

The Providential Patience of God

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Preacher: Stephen Murray

[0 : 00] So Exodus chapter 4, and I want to read the first 17 verses of this for you. This comes straight after the burning bush incident where God reveals himself to Moses.

! After Moses has been out in the wilderness looking after sheep for 40 years, God comes to him in a burning bush. And this is kind of the back end of the conversation that they have.

Moses answered, He's speaking there about the elders in Israel back in Egypt.

Then the Lord said to him, What is that in your hand? A staff, he replied. The Lord said, Throw it on the ground. Moses threw it on the ground and it became a snake and he ran from it.

Then the Lord said to him, Reach out your hand and take it by the tail. So Moses reached out and took hold of the snake and it turned back into a staff in his hand. This, said the Lord, Is so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob has appeared to you.

[1 : 13] Then the Lord said, Put your hand inside your cloak. So Moses put his hand into his cloak. And when he took it out, the skin was leprous. It had become as white as snow.

Now put it back in your cloak, He said. And so Moses put his hand back into his cloak. And when he took it out, it was restored like the rest of his flesh.

Then the Lord said, If they do not believe you or pay attention to the first sign, they may believe the second. But if they do not believe these two signs or listen to you, take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground.

The water you take from the river will become blood on the ground. Moses said to the Lord, Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant.

I am slow of speech and tongue. The Lord said to him, Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight and makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord?

[2 : 15] Now go. I will help you speak and I will teach you what to say. But Moses said, Pardon your servant, Lord. Please, said someone else. Then the Lord's anger burned against Moses and he said, What about your brother, Aaron, the Levite?

I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you and he will be glad to see you. You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth. I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do.

He will speak to the people for you. And it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him. But take the staff in your hands so that you can perform the signs with it.

This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we study this together. Father, your word is truth.

And so we come to this morning looking for truth. Not for any truth, but for life-giving truth. Truth that will change us and make us like your son. We need this truth, Lord, more than we know.

[3 : 23] And so we're so grateful that your Holy Spirit takes this truth and does a supernatural work in us when we encounter it. And so I pray for that special mercy this morning. Won't you do that in us? Won't we have an encounter with truth in your word?

And won't we be changed by what we see? We ask this for Christ's sake and his glory. Amen. So this is Moses.

He has been commissioned by God to go and announce liberation, really, to his people back in Egypt who are under slavery, oppressive slavery.

But he has a long back and forth, a long conversation with God here that raises a bunch of interesting things that helps us to think about our own faith and our own spirituality. And one of the things that helps us to think about is patience. Something I think maybe as Christians we think

about, because I wonder if you ever asked the question, how patient will God be with me? I don't mean me. I mean you. We don't know how long he'll be patient with me. But with me, as a believer, as I try and understand God and his ways, how patient will he be with me? As I try and get my life into order, as I try and live according to his word, as I try and get rid of sinful habits and things that are going on in my life that I don't like and I don't want them there, these thoughts, these desires, how patient is he going to be with me in that process?

[4 : 47] Because I think for some of us, one of our biggest fears is that we'll never really be able to get our lives into order. I mean we're all too aware of our weaknesses that are there, the frailties, the failings, the sins.

And so that's why God's patience is a pretty big concern for us. Now this is a section that we just read in Exodus where Moses really tries God's patience.

And it's through this interaction that I think we learn a lot about God's actual patience for us. And what we find here is what we might call providential patience. Providential patience from God that I think really should encourage us on the one hand, and yet also challenge us and then spur us on to greater obedience and holiness.

So there's two things I want you to see this morning. Number one, the nature of patience. And then number two, the hope of providence. The nature of patience and the hope of providence. So here's the first one, the nature of patience.

Just how patient is God going to be with us? It's a million dollar question. Well let's see how patient he is with Moses. God has just appeared in a burning bush, a bush that's burning but not really burning.

[5 : 59] He reveals himself there famously as I am who I am. That is to say he is the uncreated one. The source of existence itself. God just is is what he's saying.

God is ultimate reality and he always will be. But then more than just revealing himself and saying, look, it's me, God, I'm here. He then commissions Moses. He says, I'm going to give you something to do. I want you to go and lead my people out of slavery, away from Pharaoh, out of Egypt. Now at that point, Moses starts this back and forth with God. Remember who he's speaking to always because it's really important here. He's speaking to the great I am. And he starts this back and forth with him about his suitability for the task.

