

The Longsuffering of God Has a Limit

"How do You live with it, Lord?"

That's a question I recently asked God in prayer as I thought about all of the suffering taking place around the world today, especially as human beings slaughter one another in the most horrific and barbaric ways, including reports of Muslim radicals beheading Christian children.

"Lord, how do You live with so much suffering and pain when you see it and know it all?"

As Basilea Schlink once said, "Anyone who loves as much as God does, cannot help suffering. And anyone who really loves God will sense that He is suffering."

For our finite human minds, this is a great paradox, since the Word tells us that in God's presence is fullness of joy (Ps. 16:11), and yet we know that His heart also grieves over humanity's broken condition. Did Paul experience this on some level when he said that he was "grieving yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10)?

But there is not only divine grief over human suffering. There is also divine grief over human sin, as Genesis 6 tells us immediately before the flood: "And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart" (Gen. 6:6).

There was so much wickedness, so much violence, so much depravity, so much sin. What happened to this exquisite race of people created in His own image?

My precious wife, Nancy, who sometimes weeps in prayer for hours because of human suffering, suggested to me that God's

pain over His sinning creation could be likened to the pain experienced by parents who waited for years to have a baby, and then, after what seemed like an endless wait, found out they were having a child.

The parents got the baby's room all ready and bought all kinds of little toys and clothes in readiness for their child's birth, and when that amazing day came, they showered their priceless newborn with love and affection—only to have that child grow up to be a depraved and ruthless serial killer.

Who can describe an agony like that? Yet God, in His longsuffering, has endured thousands of years of even greater agony because of human sin—look at what His creation has done and continues to do—yet somehow, He has withheld the full force of His judgment and wrath.

That's why the Word reminds us over and again that He is slow to anger and great in mercy (see, for example, Exodus 34:6; Psalm 103:8). As one man once cried out in a small prayer meeting I attended, "God I thank You that You are slow to anger and great in mercy, because if You were great in anger and slow in mercy, we would have all been destroyed many years ago."

And yet there is a limit to His longsuffering. One day the wrath of God will come.

Paul warned about it repeatedly—yes, the same Paul who wrote so much about God's grace also wrote about His wrath—and we would do well to follow his lead.

To a judgmental sinner in Romans 2, Paul wrote, "Or do you despise the riches of His kindness, restraint, and patience, not recognizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance." In other words, the reason He has not yet judged you for your sins is not because He is looking the other way or because He doesn't care. Rather, it is because He is being extraordinarily kind to you to give you the opportunity to

repent.

But Paul didn't stop there, as many teachers do when they simply state, "The goodness of God leads you to repentance" (which, again, is only part of the point Paul was making). Instead, Paul continued, "But because of your hardness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment is revealed" (Rom. 2:4-5).

This is a truly staggering thought. Nonbelievers are "storing up wrath" for themselves in the day of wrath. Can you imagine what this will look like?

With all the sins being committed every single day—from rape to torture to mass murder to every kind of defiling, unclean, idolatrous act—how much wrath is being stored up by humanity as a whole? How intense will that be? (Under no circumstances can this be applied to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD or to some other past event, as some preterists attempt to do; this speaks of a day of wrath that has not yet come.)

That's why Paul, after listing sins of the flesh that all of God's people must turn away from, could write: "Let no one deceive you with empty arguments, for God's wrath is coming on the disobedient because of these things. Therefore, do not become their partners" (Eph. 5:6-7; see also Col. 3:6).

He was saying, "Since you don't want to partake in the wrath that is coming on the disobedient, don't partake in their sin either."

According to Peter, on that day, "the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, the elements will burn and be dissolved, and the earth and the works on it will be disclosed" (2 Pet. 3:10).

And Peter was not exaggerating in the least. How "hot" it will be when God's anger, justice, and judgment are poured out on a

sinning world?

And just like Paul, Peter explained that there was a practical application for our lives as well:

“Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, it is clear what sort of people you should be in holy conduct and godliness as you wait for and earnestly desire the coming of the day of God. The heavens will be on fire and be dissolved because of it, and the elements will melt with the heat. But based on His promise, we wait for the new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness will dwell” (2 Pet. 3:11-13).

Peter was simply reiterating what the Old Testament prophets spoke about over and over again, a major theme of God’s Word: There is a limit to His longsuffering, and one day, His wrath will be poured out like fire.

Shouldn’t this be part of our preaching today?

Shouldn’t this be part of our warning to a sinning world?

And doesn’t this highlight the power of the cross and the Blood of Jesus, who died so that we would not have to suffer that wrath in this world or the next?

Paul warned sinners about future judgment (see Acts 17:31; 24:24-25) and reminded God’s people that it was coming (Rom. 2:6-10).

Shouldn’t we do the same?

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