

Doctrine of God Part 20- The Patience of God

Richard Strauss on the Meaning of God's Long-Suffering

If we want to understand God's long-suffering we must go back to His relationship with His Old Testament people Israel...it was never more evident than when Moses lingered on Mount Sinai, receiving the law from God's hand. Because it took him a little longer than they anticipated, they got edgy and demanded that Aaron fashion them new gods to lead them to their promised land.

It was inexcusable! God had performed one miracle after another to deliver them from their bondage and bring them to this place, yet they turned their backs on Him when He did not meet their expectations. That would be enough to try anyone's patience, and it sorely tried God's. "And the LORD said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them, and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation'" (Exodus 32:9-10). God said that they were *obstinate*, or more literally, that they had hard necks, necks that would not bow to His will in spite of His goodness to them.

That offer to Moses presented him with a serious test. Which was more important to him, the preservation of the existing nation or the personal honor of becoming the founder of a new nation? He passed the test beautifully and prayed for God to stay His hand of judgment. God answered his prayer. Those people deserved to be punished, but God delayed the application of His righteous indignation against them; that is the essence of long-suffering. The word itself appears for the first time in the Bible just a little later, when Moses returned to the mount to get a firsthand glimpse of God's glory. "And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth" (Exodus 34:6 KJV).

Exodus 34:6-7...Now the Lord said to Moses, "Cut out for yourself two stone tablets like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets which you shattered. ² So be ready by morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and [a]present yourself there to Me on the top of the mountain. ³ No man is to come up with you, nor let any man be seen [b]anywhere on the mountain; even the flocks and the herds may not graze in front of that mountain." ⁴ So he cut out two stone tablets like the former ones, and Moses rose up early in the morning and went up to Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, and he took two stone tablets in his hand. ⁵ The Lord descended in the cloud and stood there with him as [c]he called upon the name of the Lord. ⁶ Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and [d]truth; ⁷ who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations."

Long-suffering is actually two Hebrew words, the first meaning “long” or “slow,” and the second meaning “nostril,” “nose,” “face,” or “anger.”

Obviously, long-suffering does not refer to a long nose. But it is interesting that the Hebrew uses the same word to mean either nose, face, or anger. Maybe that was because anger is clearly seen on the face and is sometimes expressed by snorting or wheezing through the nose. But anger is the foremost idea in this expression. **It means literally “slow to anger”** and is so translated in the New American Standard Bible, as well as in several passages of the King James Version (e.g. Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 103:8; 145:8; Proverbs 14:29; 15:18; 16:32; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3). It takes a long-suffering person a long time to get heated up with anger.

Nehemiah 9:17... ¹⁶ “But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly;
They became stubborn and would not listen to Your commandments.
¹⁷ “They refused to listen,
And did not remember Your wondrous deeds which You had performed among them;
So they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt.
But You are a God of forgiveness,
Gracious and compassionate,
Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness;
And You did not forsake them.

Psalm 103:8... ⁸ The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.
⁹ He will not always strive *with us*,
Nor will He keep *His anger* forever.
¹⁰ He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.
¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.
¹² As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.
¹³ Just as a father has compassion on *his* children,
So the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.
¹⁴ For He Himself knows our frame;
He is mindful that we are *but* dust.

Psalm 145:8... ⁸ The Lord is gracious and merciful;
Slow to anger and great in lovingkindness.

Joel 2:13... ¹² “Yet even now,” declares the Lord,
“Return to Me with all your heart,
And with fasting, weeping and mourning;
¹³ And rend your heart and not your garments.”
Now return to the Lord your God,

For He is gracious and compassionate,
Slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness
And relenting of evil.

¹⁴ Who knows whether He will *not* turn and relent
And leave a blessing behind Him

Nahum 1:3...² A jealous and avenging God is the Lord;
The Lord is avenging and wrathful.

The Lord takes vengeance on His adversaries,
And He reserves wrath for His enemies.

³ The Lord is slow to anger and great in power,
And the Lord will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished.
In whirlwind and storm is His way,
And clouds are the dust beneath His feet

The same concept appears in the New Testament as one Greek word, and it conveys exactly the same idea as the Old Testament expression. It means “long tempered,” or “slow to express wrath.” God’s long-suffering has to do with His wrath. He can get angry...but it takes Him an extremely long time to do so. His nature is to delay the expression of His wrath. He is of long endurance. Those obstinate Jews deserved to be destroyed immediately for their rebelliousness and disobedience. They would have driven anybody else to quick retaliation. But God postponed the execution of His judgment because He is a long-suffering God...

There is another related word in the New Testament which must also be distinguished from long-suffering, a word which means literally “to abide under,” and which is usually translated in the King James Version “patience.” That word refers to patience in difficult *circumstances*, while long-suffering refers to patience with difficult *people*. It is never applied to God (Romans 15:5 means He gives patience, not that He *has* it.) He does not need patience with circumstances because He controls them. They cannot resist Him. But He made people with wills of their own...He is not easily provoked. He does not quickly explode into a blaze of anger. He is long-suffering.

