



Malvern Mashal 136



Patmos

Narrow Times & Coping with Change

These pages are primarily notes to accompany the beautiful audio-musical files which you can listen to [HERE](#) and here: <http://www.ruachministries.org/teaching/sevenchurchesinrevelationrevised/Patmos5HandlingTimes.mp3>

On Patmos John was in a 'narrow' time. The Latin word for 'narrow' is *angustia*, from which we get the word 'anguish.' Sometimes when we find ourselves in narrow times we fear the dead ends and the disaster that would be. The sense of ANGUISH can be very acute. These are the Glencoe times in life, when we feel hemmed in and all but crushed on all sides. But these are the very times to pray all the more fervently, or to get others to pray for us if we cannot for ourselves, that the Lord will open His way forward.

How the devil must have hoped that, stuck away on a penal colony, John would lose his fervour. If so, how wrong can he be! But how wrong John would have been too, if he did what we so often do during these times and assumed that God had no special purpose for this fallow and narrow time.

It was a miscarriage of justice that had taken John to Patmos and there have been many believers ever since who have suffered on the face of it the most devastating miscarriages of justice, only to find the Lord doing something at a much deeper way as a result. This is not perversity but purpose!

When God has a purpose in mind He can be unflinchingly determined as well as amazingly ingenious in bringing about His purposes. Anyone who reads the Bible with an open heart really can't afford to have too mushy a view of God's love.

There have been at least two occasions in our lives when we have known the Lord warning that there were people lining up to stick knives in our backs, but He still sent us out into those places and assignments, knowing full well that we were lambs amongst wolves. Isn't that what Jesus promises to do? 'I am sending you out as lambs amongst wolves' – and He knew exactly what wolves tend to do to lambs!

It's that much harder when the wolves turn out to be fellow believers – that's a whole other story, but it is worth mentioning in this context just to point out that many people's 'Patmos experiences' actually do stem from such things – and we need grace to allow neither bitterness nor sclerosis to set in to set our reactions in concrete when what we really need is faith and flexibility.

When the Lord appears to dump you into a Patmos experience, it takes considerable faith to believe that He is still working behind the scenes to bring about the change of emphasis or ministry that is on His heart.

It's important to sound a warning here: that appearances can be seriously misleading!

Transition

In terms of childbirth, transition times can feel really relentless, but they are usually mercifully brief. They're often the time when women cry out 'I want to stop and go home!' Patmos times can likewise be very intense times of transition – and they can last a great deal longer than they do in the labour ward.

There is a time to PUSH (that is, to Pray until something happens) – but there are other occasions when the only thing we can do is to set our wills and endure until release comes – as Christians had to do in places like Sardis and Smyrna, where intense persecution was raging against them, and as so many still do today . May the Lord be very much with each one today who is suffering on account of their faith: in Pakistan, North Korea, China, Iran, the 'stan' countries of the former USSR and so on.

May the Lord give them and you all you need to endure – and above all the grace not to throw away your confidence, for it will be richly rewarded. The prize that awaits us at the end of our days will owe a very great deal to the fact that we were willing to persevere!"

Huponome

We'll be seeing when we turn to the letters to the churches in Revelation chapters two and three that the Greek word for endure huponomē is one of the really great New Testament words. It speaks not just of passively bearing difficult things but of a spirit which conquers and turns them into something positive. When George Mathesson lost his sight and was disappointed in love, he refused to give in: in one of his prayers he asked that he might accept God's will, 'not with dumb resignation but with holy joy; not only with the absence of murmur but with a song of praise'.

Think of people you know or have read about who bear the seemingly unbearable not only with fortitude but even with joy. What a testimony to grace!

Then think of 'narrow' or seemingly 'fallow' times that God has allowed in your life, which have caused you to cry out more vigorously,

and which have proven in the longer term to be His way of opening up new doors.

The Wilderness

As Moses endured forty years of counting sheep in the wilderness – a decidedly woolly Patmos period, who could possibly have guessed as one decade grazed peacefully into another that God was preparing him to shepherd his people Israel at an utterly crucial time in the nation's history? You never know what God has in store beyond the Patmos period!