First, he wonders if the elders of the people are going to listen to him when he comes to announce this great rescue plan from God. So verse 1, What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, the Lord did not appear to you?

Now at some level that seems like fair pushback, right? But if you came to me and said, look, God appeared to me in a burning bush, Stephen, and I've got some news for you. And we're like, well, let me tell you about how the Bible actually works.

[7 : 10] So it sounds like fair pushback. If you actually go back to the previous chapter, though, you go back to chapter 3, verse 18. There God, the great I am, the God who happens to be speaking to Moses from within a bush that's burning but not really burning.

He himself deliberately says to Moses, the elders of Israel will listen to you. So Moses, Moses is doubting the eternal creator God of the universe.

And his very, very direct word to him here. I think we sometimes think, and I'm sure maybe you've had this sort of thought somewhere along the line.

But you think, hey, if the Lord, you know, if the Lord would just appear to me in some miraculous way and speak in a very clear, audible voice to me, then I would be fully convinced for the rest of my life and I would live in absolute obedience to him until I either die or Jesus comes back again. And you know what I want to say to you? I would say, no, you won't. And you know why we know that? Because we have examples of it in the Bible. Look at Moses.

[8 : 18] Look at the apostles who spend their time with Jesus, walking with him, talking with him, seeing his miracles. So here's how God patiently responds to Moses' unbelief.

Verse 2. And the Lord said to him, what is in your hand? A staff, he replied. The Lord said, throw it on the ground. Moses threw it on the ground and it became a snake and he ran away from it.

And then the Lord said to him, reach out your hand and take it by the tail. So Moses reached out and took hold of the snake and it turned back into a staff in his hand.

This, said the Lord, is so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob has appeared to you. Then the Lord said, put

your hand inside your cloak.

And so Moses put his hand into his cloak and when he took it out, his skin was leprous and it had become as white as snow. Now put it back into your cloak, he said. And so Moses put his hand back into his cloak and when he took it out, it was restored like the rest of his flesh.

[9 : 18] Then the Lord said, if they do not believe, you will pay attention to the first sign. And they may believe the second, but if they do not believe these two signs, I'll listen to you. Take some water from the Nile, pour it on the dry ground.

The water you take from the river will become blood on the ground. So not one, but three supernatural signs for Moses to use to confirm that God actually did appear to him in the desert, like he says.

Now it's pretty evident that it's not only Moses who's got belief problems, because God gives three signs because the Israelites themselves are likely to be slow in coming around to this revelation. But Moses is not done. He's not satisfied with these three signs he's been given. Verse 10. Moses said to the Lord, You see what he's saying there?

What he's saying to God? He's saying, look, actually God, the problem, the problem is actually not all these wonderful gifts that you've given me, these great signs that you've given me. The problem is that my English is not so lekker.

[10 : 30] So God patiently comes back to him again. Verse 11. The Lord said to him, Well, who gave human beings their mouths?

Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, I will help you speak and teach you what to say. He's like, hey, Moses, I don't mean to be kept an obvious here.

But I just want to point out that I actually created the instrument in your body that makes you speak. I've got this. I will help you.

But that's still not enough for Moses. So verse 13. Pardon your servant. He always butters him up before he starts. Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send somebody else.

Now here I actually think we get Moses at his most honest. He's like, actually, look, I just don't want to go. I don't want to go. At which point it does seem like there's a bit of a limit to God's patience.

[11 : 27] Because look at how he responds in verse 14. And the Lord's anger burned against Moses. And he said, what about your brother Aaron, the Levite? I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you.

And he will be glad to see you. You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth. I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do. He will speak to the people for you. And it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him.

But take the staff in your hand so you can perform the signs with it. So even in God's anger, he still provides for Moses by sending Aaron to go along with him.

Now you look at all of this and I think you have to admit that God is exceedingly patient. Exceedingly patient with Moses.

So let's think about that for a second. Because I suspect there might be two approaches to God's patience in a room like this this morning. If you're sort of from a very conservative religious background and upbringing, it's pretty possible that you've tended at least maybe to think of God in overly judgmental ways, as this overly judgmental policeman or authority figure.

[12 : 44] Very, very quick to spot some wrongdoing in your life. Quick to frown. Quick to scowl. Quick to condemn. And as a result then, your failures, your weaknesses, your sin have often produced a very deep sense of guilt inside of you.

You have a really hard time believing that God might ever be pleased with you or accept you. What's traditionally known as the assurance of salvation, that's not an experience that you have regularly.

