

The Goodness And Severity Of God (Part Two)

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A brief tour through the Scriptures finds several passages that link destruction with rejoicing (all from the *English Standard Version* [ESV]):

» Revelation 18:20: "Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!" It is almost as though someone will be dancing in the streets during the Day of the Lord, specifically, when God brings double retribution on Great Babylon. Here, God actually *commands* that we, who love God and long for Christ's appearing (II Timothy 4:8), rejoice at the fall of this world's system.

» Deuteronomy 32:43: "Rejoice with Him, O heavens; bow down to Him, all gods, for He avenges the blood of His children and takes vengeance on His adversaries. He repays those who hate Him."

» Jeremiah 51:48, regarding the fall of Babylon: "Then the heavens and the earth, and all that is in them, shall sing for joy over Babylon, for the destroyers shall come against them out of the north."

When God brings destruction, it is just and thus worthy of praise.

Terror for a Brief Moment

In the passages in Isaiah 30 and elsewhere, which we saw in Part One, the linkage of opposites is clear. The context is the Day of the Lord, and the time separating the opposites, such as destruction and restoration, is not great. In fact, any number of scriptures point to this truism: *God's wrath, while burning intensely, does not burn long*. Is it His recognition of our frailty that impels God to reinstate so quickly some form of normalcy? Micah 7:18-20 summarizes God's predilection for bringing a quick end to correction and to hasten the healing process:

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of His inheritance? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old. (ESV)

Here are some specific expressions of God's short-lived correction, all from the book of Isaiah.

» Isaiah 54:7: This first example is so clear-cut it is classic. Notice the conceptual opposites of "desertion" and "great compassion," separated by only "a brief moment":

I deserted you for a brief moment, but I will take you back with great compassion. (Holman Christian Standard Bible [HCSB])

» Isaiah 10:25: Earlier in the chapter, God has described the punishment He will bring on Israel, particularly the northern tribes.

For yet a little while and My indignation against you shall be accomplished, and My anger shall be directed to destruction [of the Assyrian]. (*The Amplified Bible*)

» Isaiah 26:20: God’s anger lasts only “for a little while.”

Go, My people, enter your rooms and close your doors behind you. Hide for a little while until the wrath has passed. (HCSB)

These passages point to the brief nature of God’s wrath. It burns hot but not long. God’s restorative actions follow quickly after His destructive anger.

Darkness and Not Light

The prophet Amos penned a well-known comment that, at first blush, may seem to argue against the close linkage of destruction and restoration during the Day of the Lord. Amos 5:18-20 deserves more than passing comment:

Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness, and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? (ESV)

The prophet is explicit: The Day of the Lord is *totally* dark. There is nothing at all light about it!

It is important that we recognize the context of this passage. In verse 1, Amos terms his words “a funeral song—that I am lifting up against you, house of Israel” (*Common English Bible*). The *Modern English Version* and *The Voice* actually refer to it as a “dirge.” The King James Version uses the noun “lamentation.” With that definition in mind, notice the verb tenses in verse 2: “She has fallen; virgin Israel will never rise again. She lies abandoned on her land, with no one to raise her up” (HCSB).

Amos’ vision is so clear that he is actually treating his subject, the nation of Israel, as though she were already dead—gone. Yet, he wrote these words some forty years *before* ten-tribed Israel (that is, the Northern Kingdom) had actually fallen to the Assyrian Empire. Furthermore, we know that Israel *will* rise again, when God restores her, joining her again with Judah (Ezekiel 37:15-28). Indeed, Amos himself speaks of this restoration in Amos 9:11-15. Notice just verses 14-15:

“I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them,” says the Lord your God. (ESV)

Both Old and New Testaments speak of this restoration. Clearly, the language of Amos 5:2 is hyperbolic (that is, overstatement), highly apropos rhetoric for a dirge, the rhetoric of which is about as dark as it can be. With that context in mind, Amos’ meaning in verses 18-20 becomes clearer. The

prophet is in fact saying that the people of Israel *thought* the Day of the Lord was one of total light. They misunderstood.