Sometimes, the Lord's path forward leads by decidedly roundabout ways, and we must be prepared to follow it stage by stage. There was a young couple from New Zealand who told their friends that when they finished at Bible school, they were going into the mission field. They continued saying this year after year as they drifted from one random job to another: road laying, fence building and even chicken farming. When the Lord finally did call them to the mission field, guess what – all the skills, they had developed along the way proved invaluable. Even chicken farming!

Praise

The very best way to cope with the pressure of the situation we are facing is often just to take up the trumpet call in Scripture to praise the Lord, no matter how oppressive the circumstances looming over us. All too often we leave this precious two-edged sword hanging on the wall – but why leave it as an ornament when it ought to be an integral part of our spiritual armour?

It takes courage to take the sword down from the wall and to wield it but Scripture says, 'May the praise of God be in our mouths and a double-edged sword in our hands.' Praise affirms our conviction that God knows what He is doing and it somehow releases Him to move into action. That's the double edged effect of praise.

'Lord, thank You that You do know what You are doing and that You're going to move...'

The Lord has not got it all wrong, so there is no need to agree with the devil's decidedly jaundiced view that He has.

Do it today

Once we've established that, it is important even during Patmos times that we still take advantage of such opportunities as open up. Some of us hold back, waiting for a mythical magical perfect moment to arrive instead of doing what we can and using what we have. Our talents aren't assets to be hoarded: they are resources to be put to good use. Don't be like the woman who kept her very best hat that she had never worn carefully wrapped up in its box. When someone asked her why she didn't wear it at her daughter's wedding, she said she was keeping it for a special occasion!

What's wrong with now? It's the little steps we take today that enable the Lord to weave His wider purposes tomorrow. God has given us today and eternity!

Don't put things off! Welcome and work with what God says. Swallow the frog – and do the hardest thing first if need be, but get it done and don't let excuses win.

Those who regularly fail to plan ahead nearly always end up at the mercy of changes that are forced upon them. We can and must do better than that!

As Thomas Hardy put it, "A resolution to avoid an evil is seldom framed till the evil is so far advanced as to make avoidance impossible."

In other words, don't be like those politicians who only reform their privileges when they are absolutely forced to do so.

So let's ask ourselves: are we putting off important and strategic things in favour of the easier but ultimately less strategic? Many of us are really adept at coming up with excuses to avoid doing the most important thing.

If the Lord thwarts our desires and intentions in order for us to reach the place He has in mind for us, we will one day be eternally grateful that He acted as He did – in which case let's dare to praise Him now that He knows what He is doing. It will be a blessing for both Him and us.

Of course the Lord won't use all our gifts all of the time – especially during Patmos seasons – but it may well prove impossible to develop new giftings and areas of involvement that the Lord wants us to without being willing to lay certain other things down – even things that are perfectly good in themselves.

Becoming single-minded for the Kingdom usually involves making a conscious decision to do less in some areas in order that we can do more in others. This is kingdom arithmetic: multiplication through seeming subtraction

I know, the Lord often tends to take away our ability to do certain things anymore on Patmos, anyway, but that's not the point I am making here: which is that we often need to examine our priorities carefully in order to focus on the ones God is most stressing.

You've probably seen those road signs warning that the priorities have changed at a junction ahead. Is the Lord hinting at that in your life? If so, the important thing is to co-operate with Him and to be flexible, and not to allow the changes that are coming your way to blunt your cutting edge by making you feel insecure, or that the way things are working out now is nowhere near as good as it has been in the past.

Hopes, emotions, and inner dreams all go up and down during Patmos periods. Whilst many of us expect too little of God, some of us end up being swayed by 'hype' into believing for things that God has not promised. If we have a mistaken idea of what we can do or be in a given context, the Lord may well have to prick the bubble and adjust the balance.

As Samuel Johnson warned, 'Expectations improperly indulged must end in disappointment!' Rather like the man who bought a large RV (Roving Vehicle) and, under the rather naïve impression that this wonderful new vehicle ought to be able to steer itself, set the van on cruise control and wandered back into the cabin to make himself a cup of tea. The effects on the local hedgerows were predictable!

I like what Peter Marshall said: 'God save us from hot heads who would lead

us foolishly, and from cold feet which would keep us from adventuring at all.'

But if some of us aim too high and end up like Icarus flying too close to the sun and having our wings clipped, more of us set our expectations too low. I said before that it is so important that we don't side with Satan's twisted assessment of situations. It's second nature to him to spin a good yarn and to distort the truth.

