

“one Lord,” and worshipping “one God and Father of all” (4-6). But how? “With all lowliness and meekness, *with longsuffering*, forbearing one another in love” (2).

Second, in Colossians 3 also, longsuffering (12) serves the fellowship of believers (13) and “peace” in the “one body” of Christ’s church (15). Let us heed the apostolic exhortation: “Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, *longsuffering*” (12). The command to the individual child of God to “put on” various spiritual graces, including longsuffering, shows how our ongoing sanctification and growth in the image of God (10), including longsuffering, serves the unity of the church.

As well as the calling of all Christians to be longsuffering and the role it plays in congregational peace, Scripture also speaks in three places of the importance of longsuffering in the work of the Apostle Paul and Evangelist Timothy. These passages of God’s Word especially apply, in our day, to ministers of the gospel.

Paul wrote II Corinthians with Timothy (1:1). In chapter 6, the Apostle explains *how* we give “no offence in any thing” (3) and so manifest ourselves “as the ministers of God” (4), even in the midst of slander, persecution, poverty and distress (4-10): “By pureness, by knowledge, *by longsuffering*, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned” (6)!

In his last canonical epistle, Paul reminds Timothy of his apostolic persecutions during his first missionary journey (Acts 13-14) at Antioch, Iconium and Lystra (II Tim. 3:11). Paul also speaks of the battle with false teachers (1-9, 13). In the midst of these references to persecutors and heretics, and in sharp contrast to them, the Apostle tells Timothy, “But thou hast fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, *longsuffering*, charity, patience” (10). One needs grace to suffer long when one is being cruelly persecuted by wicked men and vehemently opposed by false teachers!

We end this article, and thus the series of nine articles on longsuffering, with II Timothy 4:2: “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all *longsuffering* and doctrine.” The visible church includes weak believers and even some hypocrites. Not all the physical children of believers are elect; there are also among them a carnal seed who will, in due time, reveal themselves as such (Rom. 9:6). It has been well said that “God has a billy goat in the congregation to make the minister humble!” From all this, it is evident that faithfulness to Christ will include admonition and the exercise of church discipline regarding the impenitent. How necessary it is, therefore, that the pastor “reprove, rebuke, exhort with all ... *doctrine*,” bringing the full teaching of the objective Word of God to those who err. Subjectively, the minister must also “reprove, rebuke, exhort with *all longsuffering*”! *Rev. Stewart*

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Our Calling to Be Longsuffering

As God’s elect, redeemed and regenerated people, we are called to reflect our heavenly Father’s communicable attributes, including His longsuffering to us. By His grace, we do this! Longsuffering is included as the fourth virtue in the ninefold fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5: “love, joy, peace, *longsuffering*, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law” (22-23).

In I Corinthians 13, the greatest biblical chapter on Christian love, it is the quality mentioned first: “Charity suffereth long [i.e., is longsuffering], and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up” (4).

Colossians 1:11 contains part of Paul’s desire and prayer for believers, that we may be “Strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and *longsuffering* with joyfulness.” The Apostle’s petition here is that God would grant us spiritual strength so that we are able to be longsuffering towards others, able to control our own spirits (without getting sinfully angry), tongues (without speaking hastily or bitterly) and bodies (without striking people).

The book of Proverbs contains three texts which praise the blessed virtue of longsuffering, here translated “slow to anger” or “slow to wrath.” First, “He that is *slow to anger* is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city” (16:32). Here longsuffering flows from inner power so that we are able to control our spirits, as in Colossians 1:11. Second, “He that is *slow to wrath* is of great understanding: but he that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly” (Prov. 14:29). Here longsuffering is proof of our spiritual understanding in Christ (cf. Isa. 11:2). Third, “A wrathful man stirreth up strife: but he that is *slow to anger* appeaseth strife” (Prov. 15:18). Here the believer, possessed of the Holy Spirit’s peace, exercises longsuffering so that strife does not result.

I Thessalonians 5:14 applies to our behaviour towards everybody, head for head, but especially, in its context, towards our brothers and sisters in the church: “Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient [i.e., longsuffering] toward all men.” How necessary in the congregation is this grace of longsuffering, lest foolish words and rude behaviour mar the communion of the saints and grieve the Holy Spirit of God.

Here are a couple of other New Testament passages that connect longsuffering and church unity. First, Ephesians 4 exhorts us to be diligent “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (3), for the church is “one body,” created by “one [internal] baptism,” animated by “one Spirit,” believing “one faith,” possessed of “one hope,” serving

(continued on p. 4)

Calling God “Our Father”

A reader writes, “I am trying to ascertain when the big change occurred among God’s people that meant they could and should call Him their Father. We find it occasionally in the Old Testament prophets but when Jesus said pray like this, ‘Our Father,’ most commentators say that this was altogether novel. How did John, who also taught his disciples to pray, address God? I guess it was as Jehovah or *Elohim* but how could Christ treat His disciples as God’s adopted sons before His sacrifice and the outpouring of the Spirit? Or was He anticipating what would shortly happen?”

