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Longsuffering

The Fruit of the Spirit

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But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23)

Introduction

It is interesting to note how many books have been written on the fruit of Spirit of Christian love, and with good reason as it is the pre-eminent fruit. Some books, though fewer, have been written on Christian joy and Christian peace. However, there are far fewer books written on long-suffering. Arthur Pink suggests that, “Most probably the principal reason why so many writers have failed to give us anything, separately, upon the patience of God was because of the difficulty of distinguishing this attribute from the Divine goodness and mercy, particularly the latter”. It’s hard to be sure whether this is the principal reason or not because it might just be that the topic isn’t as pleasant as love, joy or peace. Everyone wants to think about the love of God, the joy of salvation and the peace which passes all understanding – that’s all good stuff. It not only is the word suffering but also long – long-suffering. This sound somewhat ominous and distasteful.

But this reveals both a misunderstanding of love and of long-suffering. For not only is it said that “love suffers long and is kind,” (1 Cor 13:4) but also we are told to “consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation” (1 Peter 3:15). So, maybe there is something to this idea of longsuffering. ;)

There are two related but distinct words in Greek which are translated “patience”: ὑπομονή and μακροθυμία. The first means “to remain under” and speaks of bearing up under, a patient endurance. James wrote that “the testing of your faith produces patience” (James 1:3). The second word is the one which is the fruit of the Spirit. It literally means, “long of wrath” or “slow to anger.” The difference between these two Greek words is best seen in their opposites. While ὑπομονή is the temper which does not easily succumb under suffering, μακροθυμία is the self-restraint which does not hastily retaliate a wrong. The one is opposed to cowardice or despondency, the other to wrath or revenge. The specific fruit of longsuffering is the word μακροθυμία, which we will take to mean “slow to anger.”

When I was planning this study, I thought it might be good to give a summary of the first three fruits – love, joy and peace. However, when I dug down into the fruit of longsuffering in the believer, it turned out that longsuffering is a perfect encapsulation, a perfect application, a perfect example of those “big three” fruits rolled into one. And then, as we will see next, the fruit of longsuffering is one of the deepest aspects of God’s nature – and all the fruits of the Spirit reproduce in us aspects of God’s nature. That is the purpose of this, to produce holiness. These fruits can only be produced in us by the work of the Holy Spirit.

God's Longsuffering

And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:5-7)

When God revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush, Moses said to God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, the God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. (Exodus 3:13-14).

The name captures the essence of its object, it expresses the identity of what is named. The name "I AM THAT I AM" expresses the essence of God as perfect and unchangeable. To take it even further, God said to Moses, "this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations" (v. 15). God's name represents His essence and His essence is revealed to be that unchangeable perfect simplicity which is higher than words can express. God is transcendent, independent of the creation, outside of space and time, absolutely sovereign. The name reveals that God is what God incomprehensibly is – His name is wonderful. The name of the LORD is a strong tower (Prov 18:10) – that strength is here expressed in the Lord's absolutely sovereign self-existence and all-sufficiency.

Now, in the passage in Exodus 34 before us, the LORD proclaims His name once again but this time in quite a different form! The name here is really quite complex. In contrast to the one word (in Hebrew) "I AM" here we are given a 32 word complex name of God which spans the diverse aspects of the Divine nature.

- **The LORD, the LORD God** – the word LORD which we have here repeated is the translation of the Hebrew word יהוה (Y^evah) which is the proper name of God. This name is called the Tetragrammaton because it consists of the four Hebrew letters, YHWH. Most Hebrew scholars think that the name is a form of the one given in Exodus 3:14, I AM. The name is understood to mean "the one who is; the absolute and unchangeable one." It is here repeated – the LORD, the LORD God – perhaps to recall the earlier revelation of "I AM WHAT I AM" to mind or to emphasize God's absolute sovereignty.
- **merciful and gracious** – this pair of attributes covers the ideas of kindness, compassion and mercy to those in misery. It seems to express a general characteristic of God's mercy and kindness to all men, as common grace.