You don't feel peace often with your creator. Or at best you feel like he must be angry with you, at least most of the time. On a good day, maybe he's not completely angry.

I suspect there might also be people on the other side, though, who are a bit more skeptical. Where your jury's a bit out on God. You're still figuring out Christianity and what you think about Christianity. You're not overly concerned with whether or not God has patience for you.

Because as far as you can see, God, if he exists at all, appears to be somewhat apathetic towards your bad behavior and your misdemeanors anyway. Because you look out and you look at the

world around you. You see everything going on in the world.

[13:55] You look at evil. You look at injustice. You look at the evil things that people do. And you think to yourself, God doesn't seem to do much about that or care much about that. So surely he doesn't really care much about what I do or think or feel.

I think the picture of God that we get in Exodus 4 challenges both of those viewpoints. If you're on the end of the spectrum where you have a really, really hard time believing God is patient.

With your perceived inability to get your life together. To stop sinning, to do good deeds. Then I think this passage comes to you this morning and it tells you this. It says, God's patience far, far, far, far, far exceeds anything we might expect or be able to think of or conceive of.

I mean, just think about the back story here a little. God doesn't have to use Moses. At the first sign of, I'll find someone else. In fact, I've got Aaron.

He's ready made. I'll just go with him. According to the text, if you follow the narrative of Exodus up to this point, Moses has been sitting around twiddling his thumbs for 40 years in the desert.

[15:07] That's what he's been doing. By the time God rocks up in the burning bush, that's what he's been doing for 40 years. And the funny thing is at the very beginning of the book, in chapter 2, he seems to be so, so very concerned about the oppression and the suffering of his people.

So concerned to the point that he kills an Egyptian slave driver. He's horrified by how his people are being mistreated by the Egyptians. But that was 40 years ago.

That passion, that sentiment hasn't translated into action. He hasn't sought to help out his people.

He hasn't done anything for 40 years. During those 40 years, his people have been enduring terrible suffering while he's been sort of living comfortably with a new family, new flocks out in Midian.

Sort of like that social justice, social media justice warrior. They share all the right posts online, support all the right causes, express Instagram outrage at the injustices happening around the world, but they don't help people in need right in front of them.

Moses has 40 years of inaction, 40 years of failing to act on those earlier concerns for his oppressed people. And now, now he gets a chance.

[16:25] He gets a chance directly from God to do something about it. He gets to create a God of the universe, promising to be with him and to help him to rescue his people. And he dillies and he dillies.

Can you imagine the sort of patience that God must have with him? Can you conceive of the extent of that patience?

God's patience is not like your patience or my patience. Those of you who are parents are nodding, very low patience. It's nothing like our patience.

So here's what you need to know. There is a sense, and it is a sense, and I'll qualify it in a moment, but there is a sense in which you can't outfail God's patience. You can't outfail God's patience.

So long as there is breath in your lungs, God is standing there with open arms to receive you back in, into his love, no matter what you have done with your life, no matter how you have failed in this life, no matter what sins you have committed, no matter what your struggles have been, no matter how poor your self-confidence is, no matter how weak your will is, I want to say to you on the basis of the Bible that God's patience is deeper than that.

[17:39] It's deeper. So friends, if you picture God always kind of standing there with an angry scowl on his face, looking at your failings, thinking there's no possible way he can accept me if he knew what I had done with my life, well, then I want to say you do not have a biblical vision of who God is.

This is who God is. This is later on in the book of Exodus, Exodus 34. The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

Do you have any idea how patient God is with sinners? There's a segment of one of the prayers in the Valley of Vision collection of prayers.

I know I quote the Valley of Vision collection of prayers a lot, but they just say things much better. My English is also not so liquor sometimes, but their English is very liquor. So that's why I go there often to read the way they conceive of their theology.

And the Puritans of all people were really big on introspection, in a way that I think we don't really do introspection today. But here's one Puritan reflecting on their inadequacy before the Lord.

[18 : 54] Oh, how I mourn my sin, ingratitude, vileness, the days that add to my guilt, the scenes that witness my offending tongue, all things in heaven, earth, around, within, without condemn me, the sun which sees my misdeeds, the darkness which is light to thee, the cruel accuser who justly charges me, the good angels who have been provoked to leave me, thy countenance which scans my secret sins, thy righteous law, thy holy word, my sin-soiled conscience, my private and public life, my neighbors, myself, all write dark things against me.

