

PATIENCE & PERFECTION
Finding Peace in God's Plan for You!

Daniel E. Paavola

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Bacon and eggs. Coffee and doughnuts. A good book and a comfortable chair. Some things just go together. Each is fine by itself, but who wants a doughnut with no coffee? We want the whole package.

Perfection and patience. Are you seeing these two as a natural pair, the spiritual match to the chair and book? Maybe not. Either one is fine, but together perfection and patience could cancel each other out. We want perfection, at least from God, and we can make a good case that perfection is what He should deliver. After all, He is perfect, and the world He made began that way. But if perfection is too much to ask, then I suppose we can settle for patience. But isn't asking for patience just admitting that perfection will never come?

In this book, we'll find a union of patience and perfection that might surprise us. We'll study seven biblical themes that are repeated actions combining God's perfection and patience. Patience is the essence of God's walk with us, and His perfection draws us to Himself each day. Though we'll never keep to a perfect line, He persists in walking with us. His patience is His perfect, strong hold on us.

This interplay of patience and perfection in the seven themes comes from my patient students who have developed these themes with me over the years of teaching at Concordia University Wisconsin. Thank you to everyone who has shared class with me and has provided many of the examples here. Thank you also to my colleagues at Concordia who have studied these repeated biblical ideas with me. In particular, my friends in the school of nursing were wonderful in shaping chapter 8, and Dr. James Freese gave excellent ideas on the choice of hymns as examples of the seven themes.

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Blessings to you as you follow these themes and see how divine patience and perfection intertwine in our lives.

PERFECT? REALLY?

You have to buy new clothes. You've put it off as long as you can, but now there's no escape. The clothes are not the problem. It's the dressing room, that little place with unfocused mirrors and a pincushion's worth of discarded pins. You really don't want to go there, but you have to. Taylor, who loves you, has come shopping with you, and Taylor insists that this time you are actually going to try these clothes on.

Taylor chooses a whole new outfit for you: shirt, pants, belt, even socks and shoes. Taylor puts them into your arms, points you to the dressing room, and says, "Go. I'll wait here." That's code for, "Put these on and come out here wearing them." This time there'll be no carrying the clothes out and promising, "They fit fine." This time, Taylor wants proof.

It's the mirrors, the pins, and the stiffness of it all that gets you. The mirrors in the dressing room are on three sides, showing you a profile you didn't know you had. It's shocking to see what others look at every day. Maybe that's why people are always smiling at you. The pins are everywhere in these clothes, and when you've taken twelve of them out of the shirt, there's one more waiting in the collar, aimed at your artery. And then there's the stiffness of it all. The shoes have a knife edge around the top, the belt won't bend around your waist, and the holes for the shirt buttons act like they're still sewn shut.

But eventually you have it all on. You have to go out now. Stay any longer and Taylor is going to come to the dressing room door and ask, "Are you okay in there?" To prevent that, you open the door and step out.

Taylor is not alone. There's a semicircle of people waiting for their loved one to come out. The sound of the dressing room door opening gave them all hope, so they all watch as you step out. Everyone looks you over, even though they know in an instant you're not the one they want to see. They take in the shirt, hastily tucked, the belt straining to go around, the pants with one cuff tucked into a shoe. They all smile. It's a smile that says, "Are you sure about this?"

You're not sure. That's the point. You know this isn't working, and you are a half step from turning around and going back. But then Taylor takes one step forward, looks you over again, actually smiles, and says, "Perfect." It's so loud and so surprising that everyone else looks you over again. But they only smile one more time and then stare at Taylor with a look that says, "Really? You think so?"

You've got an answer. "I don't think I've got all this on right. I know I missed a button somehow, and something didn't line up right. And there's still a pin in here somewhere. These shoes are really tight, and I think I'm standing funny in them." Taylor hears all this, but it doesn't seem to register. Taking one step closer to you, Taylor says it again, "Perfect."

