

The Goodness And Severity Of God

Charles Whitaker (1944-2021)
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Please turn to Isaiah 30. I think Herbert Armstrong rightly understood the fall of America to be simultaneous with the start of the Tribulation; maybe not to the day—but pretty close.

Today, as we see America's demise looming before us, we frequently become angry. Yet, rather than righteous indignation, our anger more often closely resembles a child's temper tantrum, thrown when he does not get his own way. Is anger exhibited at a loss brought about inevitably by sin the right response for God's people? Yes. We know we should be "sighing and crying" over America's sin. Does "sighing and crying" suggest only sadness? Or should there be other emotions there as well? If so, what emotions? I want to address those questions today, suggesting that "sighing and crying" involves far more than merely a wallowing sorrow.

Isaiah 30, in reference to the Day of the Lord, points to the mindset God's people should have in the midst of today's turmoil.

Isaiah 30:25-26 (ESV) And on every lofty mountain and every high hill there will be brooks running with water, in the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. Moreover, the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day when the Lord binds up the brokenness of His people, and heals the wounds inflicted by His blow.

These two verses point out the same principle: On the heels of destruction will be the forces of restoration. With the word when, and the term, in the day (both repeated there), you get the idea that the forces of destruction and construction will be virtually simultaneous. Maybe not actually simultaneous, but close. Our knowledge of prompt renewal after destruction suggests something beyond anger and sorrow.

Looking at verse 25, we learn of two totally dissimilar incidents—the “brooks of running water” and the fall of towers—in the same breath, giving the impression that they occur at about the same time, more or less concomitantly. These brooks of running, flowing waters, apparently in abundance, could refer to the Holy Spirit. Or the term could refer to information, in this case the knowledge of God which will eventually cover the earth “as waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9).

We will come back to Isaiah 30, but please turn back to Isaiah 41. Here, God again says He will bring water to barren hills, and He links that water, at least generally, to knowledge about Him.

Isaiah 41:18 (The Voice) By making the hard, brown hills sparkle with streams of fresh water and causing valleys to come alive with springs, I will see that gentle pools wait on the desert floor for the weary traveler, [probably those returning to the Promised Land] and great fountains bubble up from dry ground.

Isaiah 41:20 They [that is, the travelers] will see all this and understand. They will ponder together and come to know that it is the power of the Eternal One that produced this.

Going back to Isaiah 30:25, the “high towers” might refer to military fortifications, but just as easily could refer to institutions such as the World Bank or the United Nations—anything that people rely on as a bastion of strength or source of protection.

Notice Isaiah 2. God talks about the destruction He will bring, classifying the tower with anything that represents the pride of mankind.

Isaiah 2:12 For the Lord of hosts has a day. . .

Surely a reference to the Day of the Lord, reminiscent of the phrase in the day which we saw repeated in Isaiah 30.

Isaiah 2:12 . . . against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up—and it shall be brought low.

Isaiah 2:15 against every high tower, and against every fortified wall.

Isaiah 2:17 And the haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the lofty pride of men shall be brought low, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day.

Returning to verse 25 of Isaiah 30: “Mountains” there could refer to governments, as in Daniel 2, and “every high hill” could refer to false religion, as in I Kings 14:23. The term “every high hill” appears six other times in the Old Testament, almost always referring to the practice of false religion. In sum, verse 25 suggests that God will initiate restorative actions through flowing water soon after He brings to naught mankind’s governments and his religions.

Now, let us focus briefly on the next verse, Isaiah 30:26. There, God says the sun’s light, and presumably its heat, will be seven times greater than normal. That would be quite destructive. But notice: All that takes place when He “binds up the brokenness of His people, and heals the wounds inflicted by His blow.” So again, the curative act of restoration (represented by “healing,” and “binding up”) is closely connected with the act of destruction.

I understand that the two acts do not have to be absolutely simultaneous, but they appear to be extremely closely connected in these two consecutive verses. All this should tell us something about our attitude to the emergent destruction all around us today.

Please, let me clarify: The close association of destruction with construction typifies the Day of the Lord, not the Tribulation, per se. The Tribulation will be a time of Satan’s unmitigated wrath, not God’s measured anger during what we believe to be a year-long period at the end of the Tribulation.

Please, do not misunderstand. I am not talking about the Tribulation. Revelation 12, verse 12 describes Satan’s attitude, one which is completely divergent from God’s. I am quoting from the Philips Paraphrase:

Revelation 12:12 (Phillips) “[A]las for the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you in great fury, knowing that his time is short!”

