

Whereas the Lord “endured ... the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction [i.e., the reprobate],” Paul declares that He has “much longsuffering” upon “the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory [i.e., the elect]” (Rom. 9:22-23).

Third, God’s longsuffering is particular because of the groups to which it is shown, such as the “eight souls [who] were saved by water” in the ark (I Pet. 3:20), spiritual Israel (Joel 2:13), penitent Gentiles (Jonah 4:2), believing Jews and Gentiles throughout the New Testament age (I Tim. 1:16), and godly individuals, such as Jeremiah (Jer. 15:15) and Paul (I Tim. 1:16).

Fourth, we know that God’s longsuffering is particular since it is always salvific or saving: “the longsuffering of our Lord *is* salvation” (II Pet. 3:15). It is revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ (I Tim. 1:15-16), who is the “only Redeemer of God’s elect” (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, A. 21).

At this stage, a question arises regarding the nature of God: Is He longsuffering *in Himself*? The answer is an emphatic Yes!

The reason for this lies, first, in God’s self-sufficiency. He has need of nothing outside Himself for He is perfectly full and rich. Thus the Almighty is self-sufficient in all His attributes, including His longsuffering. Second, Jehovah is unchangeable. Therefore, He cannot *become* longsuffering through His creation.

So how is God longsuffering in His own Being? First, we need to remove the idea of time from all our thoughts about Jehovah, since He is eternal or timeless, for there is no time in Him. Second, the Almighty never grows tired or bored with Himself because of His own infinite glory, riches and fulness (whereas we, being finite and sinful, can and do become tired of ourselves!).

If you would like a definition, God’s longsuffering is His constant and never-wearying delight in Himself as the perfectly blessed One. We worship the longsuffering Jehovah (I Tim. 1:16) from the heart: “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen” (17)!

God is also longsuffering regarding His Persons. The Triune God is one in His Being and three in His Persons, as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. He enjoys infinitely blessed covenant fellowship in Himself, between the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. This divine Fellowship is absolutely perfect for it is always vibrant, beautiful, deep and satisfying. The fellowship of the three divine Persons never wanes or grows stale (unlike our fellowship with one another in this life, sadly).

Concerning our longsuffering Triune God (16), we again exclaim, “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen” (17)!

Rev. Stewart

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God’s Longsuffering—Particular and in Himself

In the last three issues of the *News*, we have surveyed all the biblical references to God’s longsuffering. We have observed from both the Old Testament (the historical books, the Psalms and the prophets) and the New Testament (the gospels and the epistles) that Jehovah’s longsuffering is *particular*.

First, God’s longsuffering is seen to be particular because it is found amidst references to His grace, mercy and kindness. This is the case in all three passages in the Old Testament historical books. In Exodus 34:6, Jehovah refers to Himself as “The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering.” Later Moses declares, “The LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression” (Num. 14:18). Likewise, the Levites confessed that the Most High is “a God ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger [i.e., longsuffering], and of great kindness” (Neh. 9:17).

Since they are based upon the two passages in the Pentateuch which refer to God’s longsuffering, we are not surprised that all three verses in the Psalms which speak of this divine virtue connect His longsuffering with His compassion, grace and mercy. “But thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth” (86:15). “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger [i.e., longsuffering], and plenteous in mercy” (103:8). “The LORD is gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger [i.e., longsuffering], and of great mercy” (145:8).

The prophets present the same beautiful and harmonious picture of God’s attributes of goodness, with both concluding with references to His kindness: “And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger [i.e., longsuffering], and of great kindness” (Joel 2:13); “I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger [i.e., longsuffering], and of great kindness” (Jonah 4:2).

Second, it is evident that God’s longsuffering is particular because Scripture speaks of its being exercised towards the elect alone. This very point is made in the first Old Testament reference to this divine perfection. The God who is “merciful and gracious, longsuffering” (Ex. 34:6) declares, “[I] will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy” (33:19).

In the first New Testament text on Jehovah’s longsuffering, Jesus stresses this: “And shall not God avenge *his own elect*, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long [i.e., be longsuffering] with them?” (Luke 18:7). Similarly, Peter teaches that “God is longsuffering to *us-ward*” (II Pet. 3:9), those who are elect and “beloved” (1:10; 3:1).