Now that you two are a little closer, you dare to say, "Well, if I got back on the diet and actually lost those ten pounds, then maybe this would work better." You're also ready to suggest that going to the gym wouldn't hurt and that it's also one terrible hair day. But you don't get to say that. By now, Taylor is right in front of you, puts a finger on your lips, stops your mumbling, and says for the third time, "Perfect."

Taking one step closer to you, Taylor says it again, "Perfect."

And you are, if Taylor says you are. At that point, you have to decide who to believe. Do you trust the mirrors in the dressing room and the people standing outside? Or do you trust Taylor,

who said only the same word three times, but said it as though it were true? I say, trust Taylor. You're perfect.

That's the surprising judgment of God over us. Hebrews 10:14 says, "For by a single offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." The single sacrifice of Jesus is the basis for the judgment of God over us. In that judgment, God declares us perfect in His sight. It is not a perfection of our promises or progress. It is the perfection of His choice, His sight over us.

In this book, we'll study the perfection that comes from God. When we seek perfection from and with God, remember that it is a perfection of His sight and His judgment. It might be a perfection hidden from the rest of the world and, at times, hidden also from us. But God's perfection joins with His distinctive patience to announce that which Taylor said, "Perfect."

To hear and believe this is much like the story of the dressing room. For example, when we worship, we go through the dressing room experience. We enter with our old clothes, stained with the knowledge of our sins. We put on the new clothes of forgiveness, and in fact, we are clothed in Baptism with Christ Himself (Galatians 3:27). However, when we step out of worship into the familiar circle of those who know us, we wonder, "Is this really true?" Those who see us don't see perfection. They have that same indulgent smile, at best, that asks, "Perfect? Really? You think so?" And we would all be quick to offer up the same excuses we've used for years. You're not perfect, but you're trying. If work wasn't so busy right now, if Mom didn't make you so angry every time you talked, if all the bills didn't come all at once, you'd be better.

To all that, God takes a step closer and says, "Perfect." Again, you don't see anything close to perfection, but you might suggest to God that, given a little more time, you could be better. Maybe if you started getting up earlier and had a more peaceful start to the day, did some thinking and praying. Maybe if you didn't watch the news so much and get so upset by everything that's happening.

Maybe . . .

In the midst of the maybes, God steps right up to you, puts His finger on your lips, and stops your mumbling, excusing, and promising. He looks deeply into your eyes and says, “Perfect.” He’s not talking to someone else, and He’s not talking about a someday you won’t likely ever see. He’s talking about you, now, and it’s true.

PERFECTION IS MARRIED TO PATIENCE

God’s declaration of “Perfect” is true, but it takes time for us to take it all in. That’s the role of patience, one of the great spiritual gifts. But patience is not only a gift for us to exercise. Patience is the quality perhaps most married to God’s perfection. God’s view of us as perfect includes His divine patience. He declares us innocent as a timeless, eternal truth. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). This perfection is our present reality and is the partner with God’s patience over us. God’s patience is built upon His declaration that we are perfect in His sight, a sight that doesn’t change. Because of that judgment, God has all patience with us.

God steps right up to you,
puts His finger on your lips,
and stops your mumbling,
excusing, and promising.

Patience can only last where God’s perfect judgment is already in place. Imagine if we were not already justified in our relationship with God. Then what patience with God might we find? If we were not declared to be justified by Christ’s sacrifice and resurrection, if we were not declared to be innocent and even perfect in God’s sight, how long would His patience last? Patience looks for progress. Patience wants promises kept. Patience needs a purpose for all its waiting. But despite our best intentions, we find ourselves faltering in a Romans 7 frustration. The good that we would do, we don’t, and the evil that we would end, we contin-

ue in it. Left to that failure, we can only wonder when God's patience will end. We would have to conclude with Paul in Romans 7:24, "Wretched man that I am!" God's patience should end with a thunderclap, a lightning bolt, and His words of agreement, "Yes, you are wretched!"

