

Providence
William S. Plumer, 1865

**SOME EXPLANATION OF THE DELAYS OF PROVIDENCE IN PUNISHING THE WICKED.
HOW DIVINE PATIENCE SHOULD BE REGARDED; AND HOW IT MAY BE ABUSED.**

The Almighty does not settle his accounts with creatures every thirty days. He is long-suffering. He is patient under affronts. He forbears to execute deserved wrath upon offenders. This is one of the striking displays of the goodness of God designed to lead us to repentance. He bears long with us. He is slow to anger. He is *the God of patience*. Long-suffering is of his very essence. Man may exist without being kind, and gentle, and forbearing. God cannot. He can no more cease to be pitiful than he can cease to be. He warns; he entreats; he follows with mercy the very men, who flee from his gracious presence and kind offers. Often for a long time he delays his judgments.

It is very important that we should not misunderstand God's dealings in this matter. Let us not misinterpret providence, nor fall into the errors of the wicked. A few remarks made in order may help to set the matter in a clear light.

I. Let us notice some things which do not cause God to delay deserved punishment.

1. God does not defer the punishment of any sinner, because it would be unrighteous instantly to cut him down, and bring him to judgment. The sentence, "*The soul that sins, it shall die*"—is as just as it is alarming. Every sin deserves God's wrath and curse now and hereafter. It deserves punishment the moment it is committed. What evil there is in iniquity, is in it at the instant of perpetration. A murder does not become less or more a murder by the lapse of time. Whatever guilt there is in any sin, is in it from the first. A repetition of an offence is an additional sin. But it would be just and right in God to punish deservedly and terribly, as soon as he is insulted and offended. He did so in the case of the rebel angels.

2. Nor does God withhold his wrath, because we have not *often* offended him. Of each of us it is true that our sins are more than the hairs of our heads. They are innumerable. We cannot answer for one of a thousand of them. And each one of them calls for vengeance.

3. Nor does God exercise forbearance, because he has not at all times a distinct view of the number and aggravation of our offences. In no sense does God ever forget any

sin. He always sees it, knows it, hates it. His soul abhors it. He is angry with the wicked every day. No being is so far removed from everything like insensibility to sin, as God is.

4. Nor does God delay the punishment of the wicked because they escape his notice, or elude his search; nor because he cannot prove them guilty, nor because he is not as competent to decide upon their case as he ever will be. Human governments sometimes cannot detect, arrest, or convict. Evidence may be lacking. Witnesses may be absent. The law in the case may be doubtful. But these things never cause a moment's delay in the *divine* government.

5. Nor are sinners allowed to go unpunished for a season, because God regards with indifference the false impressions, which some receive from his long-suffering. On the contrary, he "is a jealous God." He is most jealous of his honor, and carefully guards the glory of his government. He would forever part with all the creatures he has made, rather than allow one truthful charge to be brought against his justice. When the rebellion broke out in heaven—in a moment he emptied the shining seats above, rather than let one sinning angel remain in his estate, a standing reproach to God, a monument of God's tolerance of sin.

6. Nor does God refrain to punish the wicked for a time, because he has not full power to execute any sentence, which his justice might decree. Omnipotence can do anything—at any time! Human governments are sometimes afraid to punish, lest they should arouse popular indignation, or dangerous commotions. But God is not for one moment restrained from executing the fierceness of his anger by any such fear. Were the world in arms against him, He who sits in the heavens would laugh at their impotent rage. One breath, one word from Jehovah would sweep them down to hell in a moment!

7. Nor is there in the divine mind any weakness, any irresolution, any lack of determination to award to every man according as his case shall demand. Many offences among men go entirely unpunished because of the vacillation of mind or feebleness of spirit in parents, masters or rulers. But it is far otherwise with God. He proceeds to the work of judgment and of punishment with an inflexible purpose, whenever his holiness and wisdom determine that the right time has come.

