God of Patience and Consolation

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From the innermost recess of his affection, that great missionary of the Gospel, the Apostle Paul, meditatively wrote about God, that He is “the God of patience and consolation” (Romans 15:5). At that juncture of Paul’s life and ministry, the most befitting description he could write about God, whom he came to know so intimately, was “the God of patience and consolation”.

That title depicts God as both the origin and source of those spiritual virtues. He not only demonstrates enormous patience with sinful men, but also endows His people with the grace of patience that they may press forward through their temptations and trials unto victory.

Patience is one of God’s perfections. In a Christian, patience is a grace wrought by the work of the Holy Spirit; and it is cultivated and perfected through suffering and sorrow. But in God, patience is an essential attribute of His being, a part of His nature, so perfect that He needs no nurturing of it through some disciplinary process. God is never without patience. He is infinitely patient.

In Exodus 34:6, the LORD Himself proclaimed, “The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth.” Numbers 14:18 says, “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.” In Nehemiah 9:17, we read, “Thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and forsookest them not” (cf. Psalms 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3).

How can we define God’s patience? It can be defined as God’s restraint of His wrath and power against man’s sins. In other words, it is descriptive of His forbearance of the wicked. As the prophet Nahum wrote, “The LORD is slow to anger and great in power” (Nahum1:3). Patience denotes the moderation of His provoked justice; His forbearance which restrains Him from avenging immediately the injuries He meets with daily in such a rebellious world.

Patience

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for “patience” (’arak) is translated as “longsuffering”. When the same word appears together with the word “anger” (’aph), it is translated as “slow to anger”. In the New Testament, two Greek words are translated as “patience”. The first Greek word, makrothumeo, has been translated as “be patient”, “have patience”, “have long patience”, “bear long”, “suffer long”, “be longsuffering” and “patiently endure”. The second Greek word, hupomone, is translated as “patience”, “enduring”, “patient continuance” and “patient waiting”. The general idea behind the use of all these words is forbearance or patient endurance in the midst of provocations and problems.
While explaining the patience of God, Stephen Charnock, the “prince of puritan,” wrote, “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 He is great in power. He has no less power over Himself than over His creatures.” Puritan writers like Charnock have explained the patience of God as His power over His own passions when dealing with man.

When a person does not have the power to resent an offence or to punish defiance, though he would very much desire to do so, his forbearance is not patience, but, simply weakness. That person is merely bound by his frailty. But it is not the case with God’s patience. God is all powerful; and He is always capable of bringing His righteous wrath upon transgressors at any time at His will. He could damn all His enemies in one breath. Yet, He arrests His wrath from instantly destroying men; and that is because He is patient. So, patience is not a weakness in God, but His perfect and powerful virtue. Octavius Winslow, a preacher-friend of Charles Spurgeon, wrote, “The power of God is more manifest in His patience to a multitude of sinners than it could be in creating millions of worlds out of nothing; this is a power over Himself.”

God’s Patience towards a Provocative Human Race

If we think about the immensity of mankind’s innumerable and despicable sins that provoke God every single moment, we would then have a glimpse of the limitless nature of God’s patience. Man’s provocation of God is great, universal and constant. Every second, billions of people cast themselves into every kind of wicked imaginations, having no reverence for the holy and just God. The more we realize the enormity of humanity’s rebellion, the more we wonder at the immeasurably vast patience of God that restrains His just vengeance against their sins. If not for His patience, the earth would be filled with ruined cities and slain bodies of rebellious people. Psalm 78:38 reminds us, “But he, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity, and destroyed them not: yea, many a time turned he his anger away, and did not stir up all his wrath.”

Man should be careful not to think of God’s patience that restrains the quick execution of the divine wrath against all his sins as God’s condoning of sins. God hates all sins though He is long-suffering with the sinner. Sooner or later, God’s wrath would fall upon the sinner. So let the sinner repent while His patience provides him a second chance by the restraining of His holy wrath against his sins.
God’s early warnings of the coming judgement against their sins are also a manifestation of His patience. Instead of immediately punishing sinners, God is seen sending a warning to them. The warning has gone forth, but the execution lingers. In this regard, God’s dealing with the city of Nineveh is a good example of His patience. God said about Nineveh that “their wickedness is come up before me” (Jonah 1:2b). So God sent Jonah to that city and told them, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (Jonah 3:4b). Instead of sending instant punishment for their sins, God set a forty-day period before He would execute His threat. This was certainly a sign of God’s patience and mercy towards that city. This expression of His patience through threatening or warning of judgement after a period of time, provided Nineveh with an opportunity to repent from its sins. Impenitent sinner! God is giving you space, or time, to repent; and He expects you to repent lest you perish.

So often, God’s patience also made His punishment of sinners lighter than His threats against them. The stroke is made lighter than the crime by His patience. If God were to empty the vials of His displeasure upon sinful man, who can bear? His patience towards us has made His punishment less severe than our provocations. The sword of His vengeance is dipped in heaven’s tender mercies and patience, so that we may not be quickly consumed by His wrath. Oh! what a patient God is our God, His patience is shown even to His enemies!

It is even more wondrous that His patience is still awaiting the repentance of many more awful sinners. Except for the infinite restraint God puts upon Himself, this fallen world could not exist a moment. Thus the patience of God works for the salvation of man.

“. . . God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory” (Romans 9:22-23).

Peter spoke of God’s amazing patience towards the transgressors of Noah’s time – “Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing” (1 Peter 3:20). It is also the case today. Like Noah and his family who in their days exemplified the Lord’s enormous patience, we should also quickly turn away from our sins to the Lord for redemption and sanctification. We will do well if we remember Peter’s words that “the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation” (2 Peter 3:15).

Even though He is aware of the innumerable provocations of men, He has been patient with them. Today, God bears with much patience a wicked world. Knowledge of rebellion and provocations normally makes it hard for any man to show patience. God knows about all of man’s heinous acts; and yet He restrains His wrath towards them. Oh what patience and mercy He has been showing to sinful men! So, sinner, rejoice in His patience and quickly turn from your sin to Christ for forgiveness. Delay no longer!

God’s Patience towards His People

If God shows such long-suffering with people who are “fitted to destruction” (Romans 9:22), He will all the more show patience to those that are prepared for glory, who have already repented and believed.

God’s patience towards His people is greater than His patience towards the unregenerate.
When a Christian sins, he sins against the grace, pardon, and love that God has already extended to him in Christ. Oh consider the enormity of God’s patience towards our stubborn unbelief and base murmuring, our secret rebellion and countless backslidings, our self-pleasing ways and unwillingness to do His will. How true it is that His patience towards the saint is greater than His patience towards the sinner!

The knowledge of God’s patience is a great comfort to the believer; and hence He is called “the God of patience and consolation” (Romans 15:5). His patience speaks of His tender feelings towards His people. God’s attribute of patience shows us that there is no place in the heart of God for obduracy but much stoicism. Patience implies feelings. God is infinitely sensitive. He does not deal with His people without deep feelings for them.

Dear Christian, are you saddened that you have grieved the Lord by your sins? Truly, our sins are offensive to Him. Nonetheless, let us remember that the patience He has manifested is indicative of His graciousness and readiness to restore us. Let the knowledge of His patience bring comfort to us that we may yield ourselves to walk with Him worthily.