But God's patience is founded on the perfection that has already come in His Son. At Jesus' Baptism and His transfiguration, the Father says, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17; 17:5). God doesn't wait anxiously for a dimly reflected, quickly passing perfection that we might offer Him. He doesn't snatch a moment of perfect reflection, a spiritual firefly that glows only long enough to be noticed but never long enough to be kept. God has seen perfection on earth already in Christ. He has seen that perfection in His Son for eternity and displayed that perfection throughout His years on earth. Now God has extended that perfection to us. He sees all those in Christ in a marriage relationship with His Son, He as the true, ideal Husband and we believers as the perfect Bride. Paul describes God's view of us in that marriage relationship with Christ, who has "cleansed her by the washing of the water with the word, so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:26–27). This view of absolute perfection brings patience. In fact, perfection and patience make up the wedding party, the maid of honor, and the best man.

Weddings take ages to plan, and they prove that by never starting on time. Weddings need patience. It is often not the fault of the bride but someone else like the photographer who shows up an hour late. The groom is left waiting and wondering what's taking so long. A wise groom just waits and says, "No problem. She'll be perfect." Only a fool greets his bride at the altar by saying,

“You’re late.” A wise groom greets her, no matter what the time is, and says, “You’re perfect.” She is exactly the vision he has always had. It’s not that he could only now see her like this, dressed without blemish or imperfection. He’s always seen her this way. That’s the marriage of patience and perfection. When these two come together, that’s a marriage that lasts.

God creates that union between Himself and us. He supplies both the perfection in His view of us and the patience by which He waits and walks with us. We learn at least a measure of His patience and trust upon His perfect plan and will. We begin to adapt our expectations to Psalm 46:10, “Be still, and know that I am God.” Knowing the perfection of God’s power and mercy, we can say with David in Psalm 27:13–14, “I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living! Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!” While we haven’t seen yet all that God plans to do with and for us, the sharing of His patience with us must be one of the most important steps He has in mind for us.

He supplies both the perfection in His view of us and the patience by which He waits and walks with us.

This combination of patience and perfection is the foundation of this book and the seven biblical themes we’re going to discuss. The repeated actions of God in the Bible show an interplay between these two. Patience and perfection need each other to be fulfilled. Taken separately, they would stand out in any list of what we expect of God. We might even put them at the top of our list of what defines God for us. He is perfect, of course, and He is patient toward us. However, we’re speaking of more than qualities on a list. We want to see how these two interplay throughout our understanding of God and our relationship with Him. To do that, our understanding of God’s perfection has to be broadened a bit. We likely want an instant perfection, but greater patience might be needed in our understanding of God.

OUR PERFECTION IS BRITTLE

It was perfect. Just look at it. Get closer if you want, but don't touch it! Your fingerprints would be the first thing wrong with it. Just look at it. You don't need to inspect it because there's nothing wrong with it. Just take it all in. From every angle, see what you knew you would see. Perfection.

I hope you've had this experience. Was it your first new car? Maybe it was the diamond engagement ring, still in the box. It was your first home, the house you actually were buying, not just renting. One way or another, I hope you've seen perfection at first sight.

Of course, perfection is a brittle thing. It's waiting to break at our first touch. Even looking too hard might be too harsh. Looking too hard might invite us to imagine some imperfection that we never noticed before. Perfection is a sharp point, a single moment that neither waits nor lasts. And so, given just a bit of time, that new car became the old, dented thing you sold for less than what was your single monthly payment. After a year, the house needed new gutters, a new roof, a new garage door, and a new furnace. It still looks good as you drive to it, but you're wondering if it wouldn't look even better if you were driving away from it.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if perfection both existed and lasted? What if new cars stayed new, right down to that wonderful smell? What if new houses always had clean walls and new carpets with no worn paths? And let's have engagement rings always express not just the hope but also the reality of a perfect relationship. We'd all agree: let perfection come, and let it last.