Let us then **II. Consider positively—why God bears long with men.** Perhaps the discussion of this point is no more important than that of the preceding. But surely there are some things involved in it, which ought to make it to us lost sinners a welcome and a delightful theme.

1. God delays to punish sinners, because in his nature are found infinite love and mercy. This thought is full of weight and of interest. Let us dwell upon it. God is "*long-suffering to us*," because he has a loving, pitying, compassionate nature.

A modern writer [William Nevins] has collected and compared many of the forms of expression used on this subject. He says,

"There is something very special in the manner in which this doctrine is taught.

Observe, *first*, several words, nearly synonymous, are used to teach us the doctrine, such as *merciful, gracious, long-suffering, pitiful, slow to anger*. And not satisfied with the positive the inspired writers use the superlative—*very pitiful* and *very gracious* also.

Observe, *secondly*, that not content with the singular, *mercy*, they adopt and employ the plural form, *mercies*. They speak of the *mercies* of God; nor are they content with a *simple* plural; but they speak of these mercies as *manifold*, yes, they speak of the *multitude of his mercies*. This is strange language. It expresses a conception not of human origin. And to denote that there is nothing uncertain about these mercies, they speak of them as *sure* mercies; and they speak of them not only as many but *great!* yes, and *great above the heavens!* And they speak of the greatness of his mercies, in *magnitude* equal to what they are in *multitude*—many and great and sure mercies. Think of that! But they are not *mere* mercies—but *tender* mercies, and these mercies they speak of not as *derived*—but as *original* with God. They speak of him as *the Father of mercies*; and they take care to tell us that mercy is not *accidental* to God—but essential; they speak of it as *belonging* to him. Daniel goes further still; he says—'*To the Lord our God belong mercies*' and forgiveness? No; but '*forgivenesses*.' You may say that is not proper grammar—but it is glorious doctrine!

Thirdly, there is another set of phrases they use; they speak of God as *rich* in mercy, *plenteous* in mercy, and *full of* compassion. They speak of his *abundant* mercy, of the earth as *full of his mercy*, to denote its amplitude. And in respect of its continuance, they say *his compassions fail not*, and in Psalm 136, twenty-six times it is said, *His mercy endures forever*. There is still another phraseology used by the sacred writers. They speak of God's *kindness*, his *great* kindness, his *marvelous* kindness, his *everlasting* kindness. But they are not satisfied to speak of it as simple kindness; they call it *merciful* kindness, and speak of it as *great* towards us. They call it *loving-kindness*, also, and we read of God's *marvelous* and *excellent* loving-kindness, with

which it is said also that he crowns us! Here, too, they use the plural form, *loving-kindnesses*; and they speak of *the multitude of his loving-kindnesses*. **What more could they say?**

Fourthly, we find the mercy of God compared to certain human exercises; for example, to a father's pity, which it is said to be like, and to a brother's friendship, than which it is closer, and to a mother's love, which it is said to exceed."

Truly, it is astonishing that such sinners as we are should be spared; but surely it is not astonishing that if spared at all, it should be under the government of *such* a God. "*The Lord is long-suffering, not willing that any should perish.*" God never punishes with delight. He does not will, or plan, or seek the ruin of his bitterest and most inveterate enemies. In the esteem of God the death of a sinner is a dreadful thing. "*Many a time he turns his anger away*" (Psalm 78:38) before he strikes a blow or crushes a sinful worm. The reason is, "*God is love.*" None else would bear so long—would so long avert deserved and terrible punishments from the heads of the rebellious. Truly, the prophet told us of the glorious nature of God, when he said, "The Lord does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men."

So far as we know, there is but one thing upon which the pure and benevolent mind of God looks with more aversion than upon the misery of his creatures. That one thing is worse than all misery, more horrible than the torments of hell. It is SIN, the parent of all misery, all disorder, all confusion. Every sigh from hell and every groan from earth is wrought out by sin, man's most cruel tyrant, God's greatest enemy. Benevolent, indeed, must be the nature of Jehovah to show pity and long-suffering to sinners.

