

GOD'S LONG-SUFFERING: AN APPEAL TO THE CONSCIENCE

NO. 1997

A SERMON
 DELIVERED IN THE AUTUMN OF 1886,
 BY C. H. SPURGEON,
 AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

“And account that the long-suffering of our Lord is salvation.”
2 Peter 3:15.

JESUS is well called “our Lord,” let us at the commencement adore Him. Let us each one cry to Him, “My Lord, and my God.” It is a long, long time since our Lord went up to heaven, and He said that He would come again. Evidently, some of those who best understood Him *misunderstood* Him, and thought that He would surely come again even in their lifetime. He said that He would come, and faithful ones in all ages have looked for Him, it is not possible that our Lord can have deceived us. Because He is so sweetly our Lord, our brethren have made sure that He will keep His word, and He will. But certain of them have gone beyond our Lord’s promise, and have felt sure that they knew *when* He would come, and they have been bitterly disappointed because the hour which they fixed passed over, and He did not appear. This does not prove that He will not come. The day is certainly nearer, and every hour is hastening His coming. “Behold, He comes with clouds, and every eye shall see Him.”

But why are His chariots so long in coming? Why does He delay? The world grows grey, not alone with age, but with iniquity, and yet the Deliverer comes not. We have waited for His footfall at the dead of night, and looked out for Him through the gates of the morning, and expected Him in the heat of the day, and reckoned that He might come before yet another sun went down; but He is not here! He waits. He waits very, very long. Will He not come?

Long-suffering is that which keeps Him from coming. He is bearing with men. Not yet the thunderbolt! Not yet the riven heavens and the reeling earth! Not yet the great white throne, and the day of judgement, for He is full of pity, and bears long with men! Even to the cries of His own elect, who cry day and night to Him—He is not in haste to answer, for He is very patient, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.

But His patience sometimes greatly puzzles us. We cannot make it out. Eighteen, nineteen centuries, and the world not converted! Nineteen centuries, and Satan still to the front, and all manner of iniquity still wounding this poor, bleeding world! What does it mean? O Son of God, what does it mean? Seed of the woman, when will You appear with Your foot upon the serpent’s head? We are puzzled at the long-suffering which causes so weary a delay.

One of the reasons is that we have not much long-suffering ourselves. We think that we do well to be angry with the rebellious, and so we prove ourselves to be more like Jonah than Jesus. A few have learned to be patient and show pity to the ungodly, but many more are of the mind of James and John, who would have called fire from heaven upon those who rejected the Savior. We are in such a hurry. We have not the eternal leisure of God. We have but to live, like mayflies, our little day, and therefore we are in hot haste to see all things accomplished before the sun goes down. We are but leaves in the forest of existence, and if something is not done soon, and done quickly, we shall fade, and pass away amid unaccomplished hope, and so we are not patient. We are staggered when the Master tells us to forgive unto seventy times seven. When He forgives unto seventy times seven, and still waits, and still holds back His thunders, we are amazed, because our mind is not in harmony with the mind of the Infinitely patient God.

We are all the more puzzled, again, because the ungodly so sadly misuse this long-suffering of God as a reason for greater sin, and as a motive for denying that there is a God at all. Because He gives them space for repentance, they make it into space for iniquity, and because He will not deal out His judgments immediately, they say, "Where is the promise of His coming?"

We have impatiently wished that He would break the silence. Have I not in my heart of hearts cried out, "O Lord, how long? Can this go on much longer? Can You bear it? Will You not come with the iron rod, breaking Your foes before Your face, most mighty Son of God?" It is hard to have the days of blasphemy and rebuke multiplied upon us, and to hear the adversary say in every corner, "Where is their God now?" Yet, dear friends, we ought not to be affected by the hissing of these serpents. Surely we would not have our God change His purposes because of the foolish taunts of men. One said, "If there is a God, let Him strike me dead," but God did not smite him, and from this he argued that there was no God; from the same fact I argue that there is a God, and that this God is truly God, for, if He had been less than divine, He might have struck him dead, but being infinitely patient, He bore with him still. Who was that speck that he should cause God to move hand or foot even to crush him? God is not easily moved, even by the blasphemies of the ungodly. He may be provoked one of these days, for long-suffering has its end, but for a while the Lord pauses in pity, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

Beloved brethren, Gods long-suffering with a guilty world He may never explain to us. There are many things which we must not ask to have explained. We get into deep waters, and into terrible troubles, when we must have everything explained. For my part, I like to believe great truths which are beyond my reason. A religion without mysteries seems to me to be false on the face of it. If there is an Infinite God, it is not possible that poor I, with my finite mind, shall ever be able to understand everything about Him. If the Lord chooses to tarry till thousands of years have passed away, yes, till millions of years have elapsed, yet let Him do as He wills. Is He not infinitely wise and good, and who are we that we should put Him to the question? Let Him tarry His own time, only let us watch, and wait, for He will come, and they that wait for Him shall have their reward.