Wouldn't God be for this, our desire for perfection? After all, God is the ultimate in perfection Himself. He has no error, no fault, no weakening or stopping. Isaiah 40:28 says, "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow

weary; His understanding is unsearchable.” God’s perfection was expressed in Genesis 1 and 2 through His creation, and His own judgment on all He made was “It is good.” We have every reason to expect that God will bring about perfection as a central quality by which we know Him. Further, wouldn’t it be reasonable for God to protect that perfection when it comes? We can’t lock up a car in a sealed garage or safeguard every carpet in our home, but couldn’t God keep His world just as He wants?

Perfection is a sharp point, a single moment that neither waits nor lasts.

PERFECTION COMES IN PIECES

However, this expectation has several problems. First, how do we know what perfection is? What we judge perfect is limited by the little we know. We’re far from Eden, so our experience with perfection is a worn hand-me-down. In this area especially, we are children, as Paul said. “For we know in part and we prophecy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away” (1 Corinthians 13:9–10). Perhaps we need a wider view of what might be called perfect.

I know a man, Brady, who restores motorcycles to like-new condition at his shop, Retrospeed in Belgium, Wisconsin. When he’s done, the bike is at least as good as it was when it left the Honda, Ducati, or Suzuki factory fifty years ago. His bikes are masterpieces that are on the cover of national magazines, and they sell for deservedly high prices. With even a glance at one of his bikes, you would say, “Perfect.”

But that’s not how he finds these bikes. For example, when a 1977 Ducati 900 SuperSport came into his shop, it was in terrible shape. Engine dead, tires flat, chrome scratched, chain rusted solid. In other words, it was perfect. Perfect because it came in pieces. Perfect because it gave Brady something to work on and

perfect because, while it was found in a field in Texas, it was finally in Wisconsin, ready to be worked on. Perfect because it showed Brady's talents. When you hear the story of the restoration, you want to see what Brady started with just as much as you want to see the completed bike. You need the "before" pictures to appreciate the "after" pictures.

Perhaps we don't recognize God's perfection because we want only the "after" pictures. We want to be the "after" picture of perfection. We imagine that we could embody perfection now if God would only set His hand to the task; we imagine that He should and could keep us in that perfect state. However, our sad experience living east of Eden is that we are always in motion, either motion toward God's perfection or away from it. In this life, with the burden of original sin, we cannot achieve any lasting state of perfect living. We're declared justified by God's grace and are seen as innocent by God's choice through the sacrifice of His Son. But our actual experience feels far from that, so we end up echoing Paul in Romans 7:18–19: "For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing."

Any perfection we might have is not in the place we are now. Our present location is not perfection. Tomorrow's destination won't be perfection. Only our direction might be our perfection.

We want to be the "after" picture of perfection.

Since we're in motion, our sole hope is that we are in the direction of God's plan. Paul again speaks of this in Philippians 3:12–14, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I

press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Our restoration process is long, much like Brady working on a forty-year-old Ducati. If there

are pieces strewn about and things seem more apart than together, remember, you should have seen how it looked when it came in. So we also are declared perfect by God even in the middle of a long restoration, far from any visible perfection.

That restoration is a daily journey. Our direction, however small and faltering, comes under that grace of God and is even found acceptable to Him purely by grace. Every parent who has taught a daughter or son to drive knows this use of “perfect” in regard to motion and direction. You take your daughter out to drive, or even better, to practice parallel parking. It won’t be fast or pretty. But you’ll say “Great” and “Perfect” a lot. As long as the wheel is turned roughly in the right direction, the transmission is in reverse or drive as it should be, and her foot is on either the brake or throttle, but not both at the same time, it’s “Perfect.” You might still end up a foot from the curb with the left front fender sticking out a little in the traffic lane, but “Honey, it’s perfect.”

So God is in motion with us. Our vision of perfection might be a spotless Lexus parallel parked on the street, three inches from the curb. But God understands that we’re a hand-me-down Honda with one wheel, at best, a foot from the curb. But in Christ, God declares us perfect. Again Paul speaks of this at the end of his discussion on the thorn in the flesh and his request that God remove it. God’s answer helps Paul recognize this perfection in imperfection: “But He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Our perfection is in God’s proclamation that we are not guilty; His proclamation is complete and perfect by the work of Christ. We see this perfection in action in how God patiently walks with us in our weakness and demonstrates His power through our faltering steps.

