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"IF YE THEN BE RISEN WITH CHRIST, SEEK THOSE THINGS
WHICH ARE ABOVE, WHERE CHRIST SITTETH ON THE
RIGHT HAND OF GOD." COL. 3. 1.

THE FORBEARANCE
AND LONGSUFFERING OF GOD.

An Address (revised) at

Ninories,
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by
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OUTLINE:

1. Emphasis in Scripture (e.g. Romans 2:4; 9:22, cf. Genesis 15:16; Numbers 14:18; Luke 13:8,9; Revelation 2:21.)
 2. Personal Experiences (1 Timothy 1:16; Lamentations 3:22.)
 3. Common Misconceptions and Inferences.
 4. The Contrasted Power of Reigning Grace. (Romans 5:21.)
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This evening beloved friends, we are seeking to ponder The Forbearance and Longsuffering of God. We do want to be clear with regard to this aspect of the character of God. I do not mean that we shall understand all the nature of God and all His character. We acknowledge that by nature we are very ignorant and that even when we have received grace we do not yet know as we were known, but only see through a glass darkly, and know in part. The character of God, is like unto God Himself, not only past finding out, but beyond our limited perception. There is no defect in the grace that reveals, but there are many defects in those to whom it is revealed, and if God can remove, as He pleases, our defects and the results of them, He is oft-times pleased to humble us in making us conscious of our partial knowledge that we may learn the privilege of faith and confidence and praise beyond mere mental acquaintance with facts.

The forbearance of God is emphasized in Scripture and therefore we acknowledge that it exists, for God does not deal with a mere term. There is a reality. Forbearance is not only a word, it is a fact; God has forbearance. It reveals part of His character, it is the display of one of His attributes, and we ask ourselves what is this forbearance of God, what is His longsuffering? We turn to Romans 2 and there we find in verse 4, "Despisest thou the riches of His goodness and forbearance and longsuffering not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to

repentance". Here the two words are together and linked with the word "goodness". "Forbearance" is by derivation a "holding up". The noun would not show what this signified, but the verb rather implies a holding oneself up, as the normal thought. It is not only a bearing but it is a keeping back of certain actions which might normally be expected. It does not say whether the actions are wrong in themselves. In a man forbearance oft-times keeps back actions which are wrong. With God forbearance is a withholding of actions which would dispensationally be inappropriate, but He does not deny His right to show wrath, He does not deny the fact that wrath will come. Forbearance is not eternal, it is not an essential modification of character. It is a restraining of the manifestation of part of the character for a certain period. Forbearance, though its results may be said to be the results of that which appears to be active, is primarily passive. Forbearance is primarily negative, rather than positive. True, the result of God's negative must be in the experience of a believer withholding certain positive results, but actually, forbearance is not the bestowing but the holding back. Forbearance is the parallel with God's display of tender mercies over all His works, in nature causing His sun to shine and sending rain on the just and the unjust. In other words forbearance is the negative of which providentially goodness is the positive. They are both beautiful, but they are both particularly associated with that which is temporary. Longsuffering is somewhat similar; it is, as you can see, two words. The word "suffering" is hardly, I think, sufficiently forcible. The latter part of the word in the Greek is from the same root as the word "desire" and the same root as the word for "indignation", and the Hebrew does bring out this idea of longness, or length of anger. It is the keeping of His anger without pouring it out for a long period. It is therefore not so much longsuffering as we understand the English word, but rather the contrast with immediate action whether from caprice or wrath. It is the attitude of hold-

