

## CONSIDER THE GOODNESS AND SEVERITY OF GOD

Over in **Romans 11:22** at the end of a long discourse on the plan of God and Israel's part in it the apostle Paul makes the following comment: "Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in *His* goodness."

Here we have two very different sides to God – His goodness and His severity. Mainstream christianity focuses a lot on the goodness of God and that God is love but here Paul also talks about a very different side of God – His severity. Given how different these two sides are it begs the question. Are these sides in conflict with each other? Is God inconsistent?

In this article I would like to answer the question: "What is the purpose of God's severity and how is it to be reconciled with the fact that God is love?"

There are three answers to that question. The first reason for His severity is to stop sinners who hurt those that He loves. Think of your reaction when someone hurts your spouse or your children. If we love someone we will do whatever it takes to stop sinners from hurting those that we love. Human nature can be pretty evil at times. Just consider the violent, hate-filled nature of terrorists who are hell-bent on hurting innocent people. To protect those that He loves God has to be very severe on people hell-bent on causing harm to others.

In **Exodus 22:22-24** we read: "You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child. If you afflict them in any way, and they cry at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry. And My wrath shall become hot, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall be widows, and your sons fatherless"

Another verse that shows this is over in **Deuteronomy 32:39** where we read: "See now that I, I am He, and there is no god with me. **I kill and I make alive**; I wound and I heal; and there is no deliverer out of My hand.

He can kill people and hand out the death penalty for sins but He can and will make them alive again in the second resurrection for their first true opportunity at salvation. We need to remember the resurrection and God's long-term view when we read of God's anger in wiping out all of humanity except for Noah's family and times when He threatened to wipe out all of Israel during the Exodus. In one sense His actions could be considered a merciful thing. Rather than continue their immoral path they would, in the next second of their consciousness, come up in the second resurrection in that new world to come.

Even to the worst of humanity God shows love by giving them every chance to repent and have a full and fair chance at receiving salvation. In **Genesis 15:16** God speaks of Israel coming back to Canaan in the fourth generation and the reason that He gives is that the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full. He gave them time to turn from their ways.

The second reason for God's severity is to get our attention so that we may turn from our sins and live His way which is the only true way to peace and happiness.

Human nature can be very stubborn at times – so stubborn that the only thing that will stop us from doing what's wrong and start doing what's right is pain and lots of it, hence the reason Paul uses the term the severity of God. God can be quite severe on us in the short term in order to be kind to us in the long term. God knows that we are hurting ourselves when we sin and, out of that same love, He uses pain and punishment to turn us from our

sin back to His way just as a doctor may use a painful treatment in order to remove something from our body that is life-threatening. To put it in the vernacular – there are times that He has to be cruel to be kind.

In **Hebrews 12:6** we read: “for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and He scourges every son whom He receives...(dropping down to **verse 10**) For truly they (our human fathers) chastened *us* for a few days according to their own pleasure, but He for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness. “

In a feast sermon in Florida Richard Pinelli highlighted something that I had never noticed before in one well-known passage in **Psalms 110** if you'd like to turn there with me. Starting in verse 1 we read: The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.' The LORD shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion. Rule in the midst of Your enemies! [And then it says] Your people *shall be volunteers* in the day of Your power” (**verses 1-3**). Jesus has to use force to begin with at the beginning of the millennium but gradually they will be re-educated and voluntarily live God's way.

The third reason for God's severity is take us to a higher level of spiritual growth so in God's kingdom we can better empathise with others who have gone through the same kind of trials and help them at that time.

Paul says in **2 Corinthians 1:4** that He comforts us so that we may be able to comfort those who are in every trouble. We would be very mistaken to think that every trial we go is because we have done something wrong. In many cases we are completely innocent in God's eyes. He may allow us to go through very painful trials in this life simply for the purpose of empathising with people in the world to come who have gone through those same trials. Most of us know that there is often a bond that deepens our love for others when we have been through the same trials as others.

Sometimes we are completely innocent but God wants us to develop even more patience, endurance and empathy for others and He uses trials to do this. We see this over in **John 15:2** where we read: “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away. And every one that bears fruit [this one is already doing the right thing and bearing fruit and it says], He prunes it so that it may bring forth more fruit.”

I'd like to share with you a couple of stories that will help better illustrate God's severity that show His use or allowance of severity in our lives is not callous or because He is indifferent but because He is shaping our lives and our character to be much better in the long term.