- **longsuffering** – this is literally “long of nostril” also translated “slow to anger” in Joel 2:13. It is very interesting to see this placed here between merciful and abundant in goodness.
- **abundant in goodness and truth** – this pair of attributes includes **חֶסֶד** (CHESED) covenantal faithfulness and truth, which is more specific and refers to the benefits reserved for the elect.
- **keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin** – this identifies the elect and the benefits which flow to them - primarily the forgiveness of sin. The word ‘mercy’ is CHESED again and not the same word earlier translated “merciful”. God (who is abundant in CHESED) keeps CHESED, covenantal mercy, for His elect, as a treasure which will be dispensed in due time.
- **that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation** – this identifies the principle which seems to us as opposing the simple goodness of God, that God will by no means clear the guilty. Even though God is merciful and gracious, abundant in goodness and truth, there are many who remain guilty. God’s name includes the idea that such people who do not have their sins forgiven will by no means be cleared.

The name of God given to us here contains the contrary ideas of, on the one hand, God forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin and, on the other hand, God by no means clearing the guilty. Please notice that there are two kinds of grace but no kinds of maliciousness. God is good to the non-elect and God is good to the elect – God does wrong to no person. And yet while God sovereignly keeps mercy for the elect, He allows the non-elect to go on in their ways, granting them the desires of their hearts and so remaining in their guilt. “The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works” (Psalm 145:9). But God’s goodness is not a blanket pardon! Rather it is a willingness, even an earnest desire that sinners turn and be reconciled to Himself. “For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men” (Lamentations 3:33). “For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye” (Ezekiel 18:32).

Nevertheless, God will by no means clear the guilty. And in God’s holiness and moral purity -- Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity (Hab 1:13) – His eyes behold, his eyelids try, the children of men (Psalm 11:4). God is angry with the wicked every day (Psalm 7:11). “the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth” (Psalm 11:5). God’s holiness is such as cannot coexist with sin, cannot tolerate sin in any form. The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (Romans 1:18).

And in God’s perfect omniscience, He is fully aware of each and every evil thought, intention, word, and deed of every man. “I know the things that come into your mind, every one of them” (Ezekiel 11:5). The LORD hath sworn by the excellency of Jacob, Surely I will never forget any of

their works (Amos 8:7). And for every idle word that you speak, you will give account thereof in the day of judgment” (Matt 12:36).

The holiness of God demands justice and punishment for all sin. The LORD said to Moses, “let the priests also, which come near to the LORD, sanctify themselves, lest the LORD break forth upon them” (Exodus 19:22) where we understand that to be a sinner in the hands of an angry God is dreadful. For the LORD thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God (Deut 4:24).

Nestled in between these marvelously diverse attributes is one without which the others would be inoperative, or would be incapable of demonstration along with the others. In between God’s marvelous common grace and His special grace, we find mention of God’s long-suffering. God is slow to anger and that is our salvation. For what stands between the sinner and hell except for the longsuffering of God? Jonathan Edwards writes of the Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God, Dear Sinner, ...

You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night; that you were suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up.

If God was not longsuffering, He would have immediately destroyed Adam and Eve, and would immediately send to hell anyone who dared to raise his fist against the Holy One. But God exercises longsuffering towards both wicked men, the vessels of wrath, by whom his patience and longsuffering are abused and despised; and towards his elect, on whom he waits to be gracious, not willing that any of them should perish, but all be brought to repentance; and his longsuffering is their salvation. Though God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, yet God, willing to shew His wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: (Romans 9:22)

In the Creation, we see God’s omnipotent hand at work to bring all things into existence from nothing. In Providence, we recognize God’s omnipotent hand at work as He brings all things to pass in accordance with the counsel of His will. In Redemption, we see God’s omnipotent hand at work in raising Christ from the dead and bringing the spiritually dead to life with irresistible grace. In the Judgment, we see God’s omnipotent hand holding men to account for their sin, not clearing the guilty. In all these things we see the perfect power and absolute sovereignty of God over the creation. But in God’s longsuffering, we see God’s perfect control over something far greater than the creation –Stephen Charnock comments, “By the same reason God’s slowness to anger is a greater argument of his power than the creating a world, or the power of dissolving it by a word; in this he hath a dominion over creatures, in the other over himself.”

And so, if we are able to conceive in our minds of the abundant goodness of God while simultaneously holding on to some appreciation for God’s utter hatred for sin, we may come to

appreciate the idea of God's longsuffering as a very lofty idea indeed and one worthy of our careful consideration. If we have a sense of the power of God in creation, we ought to consider that as nothing compared with the power which God makes known through longsuffering. Hopefully a few Biblical examples will help to round out the idea in our minds before we consider the fruit of longsuffering.