ing-in anger that there may be a time of respite during which the attitude of those receiving this longsuffering passes in review before Him who mercifully waits. We have therefore not only these two words in the passage before us but also goodness, and the next sentence says "not knowing that the goodness of God" - a still further word is found here an adjective used as a noun, that which is good belonging to God. - "Not knowing that which is good belonging to God leadeth thee to repentance, but according to thy hardness and unrepentant heart thou treasurest for thyself wrath with a view to the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God". These definite words, "the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment", imply that wrath is not abrogated. The present time is the time of the veiling of righteous judgment. Then there will be the revealing of righteous judgment. But the righteous judgment is a fact and forbearance has nothing against judgment; it is not the opposite of judgment, but the appointed delay of judgment. It is important therefore to distinguish the negative meaning of forbearance and longsuffering. While God is longsuffering men are but heaping to themselves wrath, for God will give to every man, not "He is giving", He WILL give to every man according to the works. So we have brought before us in Romans 9 another unveiling of God's attitude. In verse 22 we read "but if God willing to have shown His anger and to make known His power" that which is powerful belonging to Him, another adjective viewed as a noun, "bore in much longsuffering vessels of anger having been fitted with a view to destruction". Here then we see that all the time God is bearing man's evil actions in much longsuffering. He is the same God who is willing, not I think only willing, but WILL-ing, to show His wrath, and to make known His power at the appointed time. He is the same God, but the longsuffering is great, and vessels of wrath are borne: during that period men are not dashed to destruction. He bears and bears with them. Therefore we see that longsuffering leaves them untouched as to their

character, and does not deal with their sins as to judgment.

There are many examples of longsuffering in the Scripture. God has emphasized this is part of His Name in Exodus 34:6. He is not only "The Lord, Merciful and Gracious"; He is also "Longsuffering and Abundant in goodness and truth". This attitude is emphasized therefore in varied dispensations. Hence quotations from Exodus lay a stress on this. For example in Numbers 14:18, where Moses refers to God's character, he says, "Thou hast spoken saying, the Lord is longsuffering and of great mercy". And in Psalm 86, "Thou art a God full of compassion and longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth". Jonah refers to this. "I knew that Thou wert a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest Thee of the evil". Here we have brought before us then that God's character has ever been manifested as linked with this longsuffering. Hence again and again He has waited. Among the well known examples are - (1) Genesis 15, "The iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full". (2) with regard to Israel, Romans 3 gives a statement; our English version is hardly clear; in chapter 1:25, "Whom God has set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness BECAUSE OF the putting on one side of the sins that have come to pass before". "The putting on one side" was in the forbearance of God. Now here you have the striking contrast, the sins were put on one side in the forbearance of God, but His righteousness is now declared and the sins are forgiven or put away in the propitiation of Christ through the grace of God. You will observe the striking contrast here; "being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus", to declare His righteousness. Grace, redemption and righteousness go together, but they are linked with forgiveness. The putting on one side, the passing over of the sins, as the margin puts it, is linked with the forbearance of God. Our English rendering "remission" quite misses the point, and the punctuation makes it very confusing. Christ is the propitiation to

declare God's righteousness now because of that passing over of the sins which did not appear righteousness. How could the passing over and putting on one side of sins by an animal sacrifice appear to be righteousness? THAT was in the forbearance of God. In forbearance God waited, and through animal sacrifices the sins were put on one side, but not one sin was put away. Sin could not be put away apart from the finished work of the Lord Jesus. The putting on one side was forbearance. During the time of forbearance, God dealt with Israel, but God is not dealing with those of us who believe in the precious Name of the Lord Jesus on the ground of forbearance. I have no hope as to forbearance, but as to positive grace. Forbearance is but restraining. We shall come to this in a moment, but do let us realize it in our hearts with thankfulness now. The putting on one side is in forbearance, the putting away is in righteousness, the putting on one side is in longsuffering, the putting away is in accord with grace, because of a propitiation, and the Holy Spirit makes this sweet to our hearts. The putting on one side is not remission in forgiveness, the sins still remain as Hebrews 9:15 puts it, referring to the transgressions that rest upon the first covenant and there they remain. But they no longer remain when there comes one into the world who fulfils the will of the Father and obtains eternal redemption for us. There is no longer longsuffering with regard to our acceptance in the Beloved. I do not behold in Christ's finished work, nor do you behold longsuffering or forbearance. Therein the Spirit of God reveals God's complete satisfaction with those viewed in Christ. There was no longsuffering, there was no forbearance, when He met wrath. The holy judgment of God broke upon that sinless Saviour, and He bore wrath, that everyone trusting in Him might be saved not on the ground of forbearance or longsuffering, but in a satisfactory atonement, because of the glorious merits of that Glorious Substitute. There is no substitution in longsuffering, substitution does not bring longsuffering, substitution

guarantees redemption. Without substitution there is only a temporary putting on one side of the transgression. These things are entirely contrasted and invariably contrasted and yet at the present time so many of God's dear children are confusing the longsuffering of God with the display of sovereign reigning grace.