Satan will do nothing restorative during the Tribulation; you can be sure of that! But, the Day of the Lord is a different story.

That said, let us dig deeper into the juxtaposition of destruction and restoration during the Day of the Lord. This dichotomy or this contrast, this distinction, between destruction and restoration is echoed or paralleled in another distinction. That is the contrast of destruction and rejoicing. Not anger, not sorrow, but rejoicing.

I suggest that the two concepts, destruction and restoration on the one hand, and destruction and rejoicing on the other, are related to each other. To see the dichotomy of destruction and rejoicing, we do not need to go very far. Notice a few verses down:

Isaiah 30:32 (Lexham English Bible) And every stroke of the staff of foundation that Yahweh lays will be on it [in context, on Assyria] will be on it with timbrels and lyres, and He will fight against it with battles of brandishing.

Somebody is going to be making music in the midst of all this destructive warfare. The Hebrew word for foundation there appears nowhere else in the Old Testament. However, it is related to another word translated foundation in reference to Solomon’s Temple in II Chronicles 8:16. It is also related to yet another word translated foundation, this time in reference to the Millennial Temple in Ezekiel 41:8. The root also appears in Isaiah 28. I will quote that one:

Isaiah 28:16 “Look, I have laid a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation.”

So, we can paraphrase Isaiah 30:32 to say, “And every stroke of His foundational rod that the Lord brings down.” The *King James Version*, a fairly literal translation, uses the word grounded, which approaches the concept behind foundational. A foundation is in the ground, as it were; it grounds the building.

The rod of correction is foundational. That is something every good parent understands. A parent does not use it to hurt so much as to build character. God knows that too, as Paul tell us in Hebrews 12:10. The punishments God sends are, “for our profit, that we may be partakers in His holiness.” Likewise, the blows God delivers to the Babylonish system on the Day of the Lord will be foundational in that they lay the groundwork for a better civilization; the destruction of the environment and of the infrastructure will facilitate the creation of better ones—and that in short order. The old has to go before the new can come in.

While not strictly causative of restoration, God's “staff of foundation” or His “staff of discipline,” as some translations render it, is curative, even creative.

Just as a paddle may not actually cause or create good character in a child, properly used, it can certainly become an agent in character development. Likewise, God’s highly sagacious and measured discipline in His Day will facilitate restoration. That is why destruction is so closely associated with restoration. That is why the correction of the Day of the Lord is also attended with rejoicing. Better things are coming soon. The opposites of the two dichotomies both work for good, ultimately.

Before I move away from this part of my discussion, I want to briefly look at three other passages which associate destruction with rejoicing. Please, turn to Revelation 18. It is as though someone will be dancing in the streets during the Day of the Lord. You know the passage well, where God brings double retribution on great Babylon.

Revelation 18:20 Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!”

God actually commands that we, who love and who long for Christ's appearing, rejoice at the fall of this world's system. And, of course, we understand why. This passage echoes part of the Song of Moses:

Deuteronomy 32:43 "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people; for He will avenge the blood of His servants, and render vengeance to His adversaries; He will provide atonement for His land and His people."

Finally, consider Jeremiah 51. Those of you who know your chapters know that the subject of Jeremiah 50 and 51 is the fall of Babylon.

Jeremiah 51:48 "Then the heavens and the earth, and all that is in them, shall sing for joyously over Babylon; for the plunderers shall come to her out of the north."

Every one of these passages in Isaiah 30 and elsewhere juxtapose either rejoicing with destruction, or restoration with destruction—in events associated with the Day of the Lord; opposites, closely linked with one another. And, opposites not highly separated in time.

A number of passages indicate that God's wrath, while burning intensely, does not burn long. Let us look at three from Isaiah. I will read these without much comment. You can study them later to determine the context.

This is a clear example. God says, speaking of the healing, the restorative, actions He will take in due course:

Isaiah 54:7 "For a mere moment I have forsaken you, but with great mercies I will gather you."

Note the conceptual opposites of "desertion" and "great compassion," separated by only "a brief moment."

Isaiah 26:20 Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourself, as it were, for a little moment, until the indignation is passed.

Isaiah 10:25 (Amplified Bible) For yet a little while and My indignation against you [Israel] shall be accomplished, and My anger shall be directed to destruction [of the Assyrian].

All these passages point to the brief nature of God's wrath. Oh, yes—it burns hot, but not long. God's restorative actions follow quickly on the heels of His anger. That is cause for more than anger, more than sorrow, on our part.

Please turn to Amos 5. The prophet Amos penned a well-known comment which, at first blush, may seem to argue against the notion of the close relationship between destruction and restoration during the Day of the Lord. So, in terms of my comments today, Amos 5 deserves more than passing comment.

