

CHAPTER VII

THE LONGSUFFERING OF GOD

A. INTRODUCTION

1. Why is it that God does not now rightly judge America for its sins?

At times we may feel like crying out as did Habakkuk, “How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and Thou wilt not hear? I cry out to Thee, ‘Violence!’ Yet Thou dost not save. . . . Therefore, the law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore, justice comes out perverted” (Hab. 1:2, 4).

- a. To begin with, this holding back on God’s part is undoubtedly due to concern for His elect, a godly remnant, as was the case with Lot (Gen. 19:22; cf. Matt. 24:21-22). Yet this is not to suggest that God is indifferent and unconcerned toward the non-elect, as His common grace indicates.
- b. While Habakkuk is told that fierce judgment is certainly coming upon backslidden Israel, yet the Lord declares, “Thou it *tarry*, wait for it” (Hab. 2:3). Surely the additional reason for this delay is the longsuffering of God, which the true child of God, such as Habbakuk, needs to rightly appreciate. He appears to be far more impetuous than God, though he seems eventually to learn (Hab. 3:16-19).

2. Why did God give 120 years advance notice concerning the judgment of the earth by the Flood (Gen. 6:3)? Was it simply for the building of the ark and the gathering together of God’s elect, which in this instance was comprised of Noah and his family, and none else. Again, God was undoubtedly zealous with care for His elect; but was this the only reason?

- a. Remember, even at the time when God first announced the Flood, He assessed man’s wickedness in those days as very great, and saw “that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:3, 5). When that period of 120 years commenced, that is at the beginning of the building of the Ark, Noah and his family already appear to be a consecrated unit.
- b. The further answer, according to Peter, is that “the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark” (I Pet. 3:20). Also consider that the whole created order of planet earth seems to have been prepared for judgment, yet not in a hurry. Clearly, extended opportunity was given to man, through the preaching of Noah (II Pet. 2:5), so that he might once again “call upon the name of the Lord” (Gen. 4:26).

3. Why is it that while over 1970 years have passed since the first coming of Jesus Christ, yet his second coming still waits?

- a. Certainly many have continued to treat this delay with scorn and unbelief in a manner reminiscent of Noah's generation (Matt. 24:37-39, 48; II Pet. 3:3-4).
 - b. The answer is the patience of God during the time called "the fulness of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24; Rom. 11:25); then, "the Deliverer will come from Zion" (Rom. 11:26). God awaits until His gospel is preached throughout "the whole world" (Matt. 24:14), after which the end of this age will come.
4. Why is God so patient with me when, in all honesty, I admit to my indifference, spiritual lethargy, and faithlessness in the face of His continuous call?
- a. God's patient, persistent interest in rebellious sinners and saints is well documented in Scripture (Is. 30:18; Rom. 3:25).
 - b. The answer is, "the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience" (Rom. 2:4), which are extended so that man might be led to repentance.
 - c. By way of illustration, C. H. Spurgeon comments:

Perhaps you began your religious life with the great mistake of hoping to find salvation in your own goodness. You looked to your feelings, prayings, doings and professions for safety. You thought that your deliverance must come from yourself, and so you sought "to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," without remembering that "it is God that worketh in us to will and to do of his own good pleasure." You knew nothing of God's grace; you thought much of your own good works. So many prayers and tears, so many church-goings or chapel-goings, so much of sacraments, almsgivings, and the like; and this would make up a sweet-smelling sacrifice, acceptable to God. Blessed be the Lord who had great patience with you. . . . See how much more patience there is in God than in man. We refuse his free salvation, and go round by way of our own merits, and everywhere else, to try and find some other ground of confidence, and then at last, when everything has broken down, we come back to God and to salvation through Jesus Christ; and yet we find the Lord lovingly waiting - a God ready to pardon.¹

B. THE NATURE OF GOD'S LONGSUFFERING

1. By definition, God's longsuffering is that patient, breadth of love that withholds judgment so that grace and mercy might be offered to sinners, and the grounds of condemnation and eventual abandonment of sinners might never be more certain.
 - a. It means that God is slow to anger and restrained in temper (Neh. 9:17; Isa. 30:18).
 - b. It is God's waiting love, or patience in the face of provocation to judgment (Deut. 9:7).