At this time I am going to speak a little upon this point. First, *let us admire the long-suffering of God.* And, secondly, *let us make a right account of it* by accounting it to be salvation.

I. First, I would conduct your minds hurriedly over a few points that may help you to ADMIRE THE LONG-SUFFERING OF GOD.

Admire the long-suffering of God as to *peculiar sins*. Look, brethren, they make images of wood or stone, and they say, "These are God," and they set up these things in the place of Him that made the heavens and the earth. How does He endure to see reasonable beings bowing down before idols, before fetishes, before the basest objects? How does He bear that men should even worship emblems of impurity, and say that these are God? How does He bear it—He that sits in the heavens, in whose hand our breath is, and whose are all our ways?

Others, even in this country, blaspheme God. What an amount of profanity is poured out before God in this city! One can scarcely walk the streets today without hearing horrible language. An oath has often chilled me to the marrow—an oath which was not excused by any special circumstance, but rolled out of the man's mouth as a customary thing. We have today some among us that might match the devil in blasphemy, so foully do they talk. And oh, how is it that God bears it when they dare imprecate His curse upon their bodies and their souls? O Father, how do You bear it? How do You endure these profane persons who insult You to Your face?

Besides, there are those who use fair speech, and yet blaspheme most intolerably. Men of education and of science are often worse than the common folk because they blaspheme with fearful deliberation, and solemnly speak against God, and against His Son, and against the precious blood, and against the Holy Spirit. How is it that the Thrice-holy One bears with them? Oh, wondrous long-suffering of a Gracious God!

And then there are others who wallow in unmentionable impurity and uncleanness. No, I will not attempt any description, nor would I wish to take your thoughts to those things whereof men may blush to think, though they blush not to do them. The moon sees a world of foulness, fornication and adultery, and yet, O God, You bear it! This great blot upon the face of the world, this huge city of London reeks in its filthiness, and yet You hold Your peace!

And then, when I turn my thoughts another way, to the oppression of the poor, to the grinding down of those who, with the hardest labor, can scarcely earn enough bread to keep body and soul together, how does the Just God permit it? When I mark the oppression of man by man—for among wild beasts there is none that equals the cruelty of man to man—how does the All-merciful bear it? I think the sword of the Lord must often rattle in its scabbard, and He must force it down, and say, “Sword of the Lord, rest and be quiet!”

I will not go further, because the list is endless. The wonder is that a Gracious God should continue to bear all this! Think of the sin involved in false teaching. I stood one day at the foot of Pilate's staircase, in Rome, and saw the poor creatures go up and down, on their knees, on what they are taught was the very staircase on which the Lord Jesus Christ stood before Pilate. I noticed sundry priests looking on, and I felt morally certain that they knew it to be an imposture. I thought that if the Lord would lend me His thunderbolts about five minutes, I would make a wonderful clearance thereabouts, but He did nothing of the kind. God is not in haste as we are. Sometimes it does suggest itself to a hot spirit to wish for speedy dealing with iniquity, but the Lord is patient and full of pity.

Especially notice, next, that this long-suffering of God is seen in *peculiar persons*. In certain persons sins are greater than the same sins would be in other people. They have been favored with a tender conscience, and with good instruction, so that when they sin they sin with a vengeance. I have known some who have stood at God's altar, and have gone forth from His temple to transgress; they have been Levites of His sanctuary, and yet first in villainies. Yet the Lord spares the traitors and lets them live.

It is wonderful that God should have such long-suffering when we look at the *peculiar circumstances* under which some men sin. Some men sin against God willfully, when they have no temptation to it, and can plead no necessity. If the poor man steals, we half forgive him, but some do so who have all that heart could wish. When the man driven to extremity has said the thing that was not true, we have half excused him, but some are willful liars, with no gain or profit therein. Some sin for the sheer love of sin, not for the pleasure they gain by it, nor for the profit they hope from it, but for mere wantonness. Born of godly parents, trained as you were in the very school of godliness, made to know, as you know in your own conscience, the Lord Jesus to be the Son of God, when *you* sin against Him, there is a painful emphasis in your transgressions. I speak to some who may well wonder that they are still alive after having sinned with such gross aggravations.