In Christ,
God declares
us perfect.

GOD'S METHOD OF PERFECTION

So one of the challenges we have is seeing God declare an active perfection over our imperfect motion. We see perfection by God's declaration of mercy, not by any state we have achieved. But another challenge of God's unique perfection is recognizing the means He uses to express this mercy. We can understand that we might not be perfect, but certainly we can expect God to be. Yet when we see His mercy in action, it looks far from perfect.

Of course, God is perfect by any standard of holiness. Isaiah's breathtaking view of God announces this with the cries of the seraphim, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isaiah 6:3). But Isaiah is also afraid of God's holiness because he is a man of unclean lips, living among equally sinful people: "Woe is me! . . . For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:5). Given such a view as this, our awe and fear of God's perfection would be just as immediate and obvious.

We can see this expression of God's perfection repeatedly in the Old and New Testaments. One of the biblical themes in this book, "What Does Greatness Look Like?" expresses this expectation. The transfiguration of Jesus might be the highpoint of this visible and convincing perfection. Jesus shines like the sun while the Father speaks from the clouds. The sight and sound of such perfect glory reduce the disciples to an Isaiah-like fear coupled with a desire to see more. God's perfection draws us close enough to watch but distant enough to escape.

However, God has chosen a different method of perfection through the ministry and especially the death of Jesus. His perfection is that of the servant, the One who emptied Himself and became obedient to death, even death on the cross, as Paul summarizes in Philippians 2:6–8. He is the One who chose on the cross to be despised, "He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him. He was despised

and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:2–3). Perfection came as He steadfastly looked upon our sin, carried our sin away, and healed us by His wounds. How strange is this perfection? We cannot bear to see His perfection on the cross, but He can bear to see all our sins. Christ, the holy Son of God, was transformed in His bearing of our sin. “For our sake He made Him to become sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

When we see His mercy in action, it looks far from perfect.

We don’t expect this change as the path to perfection. Brady transforms the broken pieces into a whole, perfect motorcycle. He takes it apart, but he doesn’t destroy it. If a gas tank has original, perfect paint, he keeps it. If the original pistons have perfect compression, he doesn’t burn a hole through them. But God, in restoring us, afflicts all that which is imperfect onto His Son even to the point of death and says at His broken death on Good Friday, “Perfect.”

That perfect bearing of sin is the companion to God’s patience. God not only sees us as the spotless Bride, but He also has seen the complete destruction of our sin through His Son. His anger is not building up with an impatient boiling, eager to pour over us. He has put that anger into the death of His Son so that a new patience exists between Himself and us.

THE SEVEN THEMES UNITE PATIENCE AND PERFECTION

The seven biblical themes that we explore in this book develop this union of patience and perfection. Of course, there are aspects of both qualities that are expected and others that are a surprise. A brief overview of the seven themes can help us think about God’s patience, which fulfills our expectation for His perfection.

The first theme takes these two qualities on directly: “Instant Perfection—Patient Relationship.” In this theme, we explore God’s perfection through His actions throughout the Bible. From the creation in Genesis 1 and 2 through the perfection we see and yearn for in Revelation, we find God creating and restoring His world. We see perfection in the life and work of His Son, especially in His instant actions of healing that make the lame walk, the deaf hear, and the dead man step forth.

But as much as we yearn for this perfection, God offers another dimension in His tie with us—patient relationship. While perfection could come in a greater measure in our lives, God answers our impatience with His perfect patience in relationship. He helps us realize that our walk together is worth as much or more than the destination. The true wonder is not that God is perfect, but that He wants to be in a patient relationship with us. Together, these two dimensions of one theme give us God’s essential qualities, patience and perfection.