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God's Immanence in Hell

One of our readers asked the following question: "How can God, being immanent, still be in hell, which is a place of total separation from Himself?"

Perhaps the brother is thinking of Job 26:6: "Hell is naked before him, and destruction hath no covering." He may especially be recalling Psalm 139:8: "If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there."

The last verse deserves to be quoted in its context: "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me" (7-10).

First, notice where Jehovah is present: land and sea (even the most far-flung regions), and heaven and hell. Second, observe that God is present everywhere in all His Persons, including the Holy Spirit (7) and so He is present spiritually and invisibly. Third, let us embrace the comfort this brings to Jehovah's people for our God is present with us everywhere in His covenantal goodness. This evoked the Psalmist David's awe and amazement expressed in the form of a rhetorical question: "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?" (7).

But let us return to the question, this time proceeding more theologically.

God's immanence is the same as His omnipresence. Jehovah is everywhere present in the entire earthly and heavenly creation. God's immanence is intrinsically related to His works of creation and providence.

God's work of creation, according to Scripture, is that divine operation whereby He gave existence to all creatures in heaven and on earth in such a way that He remained separate in essence from them, while the creature was and remains dependent on Him for its existence.

To deny that God created all things is that dastardly heresy of evolutionism, which thrusts God out of His own creation. To deny that all creatures are dependent on God for their continued existence is Deism, a heresy born in England that has become the handmaiden of theistic evolutionism. Pantheism, on the other hand, teaches that all the creation is an outflowing of God's divine Being. The timid violet and the mighty oak are God Himself, His very Being, according to this devilish doctrine.

Scripture teaches that God created all things by the word of His power (Heb. 11:3) and that He continues to speak the word that brought the creation into existence so that it always owes its existence to God's word (1:3).

Once having brought man into existence, God continues to speak the word "man." If He should stop speaking that word, man would cease to exist. This is true of every man, both wicked and righteous—as well as *the* man, Jesus Christ in His human nature. After all, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1-14).

Providence means that the God who gives existence to all things also upholds and

directs all the activities of every creature in such a way that each is His instrument to reveal His greatness, power, majesty and sovereignty. Anything less than this would give power to the creature independent of God's power.

The Scriptures are clear on the fact that the hosts of darkness are also under Jehovah's sovereign control. Satan could bring evil on Job only with God's permission (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6). The demon who was a lying spirit in Ahab's prophets was sent by God (II Chron. 18:18-22). Christ, as our exalted Lord, has supreme authority at God's right hand also over the wicked (Ps. 2).

Since God is immanent in the wicked and sovereign over their lives, it is not difficult to understand that He is immanent in hell as well. We must, however, be careful as to how we understand this.

The Scriptures speak of God's omnipresence as regards rational, moral creatures in two senses. God can be, and is, present with the wicked and the righteous in fundamentally different ways. He is present with the wicked to uphold them by His sovereign power—also in hell—but He is present with the righteous in His favour, love and merciful care of them. Or, to put it differently, God is present with the wicked in His fierce wrath against them, while He loves His people in Jesus Christ and takes them into His own covenant fellowship.

I am inclined to think that hell would not be such a terrible place if God were not there. But God is there and that makes it so awful.

Is not that true even in earthly relationships? If I am living five thousand miles away from my father, when I in some way incurred his wrath, it would, I think, be tolerable if he told me of his anger by a letter. But if he were in the same room with me and I could see the blazing fury that filled his eyes—if I could hear the cold, measured words that conveyed his utter wrath—if every bodily movement spoke of his determination to disown me as his son and to have nothing more to do with me, that would be unbearable. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

This brings us to a misconception in the brother's question. The idea of hell as "a place of total separation from [God]" is, at best, incomplete. Hell is a place of total separation *from all the pleasant things God sends in His providence* but never from the omnipresent One Himself. God is in hell as the holy, avenging punisher of all impenitent sinners!

One more point: If God created and upholds the wicked, He does so for a purpose. That purpose is defined in *Belgic Confession* 16, which speaks of God's goal in election as being to reveal His mercy, adding that He is also "just, in leaving others in the fall and perdition wherein they have involved themselves." God's purpose in reprobation is to reveal His attribute of justice.

Prof. Hanko

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