The first example we have is the time before the flood when the "longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing" (1 Peter 3:20). Many years passed between the time when God commanded Noah to build the ark and the time when the flood came upon the world. Noah was a preacher of righteousness but none were saved but his immediate family. God gave them warnings for a long time but eventually the day came – God spared not the old world (2 Peter 2:5) but saved 8 people.

When God revealed His purpose to Abraham for his future generations, God said, "But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full" (Genesis 15:16). The principle that God invokes here is His own longsuffering. As it worked out in history, the people of Israel languished in Egypt for 430 years while the iniquity of the Amorites was allowed to flourish. The longsuffering of God allowed that wicked nation to develop in its wicked according to its own organic principles while at the same time He nurtured the nation of Israel in the womb of Egypt. God had previously brought forth the nation of the Amorites, given them their portion of land in Canaan, and was not willing to bring judgment against them before their iniquity had reached its full measure. "Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain" (James 5:7). Civilizations rise and civilizations fall in accordance with their own inner life, always in accordance with Romans 1:18ff, as God works His plan throughout the generations. God gives them up slowly, in stages, as the Spirit of God strives with men only to a certain point and then lets them go – and God works all these things out in accordance with His wisdom and longsuffering. He brings judgment upon nations but always in His own time, which is usually much longer than we could possibly have imagined.

We know "that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Peter 3:7). And we find ourselves living in the final prolonged period of God's longsuffering which will end when Christ returns. We know that "the Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). "And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation;" (2 Peter 3:15). Consider also that God is longsuffering with the elect before their conversion. Though the elect may live like the Devil and care nothing for Christ or the gospel yet the longsuffering of the Lord is their salvation. The time will come for each elect person when the covenantal faithfulness kept for him/her by the grace of God will be applied. But in the meantime, God bears long with His elect for the sake of His dear Son.

God's longsuffering is an expression of God's goodness. The elect are given grace to respond in the effectual call but those who are not elect have a different response to God's longsuffering,

as Paul wrote, “despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?” (Romans 2:4) which is intended to lead people to repentance. But it is easy to fall into the mental trap of believing that, because the Lord allows men to go on in their sin, that there is therefore no condemnation forthcoming for that sin. As the wise man wrote, “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” (Ecclesiastes 8:11). And so, because of the hardness and impenitence of men’s hearts, they treasure up wrath for themselves in the day of wrath when God will reveal His righteous judgment against all the sins of men (Romans 2:5). God’s silence does not mean that He consents to the evil deeds which men customarily practice.

These things are deep and mysterious, because the secret things belong unto the LORD our God (Deut 29:29). God’s longsuffering is a marvelous work of God’s power, greater than anything we can comprehend, as we have only a dim awareness of God’s goodness and God’s holiness. And so, hopefully we have an appreciation for why longsuffering is a fruit of the Spirit – because we are entering into God’s longsuffering or rather the characteristic of God’s longsuffering is being formed us.

The Spiritual Fruit of Longsuffering

Now, based on all this, we can finally proceed to develop the idea of the fruit of longsuffering. My purpose is to show the dependence of the fruit of longsuffering on the fruits of love, joy and peace. It is when we have those fruits in abundance that longsuffering takes on a positive character. The fruit of longsuffering is made sweet to our taste when we discover that it is full of life. For, in order for longsuffering to be a spiritual work of grace it must have the motive of love, the strength of joy and the perseverance of peace.

Paul commands that we should be “longsuffering, forbearing one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2). For we know that in the body of Christ are all sinners. And we know that sinners tend to give offense to one another as they do to God. We’ve all experienced this – someone gives us a cross look or says something unkind to us or about us. The natural reaction is to retaliate – to “get even”. And so, we are called to the same forbearance with which God forbears our . By way of the parallelism, we understand that Paul is equating longsuffering with forbearing one another in love. And so we see from this verse that the fruit of longsuffering depends on the fruit of love.

It is this which constitutes the perfection Jesus called for in the sermon on the mount: But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; ... Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:44, 48). This glorifies God because it is to be like Him in His most sovereign work: “He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city” (Proverbs 16:32). This is the great power of the gospel!

We read earlier that “love suffers long and is kind” (1 Cor 13:4). Love endures evil, injury, and provocation, without being filled with resentment, indignation, or revenge. Divine love gives the person power over the angry passions and seeks after the repentance of the offender and reconciliation rather than revenge. Love puts up with many slights and neglects from the person it loves because the end goal in sight is not to make ourselves feel better about ourselves but to participate in building the body of Christ. “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins” (Proverbs 10:12).

