

divine virtue in a prayer, after Israel's wicked refusal to enter into the land of Canaan (Num. 13:1-14:10).

This is the part of Moses' intercession (13-19) that is of special interest for our present subject: "And now, I beseech thee, let the power of my Lord be great, according as thou hast spoken, saying, 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" (17-18).

Notice here two tie-ins with God's self-revelation at Mount Sinai. First, Moses at Kadesh-barnea mentions similar divine attributes and works, and in the same order as in Exodus 34:6-7: "positive" and then "negative." Second, Moses explicitly appeals to God's words uttered at the holy mount: "as thou hast spoken, saying" (Num. 14:17). But notice which of Jehovah's virtues is mentioned first here: "The LORD is *longsuffering*" (18).

Next follows the conclusion and central request of Moses' prayer: "Pardon, I beseech thee, the iniquity of this people according unto the greatness of thy mercy, and as thou hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now" (19). This is swiftly followed by God's gracious answer: "I have pardoned according to thy word" (20).

The third and final reference to Jehovah's longsuffering in the Old Testament historical books is found in Nehemiah 9. This chapter contains the godly Levites' review of Israel's history, all the way from Abraham till after the return from the Babylonian captivity, with special reference to both Jehovah's mercy and Israel's sinfulness.

Nehemiah 9:17 reads, "And [they] refused to obey, neither were mindful of thy wonders that thou didst among them; but hardened their necks, and in their rebellion appointed a captain to return to their bondage: but thou art a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, *slow to anger* [i.e., longsuffering], and of great kindness, and forsookest them not."

Unlike the two earlier historical references to Jehovah's longsuffering, this text only speaks of God's "positive" attributes and operations ("a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and forsookest them not") and not His "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children."

Nehemiah 9 mentions the historical events that occasioned both of the earlier references to Jehovah's longsuffering. God's longsuffering at the end of Nehemiah 9:17 is sandwiched between Israel's refusal to enter into the promised land (Num. 13-14) in the middle of verse 17 and the idolatry of the golden calf (Ex. 32-34) in verse 18. Here we see the glorious unity of Scripture, with the last text on God's longsuffering in the Old Testament historical books alluding to the previous two!

*Rev. Stewart*

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# *Covenant Reformed News*

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## **God's Longsuffering in the Old Testament Historical Books**

The very first use of the word "longsuffering" in Holy Scripture is found in the book of Exodus and on Mount Sinai. In this first biblical reference to longsuffering, God speaks of His own (not man's) longsuffering: "And the Lord passed by before him [i.e., Moses], 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" (Ex. 34:6-7).

The divine perfections that are listed along with longsuffering are "positive" (e.g., mercy, grace and goodness) and exercised for the salvation of God's elect ("keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin"). The Lord then goes on to speak of His "negative" work towards the reprobate: "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" (7).

This profound, divine self-revelation occurred against the dark backdrop of Israel's terrible sin of worshipping the golden calf, contrary to the second commandment. It also came in answer to the prayer of Moses, the Old Testament mediator: "I beseech thee, shew me thy glory" (33:18). Clearly, God's "glory" includes His longsuffering!

Jehovah's immediate response to Moses' intercession reveals additional and important truths about His longsuffering: "I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy" (19). First, God's longsuffering is a revelation of His "name." Second, God's longsuffering is a manifestation of His "goodness." Third, God is absolutely sovereign in His longsuffering for, since He "will be gracious to whom [He] will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom [He] will shew mercy," He will be longsuffering to whom He will be longsuffering.

After the Lord's beautiful self-revelation (34:6-7), Moses' response is twofold. First, he worships: "Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped" (8). Our adoration too should be prompted by God's longsuffering with us!

Second, Moses prays: "If now I have found grace in thy sight, O Lord, let my Lord, I pray thee, go among us; for it is a stiffnecked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for thine inheritance" (9). Organically and with respect to the elect in Israel, Jehovah, in answer to this petition, forgives His people and journeys with His inheritance towards the promised land.

The second biblical reference to longsuffering is also found in the Pentateuch. This time, it is Moses (not God) who speaks of Jehovah's longsuffering. He appeals to this

*(continued on p. 4)*

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### Three Questions

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I have a number of questions sent in by our readers that, although only requiring a short answer, are important enough to be included in the *News*. I thought it good to answer three of them in this issue.

Question 1: “In Acts 21:24, it appears that Paul abandons his liberty in Christ and returns to Judaistic practice. I have found nothing so far to explain his behaviour apart from what he says in I Corinthians 9:20.”

