

Sunday, November 30, 2014

**“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. Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his *days* be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him: But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong *his days*, *which are* as a shadow; because he feareth not before God.”  
(Ecclesiastes 8:11-13)**

This sermon is about the longsuffering of God, and indeed our God is called “the God of patience” (Romans 15:5).

God could punish sinners immediately if it was His will, and He has given us examples of how He has done this:

**“And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the LORD. And there came forth two she bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them.” (2 Kings 2:24)**

**“And it came to pass, as he had made an end of speaking all these words, that the ground clave asunder that *was* under them: And the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up, and their houses, and all the men that *appertained* unto Korah, and all *their goods*.” (Numbers 16:31-32)**

**“But it came to pass in the morning, when the wine was gone out of Nabal, and his wife had told him these things, that his heart died within him, and he became as a stone.” (1 Samuel 25:37)**

**“And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things... Then fell she [that is, Sapphira] down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying *her* forth, buried *her* by her husband.  
(Acts 5:5, 10).**

I say that He immediately punished these sinners...at least that’s how it looks to us. They had no doubt made a habit of provoking their Creator, and their cup of iniquity was finally full. Everyone and every nation has a cup that will, in the process of time, fill up:

**“...the Jews: Who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men: Forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins alway: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost.” (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16)**

**“Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?” (Matthew 23:32-33)**

**“...the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.” (Genesis 15:16)**

Our God is a longsuffering God. It is one of His blessed attributes:

**“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*.” (Numbers 14:18)**

So, what does “longsuffering” mean? In the Old Testament, the word translated “longsuffering” comes from two Hebrew words: אַרְפָּה אֵף (arek aph), literally meaning “long of both nostrils.” In addition to being translated “longsuffering”, it is also translated “slow to anger” and “slow to wrath”. This word that literally means “nostrils” is often translated “wrath” or “anger”, and is because when someone is angry, you can see it in their flared nostrils.

In the New Testament, the word translated “longsuffering” is some variant of μακροθύμως (makrothumos). It is also translated “patience”, “bear long”, “suffer long” or “patiently endure”. It is a compound word from μακρός (makros) which means “long”, and θυμός (thumos) which means “to be in a heat or to breathe violently; passion; angry.” It is translated as “wrath”, “fierceness” and “indignation”. It comes from a root word that means “kill” or “slaughter” or “immolate”.

The idea of God’s longsuffering is that He will mercifully put up with offenses from His creation for a long, long time before executing wrath. With respect to the elect of God, that wrath was borne by Jesus Christ when He was made a curse for us (Galatians 3:13). With respect to the reprobate, it ends in eternal damnation. John Gill describes it like this: “it is no other than a moderation of his anger, a restraint of that, a deferring the effects of it, at least for a while, according to his sovereign will; it is an extension and prolongation of mercy for a season; for mercy is always in it and with it; and in this it

differs from it, that the mercy of God is from everlasting to everlasting; but the longsuffering of God, as to the exercise of it, is only for a time, until some certain end is answered, and in which it issues; either in the damnation and destruction of the wicked, when they are fitted for it (Romans 9:22), or in the salvation of God's elect (2 Peter 3:15), for it is exercised towards both, till each take place."

We have a whole lot of examples of the longsuffering of God in the Scripture. God told Adam and Eve: "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." (Genesis 2:17). They certainly suffered a spiritual death on that day, but God could have killed their bodies right on the spot when they ate of the fruit of the tree. Instead, He only caused death and corruption to begin to work in them, and Adam went on to live to be 930 years old.

When mankind had become so perverse that "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5), God could have destroyed them immediately. But He gave them 120 years (verse 3), while Noah prepared the ark and preached righteousness (1 Peter 3:20, 2 Peter 2:5).

He could have destroyed the idol-worshipping Gentile world in Old Testament times, but "in times past [He] suffered all nations to walk in their own ways." (Acts 14:16).

And Israel – I don't have enough time to go over all of the ways that God was longsuffering towards Israel. He saved them out of Egypt despite their rebellion. He "suffered their manners in the wilderness" for forty years (Acts 13:18). He raised up deliverers, repeatedly, in the times of the judges to help them, despite constant backslidings. From the time they entered Canaan to the time Israel was defeated by the Assyrians, God put up with their rebellion for over 700 years, and to the time Judah was defeated by the Babylonians, He was longsuffering for nearly 900 years. The Jews killed Jesus Christ. Rather than destroying them immediately, God waited for 40 years before unleashing the Romans on Jerusalem. And to this day, Jews are still a distinct people, as a testament to the longsuffering and faithfulness of God.