God’s long-suffering is the attribute which allows Him patiently to endure our offenses and call us to repentance rather than promptly punish us. It is His self-restraint in the face of provocation which delays the expression of His wrath. As we all know, it takes a great deal of power to show restraint when people are provoking us.. .Sometimes we feel as though we may not have the power to restrain ourselves. But God has that power. The prophet Nahum put the two together when he said, “The LORD is slow to anger, and great in power” (Nahum 1:3).

A W Pink on The Patience of God

Far less has been written on the patience of God than on the other excellencies of 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—as much to be admired and revered by us. True, the actual term will not be found in a concordance so frequently as the others, but the glory of this grace shines on almost every page of Scripture. Certainly 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.

Probably the principal reason why so many writers have failed to give us anything, separately, upon the patience of God is because of the difficulty of distinguishing this attribute from divine goodness and mercy, particularly the latter. God's longsuffering is mentioned in conjunction with His grace and mercy again and again (see Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Psalm 86:15). That the patience of God is really a display of His mercy is one way it is frequently manifested. But that they 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 predicating some things of the one which we cannot of the other.

Numbers 14:18...¹⁷ But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as You have declared, ¹⁸“The Lord is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations.” ¹⁹ Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.”

Psalms 86:15...¹⁵ But You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, Slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth.

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

It is a 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 of His mercy: "the LORD is full of compassion, slow to anger" (Ps. 145:8). It differs from mercy in the formal consideration of the subject: mercy respects the creature as miserable, patience respects the creature as criminal; mercy pities him in his misery, patience bears with the sin which engendered the misery, and giving birth to more.

Personally we 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. Nahum 1:3 reads, "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.

At the above point, we think, God's *patience* is most clearly distinguished from His *mercy*. Though the creature is benefitted, 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. Thus the Hebrew word for the divine longsuffering is rendered "slow to anger" in Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 103:8. Not that there are any passions in the divine nature, but God's wisdom and will is pleased to act with a stateliness and sobriety which becomes His exalted majesty.

In support of our definition we 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 the typical mediator 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 show 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.

God is both the author and object of the grace of patience in the creature...this is what He is in Himself: patience is one of His perfections. God's patience is given 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 revenge one who has wronged you, remember God's infinite patience with you.

1 Peter 3:20...¹⁸ For Christ also died for sins once for all, *the* just for *the* unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; ¹⁹ in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits *now* in prison, ²⁰ who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept

waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through *the* water.

The patience of God is manifested in His dealings with sinners. How strikingly it was displayed toward the antediluvians. When mankind was universally degenerate, and all flesh had corrupted his way, God did not destroy them till He had forewarned them. He "waited" (1 Pet. 3:20) probably no less than one hundred and twenty years (Gen. 6:3), during which time Noah was a "preacher of righteousness" (2 Pet. 2:5). Later, when the Gentiles not only worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, but also committed the vilest abominations contrary to even the dictates of nature (Rom. 1:19-26), and hereby filled up the measure of their iniquity; yet, instead of drawing His sword to exterminate 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).

Marvelously God's patience was exercised and manifested toward Israel. First, He "suffered their manners" for forty years in the wilderness (Acts 13:18). Later, they 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 rose to such a height that none but a God of infinite patience could have borne them, He, notwithstanding, spared them many years before He allowed them to be carried into Babylon. Finally, when their rebellion against Him reached its climax by crucifying His Son, He waited forty years before He sent the Romans against them; and that only after they had judged themselves "unworthy of eternal life" (Acts 13:46).

How wondrous God's patience is 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 and devour the persecutors of His people, so that, like Dathan and Abiran, 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."

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! Now that grace has snatched us as brands from the burning, and given us a place in God's family, and 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" (2 Pet. 3:9). Since this

divine attribute is manifested only in this world, God takes advantage to display it toward "His own."

2 Peter 3:9...⁸ But do not let this one *fact* escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.
⁹The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.

May your meditation upon this divine excellency soften our hearts, make our consciences tender; and may we learn in the school of experience the "patience of saints," namely, submission to the divine will and continuance in well doing. Let us seek grace to emulate this divine excellency. "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). In the immediate context 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 sin. Shall we desire to be revenged because of a single injury?

How Do We Respond? Strauss on the Patience of God..

There is challenge in this doctrine for both the unbeliever and the believer. Think first of the challenge to the unbeliever. The very fact that long-suffering is defined as a delay in the expression of God's wrath implies that eventually His long-suffering will terminate and His wrath will be displayed. This highlights another difference between long-suffering and mercy. Scripture says God's mercy is everlasting (Psalm 100:5). It endures forever (Psalm 106:1). That is never said about His long-suffering. Long-suffering has a terminus point. There comes a time when God's patience with willful, rebellious sinners will run out and He will exhibit His wrath. Solomon wrote,

A man who hardens his neck after much reproof will suddenly be broken beyond remedy (Proverbs 29:1).

