GOD'S LONG-SUFFERING (Patience)

INTRODUCTION: Nehemiah 9:28-31

Why does God not immediately devour those who:

blaspheme; trample under foot His righteous laws; blatantly sin in defiance of the Bible; shamelessly sin with a clenched fist aimed toward heaven . . . ?

Why does God not suddenly strike dead those who rebel against His authority today as He did to Korah (Num. 16)? Or those who lie before fellow believers today in the same way as Ananias and Sapphira?

Indeed, how are we, who so often live our lives only to gratify selfish desires, spared God's immediate judgement?

Answer: "God is longsuffering to usward" (II Peter 3:9).

A. Definition of God's longsuffering:

"Longsuffering" - Both the Hebrew and Greek words refer to the quality of a prolonged "self-restraint in the face of provocation which does not hastily retaliate or promptly punish" (Vine, p. 12).

Greek = "Macrothumia" - forbearing; patient; slow to anger; "long-fused"

"Macro" = long
"Thumia" = temper (or lit. "heat" from which we derive our Eng. word "thermal").

In the KJV, the word translated "longsuffering" ("macrothumia") is different than the word translated "patience" ("hupomona").

The word "patience" is not used of God (with the exception of Christ "enduring" the cross - Heb. 12:2). Therefore, we will study the word "long-suffering."

Divine patience is that "power of control which God exercises over Himself, causing Him to bear with the wicked and forebear so long in punishing them" (Pink, p. 62).

"The Lord is slow to anger, and great in power" (Nahum 1:3). God has power over His display of anger, unlike men who lack power (control) over themselves when provoked.

"A prince that can bridle his passions is a king over himself as well as over his subjects"

(Charnack).

God can restrain His will (desires) and right to judge. He is "slow to anger" (Heb. 9:17; Ps. 103:8).

God's longsuffering (patience) is a manifestation or an expression of His mercy. His longsuffering is tied to His compassion and mercy (Ps. 86:15 - "But thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth.").

(NOTE: And mercy is an expression of His love - Eph. 2:4; "charity suffering long" - I Cor. 13:4).

Charnock called God's slowness to anger "a branch . . . from His mercy" (cited in Pink, Attributes, p. 62).

"The Lord is full of compassion, slow to anger" (Ps. 145:8).

B. Examples of God's Long-suffering:

1. In Canaan among the Amorites

"They shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full" (Gen. 15:16).

God tolerated the wickedness of the Canaanites until it came to a climactic head (cp. Lev. 18:20-30; cp. Dt. 9:4-5).

2. At Mount Sinai

NOTE: God's description of Himself (after the nation of Israel had worshipped the Golden Calf and was in jeopardy of being consumed - Ex. 33:3-5).

Ex. 34:6 - "And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth."

3. At Kadesh Barnea

Moses testified that "the LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression" (Num. 14:18 - Note context: God would have been totally justified to wipe the nation out because of their unbelief after the negative report of the 10 spies. Cp. 14:11-12).

God was long-suffering to Israel for His own Name's sake (Is. 48:9, 11 - "For my name's sake will I defer mine anger, and for my praise will I refrain for thee, that I cut thee not off. For mine own sake, even for mine own sake, will I do it: for how should my name be polluted? and I will not give my glory unto another.").

Cp. Mt. 21:33-41 - Parable of household.

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often would I have gathered. . . " (Mt. 23:37).

D. The Purpose for God's Long-suffering:

Basic answer: That men would repent and turn to Him.

The purpose of God's long-suffering -

1. To lead sinners to repentance (Rom. 2:4)

Unregenerate man often wrongly thinks that God's goodness to him means that God is pleased with him.

2. To display His ability and desire to save even the lowest of sinners (I Tim. 1:12-17).

V. 16 - "In me first" - first = the same word as "chief" (v. 15). Paul as the ranking #1 sinner serves as a "pattern" (or example) of God's mercy and grace to save even the chiefest of sinners.

NOTE: "Mercy" is linked to long-suffering (God's long-suffering flows from His mercy).

NOTE: Long-suffering is linked to Jesus Christ!

(Since God is long-suffering, and Jesus is God, He too is long-suffering.)

3. To give sinners time to repent

a. God was long-suffering before the flood came
(I Pet. 3:20)
(The first universal judgment on earth)

God's attribute of long-suffering prompted Him to "wait" (to eagerly wait with expectancy).

Is. 30:18 - "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."

b. God is long-suffering before the fire falls
(II Pet. 3:9)
(The last universal judgment on earth)

The unsaved do not interpret God's patience correctly. They wrongly think that because God does nothing right away about their sin that He is not too offended by it.

Eccles. 8:11 - "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."

Remember, the reason why God does not immediately pounce on sinners is because He is long-suffering, not because He is aloof, unaware, or disinterested in one's behavior and attitudes.

Rev. 2:21 - "And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not."

D. Our Response to God's Long-suffering:

1. The believer should be clothed with the virtue of long-suffering.

a. We are responsible before God to be patient (Col. 3:12).

b. We are dependent upon the Spirit of God to be patient (Ga. 5:22) (God is the only source of this virtue).

God is called "the God of patience" (Rom. 15:5); that is, the God who gives patience.

2. Be long-suffering toward one another (Rom. 15:1-6; Eph. 4:2; I Th. 5:14).

ILLUS: Compare God's patience with His children and our patience with our children.

3. Be patient in proclaiming and teaching the Word (II Tim. 4:2).

4. Be patient toward God fulfilling His promises (Heb. 6:15).

5. Be patient through adversity (Ja. 5:7-11).

6. The unbeliever should respond in repentance unto salvation.

God's long-suffering will not last forever!

(Gen. 6:3 - "My spirit shall not always strive with man . . .")

Prov. 29:1 - "He that being often reproved hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy."
(Cp. Prov. 1:24-26)