So we see then that love is the essential motivation for longsuffering. What about joy?

Paul prayed for the Colossians to be “strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness” (Colossians 1:11). Calvin commented, “unquestionably, patience is not sustained otherwise than by alacrity of mind, and will never be maintained with fortitude by any one that is not satisfied with his condition.” By alacrity of mind, he means a cheerful disposition. Surely, an unwavering joyfulness gives the ability to handle an unkind word or to sustain an outright attack without falling into sinful grumbling or complaining, or seeking retaliation. If our joy is in Christ, then our desire will not be for revenge but for Christ to be glorified.

We know that Jesus not only loved His own and loved them to the end but also that “for the joy that was set before Him [He] endured the cross, despising the shame” (Hebrews 12:2). Christ was moved by love, but He was strengthened by joy. The fruit of longsuffering draws strength to bear up from the fruit of joy in Christ. As Paul wrote, “I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). The joy we have in Christ now, and the certainty of a far greater joy yet to come, provides that inner strength which makes us consider all the suffering of this time as a light thing not really worthy of consideration. It is easy to discuss this theoretically but, if Christ Himself is our joy, then everything else is dung in comparison to the riches of knowing Him. And He has promised not only that He will be with us in our tribulation, as He was in the fiery furnace with Daniel’s friends – not a hair of their head was harmed – He has promised to come again and receive us to Himself and so we will ever be with the Lord. He is the infinite, eternal source of all good – if Christ is ours, what joy should fill our hearts now – though we see him not, yet believing, we rejoice with joy unspeakable (1 Peter 1:8) – and when we see Him and are like Him, what words will be able to express our joy. The former things will not come to mind in that day.

The Lord Himself commands us to rejoice – Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you (Matthew 5:11-12). And so Peter and John, who were beaten and commanded not to preach in the name of Christ, left “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (Acts 5:41). They were honored to be dishonored for Christ. Nor did they cease to preach Christ but increased all the more. The joy they experienced from the

persecution did not permit them to quit – the fruit of the Spirit made them increase in preaching Christ all the more.

The final aspect of the fruit of longsuffering I want to highlight is the fruit of peace. Peace is the fruit of the Spirit which gives us contentment in all circumstances. When you feel at peace, you're not anxious. When you're not anxious, you're not troubled by tribulation. The fruit of peace is the peace of Christ, "my peace I give unto you" (John 14:27) "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). This peace is what is needed to rest in Christ in the midst of tribulation, persecution. The peace of Christ makes us satisfied in Him, more than much fine gold, more than comfort, more than honor. All those things give some measure of peace, as the world gives, but our hearts are still restless until they find their rest in Him. In Christ we have not only reconciliation and peace with God through His Mediatorial work but full peace of conscience. Not as the world gives – His peace is the peace of God.

And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. ... This peace is the blessed peace of the gospel. It is Christ Himself who is our peace. It is a marvelous peace that passes understanding because it is Christ Himself satisfying the soul. Oh we need to have Christ in our souls and be satisfied in Him. And from this peace, we see that Paul arrives at contentment, as he says in v. 11 -- Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. (Philippians 4:7, 11).

The peace which passes all understanding is a garrison for our hearts and minds – it gives us that sense of satisfaction in Christ that words fail to express. If we have Christ and are resting in Him then, come what may, the peace of Christ is not disturbed.

Conclusion

To bring this to a conclusion, in this study on the fruit of longsuffering, the goal was to show the nature of the fruit in the character of God. It turns out to be a marvelous aspect of the Divine character in which God exercises control over Himself by restraining the immediate demand for justice in order to bring a marvelous work to pass. The full display of God's attributes hinges, as it were, on God's longsuffering. His mercy and His justice are both marvelous displays of God's nature but without the hinge of God's longsuffering, the one or the other could never have been made manifest. God could have created a world in which there was no sin or God could have destroyed the world at the entrance of sin – but God did something marvelous: He endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction, that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory (Rom 9:22-23).

And the fruit of the Spirit of longsuffering reproduces in us this very deep and mysterious characteristic of God, as we participate in His love, His joy and His peace, we bring great glory to

Him by setting aside all our natural wants and wishes to join in the marvelous work of God. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.
(Matthew 5:44-45, 48)

Love sets our heart on the good of the other person for the sake of Christ and the gospel. Joy sets our affections on things above, looking forward to future glory, despising the present shame. Peace gives us satisfaction and contentment in the midst of trials and tribulations. All of these are expressed in longsuffering.