If we were to transport a representative cross-section of Amos' audience to the twenty-first-century America, we might, after interviewing them, discover a lot of common ground between these self-righteous and hypocritical Israelites and the post-Millennialist members of today's liberal churches. Post-Millennialists believe that "things" are improving all the time, the result of the effective work of the church. They believe that, eventually, things will be so good that Christ will return. It is almost as though these people listen to different newscasts than the ones to which we listen!¹

So, too, the Israelites of Amos' day, focusing myopically on their current wealth and false sense of wellbeing, perceived nothing but "good times rolling." Times were great, getting greater, with no end to prosperity in sight. They imagined themselves to be at the gate of Paradise, what they thought the Day of the Lord would be.

Amos corrects that errant perception. The time is coming, he avers in Amos 5:16, "In all the squares there shall be wailing, and in all the streets they shall say, 'Alas! Alas!'" This is a far cry from "good times!" From their distress, he says in verse 19, they will find no viable path of escape—running from a lion, they meet a bear! Their doom is sealed.

In reality, for those doomed, the Day of the Lord *will have no good* in it at all. It will be totally dark, exactly the opposite of what Amos' audience dimwittedly envisioned. We know, however, that those not doomed during the Lord's Day will see God *promptly* take restorative action, extending "great compassion" to them.²

Goodness and Severity—and the Nature of God

In his letter to the Christians residing at Rome, the apostle Paul is characteristically astute in his statement of the dichotomies we have examined. To him, God's penchant to follow destruction quickly with restoration is summed up in the merism, "the goodness and severity of God." He sees these traits, in essence polar opposites, as definitive of God's character, the operational definition of His interface with mankind. Not that God is bipolar, exhibiting radical mood swings. Rather, God is love, intrinsically so, unchangeably so, but He responds rigorously to sin because He understands how hurtful it is.

Furthermore, implicit in the merism, to Paul's way of thinking, is a stern warning not to abuse God's mercy, lest we incur His severity. The context is the mercy that God has shown some Gentiles by calling them into His church, and at the same time, His rejection of His (physical) people Israel—at least for a while:

If God didn't think twice about taking pruning shears to the natural branches [that is, physical Israel of old], why would He hesitate over you? He wouldn't give it a second thought. Make sure you stay alert to these qualities of gentle kindness and ruthless severity that exist side by side in God—ruthless with the deadwood, gentle with the grafted shoot. But don't presume on this gentleness. (Romans 11:21-22, *The Message*)

Here is the same dichotomy—punishment and restoration, stated in a New Testament context. Two translations of this same passage, quoted below, make it clear that God's severity and His goodness combine to make up two sides of a single personality. J.B. Phillips' paraphrase puts it this way:

You must try to appreciate both the kindness and the strict justice of God. Those who fell experienced His justice, while you are experiencing His kindness, and will continue to do so as long as you do not abuse that kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. . . .

The Voice is quite clear. Notice the translator's turn, "simultaneous balance":

Witness the simultaneous balance of the kindness and severity of our God. Severity is directed at the fallen branches withering without faith. Yet kindness is directed at you. So live in the kindness of God or else prepare to be cut off yourselves.

It is fair to say that this merism—the opposites expressed in God's goodness and His severity—articulate a central, informing theme of God's Word—from its beginning to its end. We see these opposites in narrative after narrative in the Old Testament. Here are just four examples:

1. The goodness of God toward Noah and his family, His protection of them through the cataclysm that destroyed the world that then was (compare Genesis 8:1 and II Peter 3:5-6).
2. The goodness of God as He delivered "righteous Lot" from the cities of the plain, which He promptly burned to ashes (see II Peter 2:6-7).
3. The severity He displayed to Job in order to teach him an important lesson, and the goodness He showed as He ultimately "blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning" (Job 42:12).
4. The severity He exhibited toward Joseph, a bit of a cocky 17-year-old lad, who basked in his father's favor. He found himself a slave in Egypt. Psalm 105:18 (*Common English Bible*) tells us that his "feet hurt in his shackles; his neck was in an iron collar. . . ." Relatively soon, however, Joseph became Pharaoh's vizier.