The first story is that a Scottish discus thrower from the nineteenth century. In his book “The Sacred Romance” John Eldridge has this to say about him:

“He lived in the days before professional trainers and developed his skills alone, in the highlands of his native village. He even made his own iron discus from the description he read in a book. What he did not know was that the discus used in competition was made of wood with an outer rim of iron. His was solid metal and weighed three or four times as much as those being used by his would-be challengers.

“This committed Scotsman marked out in his field the distance of the current record throw and trained day and night to be able to match it. For nearly a year, he labored under the self-imposed burden of the extra weight. But he became very, very good. He reached the point at which he could throw his iron discus the record distance, maybe farther. He was ready. My Scotsman (I had begun to closely identify with him) traveled south to England for his first competition. When he arrived at the games, he was handed the official wooden discus which he promptly threw like a tea saucer. He set a new record, a distance so far

beyond those of his competitors that no one could touch him. He thus remained the uncontested champion for many years. Something in my heart connected with this story.

**“So, that's how you do it. Train under a great burden and you will be so far beyond the rest of the world you will be untouchable. It became a defining image for my life, formed in and from a story” (p.38-39)**

The second story is a fictional story that is a fascinating illustration of how God often works mysteriously in someone's life that mirrors how He has dealt with certain people in the Bible.

Many of you may have seen the movie Forrest Gump. In that fictional story Lieutenant Dan is convinced that dying with honor on the field of battle is his redemption. When he is rescued by Forrest from a firefright, his wounds require both legs to be amputated above the knee and his “dream” of dying with honor on the battlefield is taken away. With that dream stolen from him he becomes bitter and enters into a purgatorial story of his own making, killing all desire for redemption. He lives off of his veteran's benefits in a haze of alcohol, drugs, and sex with prostitutes.

When one of the women starts to abuse Forrest, who suffers a degree of mental retardation, Lieutenant Dan finds out he has not been able to totally kill his heart. He is filled with rage at this treatment of Forrest and orders both of the women to leave. With his heart again exposed, he is brought to the realization that he still cares.

Down the line he has another go at self-redemption by joining Forrest as first mate on his shrimping boat. But once again, the Divine Disrupter thwarts his efforts. Lieutenant Dan confidently directs Forrest to where he is sure the shrimp are hiding, only to have their nets repeatedly regurgitate onto the deck a collage of old tires, license plates, leather shoes, and a clam or two. By this time, Lieutenant Dan is convinced that God is working against him somehow.

The ensuing days' shrimping brings no more harvest than before. With storm clouds gathering in the background, a completely frustrated and furious Lieutenant Dan rages, "Where ... is this God of yours, Gump? I wish your Jesus were here right now!" And Forrest comments to his listeners with rare irony, "It's funny Lieutenant Dan said that 'cause right then, God showed up." God sends a storm that puts the boat in mortal danger of being destroyed. Unbowed, Lieutenant Dan lashes himself to the mast, filled with joy at this opportunity to finally have it out with his tormenter. He curses God and dares him to sink the boat. But God has another purpose for Lieutenant Dan. He allows the storm to rage until his anger is spent but does not kill him. Later, we learn that Forrest and Lieutenant Dan's boat has been the only survivor in the entire shrimping fleet. As they once again ply the shrimping grounds, now without competition, their hoists and nets strain to release one cascading swarm of shrimp after another onto the deck of their boat.

We later see Lieutenant Dan sitting on the rail of their shrimping boat. The anger and fear so long entrenched there are gone. In their place is a kind of reflective surprise, like that of a man who has been redeemed in a most unexpected way. "Forrest," says Lieutenant Dan in a quiet, almost shy voice, "I never thanked you for saving my life." And with that, he hoists his legless body over the side. As Forrest hurries to the rail with some concern over his intentions, we see Lieutenant Dan backstroking peacefully through the water with a gentle smile on his face. As the camera moves away, we leave him swimming up the reflected gold highway of the sunset on the water, even as Forrest remarks, "I think Lieutenant Dan finally made his peace with God."

It's obviously a fictional story because they become millionaires from fishing something unclean but it does illustrate well the way that God has worked in the lives of many of His

people such as Joseph and Job, whose stories we know well. John Eldridge writes that, "The story of Lieutenant Dan is a poignant and revealing portrayal of God's fierce intentions to use both crippling and blessing to redeem us from our self-redemptive and purgatorial stories." (story paraphrased and quoted from Sacred Romance, p.62-66)

God can see beyond to things we can't see and he will allow us to go through great pain in the short term if that is required to help us get to a future that is much better than what we have in the here and now.