Here are a few typical examples of how he does it. He starts out by saying that 'it', whatever it represents, can't be done. If you wisely choose to ignore that and believe the opposite, he might try this for another tack: 'well, IF it can be done, you're not the right person to do it!' That one causes a lot of people to think twice and to hold back. And if that doesn't work then he'll try to land this sucker punch: 'and anyway it's the wrong time to do it!' After all timing is such a crucial thing to get right – but the devil is trying to get us to relegate it to never-never land. All these strategies have to be overcome if we are actually to get anything done – and only you can initiate the fight against these particular giants!

Don't let the devil's condemning words pin you up against the ropes and convince you that you are disqualified, when Paul tells us that Jesus has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. We are not outsiders to grace, however bad we may sometimes feel. Incidentally that is the precise time that you may need to round up prayer from others to bring you the reinforcements that you need. Prayer puts things within reach that would otherwise remain tantalisingly out of reach. Time and again Satan loses out when we share honestly with others and pray release of faith into those situations.

And if you have stepped out in faith in the past in all sincerity in the past only to find something not working out, don't give up. Adjust your sights if need be, but don't come to a judgering halt.

Try this. It's an exercise that helps a lot of people to seriously recover from that sense of defeat and trauma. Write down what happened that caused you

to feel the loss. Don't leave anything out.

Secondly, either later or the following down, write down how you felt AT THAT TIME. Then write down how you feel about it NOW. You will often find something wonderful happening at that time, helping you to see the good things that the Lord has actually brought to pass through it. Far more has happened than you may have been aware of at the time, let alone were able to appreciate.

So don't let the memory of things that didn't appear to work out open the door to doubt. 'No good thing does He withhold from those who are seeking to lead a godly life.'

Don't settle for less! I've often heard church leaders calling for balance in everything, I would agree with that, if their definition of being balanced means being as radical as possible in pursuing every God-given lead and calling in our lives. I'm afraid I've heard quite a number of ministers declare that it is their stated aim to go at the pace of the slowest. This may sound kind and caring, but actually it is a certain recipe for mediocrity. Yes, of course we are to give those who are struggling all the support we possibly can, but to be so concerned to keep everybody on board that we reduce our pace to that of the slowest means avoiding all sense of risk and adventure and is sure to stifle the work of the Spirit.

God has put the most amazing and life-giving properties into these unlikely Patmos times, just as He has into other unlikely looking substances. Think of lumps of clay that can be shaped and refined and fired into beautiful teapots, that dispense endless cups of tea. Mmmm!

Or Chunks of coal that under extreme pressure turn into glittering diamonds. It is beyond belief. So too is the way the Lord can bring beauty, power and purpose out of the seemingly most unpromising situations.

You'll be familiar with the old adage 'you can't steer a parked car.' It's so important to be willing to step out again.

The message from Patmos is very clear: 'To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations.' (Rev. 2:26)

So long as we don't actively set out to oppose His intentions, or give up under the pressure, we will reach the place He has in mind for us – and will be eternally grateful for His faithfulness that gave us the grace to be persistent.

We had a lovely group visit us for a retreat the other day in our Sanctuary Shed. At the end I suddenly found myself rather daringly saying, "God has a box of tools. He is going to take one of these tools and place it in your hands now – and you will feel it!" And He did!

Perhaps the anointing may extend to you for this. Imagine the situation and see if the Lord would say something to you, or to someone you love in this respect. For myself, it was a saw – He said, "The teeth are sharp, and you are very determined in sawing a straight line through thick pieces of wood." Let's give Him the chance to speak to us now. He has many gifts to give us even while we are still on Patmos.

Handling times when no change is in sight

More people fail in their objectives through a lack of willingness to persevere than through lack of talent. But it is much easier to persevere through something if we know that it is only going to go on until a certain date. It is much harder when issues are open-ended, and we simply don't know if something is ever going to change or open up. John had no more idea whether he was ever going to get off the island of Patmos than Elijah did when God directed him to camp beside the brook Cherith during a time of drought.

Neither is it always obvious whether certain difficulties are permanent. It is only too easy to convince ourselves that 'all is lost' when, in reality everything may not be. Many are the tricks that the mind plays! But it is also human nature to hope that something may only prove to be a temporary blip which is in fact permanent.