We do not know *when* that will be, but we do know that it *will be*. We can count on it. We cannot trifle with God's long-suffering or try to take advantage of Him.

Because God delays His judgment, sinners may begin to think that He is not aware of their sin, or that He does not care about it, or possibly that He has forgotten it. So they go on sinning without fear of the consequences. After all, if they have gotten away with it this long, who is to say that they will not get away with it forever? Solomon warned us of that attitude: "Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil" (Ecclesiastes 8:11).

Does God ignore sin? Look again at the Old Testament references to His long-suffering. Right after the golden calf incident and the revelation of God's long-suffering, He immediately adds that He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished (Exodus 34:7). After that gross exhibition of unbelief at Kadesh-barnea, He repeated it again: "He will

by no means clear the guilty” (Numbers 14:18). The prophet Nahum assured us that God is slow to anger and of great power, but he immediately added, “And the Lord will by no means leave the guilty unpunished” (Nahum 1:3).

Some human judges may be accused of softness toward sin and leniency toward sinners, but the divine Judge will ultimately punish every unrepentant sinner. He may postpone His judgment for awhile, but He does not forget the sin. Paul reminded the Athenian philosophers of that: “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31 NIV). A day of judgment is coming when God’s wrath will be revealed.

The message of judgment is not any more popular today than it was in Paul’s day. It does not calm troubled minds or soothe frazzled nerves. It will not win friends or ingratiate us with people, but it is true. The person who has never turned from his sin or trusted Jesus Christ as his Saviour must not be misled by God’s long-suffering. It is not a license to go on sinning. It is the evidence of God’s love for sinners and His desire to save them from eternal punishment. He is patiently waiting, holding back His wrath against their sin. It would be wise for them to avail themselves of His gracious delay. God’s long-suffering and forbearance are designed to lead them to repentance and eternal salvation (Romans 2:4).

Romans 2:4...

Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. ² And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. ³ But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? ⁴ Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? ⁵ But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, ⁶ who will render to each person according to his deeds: ⁷ to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; ⁸ but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.

There is in this doctrine a challenge for the believer also. It is, first of all, a challenge to pray for those who deserve God’s judgment, even as Moses prayed for his people. On two occasions, God restrained His wrath because Moses asked Him to, demonstrating that this is something God is pleased to do in answer to our prayers. Are you longing to see a loved one come to know Christ? Ask God to delay His judgment and to use that demonstration of long-suffering to lead that person to repentance.

Secondly, it is a challenge to proclaim the message of God's long-suffering.

The world needs to hear that God is patiently waiting, but that the day of His patience will eventually end. Our nation needs to hear that God is graciously restraining His wrath against sin, but that one day the cup of iniquity will be full and He will restrain Himself no longer. As unpopular as the message may be, it must be proclaimed. It is a matter of eternal life and eternal death. If we knew that a dam had cracked and that a great torrent of water would soon sweep through the valley below, destroying everything in its path, we would be quick to warn the inhabitants of that valley. We do know that God's long-suffering may soon give out and that a great torrent of judgment will be poured out on the inhabitants of this earth. Should we be any less quick to warn them?

Finally, it is a challenge to be long-suffering in our own personal

relationships with others. The Apostle Paul encouraged us to be long-suffering with one another, bearing with one another in love and forgiving one another (cf. Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 1:11; 3:12-13). People often get on our nerves. They irritate us, exasperate us, slight us, provoke us, gossip about us, wrong us, offend us. Our patience wears thin and we want to strike back in anger. God wants us to be long-suffering, to bear those injuries patiently, and to forgive.

Solomon wrote several proverbs extolling the person who has learned this important lesson. They are worth some prayerful meditation.

He who is slow to anger has great understanding,
But he who is quick-tempered exalts folly (Proverbs 14:29).

A hot tempered man stirs up strife,
But the slow to anger pacifies contention (Proverbs 15:13).

He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty,
And he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city (Proverbs 16:32).

Being long-suffering with people who exasperate us is not easy, and it is certainly something we cannot do consistently in our own strength. Long-suffering is the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). It is produced in us by the Spirit of God as we occupy our minds with Him, grow in our knowledge of Him, and yield ourselves to His control. How can we refuse to do that when we consider His long-suffering with us, His interminable patience with our stubbornness, self-will, and rebelliousness?

The world may not consider long-suffering to be a very important trait, but the believer who has demonstrated it to others will tell you it has brought harmony to his relationships. It helps him to get along with his spouse, to handle his children, to put up with his boss, to deal with his employees, to enjoy his in-laws, and to show his neighbors that the gospel of Jesus Christ makes a difference in his life. As we grow in the likeness of our long-suffering God, we shall show the world that He is real and so bring glory to Him.