In **Genesis 15:12-16** we read: "Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror *and* great darkness fell upon him. Then He said to Abram: "Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land *that is* not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites *is* not yet complete."

God knew in advance about the horrible slavery to come on Israel in Egypt. From great pain would be born great lessons of faith and why God would restrain Himself from rescuing them before the right time. In his excellent book "The Authority of the Bible" Colin Peckham describes the amazing lessons of the Christian life that come directly from the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt:

**"The history of the Israelites pictures the New Testament plan of salvation showing that the Old Testament and the New Testament present one message. In the Old Testament it is the shadows and types, and in the New Testament we have the reality of an accomplished salvation.**

"The Israelites were in bondage to the Egyptians. Egypt is a picture of the old life of sin in which all are held under the domination of Pharaoh, who represents the devil. The only way to be rescued from Egypt's bondage and God's judgement was through the blood of the lamb. They were to be spared from the judgement of God, which rested on the whole land, only by applying the blood to their doorposts. This, of course, is a picture of God's judgement on the sinful world, from which we can escape solely by applying the blood of the Lamb of God to our hearts. The judgement passed from the people to the lamb. The slain lamb is the substitute for the first-born, and God's Lamb is our substitute. He dies in our place, and we are free from the old life of bondage, sorrow and sin through the blood of the Lamb [**1 Corinthians 5:7**].

One of the ultimate examples of severity is that of what Jesus Christ went through on the cross. By God allowing His Son to bear that penalty for us rather than just letting us off on grace with no penalty paid God has driven home deeply two lessons – 1) Sin hurts and 2) The sheer depth of His love for us by being willing to suffer so severely in our place.

Dr James Dobson made the following interesting comments on a video entitled, "Emotions: Can You Trust Them". He said:

"I like negative thinking too...it is negative thinking that makes me buckle my seat when I get into a car I might get myself killed if I don't...It is also negative thinking to look at what the scriptures say about God's judgment and wrath and His promise to punish sin if you only concentrate on positive thinking you're going to eliminate a good part of what Jesus said...What I like about the scriptures is that there is a balance between the positive and negative If you only look at the negative you get depressed. If you only look at the positive you get confused.

"[Like a battery] the power of the gospel comes from the positive and the negative. The negative is that sin is a disease that affects mankind. It warps, it destroys and ultimately it damns. That's negative. The positive is that Jesus Chnst came and He loves each and every one of us...and He's provided so great a salvation. That's the most positive news that has ever been given You can't understand the positive without understanding the negative...

"Penicillin is nothing but a sticky, gooey substance. It means nothing until you understand what bacteria can do to the body. When you understand bacterial infection, penicillin becomes a miracle cure. Likewise, you cannot understand why Jesus had to die and why He provided this remedy until you understand the disease of sin."

When we go through long trials it is easy to minimise the degree of love that He has for us personally. It's easy to think deep down if we are honest with ourselves that He is indifferent and doesn't care but this is a false perception we need to counter with the truth.

A good friend of mine made an interesting comment while I was going through a long trial that had been dragging on for many years. He said, "God has BIG plans for us now, not just in the future." In this life we can be tempted to resignation that we won't have the things we dream of such as "the good life" and think that we will just have to struggle through life, build the character we need and just have to wait until the Kingdom to experience "the good life". We are precious and wonderful to Him and He longs to give us good things in life when He feels we are ready to handle them. Character is much more important than comfort and blessings but He does care for us and wants to give us the latter also.

God knows what we really need and when our lives have been tested sufficiently and our hearts have become ready and prepared through the struggles of life He often will open up the windows of heaven and bless us. This is something that I have seen happen in my own life after years of struggle as well as other people much like the happy ending that came upon Lieutenant Dan quite unexpectedly to him. We are all familiar with the incredible trials of Job. After his long trial where he lost everything God not only restored what he had lost but generously restored double.

In summary, God's severity is not in conflict with His love for us. He uses it in the short term to show love for us in the long term. He will fiercely protect those He loves when carnal men try to hurt those that He loves. Human nature can be very stubborn at times – so stubborn that the only thing that will stop us from doing what's wrong and start doing what's right is pain and lots of it, hence the reason why God will need to be severe on us at times. Lastly God will allow us to go through severe trials so in God's kingdom we can better empathise with others who have gone through similar trials in this life and help them in the world to come. Great pain in the end will truly lead to great gain.