Some manifest the long-suffering of God very wonderfully in the length of time in which they have been spared to sin. Many men are provoked by one offense, and think themselves miracles of patience if they forget it. But many have provoked God fifty, sixty, seventy, perhaps eighty years. *You* could not stand eighty minutes of provocation, and yet the Lord has put up with you throughout a lifetime. You tottered into this house tonight. You might have tottered more if you had remembered the weight of sin that clings to you. Yet the mercy of God spares you. Still, with outstretched arms, infinite mercy bids you come and receive at the hand of God your pardon bought with the blood of Jesus Christ. This long-suffering of God is marvelous.

Remember that it would be easy on God's part to be rid of you. There is a text where He says, “Ah! I will ease Me of My adversaries.” Some men bear because they cannot help it. They are obliged to submit, but God is not in that condition. One wish and the sinner will never provoke Him anymore, nor refuse His mercy again. He will be gone out of the land of hope. Therefore, I say the long-suffering of God is enhanced in its wonderfulness by the fact that He is under no necessity to exercise it except that which springs out of His own love.

I beg all of you who are unconverted to think earnestly upon God's long-suffering to you in permitting you to be here, still to hear from the cross of Christ the invitation, "Look unto Me, and be you saved, all the ends of the earth."

II. Secondly, let us take THE RIGHT ACCOUNT OF THE LONG-SUFFERING OF GOD. "Account that the long-suffering of our Lord is salvation." What does this mean?

Does it not mean, first, as *to the saving of the many*? The Lord Jesus Christ is, as I believe, to have the pre-eminence. I think that He will have the pre-eminence in the number of souls that will be saved as compared with those that will be lost, and that can scarcely be effected except by a lapse of time in which many will be brought to Christ. I am not, however, going into any speculations. I look at it this way. As long as this old hulk keeps beating up against the rocks, as long as she does not quite go down into the sea of fire, it means man's salvation. It means, "Out with the lifeboat! Man the lifeboat, and let us take off from her all that we can, and bring them to shore." God calls upon us, until the world is utterly destroyed with fire, to go on saving men with all our might and main. Every year that passes is meant to be a year of salvation. We rightly call each year "the year of our Lord." Let us make it so by more and more earnest efforts for the bringing of sinners to the cross of Christ. I cannot think that the world is spared to increase its damnation. Christ came not to destroy the world, but that the world through Him might be saved, and so, as every year rolls by, let us account it salvation, and spend and be spent in the hope that by any means we may save some.

And if we can indulge a still brighter hope that the kingdom of Christ shall come, and that multitudes shall be converted, and that the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea, so let it be. But always let this be to the front—that this long-suffering of God means salvation, and at that we are to aim.

So, dear friends, in the second place, the next meaning of this is *to any of you who are unconverted*. I want you to account that the long-suffering of God in sparing you means to you salvation. Why are you here tonight? Surely it is salvation. I met years ago a soldier who had ridden in the charge of Balaclava. He was one of the few that came back when the saddles were emptied right and left of him. I could not help getting into a corner, and saying to him, "Dear sir, do you not think that God has some design of love to you in sparing you when so many fell? Have you given your heart to Him?" I felt that I had a right to say *that*. Perhaps I speak to some of you who were picked off a wreck years ago. Why was that? I hope it was that you might be saved. You have had a fever lately, and have hardly been out before. You have come here tonight, still weak, scarcely recovered. Why were you saved from that fever when others were cut down? Surely it must mean salvation. At any rate, the God who was so full of pity as to spare you, now says to you, "Call upon Me in the day of trouble: I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me." When Master Bunyan was a lad, he was so foolhardy that, when an adder rose against him, he took it in his hand, and plucked the sting out of its mouth, but he was not harmed. It was his turn to stand sentinel at the siege of Nottingham, and as he was going forth, another man offered to take his place. That man was shot, and Master Bunyan thus escaped. We would have had no "Pilgrim's Progress" if it had not been for that. Did not God preserve him on purpose that he might be saved? There are special interpositions of divine providence, by which God spares ungodly men, whom He might have cut down long ago as cumberers of the ground; should we not look upon these as having the intention that the barren tree may be cared for yet another year, if haply it may bring forth fruit? Some of you who are here tonight are wonders to yourselves that you are still in the land of the living—I pray you account the long-suffering of God to be salvation. See salvation in it. Be encouraged to look to Christ, and, looking to Him, you shall find salvation, for "there is life in a look at the Crucified One." Account God's long-suffering to be salvation to you if to no one else.