In my book, *When You Pray*, I suggested that only after our Lord came was it possible for God’s people (individually) to address God as their Father. Although I received many comments and questions on the material in that book, I am sure more questions were generated by that remark than any other part of it. I will try again to answer the question as clearly as I know how.

The questioner is correct when he asks, “Or was He anticipating what would shortly happen?” It is not strange that our Lord anticipated His suffering, death and resurrection. He also spoke many times to His disciples, and the multitudes that heard Him preach, of the blessings that would come to His people after He had completed His work on earth. One of those blessings, great and marvellous, was that now in their prayers they could call God their Father.

Before I say anything more, to me the real problem is not that the Old Testament saints could not individually call God their Father; the really perplexing problem was that they could pray at all! I know that the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, prayed but this was possible because they were, in a dim sort of way, prophets, priests and kings before these three offices were separated from each other. Later, when the three offices were separated in Israel, we read of occasions when men who held one of these three offices did pray. We even occasionally read of a saint praying—as in the case of Hannah, the wife of Elkanah and, eventually, the mother of Samuel. But even Hannah’s prayer was divinely inspired and it is similar in many ways to Mary’s prayer, when she learned that she was pregnant with Christ. Mary may even have had Hannah’s prayer in mind.

Ordinarily God’s people had to go to a priest or a prophet to learn the will of God. They had, frequently, to go to the temple with a sacrifice in order to worship God and pray to Him. It was also legitimate in those days of the shadows of good things to come to make use of the Urim and Thummim. It is true that many of the Psalms were prayers and were sung in the temple, but they were all inspired by God and penned by men whom He had chosen.

When John and Jesus preached, their very sermons presupposed that the people prayed but that the people themselves knew that their prayers were difficult, for the way into the inner sanctuary where God dwelt was blocked by the veil that separated the Most Holy Place from the rest of the temple. Now God’s people are called to enter boldly into His presence, for the way is opened through the cross of Christ (Heb. 10:1-25).

When our great High Priest came to earth to make the perfect sacrifice, and taught His disciples and the multitudes what marvellous blessings the saints would receive now that the perfect sacrifice was about to be made, Jesus tells His disciples (and us) that we may not only go directly to God, but also when we arrive at the foot of His throne of mercy and grace, led there by Christ, we may even, wonder of all wonders, call the eternal and infinitely blessed God, “Our Father!”

I must confess that for me there are times when I have to struggle to come to God in the faith that He is a father to us. It sometimes seems presumptuous. God is infinitely great. He makes the heavens His throne and the earth His footstool. He has created all things and upholds them by the word of His power. The distant galaxies, the tiny ant, the electron that spins around the nucleus of an atom—His hand moves them all. His holiness is a light too bright for even the seraphs, who cover their faces with their wings and cry, “Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa. 6:3). Yet here I am, less than a speck of dust and a terrible sinner besides. His name I have blasphemed and cursed, and His infinite holiness I have trampled under my feet. And I am going to call Him “my Father”?

I have to read Hebrews 10 once again, for God calls me to Him with words of tender care. He tells me, “It is possible. I have given you My own Son, Jesus Christ the righteous, who will lead you, even trembling and awestruck, to Me. I will take you in My arms with an everlasting love and bring you home to live with Me forever.”

I cannot list here the many and wonderful blessings that we receive from our Father in heaven. Even in the Old Testament, the infinitely blessed God is compared to an earthly father: “Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him” (Ps. 103:13). If you want to know something of what blessings are ours because Jehovah is our Father, read Psalm 103 in full. It will be good for you.

Remember, we can and must call God our Father because of the gift of His only begotten Son. He is the eternal Son, Himself “true God of true God,” as the *Nicene Creed* states, whom God gave in His everlasting love for us. God loves His Son with a great love, yet He gave Him to us because it is His eternal purpose to glorify His name through the creation of a new family, a family that reflects the riches of the Triune God who lives a family life in Himself. In that family, the Triune God is Father; Christ is our elder brother, who made the family of God possible for us; we are all children of God for Christ’s sake. Because He is the Son, believers are sons in Him. Because He cried out, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:34), we can follow Him to God.

We hide behind Christ when we approach the throne of God and pray “for Jesus’ sake.” But we are told to come with boldness! We must not doubt. We may not be so artificially humble that we dare not come where our Father dwells. With unceasing songs of praise, we cast all our cares upon Him, for He cares for us. *Prof. Hanko*

Prof. Hanko’s *When You Pray* (hardback, 192 pp.) is available from the CPRC Bookstore for £14.30 (inc. P&P in the UK).