2. God delays deserved punishment, because if he did not, the race of man would immediately be extinct, and horrible desolation would seize upon all the habitable parts of the earth. In the days of Noah the long-suffering of God, after waiting a hundred and twenty years, was exhausted, and but eight souls escaped the dreadful overthrow. God has great ends to answer by the creation of the world. To sweep away all its inhabitants would defeat those glorious purposes.

3. One great purpose of God is to continue and enlarge the church of Christ upon earth. The flock of God has ever been composed of those, who, in God's esteem and in their own esteem, had once been great sinners, and so deserved dreadful judgments. Had not God patiently borne with their evil manners, there is not one member of the visible

church, who would not long since have perished. So says the conscience of every renewed man.

"But I will not destroy them all," says the Lord. "For just as good grapes are found among a cluster of bad ones (and someone will say, 'Don't throw them all away—there are some good grapes there!'), so I will not destroy all Israel. For I still have true servants there." Isaiah 65:8.

4. For the sake of his people, and in answer to their prayers, many a wicked man is spared for a long time. So Jesus taught, *"Except those days be shortened, there should no flesh be saved—but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened."* Ten righteous men would have saved the cities of the plain from the vengeance of eternal fire. Many a time God permits the wicked to outlive their godly parents and friends, that the pious may escape the anguish of weeping over them, when they die in their sins, in their unbelief, and in their impenitency.

5. God long spares sinners, that by his goodness they may be led to repentance. He is *"not willing that any should perish—but that all should come to repentance."* In subduing the hearts of sinners, God's great argument is his kindness. If God instantly punished every man according to his transgressions, we could no more be exhorted to *"count the long-suffering of God salvation."* Thus God teaches. So also is his practice. A right view of the divine forbearance and mercy breaks every heart that ever is broken, bows every will that ever submits. *"They shall look on him whom they have pierced—and mourn."*

6. God long spares sinful men that he may entirely cut off all pleas from his incorrigible foes, and make his justice glorious, when he shall at last visit them for their sins. Every murmur against God, and every suspicion of the divine equity must be banished forever, if it shall at last appear that *"God endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction,"* and that not until it was evident that longer forbearance would give plausibility to the charge of weakness or irresolution, did God *"show his wrath and make his power known."* The truth must be kept alive that "there is a God that judges in the earth." But in impressing even this truth on men Jehovah adopts a course of great long-suffering.

Let us notice— **III. The proper USES of this doctrine.**

1. If God is so long-suffering to us, we ought to be long-suffering to one another. No man has ever treated any of us as badly as each of us has treated God. If God spares us, let

us spare one another. "*Beloved, if God so loved us—we ought also to love one another.*" "*Be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.*" The true spirit of the Gospel never calls down fire from heaven even on the bitterest foes. He, to whom ten thousand talents have been forgiven, is surely not the man to take his brother by the throat, and say—Pay me the fifty pence you owe!

2. When we see God sparing the lives of our wicked friends and neighbors, we ought to labor and pray for their salvation. Not only should we desire it. We should also expect it. Perhaps the church often abandons sinners before God's Spirit forsakes them. Pray and toil for their conversion while there is breath—for while there is life, there is hope. Look at the miracles of grace around you, yes, look at yourself, and be encouraged to hope and pray for others!

3. Let a due consideration of God's long-suffering increase our abhorrence of sin. All sin is an offence against the most gentle, loving, patient, forbearing Being in the universe. To maltreat any *man* is wrong. But to pursue with causeless insults, and abuse a person who shows a loving disposition, even after he has been treated amiss, is justly regarded as very despicable. Such is the real character of all the sin we commit against God. And sin in the regenerate is against more love, more light and more mercy than are granted to the unregenerate. O Christian, hate sin in all—but most of all, hate it in yourself.