To return, beloved friends, we have another unveiling of this character of God's forbearance in the days of Noah. "The longsuffering of God" says 1 Peter 3:20 "waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few that is, eight souls were saved by water". Forbearance and longsuffering were manifested, but though that longsuffering was tending and leading to repentance, yet they did not repent. A further striking commentary on Romans 2 is found in the book of Revelation. We find there in the second chapter the forbearance that was manifested toward Jezebel. The words are very definite. I gave her space to repent, space or time that she should repent out of her fornication, and she is not willing to have repented. Here then we see that forbearance gives space for repentance, but Christ is exalted to give repentance. We do not depend on forbearance, but on an exalted Christ. Forbearance would manifest godliness, if godliness were to be found in man. But, alas, godliness is not to be found in man. Forbearance oftentimes only shows iniquity as the more deliberate. "She is not willing to have repented". Granted that at times forbearance does bring out certain forms of repentance, yet the more common display is indifference. The fact that a Nineveh can and does sometimes repent is not to be overlooked. Human depravity is not to be regarded as merely described in one category as if all are alike in every relationship. With regard to the law of God, human depravity is absolute, all are alike ruined. With regard to the providence of God, human depravity is divergent in different men. There are diversities of condition with regard to the forbearance of God. There are some as we have seen who have Nineveh's repentance, and some

who have not. There are some for whom it will be MORE tolerable in the day of judgment. To sweep all forms of human depravity into one class, and say they are all the same with respect to the governmental dealings of God and with respect to the judgment of the future day is totally false. With regard to the law of God, and righteousness, human depravity is one, but from the standpoint of unrighteousness, a man is not simply a tool of Satan, but an Accountable/individual. He is possessed within limits of functions, powers, accountabilities and albeit they are known to God, God has not revealed Himself as acting with coercion upon them, though He may cause a man to hold back from doing a certain sin. Yet God, allowing men a sphere of activity, makes manifest the condition of their own will, for which they are accountable. The believer who recognizes salvation by grace, by no means denies the fact of the will of man. It is a personal will, though it is a slave-will, and man is accountable for its use, and forbearance sometimes does still bring out a Nineveh's repentance. But usually it manifests the heart that heaps treasures of wrath against the day of wrath.

Thus we have had brought before us in Scripture various dispensations during which God is mercifully waiting. In this sense we may include the words of 2 Peter 3. "Account that the longsuffering of God is salvation", though I do not think that is their primary force. We shall see that in a moment. In the period of God's longsuffering. He is working to bring poor lost souls to Himself. But the primary thought there seems the repentance and blessing of those who already have believed. Personal experience of longsuffering must not be forgotten; they too are very striking. Need you look far to find one? We realize that there is grace if we have been brought in mercy to trust in our precious Saviour. But are there not those who are very conscious that they experienced something as well as grace? I am not now speaking of days after salvation but before. Were there not those who went on frowardly in the way

of their own heart, and are conscious that grace did not lay hold of them during that period, but that longsuffering refused to allow them to die, until the appointed time when it pleased God in grace to reveal His Son in them. Longsuffering is in such cases, I had almost said, the handmaid of God's grace to keep a watchful care over those whom God is in grace determined to quicken for Himself, and longsuffering has never failed to keep within its limits those who, according to the everlasting covenant, will be eternally to the praise of the glory of God's grace. The Holy Spirit shows very beautifully the link of these parts of truth in the epistle to Timothy. Here the apostle says in verse 13, "Who before was a blasphemer and a persecutor and injurious; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. But the grace of our Lord Jesus was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am a first one. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on Him to life everlasting." Here the apostle uses both the words "grace" and "longsuffering". We have thus a parallel with Romans 3, but he says, "I was mercied in order that in me Jesus Christ might have shown all longsuffering". You observe in Romans 9, the vessels of wrath experience much longsuffering, but Paul experienced ALL longsuffering; there is a difference. "I obtained mercy because I did it in ignorance and unbelief", does not mean there is a merit in ignorance. Paul is explaining how far he went on the path of danger. I did it ignorantly, and in unbelief. Ignorance was wrong and unbelief was wrong. There was a goal in view. Many leaders of Israel began ignorantly in unbelief, but they went on further and became defiant. "This is the heir, come let us kill Him, and let us seize on his inheritance". That is no longer "ignorantly in unbelief". Paul was going on further and further,