Amos 5:18-20 “Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! For what good is the day of the Lord to you? It will be darkness, and not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him! Or as though he went into the house, leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him! Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light? Is it not very dark, with no brightness in it”?

The prophet is explicit: The Day of the Lord is totally dark. There is nothing at all light about it! There is nothing restorative or curative 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” (CEB). *The Modern English Version* and *The Voice* actually refer to it as a dirge; the *King James Version* uses the noun lamentation. Notice the verb tenses in verse 2 (Holman Christian Standard Bible). Be aware that Amos wrote this some 40 years before Israel's fall to the Assyrians:

Amos 5:2 (HCSB) She has fallen; Virgin Israel will never rise again. She lies abandoned on her land, with no one to raise her up.

Amos' vision is so clear that he actually treats his subject, the nation of Israel, as though she were already dead—gone. Stylistically, the language of

a dirge is about as dark as it can be. The rhetoric of verse 2 is an excellent example of the overstatement which often attends a funeral song. Importantly, we know that Israel will rise again. Indeed, Amos himself speaks of this restoration just a few pages over, in Amos 9. I will cite only verses 14-15:

Amos 9:14-15 “I will bring back the fortunes of My people Israel, and they shall build the waste cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them; and they shall make gardens and eat fruit from them. I will plant them on their land, and no longer shall they be pulled up from the land that I have given them,” says the Lord your God.

Both Old and New Testaments speak of this restoration many times. Clearly, the language of Amos 5:2 is hyperbolic, highly appropriate rhetoric for a dirge. 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 some of Amos’ audience to 21st century America, we might easily discover a lot of common ground between these self-righteous and hypocritical Israelites of the past and the post-millennialist members of today’s liberal churches. Post-millennialists believe that “things” are getting better and better all the time and eventually they will be so good that Christ will come down here with us. It is almost as though these people listen to different newscasts, is it not? But, that is what they believe.

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 understanding. The time is coming, he avers in verse 16, that, “There shall be wailing in all the streets, and they shall say in

all the highways, ‘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, you 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 purblindly 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.

The New Testament makes this plain. So, as I wind down, I want to look at the concept of destruction pursued quickly by restoration in the New Testament. It is there, but in a different form. Notice how Paul describes a blend of anger and kindness in God’s very character in Romans 11. Here the connection of opposites is obvious. The context is the mercy God has shown some Gentiles by calling them into His church, and at the same time God’s rejection of His people Israel—at least for a while. I will read this from a paraphrase called *The Message*. Paul uses the occasion to issue a stern warning:

Romans 11:21-22 (The Message) If God didn’t think twice about taking pruning shears to the natural branches [that is, physical Israel], 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.

Let me read it from the Phillips Paraphrase:

Romans 11:21-22 (Phillips) 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.

Please, take note of the term “simultaneous balance” appearing in yet another paraphrase, *The Voice*. Now, God is certainly not bipolar, driven by

radical mood changes. By definition, He is loving, intrinsically so, unchangeably so. But, He responds rigorously to sin because He knows how hurtful it is.

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.

I think we could argue that that merism—the opposites expressed in God’s goodness and His severity—expresses a central, informing theme of God’s Word from beginning to end. We see these opposites in narrative after narrative in the Old Testament. We see them in:

- The goodness of God toward Noah and his family.
- His protection of them through that cataclysm which destroyed the world that then was.
- The goodness of God as He delivered Lot from the cities of the plain, which He promptly burned to ashes.
- 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)

Please turn to Hebrews 12, where Paul develops this contrast in a historical context: The goodness of God, His severity, and the fact that we must not abuse God’s kindness.

Hebrews 12:25-29 (MEV) See that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused Him who spoke on earth [that is, the Children of Israel at Mount Sinai], much less shall we escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven. At that time His voice shook the earth, but now He has given us a promise, saying, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also heaven.”

And this statement, “Yet once more,” signifies the removal of those things that can be shaken, things that are created, so that only those things that cannot be shaken will remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be moved, let us be gracious, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire.

Indeed, we dare not abuse God’s goodness, lest we experience His severity.

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. Here, Paul states God’s goodness in undeniable terms.

Ephesians 3:14-21 (MEV) 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.

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; and His “great compassion.”

I will conclude with Psalm 74,

Psalm 74:12 (WEB) Yet God is my King of old, working salvation throughout the earth.

As we watch God's tearing down of America, let us look forward in joy,
never failing to see His mercy looming behind it all.