God's Coming "Great Compassion"

In Hebrews 12:18-29, the apostle Paul develops this contrast in a historical context, the theophany at Mount Sinai versus the gentleness of our call:

You have not come to something that you can feel, to a blazing fire, to darkness, to gloom, to a storm, to a trumpet's blast, and to a voice. When your ancestors heard that voice, they begged not to hear it say another word. They couldn't obey the command that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death." The sight was so terrifying that even Moses said he was trembling and afraid.

Instead, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, to the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to tens of thousands of angels joyfully gathered together and to the assembly of God's firstborn children (whose names are written in heaven). You have come to a judge (the God of all people) and to the spirits of people who have God's approval and have gained eternal life. You have come to Jesus, who brings the new promise from God, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better message than Abel's.

Be careful that you do not refuse to listen when God speaks. Your ancestors didn't escape when they refused to listen to God, who warned them on earth. We certainly won't escape if we turn away from God, who warns us from heaven. When God spoke to your ancestors, his voice shook the earth. But now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the sky."

The words once more show clearly that God will change what he has made. These are the things that can be shaken. Then only the things that cannot be shaken will remain. Therefore, we must be thankful that we have a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Because we are thankful, we must serve God with fear and awe in a way that pleases him. After all, our God is a destructive fire. (*God's Word Translation*)

Now, compare God's severity, here emblemized by the consuming fire experienced by those who rebel against Him, with Paul's comments in Ephesians 3:14-21. Here, Paul states God's goodness in undeniable terms:

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would give you, according to the riches of His glory, power to be strengthened by His Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or imagine, according to the power that works in us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus. (*Modern English Version*)

As end-of-the-age prophecies unfold before our eyes, we must always bear this in mind: No matter whether He expresses Himself in wrath or in kindness, in the fire of destruction or in the water of His Spirit, God's purpose remains the same: the outworking of His plan, His work of reconciliation, His "great compassion." As Psalm 74:12 states, "Yet God is my King of old, working salvation throughout the earth" (*World English Bible*).

The *Obergefell* decision in favor of same-sex marriage is just one manifestation of American decadence. We, standing on the sidelines—hopefully never participating—witness other symptoms of the moral decay daily. As we do so, let us look forward with rejoicing, never failing to see God's mercy everywhere revealing itself.

Endnotes

¹ The world view of a post-Millennial is essentially that of Pollyanna. Less charitably, it is related to the ostrich forcing its head in the sand, an expression of denial.

² In this sense, Amos 5:18-20 bears a definite affinity with Jeremiah 7, where the prophet warns his audience against giving heed to "deceptive words" (verse 4) and behind them, of course, fallacious doctrines. These people "entered these gates [of the

Temple] to worship the Lord“ (verse 2). Yet, much like those to whom Amos spoke earlier, they were guilty of perpetrating vast social injustices, justifying themselves all the while in the name of religion. Jeremiah asks, rhetorically:

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, “We are delivered!”—only to go on doing all these abominations? (verse 9)

He has already pointed out the moral depravity, however:

For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever. (verses 5-7)

These people considered themselves safe because of their religious heritage, typified most saliently in Solomon’s Temple (verse 4). They thought, “God would never destroy that!” God instructs the people otherwise, asking them in verse 12 to go “now to My place that was in Shiloh, where I made My name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of My people Israel.” History has shown that the threats of the “severe” God are not idle:

Therefore I will do to the house that is called by My name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of My sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim. (verses 14-15)