¹ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, XXX, pp. 98-9.

- c. It is God's restraint and postponement of judgment that is instantly merited (Jonah 3:10; Nah. 1:1, 14; Rom. 3:25).
 - d. It is God's forbearance that allows Him to persist with offered forgiveness (Matt. 18:21-35).
2. God's longsuffering or endurance is directed towards sinner and saint.
- a. To the sinner, God defers judgment (Rom. 2:4; 3:25; 9:22).
 - b. To the saint, God defers judgment before salvation (I Tim. 1:16) and discipline after salvation (II Pet. 3:9).
3. By way of explanation, Charnock writes that God's longsuffering,
- is part of the divine goodness and mercy, yet differs from both. God being the greatest goodness, hath the greatest mildness. Mildness is always the companion of true goodness, and the greater the goodness, the greater the mildness. Who is so holy as Christ, and who so meek? God's slowness to anger is a branch or slip from his mercy (Ps. 145:8), "The Lord is full of compassion, slow to anger." It differs from mercy in the formal consideration of the object. Mercy respects the creature as miserable; patience respects the creature as criminal; mercy pities him in his misery, and patience bears with the sin which engendered the misery, and is giving birth to more.²
- a. Further according to Charnock,³ God's patience is manifested towards:
 - (1) Our first parents, in view of their great age (Gen. 5:5).
 - (2) The Gentiles, to whom God "winked at" (Acts 17:30).
 - (3) The Israelites, whom He endured for forty years in the wilderness (Ps. 95:10), and longer.
 - b. Why then, according to Charnock,⁴ does God exercise patience?
 - (1) To show that His anger may be appeased.
 - (2) To wait for men's repentance.
 - (3) To allow for the propagation of mankind instead of its extinction.
 - (4) To allow for the continuance of the church, enduring thorns so that roses might ultimately be gathered.
 - (5) To suffer the wicked so that the church might be properly fashioned.

² Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, II, p. 506.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 512-4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 524-530.

- (6) To show the impeccable fairness of His future judgment.
4. God's longsuffering, or "forbearance and patience" according to Romans 2:4-5, allows for two possible outcomes:
- a. In v. 4, such longsuffering is designed to give encouragement for repentance. Thomas Manton gives eight reasons why this is so:⁵
 - (1) It gives time to think and call out for pardon.
 - (2) Forfeited mercies are yet followed by more mercies..
 - (3) Continuing mercies point to God's goodness.
 - (4) God provides a remedy during his time of patience.
 - (5) There is time to turn from our doubt and disobedience.
 - (6) God provides means of grace during his waiting.
 - (7) God warns us of the abuse of continuing mercies.
 - (8) God suffers even the despisers of grace.
 - b. In v. 5, such longsuffering gives time for stubborn and unrepentant hearts to store up wrath and the righteous judgment of God.
5. Hence, God's patience must not be presumed upon. When Jonah's call to Nineveh brought forth repentance, then God's hand of judgment was stayed (Jonah 3:4-10). However, this did not mean that judgment would never fall. Approximately 150 years later, Nahum warns of judgment upon Nineveh that finds no reprieve on account of continuous bloodshed and corruption (Nah. 1:2-3).
- a. Although God's patience is tempered with wrath, vs. 2-3a.
 - b. Although God's patience is restrained power, v. 3a.
 - c. Yet God's patience is temporary reprieve, v. 3b.

C. THE LONGSUFFERING OF GOD TOWARD HIS PEOPLE

1. God's longsuffering in the Old Testament.
 - a. The Hebrew, *erech apayim*; 'erek apayim, "longsuffering" means to be "slow to anger," or literally to be "long of nostrils," by which anger finds cooling ventilation (Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15)!

⁵ Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, XVIII, pp. 231-3.

