

of sinners, who persecuted the church before God showed His rich “grace” to him (I Tim. 1:13-16).

All of this speaks to us, beloved! How longsuffering has God been to us regarding our original sins! What about all of the sins of our youth (Ps. 25:7)? Many of us can recall our horrible iniquities before we came to Christ. There are also our sins as Christians, some of which seem to us to be even worse than our pre-conversion sins because they were committed against far greater light. We have transgressed God’s holy law as His children, as church members, as earthly sons or daughters, as husbands or wives, as fathers or mothers, at home and at work, in our thoughts and words and deeds!

But our covenant God comes to us in Scripture, reminding us of His longsuffering! Through the preaching of the holy gospel, He declares to us that He is longsuffering, as the One who is patient, gracious and slow to anger. Jehovah’s longsuffering is symbolized and sealed in the sacrament of holy baptism (I Pet. 3:20-21).

God’s longsuffering is an instance of what are often called His communicable attributes, that is, those divine perfections that He works into the hearts and lives of His people so that they reflect His virtues in a creaturely way.

Think of the parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18:23-35, which could also be called the parable of the unlongsuffering servant! Regarding the slave and his master, we read, “The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with [i.e., be longsuffering towards] me, and I will pay thee all” (26). Regarding the slave and his fellow slave, we read, “And his fellow servant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with [i.e., be longsuffering towards] me, and I will pay thee all” (29).

The point of the parable is that we should be longsuffering towards and forgive those who have wronged us, if they ask for our forgiveness (and we should be willing to forgive those who wrong us, if they do not ask for our pardon). After all, Scripture itself tells us the lesson regarding forgiveness that Christ’s parable is designed to teach: “Jesus saith unto him [i.e., Peter], I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven” (22).

Forgive others! After all, God has been, and is, longsuffering towards you and has forgiven you billions of sins, like the servant who owes an unpayable debt in the parable. Thus we *must* be longsuffering and forgive others. The truth of God’s longsuffering is very practical and for some this is a hard spiritual lesson to learn. By meditating upon, and rejoicing in, God’s longsuffering in Himself and towards us miserable offenders, the Holy Spirit enables us to be longsuffering and forgiving to those who have sinned against us.

What Christ teaches in one of His inimitable parables, the apostle Paul states in one of his canonical epistles: “Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved ... *longsuffering*; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye” (Col. 3:12-13). This is our calling as the undeserving objects of God’s longsuffering!

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God’s Longsuffering and the Sins of His Elect

Having considered the reprobate ungodly in the last issue of the *Covenant Reformed News*, we now turn to Scripture’s teaching on the divine attribute of longsuffering with regard to the sins of God’s people in Jesus Christ.

Think of the terrible transgressions of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament! These included their lewd idolatry with the golden calf at Mount Sinai (Ex. 32-34) and their stubborn refusal at Kadesh to enter the promised land (Num. 13-14). We read of God’s being longsuffering or slow to anger at both of these low points, both at the time (Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18) and later (Neh. 9:17).

This last verse occurs in a review of Israel’s history that highlights Jehovah’s mighty acts for the salvation of His people despite their terrible sins. Nehemiah 9 begins with the children of Israel coming together for a fast, covered with “sackclothes” and with dust upon their heads (1), confessing “their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers” (2).

Listen to their lament: “our fathers dealt proudly, and hardened their necks, and hearkened not to thy commandments, And refused to obey, neither were mindful of thy wonders that thou didst among them; but hardened their necks” (16-17). Moreover, “they were disobedient, and rebelled against thee, and cast thy law behind their backs, and slew thy prophets which testified against them to turn them to thee, and they wrought great provocations” (26). Repeatedly, “they did evil again before thee ... they dealt proudly, and hearkened not unto thy commandments, but sinned against thy judgments ... and withdrew the shoulder, and hardened their neck, and would not hear” (28, 29).

Thus the Levites declare on behalf of Israel, “we have done wickedly: Neither have our kings, our princes, our priests, nor our fathers, kept thy law, nor hearkened unto thy commandments and thy testimonies, wherewith thou didst testify against them. For they have not served thee in their kingdom” (33-35). Yet there was hope because God was longsuffering or “slow to anger” (17)!

No wonder that holy David, who meditated in God’s law day and night, celebrated this divine virtue (Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 145:8) in connection with the forgiveness of sins (Ps. 86:5; 103: 3, 10, 12).

God also magnified His longsuffering in His salvation of elect Gentiles, including the Ninevites (Jonah 4:2) and the New Testament church (II Pet. 3:9, 15), most of which is not ethnically Jewish (Rom. 9:22-24). What a multitude of sins of former pagans are covered in the blood of Jesus Christ in the longsuffering of God!

