

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE LONGSUFFERING OF GOD

The most stupendous and overwhelming subject for human study is the Godhead. The contemplation of the Divine perfections will warm the very cockles of the heart, provided, of course, that we are His children, born of His Spirit. God is a perfectly balanced person. All His attributes work harmoniously to the praise of His glory. Every man of us by reason of sin is in some measure unbalanced. The prodigal is typical of all of us by nature, and he had to come to himself before he would say, *"I will arise and go to my father"* (Luke 15:18). Sin is a form of insanity; in conversion we get a sound mind. *"Then they went out to see what was done; and came to Jesus, and found the man, out of whom the devils were departed, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed, and in his right mind: and they were afraid"* (Luke 8:35). *All of God's attributes are perfectly blended and go to make Him the great and glorious Being He is and ever shall be. God is so great that we can study only one perfection or attribute at a time.*

God cannot be found by searching. You may sail the unclouded sky and soar to the greatest heights and yet not find God: *"It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in"* (Isa. 40:22). You may sail upon all the seas and circle the globe without finding Him. You may study bugs and flowers and still be ignorant of the God who made them. You may take samples of His works into the laboratory and study them without coming to know Him, Whom to know is life eternal. God cannot be discovered by the physical senses.

All of God's works give witness to His existence, but they have nothing to say about His character or moral perfections. His works tell us that He is, but do not tell us what He is. God, in His character, can only be found where He has revealed Himself, and this is in His word, the Bible. *"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork"* (Ps. 19:1), but they give no testimony about Him as moral Lawgiver. In the study of what the Bible has to say about God, we find that the attribute of patience or longsuffering belongs to His very nature. *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith"* (Gal. 5:22).

#### God Revealed Himself to Moses

When God gave Moses the tables of the law the second time, He came down and stood with him on the mount and proclaimed His Name, that is, He described His character in moral government. And this is what God said to Moses: *"And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The*

*LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth*" (Ex. 34:6). God did not reveal Himself in any physical features, but in His perfections as a Spirit. And when Israel sinned by murmuring against God, and God threatened to exterminate them, and offered to make of Moses a greater nation; Moses, the typical mediator, pleaded the character of God as revealed to him on the mount. And this is what Moses said to God: *"And now, I beseech thee, let the power of my Lord be great, according as thou hast spoken, saying. The LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation"* (Num. 14:17,18). God as a moral Governor is patient or longsuffering.

### **"Long of Nose"**

The longsuffering of God is a quality in the Divine nature that makes Him slow in dealing with His enemies. God does not fly into a rage at the least provocation. The Hebrew word, which is sometimes translated "longsuffering," and sometimes "Blow of anger," literally means "long of nose" (or "breathing"). Anger is indicated by rapid and violent breathing through the nostrils, and the opposite is longsuffering or slow of anger. A snorting, charging bull is an emblem of passionate anger. But God is not like a bull or prancing horse, eager to go, in the work of judgment. God is in no hurry to punish His foes. He is not like a cruel, nervous dictator, in a hurry to have his enemies shot at dawn. God is patient with rebels, and this patience belongs to His nature. A general or universal atonement is not necessary to account for the long delay in the punishment of a wicked and rebellious. The devil, as well as man, has defied God for ages and is still at large, not because Christ died for him, but because God is patient. God is waiting to judge, not until His patience runs out, but for the human cup of iniquity to fill. The time of judgment is left to His sovereign will and does not depend upon any degree of His patience. *"Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain"* (James 5:7). He is infinite in patience, and judgment will not be an act of impatience, but of stern justice.

### **Power of Self-Control**

Longsuffering may be defined as God's power of self control. This is what Moses meant when he said, *"And now, I beseech thee, let the power of my Lord be great, according as thou hast spoken, saying, The LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and*

by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation" (Num. 14:17,18). God's great power is not only seen in His control over His creatures, but over Himself as well. God is not quick tempered; He does not lose His head and fly off the handle. He has perfect poise and balance. He knows nothing of impatience. His justice, to be sure, is inexorable, but He does not have to be in a hurry to judge His enemies. He waits in perfect patience to vindicate His honor and satisfy His justice. Arthur W. Pink says "Divine patience is that power of control which God exercises over Himself, causing Him to bear with the wicked and forbear so long in punishing them." And Charnock, one of the noblest of the Puritans said:

"Men that are great in the world are quick in passions and are not so ready to forgive an injury, or bear with an offender, as one of the meaner rank. It is want of power over that man's self that makes him do unbecoming things upon 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."

### Illustrations

There are many illustrations of Divine patience in Bible history as well as in events of general observation. God's patience has been signally exhibited through the long centuries of human and satanic rebellion.

**1. The time of Noah was a period of Divine longsuffering.** *"Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water"* (1 Peter 3:20). Those were wicked days, but God was slow to punish. Even after He announced His purpose to destroy the world, He waited one hundred and twenty years before sending the flood. *"And the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years"* (Gen. 6:3). Those were days when sexual immorality ran riot; days when Divine warning was ignored; days of fun poking at God's preacher of righteousness; *"The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence"* (Gen. 6:11), yet God waited to punish because He is a patient God.