4. Let the long-suffering of God lead you carefully to study, admire and imitate the character of God. Be like him. Think upon his name. Acquaint yourself with God and be at peace. His nature is love. Hell for depth, heaven for height, the ocean for vastness, the sun for brilliancy are all wonderful objects. But **God's character is a combination of all that is vast, sublime, majestic, kind, just, excellent and every way glorious.** O study the character of God.

5. Learn to be patient and even thankful amidst trials and afflictions. It does not befit us to make so much of a light affliction—when we deserve a heavy curse! Think of the kindness still shown you. "Were there but a single mercy apportioned to each moment of our lives, the sum would rise very high; but how is our arithmetic confounded when every minute has more than we can distinctly number." "*Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Your sorrows may be great—but the promises and the grace secured by covenant are far greater. Therefore, "strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees." Any sinner, on whom the sentence of fiery condemnation has not been executed, has great cause of joy and gratitude to God for sparing mercy. Surely

he, whose hope is set in God, ought never to be much cast down—but ought to remember that he shall yet sing the song of Moses and Miriam, yes of Moses and the Lamb!

IV. Several ways in which the long-suffering of God is perverted and abused.

1. Some, finding the wicked spared so long, infer that there is no God at all. They become atheists. There have been such monsters on earth. Reasoning more false than that—which from God's goodness infers his non-existence—can hardly be imagined!

2. A kindred error is that, when from God's patience, men infer that he is not just, and holy, and determined to deal with the wicked according to their sins. This is the great pillar, on which rest many false notions or systems of belief. He, who from God's long-suffering argues that he will clear the guilty and justify the wicked, perverts the most precious things. To the rebellious God never says, "*It shall be well with you.*" But he does say, "*Will you steal, and murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods, which you know not; and come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered to do all these abominations?*" That is, they inferred that their conduct was not displeasing to God, because awful judgments had not swept them away. Elsewhere God says, "*Because I kept silence,*" that is did not instantly and terribly reprove your wickedness, "*because I kept silence you thought I was altogether such a one as yourself.*" Thus men deny God's attributes. "*The wicked live, become old, yes, are mighty in power,*" not because there is not a just God—but because that just God is patient and merciful.

3. Some abuse the long-suffering of God, not only to continuing in sin—but to making themselves more vile than ever. Often did the Lord lift the curse from off the head of Pharaoh, and as often did he sin the more. He was very gracious when the pangs were upon him—but as soon as the suffering was over, his relentings were over also. "*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.*" What sad perverseness is here! The sinner says, Because God is good I will be bad; because he is slow to anger, I will walk in the evil of my own ways, and pursue the wicked desires of my heart. These thoughts may not be framed into words—but are they not carried out in the lives of many? Does not the increasing wickedness of men of uncircumcised hearts declare this as plainly as God's word itself? To all such, the following solemn thoughts are presented.

a. A final perdition wrought out under circumstances of such amazing mercy as surround you, will be far more intolerable than if your life had been shorter and your blessings fewer.

b. That divine clemency, which you now abuse and pervert, may, for anything you know, be nearly exhausted! When it shall be all gone, and your lamp put out in obscure darkness, how can you bear reflection on the course of life you are now pursuing?

c. If any shall be so wicked as to persist in sin and finally perish, the imputation of folly and madness will fall upon their own head. "You have destroyed yourself!" "You have procured this unto yourself!" What dreadful sentences are these!

d. The Scripture calls on all the wicked to turn and live. Will you *repent*? Will you *now* repent? That you will repent is as certain as that there is a holy and just God. But whether your repentance shall be that sorrow, which works death; or that godly sorrow which works repentance not to be repented of—is the great question. Shall your repentance be unto life and salvation? or shall it be but the fruitless relenting of a soul in an undone eternity? O accept the mercy offered to you now. Embrace the Savior, while he waits to be gracious.