God's long-suffering is one of the great means by which He works for the salvation of His elect. He will not let them die till first they live to God. He will not suffer them to pass into eternity till first His infinite love has justified them through the righteousness of Christ.

Thus I have said what I hope may be embraced by some here present.

But I must finish. This text seems to me to have a bearing upon *the people of God*. Indeed, it is for them that it is written, "Account that the long-suffering of God is salvation."

I must turn the text to give you really what lies in it. God hears the cry going up from His own elect, and it is written, "Shall not God avenge His own elect, though He bears long with them?" That long forbearance of God brings to His own people much of trouble, pain, sorrow, much of amazement and soul distress. Brother, you must learn to look upon that as salvation. I hear you say, "What do you mean?" I mean this. The very fact that you are made to groan and cry by reason of God's long-suffering to guilty men gives you sympathy with Christ and union with Christ, who endured such contradiction of sinners against Himself. Reckon that in being brought into harmony, sympathy, oneness with Christ, through enduring the result of the divine long-suffering, you find salvation. It is salvation to a man to be put side by side with Christ. If you have to bear the jests and gibes of the ungodly—if God spares them, and permits them to persecute you, be glad of it, and reckon it as salvation, for now you are made partaker of Christ's sufferings. What more salvation do you desire?

Remember, too, that when the ungodly persecute the righteous, they give them the mark of salvation, for of old it was so. He that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the spirit. If you were never reviled, if you were never slandered or traduced, who would know that you are a Christian? But when, through the long-suffering of God with the ungodly, you are made to suffer, account it to be a mark of your salvation. "Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you."

Once more; reckon the long-suffering of God, when it permits the ungodly to slander and injure you, as salvation, because it tends to your salvation by driving you nearer to the Lord. It prevents your making your home in this world. It forces you to be a stranger and a foreigner. It compels you to go outside the gate bearing Christ's reproach, and so, in this way, that which seemed so hard to bear brings salvation to you.

Therefore, comfort one another, dear children of God. Be not overly cast down and troubled because of your Lord's delaying His coming, for He will yet help you, and you shall be delivered.

If the Lord has shown long-suffering to any of you, and yet you have never repented or turned to Him, do so tonight. "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and you are not saved." But, oh, that you might be saved before this service ends! The leaves are falling from the trees thick and fast, and before you fall from the tree of this mortal life, think of your God, and turn to Him, and live. "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved." May He snatch you from the burning! Amen, and amen.

**PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—2 PETER 3.
HYMNS FROM "OUR OWN HYMN BOOK"—174, 529, 513.**

In THE SWORD AND THE TROWEL I have earnestly asked my dear friends to unite in prayer for the revival of true religion; I wish to press this with all my heart upon my Sermon readers. A visitation from the Holy Spirit would be to our churches what the springtide is to the sleeping bulbs and leafless trees: truth and righteousness would seem to blossom from the ground. False doctrine and worldliness are wolves which come down upon the sheepfolds in the winter of lifeless Christianity, but are no more seen in the clear, bright days of grace. When the Lord clothes the gospel with the power of His Spirit, error cannot stand in its presence, and sin is afraid to show its face. This, then, is what we need, and prayer is the one great and effectual method of obtaining it.

How can we promote prayerfulness concerning the present crisis? Let us each one be more than ever earnest with the Lord to plead his own cause. Oh, that He would gird His sword upon His thigh, and ride forth to the battle because of truth and righteousness! Let us, when we meet by two and three, make a point of bowing the knee together for this objective. This will suggest larger meetings, and then, best of all, we will hope that the pastors will call the churches together, and say, "There is need of special pray-

er for the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and the overthrow of error.” If this could be done by all faithful ministers, the church would not be long without heavenly refreshment.

Personally, I beg my beloved brethren to praise God with me for very remarkable help lately sent me in an hour of severe trial, and also to entreat the Lord on my behalf that I may be kept steadfast, and peaceful, and made wise under the peculiar circumstances of the present severe conflict. What I have done hitherto I have done under pressure of a necessity which no faithful man could have resisted. I have nothing to regret, nothing about which I have a shadow of a question. I could do no other than I have done. Unless I had been willing to have been condemned at the last great day with the enemies of the cross of Christ, I could not have kept silent, nor have continued in an evil confederacy with those who make void the gospel. I can bear anything but an accusing conscience.

C. H. S.

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