Even where something is the result of our own failure, it is vital not to give up. Toddlers don't when they fall over, and neither would you expect to give up driving just because an accident has happened, even one for which there can be no easy resolution. The quicker we are to embrace the reality of the new situation, the more likely we are to come successfully through recovery process.

No wonder the writer to the Hebrews spells it out so clearly: *You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised.* (Hebrews 10:36)

In this section, therefore, I want to look in more detail at the effect on our emotions that the changes we go through during Patmos times may have on us.

We can take heart from the fact that the Lord who rescued Elijah when the Cherith brook dried up will also find ways to lead us on when we find ourselves in Patmos situations. The Lord has not changed his mind about us just because we find ourselves there.

The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek." Psalm 110:4

The Spirit of the Lord will come upon you in power, and you will prophesy and be changed into a different person. (1 Sam. 10:6)

And if you find yourself tempted to feel 'I deserve better than this,' remember Andrew Murray's words, 'all the steps of God lead downwards.' Patmos experiences rarely feels like promotion at the time, and this can hit our self esteem hard – but God only narrows John's life down here on Patmos, just as He did for Jesus on the Cross in order to open everything up much wider again. It takes time, of course, to adjust to major changes that come our way.

The ways of the Lord are eternal, as it says in Habakkuk 3:6, but all that can be shaken is being shaken. Just as there is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance (Ecclesiastes 3:4) so we need grace to adjust to the change of pace and circumstanc-

es that Patmos involves. Shrinking horizons and reduced circumstances

Now I'm talking about change in this Patmos context primarily in terms of loss. Depending on our personality type, and our faith levels, when we go through really difficult changes, it can often take us longer to adjust to the new realities than we think it ought to – and far longer than certain other people think it ought to do. How right Shakespeare was when he said that everyone can master a grief except the one who is suffering it! What we can't afford to do is to start taking on other people's misconceptions as well as our own pain, for that would make us 'sideways' focused rather than 'up'.

David faced not one but two huge 'Patmos' experiences. The first came when his erstwhile employer Saul became jealous of him and chased him out of the town he was so highly honoured in at the point of a spear. He lost his wife, his whole role in life. He had to make a base for himself in the wilderness at Adullam's cave.

Ponder how David cooped up in a cave at Adullam, and how he strengthened himself in the Lord. In many ways he fared better than he did during his second Patmos experience when his own son Absalom chased him out of Jerusalem and sought to kill him.

In many ways David handled this second episode less well, remaining so fixated on the loss of his rebellious son Absalom that he came perilously close to being unable to function at all. Praise God for Joab recalling him to his duty!

Likewise, when Daniel and his young friends were deported to Babylon, in effect their Patmos experience, just imagine the amount of lifestyle changes that represented. Daniel could so easily have become an angry and rebellious young man, resenting the Babylonians, despising their culture, feeling that his life was ruined, and deep down blaming God for it all. Instead, as we know he made the very best of the situation, and was greatly used by the

Lord. We can learn a great deal from Daniel about rising above the seemingly limiting circumstances that Patmos imposes on us!

Battling the What ifs and the if onlys

If we handle these Patmos times the wrong way, we can end up endlessly berating ourselves, 'If only I hadn't done this, and if only that other thing hadn't happened, then this situation would never have happened.' Such attitudes risk locking us into the past. Just imagine walking along, as it were, looking over your shoulder the whole time – at best it will slow you down and give you a stiff neck, at worse you'll end up bumping into lamp posts!

In fairness, it isn't always easy to know when something is a genuine distraction – that needs to be genuinely resisted(!) – as opposed to one of God's 'significant interruptions in disguise'. Jesus had set out in response to Jairus' impassioned appeal to come and heal his dying daughter when a woman who had suffered bleeding for twelve years thrust herself forward and touched the edge of his cloak. If He was anything like us, Jesus might have been inclined to think, 'She's had this condition for twelve years - can't she wait another day? I'm on an important mission!'

But He dealt with the interruption, as we all know, healed the woman, then raised the little girl from the dead. May the Lord help us to know whether we are in a Patmos we need to pray ourselves out of, or whether this is actually God coming in disguise.

Don't dwell too long on questions we just can't answer for the time being. Allowing house room to the 'but what ifs' and the 'if onlys' risks taking their dreary refrains into the depths of our heart. It's all part of the 'taking every thought captive' discipline that we need to grow in.