we seem to see him; he is getting near to the precipice. What will be the result, longsuffering has reached its extreme limit; one step more, what will happen. Will he go over the precipice and be among those who forever set at nought the Son of God? All longsuffering has almost reached its goal; but behold grace superabounding lays hold of the man, with faith and love that is in Christ Jesus, and in answer to the word, "Saul, Saul why persecutest thou Me", the result of a gracious working sounds forth, "Who art Thou, Lord". Longsuffering held him up to the edge of the precipice, but grace snatched hold of him as he was about to fall over. And thus in the display of preparatory longsuffering, and in the manifestation of victorious grace, we see a type of divine working which never faltered in the history of Saul of Tarsus.

We call to mind too the words of Lamentations 3:22, with regard to God's longsuffering, "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed because his compassion fails not, they are new every morning, great is his faithfulness". I know nothing in grace that contradicts law. God did not save us at the expense of law, nor will He keep us at the expense of His law. I want to feel more the force of these words myself. I see no danger in rightly warning believers of hell fire. Our Lord does warn His disciples, I see no peril in the use of strong language of Hebrews 10. "If we sin wilfully after receiving a knowledge of the truth". I know of nothing in sovereign grace to break the divine words that if we keep on sinning wilfully, there remains no more sacrifice for sin, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation which shall devour the adversaries". Grace has never contradicted law and never will. It is not by contradiction of law that God preserves His own redeemed. What He does effect is this: - In love He watches over them, and if they become on the edge of a precipice that their continuance further might involve them, would involve them righteously in an eternal judgment, grace does not negative the fact that

continuance in sin shall bring judgment, but God steps in and cuts short their life. God would rather kill their bodies than destroy His grace. "For this cause many are weak and sickly among you and some sleep". There must be such a manifestation of grace to prevent the breaking of law. "Whom I have delivered to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the soul may be saved in the day of Jesus Christ". God will use the most extreme measures to guarantee eternal salvation, but He will never use one measure to break the divine severity of law. Hence we have the delightful words of 2 Peter 3, so often misunderstood. "Account that the longsuffering of God is repentance". "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise as some men count slackness, but is longsuffering to usward not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance". Now many dear children of God say that must refer to the unsaved because it is "not willing that any should perish". Beloved friends, there is no reason at all to apply it to the unsaved. If a believer gets away from the thought that if he wanders he must face in his experience God's revelation of perishing in judgment, he is in danger. If he rejects this thought, he is on a perilous road, toward turning the grace of God into lasciviousness. It is the longsuffering of God that waits to bring God's people to repentance. And God in mercy will do unexpected things to bring His people to repentance because the sheep of Christ shall never perish, but an assurance of salvation is not based on the knowledge of the covenant. As soon as we base assurance on the mental knowledge of facts we are on risky ground. It is deeply important that we should realize that God has emphasized with the knowledge of facts the unveiling of His Own inner working by the Holy Spirit to keep His people in the line of eternal salvation. Here then we have brought before us the personal experience of longsuffering. Do not believers present realize something of what this means? Are we not troubled, some of us at least, that we are not more responsive to the Lord's longsuffering with us? I am now speak-

ing of that which succeeds salvation. The Lord oftentimes manifests wondrous grace toward us in a melting way, but at times He particularly reveals the character of longsuffering to awaken our love toward Him. He does not rise up in the display of His activities in judgment, but He would make us feel that He is waiting that there might be the responsiveness of love instead of the coldness of our cold hearts. It is this attitude which I feel in my own experience needs to be more impressed, and I affectionately would bring it before others also.