- b. In Noah's day, God was longsuffering in waiting 120 years while the Ark was being built and Noah preached righteousness (Gen. 6:3; I Pet. 3:20; II Pet. 2:5).
- c. In Moses' day, God was longsuffering.
 - (1) It was revealed to Moses (Ex. 34:6).
 - (2) It was experienced by Israel through Moses (Num. 14:18-20).
- d. In David's day, God was longsuffering (Ps. 86:15).
- e. In Isaiah's day, God was longsuffering (Is. 48:1-11).
 - (1) Israel's relationship with the longsuffering God, vs. 1-8.
 - (a) Religious, but not reverent or righteous, v. 1.
 - (b) Formal, but not submissive, vs. 2-3.
 - (c) Obstinate, unyielding, and shameless, v. 4.
 - (d) Idolatrous, v. 5.
 - (e) Faithless, treacherous, in spite of God's revelations, vs. 6-8a.
 - (f) Rebellious from birth, v. 8b.
 - (2) The longsuffering God's relationship with Israel, vs. 9-11.
 - (a) It is longsuffering for the sake of His name, v. 9a.
 - (b) It is longsuffering for the sake of His praise, v. 9b.
 - (c) It is longsuffering that refines, v. 10.
 - (d) It is longsuffering for His glory, v. 11.
- f. In Nehemiah's day, God was longsuffering (Neh. 9:26-31).

Here is a description of a cyclical pattern in the history of Israel of sin, discipline, and grace. But the larger picture is that of God's covenant faithfulness, likened unto the father who patiently awaits his prodigal son.

- (1) Sin followed by discipline (oppressors) and grace (deliverance from oppressors), vs. 26-27.
- (2) Sin followed by discipline (abandonment to enemies) and grace (rescue with compassion), v. 28.

- (3) Sin followed by patience, discipline (foreign captivity) and grace (the return of a remnant under Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah), vs. 29-31.

2. Longsuffering in the New Testament.

The Greek ~~XXXXXXXX~~Chupomonē, means “a waiting, enduring under,” particularly for the believer, although it also refers to “the word of My [Christ’s] patience” (Rev. 3:10). In parallel with the Hebrew for “longsuffering” is ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~, makrothumia, similarly meaning “long [rather than short] temper,” with reference to God (Rom. 2:4; I Pet. 3:20) and His child (II Cor. 6:4-6; Gal. 5:22).

D. THE LONGSUFFERING OF GOD EVIDENT IN THE BELIEVER

1. Believers are saved for the purpose of reflecting, along with other virtues, the longsuffering of God. Paul declares, “I found mercy, in order that in me as the foremost [sinner], Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience, as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life” (I Tim. 1:16). This communicable “perfect patience,” ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~, of Jesus Christ describes “length in temper” that extended to the “perfect/full measure” or degree necessary to accomplish God’s saving plan in Paul’s life, which the Apostle assessed as so utterly wretched. Thus the patience of Christ was not thwarted, but fruitful as divinely intended.
 - a. Believers, who have encountered the longsuffering of Jesus Christ, are to exercise longsuffering (Rom. 15:5-6), in particular regarding:
 - (1) Fellowship in the church (Eph. 4:2-3; Col. 3:12-13).
 - (2) In Christian pilgrimage (Heb. 6:12; 12:1-2).
 - (3) Involvement in Christian ministry (II Cor. 6:4-6; II Tim. 2:24).
 - (4) All men (I Thess. 5:14).
 - (5) Christ’s imminent return (Jas. 5:7-8).
 - b. However, while Jesus Christ is the model of patience, yet it is the powerful agency of the Holy Spirit that cultivates this choice fruit (Gal. 5:22; Col. 1:9-11).
2. By way of illustration, in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the patient child of God is graphically portrayed in contrast with the impetuous child of this present world. At the house of the Interpreter, Christian enters a room in which two children, under a Governor, sit upon separate chairs. The eldest child called Passion appears most discontented. The other child called Patience is very quiet and unruffled. Both have the future promise of great treasure from their Governor. However, Passion would have it all now, but Patience is content to wait till next year.⁶

⁶ John Bunyan, *The Works of John Bunyan*, III, p. 99.