The final Scriptural example I'll go over is the Apostle Paul. Despite his blasphemy of Christ, and his arresting, murdering, and otherwise persecuting His people, God was longsuffering towards our dear brother Paul. "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." (1 Timothy 1:16).

And if you need other examples, just open your eyes and look around you. Despite millennia of ever-increasing blasphemy and rebellion against God, the world is still here. That won't last forever, though.

Let us look in more detail at the longsuffering of God towards wicked men.

**“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.” (Romans 9:22)**

There are people who have been created by God as “vessels of wrath fitted to destruction.” These people are reserved unto the day of destruction and judgment to be punished (2 Peter 2:9, Job 21:30), and in fact, “The LORD hath made all *things* for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil.” (Proverbs 16:4). In seeing and hearing the daily vexing blasphemies, proud sins, and provocations against God of these “vessels of wrath fitted to destruction,” it's an amazing thing sometimes that God doesn't immediately strike them down. Not only does He not immediately destroy them, but He gives them great blessings and mercies. They deserve eternal hellfire, and He could justly dispatch them all to hell immediately. It is only because He has sovereignly determined to be longsuffering with them that they are still alive. But why? Why does He not immediately cut off every one of them, as He did Ananias and Sapphira? Several reasons:

1. Longsuffering is one of the holy attributes of God, and it is gloriously displayed in His dealings with these “vessels of wrath fitted to destruction.” Men learn (or should learn) about this attribute of God by seeing it.
2. Wicked men are absolutely necessary for the sanctification of the elect of God. “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.” (2 Timothy 3:12). If He cuts them off before they fulfill their appointed purpose, it is detrimental to His sheep.
3. We are commanded to “be ye holy; for I am holy.” (1 Peter 1:16). We are supposed to be longsuffering, like God is. It's one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). If He were to destroy wicked men immediately, we would not see this attribute of God displayed in all of its glory, and would not have the blessed example that God sets for us.
4. It teaches us to frame up proper prayers to God as our Avenger, day and night. “And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily.” (Luke 18:7-8).

5. To give wicked men space for repentance, so that they are without excuse. “And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.” (Revelation 2:21). “Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance? But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.” (Romans 2:4-5).

Of course, the wicked take the longsuffering of God, and they pervert it just like they do everything else. Referring back to Ecclesiastes 8:11-13, they think that because God doesn't immediately punish them, then that must mean that God doesn't see what they're doing, and that God is never going to punish them. So they become more bold in their sins against Him.

**“These *things* hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether *such an one* as thyself: *but* I will reprove thee, and set *them* in order before thine eyes. Now consider this, ye that forget God, lest I tear *you* in pieces, and *there be none to deliver.*” (Psalm 50:21-22)**

**“They spend their days in wealth, and in a moment go down to the grave. Therefore they say unto God, Depart from us; for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways. What *is* the Almighty, that we should serve him? and what profit should we have, if we pray unto him?” (Job 21:13-15)**

**“Let favour be shewed to the wicked, *yet* will he not learn righteousness: in the land of uprightness will he deal unjustly, and will not behold the majesty of the LORD.” (Isaiah 26:10)**

Finally, let us consider that God is also longsuffering to His elect.

**“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...Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless. And account *that* the longsuffering of our Lord *is* salvation.” (2 Peter 3:9, 14-15).**

This passage ranks up there with John 3:16 as one of the most abused and misused passages in the Bible. Heretics love to jump all over this and say “See? It says that God is not willing that any should perish!”

The passage clearly means that God is longsuffering toward US, not willing that any of US should perish, but that all OF US should come to repentance. And the “us” is none other than those people to whom both epistles of Peter are written, to wit, the elect of God. God is not willing that any of those little sheep shall perish. He is delaying His return, and is longsuffering towards His people until the last sheep comes to repentance. He is not willing to lose one of His sheep:

**“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any *man* pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave *them* me, is greater than all; and no *man* is able to pluck *them* out of my Father's hand. I and *my* Father are one.” (John 10:27-30)**

God is longsuffering and patient with us before we are saved, while we were by nature the children of wrath, because He is not willing that any should perish:

**“And therefore will the LORD wait, that he may be gracious unto you, and therefore will he be exalted, that he may have mercy upon you: for the LORD *is* a God of judgment: blessed *are* all they that wait for him.” (Isaiah 30:18)**

And even after we’re saved, He’s longsuffering to us. Arthur Pink: “...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 usward*.’” He will continue to be longsuffering to us, until He brings the last one of His elect to repentance, and all of us to salvation.

**“Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know *these things* before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own stedfastness. But grow in grace, and *in* the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him *be* glory both now and for ever. Amen.” (2 Peter 3:17-18)**

I love you. Amen.