We have already dealt with common misconceptions and inferences. I have already suggested that many dear children of God seem to think that forbearance and longsuffering are active. They somewhat confuse them with God's grace. We are not primarily to preach longsuffering but we are to preach grace. Longsuffering emphasizes man's accountability. Grace emphasizes God's bestowal of free mercy. Do not let us confuse them. Furthermore, there are some who think that by longsuffering souls will be saved. In longsuffering God is displaying grace that souls may be saved. But I know of no Scripture which shows of a soul saved by longsuffering. Is there a single soul brought to know eternal salvation by forbearance? Surely not. The vessels of mercy are afore prepared for glory, they are not vessels of forbearance. Forbearance and longsuffering were displayed on Saul of Tarsus, but the description was very precious, "he is a chosen vessel to bear My Name". It was grace that laid hold on Him. And Romans 5 brings before us that which is not waiting for man, nor tarrying for the sons of men. Grace reigns through righteousness. There is a marvellous reigning power in grace, and the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. There is a tendency, perhaps a danger, with us all to think something of the preacher and to exalt the hearer, forgetful that the preaching is to be in weakness, or strengthlessness, that the hearer is without strength, and that the gospel is the power. The law was without strength, says Romans 9, because it depended

on man's response. The Gospel is powerful because every condition is fulfilled in the work of the Lord Jesus, and grace is absolutely free. Not that the poor guilty sinner who rests upon grace can give a description of all that grace means, any more than the baby can describe the early life it illustrates. The expression of life and the understanding of life are quite different. And we would not preach to the poor troubled sinner the method of grace. It is deeply important to bring sinners face to face with sin and judgment. And when they feel the terror of a broken law, and the wrath of a righteous God, and when God's just claims are set in front of them, surely some will at times, in mercy, be brought to feel a burden and a load, and to them nothing but a free gospel is attractive. And though they know not why they have been brought to see their ruin, and how they had been led to feel their emptiness, apart from Him, yet that feeling is a real feeling, and that experience is a personal experience, and nothing of forbearance can meet their need. They need more than a temporary holding back of deserved judgment. They want not a salvation expressed in terms of "You do your part, and God will do the rest". But they want to know of a glorious finished work in a gloriously exalted Saviour; that, in their utter worthlessness, not depending on anything of themselves they may as it were fall in true desperation upon that salvation which will bear their weight, and never prove faulty.

O beloved friends, reigning grace is a glorious power and as we have such a wondrous salvation to declare to poor guilty sinners, let us not confuse it with law, nor confuse it with providence, nor confuse it with longsuffering, but, emphasizing all the attributes of God, though we only know them in measure, let us ever describe all the praise of salvation unto His Own Holy Name, that men may not seek to divide the glory whether they be preachers or hearers, but He alone may be exalted from beginning to end.

Q. When we first were brought as guilty sinners to our Lord Jesus Christ the ground of our salvation and the ground of our assurance were

the same, the finished work of the Lord Jesus. When a believer has known the Lord, months or years, the ground of salvation remains absolutely the same; all his growth, all his attainments add nothing to the ground of salvation. But in the light of the epistle of John he is not entitled to assurance unless he has the desire to please and serve God. "We know that we are children of God"; is not linked with the knowledge of facts in themselves, but with the knowledge of facts, and by the grace of God a corresponding attitude to those facts. Do any of us differ upon this?

A. I should have put it another way and said that a believer who has known the awhile has the ground of assurance in Christ's work, and also the experience of assurance via obedience.

Q. You would hardly say that all believers fully trust in the finished work of Christ. There may be very little knowledge of the work.

A. You mean that as the sin offering had different forms, and that there are some who have a very small perception of the ground of salvation?

Q. Some in their distress may vaguely call upon God for forgiveness and mercy, being in a state of repentance and humility.

A. "Knowledge" is not the primary thought, undoubtedly. Life is the important matter, is it not? If one is born from above, faith is the expression of life.

Q. Would you say that the usual definition of grace, "unmerited favor" is satisfactory?

A. Is it quite strong enough? I thought there was something more active and mighty in grace than merely the thought of unmerited favor. All these words make us feel how little we know of the Lord's fulness and how little we love.

Q. You say we preach not a method of salvation. We have to preach that, don't we?

A. I meant that we should not preach in general, e.g. in the open air, how the quickening in the life of a sinner is because of a gracious decree of God, and the wondrous divine working because of electing love. We should rather preach an objective work and the Lord Jesus Christ for guilty sinners, that anyone who feels himself a lost sinner is absolutely welcomed to the Saviour of sinners. Election I think is only preached to cavilling unsaved souls. It is a refreshment when any are saved to see the glorious foundation of their experience.