I deny them not, frame no excuse, but confess, Father, I have sinned. But then the writer writes this, yet still I live, and fly repenting to thy outstretched arms.

Thou wilt not cast me off, for Jesus brings me near. Thou wilt not condemn me, for he died in my stead. Thou wilt not mark my mountains of sin, for he leveled all, and his beauty covers my deformities.

Thou wilt not cast me off, let me cover over your sins, and remove your burden of guilt.

But that's not all we learn about God's patience here. We also do see that there is eventually a limit to his patience.

[20 : 55] Verse 14, his anger burns against Moses. And so perhaps this is for you, if you find yourself on the skeptical end of the spectrum, thinking that God is apathetic towards sin, towards injustice, towards evil in the world.

Patience wouldn't be patience if there wasn't a final accounting for all sin and all wrongdoing. If there's no final judgment, then God really is apathetic to all evil in the world. If God is not in the end, fiercely, fiercely angry with all sin, then he's actually not truly good.

Now, just a few seconds ago, we quoted from Exodus 34, where God reveals his compassion to Moses. The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin.

But the passage actually goes on from there. And it says this, yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. So in the end equation, there is a final punishment.

There is a point where God, where God will no longer delay his righteous anger against evil and sin and injustice. There is a point in human history when he will say enough.

[22 : 16] And so if you're sitting here and you're thinking this morning, well, God seems largely apathetic towards evil in this world, and so why should I care about how I live? Well, then I feel that on the basis, I have to warn you, on the basis of scripture, I have to warn you this morning.

I have to say to you, friend, God's patience will not last forever. The apostle Peter makes this exact point in 2 Peter 3, verse 8.

He says, Do not forget this one thing, dear friends. With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.

Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar.

The elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

God's immense, immense, immense patience will one day give way to the fire of his righteous anger and judgment against sin.

[23 : 27] And so we should not presume on his patience. We should get on with the work of repentance. Turning away from lives that are lived in disobedience and rebellion towards God and turning towards his son in faith and holy living.

God's patience is incredibly deep, but it is not eternal. There is a final reckoning. And so we, I think, should let this sober reality sober us up, motivate us to embrace the gospel by faith, to commit to pursuing holy living in accordance with the teachings that we find in the Bible.

If God's patience serves as our great comfort, then God's final judgment sort of serves to spur us on. Keep going. If you take one of those two things away, you get a major problem.

Take away God's patience and we live our lives in fear, overcome by a sense of defeat in the face of our own weaknesses and the face of our own sinfulness. Take away God's justice and judgment and we drift into apathy.

We lose motivation for holy living. Hold those two things together and it creates people who rest securely in the arms of a deeply patient and forgiving God, but also people who make every effort to live in obedience to God, for just and holy God.

[24 : 56] And so friends, this is how this passage pushes us to think about God's great patience. So that's the first thing I want you to see. The second thing is the hope of providence. You might look at all of this and you might say, well, it's really great that God is so patient and long-suffering when it comes to me and my baggage, but I just don't think I have it within me to come right on this issue.

I don't have the power to beat sin. I've failed so many times in the past. I've got the track record. I just don't have the power to beat certain sins. I don't have the will to keep pursuing obedience even when it's hard or it costs me.

I often don't have the energy to get up and keep enduring in holiness. If that's you, if you sense something of that in yourself, then I want you to see the hope that we have, the hope that we have in God's providence, that he will patiently provide for us in our very weaknesses themselves.

So you might notice that Moses really faces three problems here. the problem of unbelief, the problem of inability, and the problem of desire. You can actually see them all in the text.

So verse one, what if the people don't believe me? Well, that's the problem of unbelief. Verse 10, I don't have the ability to be your spokesperson, Lord. Well, that's the problem of inability. Verse 13, please send somebody else, Lord.

[26 : 22] Well, that's the problem of desire or a lack of desire. I don't want to go. Now that's a lot that's stacked against Moses here in his own struggle. But in each of those different problems, in each of those different instances, God provides very carefully in the text.

So people won't believe me. Well, here's not one, but here's three supernatural gifts to build belief, to quell unbelief. Well, I don't have the ability to be your spokesperson.

Well, who gave people their mouths? Who makes the mute speak? Who makes the deaf hear? I will help you speak. Well, I don't want to go and speak to the people in Egypt.

Well, here, what about your brother Aaron? I'll send him. As your substitute speaker alongside you, he'll speak in your place. Each time, all three of the problems, God provides.