- a. The temperament of Passion expounded as a child of this world.
 - (1) Because of his agitation, his treasure is immediately brought to him, at which he rejoices for a time, but finds that it wastes away so that only rags are left behind.
 - (2) Passion is a man of this world who has no time for that which is to come beyond the grave.
 - (a) His proverb is, “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.”
 - (b) His philosophy is, “Let’s have the goodies here and now, not pie in the sky when you die by and by.!”
 - (c) But his pleasure is short lived (Ps. 73:3-9, 18-20; Luke 16:25; I John 2:17).
 - (d) Yet he mocks and scorns Patience because of his temporary poverty.
 - b. The temperament of Patience expounded as a child of the world to come.
 - (1) He patiently accepts his Governor’s will that he wait for the best things next year, even though he temporarily lacks and is ridiculed by Passion.
 - (2) His benefits, though deferred, yet are wisely waited upon, for he is a child of eternity.
 - (a) His treasure shall be vastly superior (Rom. 8:18). This is so since that of Patience is eternal while that of Passion is temporal (II Cor. 4:16-18).
 - (b) His glorious enjoyment of these riches shall be when Passion has but rags.
 - (3) He is the spiritual man awaiting God’s glorious heavenly provision, not as Passion who invests in fleeting earthly treasure (Heb. 12:1-2; Jas. 5:7-8).
3. The perfecting work of patience in James 1, 5.
- a. The fruit of patience or endurance in James 1:1-4.
 - (1) The endurance that is of God’s bond-servant, v. 1.
 - (2) The endurance that is joyful in trials, v. 2.
 - (3) The endurance that comes from tested faith, v. 3.
 - (4) The endurance that produces a perfect result, v. 4.

By way of illustration, when London was on fire in 1666, the godly puritan, Thomas Goodwin, had his large library located in two parts of the city. His secular collection was distant from the fire while his sacred portion was near the blaze. Yet he later discovered that the secular collection was destroyed while the sacred portion was preserved. This led him to admit that he had loved his library too well. Nevertheless, he confessed that God had saved the better part. In reflecting on the benefits of this experience, Goodwin wrote a small discourse based upon James 1:1-5 entitled, “Patience and its Perfect Work under Sudden and Sore Trials.”

Goodwin significantly points out that James is not describing patience in v. 4 individually, that is as one grace that needs to be perfected. Rather, the point is that by its very nature and requirement of time, patience allows other graces to flower and bear fruit.⁷ This perfecting work results in negative and positive effects.⁸

- (a) Negatively, contrary passions are expelled, such as excessive grief, envy, passionate anger, fears, murmuring against God, worldly cares.
- (b) Positively, quiet fruits are produced, such as contentment, the sufficiency of a pure heart, and constant joy.

b. The fruit of patience or endurance in James 5:1-11.

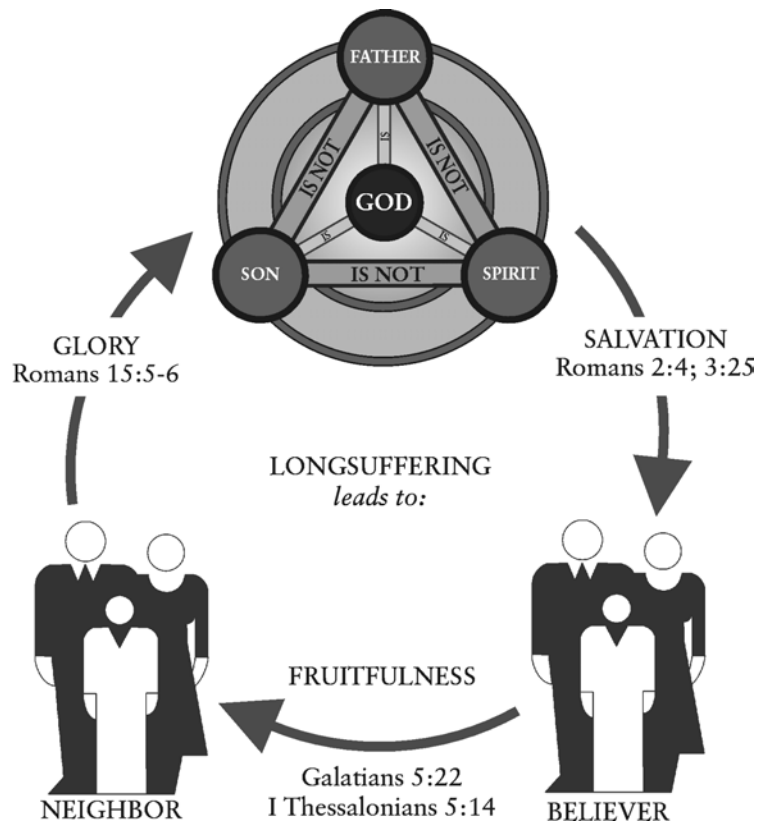
The same principle is taught here as in James 1:1-4, as well as the contrast of patience and passion reminiscent of Bunyan’s allegorical illustration.