The dual nature of the first theme leads to the second theme, “It’s Not the First, but the Second That Counts.” Both the nature of Hebraic repetition and God’s actions in Genesis show this love of the second over the first. God’s enduring relationship with a fallen world isn’t merely playing out a losing hand; God’s relationship with the world shows His creativity and plan. Frequently, it appears that the second is preferred over the first in the Bible. Jacob is blessed over his brother Esau, and David, the second king, is greater than Saul. Jesus comes as the Second Adam, far beyond the first. Patience is needed as we step from the first to the greater second.

This emphasis on the second points to the third theme: “One Stands in Place of Us All.” At first, this principle rankles us. Why should we bear the punishment of another’s failure? But when the Second Adam succeeds in our place and His triumph becomes ours, then this is a wonderful principle. Goliath was right when he challenged the army of Israel to send a champion against him;

we don't all need to fight, but we can let one stand in our place. Then the victories of David and the greater victories of David's Son come to us all. Perfection will come with His work, but it takes patience to wait as He steps forward in our place.

This is pure good news, but what an effect it has for us. God is with us. Surely life will be better, starting now. But the fourth theme, "Grace Upends Our World," reminds us that the gracious presence of God still leads us into the path of danger and difficulty. The people of Israel, even after God sends Moses to free them, must make bricks without straw. Mary hears the wonderful news that the Messiah will be born of her, but she also hears that Joseph plans to divorce her. Paul is met by Jesus on the road, yet he's blind for three days. Grace upends our world, but it does so through difficulties we never imagined.

This combination of good news and difficulty captures the two sides of the fifth theme, "What Does Greatness Look Like?" This is a principle taken from Bruce Catton's history of General U. S. Grant, *Grant Moves South*. We expect that power and glory ought to look like power and glory. Shouldn't a general wear a spotless uniform and be mounted on a magnificent horse? Biblically, we see this version of greatness when Solomon's wisdom dazzles all and the temple reflects the glory of God. But glory can also look strange and hidden. Grant was known to go about camp in a mud-stained private's coat with no insignia at all. And so David, though anointed as king, lived in caves while being hunted by Saul, and his greatness was in sparing Saul's life. Jesus' miracles came with both measures of greatness. He showed the obvious glory of the transfiguration but also showed the hidden glory of One who saved others but would not save Himself from the cross.

Grace upends our world, but it does so through difficulties we never imagined.

That willingness to die is the heart of the sixth theme, "God Cures with the Illness Itself." We cure with the opposite of illness.

We cure hunger with food, fatigue with rest, and cold with a warm blanket. And we want to make this exchange in an instant. But God surprises us by choosing the illness itself as the cure, though that cure might not come immediately. God cured those bitten by snakes in the exodus by giving them a bronze snake to look upon. God cured death by placing His Son into a body of death, ending sin by being made sin Himself. He grasps the illness to Himself, giving healing to us.

But waiting for this cure can leave us in a dark place. Then we need the assurance of the final theme, “Perfection Welcomes Failure.” Of course, this is not how our world usually works. Perfection frightens failure. But God draws all men to Himself through the perfect life and death of Jesus. Hebrews 4 reminds us that though He was tempted in all things as we are, He never failed. And therefore, we draw near to His throne of grace. Frightened Peter dared to step out of the boat when he saw the perfectly powerful Jesus walk on the waves. The perfect Gospel not only lets us come but also draws us out of our fear. In the end, the Bible concludes with the perfection of a new heaven and a new earth, an absolute perfection that welcomes us home.

A BALANCE OF EXPECTATION AND SURPRISE

These seven themes express then the tension between perfection and patience. In doing this, they have another tension: expectation and surprise. These themes are patterns of God’s action that we can see repeatedly throughout Scripture. The themes are significant enough that we anticipate them happening again and again. But when are they going to come? That is the question, and we might be surprised where we see these themes. We might be surprised when we find a new expression of God’s perfection in the most unlikely place.

These seven themes not only keep us wondering when each is going to reappear. These themes also unite the whole Bible under

seven patterns. As we see the patterns appear over and over again, we might feel a natural familiarity combined with a desire for something more. Hebrews

1:1–2 expresses this in a broad way by saying, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God

The perfect Gospel not only lets us come but also draws us out of our fear.

spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son.” The continuity of the message from prophets to Son is clear, just as there is also the expectation that the Son will bring a new dimension to this revelation.

