

THE PATIENCE OF GOD

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FAR LESS HAS BEEN WRITTEN UPON THIS THAN THE OTHER excellencies of the divine character. Not a few of those who have expatiated at length upon the divine attributes have passed over the patience of God without any comment. It is not easy to suggest a reason for this, for surely the longsuffering of God is as much one of the divine perfections as is His wisdom, power, or holiness, and as much to be admired and revered by us. True, the actual term will not be found in a concordance as frequently as the others, but the glory of this grace itself shines forth on almost every page of Scripture. Certain it is that we lose much if we do not frequently meditate upon the patience of God and earnestly pray that our hearts and ways may be more completely conformed thereto.

Most probably the principal reason why so many writers have failed to give us anything, separately, upon the patience of God was because of the difficulty of distinguishing this attribute from the divine goodness and mercy, particularly the latter. God's longsuffering is mentioned in conjunction with His grace and mercy again and again, as may be seen by consulting Exodus 34:6, Numbers 14:18, Psalm 86:15, etc. That the *patience* of God is really a display of His *mercy*, that it is indeed one way in which it is frequently manifested, cannot be denied. But that patience and mercy are one and the same excellency, and are not to be separated, we cannot concede. It may not be easy to discriminate between them, nevertheless, Scripture fully warrants us in affirming some things about the one which we cannot about the other.

Stephen Charnock, the Puritan, defines God's patience, in part, thus:

It 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 so holy as Christ, and who so meek? God's slowness to anger is a branch...from His mercy: "The Lord is full of compassion, slow to anger" (Psa 145:8). 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.

Personally, we would define the Divine patience as that power of control which God exercises over Himself, causing Him to bear with the wicked and forbear so long in punishing them. In Nahum 1:3 we read, "The Lord is slow to anger and great in power," upon which Mr. Charnock said:

Men that are great in the world are quick in passion, and are not so ready to forgive an injury, or bear with an offender, as one of a meaner rank. It is a want of power over that man's self that makes him do unbecoming things upon a provocation. A prince that can bridle his passions is a king over himself as well as over his subjects. God is slow to anger *because* great in power. He has no less power over Himself than over His creatures.

It is at the above point, we think, that God's patience is most clearly distinguished from His mercy. Though the creature is benefitted thereby, the patience of God chiefly respects Himself, a restraint placed upon His acts by His will; whereas His mercy terminates wholly upon the creature. The patience of God is that excellency which causes Him to sustain great injuries without immediately avenging Himself. He has a power of patience as well as a power of justice. Thus the Hebrew word for the divine longsuffering is rendered "slow to anger" in Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 103:8, etc. Not that there are any passions in the divine nature, but that God's wisdom and will is pleased to act with that stateliness and sobriety which is becoming to His exalted majesty.

In support of our definition above let us point out that it was to this excellency in the divine character that Moses appealed, when Israel sinned so grievously at Kadesh-Barnea, and there provoked Jehovah so sorely. Unto His servant the Lord said, "I will smite them with the pestilence and disinherit them." Then it was that

the mediator Moses, as a type of the Christ to come, pleaded, "I beseech Thee, let *the power* of my Lord be great, according as Thou hast spoken saying, The LORD is longsuffering" (Num 14:17). Thus, His "*longsuffering*" is His "power" of self-restraint.

Again, in Romans 9:22 we read, "What if God, willing to shew His wrath, and to make His *power* known, endured with much *longsuffering* the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction." Were God to immediately break these reprobate vessels into pieces, His power of self-control would not so eminently appear; by bearing with their wickedness and forbearing punishment so long, the power of His patience is gloriously demonstrated. True, the wicked interpret His longsuffering quite differently—"Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (Eccl 8:11)—but the anointed eye adores what they abuse.

"The God of patience" (Rom 15:5) is one of the divine titles. Deity is thus denominated, first, because God is both the Author and Object of the grace of patience in the saint. Secondly, because this is what He is in Himself: patience is one of His perfections. Thirdly, as a pattern for us: "Put on therefore, as the *elect of God*, holy and beloved, bowels of mercy, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, *longsuffering*" (Col 3:12). And again, "Be ye therefore followers [emulators] of God, as dear children" (Eph 5:1). When tempted to be disgusted at the dullness of another, or to be revenged on one who has wronged you, call to remembrance God's infinite patience and longsuffering with yourself.

The patience of God is *manifested* in His dealings with sinners. How strikingly was it displayed toward the antediluvians. When mankind was universally degenerate, and all flesh had corrupted its way, God did not destroy them till He had forewarned them. He "waited" (I Peter 3:20), probably no less than 120 years (Gen 6:3), during which time Noah was a "preacher of righteousness" (II Peter 2:5). So, later, when the Gentiles not only worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, but also committed the vilest abominations contrary even to the dictates of nature (Rom 1:19-26) and thereby filled up the measure of their iniquity, yet, instead of drawing His sword for the extermination of such rebels, God "suffered all nations to walk in their own ways," and gave them "rain from heaven and fruitful seasons" (Acts 14:16,17).

Marvellously was God's patience exercised and manifested toward *Israel*. First, He "suffered their manners" for forty years in the wilderness (Acts 13:18). Later, when they had entered Canaan, but followed the evil customs of the nations around them, and turned to idolatry, though God chastened them sorely, He did not utterly destroy them, but in their distress, raised up deliverers for them. When their iniquity was raised to such a height that none but a God of infinite patience could have borne them, He spared them many years before He allowed them to be carried down into Babylon. Finally, when their rebellion against Him reached its climax by crucifying His Son, He waited forty years ere He sent the Romans against them, and that, only after they had judged themselves "unworthy of everlasting life" (Acts 13:46).

How wondrous is God's patience with the world today. On every side people are sinning with a high hand. The divine law is trampled under foot and God Himself openly despised. It is truly amazing that He does not instantly strike dead those who so brazenly defy Him. Why does He not suddenly cut off the haughty infidel and blatant blasphemer, as He did Ananias and Sapphira? Why does He not cause the earth to open its mouth and devour the persecutors of His people, so that, like Dathan and Abiram, they shall go down alive into the Pit? And what of apostate Christendom, where every possible form of sin is now tolerated and practiced under cover of the holy name of Christ? Why does not the righteous wrath of Heaven make an end of such abominations? Only one answer is possible: because God bears with "*much* longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction."

And what of the writer and the reader? Let us review our own lives. It is not long since *we* followed a multitude to do evil, had no concern for God's glory, and lived only to gratify self. How patiently He bore with our vile conduct! And now that grace has snatched us as brands from the burning, giving us a place in God's family, and has begotten us unto an eternal inheritance in glory, how miserably we requite Him. How shallow our gratitude, how tardy our obedience, how frequent our backslidings! One reason why God suffers

the flesh to remain in the believer is that He may exhibit His “longsuffering to *us-ward*” (II Peter 3:9). Since this Divine attribute is manifested only in this world, God takes advantage to display it toward “His own.”

May our meditation upon this Divine excellency soften our hearts, make our consciences tender, and may we learn in the school of holy experience the “patience of saints,” namely, submission to the Divine will and continuance in well doing. Let us earnestly seek grace to emulate this Divine excellency. “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matt 5:48). In the immediate context of this verse Christ exhorts us to love our enemies, bless them that curse us, do good to them that hate us. God bears long with the wicked notwithstanding the multitude of their sins, and shall we desire to be revenged because of a single injury?

Taken from the author’s own work entitled— The Attributes of God