Father, help us as a deliberate act of the will to turn away from pointless inner dialogues that You and we both know from experience will lead us nowhere: to inner turmoil and gloomy dead ends.

Help us to catch ourselves whenever we find ourselves rehearsing conversations in our

heads with the people who have been the cause of our grief – or, for that matter, with people we really want to influence either.

Thank You that ninety-nine percent and more of our life still lies ahead of us in eternity, that one plus God is still a majority and that You are still planning and shaping the future for us. In your consummate skill, lead us on from where we are, reweaving threads so skilfully that the time will come when we will look back and say that there really is no second best in Your kingdom.

One warning to sound is that because Patmos times often feel like becalmed times, many people start making their own plans to escape their circumstances, and end up going in search of something more outwardly exciting. This is what leads not only the young and impressionable astray, but also pushes apparently mature people into the most outlandish escapades too. Midlife crises start early and can be a very real issue.

Try not to make major decisions at times when major changes have knocked you off balance. When the axis of your life has shifted, it can be very easy to make rash decisions that you will regret when balance has been restored.

Don't try to dodge these times just because they look, and are, hard. Paul knew he had to go to Jerusalem, even though the Spirit was warning him there would be great hardships ahead, so he refused to yield to the pleas of his friends not to go. (Acts 21:12-14)

Don't try to manipulate your way forward

Boston slow movement from about 1:25#

When things are not working out as we had hoped, it vital not to twist and manipulate things and people to get your own way. Much evil is done when people do this.

When we try to put things right by our own scheming, it may be as foolish and as wrong as when certain car thieves weld bits of two busted cars together. Apart from being illegal, there are always marks left at the join, which seriously weaken the whole structure. But when the Lord joins two broken but humble

people together for His own purposes it can be immensely powerful!

By definition even the biggest Patmos times can't be too big for God to handle.

Through it all, the Powers of darkness are actively at work targeting our trust levels. If that is accomplished best by hitting relationships and causing division, then that is what they will do. And the sort of temptations that come our way won't be of the easy to resist "go and rob a bank" sort of thought either. That would be altogether too easy to lift the shield of faith against. They will always be plausible and persuasive.

In all this what the enemy is trying to do is to make us wary of what God may throw our way, so that we will be prepared to settle for less in return for having fewer attacks aimed against us. It all happens at an out of sight below the surface level as the enemy tries to get us to hold back.

I love the Message version of the well known passage in Phil. 4

*Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the centre of your life.
Phillippians 4 in The Message*

If all things work together for good in the Lord, then perhaps it will help to look on difficulties more as stepping stones than as the boulders sent to stone us. It is not a sin not to worry. It sounds kinder that saying that worry is in a sin but it's saying straight out the same thing really, because worrying is like driving with one foot on the brake. Faith is crying for God to turn our disappointments into His appointments.

Let the memory of past encouragements strengthen you through these times on Patmos, in Adullam's cave or in Babylon or, like

Moses, out in the desert with the grazing sheep.

In Psalm 112 it says that:

A righteous man will be remembered forever.

He will have no fear of bad news; his heart is steadfast, trusting in the LORD.

His heart is secure, he will have no fear; (Ps. 112:6-8)

I once spent a week dreading what the bad news was that I was going to hear after reading that verse, which was the complete opposite of what the Lord had intended!

Hope

Because hope is such a psychological necessity, it is important to maintain a healthy view of the future. Most mental illness, and most listlessness for that matter too, has at its root a fear of what may happen in the future. If you are in the middle of a Patmos situation yourself, or know of others who are, then lift the situation to the Lord now and declare with St Paul, *I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death* (Phil. 1:20).

Encouragement is so vital to help people through their Patmos times. People thrive on it. Even when you are experiencing grief, go out of your way to praise and encourage people. Be extravagant in the praise you give. Building them up will also encourage you, and help to refocus you away from being inward looking.

When compliments and encouragements come your way, savour them to the full. Resist the temptation to think, "If only s/he knew what I was really like they wouldn't say such things." Or if just how difficult circumstances are, and you can't share them freely . . .

To a large extent people become what you say of them. It is as we sow that we will also reap.

Who would the Lord have you go out and encourage today?