So, as the seven themes unfold throughout the Bible, we welcome their repetition. For example, the theme “One Stands in Place of Us All” is easily seen through the kings, prophets, and priests of the Old Testament. Yet we know that the ultimate One in place of us all comes only in the Son of God. We’re intrigued to see God repeatedly choose and bless the second over the first through the Old Testament, but we know that the full use of that theme will be in Jesus, the new Adam.

Throughout this book, we’ll see how the seven themes lead to Jesus but also how the themes intertwine. Our last chapter will highlight this, and you’ll anticipate that as you see examples of each individual theme. David, the shepherd boy who dares to step out against Goliath, is both an example of one person standing in place of us all and also an example of greatness looking like greatness in the most surprising way. Not only do the themes intertwine, but they also lead you to expand them or develop new repeated patterns for yourself. Read with this tension between your expectations of these themes versus the surprise of where you find them. It’s all like a trip down a north woods river.

OUR TRIP DOWN THE RIVER

The Chippewa River of northern Wisconsin is perfect for canoeing with a seven-year-old boy. In the deep woods west of

the small town of Glidden, the Chippewa meanders through the Chequamegon National Forest. The river is only two or three feet deep, usually fifty or so feet wide, going no faster than a man can walk. There are a few rocks but no raging rapids. On the banks is the unbroken northern forest.

Our family went canoeing on the Chippewa River for years, but usually it was a trip for our son, Steve, and me. We would drive about a half hour from our home in Butternut into the Chequamegon Forest to a canoe landing. Unload the canoe, get the life vests and paddles out, and push the canoe into the river. Let's go canoeing!

Now imagine that our son didn't want to go. By the way, Steve was always ready to go camping or canoeing, but for this story let's imagine he's afraid of getting into the canoe. If I ask him why, he'll say, "I don't know what's around the bend." The Chippewa is constantly turning, so you never see more than about fifty yards at a time. Steve's worried that something terrible is waiting around the bend. He's seen too many Disney videos where unsuspecting people come around a river bend to find a hundred-foot waterfall. So he's worried that around this bend, the Chippewa is going to plunge us to our death.

What do you say? You could start with "Steve, this isn't a cartoon." Then explain that the river we see here is the river we will have around the bend. How deep will it be? The same: two or three feet. How fast will it go? Just like here. We can walk faster. What's on the banks? Trees, trees, and trees.

That should do it. The river we have here is the river we'll have around the bend. If it weren't, we would never dare to go canoeing. Real rivers are generally the same from bend to bend, or they let you know by their roaring that something is coming. But generally, the river you have here is the river that is coming.

Now, if this were a movie, Steve should say, "Great, Dad, let's

go!” But what if he does this: he looks down the river as far as he can see, turns to look up the river, and then says, “Okay, Dad, let’s go home.”

What’s he thinking now? Well, he’s seen it all. If the river here is the same as around the bend, why go? Look up and down and you’ve got it. Let’s go home—maybe he’ll even help load the canoe.

No, we’re not going home. You don’t go on the river to see the same thing. You go to see what you’ve never seen, or what you saw just that one time and maybe you’ll see again. What’s around the river bend? Maybe this time it will be a whitetail deer and her fawn drinking from the river. (Be quiet, Steve, and don’t slap that blue plastic paddle of yours against the canoe so much.) Maybe we’ll see the king of the forest, the black bear. Or best of all, we’ll see a bald eagle in his nest or soaring above the river.

The deer, the bear, and the eagle don’t line up at the boat landing to meet you. Even if you paddle under the eagle’s nest, the eagle might not be there today. But that’s the reason you have to go. The eagle might be there, or he might be fishing around the next bend. We won’t know until we go. So get in the canoe. We’re going around the river bend. (By the way, I’m writing this while sitting on the bank of another Wisconsin river on a perfect June day, looking at the river as it sweeps past me around a bend a hundred yards away. Perhaps I should stop writing, get in a canoe, and see what’s around that bend today.)