The answer is simply that what the believing Jews asked Paul to do was a matter of Christian liberty. Christian liberty means that with certain things if a Christian does or does not do them he is not sinning. It is the motive that God judges. From the context, one learns that Paul did not budge on the question of circumcision but he did agree to take the vows of purification. These were in themselves innocuous; the motive for taking the vows is what counted. Paul’s motive was to avoid unnecessary strife in the Jerusalem church. It does seem from various parts of Scripture that the Jerusalem church was weak on the matter of Christian liberty in connection with Old Testament rituals. Paul chose not to offend the weaker brethren (Rom. 14:1).

Question 2: “Were the Donatists right regarding those who denied their faith under persecution, that they could not return to the Lord?”

The Donatists were a sect in early church history. They were numerous in N. Africa in the days of Augustine (354-430), who wrote against their position. They taught, as the questioner points out, that those who denied their faith to escape persecution could not, even after confession of sin, become members of the church again. They were forever excluded from the church and, presumably, from heaven.

This was a wrong position to take, for the Scriptures make clear that everyone who confesses his sin finds forgiveness (I John 1:9). God’s Word makes no exceptions, except those who have committed the unpardonable sin (Heb. 6:4-8; I John 5:16-17).

The questioner, in appealing to the Greek, points out that Jesus uses the future tense in such passages as II Timothy 2:12. But the future tense simply means that if someone denies Christ in this life, He will deny him in the judgment day when all men stand before the Lord Jesus, the universal Judge. That does not rule out his being restored in the way of confession and sorrow for sin.

The questioner adds in the same connection, “If that’s the case [i.e., that someone who denied Christ cannot be saved and restored to the church], then if someone repents and wants to come to Christ, since they were not actually a believer in the first place, according to Calvinism and predestination, can they have faith in him as Lord and Saviour after they have denied him?”

The questioner, sadly, has a serious misconception of Calvinism and biblical predestination. He should correct that. The fact is that anyone who is eternally predestined to be saved and is, in fact, saved in this life, nevertheless, can and often does fall into terrible sins. We must learn to pray, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us

from evil” (Matt. 6:13). Abraham and Isaac both left Canaan contrary to God’s will. David committed adultery and murder. Peter denied Christ out of fear of being killed by the same Sanhedrin that was condemning our Lord. All of these four men were true believers when they committed these awful sins. All later repented and were forgiven. Some Christians denied their Lord under the threat of persecution. When they confessed their sin, they were pardoned.

Behind the Donatist position was another error, serious and deadly. It is the idea that only true believers may belong to the church of Christ. And so the Donatists also denied infant baptism, for infants cannot believe. They basically deny the covenant.

Question 3: A Baptist asks, “Are you saying that we should teach all our children to believe they are God’s children, forgiven of their sins, etc., when in fact they may be the devil’s children and destined to eternal hell?”

The answer to this question is a most emphatic NO. Children of believers are born within the dispensation of the covenant. No Baptist can and will deny that this is true. This means that every child of believing parents comes under covenant instruction in the home, in the church and, where possible, in the Christian school. In all of these spheres, he is taught the truth of God’s Word: “Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations” (*Canons* II:5). This is the heart of the instruction children receive.

Furthermore, the Scriptures teach that God, while saving His church from those born outside the church, also saves believers and their seed (Gen. 17:7). Children, as well as adults, are citizens of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 19:14; 18:1-6).

Therefore, godly parents teach their children, knowing that God saves children of believers and that He has not promised to save all of them. Believers are very conscious of Esau and the faithless Israelites. But they do not look at their children as a “nest of vipers,” as Jonathan Edwards did and as do all who believe in a conditional covenant. They teach the children to lay hold on the promise of God through faith in Christ. They teach these same children to repent and confess their sins to find forgiveness in Christ. God saves His elect and uses the means of covenant instruction. He saves those who believe in Christ. In other words, since faith is a gift of God, He gives elect, covenant children faith to believe in Christ and to confess their sins.

The trouble is that baptistic theology is independentistic—a grave weakness. They teach, so to speak, “Every man for himself.” God deals with every man in isolation from all others and as an individual. This inevitably leads to Arminianism. The Scriptures teach the organic unity of family life: God works out His salvation in families. He deals with people in all their organic relationships in life, and children in families.

Those interested in this question can read an extensive development of it in my book, *We and Our Children*, available from the CPRC Bookstore (£9.90, including P&P).

*Prof. Hanko*