Jehovah is “longsuffering” to predestinated individuals, including Paul, the “chief”
(continued on p. 4)

False Prophets

“And if the prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing, I the LORD have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand upon him, and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel. And they shall bear the punishment of their iniquity: the punishment of the prophet shall be even as the punishment of him that seeketh unto him” (Eze. 14:9-10).

A reader of the *News* from Uganda asked to have this passage explained.

God spoke to His people Israel in different ways. Sometimes He spoke directly to them, as at Sinai; sometimes through miracles He performed for them, which miracles were signs of spiritual truths; very frequently, God spoke to His people through prophets whom He anointed with His Spirit. Moses himself was a prophet through whom God spoke, more frequently, it seems, than any other prophet. But all the prophets spoke the Word that God gave them to speak. That was their glorious calling.

Just as a priest was a mediator between God and His people, and just as a king ruled over God's people in His name, so a prophet spoke the Word of God. Even the word “prophet” means one who “bubbles over” with the Word of God. When Jeremiah, because he suffered much and was repeatedly rejected by Judah, wanted to resign his office and told God so, he could not resign because, as he put it, the Word of God was “as a burning fire” within him (Jer. 20:9). But where there were true prophets, there were also false prophets. They put themselves in an office to which they were not called by God. They falsely claimed to be sent by God and to speak on His behalf.

Even before Israel entered Canaan, while they were in the plains of Moab ready to cross the River Jordan, God through Moses spoke long to them. Among the things He said to them was His warning against false prophets and how Israel could distinguish them from the true prophets of God (e.g., Deut. 13; 18).

Perhaps, the clearest instance of false prophets as distinguished from a true prophet is found in II Chronicles 18. (The reader is urged to read the entire chapter and especially verses 4-27.) Let us take a close look at this chapter for it answers the questions of the reader.

II Chronicles 18 describes the wicked agreement between godless Ahab and God-fearing Jehoshaphat to go to war together against Syria. As the prophet Jehu told him, this was very wrong of Jehoshaphat: “Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the LORD? therefore is wrath upon thee from before the LORD” (19:2). The righteous should never join with the wicked for any reason.

Ahab and Jehoshaphat were sitting at the entrance of the city of Samaria, where in most cities in Israel was a huge gathering place, a sort of public square. The false prophets that claimed to speak in God's name were prophesying before the two kings, proclaiming and saying that the kings should indeed fight against the Syrians because Jehovah said they would be victorious.

Jehoshaphat asked for a prophet of the Lord and Ahab knew only of one, Micaiah

by name, but Ahab did not like Micaiah because he always spoke evil of wicked Ahab. It is a strange conversation that revealed Ahab's twisted mind. Micaiah prophesied the same as the prophets of Baal. Ahab demanded that he speak Jehovah's word. Micaiah did so and was imprisoned by Ahab for doing it.

In the course of Micaiah's prophesy of the defeat that Israel would suffer, he explained why the false prophets prophesied falsely. Some of the demons were in heaven (as was possible for them in the old dispensation) and God asked the assembly for volunteers to deceive Ahab. Some demons said they could deceive the king by being a lying spirit in Ahab's false prophets and God gave them permission to do this.

This answers the question of the reader why the text quoted speaks of God deceiving wicked prophets. God is sovereign also over the demons. Yet, as the text makes clear, those who prophesy falsely, as well as those who listen to and act on the wicked prophesies that lead people astray, are all guilty. For they all commit their sin wilfully.

In other words, the people who listen to false prophets know that the prophet to whom they listen is a wicked prophet who does not come with the Word of God. They listen to him anyway and do what he says. They are enticed by the false prophet's flattering words and like the predictions that suit them. (I do not know why good King Jehoshaphat did what the false prophets said and ignored what he knew to be the Word of God. He must have been so enamoured by his desire to cooperate with wicked Israel that he was blind to what he knew he ought to do.)

In the old dispensation, the Lord gave guidelines for Israel to distinguish between a false prophet and a true prophet. For one thing, they were to see whether the predictions the prophets made actually took place.

Today's false prophets swarm like bees in the church world. Jesus said this would happen as a sign of His coming (Matt. 24:4-5, 11, 23-28). They claim to speak the Word of God but instead they speak seducing words, words that men like to hear. All the false prophets who emerge throughout the whole history of the church will culminate with the greatest of all false prophets, the Antichrist. The whole world will accept him not only as a prophet but as if he were Christ Himself, the great prophet of God (II Thess. 2:1-12; Rev. 13:3-8).

In the new dispensation, God has given to His church an infallible canon by which every prophet, whether true or false, can be evaluated or tested. That canon is the sacred Scriptures. Let us not be deceived: those who follow false prophets know they are false; they follow them anyway, but they walk contrary to God's righteous ways and will be destroyed. We must listen to prophets who bring to us the Word of God as found in the holy Scriptures alone.

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