

THEISM

The Goodness and Severity of God

Our thoughts about God tend to determine our behavior. If we think that God is only a good and loving God, then we may neither fear nor obey God because we may think that God will not punish us for disobedience. On the other hand, if we think God is only a wrathful God who severely punishes the disobedient, then we may fear and obey God, but may not be inclined to love Him. Obeying God may be only out of a sense of duty because we do not want harsh punishment for disobedience. We need a balanced understanding about God in order to produce steadfast and loyal behavior— a perspective that acknowledges both the goodness and severity of God, and that produces behavior prompted by both love for and fear of God.

The Apostle Paul presented this perspective when he admonished disciples to “consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off” (Romans 11:22). The context of that admonition (Romans 11:13-25) is about God’s rejection of the Israelites because they had rejected him, and also about God’s acceptance of the Gentiles because they turned to him in faith. Paul used the imagery of an olive tree. The Israelites were like branches that were discarded because of their unbelief. The Gentiles were like wild olive branches that were grafted into the tree in order to “become partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree.” Paul hoped that by his talking about Gentiles being grafted in, Israelites would become jealous, want to be grafted back into the tree, and thereby turn back to God (Romans 11:14). As God, in His wrath, discarded the Israelites because of their unbelief, so also God would discard Gentiles from His goodness if they did not fear and obey Him (Romans 11:20).

The goodness of God toward the Israelites was summarized by Paul when he wrote that God had given the Israelites “the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God” (Romans 9:3-5). No other nation received so numerous and good blessings as did the Israelites. Even so, Israel rejected God. Isaiah lamented Israel’s rejection of God. “Hear O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the Lord has spoken: ‘I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me; the ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, My people do not consider.’ Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers, children who are corrupters! They have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked to anger the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away backward.” (Isaiah 1:2-4; see also Isaiah 5:3-4). Israel’s history is filled with disobedience toward God. Through Isaiah, God said, “I have stretched out My hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, according to their own thoughts” (Isaiah 65:2; Romans 10:21). Jesus also spoke about Israel’s rejection of God. He once lamented, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34). On another occasion, Jesus told a parable about a landowner who planted a vineyard, and leased it to vinedressers. When vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to receive its fruits from the vinedressers, only to have his servants beaten and killed. He even sent his son, but they killed him also (Matthew 21:33-44). This parable was about the Israelites. Because Israel rejected God, God was severe with the Israelites. Those to whom Jesus spoke the parable realized that when the owner of the vineyard came, he would

destroy the wicked, “and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers, who will render to him the fruits in their seasons” (Matthew 21:41). Jesus told them that “the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it” (Matthew 21:43). The Apostle John observed that “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God . . .” (John 1:11-13).

The goodness of God toward believers in Christ was summarized by Paul when he wrote that God “has blessed us with every spiritual blessing” in Christ, that he “predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ,” that in Christ we “have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins,” that he has made “known to us the mystery of His will,” that in Him we “have obtained an inheritance,” and that he has given us the Holy Spirit as the “guarantee of our inheritance” (Ephesians 1:3-14). Paul wrote to the Romans that “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). The Apostle John declared that “we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him” (1 John 4:16). Even so, God is severe not only to those who do not believe and obey, but also to believers who have turned away from God. “Our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29; Deuteronomy 4:24). Regarding unbelievers, Paul wrote that “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels” He will take “vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9; see also Matthew 13:38-42). God expects believers to “walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10; see also Ephesians 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 2:12). Jesus described unrepentant believers who turn away from God as unfruitful and withered branches that would be thrown into the fire and burned (John 15:6). Peter observed that if those who “have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning” (2 Peter 2:20). “Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. And again, ‘The LORD will judge His people.’ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:29-31).

Just as the Israelites who had forsaken God might return to Him, so also believers in Christ, who have forsaken him, may repent and return to God. “If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (1 John 2:1-2).

After Paul admonished those who are called to be saints to “consider the goodness and severity of God” and to “continue in His goodness,” “otherwise you also will be cut off” (Romans 11:22), he wrote, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:1-2).