anthem written by Natalie Sleeth entitled "Little by Little," which has this key line: "Good things that are here to stay,/ don't get done in just one day."

It's true in sports, in music, in business, in education, in family life, in personal maturity: the things that matter most don't come overnight; they don't come instantly; they have to be grown, cultivated, and developed over a long period of time, with a lot of hard work.

And it's also true spiritually. How do you develop a meaningful prayer life? It doesn't come suddenly. You have to work at it. You have to practice and practice and practice some more. How do you become a good student of the Scriptures? It doesn't come suddenly. There is no easy way to master the Bible. You have to spend time with it. You have to work at it. You have to read, study, discuss, and reflect. How do you become a great churchperson? It too takes practice, commitment, and dedication. Get in the church; get involved; come every time the doors are opened. Love it, serve it, cherish it, and share it with others. Center your life on the church. Work at it. Give it time. How do you become a spiritually mature person? Well, it takes time. God wisely made life. God ordered it in specific stages, and if we skip a stage or two, we are headed for trouble.

Yes, it takes time and experience to become a mature person. The way to become a spiritually mature Christian is to spend so much time with Christ that we begin to think and act like him; to spend so much time with him that we take on what Paul called "the mind of Christ." It just takes time and effort and commitment. There are no easy, magical, instant solutions. There are no overnight spiritual superstars. So, we had just as well forget that. What we need to remember is that the things that matter most in life take time, effort, commitment, discipline, a lot of practice, a lot of hard work, and a lot of patience.

So, with God's help, live patiently now!