And friends, in the gospel, he has done exactly the same thing for all of your weaknesses and all of your struggles. Exactly the same thing. Because you come along and you say, Lord, I struggle to believe in this good news, this gospel.

[27 : 35] And so he says, my child, let me, let me give you a miraculous sign to quell unbelief. let me give you a man crucified, dead, and buried, and yet three days later he rises from the grave alive and well.

And you say, Lord, well, I don't have the ability to walk in holiness, to keep living in obedience. And he says, who gave human beings life? Who rescued you?

Like we read earlier this morning, who rescued you from sin and death? Who opened the ears of the spiritually dead? Who opened the eyes of the spiritually blind? Now go.

I'll help you to walk in this newness of life that I've already granted you in the gospel. And you say, well, Lord, my desires are just weak. There are days when I just don't want to live like a Christian at all.

And he says, what about your brother Jesus? He lived a perfect, sinless life.

[28 : 46] His desire for God and for his glory never wavered. I'll send him as your substitute. His life, his death for you.

In your place he'll stand. You see, friends, God provides for us at every single step of the way. Every step of the way he provides. His patience does not mean that he is passive.

He is very hard at work all the time, drawing us in, giving us what we need for salvation and for godliness. The whole point of the gospel is that you in and of yourself can't save yourself.

You can't muster up the belief necessary. You can't generate the ability necessary. You can't build up the desire necessary to worship God. The whole point of the gospel is that Jesus succeeds in every single way that you fail.

It's not your strength of belief. It's not your ability. It's not your desire that gets you into a right relationship with God. It's Jesus who gets you there. You cling to Jesus. You trust in him.

[29 : 48] That is God's great provision for you. In his great patience what God does is he removes and he deals with every single one of Moses' excuses and concerns.

And so in the provision of our Lord Jesus Christ he's done exactly the same thing for you and me. He has removed every single one of our excuses and our concerns. There's a hymn written in 1759 called Come Ye Sinners.

The first verse of the hymn goes like this. Come ye sinners, poor and needy, weak and wounded, sick and sore, Jesus ready stands to save you full of pity, love and power.

And see the offer of the gospel is so good. God's loving patience is so extensive. So the question is why don't we come? Why don't we just willingly come to that? Verse 4 of the hymn tells us, Come ye weary, heavy laden, lost and ruined by the fall.

If you tarry till you're better, you will never come at all. It's that third line that's the obstacle there. If you tarry till you're better, you will never come at all.

[31 : 04] That's what's stopping us. We tarry, we linger or we delay in coming to Christ and His glorious grace. We tarry because we hope to make ourselves better.

We hope to try and clean our lives up first before God will accept us. We hope to try and beat sin on our own terms. If I can just get this stuff under control, if I can just put the building blocks of my life back together, if I can just develop deeper desires, if I can just improve my quiet times.

But that's the wrong thing to hope in. It's the wrong thing to hope in. That is prideful works righteousness. We need to hope in God's provision. God has sent us a substitute, our Aaron, who will speak for us.

He's already on His way to meet us. Don't tarry. Don't delay. Go to Him. Go to Him. The hymn says, if you tarry till you're better, you will never come at all.

Friends, stop trying to fix your life on your own terms. Run to Jesus Christ and He will fix it. Let's pray together.

[32 : 29] Our gracious God and Heavenly Father, our natural instinct is to try and make ourselves better and presume that that is the solution to getting our lives back on track.

It is a scary thing sometimes to relinquish control and to trust in Jesus Christ and Him alone to redeem us and to save us and to put us right.

And yet, it is in Christ that we find your great provision, your providence at work. You're so incredibly patient with us, waiting for us to turn and to fly to Jesus, to run to Him.

And so I pray we would, Lord. I pray that we wouldn't presume on that patience as great as it is. I pray we wouldn't be sitting here thinking, oh well, it's inconsequential what I do with my life. I'm just going to keep living in sin and not worry about it.

Let us see that there is a final judgment coming, a righteous judgment coming. And so we had best turn to Christ now. And let us see, Lord, even in our many failed attempts to try and get our life back on track and to try and walk in Christ's ways that your immense patience means you are standing there with welcoming, open arms inviting us back into your love.

[33 : 46] We thank you for Christ, our Aaron, who speaks for us, our substitute. He is our hope. He has gone before us and done what we could not do. And as long as we rest in him, we will be saved and we will start to produce the fruit of righteousness, obedient living.

Help us in this, Lord. We ask this for Christ's sake in his glory. Amen.