

THEISM

God Is Longsuffering

When Moses wanted to see the glory of God, the Lord allowed him to see his back but not his face. As God passed before Moses, He proclaimed His own nature, saying, “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation” (Exodus 34:6-7). King David wrote about the longsuffering nature of God, saying, “But You, O Lord, are a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth” (Psalm 86:15; see also Psalm 103:8; 145:8). Again, David wrote, “The LORD is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and great in mercy” (Psalm 145:8). To be longsuffering is to be purposefully slow in becoming angry at having been treated wrongfully. A longsuffering response to having been treated wrongfully is active, not passive, in withholding retribution against a wrong doer.

On many occasions in biblical times, God demonstrated his longsuffering nature by withholding immediate harm from evil doers. During the days of Noah, “the LORD said, ‘My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, for he is indeed flesh; yet his days shall be one hundred and twenty years’” (Genesis 6:3). The Apostle Peter noted that “the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water” (1 Peter 3:20). When faithless spies persuaded the Israelites that they could not take the land of Canaan, God said He would destroy the people. But Moses responded by reciting God’s own words that the LORD is “merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.” Moses pleaded with God to pardon the people (Numbers 14:17-19), and God did. Nehemiah detailed God’s extensive graciousness toward the Israelites when he recounted their history (Nehemiah 9:7-15). But then he noted that “our fathers acted proudly, hardened their necks, and did not heed Your commandments. They refused to obey, and they were not mindful of Your wonders that You did among them. . . . But You are God, ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and did not forsake them” (Nehemiah 9:16-17).

To be longsuffering, i.e., to purposefully display graciousness, mercy, and forbearance, is to allow time and opportunity for an offender to change. When Nineveh was wicked, God sent Jonah to cry out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (Jonah 3:4). When the people repented, “God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it” (Jonah 3:10). But Jonah was displeased and “became angry. So he prayed to the LORD, and said, ‘Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness, One who relents from doing harm’” (Jonah 4:1-2). When Israel was evil, God pleaded through the prophet Joel, “turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. So rend your heart, and not your garments; return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. Who knows if He will turn and relent, . . . ?” (Joel 2:12-14). When the Apostle Peter reflected about scoffers who did not believe that the Lord would return, he said that “the Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that

any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9-10). Peter wanted his readers to “consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation” (2 Peter 3:15). Moreover, the Apostle Paul reminded his Jewish readers “that the goodness of God leads you to repentance” (Romans 2:4). To the idolatrous Athenians, Paul remarked that their behavior in previous “times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). Everyone is now “justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . . because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:24-26).

God’s longsuffering must eventually come to an end. Longsuffering may delay but not annul God’s judgment. In the same passage that God declared Himself to be “merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth,” He also described Himself as “by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation” (Exodus 34:6-7; Numbers 14:18). Although God was longsuffering toward evil during the days of Noah, he nonetheless destroyed evil humanity by a flood (Genesis 6-8). Although God was longsuffering toward Nineveh, he nonetheless later destroyed the city when it returned to its evil ways. Nahum prophesied that, “it shall come to pass that all who look upon you will flee from you, and say, ‘Nineveh is laid waste! Who will bemoan her?’” (Nahum 3:7). Although God was longsuffering toward the Israelites for their numerous rebellions against Him, He nonetheless finally removed the northern kingdom from their lands (2 Kings 17:5-18). When the southern kingdom of Judah continued to sin against God, he had them carried away into Babylonian captivity (Jeremiah 3:6-11; 2 Kings 24:1-4). Concerning Jezebel (a woman in the church at Thyatira who called herself a prophetess and who taught God’s servants to commit sexual immorality and to eat things sacrificed to idols) God said, “I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children with death. . .” (Revelation 2:20-23). A final day of judgment is coming to all (Matthew 7:21-23; 25:31-46; Revelation 20:11-15). Whoever does not serve God will “drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation. He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb” (Revelation 14:10). While God is longsuffering because of His nature, His longsuffering nature will finally give way to judgment. Jesus warned, “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3, 5).

Just as God is longsuffering so Christians should suffer long toward those who treat them wrongfully. “Be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. . . take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed, we count them blessed who endure . . .” (James 5:7, 10-11). “Imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (Hebrews 6:12). “Walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:1-2; see also Colossians 3:12-13; 1 Thessalonians 5:14). “Love suffers long and is kind” (1 Corinthians 13:4). “Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ” (2 Thessalonians 3:5).

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