**2. The whole of the Old Testament dispensation was an era of Divine forbearance.** *"Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God"* (Rom. 3:25). We learn that the sins of that dispensation were remitted through the forbearance of God. The sins of the Old

Testament believers were passed over until Christ should come and make atonement. *"For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul"* (Lev. 17:11). God did not punish them for their sins because He was waiting to punish them in the person of His Son. Their sins were remitted before they were paid for. It was like this: Christ, in eternity past, became the Surety for those given to Him by the Father in the everlasting covenant, agreeing to assume human nature, pay their debts and thus make satisfaction for their sins to Divine justice. This was announced immediately after the fall: *"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel"* (Gen. 3:15), but it was four thousand years to the fulness of time, when Christ, the Surety of the better covenant, should come to obtain redemption of transgressions that were under the first covenant: *"And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance"* (Heb. 9:15). And all this time was one of patience or forbearance. God did not stir up His wrath and execute judgment upon sinners because He had reserved it for His Son, their Surety. And while waiting for the Surety to come and make satisfaction for sins, He appointed animal sacrifices, which could not satisfy justice and take away sin. *"For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins"* (Heb. 10:4).

**3. God's dealing with Pharaoh is another instance of His longsuffering.** Paul defends God from criticism in His dealing with Pharaoh, by saying, *"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"* (Rom. 9:22). The will of God referred to here is His will of purpose. God's will of purpose, concerning vessels of wrath, is to display His wrath and power in their judgment, but in longsuffering He endures or tolerates them until by their sins they are fitted to destruction.

*"How often do men wonder that God endures so much sin as appears in the world. Why does not God immediately cut off transgressors? Why does He not make an end of them at once? The answer is, He endures them for His own glory, and in their condemnation He will be glorified. To short sighted mortals, it would appear preferable if God would cut off in childhood all whom He foresaw would continue in wickedness. But God endures them to old age, and to the utmost bounds of wickedness for the glory of His own name"* (Robert Haldane).

**4. God's dealing with Paul illustrates His longsuffering towards "vessels of mercy."** *"And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore*

*prepared unto glory*" (Rom. 9:23). We will let him tell it: "*Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting*" (I Tim. 1:16). Of all the unbelieving Jews, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus seemed the most unlikely, "*Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief*" (1 Tim. 1:13). But in the purpose of God he was a vessel of mercy afore prepared unto glory, and in dealing with him God gives a pattern of His longsuffering.

And Peter has these same vessels of mercy in view when he explains the long delay of our Lord's return. "*The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance*" (II Peter 3:9). Most certainly the reference is to His will of purpose that none of those denominated "us" should perish. The "us" of the text are the same as the "beloved" of verse one, and are distinguished from the "scoffers" of verse three. And verse fifteen lends weight to this interpretation: "*And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation.*" God's longsuffering issues in the salvation of the vessels of mercy. It is like this: We who are now saved were by nature children of wrath, even as others, and needed to repent. If Christ had returned before we repented we would have perished. When He returns, the day of salvation will be over and judgment will begin; and if He had come five, ten, or twenty years ago many of those now saved would have perished in their sins, and God's will would have been thwarted.

### **God's Patience is Greatly Abused**

The exercise of this attribute leads men to sin more boldly. "*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). Men confound the patience of God with their belief in His non-existence. Because they sin and get by with it for a time, they conclude there is no moral Lawgiver to Whom they must give account. A farmer thought he had proven there is no God. He selected a certain piece of ground on his farm for an experiment. He broke the ground on Sunday, he planted the seed on Sunday, he did all the cultivating on Sunday, and on the first Sunday in October he reaped a larger harvest than on any other part of the farm. He wrote to his newspaper editor the results of his experiment, scoffing at the idea of any God. The editor replied briefly but to the point in these words: "May I remind you that God does not settle His accounts on the first Sunday in October."

Bob Ingersol thought he had demonstrated there is no God when he challenged Him and gave Him five minutes by the watch to strike him dead. When a great preacher in England heard what the

upstart had done, he remarked: "Does the gentleman from America think he can exhaust the patience of God in five minutes?"

If the believer does not understand this attribute of longsuffering, he will fretfully wonder why God does not crush His enemies and put an end to so much wickedness. Blessed be His Name! He will, but in longsuffering waits for His purposes to ripen. And while He waits some are fitting themselves to destruction, and some are being fashioned by His grace to be vessels of glory. *"Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry"* (Heb.10:35-37). *"But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him"* (Heb. 11:6). In much humility and gratitude may both writer and reader say with the poet:

"Lord, we have long abused Thy love,  
Too long indulged in sin,  
Our aching hearts e'en bleed to see  
What rebels we have been."