- (1) The corrosive results of passion for this world, vs. 1-6.
 - (a) The weeping and misery of the materialist, v. 1.
 - (b) The wasting away of riches, vs. 2-3.
 - (c) The wages of selfish and ill-gotten gains, vs. 4-6.
 - 1) Pay-day is coming for the harsh employer, v. 4.
 - 2) Pay-day is coming for the self-indulgent, v. 5.
 - 3) Pay-day is coming for the unjust and conniving, v. 6.
- (2) The fruitful results of patience for the world to come, vs. 7-11.
 - (a) The waiting that produces spiritual growth and produce, v. 7.
 - (b) The waiting that produces strength of heart, v. 8.

⁷ Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, II, pp. 432-3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 446-9, 454-7.

- (c) The waiting that produces contentment, v. 9.
 - (d) The waiting that produced endurance in the prophets, v. 10.
 - (e) The waiting that produced blessing for Job, v. 11.
4. The glorifying work of patience in Romans 15:1-6.
- a. The example of Christ, our model, for longsuffering, vs. 1-3.
 - (1) The strong Christian is to patiently bear with the weaknesses of the less mature Christian, for Christ, the Strong One, has borne that which we weaklings could not carry (Matt. 11:28-30), vs. 1-2.
 - (2) The earthly ministry of Christ is a continuous testimony to his patience, v. 3.
 - (a) He bore all the wrath that men wished to vent upon God the Father, willingly, patiently (Rev. 1:9), in fulfillment of Psalm 69:9.
 - (b) Though he was oppressed and afflicted, “yet He did not open His mouth” (Isa. 53:7).
 - b. The dynamic of God, our Father, for longsuffering, vs. 4-6.
 - (1) The example of divine longsuffering is communicated to the believer through the Word of God, v. 4.
 - (2) The impartation of divine longsuffering is a sovereign bestowal channeled through the instrumentality of prayer, v. 5.
 - (a) Specifically, God the Father grants it, God the Holy Spirit implants it, and God the Son models it. But each member of the Godhead is equally longsuffering in spite of these differing functions.
 - (b) The New International Version correctly translates the end of v. 5, “as you follow Christ Jesus.”
 - (3) The purpose of the believer manifesting divine longsuffering is that of glorifying God, not man, as with all of the communicable attributes, v. 6.
 - (a) God is glorified when the church, the body of Christ, manifests a unity in the display of the attributes of God (I Pet. 4:11).
 - (b) The following diagram illustrates the cyclical influence of God’s longsuffering toward mankind.



5. Charles Simeon comments on Psalm 36:1:

How marvelous is the forbearance of our God! He sees the state of every living man: he sees, not our actions only, but our very thoughts: for “he trieth the heart and reigns.” What evils, then, does he behold in every quarter of the globe! Not a country, a town, a village, a family, no, not a single soul, exempt from the common malady! all fallen; all “enemies in their hearts to God by wicked works!” Take but a single city, our own metropolis for instance [Cambridge, England], and what a mass of iniquity does God behold in it, even in the short space of twenty-four hours! Is it not astonishing that God’s wrath does not break forth against us, even as against Sodom and Gomorrah, to consume us by fire; or that another deluge does not come, to sweep us away from the face of the earth? Dear Brethren, “account this long-suffering of our God to be salvation” (II Pet. 3:15), and “let it lead every one of you to repentance” (Rom. 2:4).⁹

⁹ Charles Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, V, p. 270.