### God’s Patience

A final expression of God’s love is His forbearance or patience. The Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper defines patience as follows: “The terms patience and long-suffering reveal that phase of God’s goodness which prompts Him not to punish immediately, but to wait for the sinner’s repentance.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Let us investigate this attribute in more detail.[[2]](#footnote-2) Scripture often ascribes this quality to the Lord (Ex 34:6; Num 14:18; Ps 103:8; 145:8, Nah 1:3; Jon 4:2; and others). The Hebrew expression for patience is the phrase אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם (*ereh afaim*), which literally translates “long in regard to wrath,” or more simply, “slow to anger.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Old Testament provides some amazing examples of Yahweh’s long-suffering. He tolerated sinful humanity for 1500 years from the time of Adam until the Flood. In addition, He endured Israel’s unfaithfulness to the covenant about 900 years before He exiled His people to Assyria and Babylon. God expressed His ultimate frustration with Israel with the words, “I have spread out My hands all day long to a rebellious people” (Isa 65:2).

Not all people take advantage of the Lord’s patience as an opportunity for repentance. God speaks to Israel’s leaders through Isaiah the prophet, “Was I not silent even for a long time so you do not fear Me?” (Isa 57:11). On the other hand, those faithful to Yahweh may take offense at His patience, thinking that God is failing to punish sin. Even Jeremiah inquired, “Why has the way of the wicked prospered? {Why} are all those who deal in treachery at ease? You have planted them, they have also taken root; they grow, they have even produced fruit.” However, Jeremiah answers his own question by acknowledging that the day of punishment is coming and appeals to God with the words, “Drag them off like sheep for the slaughter and set them apart for a day of carnage!” (Jer 12:1-3).

Yahweh’s patience is sometimes expressed in partial chastisement, after which He expects His people to respond to Him. He thus dealt with Israel in the time of Amos:

“I gave you also cleanness of teeth in all your cities and lack of bread in all your places, yet you have not returned to Me," declares Yahweh. "Furthermore, I withheld the rain from you while {there were} still three months until harvest… yet you have not returned to Me," declares Yahweh. "I smote you with scorching {wind} and mildew… yet you have not returned to Me," declares Yahweh (Amos 4:6-9).

The Old Testament also testifies that Yahweh’s long-suffering has limits. Prior to the Judean exile to Babylon, God instructed Jeremiah, “Do not pray for the welfare of this people. When they fast, I am not going to listen to their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I am not going to accept them. Rather I am going to make an end of them by the sword, famine and pestilence” (Jer 14:11-12). In the following chapter, we hear the woeful words, “I am tired of relenting” (Jer 15:6), and, “’I have withdrawn My peace from this people,’ declares Yahweh, ‘{My} lovingkindness and compassion’” (Jer 16:5).

We see the same result in Nehemiah, chapter 9, where Nehemiah prays to Yahweh: “You bore with them for many years, and admonished them by Your Spirit through Your prophets, yet they would not give ear. Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands” (Neh 9:30).

The New Testament joins the Old in recounting the Lord’s patience and long-suffering. Jesus revealed the Father’s willingness to wait on repentance in the parable of the fruitless fig tree:

A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, “Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?” And he answered and said to him, “Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, {fine;} but if not, cut it down (Lk 13:6-9).

The book of Acts reveals that in earlier times, God “permitted all the nations to go their own ways”, yet “He did not leave Himself without witness” (Acts 14:16-17). Now is the time to believe the gospel! Likewise, in Romans 3:25 we learn that during the time of God’s forbearance, “He passed over the sins previously committed,” in the sense that the forgiveness which He “preliminarily” offered in the Old Testament is made real in Christ.

Furthermore, Paul writes that God “endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And {He did so} to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy” (Rom 9:22-23). He calls Him “the God who gives perseverance” (Rom 15:5). Paul himself, being a former persecutor of the saints, is now a premier example of this attribute of God. The apostle writes to Timothy, “In me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example…” (1 Tim. 1:16). Finally, Paul joins the Old Testament in warning people not to take for granted God’s long-suffering, but to take advantage of the opportunity for repentance (Rom 2:4-5).

We conclude with citations from the apostle Peter. In his first epistle, he speaks of God’s patience in Noah’s day, while he was constructing the ark (1 Pet 3:20). In his second letter, he accents the Lord’s forbearance toward people of his time: He “is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). The goal of patience is for obtaining salvation: “Regard the patience of our Lord {as} salvation” (2 Pet 3:15).

1. Pieper F. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MI: Concordia Publishing House, 1999. – V. 1, – P. 461-462. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Pink A. W. The Attributes of God. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975. – P. 61-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Brown F., Driver S. R., Briggs C. A. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (electronic ed.). – Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. – P. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)