What’s around
the river bend?

THE BIBLE IS A CONTEXTUAL RIVER

Reading the Bible is like taking a river trip. The headwaters are Genesis 1, and from there, the river flows through almost countless turns. Each short narrative of a few verses is the hundred-yard-long stretch that you can see at this time. But we read

by remembering where we've been. And we read by wondering what's going to come next. Come to the end of a particular story, finish a chapter, or reach the end of a person's life story, and you're ready to go around the bend.

Just like the Chippewa River, the Bible is both comfortingly familiar and also surprisingly new. We need consistency. The God we meet in Genesis 1 creates the world in great detail with approving love. Don't we want to meet that same God around every bend? The wonderful healer Jesus who just cleansed a leper or cast out a demon, don't we want to read next that He raised the dead son for his widowed mother? We dare not find a God who casts off the world as hopeless and hated. We won't keep reading if the healing Jesus next becomes a carpenter who kills His enemies with a single blow.

We read the Bible because of the consistent message it gives. We dare to move from the past of Genesis finally to the future of Revelation because of this consistency. In our use of the seven biblical themes, this is the consistency that makes these actions reliable themes. They can be counted on appearing around the bend. But they won't come on demand or with any numerical predictability. They come with the simple assurance that anything this important and striking will happen more than once. There's more than one bear, deer, and eagle in the forest. When you've seen one, you can plan on seeing another.

THREADS TO TIE IT ALL TOGETHER

As we go down the contextual river, we want to see connections between the seven themes as they appear. The sidebars, those interesting boxes set off in each chapter, will use two patterns to show those connections. The first is the sense of a journey

down a familiar road. We've all driven the same road over and over, only to be surprised at some point by something we notice for the first time. It's not that there's anything particularly new; you've just never noticed it before. So also the themes all use the biblical accounts that we know well. But now with the individual themes, there's something about them we've never seen before. Like we notice our neighbor's tree for the first time because it's in full bloom, so we also will see something new in the familiar Bible stories through these budding themes.

The other set of sidebars will feature a few wonderful hymns. These will likely be hymns that you know but have not thought of in terms of these seven themes. Like the houses and buildings we pass by every day without really seeing, perhaps we've sung these hymns without seeing their part in a larger biblical pattern. However, when all seven themes and hymns are done, then we have the complete picture that God has in mind.

STEP OUT OF THE DRESSING ROOM

It's time to step out of the dressing room. We can't hide there. Despite our natural fears of appearing before God, we finally have to meet Him. But the wonderful news from these seven themes is that God meets us, says the first word Himself, and that word is "Perfect." In the coming seven themes, God repeats this message with a distinctive understanding of perfection that is married with patience. In the twisting river of biblical reading, we can both expect and be surprised by His repeated message. So turn the page, listen to Him, and hear Him say to you, "Perfect."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The opening story described reluctantly trying on new clothes. Is this something you also are reluctant to do? What would it mean for you to have someone greet you outside the dressing room and say to you, “Perfect”?
2. This chapter joined perfection and patience like a marriage. Why does each quality need the other: Patience needs the ultimate goal of perfection, and only by patience will perfection be found?
3. Define *perfection* quickly, perhaps with an image of what it would look like. It could start in any of these ways: “The perfect day would be . . .” “The perfect car would be . . .” “The perfect meal would have . . .” How is the life and work of Christ perfect in ways that we can see?
4. The seven biblical themes of the book were briefly explained. Which ones are the clearest to you now? Which ones leave you wondering what exactly is being described?

5. What value might there be in seeing biblical themes—that is, repeated actions, people, and places—that share a common message and yet are distinct each time they appear?

6. The canoe trip down the Chippewa River spoke of a combination of the familiar and the surprising. If not a canoe trip, what other activity gives you a similar combination of finding what you expect and yet being surprised?

7. If reading the Bible is like a canoe trip, how might that energize your Bible reading?