Tom Petty has a knack for timeless lyrics with universal appeal.

Some thirty years after its release in 1981, his song "The Waiting" tugs at listeners more powerfully than ever. Whether it’s waiting in line, waiting in traffic, waiting for food service, or waiting for marriage, biding our time is more counter-cultural than ever. And proclaiming it “the hardest part” resonates deeply. We have been conditioned to have it our way, right away. First it was fast food and instant coffee; then it was everything else as well.

But our disdain for waiting isn’t just the product of social trends and generational shifts; it is an expression of something profoundly human.

Our twin four-year-old boys can relate already. They heard Petty’s chorus, and it struck a nerve — and stayed with them more than anything else from his greatest-hits album. Now they sing it to pacify themselves when they feel the burn of waiting.

And the pains of waiting seem even more pronounced in mom and dad. From gestation, parenting has challenged our patience, and exposed its lack, with embarrassing frequency and depth.

**Christianity Is Waiting**

Our perspective on waiting is perhaps one of the stronger ways our society is out of stride with the biblical worldview. Not that waiting was easy for our forefathers, but they were more at peace with it, and more ready to see its goodness and potential.

In the Old Testament, the psalmist celebrates waiting patiently for the Lord (Psalm 40:1), and Isaiah promises that those “who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31).
Waiting on God is a regular refrain in the life of faith. It is an expression of the healthy heart's desire: “O LORD, we wait for you; your name and remembrance are the desire of our soul” (Isaiah 26:8). And it is an echo of the unparalleled power and grace of God, “who acts for those who wait for him” (Isaiah 64:4).

With all those centuries of waiting for the Messiah, you might think the waiting would be done once Jesus had come. But now in the church age, we wait as much as ever, called to live in the shadow of his return. We “wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:7); we are a people “waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). The church is that community which has “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven” (1 Thessalonians 1:9–10), knowing that when he appears, he comes “to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:28).

The church has endured two millennia of extended waiting. We “groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23), and we aim to live in “holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God . . . waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:11–13). And as we bide our time on this side, we “keep ourselves in the love of God” by “waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life” (Jude 21).

Patience Is the Virtue

The illusive virtue, then, which corresponds to this dreaded condition is patience. It is the first thing Paul celebrates about love in 1 Corinthians 13 — “love is patient” (1 Corinthians 13:4) — and one of the most repeated exhortations to church leaders (1 Thessalonians 5:14; 2 Timothy 2:24; 4:2). Eternal life is the possession of “those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality” (Romans 2:7). And patience is a virtue so rare, and of such divine doing, that Paul twice draws on its exercise as a defense of his apostleship (2 Corinthians 6:4–6; 12:12).

Patience is the companion of humility and the enemy of pride. “The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit” (Ecclesiastes 7:8). It is the appropriate posture of the creature illumined
enough to say, “God is sovereign, and I am not.” And it is not our own production, but “the fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22; 5:5).

Three Pathways for Cultivating Patience

In the practice of patience is one of the times we most feel the burn of sanctification and the inward groans of the Spirit (Romans 8:23). At times it can seem we’re being conformed to Jesus almost effortlessly; the winds of the Spirit in our sails, as we feed the nourishment of self-forgetfulness. But part of waiting is the conscious hardship. We taste the bitter pill of patience and feel it slither ever so slowly down our throat. It’s not patience when we’re gloriously unaware of the waiting. And so when we feel the burn, we need divine promises in store and a plan of attack. Here are three biblical pathways for cultivating patience in the waiting.

1) Renew Faith and Hope

When you feel the first resistance, let it be a reminder to go Godward. Recalibrate the focus of your faith. Move the weight of your trust off self, where it keeps gravitating back, and consciously reorient on God. Whether it’s simply spare moments or seemingly endless days, waiting is no waste in God’s economy. It is in the delays and the pauses, and in becoming aware of our lack of patience, that he works to save us from self-reliance and revitalize our faith and hope in him.

Patience comes with faith (2 Timothy 3:10; Hebrews 6:12) — faith for the moment, and hope toward the future. Faith feeds hope, and when “we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Romans 8:25).

2) Pray and Give Thanks

Second, let the waiting prompt you to pray. The summons to “be patient in tribulation” is followed with the reminder to “be constant in prayer” (Romans 12:12). A healthy life of prayer doesn’t necessitate hours each day in the closet, but eyes to see the opportunities in, and a heart to seize upon, the unexpected moments and seasons of waiting.

And there is a remarkable role for thanksgiving in cultivating “patience with joy.” Paul prays for Christians, “May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified.
you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light” (Colossians 1:11–12).

How do we “put on . . . patience” (Colossians 3:12)? The apostle points us to thanksgiving not once or twice, but three times:

*Be thankful.* Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:15–17)

Few things will pass the time as effectively and richly as counting your blessings and naming them to God.

**3) Remember the Patience of God**

Finally, the pain of waiting can point our hearts to the life-saving patience of God. We owe our everything to his kindness and patience with us. “Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” (Romans 2:4).

He was patient when the first man and woman sinned. His “patience waited in the days of Noah” (1 Peter 3:20). He was patient with Abraham and patient with Israel. He showed his patience through his prophets (James 5:10). And if he is patient even with “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,” how much more has he shown his patience to us in making known “the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory” (Romans 9:22–23)?
Jesus himself is the climactic display of God’s perfect patience toward sinners (1 Timothy 1:16). He is “patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). We “count the patience of the Lord as salvation” (2 Peter 3:15) and bank on his promise, in all our waiting, to “sustain you to the end” (1 Corinthians 1:8).

Perhaps Tom Petty is onto something better than he knows when he sings about waiting, “You take it on faith, you take it to the heart.” The unwelcome intrusions of waiting into our lives, whether weighty or seemingly trite, are powerful opportunities to welcome God into every moment and keep our hearts renewed in him.

Source: David Mathis
desiringgod.org